

“I’m willing to let you know me if you’ll do the same”: Sylvia Plath’s Redemption of Bill the Veteran in “Brief Encounter”

When Sylvia Plath, journaling about a first date with a Korean War veteran in the winter of 1950, writes of her eagerness to learn about war, she articulates a curiosity that pervades her work, and emphatically includes herself in war-related and otherwise political conversations that may seem outside the realm of proper Smith girl experiences. “‘What’s it like to fight? to kill someone?’ (Your curiosity is aflame. Granted you can’t be a man, but he can tell you how it was)” she writes in her journal, her political interest clearly piqued (41). Significantly, her acute interest in what fighting is like, what the masculine experience of war is like, parallels a different sort of interest: she is on a date, after all, and her interest in Bill’s war experience is intertwined on the page with her interest in Bill’s sexual experience; her curiosity about war’s violence is connected here with an experience of sexual violence, an experience that leaves Plath shaken, angry, and acutely aware of her own frustrated desire (Journals 43). In her description of this encounter in her journal, Plath seems acutely aware of the connection between the political and the personal; further, the misunderstandings and the violence with which interpersonal relationships are fraught reflect war’s violence, war being perhaps the ultimate example of the failure of human relationship. Throughout her work, Plath presents a solution, over and over again,¹ to this problem: the alienating effects of war experience can be ameliorated through caring, and diverse, interpersonal relationships. Her story “Brief Encounter,” I argue here, is one place where Plath presents this solution. In this story, Plath takes a fledgling relationship fraught with violence and misunderstanding, and transforms it through her art into an encounter that offers healing and reconciliation, especially for the veteran, who has experienced the most violence in the course of the war, as well as acute alienation after coming home.

Analysis of the relationship between the personal and the political in Plath’s work pervades much of Plath scholarship. “I’m rather a political person,” Sylvia Plath told Peter Orr in a 1962 interview for the BBC; many Plath scholars, with the notable exception of Susan Gubar and Sandra M. Gilbert,² take Plath’s words to Orr seriously. They consider how her work reflects the political climate in which it was written, charting the ways in which Plath’s letters, visual art, poetry, journals, and fiction address and integrate her political questions and concerns: about the haunting presence of WWII; about the distant threat of the Korean War in the early fifties; about the Cold War’s bomb scares and the threat of ultimate destruction posed by nuclear weapons. Concerning Plath’s poetry, Stan Smith argues in his 1982 book *Inviolable Voice: History and Twentieth-Century Poetry* that: “It is precisely because her poetry is intensely private that it records so profoundly and distinctly the experience of living in history. In Plath’s poetry, there is no gap between private and public” (202); Al Strangeways makes a similar assertion in *Sylvia Plath: The Shaping of Shadows*, in 1998. Tracy Brain, writing nearly two decades after Smith, again makes a very similar statement: “By taking Plath’s writing away from the conventional personal readings to which it is customarily subjected, we see that her poems and fiction...are deeply, politically engaged with the world” (36-7). Even more recently, Robin Peel charts the intersections between Cold War politics and Plath’s late work in *Writing Back*, arguing that Plath’s political thought crystallized in the early 1960s; Luke Ferretter discusses the relationship between Plath’s politics and her fiction in *Sylvia Plath’s Fiction: A Critical Study*; and Langdon Hammer points out how Plath’s thoughts about politics is expressed in her visual art, from the cover of her eighth grade history project to her collage of Cold War images in 1962.³

To this fabric of Plath criticism I will, in the following pages, contribute a thread. Building on Smith’s statement that, in Plath’s work, “there is no gap between public and private,” and Brain’s assertion that Plath’s work, while often subjected to “conventional personal readings,” is also “deeply, politically engaged with the world,” I will consider how Plath transforms one specific personal experience artistically in a way that, first, shows an acute desire to be involved in politics, and second, shows that the solution to war’s destructive effects on society is to build interpersonal relationships, particularly, here, relationships of understanding and respect between the sexes. The relationship I consider here, one that, in my view, makes its way into Plath’s fiction, is a brief and eventually violent encounter with an “older,”

Plath’s work, across her lifetime, is rife with examples of this solution. For example, in a letter to her German pen-pal Hans-Joachim Neupert, dated January 29, 1949, Plath’s speculations about the peace-promoting benefits of a unified Europe are filtered through her emphasis on the fact that her correspondence with Neupert has helped her think of Germany not as a state, but as a body of people, a group of other Hans-Joachims whom she might also befriend. In her journals, Plath sees the ill effects of war on America society as a failure to love: “I could love a Russian boy – and live with him. It’s the living, the eating, the sleeping that everyone needs. Ideas don’t matter so much after all” (46). Plath’s reaction to the execution of the Rosenbergs indicts her fellow Americans for ignoring the Rosenberg’s humanity: “Two real people being executed. No matter. The larger emotional reaction over the United States will be a rather large...yawn” (542). War’s destructive effects on neighborly relationships on the home front are clear in her stories “Superman and Paula Brown’s New Snowsuit” (1955) and “The Shadow” (1959). As a final example, in a letter to her mother dated April 21, 1960, Plath writes of an anti-bomb protest she attended, where she stood with an astonishing mixture of races, ages, and walks of life—the kind of international community Plath had longed for and written about for over a decade: “I found myself weeping to see the tan, dusty marchers, knapsacks on their backs—Quakers and Catholics, Africans and whites, Algerians and French—40 percent were London housewives” (Letters Home 378).

In their essay “In Yeats’s House,” Gilbert and Gubar, writing about Plath’s use of battle imagery in her poetry and fiction, argue that “although Plath claimed in a late radio interview to be deeply concerned with world politics, she did not have an explicitly political imagination,” and that Plath’s use of war and battle imagery in her work has more to do with the war between the sexes than it does with any war between states that Plath would have experienced (297).

Both of these pieces of Plath’s work can be found in the Mortimer Rare Book Room at Smith College, Northampton, MA.

“partly bald,” and “quiet-but-nice” disabled veteran named Bill. Arguably, a version of this veteran appears in Plath’s unpublished story “Brief Encounter,” in which a Korean War veteran, also disabled (he is missing one leg), finds respite and community through his conversation with a young woman on a train. Through this story, Plath shows not only that she, as a young woman, belongs in conversations about war and politics, but also that true, caring communication between people from home front and war front is a powerful answer to the violence and strife begat by war.

Plath describes her blind date with the disabled veteran, Bill, in two places: first, in her journal, and second, in a letter to her mother. The letter is dated December 4, 1950; Plath’s date with the veteran occurred shortly before, during her first winter at Smith. In a relevant passage in her journal, Plath describes the date as rather stale and forced in its early stages—“Conversation is bad from the beginning,” she writes (40)—but eventually the two warm up to each other a bit when Plath, in a move that is part flirtation, part genuinely interested, confesses that she herself tires of dates where “so often you never do more than find out where your date lives.” “I’m willing to let you know me,” she tells Bill, “if you’ll do the same. Then tonight won’t be a total loss” (41). The conversation changes immediately and becomes meaningful, partly because, we gather, it has shifted away from shallow small talk and delved into the more weighty topics of politics and war: “He starts talking about political science. You ask questions, loving him for sharing a little of what matters with you” (41). When Bill suggests that they walk outside, because “we can’t talk here,” Plath complies; when he confesses that his father died recently—a man who, he says, “used to talk to me the way you did” about political science, she comforts him, “impulsively patting his shoulder maternally. There there baby” (41). Immediately after this scene of maternal comforting, Plath asks Bill to tell her about the war:

“Tell me. About the war.” (He’s a veteran. Pat told you. He was disabled. You wonder if he has a wooden leg and think how noble you would be if he had one.)

“Where were you hurt?” you ask delicately.

“I got hit in the lungs by a shell. I was in the hospital two years.”

“What’s it like to fight? to kill someone?” (Your curiosity is aflame. Granted you can’t be a man, but he can tell you how it was.)

He is nonchalant. “You go from one island to another, practicing. Then one day you start out again. ‘This one isn’t taken,’ they say. You get out. You eat, sleep, joke. What do you do if you see an accident? You try to fix him up. That’s all you do to your guys in war. It’s not so different.” (J 41)

Here, Plath’s interest in Bill is shown clearly—if it wasn’t altogether clear already—to be less than genuine; the relationship she cultivates with him is, on her part, out of a desire for information rather than a wish for companionship. She even writes to herself that if Bill’s injury had permanently maimed him, “how noble” she would be for going out with him.

Shortly after, their conversation takes a slight turn away from war and towards matters equally unsuitable for a nice young lady. “You want to be worldly,” Plath writes. “You ask with impersonal gravity, ‘Have you had many women?’” (J 42). As Plath questions him, Bill confesses to having had three lovers; he follows this confession by telling Plath: “I want you to be mine, all mine,” to which Plath responds, internally and sarcastically: “(You think vaguely of a marriage proposal. How lovely - he has become captivated by your keen and sympathetic mind)” (J 42). What happens next first terrifies and then enrages Plath: Bill assaults her, pushing her down in the pine needles—“You are sick. He is damn strong”—while all the things Plath has been told about good young women’s responsibilities concerning sex race through her mind: “You are playing a part. You want him, yet you remember: ‘Once a woman has intercourse she isn’t satisfied.’ ‘You need time and security for full pleasure.’ ‘You’ll be finished at Smith’” (J 42). Bill backs off in response to her struggling, and Plath tries, weakly, to explain to Bill “how it is”; the two reach an impasse, a gulf widened by mutual lack of understanding, when Bill replies in kind: “‘You don’t know how it is,’ he says. ‘You can’t, when you’re all burning, on fire inside’” (J 43). In her journals, Plath concedes her ignorance, parenthetically and to herself: “(Okay, so you don’t),” but closes the entry with words of impotent rage: “You know that you won’t go out with him again if he asks. But you will never take a walk. You will never be alone. And you hate him because he has deprived you of that: - - walks and aloneness. And you hate him because he is a boy. And you won’t see him if he asks again” (43).⁴

Plath is simultaneously aroused by Bill’s actions and hating him for assaulting her, simultaneously curious about and despising him, simultaneously reminded that she doesn’t understand male sexual arousal yet acutely aware of, and frustrated in the desire to satisfy, her own: “You pull away, disgusted, yet not disgusted” she writes (43). This journal entry clearly depicts a failed attempt at relationship,

Karen Kukil, in *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, notes that Plath’s conflicted response to her date with Bill is reflected even in how she edits her own language in this passage. Plath originally ended this journal entry with the line: “But you will see him if he asks again. You are a girl”; earlier in the paragraph, she also originally wrote: “You know that you will go out with him again if he asks,” but changed “will” to “won’t” later. Kukil also notes that Plath continued to see Bill after their first date (678).

begun with perhaps a hint of promise but ending in violence, misunderstanding, fear, and frustration.

This maelstrom of frustrated desire and anger toward men and their greater sexual freedom also figures, though Plath has clearly edited it, in a letter Plath wrote to her mother, dated December 4, 1950, which I mentioned above. She begins, as she did in the journal entry, by talking about how she decided "to stab in the dark and see if I could get to know him better," rather than continuing with small talk (Letters Home 62). "I told him I like to write and draw and know people more than just on the surface," she writes to Aurelia: "Evidently, he was rather overwhelmed by the fact that I could be so intelligent and yet not be ugly or something, and...he told me that he was twenty-five, disabled in the last war. Naturally that bowled me over, so I asked if he could tell me at all about it" (62). She also mentions that she and her date seemed to genuinely connect: "He told me a little about fighting in the Marianas and about what it is like to have to kill someone or be killed. Then he asked when my father died, and when I told him, he said his died two weeks ago... So he told me how he felt about him and said that the other girls he'd been out with since didn't give a damn, etc" (62-3). And, as she did in her journals, she writes about how "he seemed to think we should have intercourse," and that "he said...that the Marine Corps wasn't the place to be a gentleman and that ideals didn't quite matter when you slept and lived in the mud," and about the other women he had slept with (63). Just as in her journals, in her letter to her mother, she describes the date as beginning with her attempt to gain information about what war is like. She and Bill's apparent bond, and then, at the end of the date, the sharp reminder of the rift between their expectations, experiences, and the mores they are each told to follow.

Both of these passages are not straightforward reports of Plath's date. Instead, and especially in the passage in her journal, Plath describes the date and does two other things besides: first, she describes not just the events of the date but her responses to them, particularly in her parenthetical asides; second, and significantly, she deliberately transforms those events artistically. Her use of the second person pronoun in her journal is one of the clearest examples of her efforts to employ artistic techniques in what might have been a more straightforward narration of the night's events. It seems safe to claim, then, that in her journals—in all of her writing that cannot be classified as "fiction" or "poetry"—Plath is still, and always, working on her art. Therefore, it seems true as well that for Plath, her curiosity about war and her conversation with Bill about his war experience, their aborted tryst and her anger about gender-specific sexual mores are not separable incidents. These two events are very much connected to her; apart from the simple fact that the incidents are juxtaposed on the page, Bill's promiscuity is also attributed to his being part of the military, and Plath's interest in Bill stems partly from his ability to give her the information about politics and war that she seeks. What these passages show, then, is the intense connection in Plath's experience between seemingly "non-political" things, like dates and sex, and "truly political" things, like war. Even further: for Plath, these experiences are all, if not war-related experiences, indeed political experiences, and separating what may seem the trifles of her romantic, social, and even artistic life from the questions she asks of herself and others about matters of war and the State is at best unfortunate and, at worst, could potentially be a source of profoundly limited analysis of Plath's work.

To separate the "non-political" from the "truly political" in Plath's work, then, is, in my view, a grave mistake, and leads both to misinterpretations of that work and a too-hasty devaluing of her views—particularly those in the early 1950s—of state politics and war. In *Writing Back*, for instance, Robin Peel, though he offers an highly detailed analysis of the relationship between Plath's political thought and creative work in the last years of her life, establishes first that a political lens "has significance for a reading of [her] 1960s texts that is not true of Plath's pre-England 1950s writing, where the political awareness is often perfunctory" (34), and that, more significantly for my purposes here, "in the 1950s, Plath defined and discussed herself primarily in relation to imaginative writing, art, and immediate personal relationships. Her relationship to the state was secondary" (26).⁵ In Peel's view, it is important to draw a sharp distinction not only between Plath's more purely "political" thoughts and writing, and her writing about creative work and "personal relationships," but also between what seems, to Peel, to be Plath's more and less *bona fide* attempts at political thought and engagement. In my view, however, attempting to distinguish between more and less genuine and more and less "perfunctory" examples of political awareness in Plath's writing offers little that is of value for Plath scholarship. Of much more value and significance is identifying where concerns about war and the state appear in Plath's writing and considering how those concerns relate to their contexts both in the text itself and in the world Plath lived in outside the text. Further, readers and scholars alike would do well to keep in mind that for Plath, all questions—whether of the State, or of navigating family and romantic relationships, or of planning her future and navigating her career and educational paths—are political questions.

In light of the above ideas, then, and also in light of Plath's description of her date with the veteran, Plath's early 1952 story "Brief Encounter" becomes not merely a college exercise or even a strong attempt at fiction by a gifted writer whose creative abilities have budded but not fully flowered. Instead, "Brief

In Peel's more recent work in both his 2004 essay "The Ideological Apprenticeship of Sylvia Plath" and 2007 essay "The Political Education of Sylvia Plath," he does bring Plath's earlier writing—particularly her coursework as a student at Smith and at Cambridge—into his discussion of Plath's development as a political thinker. However, Peel continues to privilege Plath's later work in *The Bell Jar* and *Ariel*, arguing in his most recent essay that Plath's "post-1960 experience involved a reassessment, revival, and restoration of a dormant political engagement, culminating in the *Ariel* sequence" (40-41).

In his discussion of “Brief Encounter” in his book *Sylvia Plath’s Fiction*, Ferretter argues that “love, marriage, home and family—these are the values the story privileges, in direct contrast to war and to the basis of America’s participation in the Cold War” (100).

Due to copyright restrictions, I cannot quote directly from any of Plath’s unpublished works. Here, I instead paraphrase the content of “Brief Encounter”; later in the essay, I paraphrase from one of Plath’s letters to her mother for the same reason. Both “Brief Encounter” and this letter can be found in the archives of the Lilly Library at Indiana University, Bloomington, IN.

Encounter” does several things at once. First, it not only continues but further sharpens the connection between the more obviously political, concerns of war and the state, and the less obviously political, concerning the presence and effects of power relationships in everyday life, particularly where gender and sex are concerned. Second, in this story, Plath emphasizes the fact that, while waging war drives a wedge between the soldier and the home front, such a rift can also be bridged through relationship and the reunification of family, as Luke Ferretter notes.⁶ Third, and most significantly, “Brief Encounter” can be read as Plath’s redemption of Bill the veteran and men like him. The erotic elements the story contains, and the “brief encounter” that it details, parallel Plath’s date with Bill in a way that suggests that the two can be compared. Plath transforms her frustrated date, and the failed attempt at relationship it depicts, into a story about relationship’s ability to potentially overcome the violence of war and the alienation felt by a returning veteran.

These first two points above are so intertwined that I will discuss them, and the way they are both evidenced in “Brief Encounter,” together. First, then, the story sharpens the connection between the political concerns of war and the state, and those of everyday life; it does so partly through its portrayal of, second, a young woman with whom a recently returned, now alienated Korean War veteran finds brief connection.

“Brief Encounter” takes place on a train, and as the story begins, readers are introduced to its protagonist, a young man referred to only as “the veteran,” as he returns to his seat next to a female stranger after a trip to the dining car. He offers the girl a cigarette, which she politely refuses.⁷ The veteran settles in for what he thinks will be a lonely ride. This sort of loneliness is, we quickly learn, something the veteran is used to and believes he will endure for the rest of his life; in fact, the girl’s refusal of his offered cigarette is, for the veteran, one more example of the way that people on the home front speak to him, keeping him at a distance while remaining unfailingly polite. Feeling cut off from the people in the warm interior of the train, the veteran looks away from the girl beside him and stares past her out the window, feeling as though he has more in common with the dark, bleak emptiness of the winter landscape outside the train than with the warmth, light, and potential for human interaction within it.

As the story’s early pages unfold, the divide between the veteran’s experience and the experiences of the people on the train becomes clear and stark. The veteran sees a group of new recruits attempt lewd flirtation with the girl sitting next to him; he pities them, realizing that they think much of themselves now, but will be surprised, unpleasantly so, after a few years on the front. The difference between the new recruits and the veteran parallels the difference the veteran sees between the civilians in the early days of the war, frightened by the threat of Communism and ready to rally beneath the flag as bands played patriotic songs, and the people he sees around him now. However, instead of having been changed because of experience and newfound—and hard-won—knowledge, as the veteran has, the people around him seem to have moved in the opposite direction: their early flush of involvement with and investigation into the war effort has faded back into ignorance. It is difficult, the veteran thinks on the story’s third page, to remember that anything is wrong at all once a body finds himself back in the States, away from the war front.

However, the division between home front and war front, between the people on the train and the lonely veteran among them, is prelude to the veteran’s second, and successful, attempt to engage the girl next to him in conversation, and their conversation and brief connection stands in direct contrast to the unknowingly alienating presence of the others on the train. Further, the girl is not only willing to listen, but she is genuinely able to relate to the veteran’s experiences, despite never having been to war herself. By the end of the story, though the connection forged by the veteran and the girl is short-lived and cannot fully overcome the alienation the veteran so acutely feels, their brief encounter does mitigate some of its effects. Through his relationship, however short-lived, with the girl on the train, the veteran is allowed some respite from the effects of the war. The girl’s involvement in this relationship, in turn, shows that the concerns of war certainly do affect and deeply concern those on the home front. When those on the home front deny their involvement and forget, the rift between fronts is widened; however, when people, like the girl on the train, do seize hold of that involvement, they can help bridge that gap through meaningful relationship, however short-lived.

The conversation between the girl and the veteran does not begin with the war. Instead, the veteran asks her about her art book, confessing that he could never really understand modern art, asking her to help mitigate his ignorance. The question, and the veteran’s grin as he asks it, are flirtatious, of course, and are immediately followed by a description of the girl as the veteran sees her: a smiling face, a slender body sheathed in a gray dress, almost-blond hair, a mouth red-lipped and sweet. The girl represents to the veteran a human connection that is at once tied to the political—it might help him narrow the alienating division between home and war front, and its effects on his life—and also to the erotic. Significantly, the relationship between the girl and the veteran, genuine though it is short-lived, combines

political concerns and sexual ones, "serious" conversation with flirtation. By having the veteran's "brief encounter" happen with a young woman, Plath deliberately intertwines the stuff of war and the State with that of relationships and everyday life; the division between home front and war front is a false an alienating one, as political questions and concerns are everywhere, and should involve everyone.

Further, it is important that the girl with whom the veteran speaks is not only female and desirable, as well as intuitively aware of the divide between home and war front that the veteran so acutely feels, but that she is also curious about the veteran's experience in a way that serves to close, not widen, that divide. After beginning their conversation talking about modern art and where they each are traveling, and after the veteran remarks that it will be strange to be home after two years away, the girl asks him, casually and without pity or awkwardness, whether he has been "over there." He tells her yes, that he has been in Korea; she asks him what it was like, confessing that she's always been curious about it. He tells her that it is "not much different," a statement that could be taken two ways. First, it might be read as the veteran's attempt to shield the girl (and perhaps himself) from the stark differences between the violent war front in Korea and the peaceful home front in the States. However, in my view, it seems more likely that the statement should be read in a second way: Plath uses the veteran's statement here to collapse the divide between war and home front, keeping readers' focus on the relationship between the girl and the veteran rather than on the perceived gulf between their experiences of war. This story, both the girl's curiosity and the veteran's statement imply, is about connection rather than difference.

The girl's curiosity about the war and the veteran's experience in it is most significant, then, because it is not self-serving, but is clearly pursued as one step towards helping the veteran find a place within his own family's home again. A bit later in their conversation, the veteran confides to the girl that though he is going to Providence, Rhode Island to visit his family, especially his sister, he is very nervous to visit because he has been gone so long, and has missed milestones like his sister's wedding and even meeting her husband. He is so uncertain, in fact, about his welcome at home, that he has not told his sister that he will be visiting, and plans on getting a hotel for the night when he arrives in Providence, rather than going home. Clearly, the veteran feels an acute sense of separation from his family and from the pattern their lives have taken in his absence. Here, readers see that the division brought about by war does not only affect the soldier, while those at home stay safe and protected, but also profoundly affects the family to which the soldier belongs. And here as well, readers see that Plath's response to this division and its effects is also tied to relationships. "Brief Encounter" shows that one of war's profoundest effects is its forced separation of home front and war front, and of family members from each other. The profoundest form of healing after war is, then, the soldier's reintegration into family. The girl's angry, impassioned response to the veteran's saying that he plans to overnight in a hotel rather than at his sister's clearly shows the centrality of family relationships to the soldier's recovery from his war experiences and the alienation they have caused.

Thus far in my discussion of "Brief Encounter," I have shown how Plath uses the story to show how conjoined the concerns of war and the state are with those of everyday life, especially where the family is concerned, and that the possibility of healing after war comes about through relationships—again, especially family relationships. However, there is a third element to this story's presentation of the ameliorating effects of relationships upon those whom war has torn from the home front. In my view, this story can also be read as Plath's redemption of a very specific veteran, Bill, and her brief relationship with him. Read this way, the story can be viewed as more than an artistic expression of Plath's thoughts about war; it also becomes a deliberate attempt to connect her art to the world around her in a more tangible way, tied directly to her own love experiences and transforming them from frustrating and frightening to hopeful and restorative.

Though I acknowledge the potential pitfalls of so deliberately connecting Plath's date with Bill to "Brief Encounter," this connection is worth making for several reasons. The first of these is that such an autobiographical reading of the story is common in Plath scholarship and, if done carefully and sensitively, such readings can be quite fruitful, especially because so many of the characters and situations in her stories and poems correlate explicitly to events in Plath's life. The second reason I make this connection is that the veteran's clear sexual attraction to the girl, coupled with his relief at her sensitivity and willingness to converse with him, are parallel to Plath's experience with the veteran, though the way the veteran acts on his attraction is, of course, far different. Third, the girl's curiosity, shown by her questions about whether the veteran has been "over there" and her willingness to converse about it, mirrors Plath's curiosity about Bill's war experience. Fourth, Plath specifically mentions in her journal entry that Bill "was disabled. You wonder if he has a wooden leg and think how noble you would be if he had one" (J 41); in "Brief Encounter," the (disabled) veteran, just released from the Army hospital, walks on crutches and is offered seats by old women because he is missing his left leg. Finally, Plath's journals and her subsequent letters to her mother about the date show how deeply the incident affected her; she

finally decides to interpret Bill's actions as springing from an acute desire for someone to listen and understand, and it is this sentiment that is so clearly expressed in the story.

It is on this last point that I want to focus in more detail here. I have already discussed how Plath details the beginning of the date in both her journal entry and in a letter to her mother, focusing on Bill's surprise at her intelligence and the fact that she relates to and is concerned about the recent loss of his father—a sensitivity former dates and lovers have not shown him. However, in the journal entry and in her letters Plath shows that, as easily as she can interpret her conversation with Bill at the beginning of the date, figuring out what to think about the evening's later events is much more difficult. In writing my analysis of Plath's thoughts in these passages, I find myself struggling to find words to properly describe it: is it accurate to write that Bill attempted to rape Plath? If I do, how, then, do I interpret the tangle of disgust and desire that Plath so clearly articulates in her journal entry, and the fact that she seems to refuse Bill in part because of the sexual mores she feels constrained by, rather than because of her own lack of desire? However, what then do I do with Plath's lingering fear, her (conflicted; see note 3 above) decision not to see Bill again if he asks, and her hatred of him because his assaulting her has "deprived [her] of...walks and aloneness," of feelings of safety (J 43)? And how, as well, do I take into account the reality that Plath's thinking here has been shaped by a sexual ethic that elides women's sexual desires, while at the same time not depriving her of agency and the voice to tell her own story?

This struggle mirrors—through a glass, darkly—what, it seems fair to say, was Plath's struggle when trying to articulate her experience on that date. This struggle, or at least the way it manifests itself in Plath's writing, occurs not only in her journal entry but also in two letters she wrote to her mother in swift succession immediately after the date. The first letter she sends is the one I quoted above; in *Letters Home*, Aurelia Schober Plath has dated it as "December 4, 1950," and it was clearly written the Sunday after Plath's Saturday date with Bill. After describing Bill for her mother and telling her a bit about him and their conversation, Plath writes: "I guess he was overwhelmed with the idea that at last someone was interested in him as a person, not just as a date, that he seemed to think we should have intercourse. Of course, I was in a rather bad position, having gaily gone on a walk, but I told him quite forcibly that I wouldn't oblige—all of which made a scene" (*Letters Home* 63). Here, Plath is still giving her mother a rather straightforward narration of the date's events, though—in keeping with the system of sexual mores she has been taught, that "Once a woman has intercourse she isn't satisfied" and that she would be "finished at Smith" for obliging Bill (*Journals* 42)—she is quick to shift blame for Bill's assault onto herself and the position she has put herself in. However, immediately after this narration, Plath shifts from storytelling to analyzing:

"I came home rather in a fog. I don't know just how things will work out or whether I should see him again. I am just beginning to realize that you can't ostracize a person for having relations with a lot of others. That doesn't automatically cancel out their worth as human beings....I would like your opinion on the matter, as I don't quite know what to make of it, never having run into anyone quite so determined before. [...] (Why do I always inspire males to pour out their life story on my shoulder? I guess I just ask for it.)" (LH 63)

Unlike her journal entry, which ends in anger at Bill for depriving her of "walks and aloneness" and hatred of him "because he is a boy," not bound by the same rules she feels tightly around herself, Plath's letter to her mother concludes with an incongruous mix of self-blame and compassion toward Bill. Though her statement that "I guess I just ask for it" should trouble readers, it should not blind us to Plath's dedication to community rather than alienation; she emphasizes Bill's worth as a human being, and that he should not be "ostracize[d] for having relations with others."

This same dedication to community, to seeing Bill as a troubled and worthwhile human being rather than ostracizing him for his behavior, is evident in a second letter Plath wrote to her mother, almost immediately after the first letter discussed above. This letter, which Aurelia Schober Plath did not include in *Letters Home*, was likely composed immediately after the first; Plath wrote "Monday 3:30" at the top of the letter, and remarks in the first sentence how she wishes it could have been sent in the same mail as her first letter.⁸ At first, it seems as though Plath has decided that her agitation after her date with Bill was silly; she writes that she has to laugh at the night's events now, rather than feeling troubled. However, immediately after she seems to write off the whole experience, she tells her mother that, after talking over the date with some of the girls at Smith, and learning that many of them have had similar experiences, she has been led to conclude that Bill needed some sense of security and sympathy, and that Plath's willingness to listen affected him so profoundly that he reacted more eagerly than he might have otherwise.

Of course, of incredible significance here is the fact that Plath's seeming willingness to brush the assault

This letter can be found at the Lilly Library at Indiana University in Bloomington, IN.

by in these letters is indicative of her having been influenced by a system of sexual mores that demands tight restraint from women and that ultimately blames them if those mores are broken. However, in my view, Plath's words in her letters to her mother are hardly her final word on the subject, and thus she does not brush the incident aside, concluding that it's something that just happens to girls sometimes if they lead boys on. Plath's journal entry describing the date, which given its detail and intricacy may very well have been written after the letters to her mother, seems evidence of her rejection of such a sexual ethic; her words in other places in her journals, where she rails against the system of sexual mores that has been imposed upon her, provide further, and emphatic, evidence.⁹ Instead, Plath uses her art to write past this forced gap between male and female experience, particular as it relates to war; finally, she privileges—and honors—Bill's perceived desire for human connection rather than alienation over and above any system of sexual mores and expectations that divided them, and endangered her.

Plath's emphasis on relationships rather than forced divisions between human beings allows us, then, to read "Brief Encounter" as a striking reimagining of her date with Bill, and the kind of relationship it represents. Instead of writing from the girl's perspective, in some ways keeping the veteran at arm's length as an Other, Plath assumes the veteran's perspective. By doing so, she denies that the masculine experience of war is beyond her as a female writer, and does her utmost to sympathize with that experience. By including—frequently—the veteran's thoughts about the girl's attractiveness as they converse in the story, but by relegating those thoughts to a supporting role in what is, finally, a relationship based on both parties' interest in the other "as a person, not just as a date," as Plath writes her mother, Plath works to remove the threat of violence from sexual attraction and instead incorporates it into an ethic of relationship based on mutual respect for the other's humanness. Finally, by giving the veteran an ending past his brief relationship with the girl, where perhaps he will reconnect with his family and find relief from his feelings of alienation, Plath, in my view, gives veterans like Bill a possibility for connection and relationship. This story, finally, is Plath's way of bridging both the gap between gendered experiences of war, and the resulting—and painful—rifts that result in human relationships. A journal entry a few months after her date well sums up her emphasis on how the idea of "a man's world," and the violence in it, not only frustrates her, but also keeps her and other women—and men—from knowing each other:

Yes, my consuming desire to mingle with road crews, sailors and soldiers, bar room regulars – to be part of a scene, anonymous [sic], listening, recording – all is spoiled by the fact that I am a girl, a female always in danger of assault and battery. My consuming interest in men and their lives is often misconstrued as a desire to seduce them, or as an invitation to intimacy. Yet, God, I want to talk to everybody I can as deeply as I can. (Journals 77)

Human connection, human relationships—these are the things that, for Plath, might mitigate not just violence between the sexes—the "danger of assault and battery" to which she refers—but even violence between nations.

A flaw lurks in this conclusion, however: at first glance, "Brief Encounter" does not end, as we might assume, on a positive, uplifting note, affirming that the girl and the veteran's brief connection will carry them both—particularly the veteran—into a happier life. The veteran and the girl do not exchange contact information and promise to write, nor does the story take us all the way to the veteran's sister's home, and allow us to witness his happy reunion with his family. Instead, the veteran and the girl say a brief good-bye on the train, and afterward she waves to him as he stands outside her window, grinning, but pale, with fear in his eyes, alone on the platform. Another passenger takes the seat next to the girl; this new woman is characterized in a way reminiscent of the comfortable excess, and of the ignorance about war's hardship, that so alienates the veteran at the beginning of the story. When the new woman greets her, the girl leans against the window, feigning sleep, refusing to engage in another brief relationship with a stranger on a train.

If the author in question were not Plath, we might interpret this ending as a return to reality, a reality that no brief connection formed between strangers can fully erase. And indeed, in many other places in Plath's work, we read a similar warning that this world of loneliness, alienation, and conflict is one to which we condemn ourselves if we allow the language of violence and fear—the language that dehumanizes the Rosenbergs, for example—to overwhelm our abilities to see others as real people.

But however often Plath's work gazes unflinchingly at the reality of human beings' violent treatment of each other, Plath's work is also pervaded with an equally unflinching, and often seemingly incongruous, optimism about humanity's unrealized capacity for community and reconciliation. Plath's impassioned insistence in her journals that she could "love a Russian boy – and live with him," and that this life of love could bridge gaps caused by violence and yawning between states (J 46), is voiced later and elsewhere in her work. In a 1956 letter to her mother, for example, Plath describes her attendance at a party

For example, about half a year after her date with Bill, Plath writes: "For if a man chooses to be promiscuous, he may still aesthetically turn up his nose at promiscuity. He may still demand a woman be faithful to him, to save him from his own lust. But women have lust, too. Why should they be relegated to the position of custodian of emotions, watcher of the infants, feeder of soul, body, and pride of man?" (J 77). An entry a few months later refers to "the potent [female] sex drive," which "could be used for either her triumph or her downfall. It could be her most dynamic asset or her most tragic flaw" (J 111).

in London thrown by Russian ambassadors; she ends her time at the party by "toasting Russo-American relations in vodka with a charming blond chap working in commerce." She and the "blond chap" agree that "if we could meet each other as simple people who wanted to have families and jobs and a good life, there would never be any wars, because we would make such friends" (Letters Home 242).

Thus, though conflict and division remain in the final pages of "Brief Encounter," it is the relationship forged by the encounter and its suggestion of humanity's potential to overcome violence through relationship that is central to the story. In "Brief Encounter," Plath refashions a piece of her own experience in a way that not only redeems Bill, the veteran who resorts to violence but craves understanding and relationship, but also further hones the humanist ethic of love and respect that pervades her later writing about war. "Brief Encounter," a story displaying the redemptive power of human relationship in a violent, alienating world, along with others of her early writings, forms the point which the arrows of her later political and war-related writing shoot off from. ○

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