

The Day I Met Sylvia Plath

[This essay is from Oklahoma's 2008 State Champion, Hannah JoBeth Roark. In it, she talks about her experience with POL and poetry. She presented it as part of a panel on adolescent reading habits at this year's National Council of English Teachers (NCTE) annual conference in San Antonio, Texas, November 21, 2008.]

Hello. I'm so happy to be here and I would like to thank the National Endowment for the Arts and The Poetry Foundation for inviting me to speak to you today. Because of Poetry Out Loud, I spent months memorizing, interpreting, and learning to recite poetry. But until last year, I had never recited a poem, or chosen to read poetry in my spare time. I used to approach poetry as another subject in English, but now I see it as an art form that is meant to connect people. Today, I would like to tell you about my experience with Poetry Out Loud and how it moved me from a place where I was a passive appreciator of poetry to a place where poetry engaged me, enriched me, and inspired me.

I can trace it back to one pivotal day: The day I met Sylvia Plath. Usually, Sylvia Plath is introduced to classrooms through a poem like "Lady Lazarus" or "Daddy" or one of the other harsh and often grotesque poems that were written by this incredible woman. My senior English teacher decided on a different approach. She introduced Sylvia Plath through the poem "Chaucer" written by Ted Hughes, Plath's estranged husband. In his poem, Hughes describes the brilliant and impassioned Sylvia Plath that he adored. Hughes writes:

At the top of your voice, where you swayed on the top of a stile,
Your arms raised—somewhat for balance, somewhat
To hold the reins of the straining attention □

Of your imagined audience—you declaimed Chaucer □
To a field of cows.

After reading this poem in class, I loved the woman Hughes described. I shared her passion for literature and her ambition to share it with the world. But my teacher followed with an historical account that detailed Plath's educational prowess and literary potential, then continued with her personal life and her relationship with Hughes, and concluded with her struggle with depression and tragic suicide. While I wouldn't have related to a mere reading of "Lady Lazarus," I felt a small personal connection with the young Sylvia Plath, and was intrigued by her life and fascinated by the poems that her life inspired. What happened to the girl whose favorite character was Wife of Bath? What happened to the joy, the giddy spontaneity that enticed her recite old English to a group of cows? Sylvia Plath challenged me in ways that I had never been challenged by a writer before, not only through her gut-wrenching images, but through the contrast between the harsh expressions in her poetry and the woman that Ted Hughes fell in love with.

Midway through our Poetry Unit, my teacher hung a poster for Poetry Out Loud on the door. Every time I reached for the handle—there was Sylvia. Finally, my English teacher cut our class a deal: If we would participate in Poetry Out Loud, we would be exempt from the essay portion of the Poetry Test. I signed up...without hesitation.

My decision began a whirlwind of preparations for school, district, state, and national competitions, and led to many discoveries for me about poetry recitation.

Learning about the lives of each poet allowed me to become immersed in each poem, and something amazing happened. I realized that reciting a poem opened up a new world for me. I created a process by which I approached each of my poems. Beginning with a study of the lives of each poet, I expanded what I had learned through reading, memorizing, and finally reciting their poetry.

For me, in simply reading each poem, I could admire the beauty of the language. The poems were understandable, but they were very one-dimensional to me. Committing the poem to memory was very tedious, because I had never studied a poem beyond its appearance on the page, but it deepened my awareness of the poem's structure and meaning. This added an importance to each poem, a feeling of duty to relay the poet's intention in my recitation. Once I began understand the poem's meaning, I could begin to interpret it. Even though reading the poem helped me to appreciate it and memorizing the poem helped me understand it's meaning, what I gained through reciting the poem was most important.

When I recite a poem I can most fully connect with it. In learning to recite poetry, I went through three specific steps. These steps allowed me to make even deeper connections with myself, with the audience, and with each poet. First, I said the poems to myself in front of the mirror. When I saw myself recite each poem, I saw emotions that I had never seen on my face before. I was able to relate to them on a personal level, and I believed I had made the poems my own. After I had practiced enough to internalize each poem, I began to recite them in front of my peers. At first this was daunting, but looking back, it was the most beneficial part of

the entire process. I learned to watch the faces of the people in front of me. I found I could manipulate the sound of certain words or phrases in order to make the poem more effective. When I was able to respond to the emotions of my peers, the poems changed again. They were no longer mine--They belonged to the audience.

The last time I recited my poems was on stage, I could see no one, and I felt mostly nerves, but when it was time to recite, the poems came alive. It was as if I had detached from the experience and they went on, it was as if they had become the poets' once again. In the space before me, I felt Sylvia Plath's hurt, I saw the shore of the wide world that Keats faced alone, and I bravely fought a Jabberwocky. It was the life of each of my poems that I loved, and watching them pass from the page to me to others to the pitch black on stage. That was what Poetry Recitation was meant to me.

On the final night of Poetry Out Loud, I stood nearby as a few of the contestants talked to Garrison Keillor. Looking the state champion of Alaska dead straight in the eye, he asked, "Are you all actors?" At first, I took offense to this comment because recitation is not acting. Now, I realize that there is an element of truth in his question. Poetry recitation is not drama, but it is interpretation. It is an oral tradition, and through it, I believe that I not only connected with the audience, but I connected with emotions that the poet needed to relay. Poems are meant to be experienced. Poems are beautiful on the page and introspective when said in private, but they are awe-inspiring when recited aloud. Whether or not we share

the premature loss of John Keats or Sylvia Plath's pain of abandonment or Lewis Carroll's childlike inner spirit, poetry creates deeper connections between people.

I would consider this experience rare for a student of my generation. I have grown up in the age of technology, in which communication and entertainment have been sped up. The phone call has been replaced with the text message and the letter has been transformed into an email. Cable TV gives us hundreds of channels at a time and movies on demand, and the Internet provides unlimited and unregulated information at the click of a button. In this high tech and fast paced world where we are inundated with choice, few of us take time to slow down and sit down to absorb a piece of literature. My generation relies on shallow, inflectionless communication and reads mostly for short bursts of information. Despite all of these innovations, we become frustrated when true meanings are misinterpreted. Communication has become more efficient, but it has also become less meaningful. We are skipping along the surface of ideas, and are losing the ability to let written words sink deeply into our thoughts. Programs such as Poetry Out Loud that encourage the oral interpretation of text and the use of memory are important because they make us stop and take time to find meaning in the piece of literature before us, and in so doing, reconnect us with the power of the written and spoken word.

I would like this opportunity to thank my teachers. My entire high school English department, when they heard that I had been invited to speak to you today, traveled from Stillwater, OK to be with me. Thank you. You didn't just teach me, but

you took interest in me. You didn't teach me only to test me, but you lit me on fire. You made sure I knew the basics, but found a way to show me that I can make a difference in everything that I do. You didn't just try to scare me with a vocabulary list or threaten to test me on complicated rhyme schemes, you did these things, yes, but beforehand, you taught me that everything I read was not only admirable, but applicable. You began with the lives of the people who wrote each work, and showed me that they were not authors when they began to write, but they were people, just like me, who felt the need to say something. You related these poems to my life, but challenged me to make the connections on my own, so that I could create a process to find connections for myself in the future. Thank you.

And now I would like to recite some poems.

(Hannah recited Plath's "Fever 103°" and Lewis Carroll's Jabberwocky.)