

# Mental illness, creativity and societal repression: the sylvia plath syndrome



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1963 was a particularly important year for American Confessional Poetry Movement for one of its chief proponents, Sylvia Plath famously committed suicide by carbon monoxide poisoning, sticking her head inside the oven and leaving behind a collection of verse that would later go on to win the Pulitzer Prize. The same year, another Pulitzer prize winner Katherine Anne Porter confessed in an interview “ I think I’ve only spent about ten percent of my energies on writing.. The other ninety percent went to keeping my head above water”, thereby suggesting a link between creativity and mental illness, a phenomenon that psychologist James Kaufman dubbed “ The Sylvia Plath Effect”. But what I intend to explore in my essay is whether Sylvia Plath’s suicide had less to do with her supposed mental instability and more with the social construct of her times, that espoused slyly among other things, the repression of the woman and their conformity to a pre-designed model as per conservative Victorian standards as gleaned from her poetry and other works, along with biographical details. Plath’s juvenile pre 1956 poetry, establish her as a writer of developing talent, with a fondness for surreal imagery, an adherence to the usual rules of rhyme and meter and a morbid obsession with death themes. Among the sonnets and villanelles dedicated to jilted lovers, she also writes lines such as “ Death comes in a casual steel car” and “ Time is a great machine with iron bars” and creatively explores a doomsday scenario. Unlike Emily Dickinson, whose attitude to death was rather inconsistent and varied from poem to poem, for Sylvia Plath death was the ultimate freedom from the deadly game of conformity, the ideal “ birthday present” she desperately longed for, as a last resort and an alternative to mental fulfillment and happiness. Plath’s prolonged exploration of morbid themes thus point to her Confessional

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streak, as well as society's failure to acknowledge the existential issues faced by the gifted teenager. However Sylvia Plath was neither alone in her depression nor was her condition unique in the literary tradition. Fellow Confessional poet and Plath's friend, Anne Sexton whose poetry openly dealt with similar issues also committed suicide eleven years later by locking herself in the garage and gassing herself to death. Prior to Plath in 1931, another lyric poet, Sara Teasdale overdosed on sleeping pills following a divorce from her husband and an onslaught of financial problems. With Virginia Woolf, Plath seemed to have found a special connection, writing in her journal that she feels her life "linked to her, somehow" and adding "But her suicide, I felt I was reduplicating in that black summer of 1953. Only I couldn't drown. I suppose I'll always be over-vulnerable, slightly paranoid." Three points can be thus noted : all the above-mentioned figures were women, most wrote on feminist themes and were characterized by a fierce sense of independence that was curtailed by society. Seen from this angle, it would appear that mental illness is not an individual phenomenon, but a collective inevitable symptom of a repressive, hypocritical society. As Virginia Woolf writes "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction." It can be evinced that Plath who had an otherwise enthusiastic and extroverted personality, was threatened by a lack of freedom which she perceived was her natural right. Like Nora from Ibsen's *The Doll's House* who physically walked out of her marriage to claim a life and identity of her own, Plath may have felt a similar need, but was compelled to compromise for sake of family and society. Her playful and independent streak is perhaps best manifested in the poem "Soliloquy Of The Solipsist" where she writes "my look's leash/ Dangles the puppet-

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people/Who, unaware how they dwindle,/Laugh, kiss, get drunk,/Nor guess that if I choose to blink/They die”, thus highlighting her need to control and be assertive. Yet her rising powerlessness and inability to fit in a society that valued the ideals she detested, prompted her to confuse independence with death as seen in the poem “ I Am Vertical” where she writes “ And I shall be useful when I lie down finally: Then the trees may touch me for once, and the flowers have time for me ” and concedes that she is neither “ spectacularly painted” nor “ the beauty of a garden bed” which brings us to the central dilemmas of Plath’s life: the need to conform to the stereotypical notions of the housewife and motherhood. The advertisements and magazines of her time heavily focused on the need to be a “ good” housewife that entailed being skilled in the arts of cooking and weaving and being subservient to the will of the husband. In other words, a woman must spend her childhood and teenage years in preparing a portfolio to showcase that she’s the best candidate eligible for matrimony and spend the rest of her life living up to such expectations and sacrifice all her own dreams and aspirations for someone else. Naturally, female writers had no place in such a social order and Plath parodies this trope in her poem “ The Applicant” where a prospective wife is leached of her gender and her skills are advertised as follows: “ It is waterproof, shatterproof, proof/Against fire and bombs through the roof./Believe me, they’ll bury you in it.” Similarly in “ A Birthday Present”, the thought of death invades her mind when she is involved with housekeeping activities of cooking and the adhering to “ rules, rules and rules” and she openly declares “ I do not want much of a present, anyway, this year./After all I am alive only by accident.” In her roman-a-clef novel “ The Bell Jar” she claims that she “ never intended to get married” and that <https://assignbuster.com/mental-illness-creativity-and-societal-repression-the-sylvia-plath-syndrome/>

she “ hated the idea of serving men in any way “ and discusses her insecurities at being “ dreadfully inadequate”. In her list of things she couldn’t do, she includes cooking, dancing, singing, shorthand and the like- all the prerequisites of an accomplished lady of her day. While on one hand she does wish for a “ happy home and children”, she equally cherishes the wish to be a “ famous poet”, “ a brilliant professor”, an “ amazing editor”, a globe-trotter and a life of “ lovers with queer names and offbeat professions”. Yet she concedes that choosing one option implies “ losing all the rest” thereby highlighting her desire to both conform to society as well as live her own bohemian life on her own terms. Furthermore, a stint at Mademoiselle magazine exposed her to the “ theatrical” world of glitz and glamour of New York which only disillusioned her and in “ The Munich Mannequins”, with reference to the artificial models at shop windows she comments “ Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children”, thus highlighting how a woman’s identity is essentially defined by her childbearing abilities. Similarly in “ The Mirror” she discusses a woman’s obsession with appearances, “ for what she really is” and for which the mirror is rewarded with “ tears and an agitation of hands”. Finally in her last published poem “ Edge”, she contemplates a situation where a woman who commits suicide, also simultaneously murders her own children, thereby “ folding” them back into her dead body that now “ wears the smile of accomplishment”.

Moreover, Plath’s relationship with her mother was often turbulent and in “ Medusa” she concludes by saying “ There is nothing between us” thus hinting at the lack of an empowering familial figure to emulate. Plath’s mental illness may have thus stemmed from her inability to find a proper identity for herself. She could neither identify with the “ paragon of

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domesticity” and immerse herself completely into motherhood and child-rearing nor did she have the support or the funds to embark on an illustrious literary career that she dreamed of. Another undeniable factor in her illness is of course the dominating male influence, or rather the lack of requisite affection from a male figure, primarily in the form of her absent father and her husband Ted Hughes. Plath of course was hurt at the unfairness of a social system that granted greater sexual freedom as well as flexibility to men to express themselves and coupled with this were her “Daddy issues”. In “The Bell Jar” she claims she has never been happy since her father died of diabetes complications in her childhood and she sought reunion with him by attempting suicide at the age of twenty. In the “Daddy” poem she even refers to Ted Hughes as a “vampire” who drank her blood for seven years, thus highlighting the physical and mental turmoil that the celebrated marriage had entailed, both during and after. Although there is no direct evidence to suggest whether Hughes was ever physically abusive to her, their marriage crumbled when Hughes took a mistress, Assia Wevill and Plath moved to a new flat with her children and committed suicide a few months later. Six years after, Wevill herself committed suicide in the exact same way and also killed her only child with Hughes. The eerie similarities in the nature and circumstances of their deaths, further illustrate Plath’s unhappiness at having to conform to the rituals of domesticity and silent acceptance of injustice, a role for which she may have felt unprepared and wholly unfit for. Thus Plath’s poetry and prose would have us believe that her mental illness stemmed from three factors: the hypocritical “theatrical” society in which she was trapped, the frustration at never being able to conform in said society and the subsequent loneliness at being estranged

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from her husband and consequently alienated from society. In "Tulips", she identifies herself as a "thirty-year-old cargo boat/ stubbornly hanging on to" her "name and address" and in perhaps her best known poem "Lady Lazarus" she proudly announces "Dying/Is an art, like everything else. /I do it exceptionally well." Thus Sylvia Plath presents a well-documented case of an individual's mental illness not as a means but rather an inevitable consequence of social othering, a case of a feminist born in the wrong place at the wrong time.