
Research Papers



**A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF SYLVIA PLATH'S SHORT STORIES WITH
SPECIAL REFERENCE TO JOHNNY PANIC AND THE BIBLE OF
DREAMS PART IV : Stories from the Lilly Library**

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Abstract

Sylvia Plath a leading and dominant American poet also wrote one novel, The Bell Jar and a collection of short stories entitled Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams. She has realistically presented the experiences of her personal life, as well as her experiences with the world around her. Renowned for her poetry, Sylvia Plath was also a brilliant writer of prose. This collection Johnny Panic and Bible of Dreams of short-stories, essays, and diary excerpts highlights her fierce concentration on craft, the vitality of her intelligence, and the yearnings of her imagination. Featuring an introduction by Plath's husband, these writings also reflect themes and images she would fully realize in her poetry.

Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams truly shows the talent and genius of Sylvia Plath. In this book she has turned her experiences into a private literary breakthrough.

Johnny Panic and The Bible of Dreams was published in 1977. Sylvia Plath wrote a considerable amount of prose. The first edition of this book published in 1977, was made up of a selection from these seventeen stories, together with some pieces of her journalism and extracts from her Journal. When this collection was being published a large quantity of Sylvia Plath's papers emerged in the Lilly Library at Indiana University, acquired by the library from Mrs. Aurelia Plath, the writer's mother, and among these were the typescripts of over fifty stories-dating from her first attempts at writing upto roughly 1960, though most of them are very early works.

The second edition contains thirteen short stories included in the first edition together with five of her more interesting pieces of journalism, and a few fragments from her journal, and in part IV, further nine more stories selected from the Indiana Archive. All items are given approximate dates of composition. We really know that when she wanted merely to record, with no thought of

artful shaping for publication, she could produce some of her most effective writing and that appeared in her journals.

This collection of short stories, prose and journal excerpts was published in 1977 in Britain, and two years later in the United States. *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* deals with the theme of the writer's painful subjectivity. This book is divided into four parts. But the short stories are not chronologically ordered as per their years of publications in the original text. The present paper deals with Sylvia Plath's short stories with special reference to Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams-Part IV : Stories from the Lilly Library.

- 1) A Day in June
- 2) The Green Rock
- 3) Among the Bumblebees
- 4) Tongues of Stone

"A Day in June" was published in 1949. In this story, Sylvia Plath describes the tension between fear of the sexual act and the fascination with it. It is a story about adolescent girls. This story presents a much more caustic Sylvia, who describes dating as the game of searching for a male, testing and trying. She wrote with wicked humour about the strong smell of masculinity

which creates the ideal medium for her to exist in. She has also described, perceptively, the real sexual conflicts which she endured. Sylvia Plath says in this story, 'I can only lean enviously against the boundary and hate, hate the boys, who dispel sexual their hunger freely, while I drag out from each date in a slobby desire, always unfulfilled, the whole thing is the sickness me.' She ironically called herself the American virgin dressed to seduce. She says also like we go on dates, we play around and if we are nice girls, we demur at a certain point.

In this story there is a sexual dimension to the farm experience as well. Ilo, a Latian immigrant, was walking there before going to New York to start a career as an artist. He had been studying art in Munich and Sylvia Plath's interest in drawing led to friendship with him, but she was frightened when Ilo French-kissed her. One of her college stories called, "The Estonian", describes that attraction.

"The Green Rock" was published in 1949. In this short story Sylvia Plath describes her visit to the seashore and the Green Rock. Here she describes the atmosphere of the Green Rock. She says there was a gleam of blue in the crowded city tenements. The huge buildings with their identical fronts were like stage scenery, but behind them the ocean sparkled in the warm June in sunlight. This is the description of the place where Susan and David were living. David here says that first of all they were going to the beach, where there was a lonely little cove at the end of street, too small for public bathing. The children liked to play there in the summer time. There, near the ocean Susan ran along with David closely. Near the ocean the road dipped into the beach, and the sand had drifted up over the tarred surface. When Susan and David went to the seashore, there was something within her which soared at the sight of the cloudless sky and the waves washing on the shore with a scalloped fringe of foam. The land behind her was a ledge, a narrow shelf from which she could fling herself into the vast blue space. Here Sylvia describes the children who were silent as they moved down the beach, searching for shells into the line of the last high tide. There was the sound of the water rushing in and then withdrawing with a sigh which filled their ears. Again she describes the seashore, the retreating waves foamed about the large flat rock. As she started at the noisy, receding waters, a delightful idea came to her. David and Susan wandering here and there near the seashore came across the green rock, both liked the rock

which was like some docile animal. There were the children who loved to climb up the friendly irregular surface of the green rock, and play all sorts of magic games. They know that sometimes the rock would be a sailing boat in the stormy seas, and sometimes it became a lofty mountain. Both mounted the creating wooden steps to the porch and walked towards the beach. There at least, things would be the same, the ocean, the sand, and the green rock.

The beach looked smaller than they had remembered it, and there was something strange and alien concealed beneath the smooth sand and calm, unruffled surface of the water. There was an emptiness that rose to meet them and a queer silence above the lapping of the waves. It was like entering a familiar room after a long absence and finding it vacant and desolate.

Again Susan and David went to the green rock, and there was the magic still to be found by the green rock. Near the seashore there was the boulder, seemed to have diminished in size. It lay among the pebbles with a heavy, inert shape. Once there were castles, sailboats and the mountains but now only the stark and bare rock remained.

"Among the Bumblebees" was published in the early 1950s. Among Sylvia Plath's stories collected in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, many are obviously based on Sylvia Plath's own experience. In the story, "Among the Bumblebees", written for the Smith College English Class, she creates the picture of a daughter bereft after the death of her father.

The story opens with the Biblical-sounding like, "In the beginning there was Alice Denway's father, tossing her up in the air until the breath caught in her throat, and catching her and holding her in a huge bear hug."¹ (JP, 259) That initial comforting image of the father as protector, follows the picture of the father being in the ocean or on campus. Sylvia Plath describes his illness and death. In the closing scene when the child, Alice, monitors the weak pulsing of his heart, she realises that he is about to die. He has forgotten her as he has withdrawn into the 'core of himself. She has already lost the powerful parent who had earlier made her feel as if, with him, "she could face the doomsday of the world in perfect safety." (JP, 264)².

Once her father was dead, Sylvia was less sure about her place in the world, about her mother's ability to care for her very existence. But she continued to benefit from the love of her strong mother and the Schober family, as well. Her

father's death may have struck like a hurricane, but the efforts of her extended family helped her rebuild her young promising life.

In fact, "Among the Bumblebees", describes with a remarkable depth a young girl's feelings when her father died. We realize that in her short stories many of the events she writes about in the novel, *The Bell Jar* are autobiographical. So her readers have assumed that her short fiction has sprung from those same roots even in the case of her fanciful stories.

Ted Hughes says that Sylvia Plath started writing the novel *The Bell Jar* in 1960. But at least four stories written between 1954 and 1959 deal with the same topic. One, in particular, "Tongues of Stone" (1955), uses the experience of a young girl's nervous breakdown much as Plath uses it in *The Bell Jar*. In this story, at least six key incidents appear first before being transformed and interpolated into the novel. The start of the breakdown is the same in both the pieces. The main character is suffering from extreme apathy and anxiety. In *The Bell Jar* Esther enters the first Clinic, Walton, after three weeks of sleeplessness whereas in "Tongues of Stone" the character is two months of sleeplessness. In setting the scene, of the "Tongues of Stories" the narrator explains, "It was sometime in October, she had long ago lost track of all the days and it really did not matter because one was like another and there were no nights to separate 3 them because she never slept anymore." (JP, 268)³. Both young women try to forestall their depression by looking for intellectual occupations to kill time. Each tries particularly hard to read, only to find the print on the pages of their books indecipherable, 'dead black hieroglyphs', and "fantastic untranslatable shapes, like Arabic and Chinese." (BJ, 102)⁴. Both are denied solace by their alienation from the dead intellectual world represented by the printed books. But more obvious in their similarities than parallels of general circumstances are the active steps in their attempted suicides and their subsequent treatments. Looking at these steps, the reader can see Sylvia Plath's movement from a rather flat narrative to the evocative and powerful personal voice of the novel. The apprentice piece has all the isolated units but does not have the developed

style, theme or political focus of *The Bell Jar*.

First, in both "Tongues of Stone" and *The Bell Jar*, each of the girls visits her sleeping mother and realise that there is neither parental security nor any meaningful reason to continue being in

either the present or the future. In "Tongues of Stone", the main character sleeps beside her mother on the same bed, "Listening to the thin thread of her mother's breathing, wanting to get up and twist the life out of the fragile throat, to end at once the process of slow disintegration which grinned at her like a death's head everywhere she turned." (JP, 271)⁵.

The girl (who remains nameless throughout the story), has sought out her mother. By getting close to her, the girl hopes to save the fears and despair she feels. But the mother can neither solace nor protect her daughter. She is even unaware of the girl's presence. She is understood by her daughter as fragile and disintegrating, not a possible shelter against the death her daughter seeks everywhere, even hi her. This same incident occurs in *The Bell Jar*, but some of the narrator's feelings have changed. In the novel, the mother is less mutual victim like another fragile throat, which can be stopped, and more a despised perpetrator of circumstances, a guardian of the world's values and actions. The main character, Esther, looks at her sleeping mother, listens to her piggish snoozes and explains in the following way :

.. for a while it seemed to me that the only way to stop it,
the sound in her mother's throat would be to take the column of
skin and sinew from which it rose and twist it to silence
between my hands. (BJ, 101)⁶.

Not only is the mother more unattractive in this version being piggish and irritating, but the action of strangling her is not done to stop a mutual disintegration, a slow and painful change, but more to relieve Esther's aggressive dislike of what her mother represents. She and her mother are struggling against each other. They are tussling between their expectations of Esther's future and Esther's own desires. Neither is totally passive. Esther views the strangling not as euthanasia, but as a means of effectively changing her own world. In "Tongues of Stone", the girl creeps into her mother's bed for solace and in *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood merely looks at her mother from the bed-room door, not seeking communion with a source of safety, but to keep observing an enemy.

After this scene, both stories show the female protagonist trying to escape the world around her by hiding under the mattress of her bed. In each case, she hopes to be crushed, to never

reawaken to the oppressive world of sleepless, meaningless and comfortless living. In "Tongues of Stone", the girl leaves her mother's bed, "Creeping back to her own bed then, she had lifted up the mattress, wedging herself in the crevice between the mattress and the bedsprings, longing to be crushed beneath the heavy slab." (JP, 271-following way : slab." (JP, 271-272)⁷. The same scene is enacted in *The Bell Jar* in the following way :

I crawled between the mattress and in padded bedstead and
let the mattress fall across me like a tombstone. It felt dark
and safe under there, but the mattress was not heavy
enough. It needed about a ton more weight to make me
sleep. (BJ, 101)⁸

The tone of the second scene is sharper. The slab has been defined as a tombstone, the oppression and death imagery are more overt. Plath's character recognises consciously what she is seeking about the safe darkness of death and what it would take to achieve it about a ton more. Both girls then attempt suicide actually to reach out to take hold of the darkness, but are discovered at the last moment and saved. Each believes herself blind, upon first awakening from their drugged state. In "Tongues of Stone", the narrator explains :

At first they thought she would be blind in that eye.
She had lain awake the night of her second birth into
the world of flesh, talking to a nurse who was sitting
up with her, turning her sightless face toward the
gentle voice and saying over and over again, 'But I
cannot see, I cannot see...You will meet a nice blind man
and marry him some day. (JP, 272)⁹

Here, in this scene the nurse is an acknowledged presence, someone known and staying with the girl, not just beside her. She is described as gentle and comforting, albeit not well informed. This same scene is recreated in *The Bell Jar*. However, there the nurse's presence is not so immediately felt as sympathetic:

I opened my eyes.
It was completely dark.
Somebody was breathing beside me.
'I cannot see! I said-
A cheery voice out of the dark. There are lots of blind
people in the world. You will marry a nice blind man
some day. (BJ, 140)¹⁰

Although there are slight changes, they do match up with the more sinister and detached feelings of Esther in the novel. The nurse in the second presence is not known immediately. She is somebody. She is not in company with the girl, but she is beside her. Although she is cheery, unlike the original image of comforting presence, we have no reason to assume. Her intentions are personal. Rather, they suggest habitual, professional cheeriness.

Each girl also tries to strangle herself, although the timing of the attempt varies. In "Tongues of Stone", the girl is in the sanatorium. She is frustrated and depressed because the insulin treatment is not working. She considers strangulation as a means to end the continuing depression and self-disgust:

One night she hid the pink cotton scarf from the raincoat in
the pillowcase when the nurse came around to lock up her
drawers and closets for the night. In the dark she had made a
loop and tried to pull it tight around her throat. But always
just as the air stopped coming and she felt the rushing grow
louder in her ears, her hands would slacken and let go, and she
would lie there panting for breath, cursing the dumb instinct in
her body that fought to go on living. (JP, 273)¹¹

In *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood considers and experiments with strangulation as one possible form of suicide. She tries a number of times before the final attempt she tries with sleeping pills. In the beginning, in her version of the scene, she hopes to hang herself, but finding no adequate beam in the house, she admits:

I sat on the edge of my mother's bed and tried pulling the
cord tight. But each time I would get the cord so tight I could

feel a rushing in my ears and a flush of blood in my face,
my hands would weaken and let go and I would be all right again.

Then I saw that my body had all sorts of little tricks, such as
making my hands go limp at the crucial second, which would
save it, time and again whereas if I had the whole say, I would
be dead in a flash. (BJ, 130)¹²

In this scene, the body's instinctual response is more malevolent. It is not simply 'dumb', but it has all sorts of little tricks. In *The Bell Jar*, the character's mind and body split is strongly felt. The world is active in its oppression; the body is active in its rebellion from the will. Finally, both stories describe the insulin treatment used to combat the character's suicidal descriptions. Each story starts with the appearance of a nurse to administer the insulin injection. In "Tongues of Stone" we are told in the following way :

At seven the nurse came in to give the evening insulin shot
'What side?' she asked, as the girl bent mechanically over the
bed and bared flank. 'It does not matter', the girl said. 'I can
not feel them any more'. The nurse gave an expert jab.
'My, you certainly are black and blue', she said. (JP, 273-274)¹³

In *The Bell Jar*, as well, both the characters are detached. The section is a little less calm, however, since we are at least aware of what Esther sees when she views herself:

The nurse gave a little clucking noise. Thus she said, 'which
side?' It was an old joke. I raised my head and glanced back
at my bare buttocks. They were bruished purple and green
and blue from past injections. The left side looked darker
than the right.
'The right'.
'You name it'. The nurse jabbed the needle in, and I winced,
savouring the tiny hurt. (BJ, 157)¹⁴

It is also useful to note that Esther does feel something in this painful episode. And that is

welcomed, for it is something instead of the dull apathy of the first scene.

The final movement in each story is the breakthrough caused by the girl's reactions to the insulin treatment. In each case, the reaction signals the momentary lifting of the oppressive atmosphere, the depression, and bell jar which each of the character is labouring under. After what seems a fruitless waiting in "Tongues of Stone", the girl's reaction occurs, accompanied by a proliferation of growth and light images as it reflected in the following narration :

In the blackness that was stupor that was sleep, a voice
spoke to her, sprouting like a green plant in the dark.

'Mrs. Patterson, Mrs. Patterson, Mrs. Patterson !' the voice

said more and more loudly, rising shouting. Light broke on
seas of blindness. Air thinned.

The nurse, Mrs. Patterson, came running out from

behind the girl's eyes... Mrs. Patterson was holding a white

celluloid cup of orange juice to the girl's lips. (JP, 274)¹⁵

As the short story ends, this scene hopefully portrays a healing conclusion. The sun has returned, in fact, it is speaking directly to the girl. Both, the blackness that emerges from and the real world represented by the nurse are positive; the first is plain like plant, the second is warm and round as an apple. The air is clear, the light literally and figuratively dawns. The girl herself speaks words and listens to a voice, which apparently signals the start of a new world. In *The Bell Jar*, the parallel scene follows the same progression, but has a slightly different tone :

I had fallen asleep after the evening meal. I was awakened

by a loud voice, Mrs. Bannister, Mrs. Bannister, Mrs. Bannister,

Mrs. Bannister. As I pulled out of sleep, I found I was

beating on the bedpost with my hands and calling. The sharp,

way figure of Mrs. Bannister, the night nurse, scurried into

view... And when Mrs. Bannister held the cup to my lips,

I fanned the hot milk on my tongue as it went down, tasting

it luxuriously, the way a baby tastes its

mother. (BJ, 164)¹⁶

Several things have changed in this scene. In "Tongues of Stone", it is the girl who first focuses on the change in both in herself and in her surroundings. She feels different and it is not just her, but the atmosphere, the world, which is light and airy. In *The Bell Jar*, Esther feels 'funny', 'light and airy'. But we do not sense whether the external world is in accord. In "Tongues of Stone", the girl seems to have become attuned again to the physical, natural world. On the other hand, in *The Bell Jar*, the natural world referred to is that of the mother and child. It is not the most hopeful image taken in the context of the heavily negative connotations given to that relationship throughout the novel, both before and after the scene. We really know that Esther's own relationship with her mother and also which are due to circumstances and her opportunities, and the notion becoming a mother herself would kill her chances to be a writer, a complete person in her own right.

In fact, Sylvia Plath is using the same material, even same phrases and images in this early story and *The Bell Jar*. Obviously, however, there are some significant differences in her presentations, many of which seem to be caused by an increased thematic awareness on Plath's part in the novel. In "Tongues of Stone", we have a description which is more than the 'clearly delineated conflict'. The causes of breakdown, the fears for the future, the active resistance of the girl to both medical help and her surroundings, are never presented. It seems doubtful that the girl herself is aware of all the factors the surroundings for her previous actions. We are given a third person and a limited view of the events. All conflicts and conditions leading to the suicidal attempt are cloaked. But in the expanded scope in *The Bell Jar*, on the other hand, the older Esther, the narrator, has moved to a recognition, that she is frequently frustrated and angry of the social and familiar forces which lead to her breakdown. Her mother is seen in a sharply critical relief. Her male doctor is at best indifferent to Esther's struggle; at worst, he denies its value. It is a world of mental dullness and stupid options, and intellectual sterility, which places Esther under the bell jar. It is this thematic awareness even more than a stylistic change which gives *The Bell Jar*, a power which is lacking in the earlier story. It is the same factor that accounts for much of the difference between the other apprentice pieces and the novel.

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