

Localizing the Global in Sylvia Plath’s “Fever 103”

Julia Machtenberg

ABSTRACT

The essay presents a close reading of Sylvia Plath’s poem “Fever 103” and argues that Plath’s construction of her speaker’s vulnerable self facilitates a breakdown of the boundaries between the embodied self and its socio-cultural environment. The argument is built on recent scholarship on Plath’s work that views it in the context of the global political movements of her time. By examining the ways in which Plath’s use of Cold War discourses shapes her construction of vulnerability, the essay shows how this construction produces the embodied self as deeply entangled with global political movements manifesting in and through the embodied self. By evoking and concurrently undermining the “poetics of hygiene,” the poem suggests that any attempt to ascertain a state of utmost purity, of clearly delineated bodily and cultural boundaries, can only end in annihilation. It is in this sense that Plath’s representation of her speaker’s vulnerable self allows her to develop an astute perspective on the interconnectedness of the private, the national, and the global socio-political environment. In this way, the poet’s construction of a vulnerable self represents an understanding of a globally interconnected world that poses localized dangers of (self-)destruction.

KEYWORDS

Cold War, poetics of hygiene, vulnerability, embodied self, US poetry, affect

Canonized as a confessional poet renowned for her use of “the trope of vulnerability” (Morse 80), Plath’s poems have frequently been read “as straightforward ‘confession’” (Clark 362) of her own mental states. While the “trope of vulnerability” has been associated with plain language and an ostensibly candid voice giving expression to the poet’s personal sentiments, Plath’s poems also show a superb control over poetic form and devices (Morse 80). Still, for a considerable amount of time, scholarship on Plath approached her poetic engagement with vulnerability through an autobiographical and/or psychoanalytical lens. In doing so, these approaches, first, showed a narrow understanding of the condition of vulnerability as connoting a personal susceptibility to pain and suffering. While vulnerability can encompass these components, Erinn Gilson presents a more nuanced understanding of the condition as “a basic kind of openness to being affected and affecting in both positive and negative ways, which can take diverse forms in different social situations (for example, bodily, psychological, economic, emotional, and legal vulnerabilities)” (310). As this definition shows, vulnerability is a more complex condition than a mere susceptibility to personal suffering as it was often understood in relation to Plath’s poetry.

Second, earlier approaches to Plath’s poetry oftentimes obscured the historical context in which Plath’s poems originated and hence missed its significance for her writing. As Robin Peel argues in his book *Writing Back: Sylvia Plath and Cold War Politics* (2002),

Plath’s later writing was produced in specific places in England during a period of heightened world tension, and her interaction with the specificities of place and time including the textual environment, the physical and cultural environments and the global political movement, should not be overshadowed by the narrative of her marriage and premature death. (24)

Plath herself points to the influence of her socio-historical environment on her writing in an interview published in the *London Magazine* in 1962:

The issues of our time which preoccupy me at the moment are incalculable genetic effects of fallout and a documentary article on the terrifying, mad, omnipotent marriage of big business and the military in America – “Juggernaut, The Warfare State,” by Fred J. Cook in a recent *Nation*. Does this influence the kind of poetry I write? Yes, but in a sidelong fashion. I am not gifted with the tongue of Jeremiah, though I may be sleepless enough before my vision of the apocalypse. My poems do not turn out to be about Hiroshima, but about a child forming itself finger by finger in the dark. (Plath, “Context” 64)

Even though Plath claims to abstain from addressing the Cold War and its threat of nuclear fallout in a direct manner in her poetry, the “sidelong fashion” in which these concerns impact her writing becomes perceivable in numerous ways.

The influence of the cultural climate of the Cold War on Plath's poetry becomes for instance apparent when paying close attention to the ways in which "discourses on pollution, toxicity, poisons, and fallout penetrate and circulate in Plath's poetry" (Bundtzen 46). Oftentimes, these discourses intersect with a "lexicon of suffering and clinical appraisal [whereby] Plath documents, in an unnervingly visceral manner, the impact of human vulnerability" (Didlake 269). Vulnerability here centers on the physically vulnerable human body and its striving for and failing to secure a supposedly safe state of invulnerability. Ralph Didlake concludes that these representations of bodily vulnerability work to "create . . . a powerful registry of human health and illness" (269). Building on Didlake's observations, I maintain that Plath's intermingling of medical and Cold War discourses in her representation of vulnerability destabilizes the boundaries between the speaking self and its socio-political environment. As I will show through an analysis of her poem "Fever 103°," Plath reconstructs vulnerability as a condition that may be located in her speaker's body but that nevertheless incorporates larger (trans)national phenomena. In this sense, Plath's representation of vulnerability, as "a basic kind of openness to being affected and affecting in both positive and negative ways" (Gilson 310), closely intertwines her speaker's private plight with her cultural environment. Thereby, Plath's construction of her speaker's vulnerable self represents seemingly localized dangers of (self-)destruction as deeply interwoven with a globally interconnected world, suggesting the impossibility of separating the bodily self from the world or vice versa.

Its title gives a clear indication of the poem's governing theme: a physical state situating the body in a defensive position against a hostile bacterial or viral invasion. Finding itself under threat of hostile invasion, the body increases its own temperature to fend off the intruder. A fever positions the body as exposed to and affected by dangerous viral forces while simultaneously affecting these very forces. As such, the feverish body represents one manifestation of physical vulnerability. However, in the context of Plath's poem, this physical state of vulnerability gains another layer. The poem's main concern - the speaker's embodied experience of danger and defense - becomes representative of US-American anxieties of the Cold War, when "[c]ommunism was considered the contaminated 'Other' - a metaphorical virus that threatened to infect the world and subvert the United States where it was most vulnerable" (Smith 308). Plath unfolds and complicates this analogy throughout the poem.

Instead of expressing fear in light of her ill, feverish state, the speaker opens the poem with two succinct questions: "Pure? What does it mean?" (Plath, "Fever 103°" 77). This concern with pureness is a recurrent theme of Plath's poetry. Laura Perry explains that "Plath's invocations of purity connect body with culture, inviting us to consider how ideas of what makes a clean body are gendered and policed by

institutions and norms" (194). By connecting "Plath's poetics of hygiene" with a post-Second World War "transatlantic discourse about hygiene . . . that trafficked in mid-century anxieties about biological containment, sexual purity and interracial contact" Perry demonstrates how the theme of hygiene in Plath's poetry "serves to reframe her search for transcendental purity ('my selves dissolving') (CP 232) by showing how this purity is embodied and historically located" (191). The two opening questions of "Fever 103" introduce the reader to Plath's drawing on and further lyrical development of such global discourses of hygiene in the poem at hand. Placing those two questions at the onset of the poem, Plath sets the scene for an engagement with Cold War discourses seeking to safeguard the supposedly uncontaminated (US) body from hostile intruders. Analyzing the ways in which Plath constructs her speaker's vulnerable state through a hallucinatory language that recombines figures from Greek mythology with images of nuclear fallout against the backdrop of the speaker's fever shows not only "how [her speaker's search for] purity is embodied and historically located" (Perry 191). This analytical reading also reveals how Plath attempts to renegotiate her speaker's embodied (trans)national location by having her speaker strain and ultimately fail to attain a supposedly invulnerable state of utmost purity detached from the worldly ills affecting her bodily self.

Instead of providing a direct answer to her opening questions, the speaker refers to Greek mythology to reconfigure notions of pureness:

The tongues of hell
Are dull, dull as the triple

Tongues of dull, fat Cerberus
Who wheezes at the gate. Incapable
Of licking clean

The aguey tendon, the sin, the sin. (Plath, "Fever 103" 77)

In these opening tercets, the speaker declares the fires of hell as lacking the power to burn off the sin from the deceased sinner just as the hellhound's tongues are too "dull" to lick off the sins from the sinner's body. While the exact nature of the sin remains unclarified, the subversion of myth effectively "undercuts our assumptions about purity . . . [The poet's] emphatic twist on the Cerberus myth renders the terrifying three-headed hound of hell into a plainly pathetic old dog who's 'wheezing' and sluggish . . ." (Wayson). Purity, as suggested by the speaker's line of inquiry, cannot be attained through culturally established cleansing rituals. Not only do the fires of hell fail to burn the sin from the sinful body, but also hell's creatures pale in comparison to "the aguey tendon" representing the notion of indistinguishable sin and the speaker's burning fever.

This subversive use of Greek mythology is not unusual for Plath's poetry. In this poem, Plath references the classics to reimagine notions of purity and contamination as they play out upon the speaker's feverish body. This renegotiation of purity and the deceased or indeed diseased body is significant in a US-American cultural context where

[t]he poetics of cleanliness is a poetics of social discipline. Purification rituals prepare the body as a terrain of meaning, organizing flows of value across the self and the community and demarcating boundaries between one community and another. (McClintock qtd. in Perry 192)

In "Fever 103°," Plath upends this poetics by denying her speaker to attain a sense of cleanliness through the invocation of culturally sanctioned mythology. The poet thus undermines the speaker's attempts to restore a coherent sense of self to her body and as a result forces her to depart from traditional scripts in the effort to restore meaning and strength to her fevered body.

This construction of the speaker's fever posits the illness itself as an affective state with which the speaker is forced to engage but which she cannot fully control. Her body reacts to the bacterial or viral invasion on its own accord and might self-destruct in the process. Meanwhile, Plath's subversive use of mythological references next to telling cultural allusions situates the speaker in a cultural framework defined by Cold War fears of contamination. Accordingly, the speaker continues to declare that "[s]uch yellow sullen smokes / Make their own element" (Plath, "Fever 103°" 77). Although subtle, this description of the smoke recalls the gas released in the notorious gas chambers of the Second World War (Axelrod 222). As the speaker elaborates, this kind of smoke "will not rise, // But trundle round the globe / Choking the aged and the meek, / The weak // Hothouse baby in its crib, / the ghastly orchid / Hanging its hanging garden in the air" (Plath, "Fever 103°" 77). In her feverish state, the heat the speaker experiences becomes an uncontrollable entity; it turns into a poisonous, suffocating smoke that not only threatens to engulf the speaker but the whole planet, killing those who are most susceptible first. This allusion to the Second World War also suggests that the destructive forces of this war continue to "trundle the globe" to "choke" people right into the speaker's present moment. Next, the speaker declares,

Devilish leopard!
Radiation turned it white
And killed it in an hour.

Greasing the bodies of adulterers
Like Hiroshima ash and eating in.
The sin. The sin. (Plath, "Fever 103°" 77)

By concluding the imaginary chain of metamorphoses from infant to flower to “devilish leopard” with the declaration that “Radiation turned it white / And killed it in an hour,” Plath’s speaker evokes the Cold War threat of nuclear annihilation. Claiming that the deadly nuclear radiation “greas[es] the bodies of adulterers like Hiroshima ash,” the speaker blurs Cold War imagery with domestic homewreckers with the utter destruction the United States wrought in the Second World War in Japan. This conflation of domestic unrest and transatlantic warfare is typical of both the Cold War period and Plath’s poetry, as Robin Peel explains: “The nuclear mushroom cloud was a potent and recurrent image haunting the Cold War period” (30). The image circulated in the media of the time and also found its way into Plath’s writing: “the 103° fever that accompanies radiation sickness, the peeling skin, the baldness of the irradiated victims, and the presence of German Catholic priests suffering alongside the Japanese victims of the nuclear bomb” (30). The speaker’s recurrent chant of “The sin. The sin” thus gains a much more complex meaning than its first appearance suggests. Instead of merely denoting seemingly indistinguishable, personal sins, the sin the speaker evokes transcends the personal to include ineradicable sins of humanity in the guise of gas chambers and nuclear annihilation. In this sense, Plath’s construction of her speaker’s fever as a profoundly unsettling affective state not only conveys the disorientation brought on by a high fever per se but registers a much more complex (trans)cultural meltdown in light of destructive forces produced by and at the same time used against humanity. Thereby, Plath represents her speaker’s vulnerable body as not merely exposed to hostile forces but as a battleground on which those forces and their (trans)national significance play out and may be renegotiated.

Through the construction of her speaker’s feverish state, Plath’s poem merges and reconsiders notions of purity, embodiment, and worldly suffering. By thus representing

the body’s capacity and disintegration [Plath] challenges readers to probe deeply and bravely into the boundaries that support their own self-concepts. Key distinctions between life and death, existence and nonexistence, and the differing borders that health and illness pose with respect to the promise of life are dramatized in her poetry. (Didlake 270-71)

In “Fever 103°,” Plath not only dramatizes but blurs the boundaries between such binarized concepts, suggesting that the body cannot be fully separated from its (trans)national context or vice versa. The speaker’s feverish, embodied self constitutes a space that incorporates and engages with interior (bodily) as well as exterior (worldly) forces. The fact that the speaker strains to transcend those forces she deems unclean and disconcerting may appear to suggest that the poet writes in the

tradition of a “poetics of cleanliness.” Yet, Plath’s deliberate blurring of the personal with the transnational discourses of her time undermines this poetics in her poetry. Instead of reinforcing clearly demarcated boundaries and preconceived meanings, Plath’s construction of the speaker’s fever as a profoundly destabilizing affective state undermines any attempt to reinstate the presumed boundaries between the private self and the public global-political environment. Accordingly, the speaker ends the poem by declaring:

Does not my heat astound you! And my light!
All by myself I am a huge camellia
Glowing and coming and going, flush on flush.

I think I am going up,
I think I may rise—
The beads of hot metal fly, and I love, I

Am a pure acetylene
Virgin
Attended by roses,

By kisses, by cherubim,
By whatever these pink things mean!
Not you, nor him

Nor him, nor him
(My selves dissolving, old whore petticoats)—
To Paradise. (Plath, “Fever 103” 77)

In the concluding lines of the poem, the fever reaches its zenith. Plath’s use of parallelisms, assonance, and frequent repetitions of the personal pronoun “I” jointly contributes to the speaker’s apparent rising not above but in concordance with her fever. The speaker’s rhythm of speaking matches the pulsating fever; the light vowels and imagery evoke the heat of her body as well as the speaker’s movement toward transcendence. The fever’s peak coincides with the speaker’s apparent ascension to “paradise,” suggesting that the speaker has finally found the answer to her opening question: purity appears to reside in a state of otherworldly perfection that is invulnerable to the world’s ills. Elena Ciobanu, however, remarks that

The “Paradise” in *Fever 103* [sic.] is never reached . . . not only because the persona mocks at the myth underlying it, but also because her body, represented by her selves that are left behind like “old whore petticoats” . . . re-inscribes itself in the text as an almost imperceptible absence: the “acetylene virgin.” Since acetylene is an odorless, colourless gas, highly unstable, that leads to explosions when associated with high temperatures, the acetylene body in Plath’s poem, rising among “beads of hot metal,” finally evaporates into nothingness. When the ban ages/selves have been discarded, there is only an emptiness. The poem, rather than affirming the possibility of the ascension of

the body into the sky, denies it altogether: the nature of the body does not allow it.
(216-17)

In other words, the apparent transcension of the speaker's feverish state symbolizes the body's negation. Straining to find an answer to her initial questions, the speaker claims a pure, virginal state for herself but the concomitant transformation into "acetylene" signifies, as Ciobanu points out, that such a transcension of the body and the world's ills in fact results in "nothingness," i.e., in non-existence. Purity, in this sense, becomes aligned to a state of utter perfection and invulnerability whose realization, however, requires an impossible state of self-negation. The "Paradise" the speaker evokes at the end of the poem thus signifies a state of transcendence that does not sustain but destroy. Hence, the poem's conclusion suggests that the condition of vulnerability, for all the anguish it may entail, constitutes a vital connection between self and world.

In conclusion, Plath's reconstruction of her speaker's vulnerable state of ill health allows her to break down the boundaries between the private and the cultural sphere. By constructing a speaker who experiences the body as vulnerable to bacterial, viral, as well as (trans)national ills, the poet captures not only the speaker's ill health but also the socio-historical forces bearing upon this body. By evoking and concurrently undermining the "poetics of cleanliness," the poet suggests that any attempt to ascertain a state of utmost purity, of clearly delineated bodily and cultural boundaries, can only end in annihilation. It is in this sense that Plath's reconstruction of her speaker's vulnerable state allows her to develop an astute perspective on the interconnectedness of the private, the national, and the global socio-political environments.

About the Author

Julia Machtenberg is a PhD student at Ruhr University Bochum (RUB), Germany. Julia Machtenberg received their BA in German and Anglophone Studies from the University of Duisburg-Essen in 2017 and their MA in English and American Studies from the RUB in 2020. Currently, Julia Machtenberg is working on their PhD project with the working title "Vulnerability in US-American Poetry." Next to vulnerability and trauma studies, Julia Machtenberg's research interests include gender and queer studies.

Peer Review

This article was reviewed by the issue's guest editors and one external reviewer.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Works Cited

- Axelrod, Steven Gould. "The Poetry of Sylvia Plath." *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, edited by Jo Gill, Cambridge UP, 2006, pp. 177–213.
- Bundtzen, Lynda K. "Historical and Cultural Background for Sylvia Plath's Poems." *Critical Insights: Sylvia Plath*, edited by William K. Buckley, Salem P, 2013, pp. 33–53.
- Ciobanu, Elena. "From Sylvia Plath's Poetry: The Metamorphoses of the Poetic Self." *Plath Profiles*, vol. 12, 2012, pp. 213–18.
- Clark, Heather. "P(l)athography: Plath and Her Biographers." *Plath in Context*, edited by Tracy Brain, Cambridge UP, 2019, pp. 360–70.
- Didlake, Ralph. "Terms of Art: Plath, the Medical Lexicon, and the Human Body in Health and Disease." *Critical Insights: Sylvia Plath*, edited by William K. Buckley, Salem P, 2013, pp. 258–72.
- Gilson, Erinn. "Vulnerability, Ignorance, and Oppression." *Hypatia*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2011, pp. 308–32, www.jstor.org/stable/23016548.
- Morse, Donald E. "Sylvia Plath and the Trope of Vulnerability." *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS)*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2000, pp. 77–90.
- Peel, Robin. *Writing Back: Sylvia Plath and Cold War Politics*. Rosemont Publishing and Printing Corp, 2002.
- Perry, Laura. "Plath and the Culture of Hygiene." *Plath in Context*, edited by Tracy Brain, Cambridge UP, 2019, pp. 191–200.
- Plath, Sylvia. "Fever 103°." *Ariel: The Restored Edition*. Faber and Faber, 2005.
- . "Context." *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams: Short Stories, Prose, and Diary Excerpts*. Harper and Row Publishers, 1983, pp. 64–65.
- Smith, Geoffrey S. "National Security and Personal Isolation: Sex, Gender, Disease in the Cold War United States." *The International History Review*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1992, pp. 307–37, www.jstor.org/stable/40792749.
- Wayson, Kary. "Sylvia Plath: 'Fever 103°': The Incinerating Vision of this Plath Classic." *Poetry Foundation*, 14 Aug. 2007, www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/68911/sylvia-plath-fever-103.