

Philosophy, Poetry, and the Self

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Abstract: In this paper, I use Sylvia Plath's corpus as a case study to demonstrate how the functional application of philosophy, psychology, and language detect and explain the flourishing and diminishing of the self due to the tension between authentic and inauthentic written expression. I demonstrate the interdisciplinary methodology by way of using philosopher Albert Camus's philosophy of the absurd to explain why Plath's self flourishes and diminishes to the point of non-existence (i.e. her suicide). I also show that Plath suffered from Dissociative Identity Disorder, and thus had a maladaptive self that caused her to utilize inauthentic written expression in place of authentic written expression. I then show that the fluctuation of the self can be detected by way of word frequency graphs of the word binaries of Plath's commonly-used words. The philosophical and psychological theories being applied demonstrate why Plath's maladaptive self flourished and diminished, while the digital humanities provide an insight into how the flourishing and diminishing of the self can be detected. The functional application of philosophy, psychology, and language in Plath's case study provides a comprehensive insight into the current state of the self within complex psychopathologies.

In this paper, I will use poet Sylvia Plath's corpus as a case study to demonstrate how the functional application of philosophy, psychology, and language explain the flourishing and diminishing of the self. My first claim is that there is a philosophy to be found within Sylvia Plath's work and that is the philosophy of psychopathologies. This philosophy can be explained by way of using Philosopher Albert Camus's philosophy of the absurd. Philosophy of the absurd provides the framework that in which elucidates the way in which psychopathologies, such as Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) operate, due to its underlying premise that deals with the human desire to find meaning in a world that seems meaningless. My second claim is that throughout Plath's work one can see her self diminish and flourish by way the binaries of her most-commonly-used negative and positive words, and that Plath utilizes the third component of the absurd in the form of suicide to solve her inability to be authentic.

In order to know more about the person's experience of their self, it is important to note the external and an internal factors contributing to the certain experience or sense of self. This can be done by way of verbal expression. Understanding the experience of the self can be done by way of identifying the stimulus and history of response that account for words that identify the self. Analyzing the "I" by way of verbal expression is an approach that Functional Analytic Psychologists Robert Kohlenberg and Mavis Tsai take in order to understand one's experience or sense of self. In their book, *Functional Analytic Psychotherapy: Creating Intense and Curative Therapeutic Relationships*, they state, "Our hypothesis about self is essentially a hypothesis about verbal behavior. Specifically, it is that understanding the experience of self is specification of the stimuli controlling the verbal response "I" (128-129). Kohlenberg and Tsai take

this approach, because they believe it illustrates the emergence of the “I.” They believe that the “I” emerges as a child learns how to speak non-pathologically and in normal development (132). The child develops the sense of “I” in contrast to other items in their experience, such as ice cream, fish, crayon, and juice. However, in each stage the “I” or sense of self is still heavily controlled by public (external factors) stimuli. The parent or peer orients the child to the objects, acting as public stimuli that help the emergence of the “I,” due to the child not yet having the capability to do so. In addition to enabling the child to create a private orientation to being able to make relation judgment calls, such as “I see apple,” the parent, as the public stimuli, gains control over the child’s “I,” having the ability to either confirm or deny the spatial relationship between the child and the apple. The parent as the acting public stimuli also has the ability to confirm or deny the distinction between the child’s self and external objects.

In an adaptive self, the individual has the ability to use verbal expressions by way of authentic speech. Thus, with an adaptive self, the verbal expression used has an absence of all artifices, including, metaphors, expressions, symbolism, and idioms; and thus is a direct reflection of the state of the self. In addition, for a self to be considered adaptive, it must find a balance between public and private stimuli orienting it to its relational spatial placement between its “I” and external objects. For example, an adaptive self must be able to have as much private control over its relation to an external object as the public stimuli and reinforces do. Thus, the self must be able to remain unchanging despite locus (location) and public stimuli. Kohlenberg and Tsai state that severe disturbances to the self happen when the self is under total or disproportionate public control, and if not enough “I”, responses are under private control. When the “I” is under disproportionate public control, then the emergence of the self is affected (142). Kohlenberg and Tsai state, “...their sense of self can be greatly affected by the presence of other people and their opinions, moods, and desires” (142). Problems with the self start to occur when the public stimuli start to affect the self’s ability to express authentically what the self wants, desires, or thinks.

When the self starts to be affected by the imbalance of the disproportionate reliance on public stimuli, it starts to use inauthentic verbal expression, such as, metaphors, idioms, and expressions, to express it’s “I” identity, desires, wants, and opinions. This causes the self to become confused and cling tighter onto the orientation from the public stimuli, prohibiting the development of an adaptive self and promoting the development of a maladaptive self. This imbalance causes the perception of the self to become skewed, distorted and maladaptive, causing the self to develop complex personality disorders, such as Dissociative Identity Disorder.

Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) is a personality disorder developed from a maladaptive self. The self contained within DID becomes confused and relies heavily on public stimuli to express wants, desires, wishes, its identity, or opinions. According to the four criteria model, in which psychologist Sara Staggs cites the DSM-V criteria for DID:

(a) the capacity for dissociation; (b) experiences that overwhelm the child's non dissociative coping capacity; (c) secondary structuring of DID alternate identities with individualized characteristics such as names, ages, genders; and (d) a lack of soothing and restorative experiences, which renders the child isolated or abandoned and needing to find his or her own ways of moderating distress. (ISSTD, 2011)

The proximal and distal factors to Plath's maladaptive self and symptomology of Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) concern the trauma she procured by way of her father's death, dysfunctional marriage to Ted Hughes, and the birth of her two children. Plath's father, Otto Plath, was an entomologist, who studied the branch of melittology (study of bees). He is the contributing distal factor to Plath's maladaptive self and symptomology of DID, because of the impact his sudden death had on her when she was eight-years-old. Plath never completed the grieving processes, and obsessed over her father's death. Because of this, Plath became traumatized by his passing and attempted to understand the traumatic event through her writings. She attempted to moderate her distress of feeling abandoned by her father by way of implementing terminology related to his field of study into her poetry. The most ostensible example of this can be seen by the amount of bee-related terminology she uses, including titles, and her father being one of the main themes of her writing throughout her poetry collection between 1956-1963, with an exponential increase in references to bee-related terminology, flowers, and to him between 1962-1963.³⁶ Plath's marriage to fellow poet Ted Hughes, her breakdown in college, suicide attempt at twenty-one, and the birth of her children are Plath's contributing proximal factors to her maladaptive self and symptomology of DID. Plath was susceptible to procure the personality disorder DID due to the trauma

³⁶ "Poppies in July"
"Daddy"
"Stings"
"The Swarm"
"The Moon and the Yew Tree"
"Poppies in October"
"Among the Narcissi"
"Blackberrying"
"Tulips"

she faced as a child and young adult and meets all four criteria for DID. (i.e. her father's death, suicide attempt, dysfunctional marriage to Ted Hughes, and etc.). Now that the distinction between an adaptive and maladaptive self has been made and the DSM-V criteria for DID that Plath meets has been explained, I will go on to my second claim. My second claim is that throughout Plath's corpus, one can see her maladaptive self diminish and flourish. Because Plath's self is maladaptive and contained within DID, we see her self diminish to the point of nonexistence (i.e. her suicide).

My second claim is that one can determine the fluctuation of Plath's maladaptive self by way of the peaks and declines of the negative and positive binaries of verbal expression she uses throughout her corpus, and in this case *The Bell Jar*. Because *The Bell Jar* is semi-autobiographical³⁷, Esther's self will be akin to Plath's self. The way in which one uses verbal expression is an indicator for how their self is operating. This is also the case with Plath. Plath uses these binaries as inauthentic expression instead of authentic expression as verbal expression to express her authentic self. The words I will specifically focus on are her most significant inauthentic expressions to indicate the state of her maladaptive self. They are as follows: death and birth, white and black, dead and alive, and red and blue.³⁸

Plath's maladaptive self uses inauthentic expression, in the forms of metaphors, symbolism, or expressions to express how her authentic self is operating. One can see this from the very beginning of *The Bell Jar* when Esther struggles with her identity and how it ought to feel, not what she authentically feels. For example, Esther writes:

I was supposed to be the envy of thousands of other college girls just like me all over America who wanted nothing more than to be tripping about in those same size- seven patent leather shoes I'd bought in Bloomingdale's one lunch hour with a black patent leather belt and black patent leather pocketbook to match. [...] I felt very still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo (3).

³⁷ As author of *Sylvia Plath*, Peter K. Steinberg states: *The Bell Jar* is a loosely autobiographical novel which recounts the events leading up to the breakdown and the recovery. Plath changed the names of some people and merged others into a single identity for the sake of her novel. There are some well known facts that are easily recognizable in the novel. We know that Plath had a guest editorship much like Esther's. We know that Plath's first suicide occurred after the guest editor experience and that the attempt was an overdose of sleeping pills. And, Plath's boyfriend Richard Norton appears in the novel disguised as Buddy Willard. The list can go on and on. Plath's personal papers from her guest editorship are held by the Lilly Library, Indiana University. These papers reveal much about her schedule, events, and assignments. The Lilly Library also holds some letters to Plath from Richard Norton (A celebration, this is sylvia.plath.info: The Bell Jar).

³⁸ I also have word frequency graphs that further substantiate and illustrate the significance of these specific peaks and declines.

The word frequencies³⁹ point to this passage in which one sees Esther (Plath), the protagonist of Plath's novel, struggle with her identity. Her verbal expression is relatively authentic as it attempts to express the conflict between what her private stimuli orient her to and what the public stimuli are orienting her to. One can see her self being oriented predominantly by public stimuli, causing an inner conflict with her authentic and inauthentic self and the external world. Because of this, Esther expresses feeling "empty" and "numb" despite all of the happiness she is "supposed" to be feeling because of what the public stimuli orient her self. This type of identity conflict is indicative of a maladaptive self seen within the personality disorder DID, for an adaptive self would be able to orient privately and be able to move on from the inner conflict, whereas we see Esther dwell upon it.

Another important divide that the word frequencies point out is seen when Esther receives injection, first for food poisoning and then again when she is in the asylum. Plath draws a parallel here that the binaries point out. The passage goes as follows, "The doctor's given you an injection," the nurse said from the doorway. "you'll sleep now." And the doctor took her place like a sheet of blank paper, and then a larger sheet of paper took the place of the door, and I drifted toward it and smiled myself to sleep" (25). On the surface, Esther gets an injection to induce a sleep-like state in order for her to convalesce from the food poisoning her and her magazine cohort get from a party. However, when one investigates this passage further, one can see that Plath is foreshadowing, for one then sees this imagery come up only once more, by way of the following passage, "Lie down," the nurse said. "I'm going to give you another injection." Three times each day the nurses injected me, and about an hour after each injection they gave me a cup of sugary fruit juice and stood by, watching me drink it. "Lucky you," Valier said, "You're on insulin" (101). The injection here is different from the injection Esther receives at the beginning of the novel in that this injection is meant to induce coma as a form of shock therapy after a suicide attempt.

Plath explains the effects that the shock therapy injection has on her self way before the reader realizes it. This is also an important parallel in which the word binaries catch, because it illustrates moments of induced dissociation that other scholars, such as Phenomenologist Jane Duran, have confused for moments of solipsism, which is a philosophy that purports that one's own mind is all that exists. In Duran's essay "Plath and the Philosophical Novel," she forms a postulation that is based upon a lackadaisical and myopic text analysis that only focuses on two moments in the novel 1) when Esther was

³⁹ Seen in aforementioned word frequency graphs.

being released from the hospital (pg. 237) and 2) when Esther reflects on the state, in which she reflects upon thinking at the beginning of the novel (pg. 13). These two moments are more illustrative of DID more than anything, because of the dissociative language and by extension inauthentic expression that Esther uses. Thus, one sees here, that Plath is induced into these moments of dissociation that have been before confused with moments of solipsism. DID is invoked in a maladaptive self that undergoes any form of trauma, and here one sees two instances of this, with the overdose and shock therapy treatment she receives in the asylum, which has not been previously caught.

An additional important moment, is when Plath talks about Joan, as if Joan were an “alter” or part of her own self that emerges in moments of “crisis,” demonstrating a maladaptive self contained within the personality disorder DID. The passage is as follows, “Sometimes I wondered if I had made Joan up. Other times I wondered if she would continue to pop in at every crisis of my life to remind me of what I had been, and what I had been through, and carry on her own separate but similar crisis under my nose (115). Alters function as protective walls for the self, and the way Plath approaches the character Joan correlates to how she uses alters throughout her poetry, and even the name in which she originally published *The Bell Jar*, which was Victoria Lucas. Plath’s self is dominated by Joan’s thoughts and feelings, and even though she knows their thoughts and feelings are different, she explains feeling as if Joan were a “black image of my own.” Plath’s maladaptive self demonstrated by way of Esther adopts Joan’s self so much so that Esther expresses feeling as if she “had made Joan up.” Plath’s self is too dominated by public stimuli and not influenced enough by private stimuli to be considered an adaptive self. Now that I have shown the diminishing and flourishing of the self by way of the binaries of her most-commonly-used negative and positive words, I will now show how Philosophy of the Absurd explains this fluctuation, and why Plath’s maladaptive self chose the third option of the absurd.

The philosophy of the absurd has three components 1) it is a state of affairs, 2) it is a problem, and 3) it is a solution. The Absurd is a concept that philosopher Albert Camus purports consists of the tension between conscious entities seeking inherent meaning and the inability for this meaning to be obtained or found. A maladaptive self will find a solution with suicide, thus disengages with the absurd. Because the maladaptive self chooses suicide as the solution, the self is not able to resolve the tension between using inauthentic expression to express its authentic self and the want to express the state of the authentic self authentically. Conversely, an adaptive self will find a solution with hope, thus keeps engaging in the absurd, and through this constant repetition, the self finds resolution. One engages in the absurd when

one realizes the futility in seeking meaning of the everyday life and its impossibility.

The philosophy of the absurd's first component provides the framework in which the self functions within the human experience, because it is a state of affairs. As Camus states in his book *The Myth of Sisyphus*, "It is a matter of living in the state of the absurd. I know on what it is founded, this mind and this world straining against each other without being able to embrace one another" (40). The absurd explains the circumstances as to why the self constantly faces tensions within itself and between the world, because it is in a constant state of conflict. One sees this with Plath's maladaptive self. Even though it is controlled predominately by public stimuli, it still attempts to find meaning and resolution within itself and the world. Philosopher Avi Sagi states in his book, *Albert Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd*, "The Myth of Sisyphus is an explication of human existence within the confines of the absurd, and the absurd is the final datum from which Camus sought to derive the full spectrum of attitudes to existence" (Avi Sagi, pg43). Thus, the absurd provides a framework within its state of affairs that the maladaptive and adaptive self operate. However, because of this pattern of attempted meaning finding and want for resolution within the self itself and between the self and the external world, the absurd moves from its first component, state of affairs, to its second component of being a problem. When the maladaptive and adaptive self cannot find meaning or resolution within itself or the world, it starts to diminish as the "hope" begins to become "stifled."

The maladaptive and adaptive self both attempt to find clarity and meaning amongst the meaninglessness of the world, and when the futility of meaning finding becomes apparent, both find issue with this. The maladaptive and adaptive self are both contained within this framework, because the absurd determines the pattern in which the maladaptive or adaptive self will operate within their experience, and one sees this determined pattern with Plath's maladaptive self. Philosopher Avi Sagi states, "The absurd person is the one who is aware of, and draws the inevitable conclusions from the state of affairs" (Avi Sagi, pg. 48). This inevitable conclusion from the state of affairs is that the tension found between the self itself and the world presents a problem, leading into the second component of the absurd.

The second component of the absurd, as a problem, is where the maladaptive and adaptive self start to diverge. The self starts to see that the world does not have any guiding principle, which causes a problem. This problem causes both the adaptive and maladaptive self to raise the question, "is life worth living?" Because the maladaptive self is driven primarily by public stimuli, when it is faced with an issue of

attempting to find meaning and only finds “contradictions” and “nonsense,” it starts to attempt to escape the absurd. Conversely, the adaptive self, with its balanced public and private orientation, will see that it cannot find clarity nor meaning, and will thus remain within the cycle of the absurd, accepting the problem. The problem the second component of the absurd creates is the unresolved tension between the self itself and between the self and the external world. Thus, the self must make a decision as to whether or not it can live and die within the absurd or die and thus escape from the absurd. Camus states, “It is essential to know whether one can live with it [the absurd] or whether, on the other hand, logic commands one to die of it” (50). This problem leads into the third component of the absurd, which is that it poses as a solution.

The third component of the absurd has two subsets contained within it: 1) resolution by way of hope or revolt, or 2) suicide. The maladaptive and adaptive self will inherently entertain the question of whether or the absurd dictates death. The decision to cease the cycle of the absurd or to continue the cycle of the absurd becomes heavily weighed by each self. Camus states, “The mind, when it reaches its limits, must make a judgment and choose its conclusions. This is where suicide and the reply stand” (27). The adaptive self will gather its wants, desires, hopes, wishes, moods, and thoughts by way of balanced public and private orientation. Because it has this balance, the adaptive self will always choose hope, and thus will always choose to perpetuate and continue the cycle of the absurd. Camus states, “Living is keeping the absurd alive. Keeping it alive is, above all, contemplating it”(54) Conversely, the maladaptive self will be too influenced by public orientation to what the external world wants, needs, desires, wishes, and thinks, that it will become overwhelmed by the tension the absurd creates. Thus, the maladaptive self seeks to end the vicious cycle of the absurd by way of suicide, for suicide is the only way out of the absurd.

Camus states, "In its way, suicide settles the absurd. It engulfs the absurd in the same death. But I know that in order to keep alive, the absurd cannot be settled. It escapes suicide to the extent that it is simultaneously awareness and rejection of death (54). The inability to orient publically and privately, in a balanced way, prevents the maladaptive self from being able to handle the internal and external tension; thus, the maladaptive self will commit suicide as a resolution or as a way to “settle the absurd.” The maladaptive self uses inauthentic verbal expression to express the authentic state of the self. By using philosophy, psychology, and word frequency graphs to detect the current state of the self, one is able to determine exactly what is going on, why, and how despite inauthentic expression being used. The actual state of the authentic self in a maladaptive self can be better determined before it diminishes to the point

of non-existence, because the combined quantitative and qualitative research methodologies being employed pinpoint specific frameworks and penetrate through verbal artifices.

In this paper, I have used poet Sylvia Plath's corpus as a case study to demonstrate how the functional application of philosophy, psychology, and language explain the flourishing and diminishing of the self. I have also shown that there is a philosophy to be found within Sylvia Plath's work and that is the philosophy of psychopathologies. I have also shown how this philosophy can be explained by way of using Philosopher Albert Camus's philosophy of the absurd. I then presented how the philosophy of the absurd provides the framework that psychopathologies, such as Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) operate, due to its underlying premise that deals with the human desire to find meaning in a world that seems meaningless. In addition, I demonstrated that throughout Plath's work one can see her self diminish and flourish by way of the binaries of her most-commonly-used negative and positive words, and that Plath utilizes the third component of the absurd in the form of suicide to solve her inability to be authentic.

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