

Sylvia Plath in 3-D: High School Students Analyze Plath

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Even 40 years after her death, Sylvia Plath's poetry remains not only relevant but also inviting. The student responses that resulted from analyzing her poems in my junior-level composition classes confirmed the viability of Plath's words in a world vastly different from her own. Universal elements of human experience included in her poems, such as love, fear, and hope, allowed many students to, at the very least, sense the potential connections between her words and their lives.

I chose four Plath poems to fit into my "Families" unit¹: "Balloons," "Child," "Morning Song," and "Nick and the Candlestick." I made it a point to speak only briefly and generally about Plath's biographical details because I suspected that the sensational plot points of her life would overshadow the content of her poems and eliminate an organic discovery of the thoughts, feelings, and emotions that are expressed in each of these poems.

As stated to my students, the main goal of this endeavor was not to understand each word of every line in the four poems but to simply interact with the text, to have a dialogue with parts of the text that struck them as interesting, confusing, enlightening, etc. To put it in their language, I asked them to choose several lines or a stanza, to don 3-D glasses, and to take a tour of her words, noticing the sharp edges, the depth of hidden spaces, and when to duck if flying objects appeared along the way.

Communication Envelopes

Both of my composition classes this past semester were vocal and participatory. However, when it came to discussing poetry, it seemed that even the students eager to chime in on virtually any discussion became quiet. When asked, the students commented that they felt more reserved about responding to poetry because it could be confusing and they said they were unsure of their answers.

¹ When grouped thematically, the course readings provide students with a central point of focus for approaching various texts. The designated theme (whether determined by a teacher or a text) serves as the hub of a wheel that connects all spokes – or literary selections. In addition, themes based on broad ideas easily relate to students' lives, which, consequently, makes the content more applicable.

While at a recent teacher workshop, I learned an alternative discussion approach called “communication envelopes” that I used for teaching Plath. This technique enabled students to ask questions and make comments without feeling the pressure of 24 classmates listening.

First, my students created their own envelopes using basic supplies (construction paper, markers, and tape). After a student volunteer read the poem aloud, students wrote questions and/or comments about the poem on pieces of paper, which were folded and placed in envelopes and then collected and redistributed so that other students read feedbacks and responded with ideas of their own. I repeated the process until I had the desired number of reactions, returning envelopes to their original owners when finished.

After my students received their original envelope, they read through the entries. I then asked for volunteers to share the content, thereby stimulating discussion. I considered this a primer to a more active reading of Plath’s poems.

Several examples of “silent discussion” are listed below. As you’ll see, they include initial questions, comments, and answers, revealing student thought processes that helped them begin understanding the poems. I chose several reactions to “Nick and the Candlestick” in order to show how multiple entries can work together, as well as individual reactions to the remaining poems.

“Nick and the Candlestick”

<i>Michael</i>	Is the poem talking about life and death or about birth? Or, maybe even about love? I liked the sensory details and vivid descriptions of the objects in the poem. I disliked that it was confusing. I feel the miner and cave are symbolic of the road to death and the baby in the barn represents rebirth.
<i>Matt</i>	I think the poem is about birth because there are many words that relate to birth, such as: “baby,” “womb,” and “embryo.” I also liked the vivid descriptions and agree that it is too confusing.
<i>Andrea</i>	I agree with a lot of what you say. However, I believe the poem is about finding love. So, I disagree with Michael’s view of the poem’s symbolism.
<i>Amanda</i>	I absolutely love this poem. Its harsh words touched me and were beautiful. Life is such a gift and children hold a clean slate, innocence. I loved how she

	used bad and mean words and objects that in the end mean something glorious. I also noticed a slight religious meaning by saying “Christ” and “holy Joes” and “the baby in the barn.”
<i>Ian</i>	I agree with you, Amanda. I think the metaphor between the cave and the womb is brilliant. The things that one would never think would be compared are compared in a way that displays how two preconceived dissimilar things can actually be very similar.

<i>Megan</i>	I didn’t like it because it is confusing. I didn’t understand the connections she tried to make. I liked the scary kind of tone, though.
<i>Michael</i>	I agree that it is confusing. But the connections are hidden, and you have to find them. The scary tone is absent, but it is somewhat dark.
<i>Erik</i>	I thought the poem is about how her son brings her joy and life in her meaningless, dark, lonely existence.
<i>Amanda</i>	I found it beautiful, and I connected with it, like having one thing that brings you enough to carry on.

<i>Alicia</i>	<p>The sixth stanza:</p> <p><i>A vice of knives</i> <i>A piranha</i> <i>Religion, drinking</i></p> <p>What does this stanza have to do with a candlestick? It also sounds kind of depressing. Almost like the narrator, Nick, I’m guessing, wants to die.</p>
<i>Amanda</i>	I took it a totally different way. I think the author (who is not Nick) is in pain but has nothing to do with a candlestick. I think the candlestick just shows change, disintegration, melting.
<i>Nick</i>	I don’t think that the poem has anything really to do with a candlestick, but there are references in the first stanza about candle-like things: “waxy

	stalactites,” “burns,” “drip.” I do agree that I think it is depressing, and the narrator has some sort of pain. And, I do agree that the candlestick may symbolize something more, but what it is, I’m not sure.
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“Balloons”

<i>Alex</i>	What do the balloons make you think of?
<i>Nadine</i>	Honestly, balloons make me think of innocence and being carefree just because of its light weight and how it is in an undisturbed manner. Why do you think that she chose balloons?
<i>Kat</i>	Balloons make me think of letting go because a friend and I wrote all of our problems/worries/regrets on balloons and then let them go. It makes you feel a little better. I think she chose balloons because they are very fragile, kind of like our lives. How do you think the boy felt after he popped the balloon?

“Child”

<i>Sarah</i>	What do you think it means when she says, “this dark / Ceiling without a star.”?
<i>Alex</i>	I think that is the baby’s view of this new, foreign world to him or her. I also think it could be a not-so-good or certain future for them all.
<i>Sadie</i>	I think she’s speaking in terms of the baby’s view. So, I agree with the person above. The baby could be looking at the ceiling without lights on or the baby doesn’t have somebody’s eyes to look at.
<i>Andrew</i>	World from child’s point-of-view. Or, possibly from a mother’s point-of-view – the dark side of having a child.

“Morning Song”

<i>Nadine</i>	I think this poem is the beginning of all the poems. I think she wrote this one
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	first because she talks about the baby being born and having great value, such as the “fat gold watch,” which would be expensive. I think her life was complete when she had her child or she wanted one so bad she got obsessed with the idea of having one. What do you think? Why does she talk about her child so much?
<i>Jordan</i>	I completely agree!! I definitely think this was first and that her baby was of great value to her. I don’t know why she talks about her child so much. Maybe she couldn’t have children and now can? Or, maybe she’s just really missing the “completeness” of having a family?
<i>Andrew</i>	I think she just really enjoys being a mother and motherhood. Do you think this is the same child as the other poems that we read in class?

Students Respond

One textbook used for this course was *Reading and Writing from Literature*, edited by John E. Schwiebert. At the beginning of the semester, I taught my students the four-step process outlined in the book: 1) read. 2) reread and annotate. 3) create a list of powerful ideas. 4) compose a written response. This four-step process teaches students how to actively read and respond to literature.

For the next part of their assignment, I asked my students to annotate two of the four poems that we had read and discussed. Then, they were to develop a list of three writing ideas. These writing ideas were simply topics that my students created based on their specific annotations. Armed with ideas from “communication envelopes” and consequent discussions, students created their own 3-D landscapes based on interactions with Plath’s poetry.

Annotations

Writing annotations gave students the chance to ask questions and make comments while they were reading. The annotations either appeared directly on their copies of poems or on separate pieces of paper. An example for “Morning Song” and “Child” follow respectively:

Brandon

- Slapping of “footsoles” is setting youth on their way
- “Blankly as walls” is standing without an answer
- “Dull stars” could be dreams

- “Voices echo” = loneliness
- “Clear vowels” = solid answers
- “Love set you going” – love made you who you are

Kelsie

- “color and ducks” – wants it to be lively
- “zoo of the new” – zoo is something crazy
- 2nd stanza of “Child” – random list
- “stalk without wrinkle” – brand new
- “grand and classical” – something new and exciting
- “not this troublous” – babies aren’t meant to be any trouble
- “ceiling without a star” – bare with nothing to be seen

List of Writing Topics

Writing topics often included both references to the themes of poems, as well as to ideas stemming from symbols or objects used in Plath’s poems. Students chose a topic from their list for their writing task.

Emily

1. Watches stop, love doesn’t
2. Air is always invisible
3. “Effacement at the wind’s hand”

Sarah

1. How is love valued in people?
2. How does love affect a family and their children?
3. What does darkness symbolize?

Jordan

1. Something related to balloons – common in both poems
2. Dealing with children and their innocence and curiosity
3. What makes the bond between family members so strong?

**Written Response from My Students**

Ian wrote a paragraph analyzing “Nick and the Candlestick.”

“This poem has a ridiculous amount of brilliant metaphors. The largest of the metaphors is found in parallels between a ‘cave’ and a ‘womb.’ The blue light represents life and the sky while escaping the cave. The yellow represents the sun and the candle flame. ‘Waxy stalactites’ draw parallels to candle wax. It also touches on, pretty blatantly, the whole birthing process. Phrases such as ‘O embryo’ display such an idea. The pain of birth is seen throughout this poem. Religion is often brought up. However, I can’t distinguish whether Christianity is being mocked or promoted.”

Nadine chose to write a poem that might inspire a woman feeling hopeless by showing the hope in the child.

“Untitled”

A mother is every child’s first hope.
Neglecting their presence won’t help them cope
with problems and struggles that they endure,
a mother can combat keeping them secure.

Brighten your smile for you are a charm
that the child will hold onto and call when in harm.
The vital source that he/she refers to,
your appearance is blessed that’s expressed in gratitude.

Continue showing your motherly spirit
and blind others that completely omit
the greatest possible thing in life
of loving your child without a strife.

Conquer the flaws and relax your mind.
Having a child is a one of a kind
feeling of hope and a sense of accomplishment
proceed in nourishing your lovely baby infant.

Some mirrored the emotions and tone of Plath’s writing, such as this poem composed by Kat; though, the feeling of helplessness grows from the child’s point-of-view.

“Untitled”

a child is innocent
blank
unknowing
a child relies on you
to teach them right from wrong
the ins and outs
of this messed up place

but what happens
when you leave them
alone
abandoned
you render them powerless
defenseless
against this cruel world

they end up broken
minds distorted
stuck with
the only memory they have
of you – walking out the door
this one memory
that dictates their lives

all they know
all they can ever think about ...
people always leave

*After reading her poem to the class, Jordan insisted that the poem was really just about balloons.
But, viewing her words through 3-D glasses unveils so much more.*

“High in the Sky”

When I let you go, you fly so high
up that I cannot find you
in the endless sky above me.
But where do you go?

I wish I hadn't let you go.
I hope you'll find
some friends up there.



If not you will be lonely.

I thought by letting you go,
I was releasing my stress and fears.
Yet now I find myself stressing
about how miserable you'll be.

If I could climb a building
and rescue you, I would.
I miss you mister blue balloon
with a star on you.

But we all know I can't, you're gone.

*Emily, decidedly not a fan of Plath, composed a poem inspired by a line in "Morning Song,"
"Effacement at the wind's hand," which mirrors the loneliness often detected in Plath's work.*

"The Billowing Wind"

Blowing heavily in the wind,
I float along feeling bare.
Pieces of me have been left behind.
I'm not whole.

I no longer remain a person,
being stripped of everything I am.
Their wind is brutal,
never leaving me alone.

Effacement leaves me raw.
Wishing I knew who I was.
I'm no one anymore,
nothing remains of me.

No longer in my control,
I let the wind decide.
It leaves me standing there,
unable to recognize who I am.

Now I'm unaware who I am.
I hope the wind will come back,
coming to return my identity.
But, the wind has taken who I am.

Others, such as this poem by Brandon, used various words and symbols from the poems to compose more reflective pieces.

“Untitled”

They were good poems,
one of children and babies of the sort,
the kind of poems for royalty inside of their court.

Babies one would not abort,
and written lines of empty sea and open port
resting in one's ear and the dark ceiling granting me rest
every year, resisting fear,
a mother watches her children begin to run with the grace of deer.

Crowds cheer and voices echo
mixed with cold winter breath of April snow
we grow, and of course we die
hearing the presence of old men, and when the youth cry,
for I see all color within the sky,
I lack the power to fly
but rise whenever I sit or lie.

Erik expressed admiration for Plath's craft and found himself humbled by her talent.

“Sylvia Plath”

Plath, Sylvia
Got a question for ya'
I don't know how you do this
Wherein I swing and miss

Your words seem to flow so well
Like the drone of a church bell
They just roll along
With thoughts so strong

I wish to write like you
So descriptive and true
I do believe we would've liked each other
But maybe it's best we do not bother

For then you shall see my incompetence
You'd see I write with a thorough rinse



Of all skill and colorful expression
Of all of your fans I am just one

One among what should be millions

Amanda composed a fictional retelling of “Balloons,” creating a detailed string of events.

“It was New Year’s Eve, about seven o’clock. My mother and father were at a party, and I was stuck at home watching my one-year-old brother, Richie. While Richie was sitting on the floor in front of my recliner playing with his toys, I just sat, sideways in my chair, watching our balloons drift all over the ceiling. We had gotten them on Christmas from my aunt. I thought it strange to receive balloons on Christmas. I also thought it was strange that the balloons weren’t just regular oval but also animal shaped. There were three that especially stood out to me: One, shaped like a cat’s head, was yellow, one a blue fish, and a plain red one that was dying and laid on the floor. The cat and fish balloons were bright, and I loved those animals (I guess because we actually have a cat and a fish). I snapped out of my distraction and noticed our cat playing with the fallen red balloon. Every time she attacked it, it just scooted a little and trembled to rest. I laughed quietly to myself, and then Richie saw what was humoring me. He crawled over to the balloon, and the cat ran fast into the kitchen. Richie picked up the balloon and started to examine it. He rubbed it, making it squeak, and then he decided to taste it. First a lick, then a bite. There was a pop, and we both jumped. Richie started to cry. I looked and saw the little, red rubber scrap in Richie’s hand.”

All of my students have their own perspectives and opinions that color how they think and write about literature. I’ve discovered that it’s the students’ unique perspectives that make their writing interesting. While students often write about similar topics (either because of the assignment or because they’ve been *trained* to respond to literature), they still exhibit their own sense of vision when they wear “multi-dimensional glasses.”

Of course not every student enjoyed Plath’s poems; but, whether they knew it or not, my students looked at her work and its depth and found images and descriptions, among other treasures, that leave a lasting impression.