

Plath Profiles

Plath and Place

Essays, Poems, and Artwork

‘I Had Never Felt So Native To A Country’:

A Portrayal Of Sylvia Plath As A Tourist Poet In Spain¹

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*“... the memory of this Spanish summer turns in our mind with a blaze of color and light like
an inward sun, to warm us through the long winter” (UJ 264).*

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Introduction

The works of Sylvia Plath have received considerable attention by both the critics and the readers, especially since the moment of her death in 1963. Much has been said about her poetry, fiction and non-fiction, all of which have equally received the attention of those interested in unveiling the mysteries underlying the mechanisms of such a delicate artistic conscience. Her only novel, *The Bell Jar* (1963) still arouses all kinds of reactions collected in numerous studies; her non-fiction is thoroughly examined trying to trace back reminiscences in the fiction texts; and her poetry does not stop gaining weight every day. However, there is a particular moment in the life of Sylvia Plath that has been unjustly overlooked: her honeymoon in the summer of 1956.

Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes married June 16, 1956 in London. After that, they met Plath's mother and brother in that same city, then visited Paris, and finally the couple left for Spain. The newlyweds arrived in Madrid, the capital of Spain, and immediately left for Benidorm, a coastal town in the region of Valencia. They spent part of July and the month of August there, and in September they went back to England to visit Ted Hughes' family in Yorkshire.

Some scholars have addressed this topic briefly. On the one hand, Linda

Wagner-Martin just mentions it in her biography (1987); Nancy D. Hargrove also analyzes several aspects of Plath's poetry concerning this period in her suggestion of a new chronology of the poems (1992); also, Julia Gordon-Bramer attempts a challenging new reading of these poems, focusing on the not so obvious layers of signification that may be found (2014); Lynda K. Bundtzen addresses Plath's non-fiction and Ted Hughes' poetry to further explore the role of food in her literary production (2010); lastly, Erica Wagner interestingly addresses the matter in her study of Ted Hughes' *Birthday Letters* (2000). Despite these examples of studies upon Sylvia Plath in Spain, I find, however, that very little attention has been paid to the period itself and the particulars of this far from negligible experience. In actual fact, Plath and Hughes' sojourn in Spain was worth, in Plath's opinion, more than a few poems.

On the other hand, Pasqual Almiñana Orozco did account for Plath's stay at Benidorm in an interesting essay (2011), but was more concerned with tracing back the geographic steps Plath took than analyzing the works themselves. Also, the edition of the journals he consulted is the first and current Spanish translation, corresponding to the abridged *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* (1982). Although he assesses the existence of an unabridged edition, the one elaborated by Karen V. Kukil in

(2002), since it is not translated into Spanish, he bases his study in the previous one.

For all these reasons, I consider it necessary and interesting to take a second and broader look at the matter from the original sources and a more literary approach. Therefore, for this paper I intend to draw both readers and critics' attention to some of Plath's most remarkable poems in terms of local color. My ultimate intention is to reassess the importance of looking closer at this underestimated part of the poet's early literary production as compared to her later texts.

1. Honeymoon in Benidorm

How Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes came up with the idea of visiting Benidorm, it is hard to know. There are certain relevant connections between them and Spain, particularly as regards Ted Hughes. As Yvonne Reddick explains, Federico García Lorca is considered one of the most significant poetic influences on Hughes' poetry (2013: 687). Also, during the 1956 summer, Plath describes, Hughes had been working on an anthology of Spanish poetry (UJ 259).² Accordingly, it is more than likely that it was Hughes who had heard

about the place and decided to visit it for their honeymoon.

Be that as it may, the fact is that Sylvia Plath's stay in Spain was one of the happiest periods of her life. Plath herself accounted in her journal for this "Perfect mental and physical well-being" she was feeling (UJ 249). This situation was possible due to several reasons: above all, she was euphoric about her new husband, of whom she thought they were little less than a match made in heaven. She thought of Hughes as a "male counterpart of myself" (LH 264). Also, she was very excited about the possibilities that this new country offered: firstly, a weather that she found utterly pleasant. It possibly reminded her of her grandparents' cottage right next to the sea on Point Shirley in Winthrop, Massachusetts, where she spent so much time in summer. As Wagner-Martin notes, baby Plath was very early delighted by the pleasures of sun at the beach. Thus, it is no wonder why the coastal town of Benidorm haunted her senses from the very beginning. She explained to her mother that, as soon as they saw the village "like a small, sparkling dream town, I felt instinctively with Ted that this was our place" (LH 262). This is probably why Plath did not think of Spain merely as a vacation place. She told her mother that Ted was applying for jobs in Madrid (LH 256) and he even submitted an application while in Alicante (UJ 255). At the very

² I will use the following acronyms in the present paper: UJ for The Unabridged Journals; LH for the Letters Home; CP for The Completed Poems; and BL for Birthday Letters by Ted Hughes.

least, they had plans to stay longer, until the end of September (LH 263), but by the end of August they had spent all their savings and they had to leave for Hughes' hometown in Yorkshire. This circumstance is accounted for in the poem "Departure." Moreover, according to Wagner-Martin, when Plath and Hughes separated, Plath had been playing with the thought of moving to either Ireland or Spain (Wagner-Martin 1987: 225), but eventually moved to London. Finally, another reason why she especially liked the place is that it was a gorgeous yet quiet place to write. A couple of years had to pass still for Benidorm to become the massive tourist destiny of nowadays. In spite of that, Plath complained that groups of people would stop in front of her balcony to watch her type her typewriter (UJ 248), but, as Orozco notes, this was not very likely (2011: 88). Plath and Hughes, just like the rest of European tourists that were spending their summer holidays there, equally drew the attention of the suggestible population of such a secluded town.

While a tourist, it is undeniable that Sylvia Plath was, before anything else, a writer at heart, and as such, she had a special intuition for details. Plath made an outstanding job at distilling and capturing the real essence of the Spanish society, and locals would feel blessed to recognize themselves in the lines of the poet. This shows how

tremendously sharp and observant she was regardless her detached position, that of a short-term tourist.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of her literary production about Spain is her treatment of color. In her letter of July 7 to her mother, she expresses for the first time her enthusiasm for the unbelievable colors of the landscape: "the colors we saw from the train window all the way down were brighter than I thought possible ... blazing yellow, tan and light-green fields under a blue-white sky, green-black pine trees, white adobe houses with orange tile roofs" (LH 261). This fascination constitutes a key motif of the Benidorm poems. They demonstrate how heavily Sylvia Plath relied on color, both literally and metaphorically. Not only is the Spanish landscape flooded by vivid vibrant colors that allow the reader to get a fair glimpse of it, but also the Spanish people and costumes are beautifully characterized, and she was perfectly aware of it. She actually told her mother about a very interesting project, "a local-color article" (LH 263) specially written for the publication that would later publish it, *The Christian Science Monitor* in 1956, alongside some of her most locally-based drawings, one of three sardine boats, a reminiscence of Benidorm's fishing character, and one of the cliff and the houses over the sea from where another view of the town could be perceived.

1.1. Benidorm: Spain Yesterday and Today

Benidorm is a coastal city located in the province of Alicante, in the Valencian region, in eastern Spain. Its privileged location, with beaches facing the Mediterranean Sea and mild weather all throughout the year, alongside the convenient amenities, have made it one of the most renowned destinations in Europe for the so-called "Sun and Beach" tourism. It receives around five million tourists every year, attracted by its iconic skyline formed by impressive skyscrapers and numerous hotels on the beachfront, and it counts with a native population of 75,000 people all year long (Mazón Martínez 2010: 9). This enormous growth started in 1956, when Pedro Zaragoza, the mayor of Benidorm at the time, initiated a challenging land-use planning so as to promote the urban expansion of the town with regard to the business and touristic sectors (2010: 12).

Funnily enough, if the curious reader tried to find now the place in which Plath and Hughes spent their honeymoon, they would feel puzzled. Where is the small quiet town where the couple found peace to write and intermingle with the locals? Until then, contrarily, the Benidorm that they visited was little more than a fishing and agricultural village with 1,700 inhabitants in 1950 (Mazón Martínez 2010: 11). As Plath wrote in a letter to

her mother, her first impression about Spain was that it was "utterly agricultural or sheep and bull country" (LH 261). In order to understand the whole picture, it is important to bear in mind that the political regime of Spain in 1956 was a dictatorship headed by general Francisco Franco. Even Plath accounts for the evident presence of the police force: "guardia civil in black patent-leather helmet & heavy green uniform biked past" (UJ 254). This system lasted from 1939 to 1975, and prevented Spain from developing towards a more modern and technological society. During these years, Spain kept an eminently agricultural culture, mainly in the rural regions surrounding big cities. Plath also described Benidorm's atmosphere as "a strange mixture of clean, colourful poverty" (LH 262), because despite the deplorable conditions in which some of the areas were, there was this sort of natural "joyfulness" that was very appealing to the poet, and in spite of the manifest neediness of Spanish society, great projects were being set into motion, and thus she says that Benidorm, "except for the hotels, is utterly uncommercial", yet it is obvious that little by little it was "being discovered by tourists" (LH 262).

1.2. Non-Fictional Plath: Letters and Journals

Apart from the Benidorm poems, the letters Sylvia Plath sent to her mother

and her own journals are our main sources of information. As Aurelia Plath accurately said, these are “radiant letters, when love and a complete sharing of hope and dreams acknowledge no limits” (*LH* 247). As a matter of fact, just like the poems, the letters that Plath sent to her mother and the notes she took in her journals are full of life. She had no time to let herself sink into any kind of breakdown because everything around her was new and stimulating, and everything was worth capturing for later literary reconsideration.

As a general rule, the letters always show an optimistic Sylvia. Enthusiastic compliments to Hughes are always present, as well as descriptions of the several tasks into which she engaged herself. Another reason to pay special attention to this period is that, as Aurelia Plath acknowledges, Plath was remarkably productive: “Sylvia produced many articles, sketches, and poems” (*LH* 247).

The couple did not stay away from the native lifestyle, which they embraced with pride, to the extent that Plath had recognized a few days earlier, on July 7, that she had “never felt so native to a country as I do to Spain” (*LH* 261). Their moving to the second apartment after their awful experience at widow Mangada’s cottage, of which we will talk about later, contributed greatly to this: Plath records in her journal her

relief for having been able to change the noisy crowded and full of hotels boulevard for “our native quarter” (*UJ* 247). Completely adapted to the environment, she describes in the letter on July 25 their daily routine: how they wake up early, and after having “café-con-leche”, they go to the market to get fresh fish. After lunch, they go to the beach “for a siesta and swim”, and after supper, they “walk through the moonlit almond groves toward the still purple mountains” (*LH* 265).

As for the journals, as opposed to the overall tone of these in precious years, that of a woman who seems to be unable to be naturally happy, we barely find during this period any sign of negativity in her mood. Also, as one may guess, Sylvia Plath’s journal is not only an outpouring of personal experiences in the traditional sense, but also a piece where to find notes she took in order to remember those details later when she sat to write, and even bits of the fiction she was working on. Here we find the story of Marcia, a woman on her way to Spain by train, where Sylvia Plath was already applying her knowledge of the Spanish culture, with Spanish vocabulary and also details of the landscape that stroke her during the first days.

One of the first contacts that Plath and Hughes had with the locals was, as Plath named her, widow Mangada, a woman whose family name was Mangada and

who had an apartment for rent. As Mazón Martínez explains, some of the inhabitants of Benidorm used to move to the countryside in the summer so that they could rent their houses to the crescent waves of tourists, and thus be able to inflate their little income (2010: 12). This is how Sylvia Plath described the classic Spanish apartment:

Doors consist of a swaying curtain of long beaded strips which rattle apart with the entry of each customer and let in the breeze, but not the sun. In the bread-shop, there is always the smell of fresh loaves ... A shining array of aluminum pots, pans and cooking utensils hang on the wall; one washes dishes and vegetables in large marble basins, scrubbing them with little snarled bunches of straw. All cooking - - fresh sardines fried in oil, potato and onion tortillas, café con leche ... is done on the blue flame of an antique petrol burner ... vines wove green leaves in the railing; a palm and a pine tree grew alongside shading one side ... She [Widow Mangada] had amassed a great quantity of white china places, cups and saucers in the formal diningroom. (UJ 239-41)

The moment when Plath really flourished, however, was when they changed to their second apartment.

The couple felt relieved that they had been able to find a better place than Widow Mangada's, for which they paid more money for a house they had to share with more people and in which the appliances did not work very well. The rent of the second apartment was lower and they did not have to share their space with anybody else. This made Plath feel renewed also creatively:

I also feel a new direct pouring of energy into my own work, and shall break the jinx of my story writing this week, trying the bull-fight story and perhaps one on Widow Mangada (funny?) ... also an article, with sketches, on Benidorm for the Monitor. Must learn Spanish and translate French, too. (UJ 249)

The most recurrent topics in her ideas about Spain for later literary pieces was the bull-fight they attended while in Madrid, about which she eventually wrote the poem "The Goring," and also their awful experience with the widow, which culminated in the short story "Widow Mangada," published in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* (1952).

After leaving Benidorm, once established back in Cambridge, where Plath was supposed to resume her Fulbright program, she explained in a letter to her mother the reason why Ted rejected the idea of getting back to

Spain to work. He was back in London, among other reasons, because Plath's status as a Fulbright grant recipient would not allow her to get married, and she explains that being separated was unbearable to both of them, "SO: Spain is out" (LH 281).

2. Benidorm Poems

The poetic persona of poems such as "Alicante Lullaby" or "Southern Sunrise" is far from the renowned artist that sought shelter and found her most brilliant expression in intricate, disturbing rhetorical figures and suicidal characters. Contrariwise, what we read in these pieces is a passionate, powerful voice. Every single occurrence during the honeymoon leads to a highly suggestive and inspirational atmosphere for Plath. As opposed to her later creations, the mood of these poems is light-hearted, and always fervently captivating, accompanied by a lively and bright vocabulary. Despite the dark shadows that can be inferred in between her symbols, or, more straightforwardly, in her poem "The Goring," for example, markedly obscure and gruesome, we cannot forget that these are to be regarded as elements that hallmark Plath's poetry and life, and that they make even more outstanding the unusually gleaming tone of the Benidorm poems.

In this sense, scholars have not reached an agreement as to which poems are

explicitly referential to Benidorm. According to Gordon-Bramer, the poems that are most widely included in this group are: "Southern Sunrise," "Alicante Lullaby," "Dream with Clam-Diggers," "Epitaph for Fire and Flower," "Fiesta Melons," "Spider," "The Goring," "The Beggars," "Departure" and "The Other Two." However, she does not mention "The Net-Menders," which is, in my opinion, one of the few that clearly alludes, with no doubt, to Benidorm, because of its motif, the old women waiving nets, who had a great impact on Plath, as we can tell from her exhaustive recollections in her journal.

Another issue regarding this matter is that it is very hard to determine the date in which they were written. On the one hand, Ted Hughes' main criterion for rearranging the poems that would be published in *The Collected Poems of Sylvia Plath* was their theme. Consequently, all of these poems, except "The Other Two," were considered as 1956 poems. On the other hand, Hargrove argues, a more detailed examination of Plath's documents reveal several inconsistencies in this classification. Hence, the most accurate attempt to date Plath's poems from this period, is Hargrove's. As she interestingly notes, Plath describes plenty of details of her stay in Benidorm in her published letters and journals, and also in some of the unpublished sources, namely a

small datebook known as *The Cambridge Pocket Diary* for 1955-56 (Hargrove 1992: 266). As opposed to this fact, there is not much recorded information about the poems she wrote about her Spanish experiences, which suggests that these were probably composed later in time (1992: 271). In any case, whether Plath initiated and completed them while in Benidorm or a couple of months later, is not a decisive factor concerning the topic of this paper. What is truly important is to be able to appreciate, as Plath put it, the "local color" of these pieces.

Moreover, not all of the poems are equally engaged with the traditional aspects of the country. This means that, while poems like "The Goring" or "Alicante Lullaby" are obvious examples of cultural display, other poems such as "The Spider" or "Dream with Clam-Diggers" seem to be more focused on the inner world of the poet. Of course, this thematic difference is related, among other reasons, to the date in which Plath composed the poems, being inspired by either more recent experience or a recollection of more vanished memories.

This being said, the poems I have chosen for close reading and elaborate short studies, are the following: "The Goring," "Southern Sunrise," "Fiesta Melons," "The Net-Menders" and "Departure." Regardless of the already mentioned datings, I have decided to

arrange my short studies of the poems in a more chronological sequence of the facts, that is, their attendance to the bullfighting in the first place, the celebration of several aspects of the Spanish lifestyle afterwards, and their departure.

2.1. "The Goring"

Sylvia Plath found a great source of inspiration in the bullfight that she and Hughes attended in Madrid. "The Goring" is about that hot afternoon in which she could finally witness the renowned "ceremony" of "ritual death" that Ernest Hemingway so largely praised, although she finds that it is not so. Instead, she realizes that the "obese, dark-faced" "picador" stabbing the bull is nothing like an "artwork" (CP 47). In the letter she sent to her mother on July 14, she told her that she and Ted felt outraged because their sympathy was all for the bull. The couple expected the epitome of a ferocious face-to-face confrontation between the man and the beast. What they found instead was a gruesome spectacle in which a noble animal was constantly distracted by other cape-wavers so that the picador riding a horse could get closer and stab the bull on the neck without killing it. The interesting thing about the poem is that the bullfight is not what Plath calls "the goring" The goring is the redeeming act that happens next, the purging sacrifice where Plath, as opposed to the

horrified "mob," finds the true art. The goring is the poetic justice for the unfair slaughter. In her own words, "The most satisfying moment for us was when one of the six beautiful doomed bulls managed to gore a fat, cruel picador ... he was carried out, spurting blood from his thigh" (LH 263-4).

What makes "The Goring" such a beautiful poem is that it is a faithful portrayal of the intensity of emotion of the poet. It is a composition that oozes fierceness even from the vocabulary chosen. The heat of the situation and motionless time are palpable in the first image, the "dull redness" is imprinted in the "arena" like rust. The action hastens towards the middle of the poem, when the picador appears. The poet enumerates his garish attributes at a fast immediate pace, "rich yellows, tassels, pompons, braid," emulating the confusion that the animal endures. The vengeance of the creature, as opposed to all the human artificial paraphernalia that the poet considers as "not artwork," is "fluent as a dance." The last rushes of blood are released "faultlessly," probably not appreciated due to the "crowd's truculence." The poem ends with a condemning image: the "sullied air" may have been "redeemed," although the show is nothing but a demonstration of "the earth's grossness."

2.2. "Southern Sunrise"

The colors of this poem are not as bright as Plath's usual range in the Benidorm poems. On the contrary, they are mild and smooth, in order to evoke a sweet sunrise, perceived still from the mists of dream. Therefore, the line "lemon, mango, peach" (CP 26), which also alludes to Plath's fixation with fruits: she loved to cook, and she loved wandering the street markets of Benidorm to buy fresh food every day. The stunning image "green crescent of palms / Sends up its forked / Firework of fronds" seems to resound overtones of celebration and fertility. Also, the allusion to the balcony from which she can see the bay relates to her description of the first apartment where they stayed in Benidorm: "facing the cool blue blaze of the bay, was more than we had dreamed ... balcony terrace, perfect for writing: vines wove green leaves in the railing; a palm and a pine grew alongside shading one side" (UJ 239). This sunrise is limpid and impeccable, "quartz-clear," just like the houses of the streets of the Spanish towns: "the tiny village ... immaculate white houses and streets" (LH 262). Lastly, keeping with the fruit metaphors, the "red watermelon sun" rises to close the poem with intensity and passion.

The images in "Southern Sunrise" are peaceful and tranquil. It is hard to suggest an alternative meaning for any symbol to try and find the melancholic tendency of the author. This seems to have been written during one of the

couple's first awakenings in Benidorm. However, as Gordon-Bramer interestingly notes, there is not a bay called "Angels' Bay" in Benidorm. The one to which the author might be referring is the French bay "Baie des Anges," perhaps an intermingled recollection of the time Plath spent in France with Richard Sassoon, the man she was in love with before Hughes (Gordon-Bramer 2014: 71).

2.3. "Fiesta Melons"

In "Fiesta Melons" ("Party of the Melons"), the poet accounts for one of her favorites pastimes: wandering the street market of Benidorm to fill her straw basket with fresh goods. Upon the observation of the market, "spread out on the beaten dirt square" (UJ 248), she focuses on the huge amount of melons. She rejoices in the different types, as if it were an exhibition of the superb diversity of nature. It is hard for her to choose one among them, but finally gets to "Bowl one homeward to taste" (CP 46). The following image is one of the most outstanding as regards its local color: "the whitehot noon". The fact that Plath utilizes the color "white" instead of red or orange or any other color more usually related to heat (just like she did, for example, in "Southern Sunrise") makes it especially evocative of the blinding effect of the sunbeams when they reflect on the white walls of the houses, and the high temperatures of the scorching Spanish summer. It is

also very remarkable how she accounts for this inspirational experience with the melons in her journal: "new green honeydew melon: not as good as yesterday (probably, by freak of fortune, the best most delectable melon in the world), wild cold honey-flavored melon-flesh; creamy texture, refreshing, sweet the way sunlight would taste, coming through the clear glassy green bulk of waves" (UJ 258). The way she puts it, one might think of this little pleasure as something close to a mystical experience. Her raw notes, later condensed in the poem, create a highly synesthetic effect. There is a change in the tone of the poem marked with a colon, which seems to delimit the moment of simply beholding the melons, in which the poet focuses on describing the physical appearance of the fruits, and afterwards, when the persona has tasted the melon that was chosen previously. Now, a new dimension of compound terms open to classify them, coming into play the rest of the senses: there are "Cream-smooth," "Pink-pulped" or "Bump-rinded," all of them ornamented with strings of seeds "To strew like confetti" in this festival of an inebriated population of "melon eating / Fiesta-goers."

2.4. "Alicante Lullaby"

This is a very enjoyable poem triggered by Plath and Hughes' visit to Alicante. Not very far from Benidorm, on their

way to Alicante, they passed Villajoyosa,³ of which Plath says that it is “more industrial; passed lots of garages; business just starting” (UJ 254). As we can see, as they get closer to the capital of the province, the quietness and solitude of Benidorm vanishes. In her journal, Plath describes the city of Alicante as follows: “beach, short, packed with people so thick under gaudy striped umbrellas that you couldn’t see water ... noisy avenue of palms; ... traumatic night walk along quays, and sleepless blaring room” (UJ 254). In the poem, Sylvia Plath plays with different alliterations to imitate the melodies of the city in order to compose a song full of infectious rhythms: the resounding “bowl,” “barrels,” “Bumblingly,” “nubs,” “cobble” (CP 43); the crackly “ramshackle,” “scuttle,” “crowns,” “cackles;” or she addresses acoustic phenomena with more specific vocabulary, as in “fizzle,” “sibilant,” “susurrous.” All these exotic sounds, however, become a maddening “Cacophony” when the couple is trying to sleep. In the partial quietness of their room, it is hard to distinguish the concrete noises, but the “cadenzas” can still be heard. They never seem to end until the poet, with her “head on the

³ The name of this town is probably the one that inspired Plath when she was writing the short story “Widow Mangada,” in which the protagonists spend their honeymoon in a fictitious town called “Villaviento,” a composed word that stands for “Windy Villa.”

pillow” realizes how it all becomes a “Piano, pianissimo” buzz that ends up working as a lullaby.

2.5. “The Net-Menders”

Another memory she recorded in her journals is the motif of this poem: “Old tanned wrinkled women sit out in chairs at the cool of the day far into the twilight, their backs to the street, weaving thick rope nets or fine sardine-mesh. They are clad completely in black stockings, dress, shoes, and even, for town shopping, a black mantilla” (UJ 247). There are many typical Spanish aspects depicted here. The first of them is that it is typical in towns that widows dressed in black permanently after their husbands or sons died, which explains why the “three net-menders” are “Dressed in black, everybody in mourning for someone” (CP 121). The second aspect is that in summer, when the sun sets and it gets cooler, old women get their chairs and put them in front of the door of their houses, the back to the street, and gather together to chat until very late at night, thus the lines “They set their stout chairs back to the road” Tomás Ortuño, the street where the couple’s second apartment was located, when the sun makes “purples the fig in the leaf’s shadow,” and until “the moon leans over the lead sea”. They “face the dark,” because the night starts to fall. Their favorite pastime is gossiping about their neighbors and the entire world, so that “Their eyes

revolve the whole town like a blue and green ball". Therefore, "Nobody dies or is born without their knowing it" because they know everything.

What makes this poem a brilliant composition is the introduction of Greco-Roman mythology, which Sylvia Plath absolutely loved. She even recorded in her journal the information about the mythological motif she would use later: the Parcae (UJ 575). These goddesses were said to control the Threads of Destiny, so that they decided the destiny of every soul by weaving their threads. With this in mind, the poem acquires a new dimension. We realize that the three net-menders are in reality the three Parcae, weaving threads to confection the nets that lead the lives of the intrepid fishermen who are their husbands or sons. They "face the dark" because there is really nothing until they compose it. That is also why "Nobody dies or is born without their knowing it," because the three net-menders control it, and therefore, they "Twist old words into the web-threads."

2.6. "Departure"

Of all the poems we have seen so far, this is perhaps the one that seems the least cheerful, according to its subject. The first three lines contain the last hues of a prosperous past time, in which the poet describes the last glance at the apartment before she leaves. The

greatest part of the color of the poem is concentrated here: the "figs" are green, also the grapes, and the tiles are "brickred" (CP 51). The last line of the stanza addresses the problem bluntly: "The money's run out." A profound disillusionment can be read among these words, and the rest of the poem gets shaded by grief. The poet feels the vibrant Spanish nature in a very different way now: it "compounds her bitters / Ungifted, ungrieved, our leavetaking" to accompany the lovers on their way out of Paradise. The following lines convey a somehow distressing description of the vista of Benidorm: "The scraggy rock" upon which the sea "Beats" in a "brutal endlessly" manner.

Other than the sorrowful subject, the reason that may explain the unusual gloomy mood of the poem is that, as Hargrove notes, the most likely date of composition is much later, around July in 1958. This hypothesis gains strength in the following line: "Retrospect shall not soften such penury." It sounds certainly detached in time, as if the poet were reconstructing that moment at a distance which is insufficient to blur the "penury" that she so closely experienced. Furthermore, in the journal entry of July 17 she mentions that she has written a few poems, two of which are about Benidorm, and that are "deeper, more sobre, sombre (yet well colored)" (UJ 410), attributes that

perfectly fit the characteristics we have analyzed here.

3. Conclusion

After a closer look at Sylvia Plath's letters, journals and poems, it seems sensible to assume that she absolutely loved every aspect of her Spanish experience, and those that upset her, at least could be used as materials for her literary works. The fact that Plath got back to her memories of Spain in later periods of her life demonstrates that the Spanish lifestyle left a firm impression on her. Her sojourn in Spain infused in her a full range of sensory impressions that enhanced her tendency to focus on strong emotions. In this case it could be suggested that the Spanish poems were a sort of training ground for her later poetry.

Nonetheless, we cannot ignore the other side of the coin. The episode described in her journal entry on July 23 is very disturbing. Probably the result of a bitter argument with Ted Hughes, she speaks about "two strangers. Two silent strangers" that have gone reluctantly for a walk, and one of them struggles with the insistently mentioned "wrongness" that "grows in the skin and makes it hard to touch" (UJ 250). Besides, Kukil indicates that the first part of this entry, typed on a separate leaf, is missing. This occurrence casts a shadow over the "perfect" honeymoon of the couple. Also, as it is widely

acknowledged, Sylvia Plath was fairly hyperbolic when it came to writing letters, especially to her mother: she tended to either magnify a more modest reality or omit certain aspects she did not want her mother to know about. Last but not least, Plath is also known to pose great, unrealistic expectations upon which she grounded her fragile mental wellness, with the subsequent disappointments and frustrations.

In her study *Ariel's Gift: Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath, and the Story of Birthday Letters* (2000), Erica Wagner analyzes Ted Hughes' account, which we can read in his book of poems composed on the death of Plath, *Birthday Letters* (1988), and she argues that indeed it was Hughes who enjoyed Spain the most while Plath felt outraged all the time. In relation to this, one of Hughes' poem, titled very boldly "You Hated Spain," claims that it was he who "felt at home" in Spain (BL 39). He assesses that "Spain frightened you." The key for this understanding is in the following line: "Your schooling had somehow neglected Spain." As Hughes saw it, Sylvia Plath was an American born and raised girl that was not ready to deal with the outer regions beyond her college education. This would explain her hatred towards the bullfight and the poor living conditions of their first accommodation. On the other hand, the poem called "Drawing" tenderly depicts what should have been a more

average day. In this poem, Hughes nostalgically remembers Plath while she drawing the market of Benidorm: "We were familiar / foreign objects ... Everybody crowded to praise your drawing" (BL 44). In any case, there is no reason to doubt the genuineness of Plath's enthusiastic recollections in her journals, her most personal and sincere production. Hughes goes on to say that "You drew doggedly on, arresting details, / Till you had the whole scene imprisoned. / Here it is. You rescued for ever / Our otherwise lost morning." In her Spanish poems Sylvia Plath took a firm hold of the art of capturing sensory perceptions: color, textures, flavors, light, among others, which she would later develop in her mature poetry.

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