

## Discovering Sylvia Plath

Steven Gould Axelrod, Distinguished Professor of English, University of California, Riverside

I vividly remember reading Sylvia Plath for the first time. It was in June 1966. I was sitting in a dentist's office awaiting some routine procedure, probably a cleaning. Tropical fish were swimming around in a tank. The scene was like the one in Elizabeth Bishop's "In the Waiting Room," except that I had just turned twenty-two and outside it was a routinely sunny Los Angeles day.

I leafed through *Time* magazine, much as the protagonist of Bishop's poem leafs through the *National Geographic*. It made for depressing reading. Floyd McKissick, the new director of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), was said to support "aggressive Desegregation Now" and to oppose the Vietnam War, a pair of positions *Time* presented as "chilling." A Buddhist nun in South Vietnam had immolated herself to protest the U. S.-backed regime in her country, an act the magazine excoriated as "demagoguery." The war itself, however, was going very well, according to *Time*'s reporting: "the beginning of success can be seen." The main impediment was the failure of politicians in Washington and Saigon to articulate the view that "the U. S. is winning in Viet Nam." I remember feeling numbed and dulled—by the magazine, by the glacial pace of progress in civil rights, by an endless war into which I expected to be drafted, and, no doubt, by the prospect of metal instruments being placed in my mouth.

I continued to flip the pages and arrived at the "Books" section. There, in a framed box accompanying a book review of Sylvia Plath's posthumously published *Ariel*, was the text of "Daddy." The review was a melodramatic account of Plath's suicide focusing on "Daddy" as "a strange and terrible poem she had written during her last sick slide toward suicide." I probably read that, as I probably read the news items cited above, though I don't specifically recall having done so. What I do recall is looking at the poem itself and trying to decide whether to read it, tilting uncertainly on the precipice of "yes" and "no." I had just graduated college with a degree in English, but my studies had focused on fiction. I had never heard of Sylvia Plath. I liked poetry but found that it required effort. Did I want

to rouse myself from my lethargy? I was only two and a half months away from marrying my girlfriend, though I don't think I realize that yet, and three and a half months away from starting graduate school. I was drifting into an advanced degree program without much idea of what that meant or where I was going.

"Oh, I'll read it," I decided. The die was cast. Once I started the poem, I was hypnotized. "Daddy" is not a poem you can take or leave alone. You react to it, cognitively and viscerally. You see yourself in it, or you deny seeing yourself in it. When you finish, you know that something just happened, even if you don't know quite what.

Who knows where my intellectual life would have taken me without that chance decision to read a poem in a magazine that never publishes poetry. I was not introduced to Plath in any of my graduate seminars to come. This was my only introduction—indelible, wrenching, draining, bewildering, and lonely. I didn't understand all of the poem, or perhaps, really, any of it. I didn't get the part in which the speaker makes a "model" of her father. I didn't know what she could possibly mean by saying, "If I've killed one man, I've killed two." But the poem's obsessions with the father and with the Holocaust resonated with my own. I definitely heard "an *oh!* of pain," and like the protagonist of Bishop's "In the Waiting Room," I wasn't sure if it emanated from outside of myself or within.

When I finished reading the poem, I thought, "That was more real than anything else in the magazine." The thought has lingered in my psychic life ever since. "Daddy" seemed to get to the heart of war, racial discrimination, and my own difficulties with my father and with myself. It seemed to worm its way into what Yeats called "the deep heart's core." I didn't believe a word of *Time's* manufactured discourse, though I was tranquilized by its compelling coherence. Yet this imagined text by a poet named Sylvia Plath seemed true in some way that the fact-checked reportage surrounding it did not. The impact on me was amazing. The only thing I can compare it to is the first time I read *King Lear* or the first time I saw *Oedipus Rex*. I didn't know it, but at the moment I read "Daddy" I turned my attention from fiction to poetry, and my life as a poetry scholar and teacher was conceived.

## Works Cited

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