

## Private Ground

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Poetry presents readers with knowledge of secret passages and hidden entries, where keys and watchwords are sometimes given – but more often earned. If one could literally walk through a poem, the colossal, multi-dimensional letters would loom, create a maze of thin black lines and white space curving and bending, potentially warping like space and time. The vacuous openings and corridors would seem meaningless until you could connect letters together to form words, transform words into images. When reading a poem, a large part of the journey rests in understanding where you have been and where you are heading, a sense of direction that reasonably includes the reader's own knowledge and experiences. Deciphering place and space created by a poem then transforms from a maze into something much more; the reader can now enter a paradoxical landscape both familiar and unfamiliar, both real and unreal. Confessional poetry, especially, creates a participatory experience because of its one-sided dialogue that the poet intends to have with her audience. This dialogue, in turn, presents an invitation and opportunity for the reader to join the backdrop that the poet and poem creates.

The interpretation of place and space that Sylvia Plath shapes in her poetry relies heavily on the reader and can be defined as equally private and accessible. Plath continually ponders her own existence, and her poetry's metaphysical nature beckons reconsideration – again and again. Many of her seemingly solitary contemplations happen not only in a secluded place but also in a place where the reader can travel the landscape. Even without geographic specifics, the place created by the poems becomes distinct and personal, Plath's words creating an imaginary but tangible vision so that the journey of the reader mirrors the journey of the speaker. Ultimately, the reader considers the mysteries of both life and death, as well as recognizes the balance created by death. Independent of the factual biographical connections and the literary criticism that aids in piecing together an integrated understanding of the poems rests the ability to read each poem and have a personal, authentic, seminal response. Two poems representative of this concept – "Private Ground" and "The Moon and the Yew Tree" – further connect the importance of Plath and place because original manuscripts of the poems await readers in Indiana University's Lilly Library, where Plath fans can access the roots of a considerable portion of her work. A combination of original manuscripts and published versions of each poem, "Private



Ground" and "The Moon and the Yew Tree," demonstrates the personal places found in Sylvia Plath's poetry, places created for her and her readers to match strides and ponder existence.

A reader discovers a quiet, contemplative vista in "Private Ground" – a poem aligning the end of a season with death; the poem constructs a sense of place immediately through its title and first line, as well as addresses universal questions about existence using contrasts and focused subject matter. The title of the poem presents the first clue of setting. While the reader does not know specifically where the poet's speaker stands, the reader does have an instant sense of solitude because of the adjective "private" used to describe the area. The time of year then follows: "First frost, and I walk among the rose-fruit, the marble toes" (130). Deliberating the idea of privacy and the feeling of cold together arguably establishes a tone of reverence, a tone much like one at a funeral. In addition, original manuscripts of this poem show that on drafts numbered 2, 4, 5, 7 and 11 by the poet, an initial title possibility was "In Frost Time." This title option more directly corroborates the symbolic connection between winter and death; however, choosing a title that indicates place instead of time compels and even prompts the reader to identify the sacred motif of the poem. Various descriptions that indicate temperature foreshadow the impending death. Much is solid and stationary throughout the stanzas, which allows for the perception of time being frozen, for the acceptance that while certain moments remain still, the speaker's / reader's journey is one of movement. The poem begins with a reference to statues – to "Greek beauties" – embodying the dead being honored, and references to an icy "cracking climate" and "mud freez[ing]" indicate that all will become rocklike because of the cold, resulting in the loss of life (130-131). The speaker, also, seems bound to the grounds, which in a way forces the observations and interactions in the poem: "A superhighway seals me off" (130). Overall, the speaker / reader explores this cooling scenery to consider the changing seasons and witness how cold affects life, specifically life that does not question its own existence.

A distinction between humans and nature, the distinction between the abilities of each, frames the content of the poem. First, two human figures inhabit the poem: a handyman and the first-person speaker of the poem. Descriptions surrounding the handyman's actions and his humanness portray him as an intrusive figure. His connection to industry and pollution solidifies when considering the similar descriptions of his "smoking breath" and the "poisons" of "the north and south bound cars" (130) referenced in the second and third stanzas. The smell of fumes and exhaust cloud the scenery. Further, the handyman's actions steal air from the "lungs" of



"goldfish." Though, without his presence, the speaker loses her purpose. The speaker of the poem maintains and even represents a positive relationship with nature. At the end of the third stanza, she mirrors a sympathetic ear: "In here, the grasses / Unload their griefs on my shoes," (130). This conversation with nature precedes the speaker's awareness of the glinting light produced by the dead fish. When described, the fish catch the speaker's (and reader's) eyes, like a small mirror tilting just right to catch the light of the sun and hints that nature sees something the speaker cannot: "They [the small fish] glitter like eyes, and I collect them all" (131). The glimmer of the fish and the reference to eyes alludes to something unknown and mysterious seen by the dead. While direct knowledge escapes the speaker in the poem, the significance of the communication does not. The reader knows this by the speaker's decision to return the fish to water to be lost beneath the lake's "reflections": "Morgue of old logs and old images, the lake / Opens and shuts, accepting them among its reflections" (131). While nature remains emotionless, the human figure wants to preserve what is lost – or gained – in death. Along with the speaker's curiosity about the afterlife, the reader also ruminates over these ideas.

The poem's drafts show that what developed into a much longer poem – with ten stanzas appearing on the eleventh draft, if you count a handwritten stanza in the margin – was cut down to four six-line stanzas, enabling the speaker and reader to focus on the subject matter more precisely linked to the potential reward death has to offer. Some of the text cut from the poem directed the focus towards analysis of the speaker and the property owner. One possible reason that Plath pared down this poem could be to ensure that the relationship between the speaker and nature remained in the forefront; otherwise, the reader might become distracted by the unanswered questions surrounding the relationship between property owner and speaker. In one instance, Plath references Fuseli's *The Nightmare* and compares the speaker to the woman pinned by the incubus (*Plath Mss.* 31-32, no. 11). The sexual implications of the incubus and the association of the owner with the figure of the helpless woman, whose limp body bends to look slightly disjointed in Fuseli's painting, create a dynamic that changes the character of the speaker; the indignant tone transforms her into someone critical and angry. While the negative association with other humans in the poem remains consistent, the speaker and poem's focus potentially derail because of these thoughts. Other descriptions that did not make the final cut describe the speaker directly and create an atmosphere that suggests the speaker wants to escape, such as comparing her sleeping quarters to accommodations at a sanatorium (*Plath Mss.* 14-15,



no. 11). The final exchange with nature in the published version of the poem depicts the speaker as a willing participant; relating her "room" to "an asylum" makes both the speaker and reader want to escape. Because nature communicates directly with the speaker, the speaker must willingly participate; consequently, the reader then has the feeling that something is being imparted, passed down.

A second poem extends a hand to the reader in a similar way. "The Moon and the Yew Tree" uses the first stanza to indicate place, inviting the reader into either the speaker's mind or the reader's own mind to eventually contemplate the separation between life and death, symbolically represented by religious connections and colors. The "where" of the poem unfolds immediately in the opening lines, and along with the description, temperature and coloring, create an atmosphere of electricity perhaps reminiscent of a scientist's laboratory in a Gothic literature piece: "This is the light of the mind, cold and planetary. The trees of the mind are black. The light is blue" (172). The dream-like quality creates an acute awareness of entering the speaker's mind via a mystical pathway, or the reader can close her eyes and be led to a place in her own mind. Also in the first stanza, the specific colors of "black" and "blue" cast a bruised haze over the image internalized by the reader so that the surrounding atmosphere becomes murky or cloudy. Similar to "Private Ground," though ironic within this context, nature attempts to connect with the speaker, and the speaker is cast in a superior light: "The grasses unload their griefs on my feet as if I were God" (172). The "humility" of the "grasses" seems out of place since remaining descriptions of nature overpower the speaker's sense of direction. In the final lines of the first stanza, Halloween-esque depictions directly reference death: "Fumy, spirituous mists inhabit this place / Separated from my house by a row of headstones" (172-173). Death and darkness loom within reach and potentially threaten the speaker's home, the speaker's mind. The shadowy nature and dimness of the scenery becomes clear after these images, when the uncertainty of the final destination becomes an integral part of the visit: "I simply cannot see where there is to get to" (173). The Plath manuscript folder for this poem contains six pages in total: five numbered pages and what appears to be a typed final draft. A holograph draft of the poem written on pink Smith College Memorandum paper with a handwritten number one, circled in the upper right hand corner of the page, shows what could be the original draft in an extended stanza format. This format simulates a stream of consciousness flow of ideas; the first draft has marks that group lines into future stanzas. When reading this copy of the poem, the reader does



not pause and linger after the speaker becomes disoriented in the first stanza, as described above. While the reader's connection to the speaker and the space inhabited by the speaker feels more intense and frenzied in the extended stanza format because of the uninterrupted pace, the reader does not naturally pause after becoming lost. While the words up to this point mirror the final version, the line break Plath finally settled on prompts critical consideration of the meaningful associations of the moon and the yew tree, two objects that aid navigation.

With the opening lines of the poem conjuring an uncertain, unwelcoming place for speaker and reader, later stanzas focus on the symbolic darkness and religious connections of the moon and the yew tree, connecting ideas of mortality and resurrection. The two primary elements – the moon and the yew tree – become the focus of the poem because the two are intricately connected, indicated by both title and descriptions. After the speaker states that she is unsure of direction, she must immediately contemplate the possibility of the moon being an aperture because she concludes: "The moon is no door" (173). In addition, Plath uses personification to concoct a figurative darkness that contrasts the whiteness of the suggested full moon. The moon's angry personality and its power remain unaffected by any idea of hope – and holds sway over the speaker: "it is quiet / With the O-gape of complete despair. I live here" (173). The haunted setting and black mood of the poem implies a permanent type of confinement, almost as if the speaker is among the walking dead. The moon offers no refuge for the speaker; additionally, the yew tree offers no escape route either. Outside of the title, mention of the yew tree is limited but powerful. First, the description of the yew tree shapes it into a compass and forms an eerie aura: "The yew tree points up. It has a Gothic shape" (173). Following this line, the reader sees that the yew directs focus on the moon in the sky, establishing a parallel between the two. In the last line, the yew tree also becomes the messenger in the poem, but the message is ambiguous and indecipherable beyond the murky darkness already presented in the poem: "And the message of the yew tree is blackness – blackness and silence" (173). The contrast between the whiteness of the moon and pitch of the yew tree might suggest two opposing forces; unexpectedly, they work together against the speaker. The poet's manuscripts offer a direct association between the yew tree and death. The draft pages are numbered pages focused on revising targeted lines and stanzas as opposed to revising the entire draft. Pages two, three and four appear to be attempts to re-work the final stanza of the poem. Page five is the first typed version of the poem. From the first to the fifth numbered draft, the



yew tree is a crypt of sorts, capable of stealing life. The combined elements of color, simile and metaphor help to portray the fatal portal, or a passageway leading to death, that hypnotizes the speaker. In Plath's words, the pitch yew tree resembles a place of interment that guides to a stifling container (*Plath Mss.* 22-23, no. 5). Immersed in constant references to death, the speaker / reader can find a balance because of the infusion of religious references both in a cut stanza and throughout the published draft of the poem, presenting the idea that life is possible after this death.

The religious contrasts and descriptions offer the only points of warmth and light, which in turn offers a point of solace in the dismal landscape. First, in the second stanza, church "bells" stun the sky in a way that shows the moon separated from religious notions: "Twice on Sunday, the bells startle the sky — / Eight great tongues affirming the Resurrection" (173). In this funereal setting, religious ideals prevail and offer a potential escape for the speaker from harsh surroundings. The speaker implies that the moon spawned her when she names her mother, a mother that diverges from the comforting, archetypal notion of the Virgin Mary as mother: "The moon is my mother. She is not sweet like Mary. / Her blue garments unloose small bats and owls" (173). In this bleak framework, both the speaker and reader need some light to balance the dark, and the religious notion of resurrection is used to offer a departure. The characteristics of Mary, specifically her visage in a church setting, create this needed warmth: "How I would like to believe in tenderness — / The face of the effigy, gentled by candles, / Bending, on me in particular, its mild eyes" (173). The candles cast enough of a glow to fight off the shadows, the darkness, and both the speaker and reader recognize that little refuge exists in this dark place, except in a candlelit reverie. While the image provides comfort, some religious figures in the poem are impacted by death. One seemingly contradictory image shows that the strength of religious refuge – whether superficial or deep – remains after death: "the saints will be all blue, / Floating on their delicate feet over the cold pews, / Their hands and faces stiff with holiness" (173). Further, their stationary positions were described more fully on page four of the poem's manuscripts. Linking to the cold described in the previous quote, the following passage continues using temperature but does not detract from the warmth created when Plath wrote about the Virgin Mary. Plath wrote and crossed out a continued description of the "saints," which further depicted them as fragile, frigid and inflexible (*Plath Mss.* 5-6). Life after death is believed to be possible in Christianity; perhaps the permanence of a religious escape is being



presented here. Or, it's equally possible that the religious figures simply represent the opposing force to death. The speaker and reader can interpret the religious figures as a way to rise, or resurrect, from the bleak setting of the poem.

While reading and analyzing "Private Ground" and "The Moon and the Yew Tree," the reader is able to dwell in a personal space, shared only with the speaker of the poem in that moment. Ultimately, the setting represents a private place created for the reader, without intrusion from the outside, where the meaning in the poem for the reader's life securely links to Sylvia Plath's words. Contemplating and facing death can help a reader understand the eventual outcome of all life more clearly. Specifically, in Plath's poetry, the reader must navigate landscapes overwhelmed by a figurative darkness; but, within the shadows cast, the reader finds her way by focusing on the subtle moments of reflection and light. Plath's poetry often feels haunted, as if she pinned ghosts behind each letter when the typebars slammed against the page. Ultimately, understanding the particular dwellings that Plath creates can illuminate new access points into her poems. Plath's persistent discussion of the contrast between life and death and the natural mysteries associated with these unknowns grants a ticket to a safe place to ponder these ideas, to reflect on our own experiences vicariously. Plath's connection to the temporal world remains fixed, rooted because of her poems. While we know the outcome of Plath's life, and her obsession with death can easily seem solely morbid, the questions she raises in her poems are important philosophical questions about life and death, not only to her but also to readers. To readers, her subject matter makes it worth being dropped into what first starts out as a mystifying maze. Her subject matter makes it worth searching for the concealed pathways.



## Works Cited

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