

Shahad Al-Shemmari

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Dr. Hanan Muzaffar

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### Sylvia Plath's Quest For "A Room of One's Own"

Sylvia Plath is one of the leading poets of the Confessional movement of poetry, or the poetry of the "I" and inner feelings. She began writing at an early age, married the poet Ted Hughes, and committed suicide in 1963. When considering Confessional poetry, one cannot help but reflect on Virginia Woolf's "stream-of-consciousness" writing technique. Woolf was one of the leaders of the literary movement of Modernism, and Plath was later to follow in her footsteps. Plath became an icon of feminism, modernism, and specifically Confessional poetry. When examining Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, it is apparent that she was rising up against male tyranny and preaching the liberation of the female mind. Plath's poetry has the spirit of Woolf lingering between the lines. Plath once wrote a journal entry discussing Woolf's works, and stated: "I feel my life linked to her, somehow." (Kukil, p. 269). Perhaps Plath was correct when saying that she felt a connection to Woolf. Interestingly enough, critics nowadays have labeled both Plath's and Woolf's struggle with depression as Bipolar disease. As for Plath's literary achievements, she was not able to succeed or prosper until she left Ted Hughes. That was when she finally found her "room of one's own." Plath is the perfect example of a female writer's condition in comparison to a male writer's literary condition. Plath proves Woolf's argument of the necessity of "a room of one's own" if the writer is to succeed, and especially if the writer is a female. Plath's life

and literary struggles seem to be an animated version, or even an adaptation of Woolf's *A Room Of One's Own*.

The movie, *Sylvia*, chronicles Plath's relationship with Hughes and reflects on her struggle as a female poet trying to succeed. The movie focuses mostly on the strong love between Plath and Hughes. However, we are able to come up with many conclusions regarding the suppression of women, and the liberation of women at a time when, as Woolf puts it, there were not many predecessors to follow. After Plath and Hughes meet, she becomes infatuated with him and his poetic genius. Slowly, she develops a lack of confidence in her capabilities as a female poet. For example, in one of the scenes, a critic says to her (not recognizing her as Plath): "Poor thing, it can't be easy married to that." He points at Hughes standing the background, with women and fans engulfing him. The irony is that the critic does not know he is speaking to Plath; he just makes a random comment. The bigger irony is that Plath is aware of the issue of Hughes being a "published poet" and her having to be his shadow. This statement highlights the whole theme that Woolf discusses about "the liberation of the female." Plath could not be freed, and could not be productive because she was married to Hughes and she was his support system. She remains standing, frozen in place, unable to write. "I feel sick of having written nothing lately. I mailed off two batches of Ted's poems, freshly typed."(Kukil,p.272 ). Plath fears writing, and she fears expressing or producing poetry, because she feels that the public are only interested in Hughes. They *are* interested only in Hughes.

The male domination in society, in arts, and poetry is apparent. Granted, Hughes is a wonderful poet, but Plath just was not given the chance to be heard. We can relate this to Woolf writing about Shakespeare's sister, Judith. She imagines how life would have been for Judith, having to live with her brother, and how no one

would have let her break free from the restrictions of society and male domination. We do not have to go through the trouble of imagining like Woolf did. Plath was Judith. She was the unrecognized creative writer who was overshadowed by a male presence in her life. Plath did not resent Hughes consciously. In a journal entry, she writes: "I am Mrs. Hughes, wife of a published poet. I am so glad Ted is first. It is as if he is the perfect male counterpart to myself." (Kukil, p.271). Plath loved her husband and was probably not aware of the mental and poetic restraints he and society had on her. In the movie, there is a scene where she finds out Hughes has been cheating on her. She bursts into tears and angrily yells at him, "Here I am, typing your poems! So I could bask in your reflected glory!" From this statement, it is made quite clear that Plath was in an inner turmoil of not knowing which part of herself to expose: the inner, or the external. She was caught in a gender-role dilemma, not knowing whether to be "wife of a published poet" or just "Plath, the poet." When reflecting on Woolf's *Shakespeare's Sister*, we can infer that she was correct in her theory that a female Shakespeare would not have been as successful as Shakespeare was, because of her sex. Plath was constantly tied down by her husband's success, although she was just as talented and just as capable of writing poetry as he was. This was seen later on when *The Colossus*, *Ariel*, *The Bell Jar*, and the rest of her works were published.

The movie depicts Plath's struggle as a female writer very strongly. In one scene, Hughes leaves her at home to write poetry. She sits down, and keeps trying to write, but ends up scribbling all over what she wrote. She is not freed. She cannot let go of herself and her emotions and write. Society around her does not help. Everything around her represses her and stifles her creativity. There is no space for her talent to grow or shine. There is no "room of one's own." At one point, she

laughingly says to her husband, "I sit down to write and I end up with a bake sale. You go out for a walk, and come back with a poem in hexameter." Society's view of male writers has damaged her confidence in her writing skills. She begins to lose faith in herself and her abilities. Another scene in the movie shows Hughes reading one of his poems in public, and after he is finished, women surround him, complimenting him. One woman (*drooling*) says to him: "Mr. Hughes, your voice is so powerful." He replies with: "What about my words?" The woman ignorantly answers with: "The words?" she is not even aware of the subject he is writing about, or the passion in the words. She can only hear the passion in his voice, in his male manipulative voice. This woman represents society and the public. She is a depiction of how society neglects female writers and female genius. The public wants to listen to Hughes, they want to read his work, and they want to take him seriously. They are not interested in what "Mrs. Hughes" has to say, like Woolf assumes no one would have been interested in what Judith had to say. Judith's life would have ended by her committing suicide, like Plath committed suicide.

At one point in *Sylvia*, we see that Plath gets only one review for *The Colossus*, her first book, while Hughes's first book wins prizes. Again, the failure of society to recognize female genius is evident. She was trapped in the position of "the wife." The movie continues to build up to the climax, where Hughes and Plath separate, after his infidelity to her. After she leaves him, she begins to discover new horizons and new emotions within her. She begins to explore her capabilities, and strongly pursues her dream of becoming a poet. Not only does she begin to express herself more bravely and openly, but also she is more confident. The movie illustrates this very vividly, as we see Plath writing feverously, nonstop, and reading her poetry out loud with passionate cries. Instead of being hesitant and reluctant, like

she was when she was with Hughes, she is now ready to embark on a life-changing journey of art. Sadly though, Plath did not enjoy her success or fame because she decided to commit suicide. In one scene, she is reading the poem *Daddy*. Gwennyth Paltrow gives an outstanding performance of the poem, although she only reads the last lines. This poem highlights the change in Plath, the emotional breakdown she tries to heal from, and through this poem she crosses the barrier to enter her own world, without a male lurking around her. Plath was freed only when she was without Hughes. Although he was “the love of her life” and her “counterpart” she only managed to “liberate her mind” when she left him. This goes back to Woolf’s theory, which states that “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.” Plath only gained access to her own room when she was without Hughes. No one could have possibly stressed the importance of this “room” as Woolf did, and no one could have proved her theory like Plath unintentionally did. Plath is a female writer whose “literary achievements” finally took place after leaving her husband, and also after her death. Although Plath was as much a genius as Hughes was, his genius was nourished and recognized, while hers was neglected until she left him. Woolf’s argument is that one must have social support as well as money. Plath had little, or none, of both. Also, Woolf stresses this “room of one’s own” and it is clear that the room stands for many important aspects of everyday life, “If she has a room to herself.. and five hundred a year of her own” (Woolf, 1025). The room is a place where a writer is not to be interrupted. It is a place where one can collect her thoughts and produce something extraordinary. This room has a certain sense of relaxation, a sense of freedom, a sense of independence, and a sense of confidence. Plath did not have any of these factors on her side; therefore, she did not have the key to this “room of one’s own.” She was tied down to her housework

as a housewife, and also dependent on Hughes, because he was financially better off due to his being a “published poet.”

Plath’s room helped her unleash the poet in her. Her separation from Hughes was her new “room.” She could sit down at a desk and write without any interruptions, which is what Woolf preaches. Woolf wants women to reach a “state of high sensibility” in order to produce art. Plath, after being emotionally wounded by her husband’s infidelity, began to reach that state, where all of her senses became fully alert. Her poetry changed and became more passionate, more inner, and more “confessional.” She could only do this when she had time alone, time to think, and time to write. Her time alone in her “own room” stirred something in her that made her a “published poet”, just like Hughes. In one scene, when her agent asks her if she is doing well, she replies with: “I’ve never been happier. I’ve never written more. It’s as if, now that he’s gone, I’m free. I can finally write.” The words used to express Plath’s state are perfectly harmonious with what Woolf describes and what she preaches. Plath’s mind, body, and spirit had been “liberated and freed,” allowing her to “finally write.” She wrote poetry at a phenomenal pace. There was no more male domination breathing above her neck. However, there were still the society’s restraints and prejudices against females, which she could only break free from after her death.

Later on, Plath also wrote her famous novel, *The Bell Jar*. The book is also sort of autobiographical, with references to suicide and mental illness. Plath was spiraling down so fast that there was no stopping her; she decided to end it all, like Woolf ended it all by drowning herself. The movie portrays her depression and her frequent sobbing outbursts. She was very angered and very sick of life. According to Woolf, for one to be a successful writer he/she must think with “an androgynous

mind, part man-womanly, and woman-manly.” Plath cannot have been an androgynous writer. I doubt that she even attempted to be “sexless” like Woolf asserts a writer must be. Plath was very much angered and her poems were grieving cries against the suppression of women and the tyranny of men. Woolf maintains that, “It is fatal for a woman to lay the least stress on any grievance; to plead even with justice any cause; in any to speak consciously as a woman.” Whether Plath spoke “consciously as a woman” or not, I cannot be completely certain. Keeping in mind that she was battling with depression and Bipolar disease, she could have not meant to be completely female, or “woman-manly.” Her mood swings must have played a part in her work. However, I believe Plath *did* write with “grievance” and this did not make her writing fatal at all. On the contrary, it made her work passionate and earned her a place as one of the finest Confessional poets. Plath could not possibly have written with an androgynous mind, considering all of the anger and resentment she had towards the men in her life. According to Woolf’s theory, this makes Plath less successful and less talented. Plath’s poem *Daddy* illustrates the strong emotional turmoil felt as a woman, constantly being abused emotionally and physically by men. Like Woolf, she revolts against male domination, but through a different perspective. Most importantly, this poem’s genre is Confessional poetry, which makes it extremely expressive and at the same time disturbing.

Woolf’s “stream-of-consciousness” technique was a new approach to literature, something completely different than the norm. This technique focuses on the character’s emotions and thoughts instead of the plot. The plot serves as the background, while the characters are the foreground. Woolf’s novel *Mrs. Dalloway* is written using this technique, as well as *The Waves*. It can be rather confusing to

follow along with the events, but nevertheless, it is a more enticing way of engaging in a story.

Confessional poetry is similar to Woolf's style in the way that it deals with emotions and the inner self. Plath's confessional poetry was somewhat bitter, and her poem, *Daddy* is the best example to use because of its intensity. In the poem, her use of metaphor is frequent. She also mixes her father and Hughes together; therefore the antagonist of the poem is one person. "Every woman adores a Fascist/The boot in the face, the brute, brute heart of a brute like you." These lines emphasize Plath's relationship with Hughes involving some sort of Fascism, and symbolize her repression. She also states: "A cleft in your chin instead of your foot/But no less a devil for that, no not/Any less the black man who/Bit my pretty red heart in two." Here, she blends her father's image with her husband's image, labeling Hughes as the "black man who bit my pretty red heart in two." Hughes broke her heart, and she slowly begins to see things clearly when she states that she made "a model" of her father, Hughes, and he had "a love of the rack and the screw. And I said, I do, I do." She goes on to conclude: "If I've killed one man, I've killed two/The vampire who said he was you/and drank my blood for a year." Plath realizes that Hughes and her father are two different men, and she breaks it down. She also identifies Hughes with a vampire, a manipulative, dominant creature that sucks the life and talent out of you. The poem is filled with emotion and rage against the men in her life. She writes as a woman, repulsed by the men around her, unaware of the extent of the emotional damage they have caused her. Therefore, when looking at Woolf's theory of androgyny, Plath wrote with a "grievous mind, angry responses to men." This makes her less successful according to Woolf's view. However, I find that

does not make her any less successful than she would have been if she did not write with a “grievous mind.”

Plath also did not have enough female predecessors to admire or follow in their footsteps, which aids Woolf’s view of “the lack of female predecessors.” Woolf stressed the need of great female writers to lead the way for the rest. Plath did not have a female role model, all she could see was Hughes and W. B. Yeats and other male writers. The lack of interest by the public and the neglect she had to undergo lead to her depression and ultimately, suicide. Her sexual oppression pulled her down beneath the surface, until she could no longer find what she wanted. The world could not give her “a room of one’s own” that Woolf describes, and stresses its importance. Also, Woolf’s idea of male domination over female literary achievement is evident because of the way Hughes tried to control Plath’s work and edit what he thought should be changed, or even removed. Woolf’s *A Room Of One’s Own* seems to highlight Plath’s literary life and achievements, and how she only needed that room, that independence, in order to write and succeed. Plath needed that room so she could break free from society’s restraints and limitations, from male domination, etc. Similarly to Woolf, Plath chose to end her life after a long struggle with despair and agony.

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