

More Than a Case Study:

Experiencing Depth with Sylvia Plath

by Ellen Miller

One of traditional philosophy's main features—an emphasis on disembodied abstract ideas—can become a weakness when theorists ignore concrete details and particulars. The use of case studies can help address philosophy's abstractness. However, even though case studies are meant to bridge theory and practice, they can still lead to objectification. Some key features of objectification involve denying the subject his or her autonomy, reducing the subject to his or her body, and adopting an instrumentalist attitude where the person is commodified. In this paper, we will explore how Sylvia Plath's writings on the body-in-pain provide insights into how we can avoid objectification in case studies, including literary case studies involving Plath. Numerous scholars analyze Plath's life and writings in order to explore mental illness, especially the question of

whether there is a link between creativity and mental illness.¹ In fact, Kaufman labeled the supposed connection between female poets and depression, "the Plath effect."² Medical professionals find Plath's writings instructive since she verbalizes what many patients cannot about suicidal ideation and bodily pain.

¹ See Brian Cooper, "Sylvia Plath and the Depression Continuum," *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 96(6), June 2003, Ludwig, A.M. *The price of greatness: Resolving the creativity and madness controversy* (New York: Guilford, 1995), and Rothenberg, A. *Creativity and madness: New findings and old stereotypes* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

² Kaufman, J.C., "I bask in dreams of suicide: Mental illness, poetry, and women," *Review of General Psychology*, 6(3), 2002 and "The Sylvia Plath effect: Mental illness in eminent creative writers," *The Journal of Creative Behavior*, 35(1), 2001.

Phenomenological approaches can help avoid objectification and reductive accounts in case study analyses. In addition, phenomenological meditations on the ways our bodies relate with Plath's writings help address the central question of this paper: What is being revealed when we become attuned to Plath's poetry? Attunement reveals how we understand our environment and situatedness in affective ways. For Heidegger, attunement denotes an essential feature of existence and meaning construction. Furthermore, the ways we care or do not care about situations shape how the world appears.

Ethical Theories and Case Studies

Traditional approaches to ethical theories often abstract away from the particular individuals under analysis. Universalistic approaches—Kant's for example—embrace this abstractness and use few examples. Even though several features of oppression outlined throughout this paper are Kantian, he does not critique the social factors that can limit one's autonomy and moral choices. Utilitarian theories focus on the consequences of our actions and are less abstract than Kant's; however, in practice utilitarian theories are often applied in ways that do not analyze gender and other social variables. Virtue ethics—rooted in Aristotle's commitment to observable entities—has an affinity with the phenomenological insights I apply in

this paper. Indeed, the focus on embodiment I endorse is a virtue. Yet, even focusing on concrete details does not guarantee an analysis will avoid objectification, commodification, or stereotypes.³

I became more attuned to the potential problems in using case studies when I first taught Biomedical Ethics and was preparing lectures on euthanasia and end-of-life issues. Case studies found within the confines of ethics textbooks offer concise information and invite the reader to utilize aspects of the case to further illustrate ethical theories. Manuscript-length analyses have more space for details; however, length does not guarantee we will open ourselves to the case study's complexities. Cases involving bodies in pain, suicidal bodies, and/or dead bodies are especially susceptible to objectification. Ethics textbooks usually include discussion of the Nancy Cruzan, Karen Ann Quinlan, and Tracy Latimer cases; many now include analysis of Terri Schiavo.⁴ In the Quinlan and Latimer

³ See Matthew King, "Towards a Platonic-Heideggerian Virtue," in *Phenomenology and Virtue Ethics*, edited by [Kevin Hermerberg and Paul Gyllenhammer](#) (New York: Continuum/Bloomsbury, 2013) for more on the connection between hermeneutic-phenomenology and virtue ethics.

⁴ Karen Quinlan's father petitioned the New Jersey Supreme Court to remove her respirator after she remained unconscious for after seven months. Her case is central in debates over privacy rights and the evolving definitions of

cases, the father's actions are usually highlighted and in discussions of Terri Schiavo, her ex-husband's actions are detailed. Chapters on euthanasia often focus more on female victims than male victims without discussion of how gender impacts those involved or how gender functions in case study selection. My concern is that even concrete case studies might still objectify the person under analysis. Engagement with Plath's writings on the suicidal body and the body-in-pain can help scholars avoid reductive approaches.

It is not surprising that euthanasia case studies contain more female than male bodies. Women's bodies have been marked as those most in need of care, control, and disciplinary action.⁵ Unfortunately, medicine and philosophy have struggled with how to analyze the role of social variables in knowledge

brain death. Nancy Cruzan—another young woman in her twenties—suffered tremendous injuries in a car accident that resulted in her becoming unconscious with no brain function. Her parents' petitioned the courts in order to allow them to remove life support from Cruzan. Robert Latimer was convicted of killing his twelve-year-old daughter who had a severe form of cerebral palsy and was thought to be in extreme and constant pain. Terri Schiavo's husband and parents disagreed over whether Schiavo would have wanted prolonged life support.

⁵ See Sue Sherwin's groundbreaking *No Longer Patient: Feminist Ethics and Health Care* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992) for more on the philosophical connections between gender and medicine.

production. We cannot ignore the ways bodies have been gendered within both institutions. When we turn towards Plath's writings, we cannot ignore the ways she performs her female body and how scholars represent her gendered body.

Plath and the body-in-pain

I agree with those theorists such as Benigna Gerisch who claim we can only understand suicidality "within its interlocking, sociocultural, and intrapsychic determinants."⁶ Plath's writings shock by laying bare the female body that will not submit to gender conventions, will not be objectified or commodified without the speaker's knowing recognition of gendered power structures:

There is a charge

For the eyeing of my scars, there
is a charge
For the hearing of my heart—
It really goes.

And there is a charge, a very
large charge
For a word or a touch
Or a bit of blood

Or a piece of my hair or my

⁶ Benigna Gerisch, "'This is not Death, It's Something Safer': A Psychodynamic Approach to Sylvia Plath," *Death Studies* 22: 735-761 (December 1998), 737.

clothes. ("Lady Lazarus," lines 57-64)

Gerisch contrasts Plath's "autonomous" portrayal of death and the female body with "male discussions in which their fear of and fascination with death is projected onto the dead female body..."⁷ Plath projects dual male and female gazes onto her poetic bodies. These dual gazes enable her to avoid self-objectification and make it more difficult for readers to oversimplify her work. Plath's writings illuminate Merleau-Ponty's descriptions of the body as the medium that brings the world into being.⁸ For Merleau-Ponty and Plath, the body is never just an object in the world. Though we are sometimes objects for others and even ourselves, that is not all we are. Plath's imaginary and biographical worlds intersect. Of course, there is now a constructed Plath created by scholars and readers that also overlaps with her writings. These imaginary, biographical, and poetic worlds can be understood as chiasmically relating with one another.⁹

⁷ Gerisch, "This is not Death," 737.

⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by C. Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), 146: "The body is our general medium for having a world."

⁹ A chiasm—following Merleau-Ponty—"is a grouping, gathering, or assemblage wherein the members are related sinuously or flexuously by means of being themselves to the other" (Samuel Mallin, *Art Line Thought*, Dodrecht,

For Merleau-Ponty, our shared perceptual consciousness underlies all the structures of higher-level consciousness. We confront the world through our lived perceptions and experiences. These are then connected with other levels of experience: imaginary, ideal, linguistic, historical, and cultural. Plath's gendered subjects provide insights into feminine subjectivity and embodiment whereas Merleau-Ponty focuses on the broad lines of embodiment.

Plath on objectification in personal and public spheres

In order to avoid reductive accounts, we need to focus on the relationships among readers/scholars and the cases under analysis. If we neglect the lived body of reader, scholar, or case, we risk objectifying ourselves and/or the subject under discussion. This level of engagement demands that we attune ourselves and our theorizing in a sinuous line rather than a rigid line of bifurcation between reader/case. When we confront the body in pain, it is understandable to push this pain into a

Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996), 243.

⁹ See Martha Nussbaum, "Objectification," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 24(4): 249–291 (1995) http://www.mit.edu/~shaslang/mprg/nussbaum_O.pdf. Rae Langton, *Sexual Solipsism: Philosophical Essays on Pornography and Objectification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) adds three additional criteria to Nussbaum's list.

separate realm. In order to understand case studies as what I deem “living cases,” it is necessary to confront these painful aspects of embodiment as Plath does in her poetry. This hyper-reflection helps avoid relating with others in ways that diminish their complexity.

Feminists have outlined multiple criteria that can constitute objectification: instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, violability, ownership, denial of subjectivity, reduction to body, reduction to appearance, and silencing.¹⁰ These need not all appear in order to constitute objectification. As Nussbaum indicates, they often appear as clusters and in some instances, they do not result in objectification. The most salient features for our study are: 1) reductive accounts that read Plath’s poems as a one-to-one correspondence between Plath and her speakers, 2) reduction to the body, in this case a sensationalized suicidal body (here Plath shares much in common with philosophical case studies that feature a disproportionate amount of inert female bodies), and 3) instrumentality, where the person is treated as a means for the objectifier’s purposes. Plath addresses the problematic nature of instrumentality in her critiques of commodification. Plath focuses on how systems of power can result in individual instances of instrumentality and commodification.

Plath writes about the dangers of commodification within marriage, the medical profession, and politics. She was well aware—as we see from the “Lady Lazarus” above—that seemingly neutral interactions run the risk of objectification. Poem after poem show speakers reduced to objects. “The Applicant’s” gender-neutral speaker is sold like a piece of clothing;

Now your head, excuse me, is
empty.
I have the ticket for that.
Come here, sweetie, out of the
closet.
Well, what do you think of *that*?
Naked as paper to start

But in twenty-five years she'll be
silver,
In fifty, gold.
A living doll, everywhere you look.
It can sew, it can cook,
It can talk, talk, talk.

“Munich Mannequins” displays explicitly female bodies, paradigms of femininity that are all body, perfect, and “without minds....”;¹¹ in “Gigolo,” the speaker reduces herself to a mechanical watch that “tick[s] well” (line 1); in

¹¹ These mannequins lean tonight
In Munich, morgue between Paris and Rome,

Naked and bald in their furs,
Orange lollies on silver sticks,

Intolerable, without mind (11-15)

"Fever 103," the speaker transcends her body and becomes "too pure for you or anyone...pure acetylene" (lines 34 and 46).

Plath teaches us that there are no clear boundaries between presumed binary terms: male—female; life—death; sanity—madness; disease—health; inner—outer; mind—body. The pathways between terms are fluid and dynamic. In her short stories and poetry, women are not perpetual victims nor are men depicted as always in control and the only gender capable of objectifying others. In Plath's short story, "The Fifty-ninth Bear," a man is killed by a bear because his not-so-angelic wife allows it to happen. In Plath's logic, the female gaze is powerful and the male gaze does not necessarily objectify. She is keenly aware of the ways gender, age, and class impact societal structures, including objectification.¹² I have omitted race here since Plath displays more blind spots about race than other variables. Though she often utilizes racialized language, she was not as capable of reflecting on ways in which her whiteness gave her privilege that intersects with her gendered—and sometimes class—marginality.

At the time Plath wrote, the majority of psychiatric patients were women treated by male psychiatrists. During the 1950's, ninety-one percent of psychiatrists and eight-five percent of

psychologists were men and two-thirds of electroshock therapy patients were women.¹³ Younger, middle-class, white women like Plath were most at risk for this treatment during Plath's time (now older women are more at risk). Plath's writings on medicine and psychiatry reveal how dualistic thinking has objectified women's bodies as more in need of modification by external forces. Plath's "In Plaster" demonstrates the futility of dualistic thinking. The speaker's double identities cannot co-exist nor can they break free from one another:

I shall never get out of this! There
are two of me now:

This new absolutely white
persona and the old yellow one

...

Living with her was like living with
my own coffin:

¹⁰ See Renee Curry, *White Women Writing White: H.D., Elizabeth Bishop, Sylvia Plath, and Whiteness* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000) and Ellen Miller, "Sylvia Plath and White Ignorance: Race and Gender in 'The Arrival of the Bee Box,'" *Janus Head* 10(1): 137-156 (2007) <http://www.janushead.org/10-1/miller.pdf>.

¹³ Phyllis Chesler, *Women and Madness* (New York: Doubleday, 1972) as cited in Luke Ferreter's insightful analysis of gender and medicine in *The Bell Jar*, "Just Like the Sort of Drug a Man Would Invent: *The Bell Jar* and the Feminist Critique of Women's Health Care," *Plath Profiles*, Volume 1:136-158 (2008), 143 (<https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/plath/article/view/4776/4409>).

Yet I still depended on her,
though I did it regretfully.

I used to think we might make a
go of it together—(1-2; 48-50)

Plath reveals speakers with multiple and
overlapping identities through her
insistence that binaries are inadequate.

Plath's corpus critiques
institutionalized psychiatry, voluntary
psychiatric treatment, pharmaceutical,
and homeopathic remedies. Each has
the potential to result in
commodification, particularly of female
bodies. Esther's treatment—or lack of
treatment—from Dr. Gordon in *The Bell
Jar* exemplifies Plath's position on
psychiatry. For Plath, Dr. Gordon
represents the entire patriarchal medical
system that cannot understand her
despite any superficial "great concern"
("Lady Lazarus," line 84).

Artworks as a model for case studies

Plath reveals the body in depth and
within depth. Depth, for Merleau-Ponty,
is the most existential of all dimensions;
it belongs to perspective itself and not
to the objects traditional views impart
with depth. Depth is original, the birth
of a field, a world; it helps break down
the subject/object dichotomy created
by modernist theorizing. Depth
"announces a certain indissoluble link
between things and myself by which I
am placed in front of them..."¹⁴
Merleau-Ponty's depiction reveals that

depth is "not yet objectified," not yet
subject to the objectification of
geometry and other sciences. For
Merleau-Ponty, spaces are not just
external places that are then
represented onto our minds. Rather,
depth is born beneath our gaze.¹⁵ This
primordial depth is more basic than the
objectified depth constructed by non-
existential sciences.¹⁶ Primordial depth
can only be understood when we
consider how we live through time and
space immersed within the world.

Interestingly, depth appears by
disappearing. Depth unites foreground
and background, inner and outer, self
and world. Drew Leder explains how
depth continuously disappears in his
descriptions of what he calls "depth
disappearance." His examples of deep
sleep, birth, and death reveal how "the
body not only projects outwards in
experience but falls back into
inexperienceable depths."¹⁷ We can
retrieve and experience depth by
stepping back and experiencing it in
artworks' silent spaces.

Plath's writings open up the depths
of existence that usually retreat into
absence. Even bodily surfaces often
retreat from view since we experience
the world through our perceptual-

¹⁴ *Phenomenology of Perception*, 256.

¹⁵ *Phenomenology of Perception*, 262.

¹⁶ Joseph Rouse elaborates on a Merleau-Pontian inspired existential science in his article "Merleau-Ponty and the Existential Conception of Science," *Synthese* 66 (2):249 - 272 (1986).

¹⁷ Drew Leder, *The Absent Body* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 53.

affective-motile-rational being. In our everydayness, we need not contemplate the body. We are immersed in the world using our bodies and technological devices that enhance our bodies. Particular situations and activities invite us to think through our bodies and contemplate embodiment: falling, losing balance, meditation, yoga, and engaging with certain artworks. When we are immersed in physical activities—think of Heidegger’s famous hammering example—we remain unaware of the precise physiology involved and it is difficult to articulate these bodily situations.

Philosophy—with its emphasis on language and rationality—is not always able to deal with that which is unspoken or beyond words. This makes it especially difficult for philosophers to deal with case studies involving embodiment and death. I have identified five key issues most relevant to Plath’s particular situatedness. A case study’s structure and analysis can diminish the complexity of those under discussion in at least four ways:

1. Case studies can reduce the subject to her body, especially when the study involves those who have died and focus shifts to death and the corpse body.
2. Case studies do not always include analysis of how social variables such as gender, race, class, ability, and age

impact the circumstances under discussion.

3. Case studies often focus on the surface body rather than the richness and complexity we can garner from a fuller understanding of depth and embodiment.
4. Case studies do not usually emphasize the relationship between the scholar and the case under discussion, especially the embodied relationship between scholar and subject that creates a living case. Plath’s work is especially helpful in dealing with the last possibility.

The heavy weight of Plath’s biography can make it difficult to locate a fully embodied Plath, a non-objectified Plath. Students who encounter one or two Plath poems in high school or college can understandably reduce Plath to the suicidal bodies she presents in her most famous works. Readers and Plath enthusiasts need to maintain enough distance from Plath and remain mindful that aspects of her life will remain concealed. This is particularly difficult in Plath’s case since her writings and life “haunt our culture” as Rose explicates.¹⁸ Plath’s thousand pages of journal entries present a lively and vivid subject, one Ted Hughes found too real

¹⁸ Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (London: Virago Press, 2014).

immediately following her death.¹⁹ In addition, our technological age seeks to understand and reveal everything. Philosophers usually have the opposite problem and maintain too much distance from case study subjects. In order to avoid both problems, case studies demand that we remain attuned to our perceptions, emotions, movements, thoughts, and the spaces between these areas of existence.

When we attune ourselves to an artwork's rhythms, and silences, we become better able to hear how an emphasis on efficiency and usefulness block out more poetic ways of relating with case studies. I contend that scholars should treat ethical and literary case studies as artworks understood as singular and irreducible happenings. Rather than viewing case studies and biographical narratives as mere illustrations or resources, we need to attune ourselves to what is being revealed in the hidden depths of our engagement. Heidegger's understanding of materiality and artworks is helpful here. For Heidegger, an artwork made of bronze does not simply utilize bronze within its space. On the contrary, artworks reveal themselves as if we are seeing their materiality for the first time; this is why certain artworks can set up new worlds,

¹⁹ Hughes admitted he destroyed at least one of Plath's journals, and the first published version was abridged and sanitized. The unabridged journals reveal more of Plath's anger towards Hughes and others.

new ways of being.²⁰ For example, Brancusi's bronze statues enable us to see bronze in ways we usually ignore.

In order to further understand what Plath reveals in her writings, we must address what it means to reveal something at all. In "The Question Concerning Technology," Heidegger asks: "...how does bringing forth happen, be it in nature or in handwork and art?"²¹ Heidegger's emphasis on concealment is particularly important for understanding how Plath reveals truths. The German *Entbergen* "connotes an opening out from protective concealing, a harboring forth."²² For Heidegger, we become most fully human when we step back from the demands of what he deems metaphysical and calculative thinking. Then we can allow ourselves to dwell poetically upon the earth, sparing the earth and letting things be. In order to save the earth (spaces that are not entirely revealed and that shelter all that appears), we must "neither exploit nor

²⁰ Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 47: "To be sure, the sculptor uses stone just as the mason uses it, in his own way. But he does not use it up...To be sure, the painter also uses pigment, but in such a way that color is not used up but rather only now comes to shine forth."

²¹ Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, translated by William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 11.

²² Ibid.

exhaust it."²³ This step back moves beneath the demand for constant presencing that constitutes metaphysical thinking. Metaphysical thinking erases world and earth whereas the poet reveals them "in ways that retain depth and breadth, for the poet reveals the sky in its depth, with light and darkness and those twilight spaces between..."²⁴ The poet reveals the spaces between spaces filled with silence and darkness; filled with what Merleau-Ponty calls depth.

Plath discloses intermediary spaces and depth throughout her writings. She frequently brings forth images of disease, pathology, and disability to blur the borders between health and illness. She reveals the quiet depths between life and death through poetic subjects who are emerging selves-in-process. Even her suicidal bodies are not static or corpse-like as we witness from the speaker's dynamic ride in "Ariel:"

Something else

Hauls me through air—
Thighs, hair;
Flakes from my heels.

²³ Bruce Foltz, *Inhabiting the Earth: Heidegger, Environmental Ethics, and the Metaphysics of Nature* (Amherst: Prometheus Publishers, 1995), 165.

²⁴ Martin Heidegger, "Poetically Man Dwells," translated by Alfred Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 226.

White
Godiva, I unpeel—
Dead hands, dead stringencies.

And now I
Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas.
The child's cry

Melts in the wall.
And I
Am the arrow,

The dew that flies
Suicidal, at one with the drive
Into the red

Eye, the cauldron of morning.
(15-31)

Plath's insights about subjectivity as uncertain and dynamic help us understand that when we confront a case study subject that subject is also dynamic and emerging. Even in those places where Plath was not able to call forth these intermediary spaces, we can experience the limitations within a speaker's binary and reductive reasoning. One vivid example of this is when Esther imagines she must choose between motherhood and writing: "I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and grow black, and, one by

one, they plopped to the ground at my feet (*The Bell Jar*, 63).” Esther’s binary thinking and depression are connected and result in an inability to act or speak. Case studies—especially those dealing with death, suicide, and the body-in-pain--understood as artworks open us towards what Heidegger names “earth”; earth denotes concealed aspects of existence. Plath’s writings perform personal and public instances of commodification and self-objectification that usually remain hidden, including the intimate spaces of marriage, domestic life, and doctor-patient interactions. Her knowing self-objectification displays phenomenological hyper-reflection that places her poetic voice between the two extremes of modernism and post-modernism. Plath reveals an embodied voice at odds with cultural narratives that sought to silence it. Plath reverses Descartes’ project by giving us a first-person, quotidian embodiment that still includes pathology, suffering, and disease.