

"A wind of such violence / Will tolerate no bystanding": Sylvia Plath, *Ariel*, and Mental Illness

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According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, a publication regulated by the American Psychiatric Association, at least five of the following symptoms must be regularly active in a patient in order for them to be diagnosed with Major Depressive Disorder: a depressed mood (particularly in the morning), fatigue or loss of energy, feelings of worthlessness and/or guilt, impaired concentration, insomnia and/or hyposomnia, markedly diminished interest or pleasure in activities, recurring thoughts of death and/or suicide, a sense of restlessness or being slowed down, and significant weight loss or weight gain (webMD.com). Whether a patient decides to receive treatment or not, it is unarguable that this disorder is a life-altering condition; one either becomes consumed with their overwhelming, negative mental experiences or they become tediously occupied by maintaining an appropriate pharmaceutical regime. The legendary American poetess, Sylvia Plath, suffered from this diagnosis; at age thirty she would commit suicide in her London, England home. There is no doubt that a life-long battle with depression was a paramount cause of the writer's death; those who are unaffected by depression do not typically possess the mental capability it takes to go through with killing themselves. Even those who do suffer from depression and/or suicidal tendencies do not truly have the desire to die, but rather the desire to end their feelings of hurt and deterioration (Smith, Segal, Robinson). But what implications did Plath's depression have on her creative process and on her poetry? Literary and psychoanalytical studies have shown a direct correlation between Plath's use of precise, intentional structure, bold, grotesque imagery, and consistent, unique voice and her mental instability; this is especially evident in her final collection *Ariel*.

In 2001 Dr. James C. Kaufman further investigated the relationship between mental illness and creativity. While this topic had been previously explored by psychologists all over the world, Dr. Kaufman believed that "such research is often fraught with methodological problems, including selection bias, controls that are not blinded, reliance on biographies that might play up mental illness, retrospective designs and unclear definitions of creativity" (Smith-Bailey). In an

attempt to revise these errors Dr. Kaufman completed two psychological studies: Study One involved 1,629 writers of all major literary genres (fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and play-wrights) and both genders; Study Two had a more specific target group and studied 520 eminent women (including poets, fiction writers, non-fiction writers, visual artists, politicians, and actresses). The writers were chosen based upon their association to either *A Reader's Guide to Twentieth-Century Writers* or *Webster's Dictionary of American Authors*. The study included a total of 882 fiction writers, 603 of which were male and 279 were female, 437 poets, 350 of which were male and 87 were female, 147 play-wrights, 126 of which were male and 21 were female, and 163 non-fiction writers, 132 of which were male and 31 were female (Kaufman 41). The conclusions of this study revealed much more detailed results than many of the previous ones. Dr. Kaufman employed a statistical tool for research known as *logistic regression*; this was the most appropriate methodology because it caters specifically to categorical variables ("Logistic Regression"). He also took into consideration pre-existing conditions the writers may have such as signs of mental illness or personal tragedy as demonstrated in the second table of the study entitled "Means and Standard Deviations of "Setback" Variables for Four Groups of Writers." The results proved that "female poets were significantly more likely to be mentally ill than any other type of writer" and that "male non-fiction writers were significantly *less* likely to experience personal tragedy than any other type of writer" (Kaufman 42). This idea has been identified by other researchers before. Since his research is consistent with previous conclusions, Dr. Kaufman decided to perform another study which explores a possible explanation as to why "female poets ... have such a high rate of mental illness relative to their fiction-writing gender counterparts" (Kaufman 43).

The women chosen to participate in Study Two were selected based on their associations to the *Webster's Dictionary of American Women*. This study was also further diversified by including the aforementioned professions along with journalists, visual artists, politicians/public officials, and actresses. Following the same essential methodological practices as Study One, the results revealed that "female poets were significantly more likely to be mentally ill. In addition, female poets were significantly more likely to experience personal tragedy than were any other type of eminent woman" (Kaufman 44-5). Even though Study Two emphasizes the importance of personal tragedy versus mental illness, both of Dr. Kaufman's studies have one statistically-sound, similar conclusion: female poets are significantly more likely to exhibit signs of mental

illness. This idea has been psychologically recognized as "The Sylvia Plath Effect." Since Plath is "one of the most gifted and troubled poets in the sample ... and has suffered from severe depression and attempted suicide" the title is every bit appropriate (Kaufman 46).

But what makes poetry such a "depressive" genre? Many, including Dr. Kaufman, believe that this may have to do with the uniquely personal and therapeutic nature of poetry. To understand this concept fully, one must also understand the concept of "locus of control." Locus of control refers to the extent to which people believe they have the ability to control the events that affect them" ("Locus of control"). People who have an internal locus of control believe that events in life derive from their own actions; people who have an external locus of control blame other things as the cause for their status, e.g. the things themselves. Dr. Kaufman writes:

Poetry, especially, is seen [as] an art linked to having some sort of a "muse." Even if such a misattribution results from superstition or modesty, it may produce a perceived external locus of control. Poets may mentally assign credit—and, indirectly, their locus of control—to such a muse, inadvertently placing themselves at a higher risk for depression and other emotional disorders. And women, especially those suffering from low self-esteem, may be more likely to have external, rather than internal, loci of control. (Kaufman 47)

As demonstrated through the themes of *Ariel*, Plath's muse appears to not just be death, but also the idea of re-birth and its relation to identity.

Ariel serves as both one of Plath's most critically-acclaimed collections as well as one of her most controversial. The root of the controversy stems from the collection's original 1965 publication—a reorganization of material by the late poetess's estranged husband Ted Hughes. "Hughes took out about a dozen poems from the original manuscript and added about a dozen poems ... and was criticized in some quarters as if his editing amounted to suppression" (Upton 260). A notable figure who disagrees with this accusation is Frieda Hughes, the daughter of Plath and Hughes; she is also the woman responsible for the Foreword and publication of *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, a re-release "reinstating [Plath's] original selection and arrangement" as stated on the cover. "[She] calls the publication of the original manuscript an attempt to release Plath's art again, an art that, unlike her life, 'was not to fall.'" She concludes: "Each version has its own significance though the two histories are one"" (Upton 260). This is certainly refutable as many people, including myself, believe that the author's intention naturally prevails. As noted by Tim Kendall, Plath's original manuscript *Ariel* was supposed to begin "with the word 'love' and end

with the word 'spring' ... the collection, had it been published in that form, would therefore have pursued a message of affirmation: the poet had survived her harsh emotional winter" (Kendall 23). Everything about construction of a poem should be intentional; it is logical that a renovated structure would impact the overall meaning of the work. In the facsimile of Plath's manuscript it is revealed that she had originally intended on ending this collection with her series of "bee poems;" This includes "The Bee Meeting," "The Arrival of the Bee Box," and "Stings" and "Wintering." However, in "I / Have a self to recover': The Restored *Ariel*," Lee Upton admits:

By sealing off Plath's original ending and concluding the book with some of her most despairing poems, Hughes extended the emotional tenor of the manuscript toward despair and a haunting inevitability. The result is that the first published *Ariel* is a more dramatic manuscript, its ending mirroring the tragedy of Plath's final decision about her own life. As a work of art it is more powerful than Plath's original manuscript ... Hughes gave us an extended view of Plath's range as a poet. (Upton 262)

Despite these structural differences, something we cannot overlook as readers is the striking quality of each poem Plath produces: their power, psychology, and poetic prowess.

The relationship between the poetry of *Ariel* and Plath's personal life is feverishly influenced by her mental instability. In "Lady Lazarus" Plath expresses her poem through the lens of a dramatic monologue. Perhaps she chose to construct the poem under these conditions because of her belief that "the audience must be brought closer to the dual experience of suffering and transformation" (Rosenblatt 142). It is because of this monologue-esque presentation that we as readers feel we are a close audience of Plath's, sharply listening to her inner-most emotions as she broadcasts them to our ears off stage. "[The poem] jump[s] with hallucinatory rapidity from mind to world, from life to death, and back again" (Rosenblatt 144). Plath's desire to actively incorporate her audience can be seen through her use of hasty imagery and form-fitting colloquialisms. The poem opens with obscure and intense visuals: "a Nazi lampshade," "fine Jew linen," a "full set of teeth" (Plath 14). The rapidity of these images are paralleled by the poem's incredible use of enjambment and abnormal syntax. There is a certain sense of urgency in her content that may make some readers feel shocked or baffled:

I am only thirty.
And like the cat I have nine times to die.

This is Number Three.
What a trash
To annihilate each decade.

What a million filaments. (14)

But why do we feel a connection to these absurdities? Perhaps it is due the shock we feel from gathering her sorrow; perhaps it is because of the sharply brave way in which Plath accounts for these feelings and images: fearlessly, concisely. Or maybe it stems from "her treatment of fantasy and reality as interchangeable aspects of mental life places her closer to the actuality of contemporary existence than would any rationalistic assumption or theory" (Rosenblatt 147). This idea has actually been addressed by the poetess herself. In a 1961 BBC broadcast Plath said: "A poem can't take the place of a plum or an apple. But just as a painting can recreate, by illusion, the dimension it loses by being confined to canvas, so a poem, by its own systems of illusions, can set up a rich and apparently living world within its particular limits" (Markey 109). Plath's drive to work through a "system of illusions" indirectly comes from her desire to escape her own reality and the tiring, mental tirades that assassinate the mind of the clinically depressed.

Plath further addresses the influence depression has had on her life and poetry in the poem "The Applicant." The poem is very much like an interview, mirroring the pedantic practices of psychologists who are meeting a patient for the first time. The fact that this poem is about an 'applicant' applying for a wife could be a reflection of Plath's, an acknowledgment of how serious the help people who are mentally ill must seek; a wife is a very serious relationship in a man's life and is not a material object like a car or a loan. This psychology can be seen in the first stanza of the poem where Plath lists other disabilities one might face:

First, are you our sort of person?
Do you wear
A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch,
A brace or a hook,
Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch,

Stitches to show something's missing? (Plath 11)

She then mimics the response of those who do not have to live with the ghosts of depression:

No, no? Then
How can we give you a thing?
Stop crying.
Open your hand.
Empty? Empty. (11)

The only consolation that is offered beyond therapy are pharmaceuticals; they are supposed to be an

instant fix. According to Plath scholar Susan Bassnett, "Marriage for the applicant will be insurance, a protection forever against unpleasant things" (Bassnett 98). This parallels the role of medication in the lives of those suffering from mental illness; ideally once a patient is on medication for Major Depressive Disorder, their medical strategy includes keeping them on that medication so long as it presents no physical danger. The long-term effects of this regime can be noted in the lines:

Naked as paper to start

But in twenty-five years she'll be silver,
In fifty, gold.
A living doll, everywhere you look. (Plath 12)

Plath then employs a combination of repetition and anaphora in order to show the mechanics of these effects: "It can sew, it can cook / It can talk, talk, talk" (Plath 12). The fact that the wife is referred to as 'it' allows the reader to see Plath's disassociation between her subject and humanity. This is an interesting contrast when comparing it to her desire to enhance audience participation through her syntax; this poetic tactic is described by Jon Rosenblatt:

Plath found the twentieth century to be an era of dehumanization and violence that requires of the poet an extraordinary openness to suffering. Only by forcing the reader to face his own suffering through the poem can the realities of our metaphysical, psychological, and social moment be experienced. The poet's [...] therefore becomes representative of the personal crisis in modern life, and his [or her] own experience of confusion and pain becomes exemplary. (Rosenblatt 143)

Readers are unable to ignore this connection; "it's [their] last [and only] resort."

Plath describes a situation in which she attempts to flee the slavish realms of her conscience in the popular poem, and inspiration for the title of her collection, "Ariel." The poem tells the story of a woman who has an existential experience while riding a horse toward the horizon, the fiery wrath and beauty of the sun. The poem ultimately "draws [readers] into [a] beautiful aural and visual universe against [their] will" (Rosenblatt 146). The poem is heavily reliant upon the images it casts. These images are so vital to the poem because of their direct influence on its abstract, syntactical construction; it is as if each stanza runs into the next while concurrently increasing the rapidity and intensity of the words and phrases. We are first given a declarative statement: "Stasis in darkness," then we are introduced to the Plath's second image of this series: "Then the substanceless blue / Pour of tor and distances" (Plath 33). This image is easily associated with the feelings a patient may experience when initially recognizing the tentacles of a depressive episode. The fact that Plath uses internal rhymes (in both the poem and collection) suggests that there is something simplistic about this

transition, almost inexplicable. This feeling, though simple, is also tragic and touching to the reader:

...the neck I cannot catch,

Nigger-eye
Berries cast dark
Hooks—

Black sweet blood mouthfuls,
Shadows. (33)

This technique can also be seen in the opening of another famous *Ariel* poem, "Daddy." Plath writes:

You do not do, you do not do
Any more, black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot for thirty years, poor and white,
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo. (74)

The use of rhyme "Daddy" however is not serving the same purpose; here Plath has attempted to mimic a story-like rhyme in order to emphasize the element of blind love, much like the way children blindly love nursery rhymes. This idea identifies itself within a psychoanalytical scope: "The poem exploits Freudian psychology which argues that the child is, at some stages in its development, 'in love' with the parent. The girl reacts with hate for her father who has made her suffer by dying at such a point in her development" (Aird 79). Similarly to the way in which one could think of the fictional nature of nursery-rhymes as somewhat of a form of escapism (from a realistic perspective), one could also view Plath's marriage to Ted Hughes as an escape from her emotional issues dealing with her father's death. Plath acknowledges this in "Daddy" when she writes:

And then I knew what to do.
I made a model of you,
A man in black with Meinkampf look

And a love of the rack and the screw.
And I said I do, I do. (Plath 76)

The poem as whole however is not necessarily a means of escape, but rather a symbol of re-birth. The two may seem similar but they are certainly fundamentally different in their goal: to "escape" implies that the climax of the experience lies within the journey of leaving a present state; "re-birth" implies that the climax of the experience lies within the arrival to the new perspective or ideology. In this poem the relationship between the girl (and Plath) and her father (and Otto Plath) is comparable to the relationship between Plath and her illness. Eileen M. Aird describes it as: "that of torturer and tortured" (80). This is further explicated through the poem's fixation on Nazi imagery and action: "Every woman

adores a Fascist, / The boot in the face, the brute / Brute heart of a brute like you" (Plath 75). This excerpt identifies with the Plath's current state of existence; the re-birth is seen in the last lines of the poem:

There's a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always *knew* it was you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through. (76)

There are instances in *Ariel* in which readers can distinguish the feelings of hypomania being exuded by Plath. Hypomania "refers to periods of over-active behavior," typically involving extreme feelings of negativity ("Hypomania"). One poem in particular that supports this idea is "Lesbos." The setting for this hypomanic incident is discussed early in the poem, the negativity mirrored in the language:

...windowless,
The fluorescent light wincing on and off like a terrible migraine,
Coy paper strips for doors—
Stage curtains, a widow's frizz.
And I, love, am a pathological liar,
And my child—look at her, face down on the floor. (Plath 38)

We are then introduced to an anonymous 'you,' the entity behind the source of this apparent bitterness. It would make perfect sense that a chemical imbalance would be the muse behind such violent imagery:

You have stuck her kittens outside your window
In a sort of cement well
Where they crap and puke and cry and she can't hear.
...
You say I should drown the kittens. Their smell!
You say I should drown my girl.
She'll cut her throat at ten if she's mad at two. (38)

Even though these are the actions of 'you' we as readers must keep in mind that all characters are creations of Plath's, an extension of her more than capable mind. In some cases, though it is more common with people who suffer from bipolar disorder, there can be random rays of hope in between the despair; this is mirrored in the end of the first stanza:

I should sit on a rock off Cornwall and comb my hair.
I should wear tiger pants, I should have an affair.
We should meet in another life, we should meet in the air,
Me and you. (38)

Immediately after this pattern-break we are brought back to the reality of the situation. Plath also

begins increasing the amount of end-stopping, possibly demonstrating the choppy and panic-stricken thoughts that occur during episodes of hypomania. She writes:

Meanwhile there's a stink of fat and baby crap.
I'm doped and thick from my last sleeping pill.
The smog of cooking, the smog of hell
Floats our heads, two venomous opposites,
Our bone, our hair. (39)

Plath even discusses the implications of when a person feels they are disassociating from their self; this idea dually addresses an attempt of re-birth based on the choice of detail:

In New York, Hollywood, the men said: Through?
Gee baby you are rare.
You acted, acted, acted for the thrill.
The impotent husband slumps out for a coffee.
I try to keep him in,
An old pole for the lightning. (39)

The re-birth is attempted when 'you' becomes the main character in poem who "acted for the thrill." For the rest of the poem we are under the impression that this is perhaps a poem where the woman is talking to an alternative persona. These personae are not only different, but more specifically opposing. "In fact, everything ... conspires against any meaningful relationship" (Markey 22). Since Major Depressive Disorder is a life-long illness we are left with the hopelessness of the speaker: "I am still raw. / I say I may be back. / You know what lies are for" (Plath 40).

The psychological term for the opposite of hypomania, which is also experienced in patients with Major Depressive Disorder, is *hypermania*. This means that the patient experiences an unexplainable boost of abnormally happy behavior. While this may seem less common in patients, it is only because it is a much more sporadic experience. This experience is manifested in the short poem "You're." The poem is about a fickle idol of happiness in Plath's life: her children. While Plath has often contemplated in her journals about how the role of motherhood essentially slowly diminishes her ability to fulfill her needs as a writer, she also often has stated that her children are the sole reason for fragments of joy in her life. The diction is certainly much more positive than many of the other *Ariel* poems and smilingly promotes the power of love. The fact that the title of the poem actually collaborates with the first line promotes the idea of motherhood; the title is the parent to its "product," the actual poem. Plath writes: "Clownlike, happiest on your hands, / Feet to the stars, and moon-skulled, / Gilled like a fish ... O high-riser, my little loaf" (Plath 77). While "clownlike," "moon-skulled" and "gilled" are not words one can find in the dictionary, their creation by Plath may be

implying the power children have on their mothers; they conjure up abilities in a woman she may not even know she has, abilities not recognized by others. Stereotypically to every mother their child is "Right, like a well done sum;" however only to Plath, a woman very aware of her distinct psychology has a child been described as, "A clean slate, with [their] own face on" (77). Another poem that exhibits hypermanic undertones (which is also about one of her children) is "Morning Song," the first poem of the collection. Once again, love appears to be the motive: "Love set you going like a fat gold watch/ ... And your bald cry / Took its place among the elements. / ... Magnifying your arrival. New statue / In a drafty museum ..." (5). It is interesting to see how due to the dramatized emotions of individuals with Major Depressive Disorder that even a "happy" poem is so mesmerized by a prominent intensity. The descriptions of beautiful things have a sorrowful tone because they seem so sporadic to the depressed mind:

I'm no more your mother
Than the cloud that distils a mirror to reflect its own slow
Effacement at the wind's hand.

All night your moth-breath
Flickers among the flat pink roses. (5)

An issue that mentally ill people sometimes have with sentimental moments such as this is that they are a haunting reminder that happiness is achievable, just not at their will.

In the poem "Elm" the immediate image that comes to mind is the type of tree. Traditionally symbols of nature have been associated with life; the irony in this poem is that it seems to almost be directly discussing the tribulations of mental illness. The poem begins: "I know the bottom," she says. I know it with my great tap root: / It is what you fear. / I do not fear it: I have been there" (27). We as readers can observe the fluidity of every idea because of the repeated use of colons; while they are serving their appropriate grammatical function, they could have also been replaced by different punctuation. The syntax, like in almost every Plath poem, is intentional. Even if these feelings may seem trivial to the person experiencing them, depression disallows the desired disassociation. We see one of her most recognizable quotes on the minions of the mind:

A wind of such violence
Will tolerate no bystanding: I must shriek.
...
I am terrified by this dark thing
That sleeps in me;
All day I feel its soft, feathery turnings, its malignity.

Clouds pass and disperse.

Are those the faces of love, those pale irretrievables? (27-28)

There is now an even greater connection between nature and emotion; man does not control nature and yet here Plath is, fixating on the joy of those who are uncontrolled and then controlling them through her innately dark perspective, her art. The audience sympathizes with her pain even though only a select percentage of can truly understand it; regardless, the idea of sorrow "nightly [flapping] out / Looking, with it hooks, for something to love" is something any emotionally-equipped individual would recognize as existentially horrifying (28).

Ariel has a distinct ability to "entice us into a kind of death—the experience of abandoning our bodies and selves" (Rosenblatt 147). The decision to abandon the self is made by the individual once they have chosen to read the poem; that is the "body." However, the re-birth, as a reader, begins once we begin to interpret the poem and assign a distinct value or meaning to it; that is the "self." The fact that Plath is aware of the psychological manipulation within her writing not only showcases her intelligence, but also an enhanced sensitivity due to her mental illness. While it might appear critical, it is simply a factual matter: Plath's depression is a characteristic of her poetic perspective; biologically, it is impossible for it not to be. This does not mean that the depression *is* the writing as it only implies it plays an intricate role in its production. This is perhaps why "I" is such a central figure in the collection. "The "I" of the poems invites the reader both to witness and to identify with her as she undergoes extreme experiences. Because the self is alternately depressive and aggressive in Plath's work, the reader must identify" (Rosenblatt 146). Being that the self is also a major thematic component within the collection, it is appropriate that the poems would exhibit "I" quite often. Plath has a way with turning the self into art, technically and poetically:

And I
Am the arrow,

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

Eye, the cauldron of morning. (Plath 34)

We can hear the faint undulations of the "I" beneath almost every other word: "flies," "suicidal," "drive," "eye." It is because of this wonderful consistency that Plath's writing has been widely-recognized in the scholarly world as extremely intentional and precise.

When Dr. Kaufman performed adequate research as to why poets, and then specifically female

poets, are more feverishly subjected to personal tragedy and mental illness he opened a realm of understanding for the psychological and literary communities alike. Dr. Kaufman states that these statistics will help psychologists and psychiatrists help "...young female poets at risk so they can better cope with their muse instead of letting it swallow them. Armed with knowledge, psychologists can do more for potentially troubled writers" (Kaufman 48). Among the literary society, scholars and analysts can now have a deeper understanding behind the motives of writers who suffer from mental illness and the background of content. The fact that Plath suffered from Major Depressive Disorder illuminates why the poetess focused on poetic techniques such as repetition, abnormal syntax pattern, sporadic internal rhymes, graphic imagery, and dramatic figurative language. Readers are introduced to the individual beyond the author and are able to gain insight into her psychological and metaphysical personae; an amazing aspect of this ability is that it was all intentionally created by Plath herself.

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