



Sylvia Plath and “The Peanut-crunching Crowd”: A Journey from Affection to Aversion

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aftermath of the Second World War, her marginalization in England, and her husband and publishers' refusal of her poetic identity and talent, which ruined her dream identity of a successful American woman.

Keywords: “Sylvia Plath,” “People,” “Attitude,” “Affection,” “Aversion,” “Misanthropy”.

Abstract

Understanding how poets respond to the people and world around them is crucial when one aims to interpret their poems, specifically when their feelings and expressions of other humans reshape as their poetic careers develop. Although different critics and biographers have attempted to shed some light on the well-known American poet Sylvia Plath's outlook on people, there seems to be no unanimous agreement among them as some claim Plath was fond of people, and others believe she abhorred them. With a closer look at her life and writings to resolve this controversy, one cannot help but notice that Plath's attitude toward people gradually changed from love to hatred. In the same vein, having analyzed Plath as a person and Plath as a poet, this paper, with a descriptive-analytic approach, initially scrutinizes how Plath viewed people in her oeuvre and then investigates why her affection for other humans changed to aversion. Among the noteworthy reasons are her different relationship failures, such as her unfulfilled relationship with her father and husband. In addition to her personal bitter experiences, other factors that contributed to her misanthropy include the impact of the Cold War in the



Introduction

People have different feelings and attitudes about various phenomena and events, and poets have a kind of sensitivity that is sharper than ordinary people, enabling them to express their extraordinary minds and thoughts through their poetic compositions. Sylvia Plath, one of the most famous and talented American poets of the twentieth century, is one of such sensitive poets whose unique feelings were reflected in her poetical works. Bruce Bawer, in his essay "Sylvia Plath and the Poetry of Confession," emphasizes this sensitivity as such: "Plath's proudly flaunted self-destructiveness, and her romantic image of herself as a sensitive genius in a brutal and indifferent world, made her a natural idol for many a young person in the throes of adolescent torment." Although some believe Plath's poetry is persona poetry, many others call it confessional. "The life of Sylvia Plath has been much discussed, so that readers may be tired of it and wish just to read her poems. But her poems bring us back to her life—she wrote about real people and incidents" [1]. Thus, the way she presents her emotions in her lines actually represents her own feelings. Indeed,

For her, autobiography and poetry had to be one and were inextricably linked to her positive and negative life experiences, even though this was contrary to the modernist idea of poetry and even though Plath herself did not have the appropriate terms at her disposition to express these complex links between poetry, autobiography, and life in language. [2]

Like everybody else, Sylvia Plath developed her distinctive feelings and perceptions about different people by interacting and socializing with them. At an early age and in her youth, Plath had a rather positive way of thinking about people; actually, "she was fascinated by people, and recorded details of their appearance, conversations, actions in her Journals" [3]. But later, gaining new experiences, she gained newer perspectives and altered her attitude, which is reflected in her writings, especially her poems.

Through her marriage with the British poet Ted Hughes, she had the chance to visit and live in a foreign country and earn new experiences with people of other cultures. However, this experience was not as sweet as she expected. Because "As an American in England she was inevitably marginalised; not belonging to the culture in which she found herself, looking at England and the English with the eyes of an outsider" [4]. Such marginalization can inevitably

affect one's attitude toward others, and besides that, her failed relationship with her husband and others aggravated the situation. Moreover, the influence of the World War on her mindset, as well as the threat of using nuclear weapons to destroy more humans, made her a somewhat cynical person towards others. Finally, she imagined an ideal identity for herself based on the standards of society as well as her poetic self, and when her husband and publishers rejected her, she found herself totally lost and disheartened as she did not succeed in reaching her favored identity. The negative feelings, therefore, affected her mind incessantly, and as her view of people changed with such experiences, she began to express them in her writings. Nonetheless, writing, as her ultimate shelter, did not save her, and the black and dark images of life and people eventually led to her decision to end her tormenting life.

Discussion

Plath's optimistic view about people in her youth can be traced in various sources. In an entry in her Journal, "written in the summer of 1950 when she was eighteen years old, Sylvia Plath wrote: "I love people. Everybody. I love them, I think, as a stamp collector loves his collection"" [5]. In general, "Plath's sense of humor and interest in different people is noted throughout her early journals"[16], a number of her personal writings which show her favorable stance toward people.

In her youth, Plath tried her best to attain the life of a successful American woman. To form such an identity, she sought to live a perfect life based on the standard norms of American society. One way to show this was through finding a good boyfriend and later an ideal husband.

In her teenage and college years, Sylvia Plath was known to put great emphasis on relationships with boyfriends. Not that she particularly liked these friendships, but for her they belonged to the life of a successful American girl. She thus followed the behavior patterns of her time, and since she wanted perfection in all she did, she fulfilled the social norms - that is what they were for her - to a very high degree, motivated significantly by her fear of loss, loss of social and familial acceptance and admiration. Consequently, she needed boyfriends - like mirrors - to give her the identity she wanted, an identity constructed by social norms



and personal desires to belong, to be an outstanding part of society. It was hard enough to be in the middle of an accepted social life and to excel within, but for quite some time - with the exception of her father's death -, she seemed to receive what she was fervently, almost feverishly, longing for, something that Paula Bennett calls "[t]he fragile foundation on which Sylvia Plath was encouraged to build her sense of identity and self-worth (I have a husband, therefore I am; I have a superior husband, therefore, I am superior too)" [7]

Later, this mindset underwent a temporary change as she attempted to go beyond social norms and standards and focused on herself and her dreams, writing, "I am afraid of getting married. Spare me from cooking three meals a day – spare me from the relentless cage of routine and rote. I want to be free – free to know people and their backgrounds – free to move to different parts of the world so that I may learn that there are other morals and standards besides my own" [8]. Paying attention to her words, one cannot help but notice that she wanted to know more and more about people and their backgrounds, which is indicative of her passion for other people in her early adulthood. To put more emphasis on her positive outlook on people, "I love everybody," Sylvia writes. "If only I can unobtrusively do well in all my courses and get enough sleep, I should be tops. I'm so happy. And this anticipation makes everything super" [9]. Such references to her enthusiasm for people and life are all pieces of evidence that in her early years, Plath tried to keep her spirits high and thought of others positively.

However, all of this was doomed to change with the appearance of Ted Hughes in her life. Plath was so much drawn to this British poet that she decided to get married to him within four months, and later, this failed marriage was one of the seminal causes of her suicide. Nonetheless, at the beginning of their relationship, she sounded pretty joyous. This is because

When Plath met Hughes she glorified him and believed to see herself reflected in him. She defined herself through him, as reflected in the poem "Pursuit." On the one hand, Ted Hughes

brought about experiences that Plath had not known before and that were not acceptable for women in society, such as her openly emerging sexuality. He did not want her to conform, but as soon as she started fulfilling her non-conformist wishes of becoming a poet (for which she needed his support in the arrangement of everyday life because they were in constant need of money and had to take care of their children), he backed away from her. He broke the (for him hardly existing) norms without sanctions and then sanctioned her for doing the same. Plath's admiration for Hughes's physicality and hugeness, the enlargement of his personality turned into feelings of domination and restriction as soon as doubts about their relationship came up in her. [10]

Ted Hughes had a substantial influence on Sylvia Plath "because he not only determined every day of their common life but also, at the beginning, every line of her writing" [11]. In a sense, Sylvia trusted Ted with her poetic identity, and as he kept changing or intervening with her ideas and lines, one might say he somehow disrupted Plath's identity and damaged her psyche. Also, Plath's sacrifices for her love and marriage should not be taken for granted. For instance, because of Ted, she agreed to move to the United Kingdom, where she experienced other negative memories that led her to shape an inimical opinion of people for several reasons. "Within barely three years she had left her native United States to live in a country that intrigued her but whose climate eroded her health and sense of wellbeing, she had given birth to two children and miscarried a third, her adored husband was involved with someone else" [12], and she felt marginalized in the society of London. What was worse was the fact that she was forsaken by Ted. "Ted's behaviour had become increasingly odd. Sometimes, Sylvia did not know where he was, for Ted now regularly went into London alone. When they were together, they often argued, more so than they had in the past" [13]. In 1957, in a letter to her mother, Plath wrote, "I have seen next to nothing of England's natural beauty & feel I should, I am so prejudiced against it in everything else: politics, class-system, medical system, fawning literary cliques, mean-minded critics" [14]. Here, she expressed her negative feelings about some aspects of England as a place where she felt no belonging.



Through this quotation, one can also deduce that Plath could not find any connection between herself and England's literary and critical circles. This is in sheer contrast with her dedicated and fervent literary activities that she had back in the United States, especially in Robert Lowell's circle.

Additionally, it should be further emphasized that Plath sought her true identity within her poetic career, and one can imagine how frustrated and fragile she was when she kept losing support or acceptance from her husband as well as publishing centers. Her definition of herself was shattered in such circumstances; this is due to the fact that

Her work is a constant process of self-definition, in which the very act of writing becomes proof of her identity, and the refusal of publishers to print her work becomes an act of self-negation. It is important to remember that few of Plath's Ariel poems and none of the more challenging poems for which she is now most well-known were accepted for magazine publication during her lifetime even though she regularly sent off poems to literary editors. At the heart of this process lies her need for approval: only when she is accepted as a poet can she be accepted as a whole and valuable human being. [15]

One of the first bitter rejections Plath experienced in her life dates back to when she was young and counted so much on herself and her literary talents. Consequently, she decided to take a short-story writing class at Harvard summer school.

When Sylvia came home her mother broke the news that she had not been accepted as a student in Frank O'Connor's short-story writing class at Harvard summer school. "I could see Sylvia's face," says Aurelia Plath, "in the rearview mirror; it went white when I told her, and the look of shock and utter despair that passed over it alarmed me." After this Sylvia seemed to have lost

all joy in life. She would sunbathe with a book in hand, but never reading it. [16]

Plath's attempt to form an identity based on the standards of the American ideal woman also failed. She could not reach the perfection that she desired, in spite of her best efforts to abide by the rules that could make her ideal in accordance with societal norms.

We can see, in both her Letters and Journals, that when she wrote about her poetry and her poetic process, about trying to find a good last line to a poem, she constantly interrupted herself to record an ordinary domestic life: as a girl, dating (very important), or later, as a young mother, shopping, cooking, tending children. She tried desperately to present herself as perfect and desirable according to the standards of her time: the perfect student, daughter, pin-up and bathing beauty, wife, mother, writer. In England, when her marriage failed, it was clear she had not been "perfect." [17]

Digging deeper into Plath's mentality and life, it becomes clear that next to Hughes, one other critical male figure who influenced her to a great measure was undoubtedly her Germanic father, Otto Plath. "Otto's death when Sylvia was eight years old (she insisted, the next day, on going to school) led to a lifetime of largely suppressed rage at him, both for being a tyrant—which he may or may not have been, depending upon how one defines the word—and for abandoning her" [18]. She later revealed her anger and hatred toward him in her poem "Daddy," in which she imagined her father as a Nazi general. The root of this wrath can be traced in the fact that "As a child, she wrote stories and poems mainly in order to be accepted by her father by whom she felt left behind and betrayed when he died" [19]. Therefore, her father and husband were among the significant reasons why she felt so devastated. When Ted betrayed her love and their marriage by cheating on Plath with another woman, "He appeared to have abandoned her, just as her father had abandoned her by dying. She was cast down again in the darkness she had known as a child and young woman. A feeling of panic—she was loved by no one and utterly alone" [20]. After discovering



Ted's disloyalty, Plath develops a bitter hatred toward the entire human race to some extent. The author of *With Robert Lowell and His Circle*: Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Elizabeth Bishop, Stanley Kunitz, and Others, Kathleen Spivack, a friend and classmate of Plath, notes that "Sylvia seemed to live a very glamorous and grown-up life with poet Ted Hughes, later privately dubbed the "Demon Lover," and there was a controlled poise about her. Both *The Bell Jar* and even the (edited) *Plath Journals* reveal the hate, disgust, and anger Sylvia felt for most of the human race" [21]. Spivack also details that Plath had changed a lot with the passage of time: "Years later, listening to a recording of a broadcast of Sylvia reading her last poems for the BBC, I heard the anger in her voice, the barely suppressed impatience, and a shaking tightness, much more present than in those earlier days" [22]. One might say that the passing of years had killed the young, optimistic, and compassionate Plath and given birth to a new, revolting, and furious Plath. Furthermore, for Spivack,

The person in class and the person revealed in Sylvia Plath's letters, journals, and eventual poems were entirely different. Longing, anger, ambition, and despair appear to have been motivating factors for that gifted poet. These Furies expressed themselves outwardly frequently, as they did even more totally inwardly, toward herself and her achievements. As in a Greek tragedy, in which the elements of destruction reside within the character of the protagonist, the elements that led to her suicide had been apparent even in the early stages of her adolescence. Her desperation, so tightly reined in, increased throughout her life. [23]

In the same vein, the feeling of disgust and hatred toward people made Plath keep her grudge and take revenge in her works by depicting humans as evil or grotesque. "In Plath's work in general, not only are other people the objects of vengeance – her parents, her suitors, her husband and in later poems his mistress – but she herself is an object of her own vengeance" [24]. Moreover, Plath "was repelled and fascinated by the grotesque: deformed men on the subway "with short arms that curled like pink, boneless snakes around a begging cup." At Yankee Stadium she saw "all the stinking people in the world"" [25]. Such fascination with disturbing images can be due to the distorted and blurry identity that Plath had of herself

because of others. After all, these 'stinking people' gave Plath such a mindset.

All in all, Plath's life got tinged with depression and despair from her childhood years onwards. It was only through writing that she felt happiness, but with the rejection of her poetic identity, this joy was evanescent. One might even dare say Plath's life had never been fully joyous. From early in her life, she was involved in bitter experiences that could gradually darken her view of people. No matter how hard she tried to recover from her damaging childhood memories to attain a glimpse of happiness, the chain of misfortunes and miseries in her life was unquestionably endless, making her life traumatic and unbearable for her. Obviously,

Plath's life and the lives of those close to her contained more than an average share of illness and loss. There were the amputation of her father's leg and his subsequent death when she was seven; her mother's chronic ulcer; her grandmother's death; her own breakdown and institutionalization, chronic sinus condition, broken leg, miscarriage, appendectomy; her real-life Buddy Willard's bout with TB and confinement to a sanitarium. In addition, her visit with Buddy Willard to Boston-Lying-In hospital where she viewed medical students dissecting cadavers, fetuses in bottles, and childbirth, provided a traumatic extension to her more immediate experiences. [26]

In order to keep face, Plath attempted to hide her inner pain and show a normal or happy image of herself to her friends and family. Accordingly, when she decided to publish her autobiographical novel – *The Bell Jar* – Plath wanted to publish it "under a pseudonym because if the real identity of the author were disclosed, it would hurt too many people in her environment and family" [27], hence, her internal and external identities were in constant struggle, further deteriorating her mental state psychologically. As Spivack notes, "Sylvia had tried so hard to be perfect and desirable. Her letters to her mother reflect a desperate cheerfulness, a striving to present herself as living the life of a '50s-style "normal American girl" and, later, a "good wife and mother"" [28]. On a sociopsychological level, it can be inferred that this

paradoxical binary in her mind and behavior at last led to Plath's suicide for

Plath's life and work evolved around personal and social definitions of femininity that were mutually exclusive. Whereas her personal self overcame this crucial tension in her poetry and understood that "identity is a necessary [and, one might add, imposed] error," Plath saw no chance to survive in society. Thus, her death is at once a personal triumph and a social failure. [29]

Another noteworthy fact that should be discussed is the impact of the Second World War and the subsequent Cold War on Plath's anxious disposition. The news about nuclear threats and new massacres that could happen through using mass-killing weapons were among the things that engaged Plath's thoughts. As Thorne puts it, "In the wider world, the Cold War and the stockpiling of nuclear weapons cast a shadow over the lives of many – both Hughes and Plath attended meetings of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament – and the political climate clearly affected Plath's response to the world around her" [30]. The impact of these matters was to the extent that the "image of the nuclear holocaust, of the ashes and malformed human remains of Hiroshima fuses with the image of the concentration camps in the poems from 1960 onwards. At the same time there is evidence of her will to become involved, to do something to help" [31]. This is precisely why Plath and her husband joined plenty of anti-nuclear weaponry campaigns.

Certainly, there can be many other biographical reasons that might have led to Plath's enmity toward humans in her oeuvre. Some biographers and critics, such as Edward Butscher, the author of *Sylvia Plath, Method and Madness*, claim that there were rumors about Plath being raped by a man named Edwin. "Whether Sylvia was actually raped is difficult to tell" [32] Butscher concurs. However, if this scenario were real, then this assumption could be considered another consequential reason why she loathed people.

Overall, taking the above-mentioned facts and details into consideration, it is safe to argue that Plath's positivity toward others gradually changed for several reasons, and consequently, her poetry began to reflect misanthropic elements. For instance, she opens the 1962 poem "Crossing the Water" with the following lines: "Black lake, black boat, two black, cut-paper people. / Where do the black trees go that

drink here?" [33] and later in the third stanza adds the line "The spirit of blackness is in us, it is in the fishes" [34]. Through such lines, not only does she highlight the darkness and blackness in the nature of people, but also, using the pronoun 'us,' she tries to attribute this darkness to the whole human race in general. The tone is so cynical that the whole world seems hostile to her: "The people in the boat, like the flowers, trees, even the fishes in the lake are filled with darkness – 'the spirit of blackness is in us'" [35].

Plath's "Lady Lazarus" is one of her well-known poems, published in 1962, a year before her suicide. In this poem, Plath created a very negative image of people demonstrating how they are careless about each other, and readers can feel how the speaker is disgusted by people. The mood of the poem is overly gloomy because of the bitter facts that take place in it. "Lady Lazarus" describes a revival of a woman who is coming back from a dead life and is surrounded by many people who gather there only to see what is happening, and they seem to be like the audience in a theatre. Here is Plath's ironic manifestation of these people:

"What a million filaments.

The peanut-crunching crowd
Shoves in to see

Them unwrap me hand and foot—
The big strip tease." [36]

The images in this poem and the described scenes are entirely unpleasant and disturbing. The unemotional and insensitive people gathered there to see "The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth" [37] of Lady Lazarus. In this scene, the poem's speaker starts to ask for a charge from the spectators, saying, "For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge" [38]. There is a sort of detachment and separation between the speaker and the other people in this poem, and readers can feel this distance by reading the lines and imagining the images that the poet has depicted. "As it is the reader can share to some extent her distaste, even hatred of daily chores of life, the pettiness of things, and, occasionally, even her detachment from her own circle. He also may share her hatred of the peanut-crunching crowd – though in reading these poems he becomes one of that mob" [39].

Written in December 1962, "Brasilia" is one of Plath's poems that depicts a dark and grotesque image of people. Unlike her earlier poems about motherhood, which were somewhat optimistic and cheerful, this poem represents a totally different theme and atmosphere. In this poem, the "mother finds herself in a situation full of fear and tension because



she has to protect her baby against the modern world, against technologies, against a super-people" [40]. In her poetic lines filled with discomfiting imageries, she attempts to show how humans have changed for the worse; "The menacing image of the people with torsos of steel/Winged elbows and eyeholes ('Brasilia') becomes representative of the dehumanisation, the inability to feel that Plath saw as indicative of the world around her" [41].

In another poem, "Sheep in Fog," written in 1963, Plath – being tired and sick of others' attitudes toward her and failing to establish a good relationship with them – writes, "People or stars / Regard me sadly, I disappoint them" [42]. This disappointment is a mutual one, and it makes the poet sadder. Being a member of society, she developed different ideas about others as she interacted with them, and "anyone who has read the Journals will have noted the bewildering speed with which her viewpoints could change" [43]. Her views on people directed Plath's unstable positions toward others. "Her accounts of people, notably relatives, could change dramatically according to whether she was looking at them with affection or with the eye of 'that photographic mind which paradoxically tells the truth, but the worthless truth, about the world', as she once put it" [44].

Plath had a very complex mindset about people and their attitudes toward her, and she somehow found herself alienated from them. In a poem like "The Bee Meeting," another poem published in 1962, she wonders about this alienation, saying, "I am nude as a chicken neck, does nobody love me?" and she is aware of her distinction from the mob: "Now they are giving me a fashionable white straw Italian hat / And a black veil that molds to my face, they are making me one of them" [45]. Knowing about her separation and distance from other people, Plath tries to avoid them. As Peter Dale analyzed another poem by Plath entitled "Stings," he also referred to Plath's estrangement, as he wrote, "Even when ostensibly one in purpose with other people she still feels this sense of alienation and distinction which she is reluctant to surrender" [46]. As a matter of fact, her way of thinking is different from others, and thus, her ideas do not fit with those of others. As a result, "She is isolated from relationships and satisfactions that make life for others worth living" [47]. It is clear that Plath's attitude toward people is mainly negative in her late works, which is quite contrary to the ones she composed at an early age, and this metamorphosis of love into hatred could be seen via reading between the lines of her verse.

Conclusion

As one of the widely discussed poets of the United States in the twentieth century, Sylvia Plath shared some of her feelings about people through her journals, poetry, and novel. Some critics, relying primarily on her Journals, think Plath loved other people. However, unlike her early journals, in which

her attitude was positive, her poetry later dealt with negativity toward people. The roots of Plath's animosity toward people can come from different sources in her journey of life, including her failure in her relationship with her father due to his death, her husband's betrayal, her marginalization in Great Britain, the threat of nuclear bombs during Cold War period, and feeling of imperfection due to the rejection of her identity both in poetic and social domains. Her dark and sad attitudes toward people are shown in some of her poems, in which she depicts an atmosphere in which the readers can feel Plath's disgust for the careless people around whom she lived. Being aware of her difference from others, she could not find herself fit with the others, and this feeling tortured her mind in a way that finally forced her to commit suicide.

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