

To See What She Saw: The Influence of Sylvia Plath

Jaime Jost

With the fringed ends of the scarf my mother had knitted for me blowing in the wind, I smiled to myself. The blustery December day did not bother me as I walked across the Smith College campus in Northampton, Massachusetts. I was smiling because for what felt like the first time I was who I wanted to be instead of an imposter in someone else's life. (I was twenty. I imagine a lot of twenty- year-olds have those cliché moments of total epiphany.) This was the farthest away from my hometown I had been, but I was more at home than I had ever felt. Most importantly, I was walking on ground that Sylvia Plath had walked on fifty years earlier. The same soil she had walked before her breakdown, which she would later use in her novel, *The Bell Jar*. I was seeing things she had seen.

Two years later, in the same city, during an early spring, my then-boyfriend Mike and I ate two sandwiches from Hayfield's Deli as we sat on a blanket in Child's Park, the "Child's Park stones" that Plath had written about nearby, her words sending sparks up and down my spine:

To know the still heart of the stones:
Stones that take the whole summer to lose
Their dream of the winter's cold. (Plath, *Collected Poems* 101)

Earlier that same year, I had visited Massachusetts just before Thanksgiving, and had hiked a path with views of Connecticut River's Oxbow, dazzled by changing leaves and out of breath. I was where Sylvia Plath had stood, on a veranda that wraps around a white building built atop what a Midwesterner would certainly call a mountain, and I see "Above the Oxbow":

Back of the Connecticut, the river-level
Flats of Hadley farms, they're lofty enough
Elevations to be called something more than hills.
Green, wholly green, they stand their knobby spine
Against our sky: they are what we look southward to. (88)

I am mostly lost in these thoughts and wordless as Mike wraps his arms around me and has another tourist take our photograph. We do not last more than three years, in love like that. It started and ended innocently enough-- two people imaging their pieces fit, only to find later they each are full of stubborn ideals that neither will fix nor accept in the other. This is not so with



myself and Plath. Had she been alive at all when I was, maybe I would not even *like* her. I have heard she was eccentric, annoying even. Gwyneth Paltrow's portrayal of her in the 2002 film about the romance she had with Ted Hughes only maddened me. I thought there is no possible way *she* could be Sylvia Plath. I can ignore what I know of her personality's reputation, like I cannot with people who are alive. Instead, I know her and am enamored with her through her writing. This started like any other shattering event usually does-- boredom. For fifty cents my mother had purchased a first edition of *The Bell Jar*. She had heard of it, of course, but had not screened it for my viewing. I was in that in-between stage in high school where *The Baby-Sitters Club* series was no longer touching me the way it once had, but was not sure where to move to next in my pursuit of worthwhile literature. The girl on the book jacket of *The Bell Jar* looked happy enough. I was not happy, to be sure. Fifteen and I am quite sure I had already been broken up inside a few times. What Plath wrote was just what I was feeling and I had no idea how a woman who died thirty one years before I lived could have pulled my feelings right out of me and stuck them on a page and called it *The Bell Jar*. And so the love affair began.

I made it through high school with a few bumps and bruises but alive and as willing to open my heart as the next seventeen-year-old. I loved literature, but of course that is not what I chose as a college major. It was the same old story of family pressures and doing what was "logical," so instead I chose nursing, there being a nursing shortage in town. *The Bell Jar* went to the bottom of a box, waiting. Medical terminology flashcards took up most of my reading time. It was terrible. Somewhere along the way, between brushing other people's dentures and answering call lights, I thought that the job was not important any longer. I thought, that when people are looking back on their lives, they will remember things they read. They will remember who taught them the most, the way I remember my high school English teachers. They will not remember who answered their hospital call light or appreciate that I brought them fresh water while they were sleeping. Like the following scene from *The Bell Jar*, I changed my mind:

Now, lying on my back in bed, I imagined Buddy saying, "Do you know what a poem is, Esther?"

"No, what?" I would say.

"A piece of dust."

Then, just as he was smiling and starting to look proud, I would say, "So are the cadavers



you cut up. So are the people you think you're curing. They're dust as dust as dust. I reckon a good poem lasts a whole lot longer than a hundred of those people put together. (66)

I enrolled at the University of Wisconsin and anxiously awaited my books to be delivered as never before. I do not mind that it has taken so long to find out what I want to be when I grow up. I have met amazing people in every path I have chosen. I have cried when nursing home residents passed away and comforted those recovering from surgery. I have been there for people who did not know who I was. But now what I study is for me.

"And of course, Buddy wouldn't have any answer to that, because what I said was true. People were made of nothing so much as dust, and I couldn't see that doctoring all that dust was a bit better than writing poems people would remember and repeat to themselves when they were unhappy or sick or couldn't sleep." (*The Bell Jar* 66).



Works Cited

Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1971. Print.

---. *The Collected Poems*. Ed. Ted Hughes. New York: Harper & Row, 1981. Print.

