

What Sylvia Plath Means to Me: A Memoir

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Sylvia Plath first became really important to me in February 2011, when someone donated a copy of *The Bell Jar* to the community center of the apartment complex where I live.

I have long been interested in what could be called "Cosmic Spirituality," a way of seeing the connection to the cosmos beyond our narrow materialistic world-view. I have been working for many years on a series of novels collectively called *The Light of Titan*, about an artist of the mid twenty-first century whose work illuminates the reality of the connection to the universe; she is the first artist to journey to Titan, the big moon of Saturn, which in these stories is home to an ancient alien civilization.

What does this have to do with Sylvia Plath? The artist in *The Light of Titan* is a poet as well as a painter; I am also a poet and I have written a number of poems in the persona of this fictional artist. I have written other poems, and I strive to be rather deep and spiritual. For many years I had heard of Plath, but knew little about her, but what I knew left a deep impression on my subconscious; I still remember seeing the TV documentary about her in *Voices and Visions* in the 1980s, but until I started studying her after that chance discovery of *The Bell Jar* in 2011, I never realized how great her influence on my poetry had been. I had been writing Plathian poems for years without being aware of her deep influence! My latest book in *The Light of Titan* series, *Down to a Sunless Sea*, has many allusions to Plath, and on at least two occasions in this book, the contemplation of Plath's poems (especially the poem "Mystic" with what I see as an uplifting ending) prevents the main character in *The Light of Titan*, the fictional artist Justine Des Jardins de Chartres, from killing herself!¹ This artist in *Down to A Sunless Sea* also does a series of paintings based on Plath's poems. She calls this series *Homage to Sylvia Plath*. Unfortunately, I am not an artist, and, since these paintings exist only in this work of fiction, I cannot provide copies of them to *Plath Profiles*. I can, however, indicate what poems these paintings illustrate.²

For the past two years, I've become more and more awe-struck by Plath's poetry. The beauty of her poetry is startling and often unearthly. Her mental problems did not stop her from

¹ Plath's poem saves Justine from suicide in Howard, Thomas, *Down to a Sunless Sea*, Amazon.com, 2012, Chapters 5 and 13 – this book, like my other books, is an unpaginated ebook available on Amazon Kindle.

² Howard, *Down to a Sunless Sea*, Chapter 14 – the poems illustrated are "Magnolia Shoals," "Electra on Azalea Path," "Point Shirley," "Two Campers in Cloud Country," "The Moon and the Yew Tree," "Ariel," and "Mystic."

writing some of the most beautiful poetry I have ever read. Her best poetry still sends shivers down my spine. I think the best first line of a poem in the English language is the first line of "The Moon and the Yew Tree." Poems like "Black Rook in Rainy Weather" (1956), "Elm" (1962), "The Night Dances" (1962), "Wintering" (1962), and "Mystic" (1963) show a deep connection to the cosmos, and that life will go on, with its deep meanings that connect us to a cosmic unity that is much greater than ourselves.

My brother and I made two trips to New England in 2011 and 2012, and portions of these trips could be considered "Plath Pilgrimages." In October 2011 we stayed for a little while in the Holyoke-Northampton, Massachusetts area for a meeting with the Native Tree Society (an Internet group I belong to which celebrates and documents trees and old growth forests). It was my first visit to Northampton, and we arrived there on a day of flooding rain, a Plathian day if she is considered to be melancholy. We walked through the drowned gardens and pine stands of Childs Park, and I noticed a white pine reaching high into the sky next to the house on Elm St. where Plath and Hughes lived from 1957-58. The sight of this tree and the drowned gardens of the park inspired my poem "Childs Park, Northampton, Massachusetts In Memory of Sylvia Plath on Her Birthday" that was published in *Plath Profiles 5* last year. We also explored Smith College, which has one of the loveliest campuses I've ever seen. Thanks to Peter K. Steinberg's website, we located the buildings where Plath lived when she was a student there. Two days later, we, along with members of the Native Tree Society, visited the glorious white pine grove at the William Cullen Bryant Homestead in Cummington, Massachusetts. These one-hundred-fifty-year-old white pines tower over one hundred fifty feet into the sky, and some of these trees are dedicated to poets like Bryant, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, and Robert Frost. I suggested that one of these great pines be dedicated to Plath; I have heard nothing further about this idea.

My brother and I went on our second Plath Pilgrimage in August 2012. Our first stop was Northampton, where we re-visited Childs Park, and walked by the house on Elm St., and to my shock, I discovered that the tall pine that inspired the poem that was published last year, was gone; only a stump indicated where it had stood. Last fall I wrote a poem about this fallen tree, how a tree that I do not doubt gave Plath hope and inspiration, is now lost to our living world as she is. I do not know why this pine is gone, but we saw several storm-damaged trees in the area.

The next day we traveled to the Salem area, and spent some time touring Plath sites in her

native eastern Massachusetts. We stopped at the house in Wellesley, where she tried to kill herself in 1953, and the setting for much of *The Bell Jar*. I noticed a row of tall white pines standing along the side of the house; these trees definitely were there when Plath lived there. I think she loved pines, and she often mentioned them in her poetry.

After we left Wellesley, we went to her beloved childhood home of Winthrop, and Winthrop enchanted us as well. It was magical to be by the sea, especially as we live so far inland, and we could understand how living in Winthrop gave Plath a love for the ocean. We found the house where she lived, and from the beach near there, we, like her, watched the jets taking off and landing at Logan Airport.

We next went to the Point Shirley area, and that was even more enchanting, with its view of the ocean. We walked the same beach she walked, the same street she walked when she visited her grandparents, and there is no doubt we walked by the right house. But we made a mistake as to which house Plath's grandparents lived in; my misinterpretation of Streetview and the photograph of the house in Ronald Hayman's *Death and Life of Sylvia Plath*³ led to an erroneous conclusion, so we mistook another house for the house that Plath's grandparents lived in. It turns out that we parked near the right house, even walked by it, even saw the unique stones she refers to in "Point Shirley," but none of that registered, so convinced was I that I had the right house.

Needless to say, another Plath Pilgrimage is required, and I would like to further explore where Plath was on the Massachusetts North Shore. I used to live in Salem, and used to often go to the neighboring towns of Marblehead and Swampscott, towns where Plath spent much time. I think she must have visited Salem, but I have not seen any reference to her going there. That should be an interesting topic for research. Was Plath ever in Salem?

Plath loved trees and wrote many poems in which trees figure prominently. Some of the poems in which trees are important include: "Mayflower" (1957), "On the Difficulty of Conjuring Up a Dryad" (1957), "On the Plethora of Dryads" (1957), "Virgin in a Tree" (1958), "A Winter's Tale" (1958), "Child's Park Stones" (1958), "Dark Wood, Dark Water" (1959), "Polly's Tree" (1959), "Two Campers in Cloud Country (Rock Lake, Canada)" (1960), "Parliament Hill Fields" (1961), "I Am Vertical" (1961), "Widow" (1961), "Stars Over the

³ Hayman, Ronald, *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath*. New York: Birch Lane Press, 1991, illustration facing p. 108.

Dordogne" (1961), "The Moon and the Yew Tree" (1961), "Little Fugue" (1962), "Crossing the Water" (1962), "Pheasant" (1962), "Elm" (1962), "Berck-Plage" (1962), "For a Fatherless Son" (1962), "Letter in November" (1962), "Winter Trees" (1962), "The Munich Mannequins" (1963), and "Mystic."

Plath's love for the ocean is palpable in her poetry, especially in "Point Shirley" (1959), which is the most beautiful poem about the ocean I have ever read. I am deeply moved by her other poems in which the ocean is important, poems like "A Winter Ship" (1959), "The Hermit at Outermost House" (1959), "Magnolia Shoals" (1959), "Blackberrying" (1961), "Finisterre" (1961), "The Babysitters" (1961), and "Berck-Plage." In "Suicide off Egg Rock" (1959), the "I am, I am, I am" captures the universal rhythms of blood and sea connected to a living cosmos (*Collected Poems* 115).

In the past two years I've collected a number of books about Plath and Hughes, including *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, edited by Karen Kukil (NY: Random House, Anchor Books, 2000), Sylvia Plath, *The Collected Poems* (NY: HarperPerennial, 1981, 1992), Sylvia Plath, *The Colossus* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008, first published by William Heinemann Limited 1960), Sylvia Plath, *Ariel: The Restored Edition* (NY: HarperPerennial, 2005, first published by HarperCollins 2004), Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (NY: HarperPerennial, 2005, first published by William Heinemann 1963), Sylvia Plath, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams and other prose writings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979, first published by Faber and Faber 1977), Ted Hughes, *Poems Selected by Simon Armitage* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000, 2004), Ted Hughes, *Remains of Elmet* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011, first published 1979), Ted Hughes, *Birthday Letters* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999, first published 1998).

I think of Plath as a shaman who could see the deep reality beyond, behind the reality of our daily lives, a shaman who sees the inner connections that make our lives possible. Plath could see these connections and she expressed them in her extraordinarily beautiful poetry. This awareness of a deeper inner reality gave her compassion for all things living, even the elm tree in "Elm," whose roots plumbed the depths of the underworld (in the ancient burial hill at Court Green which fed its roots), and also like the moisture-starved desert creatures in "Sleep in the Mojave Desert" (1960). Her ability to see into inner reality allows her to seem to inhabit what are usually considered inanimate forces; in "Finisterre" (1961), she captures the rhythm of the sea beating on the rocky shore (as in "Souls rolled in the doom-noise of the sea," *Collected Poems*

169). The last two stanzas of "Two Campers in Cloud Country" perfectly capture the sound of the wind in the pines (*Collected Poems* 145). In those few lines Plath transports me into the North Woods in a way Thoreau could in his book *The Maine Woods*.

In her poetry, Plath expressed beautifully, brilliantly what cannot be expressed in countless words of prose. Her poems transcend time, transcend our limited view of reality. This gives her poetry a universal and lasting quality.

To me, "The Moon and the Yew Tree" is more than an expression of Plath feeling isolated from the conventional Anglican religion of the small town in Devon where she lived. She delves back into the ancient pagan religion that had a deeper connection to our natural world. In this ancient religion, the Moon was sacred to the goddess who was held to be the mother of the living. This is the vibrant and intense connection to the universe that is expressed through the greatest lyric poetry. The incredibly beautiful language of this poem makes me feel like I've been thrown off the Earth. The ending of "blackness and silence" is not necessarily only an expression of Plath's despair – it is also the expression of the inexpressible, the Great Void that is the totality of the infinite universe, in which Earth is nothing more than an island in the vast darkness of space, the Void that is also the space between the atoms that form our bodies and all else on Earth (*Collected Poems* 173).

In "Two Campers in Cloud Country," Plath shows how we are humbled by the vastness of the natural world, how she sees the universal connection through this brilliant image – "Planets pulse in the lake like bright amoebas" (*Collected Poems* 145).

A shaman like Plath could intuit this deeper reality, see how the universe consists of points of light – matter and energy – connected through the Great Void and rising from the Great Void from which all potentialities come.

The last lines of "Mystic" demonstrate this universal connection. "Meaning leaks from the molecules" means, to me, that all that is in the universe is so filled with meaning that the molecules cannot contain it; this feeling of wholeness would not last long since we know that ten days after she wrote this poem she killed herself; but her mood at the time of completing this poem seems to me to be euphoric – the earlier parts of this poem are a remarkably beautiful expression of the unique despair that follows transcendent experiences, but the last lines are a rising symphony of hope as she and her beloved children (who "leap in their cots") are part of a meaningful and connected universe (*Collected Poems* 269).

Another shamanic role that Plath occupied was the role of prophet. As early as 1950, when she was a student at Smith who should have been working on her papers, she saw the downfall of the all powerful American Empire, and that "people who never mattered much in our scheme of things" in India or possibly Africa would replace us (*The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* 32). She also could see the oncoming environmental crisis; in the 1959 poem "Private Ground" she writes of the superhighway near Yaddo: "Trading their poisons, the north and south bound cars/Flatten the doped snakes to ribbons" (*Collected Poems* 130).

Plath was a wonderful writer, one of the greatest poets who ever lived, her death an immeasurable tragedy, but it is important to celebrate her life, celebrate the extraordinary wonders she accomplished in her too short life.

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