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In Defense of Sylvia Plath:
Beyond "The Moon and the Yew Tree"

Sylvia Plath's legacy as a confessional poet has long been overshadowed by morbid curiosity surrounding her tragic fate, an infamy forever intertwined in her works. One cannot read and fully understand Plath's verse without acknowledging the manner of her passing and its widespread impact, a history leaving her vulnerable to ample allegations of glamorizing suffering and indulging in overt self-centeredness. At the heart of these posthumously proclaimed criticisms lies her 1961 piece, "The Moon and the Yew Tree". Frequently dismissed as monotonous in the context of her other work, the poem serves as a multifaceted meditation on spiritual emptiness and emotional isolation, expressing a disconnect with traditional symbols of comfort and meaning. Closely examined, Yew Tree's strength lies in the very elements that widely spark debate.

One of the most persistent complaints about Plath is that her work glorifies death and mental illness. Critics look to "The Moon and the Yew Tree", highlighting its central emphasis on the yew tree, pointing upwards and invoking a sense of transcendence, as though Plath is being called to the heavens to ponder death and faith. In stating that she "simply cannot see where there is to get to" (7), Plath highlights her disillusionment with life, an overwhelming sense of survival as futile. This resignation is echoed throughout the poem, the desire to

transcend, to belong to a world other than this one: Plath cites the moon as her home, falling a long way (22) to the foreign climate of Earth. For critics, such lines read as unapologetic glorification. They are argued to encapsulate a dangerously alluring portrayal: a narrative that death, rather than a tragic ending, provides a sanctuary from this world's dissarray, an alternative existence.

Yet Plath's depictions of death are fueled neither by the romantic nor the beautiful-- they are a cry for mercy, for her suffering to be known. And are her characterizations of relief and freedom not how people struggling with depression perceive death? When I read Yew Tree, although cloaked in lyrical language, I do not see images of the romantic; I see myself. I see my darkest moments, when my fate appeared to mirror Plath's, and my mental state was worlds away from romantic or desirable. Furthermore, is depiction inherently romanticization? And why is Plath at fault for how her art is received?

Another frequently nitpicked aspect of Plath's work is its ample self-depiction. Indeed, *"*The Moon and the Yew Tree" is written in the first person, grappling with intensely personal emotion. Yet far from being egocentric, the poem looks past 'the self' to consider many other things, entwined in the natural and the sublime. Yew Tree is not a monologue, but rather a dialogue between the self and the psyche, an inquisition into her perception of the world. Despite being physically alone, she is never without company, perpetually engulfed in her thoughts. Regardless of being the only living human in the work, Plath is accompanied by spirituous mists (5), the 'sweet' Virgin Mary (17), saints (24), and so many others-- most notably the moon and yew tree themselves, acting as individuals. She writes: "The moon sees nothing of this. She is bald and wild. / And the message of the yew tree is blackness—blackness and silence (27-28).

In alluding to such a wide variety of sources and anthropomorphizing the natural, Plath has transformed the poem from a flat, individual confessional to a diverse exploration into life and death, faith and lack thereof. Her writings, while largely about herself, are not self-centered; one must look past the use of 'I' to consider the larger picture.

However, even if her work is to be perceived as self-centered-- as all poetry depends on the interpretation of its reader-- is the artist expected to be a mirror, reflecting the views of the masses, never pointing it at themselves? Why is writing about oneself inherently bad? The 'self-centeredness' of her poems is what resonates so widely with her audience-- primarily female adolescents seeking solace for newfound emotions and finding solace within Plath's prose. Critics who accuse Plath of writing too much about herself overlook the fact that what is personal can also be universal. Expressions of one's inner life (mainly that of women) have long been dismissed as excessive or indulgent. Yet for many readers, Plath's introspection is a mirror that reflects their feelings. And if not their own, it invites an avenue to empathy. The poem's speaker does not demand sympathy; she demands recognition. To depict this darkness is not to celebrate it but to define it, reclaiming autonomy over mental distortions.

Ultimately, "The Moon and the Yew Tree" challenges readers not through its bleak faithlessness, but through its raw, unflinching honesty. The criticisms often directed at Plath, those of glorifying death or indulging in self-pity, fail to recognize that her work does not romanticize suffering, but lays it bare for all to see. Her depictions of death and mental illness are not endorsements-- they are expressions of lived experience, a courageous confrontation with the self. Plath's willingness to publicly explore her creed, no matter how controversial, gives her poetry its individualistic power. Rather than asking ourselves whether her writing is dangerous or harmful, perhaps we should question why we find the confrontation of negative emotions so

deeply unsettling. In identifying her own abstract emotions, Plath does encourage a state of despair, but invites us into her own.

Works Cited

Plath, Sylvia. “The Moon and the Yew Tree” *Ariel: The Restored Edition*. Edited by Frieda Hughes, Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2005.