

A “Memoir on choosing to be the ‘One’ who ‘sits’ or ‘the [O]ther, without’”

by Sarah Josie Pridgeon

“I, sitting here brainless as if wanting both a baby and a career but god knows what if it isn’t writing. What inner decision, what inner murder or prison-break must I commit if I want to speak from *my true deep voice* in writing ... and not feel this jam up of feeling behind a glass-dam fancy-facade of numb dumb wordage” (Sylvia Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, 1975:469, emphasis added)

“Over the countless “images” of all that has once been, now heaped together and merged into an indeterminate featureless mass, there reigns *Persephone* – the eternally unique” (Carl G. Jung and Carl Kerényi, *The Science of Mythology*, 1949:147-148)

Sylvia Plath’s works continue to resonate with women irrespective of their age and life stage. Looking deeper, her oeuvre, which ended in 1963, portrays the phases of the feminine; the unavoidable junctures women experience intra- and inter-personally as they advance from child to adolescent, young adult to adult, to woman or mother, grandmother. This is a memoir of my first encounter with Plath’s work and an attempt to explain the reason why her art and life continue to be a timeless source of inspiration, fascination and encouragement to myself and other women.

Carefully dressed and spritely punctual, I took a seat in the lecture hall and awaited my first class of the semester. I had been a student at the University of the Free State for 4 years. In

Bloemfontein, South Africa, the winters are ruthless and the summers even more so. The extreme temperatures build both character and muscle with the initial shedding and later adorning of layers of clothes. Luckily for me, the winter was slowly subsiding. The rest of the class rustled in and found their seats. My first lecture was a 3rd year undergraduate English Literature class which started off with an introduction to the Confessional Poets. I sat patiently, my module guide opened and my pencil sharpened. I waited for the lecturer to walk in.

In swept Doctor Brooks, tall, bold, and with a certain gusto that assumed authority without demand. I immediately thought of an acclaimed rockstar. She appeared to be in her mid-40s and she looked incredibly hip with her black leather jacket, silver-peppered chic bangs and watery blue eyes. Without makeup, and without pretence, she swooped behind the podium and slumped her baggy black handbag and pile of books on the counter. She wore bright blood red lipstick, round, bulbous gold earrings with equally loud gold bangles that clattered and clanged when she spoke. It was the first time I had ever seen her and I was reminded of a bright, iridescent firefly, somehow unfairly caught in the unfamiliar epoch of 2013.

The class sat still and alert, like a clan of meer-

kats that had been startled by something unusual. "Today we're going to look at women poets from the 1950s," she announced. She opened her book. We promptly mirrored her actions. "Turn to page 159," we then fervently flapped through our pages until we arrived at the heading, 'Sylvia Plath'. "Ah, yes, let us start with 'Two Sisters of Persephone',¹" and the lesson began. "Two sisters there are: within in the house/ One sits; the other, without..." As she continued to read the poem, something stirred in the room.

Two girls there are: within the house
One sits; the other, without.
Daylong a duet of shade and light
Plays between these.

In her dark wainscoted room
The first works problems on
A mathematical machine.
Dry ticks mark time

As she calculates each sum.
At this barren enterprise
Rat-shrewd go her squint eyes,
Root-pale her meager frame.

We all sat in silence, hanging on each word she read. "Rat-shrewd go her squint eyes,/ Root-pale her meager frame..." I noticed, through furtive glimpses, that she read the poem with reverence, an attitude that we seemed to mimic. She purred her "r's" in a way that conveyed a deep appreciation of language that only those with an affinity for expression and communication can understand. She seemed to savour the words as she read them.

It seemed as if we were witnessing a secret performance that was being rehearsed for the grand debut. Something significant was happening. Overtly, a lecturer was reading a poet's work to the class. Latently, there was a stirring, and perhaps it was an unconscious one. It was

¹ Sylvia Plath, 'Two Sisters of Persephone' in *The Collected Poems* (United States: Harper & Row, 1956).

the transference of arcane yet intuitive and accessible knowledge. It was an awakening, or a revival. It was the telling of an archetypal story that resounded fully and deeply among the listeners. We sat, enraptured.

There are, in effect, two callings women hear. We can consider the first woman in the poem; we can study a trade and find a job. We can pursue our metaphorical "mathematical machine" and establish a career in a "dark wainscoted room". We can develop our minds professionally through whichever occupation gives us meaning, harness and develop ideas and inspirations. During the course of this singular investment, as we determinedly pour our energy into "[calculating] each sum", our other un- or over-used faculties will begin to give way. From persistent use our eyes may become "squint", our "frame" "meagre" and "pale".

As a result, Plath warns that this choice may be a "barren enterprise", where eventually, the "[d]ry ticks [that] mark time" will also secretly foster resentment at concentrating on a career at the cost of denying other pursuits. If we consider the word "barren", it points to a womb that is unused, uncultivated. Perhaps, after committing solely to the advancement of a career, towards the end of life we will realise that this path is unfulfilling. Atrophy results and, "turned bitter/ And sallow as any lemon", the lonely career-woman is, in fact, a "wry virgin to the last". Again, if we reflect on the word choice "virgin", like "barren", it suggests a lack of female experience or exploration of a faculty created for use. Lonely, with only the fruits reaped from her work, she "[g]oes graveward with flesh laid waste,/ Worm-husbanded, yet no woman". By concentrating solely on mental and intellectual development, our other faculties remain uncultivated, nascent.

Alternatively, and in no particular order, we can court, marry, bear children, furnish a house,

cook, feed, foster and nurture. This is the calling that the second woman responds to. It is an equally worthwhile pursuit, with an equally important function in society, despite its former traditional, secondary allocation to the second sex². Our corporeal and carnal faculties will be accessed and nourished; our sensual, emotional and physical needs will be aroused, explored and fulfilled as they arise.

Bronzed as earth, the second lies,
Hearing ticks blown gold
Like pollen on bright air. Lulled
Near a bed of poppies,

She sees how their red silk flare
Of petaled blood
Burns open to the sun's blade.
On that green alter

Freely become sun's bride, the latter
Grows quick with seed.
Grass-couched in her labor's pride,
She bears a king. Turned bitter

To envision the illustration of the second sister, we can become "[b]ronzed as earth". Our senses are awakened and galvanised. Unlike the former "dry" and "pale" sister, we "[burn] open", explore our sexuality, fecundity, and let our "red silk flare". We court, couple and "[grow] quick with seed". We foster birth and nurture precious progeny. We produce one/many fine and unique creation/s from our flesh. This is also fulfilling, it is "labor's pride", a fruit of another kind.

"She sees how their red silk flare/ Of petaled blood/ Burns open to the sun's blade..." rumbled Dr. Brooks's voice. Suddenly, she looked up from the text. "And they say that women 'shouldn't' wear white pants when they menstruate!" she exclaimed, with sudden vigour. "What nonsense! Absolute rubbish, really..." She held her palms facing upward in earnest and her bangles clanged with an incensed enthusiasm that I found would later become her

² I refer to Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (France: Vintage, 2009), first published in 1949.

hallmark. "Wear whatever pants you want!" she preached as she banged her fist on the counter.

I looked around the room to see the girls giggling self-consciously while the boys shuffled in their seats. The girls had suddenly found it of utmost importance to avert their faces and search for something in their handbags, or examine their notes. "In fact," she continued non-plussed, "women should celebrate when they're having their period. They should jump up and down with joy. It means, your body works! Isn't that fantastic!" She smiled. This revelation rippled among my classmates who looked shyly at Dr. Brooks. I smiled too, agreeing that this sentiment cohered with the second sister's message.

Women, innately abstruse, ambiguous and ambivalent by design, endeavour to balance these inherent opposites throughout their lives. We walk a fine line with this perpetual predicament. In our attempt to reconcile these dichotomies we make a crucial choice, not without literally life-changing ramifications. To choose one at the cost of another; or to take and balance both. There are two roads that women can travel. Which sister shall we choose to be, in our house? The one who "sits", or the other, "without"? "[B]arren" or "[b]ronzed"?

Both vocations are creative, and women create. By design, we can incubate and nourish from inception to birth. We can house and sustain a seed until it ripens, foster its development and enrich its life. The proclivity to nurture and shape our surroundings and make life beautiful shows how women are inherently 'pregnant' with life and possibility. In woman exists the bounties of nature and creation. This benevolence and positive potential can be manifested through forms that the qualities represent. Women have the ability to tap into the Amazonian for strength, the Matriarch/Wise Old Woman for wisdom, the Queen for sovereignty, Earth Mother for vitality, the Female/Princess Hero in

finding her life's quest and many more traditional and mythical archetypes.

However, women can also destroy. The other side of the double-edged sword comprises an equally resourceful disposition which can spite, scorn, corrupt and demolish. She can incite, beguile, seduce and conceal. She can rumour monger, sow seeds of doubt and insecurity; her malice can cause boundless suffering to achieve her own desires. These qualities are effectuated through a power-hungry Evil Queen, a possessive and vain Evil Stepmother, a lustful and subversive Seductress/Temptress, a subversive Lady Macbeth, a Munchausen by proxy mother. Fairy tales, myths, folk stories and tales are not too far fetched in their representation of these qualities.

Likewise, as the speaker demarcates, we can "play" a "duet of shade and light" between these two or more faces. We can "play" out our roles and identities as our personalities evolve. We *can* create both: a family, home, children and career. We can access and "burn" into all our faculties. But "can", does not guarantee quality of life, or wholeness. Creating or choosing one option destroys, or reduces, achieving the full manifestation; the totality of the other. More than any other writer, Plath portrayed and developed the psychic tension that resulted from these conflicting, innate drives.

Women can marry into motherhood at the cost, or at least temporary suspension, of the development of their career. Or, women can divorce from the natural, primordial compulsion to procreate and hone their energy into their work and other relationships. On such a crossroad, they can split in two and walk both distances halfway, never reaching either in their full capacity. The two sisters can be seen as tropes typifying two contrasting and immiscible extremes, where the solution perhaps lies somewhere in between.

On the other hand, encountering this inevitable

juncture doesn't distress all women. It is not the 1950s after all and most women are equipped with the knowledge of, for example, *The Feminine Mystique*³. They are capable of balancing their conflicting, innate and very female desires and needs. However, it only bothers those who want more. It troubles those who, like Plath and her autobiographical character, Esther, are "determined to 'have it all'" (Wagner, 2000:7), or, as Esther's boss Jay Cee states in *The Bell Jar* (1963): "She [Esther] wants [...] to be *everything*" (Plath, 1964:97, emphasis added). Likewise, Esther expresses this desire herself later on in the autobiographical novel, "I wanted change and excitement and to *shoot off in all directions* myself, like the coloured arrows from a Fourth of July rocket" (Plath, 1963:79, emphasis added).

Dr. Brooks paused before reading the last stanza. The class waited. Then she looked up meaningfully and read the final lines:

*Inscribed above her head, these lines:
While flowering, ladies, scant love not
Lest all your fruit
Be but this black outcrop of stones.*

This inscription presents the crux in every woman's narrative. Plath was especially articulate about the dual nature of woman. Written in 1957 at the age of 25, as one of her earlier poems, it presents the relevant and inevitable choice(s) every woman will make. In essence, the speaker warns that, in life, there is always a sacrifice, and she counsels us to choose wisely. The tone of the last quatrain is indeed as grave as the inscription upon the second sister's tomb. It is a timeless poem that presents the conflicting urges within women, with the characteristic tension and hunger with which Plath writes. It is also an exemplary poem to introduce Plath's *oeuvre* and her era.

3 I refer to Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (United States: W. W. Norton and Co., 1963). This book was released the same month as Plath's death, and it is a testament to the culture and era of American women.

Plath presents us with choice. By sketching the two feminine extremes in this oracular poem, she depicts a detailed panorama for her readers. She shows them their options so that they will make their decisions wisely. Equally, she counsels that it is our responsibility to give our lives meaning and purpose through whichever choice(s) we make. We must make peace with our choices and live without regret or resentment.

"Now let us read Lady Lazarus," Dr. Brooks announced. She logged into the computer and searched on YouTube while she spoke. She rattled away at the keyboard, pushing buttons here and there. "Aha! Plath can read this to us herself. How wonderful." She clicked on a link⁴ and a deep, proud, inescapably American voice began to read the poem.

During a pause in discussion, or to create effect, Dr. Brooks would ring her hands upwards and gently tug at her hair with a sense of urgency. Her bangles would sparkle and clang like a chorus of spirited school children. To me, this echoed the underlying intensity in the poem. She listened carefully while the recording played. We did the same. Plath read her poem with a chilling bravado, a sangfroid that boasted power. The cool voice performed its art while my classmates and I sat very quietly and listened.

I was fortunate to have been introduced to Plath's work by an inspirational lecturer who understands and appreciates it. Dr. Brooks easily articulated the messages in Plath's work and gave relevant depth and insight into her poems. Plath's poetry is challenging to teach to students. Her work is confessional, meditative, tormented, existential and seer-like, the prop-

⁴ Below is the link for the reading of an earlier version of 'Lady Lazarus' in 1962: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LkK2fwZfVjA>

erties of which catalyse into an anfractuous and highly concentrated plethora. It also requires, I believe, life experience and for the reader to have endured some degree of suffering to be able to understand⁵. Plath used her own mental and physical struggles in two ways: as material for the content of her work and as an impetus to stimulate the creative process.

A panoramic view of Plath's work portrays a lineage of specific symbols; throughout her development as a writer and woman, certain images and symbols in her work can be seen as milestones or portents that foreshadow significant stages in her writing and life. This complexity was also understood by Ted Hughes. Of the "substance and patterning" of her poems, Hughes (in Plath, 1960:16) states that "... her writing depended on a supercharged system of inner symbols and images, an enclosed cosmic circus". These "symbols and images" are timeless and potent.

Plath studied the work of Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung, founder of analytical psychology. Plath states in her diary that she found "confirmations of certain images" in her "Mummy story", when reading Jung's work (Plath, 2000:154). As such, I have found that his theories are highly applicable and valuable when analysing her work. Given the potency and relativity of the symbols and archetypes Plath uses, a Jungian reading of her work is immensely applicable and enlightening. Jung (1982:126) states that "These are three essential aspects of the mother: her cherishing and nourishing goodness, her orgiastic emotionality, and her Stygian depths". Further, elsewhere in *Plath Profiles*, Jungian analyst Susan Schwartz (2011:55-56, emphasis added) identifies Plath's interest in Jung's work: "... his concepts of the collective unconscious, the *archetypes* and the use of symbolic imagery". Perhaps the two polarised destinations on

⁵ For example, hospital patients found solace in reading Plath's poems about physical and mental health during their recovery (see Moraski, 2009).

a plane, i.e. the two sisters, portray a continuum of archetypes woman can access.

Like the moon, women wax and wane; like flowers in seasons they bloom and wither. Plath's personas portray the many identities that women grow and shed. They are archetypes that she captures and portrays either explicitly or implicitly in poems such as 'Two Sisters of Persephone' (1956), 'Medusa' (1962), 'Lady Godiva', 'Lyonesse' (1962), 'Lady Lazarus' (1962), 'Lorelei' (1958), 'Spinster' (1956), 'The Other', 'Cinderella' any many more. She also acknowledges and addresses 'Barren Woman' (1961), 'Heavy Women' (1961), 'Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices' (1962)', 'Childless Woman' (1962), *all women*.

Plath captures these phases and faces with an ease and accuracy unlike any other writer, and she explores them without pretence and affectation. She explores them *confessionally*. And she has written, I argue, more dynamically and deliberately about women than any other writer, viscerally investigating the various archetypes and identities vicariously in her own life and work.

In 1959 Plath (2000:502) wrote, "Forget myself, myself. Become a vehicle of the world, a tongue, a voice. Abandon my ego." She tirelessly sought "woman-wisdom" (Plath, 2000:450) and she shared her findings. This is also the reason women and scholars find echoes and reflections of Plath's themes such as existential inquiry, mental and physical illness, identity construction, nature, relationships and cultural ideologies in their own lives; they find support and empathy in her voice.

It is, in effect, reflective in her audience's ethos. It is the "[h]aunting", as Jacqueline Rose (2010) so accurately described; a primordial and collective "[m]ythology" as Judith Kroll (2010) captures. Titular in both of their studies, such a

haunting and mythology result from the above-mentioned "tongue" and "voice" in Plath's work that both resonate with and pique her reader's curiosity. Plath's work embodies familiar stories and patterns relevant to woman.

In an attempt to describe the attraction to her work, many adjectives come to mind: macabre, ambivalent, intense, melancholic, anxious, violent, and intense; notwithstanding the often overlooked eager, witty, lively, diligent, passionate, compassionate and courageous attributes of her work. Above all, and most importantly, Plath was hungry and she was driven. The juggernaut of her work shows her tireless pursuit to explore each role and identity possible, to appease her "unitive urge" (Smith, 1972), evident in Plath's dedication to her art. It is indicative of what daughter Freida Hughes describes in *Sylvia Plath: Inside the Bell Jar* (2018) as "phenomenal work ethic", by which she should be remembered. Plath's work took time to gain traction

To conclude, even today, Plath's is indeed a voice "[t]hat will not be still" (Plath, 1975: 35). The attraction in her writing is in fact much more than a symbol, metaphor, conflict, quote or character. It is her voice.

"And that's it for today, ladies and gents" she announced into the still, entranced lecture hall. "Next lesson we will discuss Anne Sexton and she'll tell us all about how poetry led her by the hand out of madness!"⁶ The hive of students began steadily rousing themselves. She flicked off the projector, plucked her open books from the podium's surface and flumped them into her handbag before sweeping out into the corridor.

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