

Sylvia Plath: The Woman Who Gave Up Her Voice

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In childhood, we are a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate upon which any experience, real or imagined, is deeply engrained on our soul. These experiences influence our decisions throughout life, sometimes in unexpected ways, guiding us down a path that could lead to ultimate success or utter destruction. "The Little Mermaid" by Hans Christian Andersen is a fairy tale that Sylvia Plath read in early childhood which mirrors her own life and death. The story may have represented a subconscious model for Plath, a model influencing the poor decisions that she made in adulthood, ultimately leading to her demise. There are several instances where Plath's tragic relationship with the poet Ted Hughes appears to emulate "The Little Mermaid."

She was a strange child, quiet and thoughtful (Andersen 135)

"The Little Mermaid" is a fantasy about "a young mermaid willing to give up her life in the sea and her identity as a mermaid to gain a human soul and the love of a human prince" (Little para. #1). This was a favorite childhood tale of Plath's. When comparing Plath's published essay "Ocean 12-12-W" with a BBC typescript, researcher Gail Crowther found a whole section missing in the published version where Plath discussed her love for the story of "The Little Mermaid" (Crowther & Steinberg 238).

In addition, Plath made drawings depicting scenes from "The Little Mermaid." At the age of twelve, she drew a sketch "of a mermaid reclining [in the moonlight] on a rock in the River Rhine and waving to someone in the towers of an old German castle on the bank of the river" (Connors & Bayley 15). Compare this to "The Little Mermaid": "When you have reached your fifteenth year...you will have permission to rise up out of the sea, to sit on the rocks in the moonlight...then you will see both forests and towns" (Andersen 135).

Plath told of how another poem, Matthew Arnold's "The Forsaken Merman," also greatly impacted her as a child:

I saw the gooseflesh on my skin. I did not know what made it. I was not cold.
Had a ghost passed over? No, it was the poetry. A spark flew off Arnold and
shook me, like a chill. I wanted to cry; I felt very odd. I had fallen into a new
way of being happy. (Plath, *Johnny Panic* 22)



One can imagine that "The Little Mermaid" had a similar effect upon the impressionable young Plath as Arnold's Merman poem did.

In her journal, Plath further illustrated the influence fairy tales had on her in youth: the lovely never-never land of magic, of fairy queens and virginal maidens, of little princes and their rose bushes...the beautiful dark-haired child (who was you)...all this I knew, and felt, and believed. All this was my life when I was young. (Connors & Bayley 15, 17)

The fairy tales that we enjoy in childhood could have profound effects upon our future destiny as shown by Dr. Hans Dieckmann (president of the International Association for Analytical Psychology). His investigation of 50 patients found that:

The main fairy-tale time of childhood is the time in which fundamental neurotic patterns are laid down and the first neurotic symptoms appear. There is a strong connection between these fairy-tales and the symptoms of the later neurosis, the structure of the personality and the patterns of behavior. (Dieckmann 29)

Or as Clair Bloom, the English actress, stated more simply in reference to Andersen's "The Little Mermaid" and "The Snow Queen": "these emotionally wrenching tales...instilled in me a longing to be overwhelmed by romantic passion and led me in my teens and early twenties to attempt to emulate these self-sacrificing heroines" (Tatar 123).

In a letter to a friend at age seventeen, Plath acknowledged how childhood stories impressed themselves into her adult personality:

If I tried to describe my personality I'd start to gush about living by the ocean half my life and being brought up on Alice in Wonderland and believing in magic for years and years. (Connors & Bayley 17)

Handsome boy, carved out of pure white stone (Andersen 135)

Plath's father died when she was eight years old (Hayman 25). Because of this early childhood trauma, Plath had serious abandonment issues. In choosing Ted Hughes as a husband, Plath may have recreated that same potential for abandonment in adulthood. On her first meeting with Hughes at a Cambridge party in 1956, Plath did not see any of his potential faults. She described him as "colossal" (Plath, *Unabridged* 211) and "that big, dark, hunky boy, the only one there huge enough for me....The one man in the room who was as big as his poems" (211-212). During this party, she quoted to him lines from his poems, one of which could well stand for Plath's own first impression of Hughes: "most dear unscratchable diamond" (211). Plath idealized him.



In college, Hughes had a "reputation as a seducer" (Hayman 92). Clive James who roomed near Hughes in college described how Hughes "invited women not only to stay the night but to advertise their presence by hanging stockings to dry outside his window" (Hayman 92). Hughes' reputation was not unknown to Plath. In her journal, Plath described how a friend warned her about Hughes: "They are phonies, Hamish said: He is the biggest seducer in Cambridge" (Plath, *Unabridged* 213). Plath still decided later to marry Hughes after a very short courtship. They had been together for less than four months (Hayman ix). Had she set herself up for failure?

Plath's superficial attraction to Hughes parallels the little mermaid's superficial attraction to the prince. Compare Plath's exaggerated first impression of Hughes to the little mermaid's first impression of the prince at another party:

Among them was a young prince, the most beautiful of all, with large black eyes....when the prince came out of the cabin, more than a hundred rockets rose in the air....how handsome the young prince looked, as he pressed the hands of all present and smiled at them, while the music resounded through the clear night air. (Andersen 137-138)

Plath's characterization of Hughes as "colossal" is key. A colossus is a giant statue. The statue symbol represented to Plath the ideal male, someone who would never change, someone who would not run away, someone who would always be there for her. This constancy in love was important to Plath since her primary male role model was her father, a father who died when she was young. Plath also wrote a poem titled "The Colossus" where the narrator attempts to piece her dead father back together as if he were a broken statue (Plath, *Collected* 129). Her father's appearance of invulnerability, the colossus, the giant statue, was a shattered illusion.

Plath described another statue in her journal: "I went to the bronze boy whom I love, partly because no one really cares for him, and brushed a clot of snow from his delicate smiling face" (Plath, *Unabridged* 200). This statue exists at Newnham College where Plath went to school in England (Steinberg para. #5). Plath equates the same statue to Hughes in her short story "Stone Boy with Dolphin," a semi-autobiographical account of her first meeting with Hughes. The female protagonist Dody [Plath] tends to a statue in the garden: "she had taken to brushing snow from the face of the winged, dolphin-carrying boy centered in the snow filled college garden" (Plath, *Johnny* 181). When Dody meets Leonard, a representation of Hughes, Plath writes that "Leonard loomed like the one statue-breaker in her mind's eye, knowing no statues of



his own" (188). Leonard is the one man in her mind who can bring the statue to life, providing her with the constancy in love that she so desperately needs.

Early in Plath's relationship with Hughes, she overlooked his potential character flaws. Instead she focused on his superficial outward appearance and her own exaggerated perception of his perfection. Shortly after they were married, "*magnificent, handsome and brilliant* were the words she used to describe him" (Hayman 97). In a 1956 letter to her mother Aurelia, Plath wrote almost pleadingly:

If only you both will just take him for what he is, in his whole self, without wealth or a slick 10-year guarantee for a secure job, of a house and car—just for his native dearness, story-telling, poem-making, nature-loving, humorous, rugged self—I am sure you will be drawn to him as I could wish. (Plath, *Letters* 251)

One can imagine the alarm bells ringing in Aurelia's ears when reading this. A potential suitor with no job, no house, and no car would be a cause of concern for any parent. Honesty, trust, and responsibility were other deeper values Plath should have been closely screening for in a potential mate.

In "The Little Mermaid" another statue represents idealized love: "she [the little mermaid] cared for nothing...excepting a beautiful marble statue. It was the representation of a handsome boy, carved out of pure white stone....She planted by the statue a rose-colored weeping willow" (Andersen 135). Later, the little mermaid compares the prince to her statue: "The mermaid kissed his high, smooth forehead, and stroked back his wet hair; he seemed to her like the marble statue in her little garden, and she kissed him again, and wished that he might live" (Andersen 138). The little mermaid idealizes the prince, focusing on the superficial outward appearance, just as Plath mostly did with Hughes. However, the prince is not the perfect unblemished statue, nor was Hughes.

This voice you must give to me (Andersen 142)

The little mermaid was known among all the mermaids to have a beautiful singing voice: "The little mermaid sang more sweetly than them all. The whole court applauded her..." (Andersen 141). To become human and to be able to be with the prince, the little mermaid must pay a terrible price. The sea witch cuts out the little mermaid's tongue in exchange for giving her human legs:



You have the sweetest voice of any who dwell here in the depths of the sea, and you believe that you will be able to charm the prince with it also, but this voice you must give to me; the best thing you possess will I have for the price of my draught. (Andersen 142)

The little mermaid must give away the very thing that makes her special, give away her "sweetest voice" to be with a man she barely knows. "But if you take away my voice... what is left for me?" the little mermaid asks (Andersen 142). Indeed! But still, she unwisely makes the deal with the sea witch.

Plath may have made the same bad deal to be with Hughes, a man that ended up overshadowing her talent while they were together. Just as the little mermaid gives up her life in the sea to be with the land prince, Plath gave up her life in the United States to be with Hughes in England (Hayman ix). More importantly, instead of spending more time improving her own poetic voice and publishing more of her own work, Plath spent an enormous amount of time promoting Hughes' poems: "Sylvia went on typing and retyping his poems to have fresh-looking copies she could send out to magazines in England and the USA. The poems that were returned she immediately sent out again" (Hayman 101). This is "in addition to teaching, studying, cooking, cleaning" (Hayman 101). Plath wrote to her mother about Hughes in 1956: "To find such a man, to make him into the best man the world has seen: such a life work!" (Plath, *Letters* 252). Plath's secretarial efforts resulted in the publication of Hughes' first book, *The Hawk in the Rain* (Hayman 101). This book jump-started his career as a poet. Lucas Myers, a friend of Hughes, said that without Plath's help: "Ted might have had to go on working in rosegardens and warehouses for quite a few more years" (101). In a very real sense, Plath's self-sacrifice saved Hughes and his artistic career.

In much the same way, the little mermaid sacrifices herself to save the prince. First from drowning: "and he would have died had not the little mermaid come to his assistance. She held his head above the water, and let the waves drift them where they would" (Andersen 138). Then the little mermaid declares her intention to sacrifice her own pursuits in favor of the prince: "I will take care of him, and love him, and give up my life for his sake" (Andersen 145).

I know what you want...and it will bring you to sorrow (Andersen 142)

It was not Plath's job to be Hughes' secretary or his housekeeper. She could have let him type his own manuscripts, submit his own works, and shared out more of the household chores. With all



her duties, it was not any wonder that Plath experienced severe writer's block as she described in her journal in March 1957, less than a year into being married to Hughes:

I am stymied, stuck, at a stasis. Some paralysis of the head has got me frozen....I haven't had an acceptance since October 1st....I write nothing. The novel, or rather, the 3 page a day stint, is atrocious. I can't get at it. (Plath, *Unabridged* 272-273)

Ariel is widely regarded as Plath's masterwork of poetry. Coincidentally, though Andersen never calls the little mermaid "Ariel" in his tale, this was the name the 1989 Disney movie selected long after Plath's death. The best poems in *Ariel* were written *after* Plath's separation from Hughes; "during the time they lived in London, from February 1960 to September 1961....she wrote only four of the poems that she eventually selected for publication in *Ariel*" (Middlebrook 152). When they were together, Plath sacrificed her own "sweetest voice" in favor of Hughes' career as a poet. She "happily played a supporting role: her aim, she told her mother, was to keep Ted writing full-time" (140). Once Plath had separated herself from Hughes, her real voice was temporarily restored until her suicide: "Particularly in her last six months, when she had separated from Hughes, she wrote 'terrific stuff,' as if domesticity had 'choked' her" (Axelrod 15). Plath wrote "at least twenty-six poems during the month after the separation" (Hayman x). "I am out of Ted's shadow" she wrote to her friend and benefactress Olive Prouty (Middlebrook 197). Like the little mermaid, Plath's relationship with Hughes had effectively cut out her tongue while they were together.

Admittedly, Plath did write her famous novel *The Bell Jar* when she was together with Hughes. Upon closer examination, however, Plath seemed to make a deliberate effort to separate this work from Hughes. *The Bell Jar*, her first novel, was not dedicated to her husband, as one might expect. In addition, she published the novel under the pseudonym of "Victoria Lucas" (Hayman 2), not "Sylvia Hughes." Although the book is semi-autobiographical, the narrator does not mention her husband at all, even when she does reference her child: "last week I cut the plastic starfish off the sunglasses case for the baby to play with" (Plath, *Bell* 3). Finally, Plath ended the novel ambiguously rather than with her and Hughes marrying and living happily ever after: "But I wasn't getting married. There ought, I thought, to be a ritual for being born twice—patched, retreaded and approved for the road..." (Plath, *Bell* 244). Comparing herself to a retreaded tire was not the most positive way of ending the novel, but it was real and honest. This was Plath speaking in her most authentic voice.



His wedding morning would bring death to her (Andersen 146)

In 1962, Hughes had an affair with Assia Wevill (Hayman x), a mutual friend. Abandoned by her father when he died, Plath felt abandoned again when Hughes acted unfaithfully. Plath's poem "Daddy" suggests that she had recreated her childhood abandonment issue by marrying someone like Hughes:

I made a model of you....And I said I do, I do....If I've killed one man, I've killed two—
The vampire who said he was you And drank my blood for a year, Seven years, if you
want to know. (Plath, *Collected* 224)

This poem is a not so veiled comparison between Plath's father and Hughes to whom Plath was together with for close to seven years. Upon discovering the affair, Plath reportedly said to a friend:

Ted lies to me, he lies all the time, he has become a little man...When you give someone
your whole heart, and he doesn't want it, you cannot take it back, it's gone forever.
(Hayman 173)

The illusion was broken. Hughes was no longer the statue, the colossus, no longer the perfect man she once envisioned.

The little mermaid similarly also suffers a rude awakening when her prince falls in love with another princess and decides to marry her. This breaks the little mermaid's heart: "The little mermaid kissed his hand, and felt as if her heart were already broken. His wedding morning would bring death to her, and she would change into the foam of the sea" (Andersen 146). The little mermaid forsakes a deal with the sea witch to kill the prince while he slept to save her own life: "She has given us a knife....Before the sun rises you must plunge it into the heart of the prince...and you will be once more a mermaid" (147). Instead, the little mermaid "threw herself from the ship into the sea, and thought her body was dissolving into foam" (148) where she becomes "Among the daughters of the air" (148).

Plath also chose to take her own life, silencing her beautiful poetic voice forever. Plath committed suicide in 1963 (Hayman x). "Her premature death led to the loss and destruction of a significant portion of the texts she had already written" (Axelrod 14) as well as texts she had yet to write. Did the story "The Little Mermaid" play a subconscious role in her decision to commit suicide? Plath killed herself rather than confronting or seeking revenge on Hughes in the same way that the little mermaid sacrifices herself rather than killing the prince. Instead of dragging



Hughes through a messy divorce, a divorce where she may have planned to name Wevill in the divorce suit "for a dramatic showdown" (Middlebrook 185), Sylvia instead chose suicide.

Plath was also working on a revenge novel during this time called *Double Take* which she described as "semi-autobiographical about a wife whose husband turns out to be a deserter and philanderer" (198). This planned vindictive novel against Hughes was the literary equivalent of stabbing him while he slept. Linda Wagner-Martin stated that the novel was to reveal "the gradual corruption of a naive American girl...by a powerful and inherently dishonest man" (Axelrod 17). Plath's suicide resulted in the novel never being finished and what did exist "disappeared" (16). Plath's method of suicide may have also been influenced by "The Little Mermaid." "She had in her possession enough sleeping tablets to kill her, but she chose to die by gassing herself" (Hayman 11). So Plath also became in the end "among the daughters of the air."

Sadly, the description of the little mermaid's last evening alive could also apply to Sylvia Plath:

She knew this was the last evening she could ever see the prince, for whom she had forsaken her kindred and her home; she had give up her beautiful voice, and suffered unheard-of pain daily for him, while he knew nothing of it. (Andersen 147)



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