

## Johnny Panic: A Journey to the Bog of Madness

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Throughout her life, Sylvia Plath was plagued by depression and internal conflict. Sadly, she seems to be as well-known for her suicide as her creative works. However, in December at the age of twenty-five, Sylvia was able to contain her inner demons long enough to release them to the world in the form of "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams." Under-read and under-appreciated, "Johnny Panic" personifies and describes that which haunted Plath. He was her God and her Devil, her inspiration and that which instilled such a fear that she was unable to write. Johnny Panic is both a puzzle and a paradox, but a better understanding of him may render a better look into the mind of Sylvia Plath.

"Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams" is a semi-autobiographical short story. The main character remains unnamed throughout and will be referred to as Sylvia herself in this analysis. Sylvia is the Assistant to the Secretary in a city hospital's out-patient clinic. More specifically, she spends a majority of her time at work transcribing doctors' analysis. As the story goes on, she spends greater amounts of time in her personal work as Johnny Panic's secretary, copying dreams into a compilation she refers to as his "bible." She devises a plan to stay overnight and devote extra time to this project. The first morning after an overnight session, she is caught by the Clinic Director and escorted to a wing of the hospital for in-patients. The story ends with her receiving shock treatments.

Sylvia is the secretary in the clinic and also secretary to Johnny Panic. It seems as if she is working both sides. She forms a plan to stay overnight and uses the night hours to copy dreams into her "Bible." It is fitting that she would choose the hours of darkness to hide and be secretary to the man in control of her secret personal Hell. Her plan to bring four changes of clothes and stay all week is an indication as to her mental state as well. To be able to accomplish that would require a lack of sleep for four straight nights. This plan could be an indication of pre-existing issues that the reader would otherwise be unaware.

Johnny Panic is a representation of Plath's mental issues. He is her vision, her god, her captor. She cannot escape him and yet she seems to worship and admire him. The reader gets the sense that Johnny is something of Sylvia's imagination, yet the Clinic Director states that "she



has been making time with Johnny Panic again" (*Johnny Panic* 171), implying that he is real. She gets so far into her obsessive worship of him that she re-creates, "dreams that are not even written down at all" (160). "Whatever the dream I unearth...by some kind of prayer" (160) she is sure that it is the lone work of Johnny Panic.

Johnny is her muse and her jailer. She extends a note of appreciation to Johnny Panic for her writing. He "injects a poetic element in this business you don't often find elsewhere. And for that he has my eternal gratitude" (161). However, she also credits him with her writer's block. "I couldn't even set down one sentence. I was paralyzed with fear" (Hughes 4). Plath frequently refers to being paralyzed with fear and panic. "Why can't I throw myself into writing? Because I am afraid of failure before I begin" (Plath, *Journals* 445). This fear of failure is a rampant theme throughout her journals. She is stalked by her panic and debates begging schools to accept her for *any* Ph.D. or Master's program, "if only to take my life out of my own clumsy hands" (*Johnny Panic* 423). However, she is also fighting Johnny every step of the way from doing that exact thing.

Johnny Panic is like a god to Sylvia. The collection of dreams is his "bible" and she calls the clinic patients "Johnny Panic's converts." When he turns his back he is "stony as Everest, higher than Orion" (165). To turn against him is a "crass fate these doctors call health and happiness" (66). At the end of the story, the main character is caught reading the old journals of dreams and led by the Clinic Director to the psych ward. She can "see Johnny Panic's top priests staring out at me, arms swaddled behind their backs in the white Ward nightshirts...they have no doubt heard of my work by way of Johnny Panic's grapevine and want to know how his apostles thrive in the world" (170). She is then given shock treatments by "the latest model in Johnny-Panic-Killers" (171). Plath uses heavy religious allusions as "the crown of wire is placed on my head, the wafer of forgetfulness on my tongue" (171). As she receives her shocks, she hears devotional chants of the others, sees and hears Johnny's presence in the light and crack of the electricity. "His Word charges and illumines the universe" (172). Yet, does the end sequence actually happen or is it a delusion of Sylvia's and the work of Johnny Panic himself?

Johnny Panic creates the dreams he gives to the dreamers. They are pulled out from the putrid sludge of Lake Nightmare. As to where Johnny Panic lives, it is unknown. It can be assumed that he lives in the Bog of Madness in the minds of everyone. Since he is god-like to Plath, he is everywhere. Yet, more so than God, Johnny is in control of the mind whether you are



awake or not. His influence is constant.

"Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams" appears to be a sort of liberation for Plath. While she struggled against "the Panic Bird on my heart" it also served as her muse (*Journals* 429). A majority of this story is an autobiographical incident. Ted Hughes is insistent that the writing of this story was a sort of release for her; that her writing drastically improved for a short time during and after this. "It was only when she gave up that effort to 'get outside' herself, and finally accepted the fact that her painful subjectivity was her real theme, and that the plunge into herself was her only real direction...that she suddenly found herself in full possession of her genius" (Hughes 5). Freeing Johnny Panic from her mind must have been extremely therapeutic for her. However, as she dramatically states, "He forgets not his own" (*Johnny Panic* 172). Even if she does recover, Johnny will remember her and return.

Johnny Panic was born of insecurities, mental struggles, and internal pressures from trying to be a mother, wife, writer, and woman simultaneously. Plath struggles to find the balance in her life and fears that failure to define permanent states of priority will cause all her aspirations to fall dead at her feet (Dobbs 2). Johnny Panic is both an external and internal force. This explains why he is both a torture to her, and also the dream-maker to the patients at the City Hospital.

Plath's mother assisted in the birth of Johnny Panic. Aurelia Plath was very vocal in her opinions about her daughter's choice to stop teaching and pursue her writing career, and also to choose Ted Hughes as a husband rather than the earlier Richard Norton. Plath was plagued by the fear of failure; failure as wife, mother, poet, woman. It is a cause for wonder over whether Ted Hughes could be a kind of Johnny Panic to her. Plath often wrote journal accounts discussing the idea of writing and "DO NOT SHOW ANY TO TED. I sometimes feel a paralysis come over me: his opinion is so important to me" (*Journals* 467).

Therefore, the name Johnny Panic itself seems self-explanatory. It is the feeling of panic that overwhelms Plath at times. "Johnny" is a common name and also a gentle one. She conveys the impression that she enjoys his company and does not want to be saved. She does not feel anger at the feelings she has, but toils at understanding them. Her instability seems to be integrated with her creativity, even while hindering her productivity.

Plath discusses this dream:



There's a great half-transparent lake stretching away in every direction...I'm hanging over it, looking down...At the bottom of the lake – so deep I can only guess at the dark masses moving and heaving– are the real dragons...they've got more wrinkles than Johnny Panic himself...Dream about these long enough and your feet and hands shrivel away when you look at them too closely...No place for you but a room padded soft as the first room you knew of, where you can dream and float...till at last you actually are back among those great originals and there's no point in any dreams at all. (*Johnny Panic* 158)

Yet, despite Plath stating the lake as the center of her personal dream, she refers to it several other times throughout the story. Her lake seems to be a representation of Hell. "I already see the surface of the lake swarming with snakes, dead bodies puffed as blowfish, human embryos bobby around in laboratory bottles like so many unfinished messages from the I Am" (*Johnny Panic* 159). Clearly, the image of the embryos is in reference to her college experience with then-boyfriend Richard Norton, appearing in *The Bell Jar* under the name Buddy Willard. If Sylvia stares too hard into her own "Hell" or illness, she will drive herself mad and go to a soft padded room. Perhaps she refers to a padded room at a mental institution, the soft lined box of a casket, or to "crawl back abjectly into the womb" (*Journals* 149).

The dragons at the bottom of the lake with more wrinkles than Johnny Panic are also a point of interest. These dragons "were around before men started living in caves and cooking meat over fires" (*Johnny Panic* 158). By wrinkles, conceivably, she means that these deep-rooted issues and concerns are old, layered and complex; whereas, Johnny is simple by comparison. The dragons are unable to be seen, they are the deepest and oldest fears, the unknown. It is these fears that move everything in the lake. With Plath, the underlying issues are not obvious, only the repercussions – the movement of the dragons.

The dream of the lake is complex in that it exists in Plath's mind as her dream, yet she thinks that it is where dreams come from. Plath informs the reader that "it's into this lake people's minds run at night" (158). She calls it Lake Nightmare and Bog of Madness, and both terms seem fitting with the portrayal of Johnny Panic himself. He is both *her* nightmare and *her* madness, but she extends his existence to all people who experience these things. Perhaps it is her implication that everyone is a little mad. The Bog of Madness is also used as a reference point for the mental state of the patients. Plath talks about people who are barely able to function in normal society, describing them as not "yet halfway down in the lake" (162). It is specifically *her* dream, undocumented, yet a universal concept. In this respect the lake represents a loss of



sanity. Plath is saying that madness is hell.

Plath also describes the lake being filled with small grains of dirt. She says they are "so commonplace it seems silly to mention it" (159). The dirt seems to represent her fears. She deals with so many common insecurities on a daily basis that they seem to be everywhere; it is silly that they bother her so. However, they integrate themselves into her life and everything festering in Lake Nightmare until it is saturated with her fears.

It is also noteworthy that Plath is perpetually hovering over the surface of Lake Nightmare but does not break through. She is able to see the filth floating in the lake but is still apart from it. Is this because she has the ability to see that she is fighting Johnny Panic but has yet to fully succumb to "his love?" "His love is the twenty-story leap, the rope at the throat, the knife at the heart" (172). The lake can also be interpreted as the equivalent of death, this is why there are rotting corpses suspended on the surface.

Johnny Panic's "bible" is an assemblage of all the dreams of patients. She feels the need to gather them as a kind of worship to Johnny Panic. Gathering them is a necessity to protect them from the hands of the "converters." The bible of dreams is her writing. The dreams she collects are more than just ones that have been copied. Plath spends time at home working on her bible of dreams, and writing dreams she imagines the patients have. The bible represents the creative writing she does in her own time, influenced by Johnny Panic. "Writing is a religious act: it is an ordering, a reforming, a relearning and reliving of people and the world as they are and as they might be" (*Journals* 436).

Plath states that copying the dreams in the "Bible" is "my real calling" (*Johnny Panic* 157). Because her short stories are very autobiographical, it seems as though she is referring to her affection for psychology. Plath had implied in her journal entries that rather than to pursue a career in English she would return to school and study psychology. The main character in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* says, "there is a certain spiritual purity about this kind of doctoring" (159). It leads the reader to believe that Plath finds solace in submerging herself in this environment. Perhaps by studying the dreams of others she will be able to see her own more objectively. Plath wrote that she felt "my whole sense & understanding of people being deepened & enriched by this: as if I had my wish & opened up the souls of the people in Boston & read them deep" (*Journals* 424). This obsession with psychology is further observed in her journal entry from December 12, 1958. Plath refers to her therapy by saying "it frees me from the Panic



Bird in my heart" (429). Plath uses her journals to document her therapy sessions and does an impressive amount of introspective analysis.

By writing *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, Plath works to document and explain her issues. Her writing is therapy. The act of personifying her struggle helps herself to understand and control it. Also, giving Johnny Panic a separate identity frees her from negative associations with her illness and renders her recovery a possibility. She is counting on the "bible" to save her, despite that her work on it is a form of "Johnny worship." Plath's dream keeps her staring into the face of death and insanity, but as her comprehension of her illness grows, she feels that she will one day rid herself of Johnny Panic completely.



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