

Re-living Sylvia Plath – the Poetess, the Myth, the American For the Fifth Anniversary of *Plath Profiles*

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In the "Foreward" to the HarperPerennial edition of Sylvia Plath's posthumous collection of poetry, *Ariel*, poet Robert Lowell briefly though lyrically recounts his memories of Plath, who attended his poetry seminar at Boston University in October of 1958 (Hayman xvii).¹ "It is poignant," Lowell writes, "looking back, to realize that the secret of Sylvia Plath's last irresistible blaze lies lost somewhere in the checks and courtesies of her early laborious shyness" (xv). Like many before and after him, Lowell, in his dreamy and elevated remembrance of her living presence, contributes to the mythologizing of Sylvia Plath – a victimized martyr to some, a psychologically unstable wife and mother to others. Clearly, Lowell falls among Plath's supporters, choosing to view her as somewhat of a mysterious, bashful heroine. Likewise, beyond Lowell's sympathetic reading of Plath's character, many critics and readers uphold a fierce idolization of Plath. Accordingly, this trend composed the first wave of Plath criticism – branding the poetess as a martyr in order to support later generations' demand for gender equality (Jackson 128). At the other end of the myth's spectrum, which is inevitably rooted in a more banal view of Plath's life and work, she is generally judged by her actions, inactions, and hyper self-reflexivity. With her life publicized and her personal relationships primed for dissection, Plath has become heavily mythologized by readers all over the globe: the "facts" of her life are used both in defense and in denigration of her value as a literary figure.²

This so-called "Plath myth" is primarily a result of the merging of Plath's life and work.³ Although this is a common phenomenon – breaking down the barrier between a

¹ Hayman places Lowell's workshop in October of 1958. However, the workshop was actually held in the Spring semester of 1959.

² For example, see Jacqueline Rose's *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (1991). Rose's critique of Ted Hughes (and other editors') treatment of Plath's work led to antagonism from Hughes and his sister Olwyn Hughes, executor of Plath's literary estate.

³ Anna Jackson explores various aspects of the "Plath myth" in her essay "Sylvia Plath's 'Exaggerated American Grin.'" Likewise, the "myth" has been referred to by numerous critics over time in various

writer's lived experiences and creative product – the buzz surrounding Plath is particularly loud and anxious. This conflation between Plath as poet and Plath as person both fuel and retard attempts at straightforward (and oftentimes simplistic) characterization – yet ultimately, the myth inevitably supports a complex reading of Plath. The Plath myth forms the basis of how the novelist-poet is popularly received in the literary sphere; an identity that is particularly arresting to us, even decades after her death. Furthermore, while the myth continues to complicate and destabilize Plath's identity as an individual – the unending argument over her motives and meanings only prove the extent to which it is impossible to get at her core – yet it nonetheless confirms and supports Plath's identity as an American.

The intangibility of the myth, and striking elusiveness of Plath's poetry firmly embodies her status as an American; not rootless, as some critics have argued, but rather, elusive in its complex psychology, representative of the era's social and political instability, and relentless in its search for solid ground. My aim here is not to de-mystify the myth – no, that would be impossible. Instead, I hope to shed a beacon of light on it, and offer up a thought or two about how the myth is possible, the ways in which it supports and encompasses Plath's legacy, and, potentially, a brief glance into why, as readers and critics, we are rightfully obsessed with her life and work.

Perhaps one of the more obvious, literary ways in which the Plath myth is promulgated is through the conversation that flowers between Plath's poetry and prose. *The Bell Jar* is widely known to be semi-autobiographical. Published under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas partially because Plath was worried about hurting loved ones, specifically her mother, *The Bell Jar* contains various glaring similarities to Plath's real life. The premature death of Esther's father, the weak, overly maternal portrait of Mrs. Greenwood, Esther's obsessive competitiveness and her suicide attempt are but a few of the many events and emotions that Plath "borrows" from her own experiences. Meanwhile, though Plath's poetry can certainly be thought of as autobiographical via her themes, there is generally no such glaring correlation to the poetess' life events. Instead,

capacities, all which will not be recounted here. My use of the term is driven by my own understanding of Plath's live, work, and death.

the bridge that allows for autobiographical confusion between *The Bell Jar* and Plath's poetry is the result of the author's language, tone, and voice. The same sensual yet gruesome phraseology emerges from both forms, thereby entwining the two.

For example, singular images in Plath's novel such as the "baby pickled in a laboratory jar" and the birthing woman's "enormous spider-fat stomach and two little ugly spindly legs" (13, 65) amass full authority as poetic images despite being enmeshed in a prose piece. Consequentially, the pickled baby reappears in *Ariel*'s "Medusa": "Fat and red, a placenta" (45). Plath's pithy, grotesque and fully biting characterization of things all too realistically carries over from her novel to her poetry, and vice versa. The birthing woman, whose labor is recalled by Esther as she "heard the scissors close on the woman's skin like cloth and the blood began to run down – a fierce, bright red" (66) returns, on the level of language, in Plath's poem "Cut," also in *Ariel*. Plath writes:

What a thrill –
My thumb instead of an onion.
The top quite gone
Except for a sort of hinge

Of skin,
A flap like a hat,
Dead white.
Then that red plush. (13)

In both excerpts, the image of the cut – the equation between household object and bodily appendix – exposes Plath's use of a gruesome yet restrained analogy. Here, Plath's specific memory of seeing a birth for the first time translates into a commonplace slip in the kitchen. It is on this level that we are able to transcribe Plath's life from her poetry, as well as from her prose.

The Plath myth displays Plath's complexity as an American writer who is both a reflection of her era's social and political sensibility, and a contributor to it. Her poetry, prose, and life story coalesce in order to argue for the relevancy, significance, and value of her literary contribution against the voices of those who assert otherwise. For example, the perpetual instability and drama of the relationship between the United States and the

Soviet Union, which Plath alludes to in the first line of *The Bell Jar*, illustrates the permeating disquietude that characterized being a middle class American in the early 1950s. Plath's famous reference to the electrocution of the Rosenbergs expresses her intimate feeling of discomfort, yet simultaneously echoes the disorder of an entire era. Similarly, Plath's exploration of the momentous and unfathomable historical events of her time is palpable throughout *Ariel*. In her poem "Lady Lazarus," Plath writes:

A sort of walking miracle, my skin
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
My right foot

A paperweight,
My face a featureless, fine
Jew linen. (6)

Her mention of the Holocaust is verbally exteriorized, yet ultimately remains intangible. The words are there, but the meaning is buried in the various layers of her psyche. According to Anna Jackson, Plath herself took the political significance of her poetry to be in "the transformation of private 'problems' and personal experiences into 'universal' meaning" (129). In this way Plath seems to be fully conscious of her impending myth, as she mingles her personal reality with the outer world. As such, the myth secures for Plath a legitimate place within the canon of American literature.

Meanwhile, in stark contrast, many of Ted Hughes' supporters recalled unflattering memories of the young Plath, picking on her "American" traits, such as her calculated professionalism and materialism (Jackson 123, Hayman 100). She seemed odd to Hughes' friends, and they generally considered her an unwelcome hindrance to his organic, poetic imperative (Jackson 119). Later, circa 1962, Plath's poetry was often negatively characterized as "confessional," and thus stigmatized as American; whereas Hughes' poetry found its rightful place in the English poetic tradition of writing about the natural world. However, as Jackson shrewdly points out via an article by Deborah Nelson: "confessionalism itself was a genre that had a real political significance, providing 'a counter-discourse to the official ideology of privacy in the Cold War'" (128). As made clear by an analysis of the Plath myth, there is a definitive underlying discourse and drama coursing through her work that pushed the author through the fold and into the

emotional and socio-political sphere of her time, regardless of whether her literary presence garnered praise or disdain. It appears that Plath's sensibilities "as an American" – her willingness to let her personal emotions and experience hang bare on the page – is what fuels the myth and thus, fuels our obsession with her life and work.

Perhaps it has partly to do with the raw experience of Plath's poetry, in that it begins and ends with the sensual; the palpable gruesomeness of life brought to light. "Black sweet blood mouthfuls, / Shadows. / Something else / Hauls me through the air" she writes in her title poem "Ariel" (29). Plath strays far from depicting an idyllic nature, reminiscent of English greats such as Wordsworth, Keats, and Yeats; yet she nonetheless remains entrenched in the natural, grisly world. And so, paradoxically, Plath's work, despite its preoccupation with death, speaks largely of life. What is ultimately most American about Plath's work is the life about which it speaks – complex, unstable, and rapidly transforming like the voice in "Ariel" which cries out: "Thighs, hair; / Flakes from my heels. / White / Godiva, I unpeel –" (29). The unearthing and the unpeeling of layers is what Plath's poetry and prose speak of, and what Plath ultimately encouraged others to do.

Fascinatingly, the drama of the Plath myth rages on today with steady vigor. Despite the lessened social significance of the Cold War and the emergence of new waves of feminism, Plath's work has not withered in the memories of American or English readers. Plath blogs, websites, and quizzes litter the Web in the true spirit of our 21st Century. And somehow, still, new conflicts arise. In a U.K. tabloid magazine, Colleen Covington writes in the wake of Plath's son's Nicholas' recent suicide: "[he] had a nightmare start in life. His mother, Sylvia Plath, had a history of fighting her own inner demons that must have made it especially difficult for her to be there in her mind for her two children, Frieda and Nicholas" (theweek.co.uk). This "exposé" itself, poorly written and factually bogus, is not by any means the striking part. Rather, the various comments posted in defense of Plath are what fascinate as the myth continues to capture the attention of readers. Above all, it is evident that Plath's life has become our own to mold and shape the way we wish. One reader comments:

Sylvia was a deeply troubled and sick individual with, at that time, little means of real support for her illness. What she did was indeed tragic and selfish but where she was left - utterly alone with two small children and a philandering irresponsible husband - was the emotional equivalent of a handgun. Sylvia might have made better choices. So might have Ted Hughes. (Jen Hubbard)

The commentator, not alone in her virulent defense of Plath, dissects Plath's, and Hughes' relationship and home life in a short paragraph akin to a psychological diagnosis. In no way singular in her appropriation of Plath's life, the commentator truly exemplifies the ways in which Plath's life and legacy continues to rage on in all of us. Al Alvarez, Plath's friend and fellow poet, quoted in another article about Nicholas Hughes' suicide, comments a bit disparagingly: "'I would love to think that the culture's fascination is because Plath is a great and major poet, which she is. But it wouldn't be true. It is because people are wildly interested in scandal and gossip'" (dailystar.com.lb).

While I would partially, though begrudgingly agree with Alvarez, I will continue to assert that the Plath myth is borne primarily out of Plath's literary talent and intrigue, as Robert Lowell recognized. Unlike the fleetingness of gossip, Plath's untold ability to destabilize the reader just as cathartically as the reader has and will continue to probe and unsettle her, is what ultimately distinguishes her as one of the most mystifying and enduring figures in American literary history.

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