INVASION AND ISOLATION IN
SYLVIA PLATH'S SHORT FICTION

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by

Ronald Patrick Huth, B.A.

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Master's Examination Committee:

Anthony Libby

Thomas Cooley

Approved by

Anthony Libby
Adviser
Department of English
To Pam
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VITA

October 13, 1962 . . . . . . . . Born - Columbus, Ohio

1985 . . . . . . . . . . . . . . B.A., The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio

1985-1987 . . . . . . . . . Teaching Associate, Department of English, The Ohio State University

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: English

Studies in Twentieth-Century Literature, Professor Anthony Libby
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INTRODUCTION

Most critics of Sylvia Plath's work have focused on her poetry for serious literary study, ignoring for the most part her short stories because they believe them to be "inept" (Wagner, Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath 12) or merely apprentice pieces for her most important fictional achievement, The Bell Jar (Zajdel, 182). Far from inept, her short fiction contains not only clear, often poetic prose, but it also explores significant themes in a coherent manner--consistent imagery and symbolism lend clarity to the stories, making her collection Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams an artistic whole. Those critics who have studied Plath's short stories have discovered in them the same significant oppositions which run through much of the author's writing: imagination versus fact, dream versus reality, and self versus the world. What criticism there is focuses on the problems these oppositions cause, on the isolation the characters experience. For example, Wagner, in "Sylvia Plath's Specialness in her Short Stories," notes that "in much of Plath's fiction, her protagonist is a woman who feels
herself different—from society's expectations and perhaps her own—and therefore, in some ways, excluded" (2).

Exclusion, or isolation, figures significantly in Plath's short fiction. There are barriers between the self and nature, the self and other people, and between aspects of the same self. But Plath does not simply point out examples of isolation that she perceives in the world; the underlying structure of her fiction is more energetic. The various oppositions often come into contact when a character attempts to neutralize the destructive polarities her or she faces. This attempted neutralization involves invasion, the antithesis of isolation. Invasion is here defined as one's going where one does not belong. However, determining what Plath conceives of as one's own territory is difficult at times, not only because her vision changes throughout her work, but because her vision is complex. Her stories portray the way the world is in her eyes, not the way she wants it to be, but her desires still penetrate her prose in places, blurring the meaning at times on the surface.

Critics have detected this concept of isolation and invasion in Plath's poetry, if not in her short stories. For example, Pamela Annas says that Plath's late poems are "[c]haracterized by a conflict between stasis and movement, isolation and engagement" (171). And Kumar has
perceptively determined that

[Plath's] world becomes a world of alienations—man from man, man from nature, man from God. So much so that the distance between the opposed selves of the same personality, too, becomes immeasurable. Her poems revolve in the rhythms and images of "breakdown" and "breakthrough." (74)

These terms—"isolation and engagement," "breakdown and breakthrough"—point to the same concept, the active participation of the characters in their attempt to move beyond a world they find themselves trapped in.

In his Introduction to the volume containing Plath's short prose, Ted Hughes says that "this collection does not represent the prose of the poet of Ariel" (9).

Instead, it "give[s] glimpses into early phases of the strange conflict between what was expected of her and what finally was exacted" (9). It is true that some of the stories represent her vision at its earliest. But the stories follow that vision through all its stages, growing alongside the poetry, all the way through the Ariel poems. Her stories either share ideas explored in her poetry, or anticipate them. And the freedom of prose allows her to examine her ideas in greater detail than her poems, which are bound by length and form. Though the style of the prose is different than the style of the Ariel poems, the content is very similar; the stories are indeed the prose of the poet of Ariel.
Zajdel believes that the stories are just practice for her novel because the stories are repetitious, sharing the "same actions, characters, images, sometimes even words" (182). But the stories should not be reduced to such a level. Though her stories utilize experiences from her own life, by using different plots and characters she was able to move beyond her own life and show that her experience was not unique. In her short fiction, "rather than using factually autobiographical materials, Plath appears to have used and reused images and themes to give insight into the problems and situations that troubled her most" (Wagner, "Plath's Specialness" 1). Rather than producing boring stories, the repetition makes her collection more unified and universal.

The primary images associated with invasion and isolation are those of violence. The various violences either involve physical injuries, ranging from a girl biting a boy on the leg to a bear mauling a man, or they portray mental fragmentation. In his book Wolf Masks, an examination of violence in modern poetry, Lawrence Ries praises her imagery: "Perhaps no modern poet has been more aware of the forces of power and violence in the contemporary world, and of their disintegrating effect on the individual identity" (34). But despite all of the violence in Plath's short stories, suicide, a favorite discussion topic about Plath among readers and critics
alike, rarely appears. The will to live is much more prevalent than the desire to die. And the stories convey even more than the struggle to merely survive; they are about the wish to achieve success and comfort, the will to live well.
CHAPTER I

Near the end of her brief life, in 1962, Sylvia Plath wrote an essay titled "Ocean 1212-W," in which she describes her early associations with the ocean. Much of the essay relates various childhood adventures along the New England seacoast, presumably to entertain and enlighten her British listeners—it was broadcast on the BBC in 1962—but within her tales one can find explicit statements that give a portion of Plath's vision; they show the isolation of the human and natural worlds from one another. After a traumatic childhood event, the death of her brother, a walk along her familiar beach reveals a change in her awareness: "[a]s from a star I saw, coldly and soberly, the separateness of everything. I felt the wall of my skin: I am I. That stone is a stone. My beautiful fusion with the things of this world was over" (23). This passage encapsulates the entire theme which underlies all of Plath's short stories and much of her poetry; the fact that everything is separate means that not only will people be isolated from the natural world but also from each other—"the wall of her skin" will close others out. And with everything else closed out, the
assertion "I am I" becomes tenuous as the self retreats from the self.

In this essay, the presence and power of the alien natural world is embodied in the ocean. The understated opening line of the essay subtly conveys Plath's sense of distinctly different worlds: "[m]y childhood landscape was not land but the end of the land—the cold, salt, running hills of the Atlantic" (20). These grey-blue hills cannot be walked upon or explored as hills of earth and grass can. Plath felt that it may have been possible at one time to penetrate into that other world; when she was an infant she had "crawled straight for the coming wave and was just through the wall of green when [her mother] caught [Plath's] heels" (21). Pondering the possible consequences of breaching that wall dividing the two worlds, Plath wrote, "I often wonder what would have happened if I had managed to pierce that looking glass. Would my infant gills have taken over, the salt in my blood" (21)? This passage reveals humanity's primal connection with the ocean and the subsequent vision—the ability to see the workings of nature—that follows from that connection, which breaks when one is born into the human world.

But just because that connection is broken does not mean that the two worlds are constantly isolated from one another. Plath's vision is more complicated, dynamic, and interesting. Her short prose investigates the nature
when the worlds come into contact; the wall between them is somewhat porous, allowing limited but unharmonious passage. For instance, people obviously venture out onto the ocean in their ships, but these vessels are self-contained. There is no sharing with the sea. People merely pass over the water to get to another part of their world, or they take from the sea, plundering its fish and mammals and minerals. But the sea also takes. Plath describes how her mother used to go to the beach after shipwrecks, "where the townspeople poked among the waves' leavings as at an open market--tea kettles, bolts of soaked cloth, the lone lugubrious shoe" (22). But the scavengers never found a drowned person. It was as if the ocean kept the invaders as a warning to those who would brave alien wilds.

It is not only upon the waves that the potential for violence exists. Since the dividing line between the worlds is porous and flexible, the coastline defines a tenuous border. The precariousness of living on the edge, close to nature's power, becomes especially apparent in hurricane season, when pounding waves invade dry land. When describing a 1939 hurricane, Plath wrote, "My final memory of the sea is of violence" (25). For Plath, this natural violence is not a negative power. Rather, "there is more admiration than fear for this power which, although destructive, is not malicious" (Ries, 37).
Indeed, Plath did not fear this particular hurricane. She was only a child when the storm occurred, and it could be argued that children in such a situation would be naturally curious rather than frightened, but that is not necessarily true. Many children would be terrified by the howling wind and whipping waves. But not Plath. Instead, "[her] brother and [she], knee-high still, imbibed the talk of tidal waves, high ground, boarded windows and floating boats. like a miracle elixir" (25). And she uses a great metaphor to describe her perception of the effects of the strong rains: "[t]he rain set in, one huge Noah douche" (26). The storm cleanses the coastline for its arrogance at building so close to the sea, and for its pollution of the water.

Since Plath sees the fierce storm as a positive event, she looks with glee, not horror, upon the destruction wrought by the hurricane: "[t]he wreckage the next day was all one could wish—overthrown trees and telephone poles, shoddy summer cottages bobbing out by the lighthouse and a litter of the ribs of little ships" (26). The image of shabby summer cottages drifting among the timbers of petty ships upon the waves conveys well the sense of smallness of men and their machines when confronted with the power of nature.
It was not only manifest violence in nature that stirred—exciting and frightening—Plath's soul. The presence of potential violence also held a dark attraction for her. She wrote that even "mountains terrify [her]—they just sit about, they are so proud. The stillness of hills stifle [her] like fat pillows" (24). In Plath's view, people should be more aware of the possible consequences of crossing barriers that can, but should not, be crossed. Her work is filled with people that cross the boundaries in pursuit of their dreams.

Invasion and isolation, actual and potential violence, play a large role in Plath's short story "The Fifty-ninth Bear," written about three years before "Ocean 1212-W." In her essay, the eye of the storm is blind; the hurricane's destruction is indiscriminate, smashing everything in its path. In Plath's fiction and poetry, however, the confrontations are more limited and direct. Her writings about nature usually involve one or two people and an animal. "The Fifty-ninth Bear" is ostensibly about a struggle between husband and wife, man and woman. And although much of the plot functions on this level, the story contains so much insight about human intrusions into the natural world that it stands apart from the bulk of her stories, which examine confrontations between persons. This story presents the most refined and detailed form of her vision of the clash between animals and people.
The story takes place in a national park—never named, but obviously Yellowstone—one of those great havens where one can enjoy the rewards of his or her success while escaping from the pursuit of that success. One would think that since the story is set in a national park that there should be some sort of harmony between people and animals; the parks are designed for the protection of wildlife and the enjoyment of the visitors. And there is some interaction: "[i]n spite of the strict rules, people fed the bears—lured them with sugar and crackers to pose in front of the camera, even shoved their children under the bear's nose for a more amusing shot" (Johnny Panic 113). This interaction is hardly positive, however. It is naive and dangerous.

And Plath wants to dispel all sense of any hope for real interaction. She does so by opening the story in a seemingly alien setting, a geyser field. By describing the area as a "barren ocher-and-oyster-colored moonscape" (106), Plath immediately erects a barrier, isolating the characters from the landscape. And later in the story, the landscape becomes animal-like, strengthening the barrier and the idea that the park belongs to the animals: "in the furred, blue moonlight, the pines bristled with shadow" (113). Plath believes that the shadow must be left alone, kept away from. There is danger for human beings
who walk into a darkness they know nothing about, and
never will.

Of course, the characters in the story do not realize
that they are invading a realm that does not belong to
them. It is, after all, a national park, supposedly safe
and sanitized, with its marked scenic overlooks, lodges,
picnic tables, and crisply uniformed rangers, just one
more big zoo laid out by the caretakers of America. In a
way, the park is a zoo, because the animals cannot stray
far from the park's boundaries or they will run into
civilization, a territory dangerous for them. They are
trapped within their diminished wilderness reduced to
scant square miles by land-grabbing dream-seekers.

The vacationing Norton and Sadie, the main characters
in the story, invade this wilderness area. The title of
the story refers to a bet that Sadie has with Norton; she
bets him ten dollars that they will see fifty-nine bears
before they leave the park. This little game is harmless,
but it underscores the attitude that the couple (and all
the park's visitors) hold—that the wild animals are
figures in a landscape put there solely for the tourists'
convenience and pleasure.

Plath brilliantly shows this lack of awareness by the
tourists, and their crude intrusions, in a passage in
which Norton and Sadie, spotting an elk, pull over to the
side of the road, where a number of amateur photographers
have already gathered. All of them attempt to get a souvenir for their scrapbooks: "twirling dials, waving light meters, calling to relatives and friends above for fresh rolls of film, they plunged over the slope in a wave, slipping, lapsing, half-falling, in an avalanche of rust-colored pine needles and loose turf" (108). Naturally, this brash invasion scares the elk away before anyone can get a shot off, but incredibly, and stupidly, the tourists grumble and complain about not capturing the elk on film, not realizing their lack of competence in the wilderness.

Sadie's and Norton's journey through the park is not as crude, but they also exhibit a real lack of awareness in their confrontations with animals, though Plath does imply at the beginning of the story that Norton has some idea that he is treading where he does not belong. As Norton walks along the geyser field, he feels "the ground frail as a bird's skull under his feet, a mere shell of sanity and decorum between him and the dark entrails of the earth" (106). The image of Norton walking on a bird's skull heightens the sense that he is walking on dangerous ground, that he is invading the animal realm.

Though Sadie has less awareness than Norton, her confrontation with an animal is not fatal, nor is it injurious, a usual consequence of venturing where one does not belong. The case in point is the time Norton finds
Sadie calmly feeding a stag out of her hand, not realizing that the stag had "hooves that could, in one blow, have dashed her to the ground. The danger simply never occurred to her" (108). Though no injury results from this encounter, Plath makes it very clear that death is only a slip of luck away. The potential for violence in the natural world constantly seethes beneath the surface.

But the fact that Norton gets killed in his confrontation with an animal is more than just bad luck or fate. And though irony is present because it is the fifty-ninth bear which kills Norton, there is also more than merely irony at work in the end of the story. The ending verifies two aspects of Plath's view of nature. Firstly, it reveals that no matter how much one tries to empathize with and understand the natural world, there is no hope of real understanding or harmony. As stated above, Plath suggests that Norton has some awareness of his place in the park's habitat. She furthers the suggestion in the incident with the elk. While Norton is standing above the stampeding tourists, "in his mind he was forming an apology to the elk. He had meant well" (108). And he follows the rules regarding food in this place where animals roam freely, especially at night. Plath describes in detail how Norton carefully cleans up the campsite after dinner, because "[b]ears only bothered messy campers, the rangers said--people who littered food about
or kept food in their tents" (113). Secure in his belief that the rangers are all-knowing with respect to wild animals, Norton locks the food in his car. But a bear smells the fish, smashes a window, and gorges. The bear does not follow park rules—it invades the campsite of a clean, careful camper. Plath shows that it is arrogant and ignorant to presume to predict natural behavior.

The incident with the fifty-ninth bear also reveals man's smallness when confronted with the violence and power of nature. This story dramatizes Plath's vision more vividly than her later essay, "Ocean 1212-W." In Wolf Masks Ries notes that Plath believed that in nature "power and violence are found in their pure state" (39). At first glance, the image of a bear rooting through garbage cans and invading campsites seemingly presents that power in a debased light—mighty bears reduced to scavengers. But it is the tourists who are the real invaders, and the bears are simply "hunting" in their own territory. To repel the "invader," Norton tries to scare the bear away with only words and a flashlight. His thoughts and actions reveal his foolish confidence that everything is under control: "[h]e held the light steady, moving forward, willing the bear to be gone. At any minute the bear should break and run" (114).
But unfortunately for Norton, the bear does not break and run because "there was another will working, a will stronger, even, than [Norton's]" (114). In this encounter, "what [Plath] sees is the domination of brute strength before which man's supposedly superior qualities are helpless" (Ries, 39), much as she does with the hurricane. Norton, the real invader, receives a fatal injury for entering a realm he fails to comprehend.

Plath explores the same ideas in "The Goring," a poem written several years before "The Fifty-ninth Bear." In this, one of Plath's early mature poems, the clash between man and animal also results in a fatal injury to the man. In this poem, Plath's sympathies definitely lie with the animal world, because she portrays the people in it as savage and tawdry. The bullfighter, the central figure in the ritual slaughter that plays an important role in Spanish culture, is described as "obese, dark-faced in his rich yellows, tassels, pompon, [and] braid." The matador could be seen as impressive, but what he ultimately displays is not richness but cheap artificiality in light of his performance, which is "cumbrous routine, not artwork." The entire ritual has been merely a cruel slaughter of four bulls by an incompetent sword arm which deals "ill-judged stabs." His sword, a debased imitation of a natural weapon, violates the bull's body.
The bull's horn is naturally designed to penetrate flesh. When the fifth bull faces the matador, it gores him efficiently and competently, "[t]he whole act formal, fluent as a dance." The man's body becomes a signifier for his brash incompetence as it perches atop the bull's horn above the safe, solid earth—he becomes "a lumped man-shape." The confrontation between the two worlds is grimly resolved in a shower of human blood which "redeem[s] the sullied air, the earth's grossness." The poem "shows a definite preference for the violence of the natural world to what [Plath] would consider man's learned violence" (Ries, 40). Nature's violence, though harsh and brutal, is not, like man's, "unceremonious, repellent, disgusting" (Ries, 40), or cruel.

Besides showing the purity of natural violence, the poem, like the fiction, shows its superiority. A line from the poem, borrowed later by the story, closely ties the two works together. Plath writes that in the arena, at first "the strongest will seemed a will towards ceremony." As in a national park, where a constant supply of bears is available to be photographed in safe surroundings, the spectators and matadors in the arena witness or take part in a steady stream of murder in a safe, gaudy environment. But bulls are wild and unpredictable, and nature's might still seethes beneath that veneer of safety. Violating the bulls (nature) proves dangerous. For Norton, nature's will
lashes forth in the form of the fifty-ninth bear, for the
matador, in the form of the fifth bull. Qualitatively and
quantitatively, nature's violence is greater.

Both "The Fifty-ninth Bear" and "The Goring" end with
the death of a man who strays from his own world, giving
the impression that human beings are always the careless
trespassers. But if Plath is to fully envision two worlds
polarized from one another, she cannot afford to be so
one-sided. And indeed, she is not; the situation presented
in the above works is reversed in "Mussel Hunter at Rock
Harbor." In this poem, Plath's vision is more clearly—or
explicitly—voiced. The poetry distinctly delineates the
human and animal worlds as isolated from one another. As
the tide recedes in the poem, the tide pools become part
of the human world—the public beach. But though the
mussels in the pools hang "dull blue and/Conspicuous," and
are thus easy pickings for the mussel hunter, they are not
easily graspable; their world is beyond her reach: "it
seemed/A sly world's hinges had swung/Shut against [her]."

By standing very still, she is able to view some
fiddler crabs—other denizens of the "wary otherworld"—at
work, but she can never understand them. The name for the
creatures is a feeble attempt to impose some sort of order
or understanding on the animal kingdom, but the mussel
hunter realizes the hopelessness of the attempt. The large
claw each crab possesses is "no fiddler's arm/Grown
Gargantuan by trade,/But grown grimly, and grimly/Borne, for a use beyond [her]/Guessing of it." Yet she still desires some connection with the crab’s world; she wants to share at least some common experience, so she wonders, "Could they feel mud/Pleasurable under claws/As I could between bare toes?" But this human imposition does not work either, of course. Her musing only confirms her alienation from that other world: "That question ended it—I/Stood shut out, for once, for all;/Puzzling the passage of their/Absolutely alien/Order." No other passage in Plath so starkly shows the barrier between the human and animal worlds.

Just as in other works, Plath does not simply show the polarized realms in static isolation; there is an invasion of one realm by the inhabitant of the other. In this poem, a fiddler crab, "strangely strayed above/His world of mud," ventures into the human world and is killed. It would work out nicely if the crab were killed by a person because the poem would then perfectly complement the works examined above. Such is not the case, however; in fact, the crab most likely died of exposure, meaning that elements of nature—sun and dry wind—killed it. The next chapter will show how Plath sees persons as isolated from one another, how there are separate worlds within the human world. So, too, in nature—there are distinct worlds within the animal kingdom, and straying
beyond "their friendly/Element" usually proves fatal to animals as well.

And the poem does show some creatures killed by a human being after they are isolated from their own realm; the mussel hunter gathers the mussels stranded in the tide pools. This situation is not neat and tidy either. The mussels did not intentionally stray from their world. As happens at times in Plath, fate or bad luck takes its toll, showing that following the harsh rules of behavior in the human and animal realms does not guarantee that everything will work out the way it is supposed to. So too in literature.

The persona in "Pheasant," one of Plath's later poems, exhibits the most competent recognition of the necessary separateness of the human and animal worlds. Just as with Sadie and the stag, there is the danger of injury, the potential for violence, in the poem. The husband wants to kill the pheasant that lives on his property. However, the danger is not dissolved by luck this time, but by the woman's sensibility. She is aware that the bird is "in its element" as it wanders about in "the uncut grass on the elm's hill," and even when it wanders through her home's courtyard, leaving tracks in the snow. This country home, like the tents and trailers in a national park, is the real intruder, built upon land that belongs to wildlife.
The woman's awareness of the situation makes her feel like an invader of the bird's space. Rather than being offended, she notes with "wonder" its tracks in the courtyard of her home, and she realizes that it is a privilege "just to be visited at all" by the pheasant, which is other, alien. The last line of the poem suggests that even getting near the bird, just observing it, is too much of an intrusion. That final line explicitly completes Plath's theory of the correct, polarized positions of the human and animal realms: "I trespass stupidly. Let be, let be."

But though this poem is a pleasant change from the works examined so far because there is no injurious invasion, the poem darkens somewhat when one realizes that the antithesis of invasion--isolation--can be just as negative and destructive. Though Plath feels that the human and animal worlds must be kept separate, she does not want them to be separate. She would like to be able to participate in the natural world. Such a desire is not surprising, considering Plath's experiences in her own world. Her longing, most vividly expressed in "I Am Vertical," cannot be realized. Only when she dies will "the trees touch [her] for once, and the flowers have time for [her]." Her dream can come true only when she leaves her own world completely, and forever.
CHAPTER II

In Sylvia Plath's vision, venturing into the natural world proves very difficult, and often deadly. Since the possibilities for constructive contact with nature are so limited, she wrote only one story and a small number of poems addressing that idea. However, the possibilities facing an individual who wishes to move beyond his or her own little world within the human realm and into another world are many and complex. The issue receives much more attention in Plath's prose; the majority of her published fiction collected in the volume Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams explores the confrontations between persons, between an individual and a group, or between the self and society in general. Because this theme is so varied and complex, Plath's vision is not consistent. For the most part, her outlook is negative--breaking one's isolation and moving into another world is usually injurious and unsuccessful. But some of her stories are more positive, revealing the hope and promise of success, which gleams within reach of most people, especially in America.
Though most of the stories are negative, showing Plath's theory that the invasion of another world cannot be successful or complete, the physical injuries are not as great as the ones a person would receive for intruding into the animal kingdom; death rarely threatens in the short fiction. Man's violence is never as great nor as graceful as nature's. The flesh heals, but damage to the psyche or soul of an individual often proves irreparable. The struggles of men and women, though petty, can do great damage to a vulnerable or fragile mind. The injury can be great enough to divorce the self from the self, a theme explored in the next chapter.

Tracing Plath's vision throughout these stories written over a ten year span is often difficult; grouping the stories is thus somewhat arbitrary, but Plath's practice of reusing plots and even phrases helps to organize her material a bit. The major subset within Plath's set of stories involving the self against the world deals with a person who wants to become part of a group. Moving into a select circle fulfills in part one's goals; one gains status and comfort when he or she is able to successfully penetrate the social, economic, or cultural barriers encasing himself or herself.

The most powerful and detailed—with respect to isolation and invasion—story in this subset is "Stone Boy with Dolphin." The plot of this story is very spare, but
the rich details and underlying structures show Plath working out her vision of how invasions of others' realms are never successful, and how failure leads to isolation not only from others, but from oneself as well. Plath also continues her examination of the role of fate in a person's success.

The plot centers on Dody Ventura, a lonely American studying at Cambridge. She is invited to a party by a fellow student, Hamish, whom she does not like, but she goes with him because she wants to meet Leonard and the other well-known student writers. She hopes that by meeting with these men she can become a part of the group which luxuriates at the university's literary and social center; she wants interesting, important friends. Her closest friend at the beginning (and at the end) of the story is a statue, the title "character," a replica of an artistic work by Verrocchio. The stone boy is symbol and center of her isolated world, a world she attempts to escape from through a series of adventures during the night in which the story takes place.

Setting the major part of the story in a party was an important move by Plath. A party is a place where people supposedly mingle and get to know one another, but Plath views the party as a place where isolation is greatest—there is little real sharing between people at such a gathering. Drunkeness and loud music, and
self-absorbed egos prevent quality communication. For instance, when Mick, another one of the literary lights, grabs Dody's hand to dance with her, one would expect that there would be some sort of bond formed. But instead, his grip just catapults her farther away from him and the party:


And just as Dody's awareness moves away from Mick when he reaches out to her, so, too, Mick retreats from Dody when she attempts to communicate with him: "[b]ut Mick turned a deaf ear, whorls waxed against siren calls. Grinning at her from far, from farther away, he receded. Over the river and into the woods. His Cheshire-cat grin hung luminous. Couldn't hear a word in his canary-feathered heaven" (182). The hallucinatory imagery of these passages is in part a function of Dody's drunken state, but the strangeness of the images also reveals the absolute alienation between the characters. Harmony appears to be impossible.
Though the goal is impossible to obtain, hope is dangled before Dody's eyes. Hope keeps one going, striving for success, trying to obtain what others around one possess. Dody stakes all her self-worth and dreams of success on her meeting with Leonard. And for a moment, she enters his world, the goal of many young men and women. After all, an American does not come to Cambridge solely for an education; one also desires the status that attendance at the venerable university can confer. The best and quickest way to gain that status is through a group such as the one Leonard and his friends belong to. He gets her alone in a side room, and he penetrates her space by kissing her. Dody welcomes this invasion, which has a healthy and positive effect at first: "in the center of the maze, in the sanctum of the garden, a stone boy cracked, splintered, million-pieced" (184). Her shell of isolation is broken. But when Leonard informs her that he has a girlfriend in the main party room, she is shut out again. Secure in his position as leader of the campus literati, he assumes that even after telling her he is attached that the drunk American girl will be thrilled to receive another kiss. But as he bends to do so, he fails to recognize that she is already lost to him; he enters a realm where he is no longer welcome, where he does not belong, and he receives an injury for doing so--Dody bites
him, a vicious penetration: "soap and water would not wash off that ring of holes for a good week" (185).

Her retribution may have been briefly satisfying to her, but it does not gain her anything. Her plans for success are smashed, her hope lost--she finds herself once again in "[t]he wrong world. Air flowed, filling the hollow his shape left. But nothing at all filled the hollow in her eye" (184). Dody's perspective is warping farther; the "wrong world" she finds herself in is actually the correct world, because it is the world she has always lived in, and always will. And Dody's angry act in fact isolates her even further from the group she wants to become a part of than she was before the evening began; with Leonard gone, beyond her grasp, the rest of the group follows. He and they shun her, so when she re-enters the main party room, "[n]o one stared: a ring of turned backs, averted faces" (185) greets her. This image sharply symbolizes her situation. And she turns away from her dream with injuries of her own--she leaves the party "damaged and with interior lesions" (186).

Since Dody no longer has a goal to strive for, her aimless state of being makes her very vulnerable, easy to be taken advantage of. And Hamish does so, taking her back to his dorm, where women are not allowed. The dorm, with its sleeping men and watchful proctors, is part of another world in which Dody does not belong. Crossing into the
forbidden territory results in further injury; the barbed and spiked fence surrounding the dorm pierces her hands as she climbs over. But Hamish's subsequent sexual penetration of her does not have any effect because she does not feel any connection with this man either:

"nothing stirred. Inert, she lay staring toward the high ceiling crossed by the dark wood beams, hearing the worms of the ages moving in them, riddling them with countless passages and little worm-size labyrinths" (189). Her isolation from the act is conveyed in the prose--the description is so subtle that one has to read closely to determine what has actually transpired on the floor of the dorm room. Though it appears that Hamish takes advantage of Dody to get what he wants, it seems very likely that Dody herself was after something. She still has a strong need to move beyond her world. And though he is no Leonard, Hamish is still other; he is Canadian and part of a world she does not belong to. Accomplishing the goal of penetrating this less glamorous realm would have been good for her. Instead, she is penetrated, and it is Hamish who enjoys success of a sort--his accomplishment gives him both the physical pleasure of the moment and the subsequent bragging rights among his male friends. But Dody leaves with much less: seeing worms deep within
ceiling beams while having sex does not result in a valuable, sharing experience. She is still out among the planets. Hamish’s lesser world is closed to her also.

Besides the plot elements discussed above, Plath also uses symbols and her masterful details to more clearly delineate her vision concerning isolation and injury. In laying out the setting of the story, Plath immediately creates barriers. The weather at Cambridge is that of "an alien climate" (174-5). And Dody lives in Arden house, where foreign students are required to live; the opposition foreign versus native immediately leads to mandatory isolation for Dody. And the descriptions of the persons Dody comes into contact with further show her isolation from other human beings. A good example is Dody’s encounter with a group of students outside Hamish’s dorm:

the five boys surrounded Dody. They had no features at all, only pale translucent moons for face shapes, so she would never know them again. And her face, too, felt to be a featureless moon. They could never recognize her in the light of day. (187)

This passage is very similar to an earlier one in which Plath describes Dody’s perceptions as she looks out of a bar in which she is getting warmed up for the party: "[p]eople swam past, undulant, with no feet, no faces. Outside the window ... face shapes bloomed toward the
glass from the dark outside sea and drifted away again, wan underwater planets at the fringe of vision" (178). Plath is not merely indulging in repetitious description. Rather, she is showing the uniformity of the barrier isolating Dody from others. And the lunar/planetary imagery ties in nicely with the passage where Dody dances with Mick, unifying the story on an artistic level. And the consistent imagery is not confined to persons; the city itself, the alien climate, shuts itself off from Dody: "[b]ut no faces came to recognize Dody . . . . Blind storefronts and eyeless alley walls . . . . Black sky spaces spoke of the hugeness, the indifference of the universe" (186).

Another symbol which consistently threads its way though the story involves "marks," both physical and mental. Even in Arden, among her own kind, Dody is secluded because all she does is study, and thus, she feels isolated from the world of art and imagination in which the other liberal arts students dwell. In her deadening world of facts, "the days dawned and set, neatly, nicely, towards an Honors B.A." (175). Desperately wanting to break out of this neat, safe, lonely world of hers, she prays to her statue, "Let me leave my mark" (175). She is very much aware that leaving her own world will require violence. She does not hope for Prince Charming/Leonard to gallop by and rescue her; she asks
instead, "Let something happen. Something terrible, something bloody" (175). So Dody is very conscious throughout the evening of leaving marks. For example, when she spills some of her drink on her dress she notes, "Marked already" (181). Even such a minor thing can draw attention to her, reducing her isolation very slightly, if somewhat negatively. Of course the major mark in the story is the teeth-cut ring on Leonard's cheek. As Dody savagely bites him, she thinks, "Mark that, mark that." Her thought is rich with meaning. The command cuts both ways; she convinces herself that by making literal marks on his face she will be able to make a deeper, distinct impression on him. She wills him to notice her, to think of her as more than just a nameless face to kiss. Her act is thus both a punishment and a last desperate attempt to enter Leonard's world.

Even amidst her bitterness she is fiercely proud of her handiwork, and she hopes she has some effect on the group in the main party room: "I did that, Dody informed the deaf air ... Dody Ventura. Mark me, mark that" (185). She wants them to notice what she has done to their leader, and maybe she even wants to receive literal marks herself. Negative attention is better than none. In this context, the reference to the worms acquires greater significance. The active worms, by eating into the dorm's wood, have made a permanent mark on the university; their
burrowings are not of great importance, but they are a presence, a part of that world. On the other hand, the inert, unfeeling Dody down on the rug makes no mark on the room, nor on the university. She will just get a degree and leave, nameless and unknown. Success goes to those who already have it.

Why is it that Dody is ultimately not successful in reaching beyond her own world? The major premise of this thesis notes that throughout Plath's stories there seems to be a sense of distinct worlds in which different groups—people or animals—reside, and the barriers between the worlds are usually too great for one to penetrate fully and unscathed. The chance for success is rooted in the ability of people to overcome barriers and rise to their potential. Thousands have obviously achieved their goals, but Plath's characters do not. Plath sees their chances as nonexistent or at least very limited. Trying to discover why Plath feels this way is extremely difficult. Part of the answer involves needs of the self, an issue to be explored in the next chapter, but fate also figures into part of the answer, at least in "Stone Boy with Dolphin."

In fact, at the beginning of the story, it appears that the only reason Dody goes to the party is a matter of chance. Some guy runs into her with his bicycle and invites her to the function, and a brief conversation
fuels her interest. She notes of her decision: "[o]n such hinges fate turned" (173). And as she enters the door to the party room, she ponders, "Life is a tree with many limbs. Choosing this limb, I crawl out for my bunch of apples. I gather unto me my Winesaps, my Coxes, my Bramleys, my Jonathans. Such as I choose. Or do I choose" (179-80)? If this tree symbolizes life's possibilities, her question suggests that one may be stuck out on a limb not of one's choosing. But is he or she stuck due to fate, or a lack of climbing ability? The answer leans to the former when one compares this passage to the one in which Adele, another American student, enters the party. Unlike Dody, Adele enters the party room smiling "[b]ecause she knew already what she would find in the room: no grab bag of star-sent circumstance, but her chosen friends . . ." (186). Adele is not fated and is thus free to choose her friends, to become part of the group. She rises to success through her ability to socialize. Dody's failure may not be a matter of fate at all, but rather a lack of social skills. Or she may possess those skills, but they are dulled by either drink or some internal strife; both problems can submerge the competent self, an issue explored in the next chapter.

"Day of Success" deviates from the path of Plath's prose somewhat in that it ends happily--the couple in the story are able to break into a world beyond their own. But
the story is important to the current exploration because it explicitly explores the relationship between striving for success and the concept of isolation from, and becoming part of, a world other than one's own. In the story, Ellen Ross is married to Jacob Ross, poet and aspiring playwright. They have a six-month old daughter, Jill, and they live in a small, drab two-room flat paid for by Jacob's odd and part-time jobs and sporadic checks from accepted contributions. Ellen seems to be content with their simple life, but part of her contentment comes from rationalization. They are happy, but they still have dreams:

How often she and Jacob had promised themselves the legendary cottage by the sea, far from the city's petrol fumes and smoky railroad yards—a garden, a hill, a cove for Jill to explore, an unhurried, deeply savored peace! (81)

And how does one attain this dream? Though Jacob works hard at his craft, Ellen feels that it is more a matter of fate rather than struggle and personal perseverance which will bring success. For instance, in a moment of contentment, Ellen prays to fate to maintain her happiness: "Please don't let it change, she begged of whatever fates might be listening. Let the three of us stay happy as this forever" (79). And when a friend of the
Ross' achieves success with a play, the description of his accomplishment acknowledges his talent, but it shows that fate has a large role:

Keith made the grade first. A play staged in an out-of-the-way theater catapulted through the hoop of please-see-it! reviews into the West End and kept going like some beautiful, lucky-star-guided missile to land smack in the middle of Broadway. That's all it took. And as at the wave of a wand, the beaming Regans were whisked from an unheated, cold-water flat and a diet of spaghetti and potato soup into the luxuriant green pastures of Kensington . . . ." (82)

If success depends on magic, it is no wonder that a sense of despair pervades much of Plath's work. Struggle is hard enough without worrying whether it is all for nought.

The image of the missile and the catapult underscores the idea that breaking into another world requires great force and violence, though this story contains only worry, no violence. Ellen is aware that the barriers between her world and her dream world are large. As she looks through a fashion magazine, "Ellen mused darkly on the gulf separating her from the self-possessed fur-, feather- and jewel-bedecked models who gazed back at her from the pages with astoundingly large, limpid eyes" (85). Ellen fantasizes about the "fairytale world" (85) these models must live in, with the luxury to go "trailing about a sparkling American kitchen in a foamy negligee, satin ribbons fluttering like triumphal banners . . . ." (85).
Though the gulf between the two worlds is large, Ellen and Jacob cross it unscathed, achieving success through their own abilities. But when the Ross' enter the world of wealth and success, they do not pursue the opulent, destructive path of the Regan's. At the end of the story, Ellen tells the furred, jeweled, but divorced Nancy Regan that she is going to be a "country wife." Even though the Ross' now have the freedom to go where they want, they realize that there are still boundaries. Rather than choosing the path where they will constantly have to impress other people, they choose to live a more simple life, closer to nature. And since they have wisely made this choice, once they are out in the country they will probably respect the boundaries out there as well, just as the woman in "Pheasant" does. This vision is the one Plath wished could be true, but which she did not really believe possible. The story is Plath's fantasy.

"Initiation," a story written in 1952, when Plath was only twenty, also embodies one of her fantasies. The youthful vision in the story expresses the wish that all people could be part of the same world. There would be no isolation and the subsequent yearning to intrude into an inaccessible world. The content of the story is a bit didactic, but it is valuable because it clearly reveals Plath's early idealism, which dimmed completely through the next ten years.
This story is very conscious of the existence of distinct groups within society, the barriers to the entrance of these worlds, and the desire of non-members to break those barriers. The story follows Millicent Arnold, a once lonely outsider who gets the chance to become part of a high school sorority, the "magic circle" (286), the most select social group at the school. She recalls when she felt isolated:

[She] had waited a long time for acceptance, longer than most. It was as if she had been sitting for years in a pavilion outside a dance floor, looking in through the windows at the golden interior, with the lights clear and the air like honey, wistfully watching the gay couples waltzing to the never-ending music, laughing in pairs and groups together, no one alone. (287)

This passage clearly shows how an isolated person feels when he or she is not part of a group. The group is in a world of its own, protected by walls, windows, and doors. Getting through those barriers will require force, struggle. The initiation into the sorority requires a five-day "trial by fire" (286) designed to bruise the ego. Millicent's experiences are trying and humiliating, but she knows it will all be worth it. She fantasizes about the rewards for her brief pain:

But now at last, amid a week of fanfare and merriment, she would answer her invitation to enter the ballroom through the main entrance marked "Initiation." She would gather up her
velvet skirts, her silken train, or whatever the disinherited princesses wore, and come into her rightful kingdom. (287)

This passage strengthens the sense that the members of a group one desires to be a part of dwell in a distinct domain. Entrance to that domain is by invitation only, but that invitation is not tied in silk ribbons—it is sealed with the sweat and pain of struggle.

Although the main emphasis of the story is on a select group of people, the narrative is very conscious of the barriers surrounding all persons, not just the members and non-members of a particular clique. For example, one of the tasks Millicent must perform is to ask all the passengers on a city bus what they eat for breakfast. She is frightened at having to confront these "stony-faced people who are staring coldly out of the window" (291).

Breaking into a group is hard enough, but having to break down the stony walls around each individual on a bus would be extremely difficult and painful. This image of the people on the bus is the dominant image in Plath's vision of the self versus others. The walls around others are just too difficult to penetrate, making union with the human world ultimately impossible.

But when this story was written, that vision had not hardened yet. The optimism expressed in a somewhat preachy passage seems genuine:
So many people were shut up tight inside themselves like boxes, yet they would open up, unfolding quite wonderfully, if only you were interested in them. And really, you didn't have to belong to a club to feel related to other human beings. (292)

Millicent adheres to this philosophy by deciding not to join the sorority after all, even though she has survived all the rigors of initiation week and is qualified to enter. The story ends on this noble note, with Millicent feeling free and happy, but given the limits of the world envisioned by Plath, this happiness will not long last.

"Mothers," written in 1962, one Plath's last stories, is the final story dealing with outsiders who want to become part of a group. Unlike "Initiation," this story is more understated, making it a bit more difficult to determine what Plath wants to say through the story. There is no apparent violence in this quiet tale of three friends--Esther, Rose, and Mrs. Nolan--who attend the monthly Mother's Union service at the village church, but there are hints of suppressed anger and discomfort seething beneath the surface, and there is a strong sense of a person's isolation from a particular world.

Esther's feelings about her personal isolation from the village appear to be mixed. At times she gives the impression that she really wants to fit into the local
life. Esther is an American who has recently moved to Devon with her husband and child. For the first month in town they kept to themselves, but the daily ringing of the church bells began to invade Esther's conscience, tugging at it: "[t]here was no escape from the probing notes. They bit into the air and shook it with a doggy zeal. The bells made Esther feel left out, as if from some fine local feast" (13). This passage does give the impression that Esther is a bit lonely, but there is a stronger sense that she feels guilty about not attending church, and that guilt engenders her sense of loneliness rather than some deep need. But when she learns that Mrs. Nolan, who is attending the Mother's Union service for the first time also, has lived in the village for six years and still feels isolated, Esther's distress seems genuine:

[Mrs. Nolan's revelation] caus[es] misgivings, like a flock of chilly-toed birds, to clutter at Esther's heart. If Mrs. Nolan, an Englishwoman by her looks and accent, and a pub-keeper's wife as well, felt herself a stranger in Devon after six years, what hope had Esther, an American, of infiltrating that rooted society ever at all? (12)

The language of this passage shows how Plath feels that entry into the town's life would be some sort of invasion, and one of the barriers preventing entry is cultural difference. Esther also reveals her desire to fit in when, during the Union service, she thinks to herself when the
baby in her belly kicks her, "I am a mother; I belong here." This insistent assertion proclaims that stronger bonds than nationality and club sisterhood exist, but these bonds are buried under petty barriers.

Esther has some sense of the smallness and meanness of the Union, so while longing to fit into it, she also desires to remain apart from it. Mrs. Nolan feels very uncomfortable at the tea after the service because she is a divorcee, and divorced mothers are not allowed to be members. Mrs. Nolan’s intrusion into where she does not belong causes her great discomfort, so she wants to leave. Esther wants to join her, but they both feel trapped by the comradery they have been searching for: "the two tables seemed more and more to resemble a large family gathering from which it would be rude to rise without offering thanks, or at least seeking permission" (17). Esther’s own discomfort stems in part from her empathy with another (a rare occurrence in Plath’s work), but she too feels like she is intruding where she does not belong; she has an interior barrier—a lack of faith. She is aware that there exists a "vast, irrevocable gap between her faithless state and the beatitude of belief" (14). Her struggle makes her feel guilt both at attending, and not attending, church. The nature of the Mother’s Union seems to dissolve that guilt, though, and the story ultimately affirms Plath’s vision: for better or for worse, isolation
is the way of the world, so it is best not to stray into a world other than one's own.

Another subset within the set of Plath's stories involving the self against the world explores how a member of a group can become isolated from the group. The group referred to is the suburban neighborhood, where one can supposedly enjoy the comforts success in America can bring. Two of the stories are very closely related, sharing ideas, plot elements, and even exact phrases. These two stories—"Superman and Paula Brown's New Snowsuit," written in 1955, and "The Shadow," written in 1959—examine a childhood evil, namely, the isolating of a child so that the group can have a scapegoat. The narrator of the earlier story becomes the scapegoat for no apparent reason. The motivation seems to be a matter of convenience—the narrator was at hand to take the blame for an accident—but the reason may lie in the later story. Both stories are set at the beginning of World War II, with sentiments against Japanese- and German-Americans running fierce. The dream that anyone can come to America and be successful and free shatters in the tense pre-war atmosphere as the supposed melting pot of the nation fragments and shows itself really to be a myriad of isolated groups encased in shells of suspicion. This idea is stronger in "The Shadow," but the earlier story is still rich in isolations and invasions as it examines the
relationship between the childhood worlds of war and peace, of reality and dreams and make-believe.

The narrator of "Superman" is a normal child who has healthy dreams, but her vivid imagination does give her dreams unusual power: "My flying dreams were believable as a landscape by Dali, so real that I would awake with a sudden shock . . ." (Johnny Panic 270). The force of these dreams comes from a welcome invasion into the realm of sleep by a fantasy figure she is a fan of: "[t]hese nightly adventures in space began when Superman started invading my dreams and teaching me how to fly" (270). This invasion is not injurious; it is similar to Leornard's brief penetration of Dody's stony shell of isolation. Contact with Superman gives the girl unlimited potential within her fantasy realm.

The narrator has a close friend, David Sterling, who is also a Superman fan, and the two not only listen to Superman adventures on the radio, but they also act out their fantasies in a daily series of adventures on the grade-school playground. This activity too is harmless, but courting the imaginative realm so openly in the midst of a place where the cruel divisions among children fuel otherness does breed the potential for problems. The narrator notes, "We ignored the boys playing baseball . . . . Our Superman games made us outlaws, yet gave us a sense of windy superiority" (270). Exercising the
imagination is great, but doing so at the expense of damaging the fragile childhood bonds is foolhardy. In this context, the games are not harmless because they lead to isolation. The make-believe games also cause another problem. The narrator and David need a villain for their games, and they choose a neighborhood "mamma's boy" who is always excluded from the other children's activities. Encouraged by the attention, his shell of isolation broken, he assumes his role too well; the make-believe games spill over into the real world, where they do not belong, with unhealthy results:

At first, we had to prompt Sheldon in his part, but after a while, he became an expert on inventing tortures and even carried them out in private, beyond the game. He used to pull the wings from flies and the legs off grasshoppers, and keep the broken insects captive in a jar hidden under his bed where he could take them out in secret and watch them struggling. (270)

His bitterness at constantly being isolated is unleashed onto a world in which Sheldon does not belong. But his irresponsible injuring of insects, while cruel, is a small act in comparison to the invasions and murders committed by soldiers; Sheldon's savagery becomes a metaphor for the current world picture.

At the time of the story, aside from rumors and news stories, the war is a world far removed from suburbia. But the narrator discovers how the imagination can unwittingly
bring isolated worlds together. A traditional birthday is played out—the neighborhood kids assemble for cake and ice cream and a trip to the local theater for a double matinee. The second feature is a war film that depicts the Japanese torturing prisoners of war. The images of the horrors cut through to the narrator’s imagination, and try as she might, she cannot prevent the recurring intrusions of the outside world: "No matter how hard I thought of Superman before I went to sleep, no crusading blue figure came roaring down in heavenly anger to smash the yellow men who invaded my dreams" (272). Though her dreams are bad, she learns that the world of her neighborhood can be just as grim.

When the cold, malicious birthday girl slips and ruins one of her gifts, a beautiful imported snowsuit, she claims that the narrator pushed her. The witnesses join in and maintain the lie, and she is helpless before the savage onslaught of their accusations. The lie turns the sentiment of the neighborhood parents against her, and a barrier even springs up between her and her mother and uncle, who had trusted her completely before. The story shows how quick people are to create barriers among themselves, further affirming Plath’s idea that isolation is the natural state of human beings.
"The Shadow" refines the plot of the earlier story, and in it Plath more clearly conveys what she wishes to say. The main character enters the realm of fantasy more often, and the war invades more closely. The war provides a good backdrop for the story because war is primarily concerned with invasions and injuries. Even before the neighborhood ostracizes Sadie Shafer she is isolated to a certain extent because she spends a lot of time with movies, comic books, science fiction magazines, and radio programs, such as "The Shadow." Sadie's escapist activities all make use of characters, such as criminals, aliens, and war enemies, who are constantly invading realms in which they do not belong. Sadie cherishes this imaginative realm because she is creative, but she also retreats to this world because she is shut out of a world within the real world that she wants entry to. She too has an imaginative friend, Leroy Kelly, and Sadie notes that Leroy "might well be inventing moon rockets by the time he got to college, and I favored moon rockets a lot more than dolls with open-and-shut glass eyes who wah-wahed if you held them upside down" (144). The sarcastic desperation of this passage underscores Sadie's plight--she knows she will be confined to a world of dolls and cooking and cleaning. She would love to break out of that world.
But Sadie has more immediate concerns than future career barriers. She finds herself isolated from her neighborhood because she injures Leroy. During a game-turned-sour, she bites Leo's leg; the neighborhood sees her as evil for this act, but everyone ignores the fact that Leo sat on her, invading her space first. She was only lashing out in self-defense. This situation is a bit of a reversal within Plath's overall vision. In it, invasion usually leads to injury, but in this case, injury leads to isolation. Nevertheless, the incident still reveals that injury, isolation, and invasion are always somehow closely aligned.

There are a couple of reasons for Sadie's isolation. As noted above, people are quick to cast out members of the group. The incident provides rich fuel for the petty gossip of idle housewives and small local retailers. Anything that can cast out a person will supposedly unite the rest of the group, but of course, such comradery in Plath is never permanent, and never real. But Sadie's act becomes more than a source of idle gossip; Mary Lynn Broe notes that "the incident gets exaggerated out of proportion in the tense atmosphere of war" (37). As Sadie herself laments, "I thought the issue of my quarrel with the Kellys a pure one, uncomplicated by any flow of emotion from sources outside it" (147). But in a story
filled with invasions, it is difficult for anything to remain uncontaminated. The dark presence of war—"the warped, brutish emotions current in the world beyond Washington Street" (147)—penetrates the suburban calm of the neighborhood, intruding upon the consciousness of the people living there and eventually damaging Sadie's family. Her once close friends blame Sadie because her father is German. She is suddenly seen as alien, very much other.

The war affects Sadie's life in more painful and direct ways than the local shunning. Like the narrator of "Superman," Sadie goes to a neighborhood girl's birthday party, which consists of cake and ice cream and a double-feature matinee. The war film about Japanese treatment of war prisoners gives her nightmares, but even worse, her nightmares "seeped out, somehow, to become a part of [her] waking landscape" (148). Dreams penetrate the barrier and become the stuff of reality. For example, the once boring routine of school fire drills becomes an anxious exercise in which the children have to put pencils between their teeth so that "the bombs wouldn't make [them] bite [their] tongues" (148-9). The teachers know that one invasion—bombed—will lead to another invasion, an injury—teeth biting the tongue. And the war invades Sadie's own home when the "powers of good: the police, the FBI, the President . . . the Shadow, Superman . . . and
God" (149) that had always protected her and neutralized evil in her imaginative realm desert her; the American government takes her father away to a camp for Germans out West. Mr. Shafer's hard work as a college teacher and father makes no difference. The guardians of America thwart the dreams of a loyal member of the group; the barriers between persons prevent objectivity and real communication. Sadie's make-believe realm, which appears to be of little value to adults, proves to be the better world, because only in it do dreams come true.

"Sweetie Pie and the Guttermen," although much different from the two stories previously discussed, nevertheless fits into the subset because it too involves a person who becomes isolated from her group of friends, and it also deals with a darkness in suburbia, a flaw in the American dream. The sense of isolation is not as vivid as in the previous stories, but it is powerfully present in understated fashion. The simple plot centers on Myra Wardle's visit to an old college acquaintance, Cicely Franklin. There is no real friendship between the two women, a common situation in Plath's work. Myra does have friends, but she is alienated from them to a certain degree because she is the only one in the group who does not have children. Her friends follow another path, the traditional one that should lead to success and personal fulfillment, but even they sense that something is wrong
with this dream: "the Wardles' relatives and friends, saddled with children, with the steady jobs, the mortgaged houses, the installment-plan station wagons and washing machines that form such an inevitable part of parenthood in the suburbs" (132) agree with them that "children tied one down too much" (132). These people feel that they are on a path they should not be on.

When Myra goes to visit Cicely, there is a barrier between the two women because Cicely dwells very much in the world of children--she has two daughters, and her husband is an obstetrician. Plath's details nicely show the barrier. When Myra first arrives at Cicely's house, she looks through the screen door but is "unable to make out much of anything in the dark well of the hall" (132). Her inability to penetrate the darkness symbolizes her inability to ever be able to truly see into Cicely's alien way of life. Myra's awareness is blocked by the illusory gleam of that dreamy lifestyle: "[t]he sunlight glancing off the white enamel and chrome surfaces of the kitchen appliances made her feel dazed, far off" (136). Myra nearly becomes isolated from her own self by the power of that gleam. The strongest image of the barriers among people is that of the two women and two children drinking lemonade under a shady tree in the yard. One would expect this peaceful suburban image to be warm, but Plath does not see it so:
The silence deepened, punctuated only by the irregular sound of four people sipping lemonade—the children, loud and unsophisticated, the grown-ups more discreet. Except for this tenuous noise, the silence surrounded them like a sea, lapping at the solid edges of the afternoon. At any moment, Myra thought, the four of them might become fixed, forever speechless and two-dimensional—waxlike figures in a faded photograph. (137)

Though the women do engage in dialogue, they may as well be speechless, because they never really say anything to each other. The barriers prevent true communication; they cannot relate to each other any more than the figures in a photograph can look over and see who is posed next to them.

Though Myra is not an inhabitant of the world of motherhood, there is a sense that she would like to enter this realm. Though ostensibly the reason for her exclusion from this world is the pursuit of a career, as discussed above, the real barrier seems to be pain. Myra is preoccupied with the anesthesia Cicely's husband and other obstetricians use to blot out the pain of entry into that new state of being. Myra theorizes from a feminist perspective that these drugs are a plot by men to make women forget the pain of childbirth so that they will blithely perpetuate the species. In spite of her convincing rhetoric, one has the sense that Myra is unsuited to bear the burdens of children.
And if one enters a realm in which he or she does not really belong, injuries result. There are clues that indicate Myra’s venturing into the world of motherhood would be a dangerous invasion. There is a suppressed violence within Myra that would smash forth if she ever had children of her own. The sense of violence seething beneath the surface is subtly indicated by Plath in a couple of passages. While discussing childhood development with Cicely, "Myra’s fingers twiddled at the leaves of a low branch of the beech tree near the arm of her chair. Already she had shredded several of the glossy, reddish-black leaves with her nails" (134). The importance and meaning of this passage becomes clearer after looking at a later passage, in which both Myra’s desires and her impulses are made clear:

Lately Myra had started wondering about babies. Young as she was, and happily married, she felt something of a maiden aunt among the children of her relatives and friends. Lately, too, she had taken to tearing off low-hanging leaves or tall grass heads with a kind of wanton energy, and to twisting her paper napkin into compact pellets at the table . . . . (140)

The juxtaposition of her feeling of isolation and desire for children with her small, nervous violences holds ominous implications. Other clues are more obvious. In her brief visit to the Franklin household, she develops a slight affinity with the older girl, Alison, because she
is constantly pushing her younger sister down. Such an attitude is not a healthy one, especially for a grown woman. And she also takes a perverse fascination with the way Alison mistreats her doll, Sweetie Pie. The end of the story is particularly chilling, when Myra asks Alison what she does to Sweetie Pie when she has been bad. Alison’s description of further abuse pleases Myra. There is a sense at the end that Myra wants to divorce herself from that evil aspect of herself, but dividing the self from the self is also dangerous. Myra, like most of Plath’s characters, finds herself trapped within her present situation, and within her mind.

Just as the early story “Initiation” expresses optimism about transcending the barriers among people, so too does an early poem, “Channel Crossing,” written in 1956. Part of this poem is also a reversal of Plath’s vision in that it shows how people draw together when confronted with the power of nature. Though the poem ultimately affirms Plath’s theories, the glimmers of hope that shine through her dark view are interesting to examine.

The poem looks through the eyes of the persona as she weathers a squall above deck on a ferry crossing, presumably, the English Channel. Another hardy person braves the deck also, and she forms an affinity with this person as the rest of the “voyagers lie/Retching in bright
orange basins" below deck. But even though the seasick passengers are in another state of being and physically out of sight, the persona even forms something of bond with these strangers since they are all in the same boat: "Far from the sweet stench of that perilous air/In which our comrades are betrayed, we freeze/And marvel at the smashing nonchalance/Of nature." These strangers win the title of "comrade" in her mind because they are not so alien as this minor manifestation of nature's might that wreaks such havoc. And two stanzas later they earn the title "brothers."

It is not only the violence of nature which makes it so alien; its unpredictability also creates a gap of understanding. The previous chapter discusses the foolishness of trying to anticipate natural acts, and the characters in this poem fall into the same dangerous habit. Before the voyage, "Blue sailors sang that our journey/Would be full of sun, white gulls, and water drenched/With radiance, peacock-colored." Just as Norton blindly subscribes to the rangers' wisdom, so too the prospective travellers defer to the sailors' great knowledge of ocean weather, and they end up in a situation they cannot handle, in a place they should not be.

There is an interesting pair of lines in the poem that resonate with the entire idea of Plath's vision: "stark violence/Lays all walls waste." Violence
accompanies any breaching of, or bouncing off, the barriers around nature, persons, and the self. And though this poem gives a brief optimistic glimpse of union between persons, the persona is aware that such bonding is not their natural state. She notes that in the storm "We forsake/Our lone luck now, compelled by bond, by blood,/To keep some unsaid pact." These lines imply that the union is temporary, that their "lone luck" has only been set aside for now. Later is a different matter. And indeed, when the ship docks safely on land, the narrator notes, "no debt/Survives arrival; we walk the plank with strangers." The necessary isolation is restored.

Another early poem, "The Beggars," also written in 1956, uses language that confirms the conception that the meeting of people from different worlds is an invasion of some kind. Beggars on the street are obvious signs that not everyone achieves success. And when they reach out to the successful in hope of gaining understanding and cash, "these beggars encroach/On spirits tenderer than theirs." Their pleas intrude upon the consciousness (and maybe the conscience) of others, tarnishing the illusory gleam of the dream that should shine forever for those who possess it, or so they hope.

The poem also continues the speculations about the cause of the failure of the dream for some. Fate again raises its face, although this time under the guise of
powerful nature, which can deal hurricanes or grant plentiful harvests. The beggars in the poem, "plaintiff against each day, decry/Nature's partial, haphazard thumb." These poor persons may be rationalizing their own incompetence to move beyond their world, but the possibility exists that the unequal distribution of wealth is not the fault of the individual. As Plath's overall view proclaims, a person can never really move beyond his or her present way of life.

Sylvia Plath's late poetry takes her vision of the barriers between persons to its grimmest limits. One poem in particular brings the concept of invasion, isolation, and injury to a most literal level. "The Surgeon at 2 a.m." portrays a doctor who cannot relate to his patient on a physical level, let alone a mental one. A doctor is a person who one would think should have the greatest empathy for and union with other human beings. His life and career are built upon this concept. But Plath's character has no such affinity. The title implies that the doctor's competence to enter another's realm is diminished. At that early hour, the doctor's awareness would be wavering; perception is difficult in a tired state. The surgeon narrates the poem in the first person, and his constant leaps of association reveal his short attention span. The surgeon literally invades the patient's body with a scalpel. Such an insertion is not an
injury in the usual sense of the word, but the flayed skin
and oozing blood cannot really be regarded as anything
else. And the doctor may really do some damage due to his
reduced ability caused by lack of sleep. The surgeon is
aware of his incompetence: "I am so small/In comparison to
these organs!/I worm and hack in a purple wilderness."
These lines can apply not only to the surgeon but to all
of Plath's characters who move beyond their own world.
They have to struggle in an unknown realm.

The poem further shows how alienated he is from the
patient under the knife. As the surgeon confronts the
interior of the patient, he thinks, "It is a garden I have
to do with--tubers and fruits/Oozing their jammy
substances,/A mat of roots." The surgeon cannot even
relate to the patient on a human level. The patient
becomes something utterly alien, plants rather than a
person. The opening stanza also shows that the surgeon is
always isolated from the patient on a level beyond the
physical: "As usual there is no face. A lump of Chinese
white/With seven holes thumbed in. The soul is another
light./I have not seen it; it does not fly up. Tonight it
has receded like a ship's light." By using the adjective
"Chinese" and the image of a receding light, Plath conveys
the sense that this doctor is so far removed from the
patient's world that he never really gets inside the other
person. The men and women who sew people up cannot succeed
in the impossible task of closing the more negative gaps that exist between them. And these gaps lead to a peril greater than physical injury: mental injury, as the self divides from the self.
CHAPTER III

The oft-quoted bromide—that you cannot make others happy until you are happy with yourself—which successful people espouse to lonely, defeated people does not hold much weight in Plath’s work. If one is not able to move beyond his or her own world and become part of another’s world, that person will be stuck with himself or herself, and Plath does not see that situation as a positive thing, nor even as the chance for a learning experience. Being forced to confront aspects of the self while being isolated from others is not pleasant or healthy. If one’s struggle for success is thwarted, the instinctive drive which fuels that struggle has to be utilized somehow, and with the outside world closed off, the only channel open to that drive is one’s own mind, the self itself. This internalization of the drive fragments the self; the two major pieces are that which retains its hold on reality and that which embraces the imaginative realm. Plath’s characters who suffer from this internal isolation usually display an inability to distinguish between fantasy and reality, and they often feel isolated from parts of their
bodies in addition to parts of their minds.

As discussed in the previous chapter, trying to analyze completely and then map out neatly the cause and effect relationships at work in Plath's fiction is a formidable task. Isolation from others can divide the self, but a divided self also causes one to be isolated from others. Therefore, it is difficult to definitely determine which came first—the divided self or one's separation from society or nature. The answer may be both—the two situations seem to be inextricably bound together. And the injuries that occur are also hard to chart. When parts of the self clash, injuries result, but injuries may also precipitate the fragmentation. All one can say with certainty is that isolation, invasion, and injuries to the self are very closely linked.

"Tongues of Stone," one of Plath's earliest stories, involves an unnamed girl who must confront her self constantly--she cannot sleep. A necessary barrier has broken down, the separation of night from day, of sleep from wakefulness. The part of her self that demands sleep—for rest and the liberating power of dreams—becomes buried deep within her, out of reach. It is isolated, but not gone forever. It lurks within her mind and festers there, like a sore or wound. Though her insulin treatments and her neglect of her body--by declining to bathe, change clothes, or exercise--do damage
to her body, she feels that isolating part of her self will do just as much physical injury, if not more, when the barrier breaks: "She was sure . . . that the scabs would never heal but would spread over her body, that the backwaters of her mind would break out on her body in a slow, consuming leprosy" (Johnny Panic 264). The image of a dam breaking is a metaphor that pervades Plath’s work, if in a very understated or subtle fashion much of the time. The dam’s breaking signals an invasion of some sort. In this instance, the amorphous self takes form and invades the body, injuring it.

Even if the image of her mind-let-loose eating away her body like leprosy is sickening, it at least shows some active engagement between mind and body. But this battle is merely an imagined possibility. In the story, she is actually completely alienated from her body, as Plath’s prose reveals: "[t]here was nothing to her now but the body, a dull puppet of skin and bone that had to be washed and fed day after day after day" (262). The nurses and doctors at the clinic are the ones who pull her strings. But even though they maintain external control over the girl, they never really get to know her condition, to get inside of her. The girl appears to be healed at the end of the story, but she somehow heals herself. The clinic personnel focus on her body, giving her sugar and shots and theories, but no real empathy or understanding:
"[t]hey were safe outside the dream, so they could jargon away. But she was caught in the nightmare of the body, without a mind, without anything, only the soulless flesh . . ." (262).

It is not surprising that the doctors and nurses cannot get inside the girl, because this situation involves a facet of Plath's vision that has been heavily emphasized--people remain isolated from one another. Plath proves her point further by showing how the girl is also isolated from the other patients in the dining room during dinner. Though the girl is eating next to the others, she is not really with them; instead, "[t]he others were all together, warm, active, and noisy. Only the girl sat frozen, withdrawn inside herself like a hard, shriveled seed that nothing could awaken" (265). The image of the seed works well because the hard barriers of a seed's outer shell prevent one from noticing the potential life dwelling within. The girl is locked within this shell, unable to sprout tendrils that can reach out to others. The seed image also works with respect to nature; the seed is shriveled because it has not had contact with the sustaining water and soil of nature. Plath verifies the depth of the metaphor in an important passage on the following page. The passage plainly--and fairly thoroughly--shows the connection between isolation from the self, from others, and from nature:
Nothing in the world could touch her. Even the sun shone far off in a shell of silence. The sky and leaves and people receded, and she had nothing to do with them because she was dead inside, and not all their laughter nor all their love could reach her anymore. As from a distant moon, extinct and cold, she saw their supplicant, sorrowful faces, their hands stretching out to her, frozen in attitudes of love. (266)

The last sentence in this passage prefigures the passage in "Stone Boy with Dolphin" where Dody dances with Mick. And though the "because" in the passage indicates that the girl's internal strife causes her to be isolated from nature and other people, one must keep in mind that everything is not therefore neatly explained. After all, what caused her internal conflict to begin with? Plath may indeed be making a clear, definitive statement about this complex relationship, but it is dangerous to be quick to assume so.

One can definitely determine that a division or fragmentation of the self causes a person to become isolated from parts of his or her own body. As discussed above, the main character in this story undergoes a complete mind/body split, but early in the story she experiences isolation from parts of her body, namely, her hands. One of the nurses has the girl do some knitting as a way for her keep busy and maintain contact with the world, but the part of her self that remembers how to knit is lost to her, and therefore, "her hands [feel] like
"clay" (262). Similar images are present in many of Plath's stories, including ones examined in the previous chapters. For example, in "The Fifty-ninth Bear," when Norton finds that someone has stolen his water bag, the problems of confronting other people arises, and this situation, combined with his alienation from nature, causes his self to recede from reality: "[h]is hands and feet seemed to be lifting, elongating, pale and puffed with a dreamy yeast. Like a vast, luminous starfish he drifted, awash with sleep, his consciousness fisted somewhere there, dark and secret as a nut" (106). This passage is closely related to both the clay hand and seed images in "Tongues of Stone," tying these very different stories together.

And as Dody climbs over the fence on the way to letting Hamish make love on her, "her hands were so cold she couldn't feel them" (188). Although her hands are literally numb from the weather, they take on symbolic significance when combined with the images of other stories and the subsequent action in her own story; as she lies under Hamish, she is a "bloodless husk, left drifting in limbo" (188). And earlier, at the party, she meets a poet who wrote a poem she liked, but her hope for any sort of union with him dissipates when she notes that he is shorter than she: "Dody looked down at Brian, who looked up at her, dark-haired, impeccable, a dandy little package of a man. Her limbs began to mammoth, arm up the chimney,
leg through the window" (181). Her limbs act this way because she wants to dissociate herself from her body, from the physical aspect of herself that creates a barrier between her and another person. Denied Brian, she denies her self.

Myra Wardle in "Sweetie Pie and the Guttermen" also finds her self divided. Part of her wants children, part does not. And as she walks away from Alison and her doll, with the memory of the visit causing a crisis within her, "her own hands hung listless and empty at her sides, like hands of wax, and she did not wave" (142). By substituting "wax" for "clay," Plath can retain the same meaning, uniting her stories, without being repetitious.

And in "Tongues of Stone," Plath brings the symbolic image of dissociation of self from parts of the body to a near literal level in a scene at the beginning of the story. The girl tries to make contact with another patient, but her attempt is rebuffed. When the girl compliments Mrs. Sneider on her clay figurine, the disturbed woman "sneered and began to take the woman apart, tearing off the arms and head and hiding the pieces under the newspaper she was working on" (261-2). Mrs. Sneider regards the girl's contact as an intrusion, as "'snooping and spying'" (262). Mrs. Sneider's internal conflict makes her unable to distinguish between real and
imagined situations. Any intrusion aggravates her internal division and isolates her further from other people.

Most of the concepts discussed so far in this and previous chapters, especially the barrier between reality and dreams, reach their most explicit and imaginative heights in Sylvia Plath's best story, "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams." The excellent, poetic prose in it sets it apart from the other stories, but like them, it contains a simple plot. It involves a woman who works a nine to five job typing up the dreams and complaints and problems of the psychiatric out-patients of a hospital clinic. She becomes a "dream connoisseur" (153), copying them into a book of her own when no one is observing her. Her hobby becomes an obsession, breaking the necessary boundary between reality and dreams and leading to a date with the electric-shock machine.

Since the story is told in the first person, it is easy to be seduced into thinking everything that goes on in the story is normal and logical. It is difficult to distinguish between what is really transpiring at times and what is the narrator's imagination; the barrier between the two realms is porous, indistinct. But maybe periodic penetrations of the wall are not all bad. Who is to say that an imaginative interpretation of events is any less real than a "rational" look at the situation? The narrator detests the pragmatic operations of the clinic.
She feels that the doctors are prying around in their patients' heads and "exploiting their dreams for the crass practical ends of health and happiness" (153). She prefers to focus on the more imaginative part of a patient's case, the dream itself. The patient is not important--"the dreamer is merely a flimsy vehicle for the great Dream Maker himself" (161). The dreamers are divorced from themselves when under the spell of Johnny Panic, who is, in the words of Shirley Staton, "a bizarre confluence of masterful lover, the creative unconscious, and death" (212). He also seems to be the collective unconscious, or the remnants of it.

Although the narrator is critical of the doctors' snooping about in their patients' heads, her delving into the old record books, prying into past patients' files, is very much an invasion of privacy. She may be aware of this on some level, but she does not consider her daily intrusions to be wrong. She feels justified in collecting the dreams because they are her hobby, and she believes that she is working for Johnny Panic. One can see her actions as positive if they are seen as an attempt to get to know other selves. The doctors want to coldly cure the patients; she wants to join them.

The narrator has a recurring dream of her own, and her nightly excursions into this realm hold the key not only to her madness, but also to the frustrating puzzle of
Plath's vision. Her dream involves a huge, deep lake into which all the worlds' past and present dreams drain. Hovering above it, she can look into its depths and discern humanity's hopes and nightmares and myths, the "real dragons" (154). By looking into the muddy, mysterious waters, she realizes that all persons are united when they are swimming in that morass: "Call the water what you will, Lake Nightmare, Bog of Madness, it's here the sleeping people lie and toss together among the props of their worst dreams, one great brotherhood, though each of them, waking, thinks himself singular, utterly apart" (155). The narrator conceives that people were not isolated at the beginning of their existence, and that they can still find union when dreaming. Dreams transcend the boundaries of class and culture--one does not pursue the dream when one is within it. But the narrator admits that diving into the lake too much can be destructive: "Dream about [the dragons] long enough and your feet and hands shrivel away when you look at them too closely. The sun shrinks to the size of an orange, only chillier, and you've been living in Roxbury since the last ice age" (154). In other words, one's self can become lost in that great lake, divorcing the self from the body, the sun (nature), and time (reality). The lake of dreams thus embodies the hopelessness of Plath's vision. Bathing in the waters of other selves is positive and destructive,
and remaining dry and isolated in the real world is also
destructive. There is nowhere to turn; "[e]verything is a
trap, a prison, a hook or a bell jar" (Kumar, 74).

Besides revealing the ultimate dead-end path of
Plath’s vision, the story also contains other points of
interest which link it to Plath’s other stories, showing
how the entire collection is an artistic whole. For
instance, the examples of isolated body parts are
numerous. One example has already been given in the
discussion above. In addition, the fact that the
narrator’s office is around the corner from the Amputee
Clinic takes on symbolic significance. The sounds that the
limping or shuffling amputees make on the way to and from
the clinic always intrude upon the narrator’s
consciousness, making her jumpy. Her boss, though not an
amputee, also has a limp, so whenever the narrator hears
limping, she has to hide the dreams she is copying and get
back to the work she is supposed to be doing. In other
words, those sounds precipitate the shift within her from
the self lost in dreams and the self that must confront
reality.

To prevent repetition, Plath introduces a humorous
example of a person isolated from a part of her body, other
than her feet or hands to show how a division in the self
can lead to problems. The narrator tells how one day
This woman came in with her tongue swollen and stuck out so far she had to leave a party she was giving for twenty friends of her French-Canadian mother-in-law and be rushed to our Emergency Ward. She thought she didn't want her tongue to stick out and, to tell the truth, it was an exceedingly embarrassing affair for her, but she hated that French-Canadian mother-in-law worse than pigs, and her tongue was true to her opinion, even if the rest of her wasn't. (156)

There is a conflict within this woman; part of her wants to do something while part of her feels that she should not do it. But her continual repression of her hatred finally takes the matter out of her hands, so to speak, and she loses control of her tongue.

There is one final, important example of one's isolation from her limbs. When the narrator is caught illegally copying dreams from old files, she cannot get up because her legs are asleep. Although her legs are literally asleep, her isolation from them acquires further significance, just as Dody's cold hands do, because the numbness occurs at a crucial moment in the story; she is apparently being taken to receive electric-shock treatment, but if one has been following the narration of the story, there does not seem to be any justification for the shock treatment. She has never been caught copying records before, and one does not usually get her mind blasted for prying in stacks of books. Her numb feet thus signify that she is divorced from herself and thus from
reality, according to the pattern of the stories. And
indeed, the end of the story has a nightmarish quality,
with its wild descriptions, odd characterizations, and
ritualistic events. The narrator has obviously been under
observation for her strange behavior for a long time, but
the self narrating the story has been unaware of it.

But there may well be another reason for the
narrator's treatment at the end of the story besides her
madness. By spying in the private files, the narrator has
literally gone where she does not belong. The Clinic
Director must make sure that his employees follow the
rules, and if they break them, they receive punishment.
The harsh shock therapy symbolizes his control over his
powerless employees. Sandra Gilbert, in her article "In
Yeats' House: The Death and Resurrection of Sylvia Plath,"
notes that "when the clinic director shocks her
transgressive dream connoisseur out of her mind, he is
doing so because this scribbling woman's appropriation of
dream books offers a challenge to his authority over them,
his mastery of the mystery of their material" (215). Her
quest for some sort of personal fulfillment is thwarted by
one who already has power and success. He tries to divide
her from Johnny Panic, an entity "who can admit the'
narrator into new realms of being" (Staton, 212).
The shock treatment also symbolizes the punishment one receives for venturing beyond his or her realm. It is as if Plath wants to shock the notion out of people that they can go wherever they please; the end of the story asserts the idea that people cannot move beyond the niche they are placed in. The narrator is a secretary, and she must be confined to secretarial duties. Examining dreams is the prerogative of the doctors. Another character supports this dim view of the chances a person has to achieve significant success. The narrator’s boss, the limping Miss Taylor, has worked at the same job for over thirty years, since the clinic opened, and "she plans to stick with the clinic until she’s farmed out in the green pastures of Social Security checks" (159). Though Miss Taylor seems content, the prose darkens the sense of the situation. The narrator will also be content with her dead-end job after the shock treatment takes effect. One must be prepared to stay within his or her own world or risk injury.

"The Wishing Box," written two years before "Johnny Panic," is an interesting inversion of that story. In the earlier work, the main character, Agnes Higgins, cannot dream. Her husband Harold, on the other hand, has very colorful and imaginative dreams, which he shares with Agnes every morning at breakfast. She enjoys his
descriptions until her jealousy drives her to irritation at "Harold's peculiar habit of accepting his dreams as if they really were an integral part of his waking experience" (205). Normally, such mixing of fantasy and reality would be detrimental to a character, but there is no mention of any problems with his job as an accountant or with his home life. The only negative effect is his alienating his wife, and he is mostly oblivious to that fact. But though his situation can thus be considered somewhat negative, his "exhilarating world from which Agnes [finds] herself perpetually exiled" (205) causes the destructiveness to fall on her, not on himself.

He seems to be a kind of fantasy figure for Plath—a person who can transcend the barrier between fantasy and reality at will and with no ill effect. He is an example of one of those people who already has what he wants, a person whom Plath's characters do not have a chance of becoming. Plath's vision of the possibilities for the self are embodied in Agnes. She admittedly does have a few dreams, but she feels that they are "so prosaic, so tedious, in comparison with the royal baroque splendor of Harold's" (206) because they are about "ordinary" things, such as losing a loved one, falling, being chased.

But like the other characters in Plath's fiction, Agnes does not sink into static isolation; she tries to break into Harold's world, to find that level of herself
that can have vivid dreams, or remember the dreams she
does have but cannot recall. She reads novels and Freud's
writings on dreams, goes to movies, and watches
television. But none of these beacons to the imaginative
realm exerts any pull on her, and her unfulfilled
obsession to move into another world breaks a necessary
barrier—"the curtains of sleep, of refreshing, forgetful
darkness dividing each day from the day before it, and the
day after it, were lifted for Agnes eternally,
irrevocably" (210). Her obsession has damaged her ability
to sleep, and she feels that only further injury to her
body can liberate her self; she thus consumes a bottle of
sleeping pills and "dies into the only country of dreams
accessible to her" (Gilbert, 213). This act is one of the
rare suicides in Plath's short fiction.

How does Agnes get into such a dead-end situation?
After all, in "her infinitely more creative childhood
days" (206) she was able to dream vividly, of such things
as a "wishing-box land above the clouds" (206) or flying
with Superman. She herself wonders "at what age had those
benevolent painted dream worlds ousted her? And for what
cause" (206)? The answer lies in her question. Vivid
dreams were a part of her childhood world, and as an
adult, that world is forever closed to her. That answer
may seem simplistic—that one simply cannot return to his
or her childhood—but there is more to the answer than
that. When one is a child, one is safely sheltered within whatever trappings of success his or her parents have managed to snatch. When one is living within a dream, other dreams seem possible. But when one is suddenly isolated from that haven, one discovers the limited possibilities for success in the real world. The reality Agnes is trapped in damages her as much as, or more than, her isolation from the dream worlds.

She may feel that she has control in the real world and can get anything she wants—"Agnes persuaded Harold to buy a television set on the installment plan. That was much better than going to the movies; she could drink sherry while watching TV during the long afternoons" (209). The darkness of her situation results from having those "long afternoons" free. In other words, her real problem is not that she has to wait for Harold to tell her his dreams every morning; her problem is having to wait for him to get home from work every evening. As a woman, she either cannot get a good job, or she believes that she cannot, so she puts all her hopes for success—utilizes her drive to get ahead—on getting into the state of being Harold dwells in while asleep. Her decision reveals "the sky-rocketing pricetag for ignoring the demands of the flesh and the practical world in favor of those shaping imaginative powers" (Broe, 29). And, like the persona of "I Am Vertical," Agnes realizes that the only way for her
to get into the place she wants is for her to kill her physical self, removing it from the world in which it presently belongs.

Just as "The Surgeon at 2 a.m." brings the theme explored in the second chapter to a literal level, "The Eye-mole," a pre-Ariel poem, shows—in a more concise and explicit manner than Plath's stories—how an injury can split the self. That is not to say that the poem explores this theme better than the short fiction. Indeed, the injury which precipitates the action in the poem is an accident. In the first stanza, the persona's awareness is steady and normal as the clear and constant sunlight is "Holding the horses, the clouds, the leaves/Steadily rooted." But a splinter enters her eye, injuring it and altering perception. The flushing tears split her self so that part of it drifts to a far away time, the mythic past, "a better time," when unicorns roamed; and to a far away place, some desert "oasis," where the horses become "double-humped camels." There is nothing to indicate that the persona was mentally unstable, her selves delicately balanced, before the poem takes place; at the outset she stands "blameless as daylight." But after the injury occurs, not only does her sight literally become diminished, but her self recedes to the point that her consciousness focuses intensely and exclusively on the invading particle, similar to the way the personas' minds
revolve around a cut and a bruise in "Cut" and "Contusion" respectively. The persona narrates, "Abrading my lid, the small grain burns:/Red cinder around which I myself,/Horses, planets and spires revolve." This focus separates her from reality, isolating her from other parts of her body and memory: "[she] wear[s] the present itch for flesh,/Blind to what will be and what was." She says that the splinter has been in her eye for a week, which is very strange. One would expect that her constant flushing would remove it. Her plight indicates what always happens in Plath's works when a boundary is breached—there is no going back; the dynamic bent of Plath's vision ensures that a character is forever altered by the experience. In this poem, the injury has "Fixed [her] in this parenthesis." She is held in her new state of being by unbreakable brackets.

The most intense and colorful representation of the concept of injury dividing the self occurs in "Cut," one of Plath's late poems. There is a playfulness to the poem which suggests that besides a bloodletting, the cutting of her finger lets loose her imagination in wild abandon but with some control. However, the light tone and nursery rhyme effect belies the dark content. In "The Eye-mote," the persona's consciousness focuses on the injury intensely, but "Cut" goes one step beyond. There is a morbid fascination with damage and hurt. That fact,
combined with the mass of head imagery, shows that the poem is really about some head/mind injury, about the "difficulty in locating the self and the concomitant suspicion that as a result the self may be unreal" (Annus, 178). The persona's self is displaced not only from the pain of the cut--pain is never mentioned--but from reality, too; her self is removed from time. The wounded head imagery moves rapidly from colonial days--"Little pilgrim,/The Indian's axed your scalp"--to the Revolutionary War--with its invading "Redcoats"--through to World War II--"Saboteur,/Kamikaze man"--and finally to more recent violence, symbolized by the bloodied "Ku Klux Klan/Babushka." The conflict has thus been going on within the persona for a long time, so to speak, and the physical injury breaks the dam, unchaining the wild current of internal violence. And while most of the poem uses head imagery to describe her cut thumb, the last stanza takes an ominous reversal; it uses "Dirty girl,/Thumb stump" to refer to her head, her self. Something more vital than her thumb may soon be cut as her imagined violence takes form in the real world.

"Cut" is the dramatic climax of Plath's vision of the separation of self from self. In "Paralytic," one of her last poems, the body is completely "overcome and immobilized by hostile forces" (Ries, 51). Some injury or illness has totally isolated the body from sense and the
mind's control, forcing the persona to live in an iron lung. But though the outside world has some small mechanical control over the body, the man or woman is still isolated from that world: "Dead egg, I lie/Whole/On a whole world I cannot touch." Isolation from others and nature leads to isolation of self—his or her memories have become "photographs," artificial vestiges of some forgotten reality. The drive to succeed, to go forward, has been taken from him or her, who narrates, "I smile, a buddha, all/Wants, desire/Falling from me like rings."

Physical injury damages the self as much as, or more than, mental illness. Mental conflict alone can sometimes be purged, like that of the girl in "Tongues of Stone," before it festers and moves out to immobilize the body, but a serious physical ailment immediately traps a person, and the steady trend towards dissolution of self cannot be reversed.
CONCLUSION

Shortly before her death, Sylvia Plath wrote a very brief essay, "America! America!" Anyone familiar with her work will immediately deduce that those exclamation points are not indicators of excitement. And indeed, in the essay she sardonically examines the America of her youth, especially the "genuinely public" (Johnny Panic 52) school system, in which "a great loud cats' bag of Irish Catholics, German Jews, Swedes, Negroes, Italians and that rare, pure Mayflower dropping, somebody English" (52) came together in supposed melting-pot-harmony. Within the short space of her discussion, she makes brief reference—often only a phrase—to events and topics she had fictionalized during the previous ten years of her short story writing career. She mentions the power of the sea, the dramatization of radio programs on the school playground about The Shadow and Superman, and the possibility that fate ruled her and the other children's lives: "If we were destined for any special end—grooved, doomed, limited, fated, we didn't feel it. We beamed and sloshed from our desks to the dodge-ball dell, open and hopeful as the sea.
itself" (52). Her use of five terms to describe the limitations people confront in their adult lives reveals her uncertainty about what actually creates those barriers.

Her most interesting and lengthy examination deals with getting into a high school sorority. She is amazed that "[w]e, even, in our democratic edifice, nursed two ancient relics of snobbism—two sororities: Subbed and Sugar 'n' Spice" (54). This passage suggests that sororities do not belong in America. Elitism seems outdated in a society where everybody is supposedly free to rise to his or her potential. Millicent Arnold feels that elitism is unnecessary in "Initiation," and declines to join the group. Eleven years after that story was written, Plath finds the right words to express the paradox of joining a sorority:

Somehow it didn't take—this initiation into the nihil of belonging. Maybe I was just too weird to begin with. What did these picked buds of American womanhood do at their sorority meetings? They ate cake; ate cake and catted about the Saturday night date. The privilege of being anybody was turning its other face—to the pressure of being everybody; ergo, no one. (55)

Being left out of the group wounds the ego, but becoming part of it dissipates the ego; isolation is damaging, and breaking into another world also proves destructive. The
hopelessness of this situation reveals why Plath's vision may seem contradictory at times.

The title and the content of this essay, as well as the content of many of the stories, suggests that Plath saw life in America as dangerous. Everything from the might of nature in the national parks to the dull violence of the suburbs threatens one's health or happiness. Anna's believes that "Sylvia Plath's sense of entrapment, her sense that her choices are profoundly limited, is directly connected to the time and place in which she wrote her poetry" (171). But that time and place was not only the prosperous 1950's America, where the woman was expected to raise a pleasant family in the peaceful suburbs and wait each evening for the man to come home from work in his finned and gleaming car; England also posed problems. Besides being faced with elitism over there as well, Plath had the added problem of living under the blanket of a successful male poet's fame. To have one's efforts thwarted because she is a woman is frustrating. And though most of the major characters in Plath's fiction are girls or women, she does create some developed male characters also beaten by barriers in order to balance her vision; to say that a person is doomed because she was unlucky enough to be born a woman would be a too easy way out. Plath wants to show that both men and women are quick to put up
walls around themselves. Her fiction does not primarily address gender or nationality--it attacks those walls.

One must keep in mind that the barriers provide both obstacles and protection for a person. Since both breaking and bouncing off the walls is harmful, a person is trapped. Judith Kroll concludes that "Plath's late poems . . . convey the sense that the future is foreclosed, that no substantial change can be occasioned by experience, and that only rebirth or transcendence of the self would be a resolution" (3). Rebirth or transcendence sounds great, but Plath's works indicate that the only way to achieve that goal is to die. The transcendent selves would have to be, in Dody Ventura's words, "[g]hosts gone gallivanting" (Johnny Panic 183). Even though most of the content of the stories portrays this conception of the world according to Plath, a few of the stories reveal the way she wishes the world could be.

Rather than introducing reborn selves into her stories, she proposes something less esoteric, characters who can be considered fantasy figures for her. One story in each chapter of this thesis contains such a figure. Among the works about the self versus nature, Sadie in "The Fifty-ninth Bear" is the most positive person. Her feeding of the stag from her hand without injury reveals some sort of instinctive connection with nature that human beings have lost. Though the woman in "Pheasant" is also
positive, she is not really in the same category as Sadie because the woman never interacts with the pheasant. She keeps her distance, is aware of the barrier between people and animals. Sadie is not aware of that boundary.

Millicent Arnold is the character Plath would most like to be among all the stories dealing with the self versus others. By not joining the sorority after she has passed the trials of initiation, Millicent attains personal satisfaction from her success and still retains her identity. She stays within her original group of friends but can now also interact with the school's elite. Though Jacob and Ellen Ross' story also represents a fantasy of Plath's, they are similar to the woman in "Pheasant." They are aware that success can take them into a risky world; they are aware of the limits of success. So, they really do not transcend any major barriers. They change their surroundings, but they retain the same lifestyle and identity they have at the beginning of the story.

Harold Higgins represents the fantasy figure from the group of stories dealing with the self versus the self. His successful balancing of fantasy and reality gives him an ideal lifestyle. He is not aware of any barriers; his imagination gets free rein and does not bring any harm to him. For Harold, Sadie, and Millicent, the terms
"isolation" and "invasion"—in the context of Plath's vision—would hold no meaning for them.

And though most of Plath's characters are trapped within the violent cycle of invasion and isolation, they exhibit an almost noble intensity as they struggle to make a better existence for themselves, making them ultimately more satisfying as characters than the fantasy figures. Unfortunately, their nobility is not rewarded. They usually end up bruised and battered from hurling themselves against the walls surrounding them, and even if they manage to smash through those walls, they are crushed by the alien environment on the other side. But even if the individual characters are damaged or destroyed, their struggles serve as testament to their will, a will which may eventually break the dam holding back the stagnant waters of "Lake Nightmare, Bog of Madness," cleansing them and drenching humanity and nature with a unifying spirit.
LIST OF REFERENCES


Plath, Sylvia. Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams


