

“I should be loving this”: Sylvia Plath’s “The Perfect Place” and *The Bell Jar*¹

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In late 2001, Lena Friesen contacted me about a published short story by Sylvia Plath refers to in a letter to her mother on November 9th, 1961.² In the letter, Plath says, “I’ll send for a copy of my awful first ladies’ magazine story.”³ Plath goes on to describe a fan letter she received from a fellow writer, in which the fan “took me for an expert on Canada and Whitby, the sailing port I visited for a day.”⁴ Since a story of this description does not match any of those in the collection *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, I planned a research trip to Smith College.

At Smith in January 2002, I read the stories not collected in *Johnny Panic*. In Plath’s, “The Lucky Stone,” Joanna, a Canadian who recently lost both her parents in a car accident, is on a weekend trip on the coast with her English fiancé, Kenneth Welbeck.⁵ During the trip, their relationship fractures irreparably. Plath names only one place in the story, Staithes. Consulting a map of England, I found Staithes to be just north of Whitby. At the top of the typescript, in Plath’s hand, is the following annotation, “Sold £15.15.0 by Jennifer Hassell.”

In addition to the holdings at the Mortimer Rare Book Room at Smith College, the Robert W. Woodruff Library at Emory University holds typescript carbon copies of “The Lucky Stone”.⁶ The copies at Emory University appear “marked-up” for publication, presumably for inclusion in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*. At the top of the second carbon at Emory is a note “Sold to Womens [sic.] Own (56?)” I

¹ A version of this paper was given at the Sylvia Plath 75th Year Symposium at Oxford University (October 25-29, 2007). A revised version was given at the Sylvia Plath 75th Year Symposium at Smith College (April 25-26, 2008).

² Three people are responsible for finding the publication of “The Perfect Place” by Sylvia Plath. They are Irralie Doel, Lena Friesen, and me.

³ *Letters Home*, 438. The author of the fan letter is unknown; the letter is presumed lost.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ The local telephone exchange in St. Marylebone in the 1960s was WELbeck, named for Welbeck Street. Plath wrote the story circa November 1960 while living in Primrose Hill, nearby to St. Marylebone. There is at least one WELbeck telephone number in Plath’s address book, which is held in the Mortimer Rare Book Room.

⁶ Ted Hughes Papers, Series 3: Sylvia Plath - Subseries 3.2: Prose - Box 139, Folder 31.

suspect that since the editors of *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* could not locate the story (it was neither published in *Women's Own* nor written in 1956), it was dropped from the book.

Smith holds a letter to Plath from Helena F. Annan, an editor at *My Weekly*, a women's weekly magazine in the United Kingdom. The letter rejects two stories, but encourages her to submit others. The letter, written on 19 January 1962, reads, "I regret having to return these ... particularly so as both stories have a sense of 'quality' and sincerity that I like very much ... and liked in your 'The Lucky Stone,' which we published last year."

Since the magazine is located in Scotland, I wrote to Irralie Doel in the United Kingdom to see if she could contact them and enquire about back issues. After six months, we received a photocopy of the published story, which appeared in the October 28th, 1961 issue of *My Weekly*. Either the editors or Plath made an interesting revision at some point, changing the title from "The Lucky Stone" to "The Perfect Place."⁷

The setting for the story grew out of a visit Plath and Ted Hughes made to Whitby in August, 1960. Based on references found in *Letters Home*, I believe that she drafted this story in November of that year, at about the same time that she wrote "Day of Success."⁸

Throughout the Fall of 1960, Plath's letters home chronicle her endeavors at short story writing for the women's magazine market. By November 28th, Plath completed one story, was at work on a second, and had a plot for a third.⁹ In several letters that fall and winter, she also mentions being in contact with a literary agent. Jennifer Hassell, who sold "The Lucky Stone," worked for the literary agency A. M. Heath & Co, then located on Dover Street in London. Hassell contacted Plath after reading a story in *London Magazine*, most likely "The Daughter's of Blossom Street" in the May, 1960 issue. Plath met with Hassell several times, and in a letter home written on December 24, 1960,

⁷ When I mention the story in this paper, "The Lucky Stone" refers to the typescript and "The Perfect Place" refers to the published version.

⁸ Plath typically did not date her short stories, but the return address of 3 Chalcot Square allows for the assignation of creation date between January 1960 and August 1961. A narrower date can be assigned based on biographical facts as well as through references found in her correspondence.

⁹ *Letters Home*, 401

mentions that her “fine, lively agent” was actively marketing her manuscripts. However, it is unclear exactly when the story sold and where this correspondence is.¹⁰ Hassell’s interest in Plath and her active marketing of Plath’s manuscripts, gave her the confidence she needed to create in what was an otherwise slow year for her writing.¹¹ What’s more, Hassell’s enthusiasm for Plath’s short fiction may have encouraged Plath to attempt longer fiction (i.e. *The Bell Jar*).



Plath describes lucky stones in at least three different compositions: the short story (1960), *The Bell Jar* (1961), and “Ocean 1212-W” (1962). In fact, the visit to Whitby and the creation of the short story “The Lucky Stone” may have given rise to its later appearance in Chapter 12 of *The Bell Jar* and in the first paragraph of “Ocean 1212-W”. A lucky stone is purple “with a white ring all the way round.”¹²

I want to show some comparisons between “The Perfect Place” and *The Bell Jar*. “The Perfect Place” is one of the last short stories, if not the last story, Plath completed prior to writing *The Bell Jar*. The similarities between the two works are so strong, that the story – its characters, episodes, and themes – appears to me as a blueprint for the novel.

In the opening scenes of both “The Perfect Place” and *The Bell Jar*, the main characters lodge in unfamiliar surroundings. In “The Perfect Place,” Joanna is in bed at a boarding house. She feels “suspended in time and space” and at a “decisive point in her life.”¹³ In *The Bell Jar*, Esther feels trapped in the Amazon Hotel. The windows are “fixed,” and she is unable to open them and lean out.¹⁴ Confined in this manner, she feels herself “melting into the shadows like the negative of a person” whom she had never before seen.¹⁵

Plath develops Esther’s feelings and expectations through Joanna. Joanna, who

¹⁰ Ibid. Smith College holds a draft of a letter from Plath to Hassell dated September 16, 1961. In the letter, Plath attempts to drum up interest in her children’s story “The Bed Book”.

¹¹ Plath’s *Collected Poems* list only 12 poems for 1960.

¹² “Ocean 1212-W” in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, 20.

¹³ “The Perfect Place”, 3, 4

¹⁴ *The Bell Jar*, 20

¹⁵ Ibid., 11

wants a small marriage ceremony, but Kenneth's family insists upon a full, traditional wedding. Kenneth's mother attributes Joanna's indifference to her extended period of mourning for her parents and coerces her into relinquishing any role in the planning of her nuptials.

In addition to planning the wedding, Joanna and Kenneth must furnish their flat. Joanna admits, "The prospect of choosing carpets, curtains, and furniture to please Kenneth's exacting taste settled on her heart like a weight."¹⁶ On a walk through Whitby, they discuss a "problem wall" in their London flat. Here, Plath has some fun with a description of some wallpaper. She describes it as "white and silver on a dark green ground," which calls to mind the cover of *The Colossus*, which was recently published.¹⁷ In the selection process, Joanna feels she must suppress her opinions, and her nonchalance and naïveté pleases Kenneth. She asks, "What do you have in mind dear? I'm relying on you to guide me, you know" with sarcasm that Plath perfects in *The Bell Jar*.¹⁸

It is evident that wedding plans do not interest Joanna at all. She forebodingly remembers, "The long, stuffy afternoon spent turning the pages of expensive wallpaper from one cold, pompous pattern to another."¹⁹ She chides herself, saying, "I should be loving this ... yet I feel stifled, hemmed in."²⁰

Regarding her opportunity as guest editor for *Ladies' Day* magazine, Esther says,

I was supposed to be having the time of my life.

I was supposed to be the envy of thousands of other college girls
just like me all over America ...²¹

Esther admits, "I guess I should have been excited the way most of the other girls were, but I couldn't get myself to react. I felt very still and empty ..."²²

Joanna "should be loving" this time of her life, as she prepares for marriage.

¹⁶ "The Perfect Place", 4

¹⁷ Ibid. William Heinemann Ltd. published *The Colossus* on October 28, 1960. The story can be dated to within a month of this publication. To see an image of the book cover, visit http://www.sylvia.plath.info/gallery/The_Colossus_Heinemann_60.jpg.

¹⁸ "The Perfect Place", 4

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ *The Bell Jar*, 2

²² Ibid., 3

Likewise, Esther, the “envy of thousands of other college girls,” was “supposed to be having the time of her life” as a guest editor at *Ladies’ Day*. Both characters are incapable of appreciating these opportunities and experiences. A bell jar surrounds Joanna just as it does Esther.

The root cause of Joanna’s apathy is Kenneth, and by extension society in general. The tension evident in their relationship mirrors the discord between Esther Greenwood and Buddy Willard. Kenneth’s occupation as junior partner in a law firm parallels the promise of Buddy’s medical school training. Buddy, we learn, becomes “a member of the AMA and [earns] pots of money.”²³

Joanna tries to convince herself that “Kenneth’s career comes first.”²⁴ When it becomes clear to her that the relationship is failing, her instinct is to blame herself. She asks, “Why must I feel so rebellious? What’s happening to me?”²⁵ She suddenly realizes that the fault lies not with her, but with Kenneth, and that she does not have to take the back burner to his wishes and whims. She looks to him, sees only a “tall, unbending shape,” and realizes Kenneth “would never understand, or make an effort to understand, the painful changes taking place in her heart.”²⁶

These questions of Joanna’s, “Why must I feel so rebellious” and “What’s happening to me,” resemble Esther’s situation in *The Bell Jar*. Almost in reply to Joanna’s questions, Esther asserts, “The trouble was, I hated the idea of serving men in any way.”²⁷ Later, to her psychiatrist, she builds on her previous statement, saying, “What I hate is the thought of being under a man’s thumb ... A man doesn’t have a care in the world, while I’ve got a baby hanging over my head like a big stick, to keep me in line.”²⁸

Both Esther and Joanna, however, eventually reject the prospect of the affluent and secure life afforded to the spouse of either a successful doctor or lawyer. They also directly defy contemporary societal expectations for young women.

Kenneth treats Joanna as though she were a child. The visit to Whitby is, in itself,

²³ *The Bell Jar*, 148

²⁴ “The Perfect Place”, 6

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ “The Perfect Place”, 7

²⁷ *The Bell Jar*, 83

²⁸ Ibid., 249

a reward for the compliance of giving in to his mother regarding the wedding plans.²⁹

In the scene at the seaside rock pools, Kenneth slips and falls, muddying up his suit. He takes his embarrassment out on Joanna, verbally scolding her: “I think we’ve had enough for one morning, Joanna.”³⁰ She reacts “slowly, like a child caught playing out too late by an impatient parent,” and resigns “herself to being lead sternly back to the boarding-house.”³¹ Later that evening, Joanna spends time in Simon’s garret looking at his artwork. Kenneth calls for her from the stair landing. Joanna reluctantly says, “I better go now ...”³²

The image of a “child caught playing out too late by an impatient parent,” reminds me of a scene in Chapter 12 of *The Bell Jar*, which is also set on a coastline. Esther visits her hometown of Winthrop in the violet light of an afternoon. She sits on a log trapped by a sandbar below the town water tower, which in itself is a symbol of a bell jar.³³ Esther plans to drown herself, but a small boy called Arthur is nearby lobbing round purple stones into the ocean.³⁴ Arthur’s mother ventures onto the sandbar, calling for him to return closer to the beach, and like Kenneth in Whitby, she slips on the rutted, beach terrain. Arthur then leaves, as the pull of his mother is too strong.³⁵

Esther, however, looks toward the sea, toward its deathly depths and resists the call from her absent father. Plath always associates the sea, especially the waters off the Massachusetts coast where she places Esther, with her dead father. The dead father is the impatient parent.³⁶ Unlike Joanna and Arthur, who acquiesce when called back, Esther rejects her father’s summons. She does retreat, however, to her mother and their house in the suburbs.

At the rock pools in “The Perfect Place,” Plath describes the sea as the “white froth of foam.”³⁷ This same image reappears in *The Bell Jar* as Esther contemplates

²⁹ “The Perfect Place”, 4

³⁰ “The Perfect Place”, 6

³¹ Ibid.

³² “The Perfect Place”, 7

³³ *The Bell Jar*, 172

³⁴ Ibid., 171; Arthur was likely lobbing “lucky stones”. Plath’s description of a “lucky stone” as being purplish is too coincidental not to be intentional.

³⁵ *The Bell Jar*, 171

³⁶ Plath develops this relationship, and enters into a kind of dialogue with her dead father, more fully in the poetry.

³⁷ “The Perfect Place”, 5

drowning when a wave, “lipped with white froth” collapses over her feet. Both these images derive from Plath’s 1958 poem, “Full Fathom Five”:

Old man, you surface seldom.
 Then you come in with the tide’s coming
 When seas wash cold, foam-
 Capped: white-hair, white beard, far-flung,
 A dragnet, rising, falling, as waves
 Crest and trough.³⁸

In *Kenneth and Buddy*, Plath creates, to say the least, unlikable men. In *Simon and Constantin*, she creates sympathetic alternatives. Simon, the artist, correlates to Constantin, the simultaneous interpreter. Joanna and Simon connect immediately. Joanna thinks, “He’s nice ... He’s – real. He isn’t thinking of the impression he’s making.”³⁹ In *The Bell Jar*, Esther comments favorably on Constantin’s intuition, “This Constantin won’t mind if I’m too tall and don’t know enough languages and haven’t been to Europe, he’ll see through all that stuff to what I really am.”⁴⁰

In the story and in the novel, Plath sets her characters in automobile rides that allow her female protagonists to feel freedom. On the way to Staithees, Simon notices a difference in Joanna’s disposition and remarks, “You’re smiling.”⁴¹ This leads Joanna to confide “all sorts of details about her home life in Canada” and “even the difficult story of her parents’ death.”⁴² She calls this outburst a “weakness” which she “never allowed herself in Kenneth’s presence ...”⁴³ Being apart from Kenneth allows Joanna to feel liberated, as though Kenneth, that “tall, unbending shape,” was her own personal bell jar.⁴⁴ In the same way, Constantin’s intuition enables Esther to let down her guard as she quickly senses that he is not a protégé of Mrs. Willard. The car ride around Manhattan frees Esther and she feels “happier than [she] had been since she was about nine and running along the hot white beaches with [her] father ...”⁴⁵

³⁸ *The Collected Poems*, 92

³⁹ “The Perfect Place”, 5

⁴⁰ *The Bell Jar*, 81

⁴¹ “The Perfect Place”, 6

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ “The Perfect Place”, 7

⁴⁵ *The Bell Jar*, 82

There are other likenesses present between the two texts. Mrs. Welbeck serves tea to Joanna in a “blue-rimmed cup.”⁴⁶ At Belsize, a nurse delivers Esther’s breakfast in “blue china.”⁴⁷ The abbey at Whitby sits “perched atop its headland like a great, grey seabird.”⁴⁸ In Winthrop, Esther sits on a log “under the stout, gray cylinder of the water tower on its commanding hill.”⁴⁹

Just as “The Perfect Place” and *The Bell Jar* begin with similar scenes, both end with the heroine crossing a threshold by stepping through a doorway. In a critical scene in the story, Joanna breaks her engagement to Kenneth. She then opens the door and steps out. This act frees her from imprisonment and from the promise of a life not suited to her needs. Likewise, after being “patched, retreaded, and approved for the road,” Esther also walks through an open door and into her own freedom in the final scene of *The Bell Jar*.

Plath’s short stories, like her poetry, got progressively better as she aged. This is especially true of her “Boston” stories: “The Fifteen Dollar Eagle,” “The Daughters of Blossom Street,” and “Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams,” written in 1958 and 1959. These stories mark a turning point: her style became more flexible; the language more colloquial, and her characters and dialogue are more colorful and more natural. As a result, Plath’s stories attracted the attention of publishers more sophisticated than *Seventeen*, *Mademoiselle*, or even her Holy Grail, the *Ladies’ Home Journal*. This being the case, she longed still to break into the women’s magazine market, which letter after letter in late 1960 relates.

The creation of Joanna, and eventually, of Esther, closely follows Plath’s own maturity and identity as a writer and a woman. A. Alvarez remarks on this transformation in Plath’s demeanor in *The Savage God*. When he first met Plath in early 1960, he says she “seemed effaced.”⁵⁰ He describes her as “bright, clean, competent ... friendly and yet rather distant ... subdued”⁵¹ Later that year, she came across as “easier,

⁴⁶ “The Perfect Place”, 4

⁴⁷ *The Bell Jar*, 236

⁴⁸ “The Perfect Place”, 4

⁴⁹ *The Bell Jar*, 169

⁵⁰ *The Savage God*, 6

⁵¹ Ibid.

wittier, [and] less constrained ... than before.”⁵² By June, 1962, Alvarez describes her as “changed.”⁵³ She was “no longer quiet and withheld ... she seemed solid and complete ...”⁵⁴

Like Plath, both Joanna and Esther are “effaced” as well as “bright, clean, competent.” Like Plath, both Joanna and Esther struggle to understand “the painful changes taking place” in their hearts.⁵⁵ Through the construction of these two characters, Plath, in the absence of critical primary source material from this period (i.e. her journals), accurately documents changes that took place in her life.

As we know with Plath, biography is never too far beneath the surface of her creative writing. Plath’s own experiences throughout the 1950s made writing *The Bell Jar* possible. She began to write about the experience of her breakdown in a fictional form as early as 1954 and 1955, in her stories “In the Mountains” and “Tongues of Stone.” Though she clearly had scenes and episodes in mind, she lacked a credible and believable lead character. It was not until Plath created Joanna in “The Perfect Place” that she built a female character capable of becoming her true heroine and spokeswoman, Esther Greenwood.

⁵² *The Savage God*, 10

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 13

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ “The Perfect Place”, 7

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