

## CHRISTIAN LITSEY

The works of Sylvia Plath that recount her trauma illuminate the reality of traumatized individuals, the ways minds work after traumatic events, and the struggles that exist after the fact. Her semi-autobiography work, *The Bell Jar*, dives into the experiences of Plath and the trauma she endured, from the death of her father to the botched electroshock treatment she was forced to undertake. By exploring her near crippling depression, the negative reactions of those close to her, her suicidal ideation, and attempts at taking her own life, Plath reveals common experiences of those who have been traumatized in great detail, showing many of the symptoms of PTSD as described by the *DSM-V*, including distrust in those around her fictionalized self, an inability to focus on tasks, and intrusive thoughts. What this shows is that without being consciously aware of her doing so, Plath was attempting to exercise the specter of her trauma through her writing, something that gave her voice and control.

The reading of works that detail trauma gives those similarly suffering a voice they can relate to and understand in ways that the dominant culture does not recognize. By centering the experiences of Plath and others that have documented their trauma through literature and placing these literary works within the established literary canon, this voice is drastically expanded upon. Doing so establishes such voices as a part of the overall cultural makeup of society, marking these experiences as ones that many people face instead of making victims into social pariahs. Through this inclusion, those suffering can find inclusion in society by having their experiences accepted and acknowledged. The value of teaching Plath in college literature courses is that it exposes students to this type of literature, allowing them to center those experiences in their own mind, furthering research and understanding in the field of trauma studies.

## SARAH KENDALL

"Desert Places" by Robert Frost and "The Moon and the Yew Tree" by Sylvia Plath use bleak, yet beautiful, imagery to paint pictures of what the world may feel like to a person struggling with depression and/or anxiety. I explicated both poems, paying special attention to both the imagery and the word choices that reflect a dismal, lifeless tone. This work is important and relevant in a 21st-century classroom because we cannot overemphasize the importance of looking after our own and each other's mental health. Sylvia Plath struggled with depression throughout her entire life; through her work, we can see a little bit of the world through a lens of depression and mental health challenges. Through a study of Plath's works and of works written on similar topics by other poets, we can normalize discussions about real life mental health struggles, including depression and anxiety.

# SYLVIA PLATH IN THE 21ST CENTURY CLASSROOM

## OTHER INFORMATION

### Mentor:

Dr. Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick

### Academic Affiliation:

Indiana University-  
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## MARGARET CARSON

I can not think of a single reason why Plath's work should not be taught in the 21st century classroom. In both her book and poems, she portrays anxiety, depression, and other issues in brilliant ways. Taking the depression/anxiety that Plath expressed and visualizing them into photographs was an amazing and mind-boggling experience. I was lucky enough to have such a location for the photo shoot. The dilapidating house represents the mindset of those who suffer from mental illnesses. The main subject of the photographs represents the put-together and "perfectly fine" appearance many people with these illnesses put on during their suffering. The shadows and occasional faceless figure represent the intrusive thoughts that live inside many mentally ill minds. Teaching Plath in our classrooms allows students to recognize that they are not alone. Mental illness is not selective, and by showing students that, mental illnesses become less and less stigmatized. English university students are not the only ones who can benefit from the teaching of Plath. Students at many levels and across disciplines would greatly benefit from the works of Sylvia Plath because of her ability to draw others in and express experiences that a lot of people can relate to in the 21st century.

## OLIVIA BROWN

With Sylvia Plath's notorious suicide preceding her notable writings, her words of love and loss are often rejected from the modern classroom by way of fearful controversy. To those who have the good fortune to read her, it is easy to realize that she speaks in confessionals and revelations of a haunting yet stunning life. Through the heavy beauty found within her poetry, a worldview can be seen through a lens of depression and mental health challenges. As nearly half of college-aged students in the United States report suffering from anxiety and over a quarter of the same demographic express experiencing depression, it is more important than ever to explore topics of trauma, frustration, mental-health, and sexuality in the classroom. Her words show the struggles she endured throughout her difficult marriage and challenging time as a mother. Further, Plath's stark honesty speaks to the sense of loneliness and self-destruction, which has unfortunately become an important part of the human experience to relate to in the 21st century. Plath's perspective and brutal honesty throughout her poetry regarding self-harm and suicide ideation paved the way in discussing real problems and wounds. Her relatability allows students to dig into her writings in attempts to find phrases which speak to them in a way that begs them to perform closer readings on all of her pieces. When 21st-century students examine Plath's literary career from beginning to end, they will read as she develops from a brave, collegiate woman to a literary rebel and master, amid mental illness struggles. By studying Plath's works and works written on similar topics by other poets, we can engage in discussions about real-life mental health struggles, including depression and anxiety. And these, in turn, can become more normalized, and we hope, recognized and treated.