

## Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Suicide

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Plath's unfortunate suicide on February 11, 1963, shocked the literary world, and her confessional and accusatory writing became a primary platform from which to dissect her life. Plath's depiction of a bold, victimized persona compelled critics to consider how the details of her personal life explained the subject matter of her poems; and, rightfully so, since it's undeniable that Plath herself embraced the idea of divulging the details of her personal life and feelings through her work. At the root of the struggles described in Plath's poetry is the fact that she suffered from an underlying mental illness and had a history of depression, suicidal tendencies and mental therapy, which included electro-shock treatments. Her published poetry and journals publicly expose how she expressed what it felt like to be her. For instance, in a journal entry dated October 3, 1959, Plath opens the entry with: "Very depressed today. Unable to write a thing. Menacing Gods. I feel outcast on a cold star, unable to feel anything but an awful helpless numbness" (517).

To a thorough reader, the sentiment of this entry rings familiar and presents the foundation from which Plath builds her idea of suicide. Specifically, in the poems composed near the end of her life, she describes a self that is preparing for suicide. In this essay, I refer to general psychiatric principles, studies about suicidal writers and literature and offer an explanation of selected poems in order to show how they illustrate known signs and warnings of pending suicide. While it may be obvious to look at a poet's work and analyze suicidal intentions after the death has occurred, the hope of this paper is to reveal a potential source of information for educators, family and friends of writers who may be at risk. With this knowledge, an individual can find that perhaps indicators found in poems and personal letters can be a way to prevent the suicide of a friend or loved one.

### Signs of Suicide

Although it's often difficult for a friend or family member to believe, a person who commits suicide might exhibit predictable patterns of conduct. As with other behavioral indicators, like those associated with a physical addiction or mental illness, a person intending to commit suicide may go through several stages before the final act. While not an exact science, an individual can prepare herself to understand how a suicidal individual might be trying to

communicate. Robert Marrone, author of Death, Mourning & Caring, describes what a person can look for:

Suicidal ideation, triggering events, and warning signs form an interrelated triad that is present in many suicides. Suicidal ideas, threats, and attempts often precede a suicide. The most commonly cited warnings of potential suicide include (a) extreme changes in behavior, (b) a previous suicide attempt, (c) a suicidal threat or statement, and (d) signs of depression, hopelessness, and a sense of a meaningless life. (193)

Those thinking of suicide can be helped simply by someone asking about and listening to their feelings; though, ironically, it seems that talking becomes easier and more necessary for those surrounding a suicidal individual after the fact. On the America Foundation for Suicide Prevention's website, survivor stories are included to help others cope with the loss of a loved one to suicide:

"...During the first couple of months after my sister's suicide, we talked about her incessantly. We reminisced about how she acted and looked. We had an insatiable desire to reconstruct the weeks before she died. We recounted the last conversations, moods, phone calls, photographs and meals, hoping that somehow our memories would explain the answer to why she'd killed herself. That question still gnawed at our guts, creating a big, black, empty hole..." (Debbie).  
("Personal")

Despite the fact that it's not always possible to detect warning signs – because sometimes those warning signs are simply not there – hope exists to uncover suicidal intentions. Specifically, the methods of a suicidal writer might adhere to a pattern of revelation, which could be found in the writer's personal letters, diaries, poems and therapeutic exercises.

Forewarning appears in suicidal writers' work because the desire to commit suicide and/or the projected act of suicide becomes subject matter. For example, one way of expressing a desire to commit suicide in poetry may come from words and phrases associated with feelings of depression that cause self-destructive behaviors. Once the writer has taken her life, her work is no longer a chronicle of a struggle to toe the line without crossing it, but an evident display of someone who needed help not to step over the boundary. When discussing suicidal poets in general, educator, editor and writer Fred Moramarco examines how confessional poetry about

suicide is a source of inspiration to the writer, at least until the final act: “So long as these poets remained alive, the tension between a flirtation with suicide through the articulation of potential self-destruction in language, and the irretrievable finality of the act itself charged their work with the energy of affirmation” (142). Moramarco’s use of the word “affirmation” can be interpreted as affirmation of the perceived self, the act of suicide and, consequently, the perceived self in the act of suicide. In the case of Plath, the thematic presence of isolation, rejection, death and rebirth, whether by shedding a figurative skin or through death, shows a final perceived self shaped by suicidal thoughts. However, some do argue that perhaps Plath didn’t intentionally commit the final act but only meant to test her expanding boundaries.

The breakdown of her family placed Plath under tremendous stress. After her husband, Ted Hughes, left her to be with his lover, Assia Wevill, Plath was left on her own to care for two small children. Because Hughes’s departure fueled Plath’s depression, she began taking medications to help her cope and function on a daily basis, which her mother, Aurelia Schober Plath, blames for encouraging rather than suppressing her suicidal thoughts, especially since such medications contain side-effects that increase suicidal thoughts (Yankowitz). Since Plath’s first suicide attempt (via an overdose of sleeping pills) was thwarted, it’s reasonable to assume that Plath might have more readily entertained suicidal thoughts because she thought someone would save her again. Additionally, perhaps Plath thought that this dramatic act might bring her family back together or simply punish her husband for his careless actions. A. Alvarez asserted that she orchestrated a dangerous, risky cry-for-help based on the clues left behind: “Had everything worked out as it should – had the gas not drugged the man downstairs, preventing him from opening the front door to the *au pair* girl – there is little doubt she would have been saved. I think she wanted to be; why else leave her doctor’s telephone number?” (36). Since we will never know Plath’s true intentions that day, it’s necessary to consider her actions within the whole context of her life. By doing this, we extend our perspective to consider not only her specific actions in life, but also what she had to say in her writing.

### The Poetry

In a rant from her published journals dated Monday, May 19, 1958, Plath’s anger is palpable when she discusses her discovery of absolute proof that her husband is cheating on her, and she openly acknowledges her attraction to both internal and external dialogue about suicide:

Why is it I so despise this brand of male vanity? Even Richard [previous boyfriend] had it, small, sickly & impotent as he was at nineteen. Only he was rich, had family and so security: a lineage of men able to buy better wives than they deserved....I know what Ruth would tell me, and I feel I can now tell her. No, I won't jump out of a window or drive Warren's car into a tree, or fill the garage at home with carbon monoxide & save expense, or slit my wrists & lie in the bath. (391)

In many cases, Plath's poetic voice resembles the tone of her journal. Steven Gould Axelrod provides a definition of what is known as "confessional poetry," which is commonly used to describe Plath's work and links her words to her ultimate intentions: "The Confessional poem is the autobiography of crisis – a crisis which characteristically has two dimensions. One dimension is psychological....The other dimension of the crisis embodied by the Confessional poem is social" (5). The psychological dimension of Plath's crisis includes expression of her interior mind stimulated by depression, and the social dimension includes rejection of the public sphere where she would ultimately express herself. While she may give us a persona in her poetry, the emotions placed into the poem come from Plath. Five poems from The Collected Poems with final draft dates close to the time of her death, "Elm," "Lady Lazarus," "Words," "Contusion" and "Edge," exemplify a progression of suicidal indicators in chronological order.

In the poem, "Elm," dated April 19, 1962, Plath utilizes multiple points-of-view to express a sense of "hopelessness," as well as to "[Make] negative comments about [her]self," two distinct signs of a potential suicide risk (Marrone 188). "Elm" is divided into fourteen, three-line stanzas, with each stanza giving us a bleak experience by the speaker (or speakers, since a dialogue seems to take place between the entities of a divided self). "She" is used only once, the second-person "you" is seen in the first five stanzas, while the first-person voice is present throughout (1, 2). A "linguistic analysis of a series of letters" written by someone who committed suicide cites a study by Stirman and Pennebaker (2001) that shows the importance of Plath's choice to use first-person: "suicidal poets used significantly more first-person singular nouns than did the nonsuicidal poets, indicating an increased focused on self" (Barnes et al. 671, 673). Plath begins the poem by preparing the reader to understand that her desperate circumstances no longer shock: "I know the bottom, she says. I know it with my great tap root: /

It is what you fear. / I do not fear it: I have been there” (1-3). However, the experiences that follow throughout the poem stun the reader.

Plath uses vivid imagery and haunting words to convey a state of self-deprecating instability. In two middle stanzas, she shows the violent nature of her pain by describing its ability to break her apart: “Now I break up in pieces that fly about like clubs. / A wind of such violence / Will tolerate no bystanding: I must shriek” and “I am inhabited by a cry. / Nightly it flaps out / Looking, with its hooks, for something to love” (19-21, 28-30). Also, Plath provokes the reader with an unforgiving portrayal of the losses the speaker has experienced. Similar to Plath’s own experience with love, the speaker describes the emotion as if it’s in darkness, as if she will never find love again: “Love is a shadow. / How you lie and cry after it / Listen: these are its hooves: it has gone off, like a horse” (7-9). The poem concludes with a sense of helplessness, indicating the underlying acceptance of the speaker’s emotional state that demonstrates the belief in an unchanging, unpromising situation.

Dated October 23-29, 1962, “Lady Lazarus” establishes a distinct obsession with “Recurring suicidal thoughts or fantasies” by using a religious figure to represent rebirth as an extended metaphor and also demonstrates a flippant treatment of her own suicidal tendencies (Marrone 188). As the female counterpart of Lazarus, Plath creates a supernatural being steeped in religious reference, and her tone articulates a sense of awe at her own inability to die, adding to mysterious aura of the continued existence. In his essay, “Plath’s and Lowell’s Last Words,” Steven Axelrod points to a style of poetry as a way to interpret Plath’s metaphoric representation of the mutated biblical figure: “The Confessional poet assumes that psychological and historical experience, the individual and the general, are related, and even at some deep level synonymous” (6). Plath again predominantly uses a first-person perspective; however, the idea of suicide is discussed more than the speaker herself. Her thirtieth birthday marks her third time to attempt death, and the speaker recounts her previous two endeavors with relish:

The first time it happened I was ten.

It was an accident.

The second time I meant

To last it out and not come back at all.

I rocked shut

As a seashell.

They had to call and call

And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls. (35-42)

In addition, Plath speaks of dying as an art form, with the survivor of suicide described as an exhibition later in the poem. Claiming to know the recipe for a successful attempt at death, the speaker recalls in-your-face details about her brushes with death: “I do it so it feels like hell. / I do it so it feels real. / I guess you could say I’ve a call” (46-48). She ends the poem with a warning to both God and the Devil, establishing “Lady Lazarus’s” power beyond both, her imagery offering an unnatural rejuvenation: “Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air” (82-84). The distance between the speaker and reader created by Plath’s association with a strong historical figure appears in future poems.

In her poem, “Words,” with a final composition date of February 1, 1963, Plath’s words represent a sense of “withdrawal” from society, into herself, and a “Giving away [of] possessions,” though the possessions are mental and physical rather than material (Marrone 188). The poem begins with the sharp word “Axes” and compares the nature of words to the character of fleeing horses. In relation to the two previous poems discussed where the use of “I” is mainly used, “I” is used only once, which helps to convey a detachment also evoked by sound: “And the echoes! / Echoes traveling / Off from the center like horses” (1, 3-5). Further, this poem’s message can be skimmed from the top by extracting the first line from each of the four, five-line stanzas: “Axes” (1), “The sap” (6), “That drops and turns” (11) and “Words dry and riderless” (16). If we interpret the speaker as the wood in which the axe is dropped, then her emotions, and consequently her words, become “The sap” that leaks. Following this, she seems to be giving away her words, even watches them leave and move along without her while she’s separated from them. The speaker shows the reader that she can no longer see or recognize herself when she describes being unable to find her reflection in the departing words:

The sap

Wells like tears, like the

Water striving

To re-establish its mirror (6-9)

She concludes the poem with “a life,” presumably a projection of the speaker’s own life, submerged and separated from both society and her emotions, where it seems she can only look out as if within a mirror: “In the end, the poem’s almost mechanical activity winds down to the utter stasis of death – under water, in reflected light, fixed” (20, Axelrod 7). Physically and mentally, Plath releases her words, withdraws and bestows her body to a muddy floor beneath a body of water.

Finalized only a few days after “Words,” “Contusion,” dated February 4, 1963, again paints a picture of absolute withdrawal and seems to “indicate that a decision has been made to attempt suicide” because the speaker details how death will feel (Marrone 188). Her depressing depiction of life sucked from a person, as well as the end alluding to sheets covering unused objects, points to two patterns of suicide writers as described by scholar Mircea Mihaies: “Melancholy and elegy are always present in the texts of the suicides, because, before being an act, suicide is a mental pattern” (72). While not a warm remembrance of her person, the elegy the speaker relays does in fact mourn an approaching death by writing about it, though she remains noticeably detached. Plath does not use first-person “I” or even a third-person “she,” and she uses images presented in “Words,” like the water and mirror, to extinguish life and reduce it to a single point of demise: “In a pit of rock / The sea sucks obsessively, / One hollow the whole sea’s pivot” and “The heart shuts, / The sea slides back, / The mirrors are sheeted” (3-5, 10-12). Her final stanza explains that no reflection will ever appear because the mirrors now have been covered, which also presents a ghostly image (the sheet over the mirror) of the speaker when she looks into the mirror to see herself.

“Edge,” dated only six days before her death, once again presents the reader with an image of rebirth, and does so in a way that matches a “Sudden change from extreme depression to a being ‘at peace’” (Marrone 188). The speaker projects a morbid image of herself into the future, though continues to depersonalize herself by not using the first-person “I.” Her sentiment toward life is revealed by the first line of the poem, as if the time for death has arrived: “The woman is perfected” (1). Additionally, if you look at her end words for the twenty couplets, a chilling perception about the death is uncovered: “Perfected” (1), “dead” (2), “accomplishment” (3), “necessity” (4) “empty” (11), “bleed” (15) and “bone” (18) convey the idea that emptying of blood and bone is a necessary accomplishment in her life, that death is her perfection. Also, rather than fight her fate, the speaker treats the death as if it were something to be happy about,

as if she joins nature as she should: “The moon has nothing to be sad about” (17). Put another way, nature should accept this premature death as a natural part of life and celebrate it – even memorialize it as if the speaker garners the worth of a white statue. Her sense of reconciliation follows tendencies of other suicidal writers, as seen in the previously referenced analysis that included a suicide writer who kept a diary: “As others who commented on the diary noted (e.g., Canetto, 2004), the woman sounded more confident and more positive about the future as the time of her death grew closer” (Barnes et al. 673). The last poem that Plath finalized, “Edge” stands out as final acceptance of her ultimate fate by lacking any sense of struggle.

In the end, Plath submitted to her suicidal feelings. Though Plath couldn't benefit from the mental expertise available today, it's reasonable to suggest that if she did, she might have received a focused diagnosis beyond depression. In a study of people with borderline personality disorder, informants displayed a similar outpouring of mental anguish and self-hate as Plath: ““The contours of the surroundings is dissolving, everything is floating together into a grey mist, while twilight is falling behind me.’/‘It's hard to believe in light, when you are living in darkness with yourself as enemy number one.’/‘I have storms of emotions inside me’” (Perseius et al. 163). It's important to recognize the potential signs and symptoms of a person considering suicide in order to help understand that person's plight and secure needed help. By educating oneself about not only suicidal writers but also about mental illness and suicide in general, hopefully, we can all work to make a difference in the lives of others.

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