

"Panic" over Puddle Jumping in Plath's "Mothers"

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Sylvia Plath's later prose works reveal an anxious American living in England. She's "puddle jumped" across the Atlantic to raise her two children and set up a name for herself in literary circles. It is my aim to show how Plath used her feelings of displacement to reach outside herself, pulling in the world around her into her works from the early 1960s, including short stories in the collection *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, namely her short story "Mothers," poetry, and her novel *The Bell Jar*. Plath is widely characterized as a confessional poet—characterized by emotion versus intellect and self-reflection versus the outer world. I will argue here that she was not as self-engaged as the standard critic would think. Plath brings in world events, social issues, religion, politics, and her family into her writing. In the early 1960s, it was thought that there was more ground breaking work coming from England and Europe which led to Plath's belief that she would have more freedom of expression in her works after her move "across the pond," to be with her husband in his home country. The move led to a burst of creativity that makes her later works her most cherished.

I have used scholarship by Robin Peel, Ann Keniston, and Jo Gill, among others to substantiate my argument. By using a mixture of British and American scholarship I have gotten a well-rounded portrait of the scholarship surrounding Plath. There is also extensive evidence of her engagement in the outer world in her journals, letters, and mainly her work itself. My work also includes an analysis of the symbols Plath used, such as the use of color. My work contains a discussion regarding the reception of her work as described in *The Unraveling Archive*, edited by Anita Helle. Helle has done extensive studies of the Plath archives and is the publisher of many articles on topics of women writers.

"Mothers" is set in Devon, England, where Plath and her husband settled after a few years in America. Esther, the protagonist of the story, is an American living in England. She feels a need to belong in the community, which centers itself around the church. Esther is torn between her dislike of the rituals of the church and wanting to have a place in the community. Plath's "Mothers" was written in 1962, while tensions were high in Europe. The Cold War, threat of WWII and Nuclear warfare were raising anxiety levels, especially in Europe due to its proximity with The Soviet Union. Esther's need to belong stemmed directly from the worldly

woes that Plath observed. In "The Bee Meeting," (1962) a poem that parallels "Mothers," Plath restates her feelings of displacement living in Devon: "They are all gloved and covered, why did nobody tell me?" (Plath, *Poems* 211).

In addition to Esther, the other important characters in "Mothers" include Rose and Mrs. Nolan who are two neighborhood women, and the rector. Rose has befriended Esther since her move to Devon, including her in their "Mother's Union" group through the church at the rector's request. Mrs. Nolan has lived in Devon six years and knows "hardly a soul" (Plath, *Johnny* 12), because Mrs. Nolan has not taken part in church activities. Church, in rural England in 1962, was particularly important to the culture in their hamlet. Rose and Esther are bringing Mrs. Nolan to a Mother's Union meeting with them. The three women are walking to the church together. When the three women reach the church gate, Mrs. Nolan and Esther nudge Rose ahead. Of the three, Rose is the only one who kneels during prayer. In addition to refraining from kneeling, Mrs. Nolan is the only one in the congregation without a hat, further showing us how different she is from other women. Esther feels a kinship with her, as she too, feels like an outsider in the community. She wants to belong somewhere. The discourse that happens at the church between Mrs. Nolan and Esther is friendly. Esther has a like for her right away as someone who is also not a member of the church. Esther and Mrs. Nolan ask if smoking is allowed, which everyone else seems to know is against the rules.

Esther requests that the rector visit her at home. During his visit, Esther expresses her doubt that she belongs going to the church. Esther was brought up Unitarian and also isn't convinced about every aspect of Christianity. The rector says as long as she is Christian, she is welcome. Later we learn that not all are welcome, even as Christians. Divorcees, such as Mrs. Nolan, are not welcome at the church. Mrs. Nolan is viewed by the church as a subaltern, or "inferior" as described by Dobie (195). Esther learns the church is a hypocritical organization, but overlooks this with her need to belong. "Mothers" ends with Rose putting out her arm for Esther to take it, which she does without hesitation. In "The Bee Meeting," Plath writes "They are giving me a fashionable white straw Italian hat and a black veil that molds to my face, they are making me one of them" (Plath, *Poems* 211). She writes this to show that her need to belong, to set roots into the rural village of England has been successful.

Plath was influenced by world politics, which she introduces to in her later writing, especially from 1960 until 1963 during the highest point of anxiety over the Cold War. From the

age of twelve she wrote about news events in her diary, including Pearl Harbor. *The Bell Jar*, which Plath had published in 1963, begins with a portrait of the Rosenberg execution. The Rosenbergs were American communists who were executed in 1953 for conspiracy to commit espionage. Robin Peel studied the Plath archives in the Lilly Library at the University of Indiana-Bloomington, where she found extensive Smith class notes heavily annotated and underlined in Plath's hand. "Political discourse was pervasive, but circumstances were not right for Plath to experience a major shift in her reading of institutions, global politics, and the structure of society. That shift was made easier when she looked back to America from England and saw the world from a wider global perspective that experience on the other side of the Atlantic gave her" (Peel 55).

Worldly events had a unique impact on Plath as an American living abroad. "A recognition of the existence and legacy of Sylvia Plath's political education and her anxieties about world events contributes to a more informed reading of her final work, particularly the *Ariel* poems. Critics have tended to take Plath's poetry out of the politics..." (Peel 39). She showed a sense of awareness about world events in her novel, short stories, and poetry. Plath is categorized as a writer in the "Confessional Movement" of poetry. Confessional poets by large, wrote in a self-reflective way-- inserting themselves into their writing. Instead of viewing Plath as simply autobiographical in her writing, we must also consider the world events that she pulled into her writing, which helped to bring her later works such success.

There are some questions that are worth exploring in the names that Plath has chosen. Plath was a creative person, no doubt. Still, there are names from *The Bell Jar* that are chosen also for *Mothers*. "Esther" is used as the protagonist in both. The Book of Esther in the Old Testament tells the story of Queen Esther, the Jewish wife of the king of Persia who saved Jews of the realm from "extermination" (Campbell). This is interesting to notice, because Plath's father was a German and her mother was Austrian, thus always making Plath feel stuck somewhere between their two identities. The Electra complex Plath had resulting from her father dying while she thought he was a god is a frequent topic of Plath's poetry. She knew what she was writing, having read Freud and even considering earning a PhD in psychology. In "Daddy," she tells us that she "may well be a Jew" (Plath, *Poems* 223), comparing her father to Hitler and making references to the Holocaust throughout the work. "Poems reveal the strain of the Holocaust not only by describing but also by enacting these strains, by permitting the poems' rhetorical,

figurative underpinnings to strain" (Keniston 140).

There are parallels between names in *The Bell Jar* and in "Mothers." There is a Dr. Nolan in *The Bell Jar*, and a Mrs. Nolan in "Mothers." "Mothers" includes a seemingly healthy, more mature Esther. She has a baby and a husband and is attempting to fit into the community in Devon, while the Esther of *The Bell Jar* had struggled with fitting into society. *The Bell Jar*'s protagonist, Esther, is a young adult with suicidal intentions and a general hopelessness about life. Could Plath be showing that people can grow up and out of mental health imbalances? Dr. Nolan in *The Bell Jar* is a young, female psychiatrist that Esther feels intellectually superior to. In "Mothers," Mrs. Nolan is a pubkeeper's wife who Esther feels socially superior to. Are these meant to be parallels?

In addition to these chosen names, there is the use of color to be noticed in "Mothers." This is a ten- page story, of which twenty- five times a color is used to describe a person, place, or item. What is most worth looking at is the use of color to describe the church itself and the rector. When Esther first meets the rector in her home, she describes him as "a small gray man with protruding ears" (Plath, *Johnny* 13). Later he turns black: "A stout, black shape paced slowly up through the stinging nettles" (14). In the beginning of the story, the church is described as gray and dark. When Esther feels more comfortable at the church, her description of the church changes. Esther says the church was "curiously light," when the women came into it (13). When the women go into the tea room, the room is described as "a brightly lit room...with clean white linen" (16). Descriptions and colors used from then on out are brighter, livelier. This indicates that Esther is feeling welcomed into the community.

Plath frequently wrote in her journal whose work she had been reading and what effect it had on her. She was inspired by the person who would come to be known as the father of the "Confessional Movement," Robert Lowell, having taken a poetry class from him in Boston. The class was also attended by fellow poet Anne Sexton. Confessional poetry was a new genre when Plath set out with her emotionally charged writings. She liked the descriptions used by Faulkner in his work and Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* influenced *The Bell Jar* heavily as a "coming of age" novel. Plath also read Virginia Woolf, Adrienne Rich, and Elizabeth Bishop (Plath, *Journals* 252). Yet, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath influenced each other's work heavily as students of Lowell's.

Plath's work began to see critical acclaim after her death—not a rare occurrence among

writers of course. The circumstances of her death, suicide by gas oven, after her husband, Ted Hughes, left Plath for another woman has intrigued audiences. Her death has inspired us to look at her life, and her life's work. It is not difficult to make a biographical reading of Plath's work, but more important is to look outside of the circumstances surrounding her death for insight. It is easy to look at her poem "Lady Lazarus," and say, "This is a poem about Plath's suicidal thoughts." It's easy to look at *The Bell Jar* and connect it with her own month in New York as a college student. In actuality, you cannot draw everything about her work from her life. In *The Bell Jar*, Esther has some similarities to Plath, but is not a complete representation. Esther is described as being flat-chested, while Plath had an ample bust. The only physical similarity between Plath and Esther is that they are both tall. Plath, like Esther, did experience a mental breakdown. She was hospitalized and returned to Smith College, where she graduated Summa Cum Laude.

The *Johnny Panic* collection is considered a minor work by a major author. It was not published as a collection until 1977, but many of the stories were published during her lifetime in magazines. Among those was "Sunday at the Mintons," which won her an editorship in New York City, which was later used in *The Bell Jar*. Besides *The Bell Jar*, little discussion has been done of her prose; Plath is known mostly for her poetry. Plath stated, in her journal: "Prose writing has become a phobia to me: my mind shuts and I clench. I can't, or won't, come clear with a plot" (248). She was eager to branch out from her instincts to write poetry, even writing two children's books, but this was painstaking work.

Plath's *The Bell Jar* was published in England one month before her death under the name of "Victoria Lucas." It had a lukewarm reception, not skyrocketing Plath to fame as she had hoped. While her poetry was regularly published in poetry magazines, she stood in the shadow of her husband, Ted. "When *The Hawk in the Rain* was published in 1957, Plath expressed her delight that her husband should be published first, that she should follow in his footsteps. During the course of their marriage she was in his artistic shadow: whether or not she stood in that shade of her own free will... could be argued..." (Wagner 22). He was established as a major poet by the time of their separation, and Plath was better known for his desertion of her than for her own work. Eight years later, *The Bell Jar* had a different reception in the United States. This time Plath's name was known, and people were increasingly interested in reading *The Bell Jar* due to the publicity surrounding her death, as well as the moderate success of Plath

as a poet. People became obsessed with Plath. *The Bell Jar* was on the best seller list for over six months.

The Bell Jar has been made into a movie. There is talk on Plath blogs that Julia Stiles has been cast to play Esther in a new adaptation of *The Bell Jar*. In 2001, Gwyneth Paltrow portrayed Plath in the movie "Sylvia," which shows that nearly fifty years after Plath's death, she still draws interest. Hughes himself released a book of poems, *Birthday Letters*, about Plath, a month before cancer took his life in 1998. When their son committed suicide in 2009, it made the international news. In 2012, The University of Indiana-Bloomington, is hosting a Fiftieth year Plath Symposium.

In *The Bell Jar*, Esther daydreams about things she'd say to her boyfriend Buddy Willard. While having a conversation in which Buddy, who is a medical student, tells Esther that all a poem is is dust, she cannot think of something to say in response. He thinks his work is more important than her work, because he is saving people. Later, she wishes she had said, "I reckon a good poem lasts a whole lot longer than a hundred of those people put together" (Plath, *Bell* 66). Plath was right. Her poems are anthologized and studied now by students universally.

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