

Teaching Sylvia Plath: An Avenue from the Personal to the Collective

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"I am not worried that poems reach relatively few people. As it is, they go surprisingly far—among strangers, around the world, even. Farther than the words of a classroom teacher or the prescriptions of a doctor; if they are very lucky, farther than a lifetime" (Plath, "Context" 16)

Most community college students who study poetry, or any literature for that matter, are never going to become English or creative writing majors. Even when I come across innately talented writers in my composition and literature courses and ask them about their interests in writing, they just smirk and tick off a money-making major that will support their life in our overpriced neck of California. Yet, many non-English majors really enjoy reading and analyzing literature, particularly poetry. It seems most students' high school poetry experiences are still regulated to a cursory study of DHF (Dickinson, Hughes, Frost), with the obligatory and easy to grade haiku assignment for "variety." When college students start feasting on modern poets like Pablo Neruda, C.K. Williams, Sharon Olds, John Berryman, or Sylvia Plath, they repeatedly say that they have never read poetry "like this" before. The poetic elements become easier for them to grasp because they feel a connection to either the subject matter (sex, death, love, afterlife, loss) or the biography of the poets. Like moving to a new neighborhood, once students know how to find a few landmarks (metaphors, rhyme, alliteration), they gain confidence and feel at home diving (or driving) into new poems. Particularly, the acts of defiance in the lives of the poets or in their poems seem to hook even the few poetry haters in the class.

However, as a college composition instructor, my job is more than to have students "like" a poem or identify with a poet. In English 1A (composition and research) students write from narration through to argument, getting put through rhetorical calisthenics. In an English 1B (writing about literature) I have the opportunity to illustrate a connection between autobiography and social or cultural critique.

Over the years, I have noticed that female students are consistently drawn to write about and discuss Sylvia Plath's life and poetry. While some of the appeal is obviously the James Dean or Lady Diana effect—dying young and immortalized—more often I sense they are intrigued by how Plath's life and poems challenge their own doubts and grapple with their own pressures of family, marriage, and independence.



Armed with a cursory lecture on biographical and historical literary criticism and a semester of Psych 101, students latch onto Plath (and/or Anne Sexton) like rabid animals, eager to tear open "Daddy," "Ariel," and "Lady Lazarus." I am often pushing them to notice something more along the lines of craft, like her aggressive imagery or her shift in diction in just a few short years or the influence of art on her later work. Alas, more often than not, I find the conversation reverting back to the specifics of her parents, the suicide itself, the moral concerns of the act, Hughes' infidelity, and other biographical and psychological curiosities.

When I first started teaching contemporary women poets and gender criticism, I spent a lot of time helping students grasp the lack of rights for women in the 1950s, the social pressure (often fueled by the media) of not working and staying home. I circulated *National Geographic* magazines from this era and posted clips from episodes of "Father Knows Best" on our class website. They researched the era thoroughly, but what they tended to focus on was how much privilege and freedom Plath possessed. She was free to be educated at top schools, she was not excluded from society because of medical treatment for mental illness, and she married and divorced freely. Many of the women in my class were initially a bit envious, if not suspicious of Plath being construed by some critics as a victim or martyr.

Despite the liberal mystique of the San Francisco Bay area, conservative values including patriarchal dominance are prevalent, and a cross section of this can be seen in the community college classroom where there are consistently more computer science and criminal justice majors than English or Art, more students who are anti-abortion and homophobic than not, and more first and second generation immigrants that bring with them socially conservative views about marriage and religion. Specifically, I continue to have female students who are saddled with the disparity between their family's values and their own aspirations. Often they are reticent to even voice their frustrations. Last semester two female Fijian students were struggling with their parents' choices for their arranged marriages. Both were vaguely against the idea of arranged marriage, only wanting to postpone it until after they finished their education. A female Hmong student wrote about how she and her sisters ate after the men in the other room of their house, leave their clan (family) after an arranged marriage, and do not have their education that supported by their parents. One female student lied about being in school; she told her parents she was working. Her parents felt educating her was a waste because in a few years she was going to be married and not part of their clan any longer.



Some students (often Catholic or Christian) are infuriated by Plath's suicide and are quick to judge her: "Suicide is murder, a sin." Or, they often want to squarely blame Hughes' infidelity for her suicide, no matter Plath's history of mental illness. We often have to review logical fallacies at this point. A few students (male and female) have even told me that they did not choose to write about Plath because they did not feel like their parents would approve of her imagery, subject matter, and tone. I am careful about how much I encourage students' independence or defiance of their own culture or upbringing—the consequence in their families are real and often severe. We have an open discussion of Plath's famous description of poetry's purpose: "Surely the great use of poetry is its pleasure—not its influence as religious or political propaganda. Certain poems and lines of poetry seem as solid and miraculous to me as church altars or as the coronation of queens must seem to people who revere quite different images" (Plath, "Context" 16).

Many female students still empathize and are curious about Plath as a woman and poet, even with her white American privilege. Eventually, students sense the poems are not merely biographical reimagining, but a unique and defiant voice they admire. They talk with near jealousy about how much trouble they would face if they ever published a critical poem about their parent or used sarcasm with such reverie found in the final two stanzas of their favorite Plath poem, "The Applicant."

But in twenty-five years she'll be silver
 In fifty, gold.
 A living doll, everywhere you look.
 It can sew, it can cook,
 It can talk, talk, talk.

It works, there is nothing wrong with it.
 You have a hole, it's a poultice.
 You have an eye, it's an image.
 My boy, it's your last resort.
 Will you marry it, marry it, marry it. (Plath, *Collected Poems* 221)

While I am not a fan of poetry as therapy, I see again and again how literature (particularly Plath's poems) shifts student consciousness (telling their stories), as well as my own. They are not necessarily leaving home or husbands, but I show them how their social roles and their individual biographies are determined by their cultural context. Then, they can step outside those



roles and critique their contexts. Ultimately, I ask students to step back into their own stories to see their voices as part of a communal dialect that is ever changing. Students read excerpts from *The Bell Jar*, some historical criticism, as well as 10 or so of Plath's poems. The lights go on. Heady stuff, but students get it.

My English instructors never overtly demonstrated a connection between the personal and the collective; they were always presented as opposites, not avenues. However, I do remember a moment in my undergraduate English class reading Zora Neal Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. I was newly and unhappily married. I got to the scene where Janie takes off her apron, places it on the hedge, runs out of the gate, and gets in a carriage with Joe Starks, leaving her abusive husband and life behind. Something about this scene has stayed with me; even after twenty years, the description disturbs and inspires. It is not that I left my husband because of or in the same manner of Hurston's character. But, the craft of the storytelling and the defiance and courage of a woman of no means was a feminist education I had never experienced. Many of my students will sit in cubicles and manage projects but still cope with antiquated ideas about women and freedom in their home life. If Plath's haunting and rebellious life and poetry can remind them that women can be secure against domination, then she will continue to have a place on my syllabus.



Works Cited

Plath, Sylvia. "Context." *London Magazine*. February 1962: 15-17-45-6. Print.

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