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The role of second-person narration in Sylvia Plath's Smith Journal

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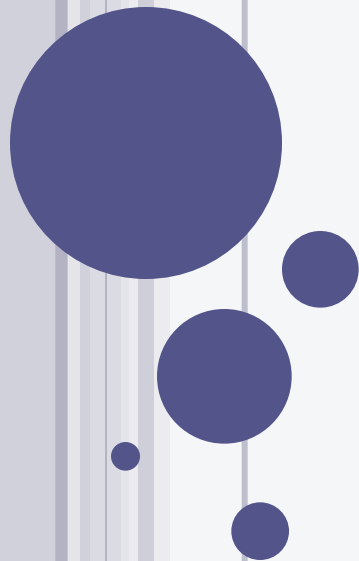
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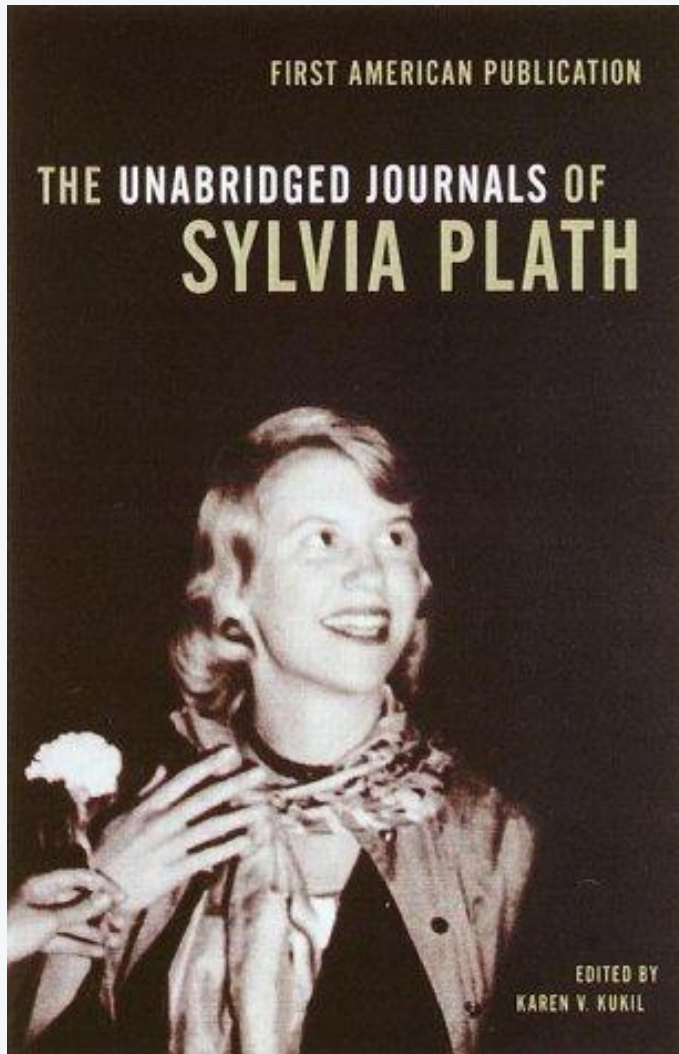
The Role of Second Person Narration

*In Sylvia Plath's
'Smith Journal'*

Zsófia Demjén,
Lancaster University



THE 'SMITH JOURNAL'



3. Stings October 6
1962 (1)

Bare-handed, I hand the combs.
The man in white smiles, bare-handed -
On cheese cloth gowns, ~~the~~ sweet + sweet,
The throats of our wrists ~~be~~ ^{be} ~~are~~ ^{are} ~~like~~ ^{like} ~~the~~ ^{the} ~~bees~~ ^{bees} ~~in~~ ⁱⁿ ~~the~~ ^{the} ~~air~~ ^{air}.
~~The bare hands are - to be bare~~ ~~perhaps~~
He + I, he and I

Have a thousand clean cells between us,
Eight ~~combs~~ ^{combs} ~~of~~ ^{of} ~~yellow~~ ^{yellow} ~~cup~~ ^{cup},
And he hives itself ~~to~~ ^{to} a teacup,
White ~~to~~ ^{to} ~~be~~ ^{be} ~~with~~ ^{with} pink flowers on it, ~~it~~
With excessive love I consumed it

"Thinking 'Sweetness, Sweetness,'"
~~Saying to the American~~
The broad cells, ~~grey~~ ^{grey} as the fossils of shells
Frenzied me, they seemed so old.
What ~~was~~ ^{was} I buying, ~~was~~ ^{was} ~~it~~ ^{it} ~~for~~ ^{for} ~~me~~ ^{me} ~~or~~ ^{or} ~~any~~ ^{any} ~~one~~ ^{one} ~~else~~ ^{else} ~~at~~ ^{at} ~~all~~ ^{at} ~~in~~ ⁱⁿ ~~it~~ ^{it}?

Is there any queen at all in it?

Is there is she is old, ~~is~~ ^{is}
Her wings torn shreds, her long body
Rutted of its plush -
Poor + bare, ~~poor~~ ^{poor} ~~and~~ ^{and} ~~shameful~~ ^{shameful} ~~and~~ ^{and} ~~shameful~~ ^{shameful}.

~~I think I am being cheated~~
I stand in a column
Of winged, unmiraculous women,
Honey-budgers. ~~I am no judge~~
I am no judge
Tough for ~~years~~ ^{years} I have, eaten dust
And dried plates with my dense hair.

And seen my strangeness exposed,
Blue dew from dangerous skin.
Will they hate me,
These women who only stung,
Whose news is the open cherry, ~~or~~ ^{or} ~~the~~ ^{the} ~~open~~ ^{open} ~~clover~~ ^{clover}?

In re
To

MEMORANDUM
SMITH COLLEGE

Date _____

SECOND-PERSON NARRATION (SPN)

“...second-person narration is a narrative mode in which the narrator tells a story to a (sometimes undefined, shifting, and/or hypothetical) narratee – delineated by you – who is also the (sometimes undefined, shifting, and/or hypothetical) principle actant in that story” (DelConte, 2003:207-8).

Simply: protagonist = narratee = you



FIRST PERSON NARRATION IN THE JOURNAL

“This morning I am at low ebb. I did not sleep well last night, waking, tossing, and dreaming sordid, incoherent little dreams. I awoke, my head heavy, feeling as if I had just emerged from a swim in a pool of warm polluted water. My skin was greasy, my hair stiff, oily, and my hands as if I had touched something slimy and unclean.”

(Entry 14, Kukil, 2000)



SECOND PERSON NARRATION IN THE JOURNAL

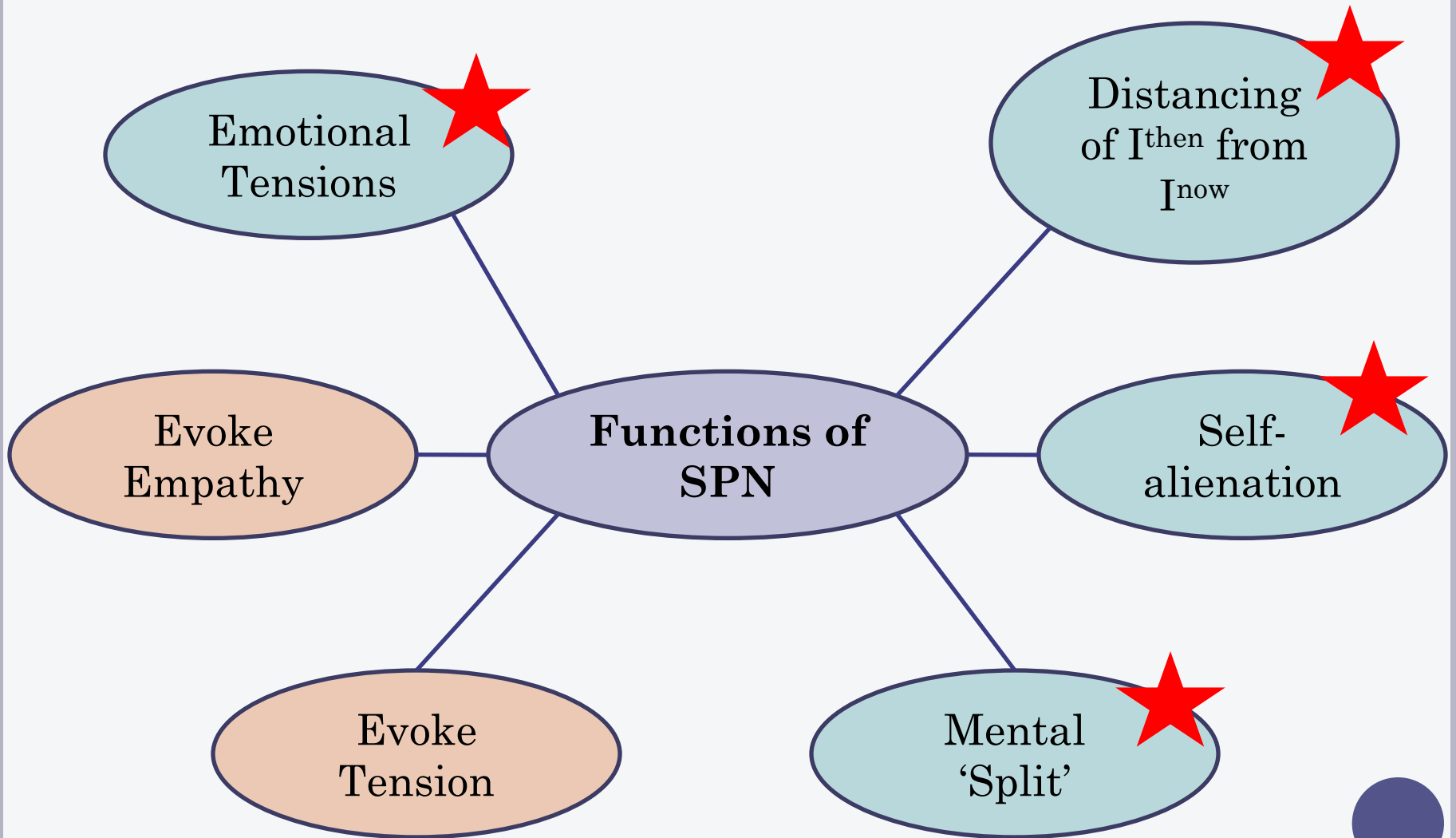
“You wonder about your eighteen years, ricocheting between a stubborn determination that you've done well for your own capabilities and opportunities . . . that you're competing now with girls from all over America, and not just from the hometown: and a fear that you haven't done well enough — You wonder if you've got what it takes to keep building up obstacle courses for yourself, and to keep leaping through them, sprained ankle or not. Again the refrain, what have you for your eighteen years?”

(Entry 81, Kukil, 2000)

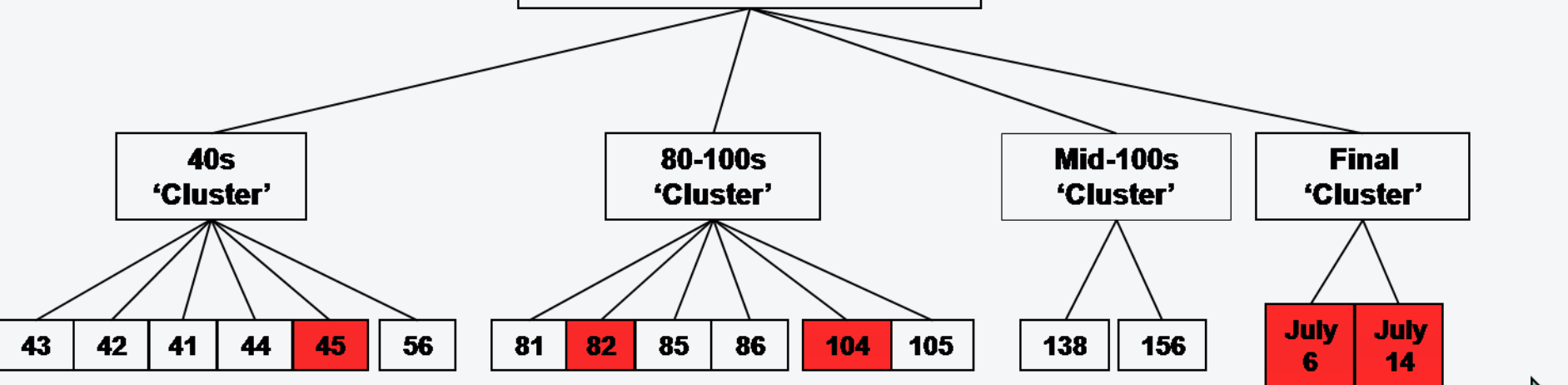


In General

In Self-address



Second-Person Narration in the Smith Journal



1951 1952 1953

Beginning of 1951
Towards the end of first year at Smith College
Mounting tension with flatmates
'Attempted rape'

June 15 – end of Summer of 1951
First work experience
First sexual experience

August 19, 1952 & November 1952
Start of 2nd year at Smith

July 1953
End of 2nd year at Smith
Editor of 'Smith Review'
Wins summer editorship at 'Madmoiselle' in New York

1953 August 24th
First suicide attempt



Era of 'Firsts'



Mounting Pressure

IN SECOND VERSUS FIRST-PERSON ENTRIES

- ↑ Self-reference
- ↑ Negation
- ↑ References to other people
- Time references: ↑ Past, ↓ Present + Future



INTERPRETATIONS FROM PSYCHOLOGY

- **↑** Self-reference
 - Depression, suicidality
 - Emotional upheaval, anxiety, trauma
 - Passivity – overuse of ‘me’
- **↑** Negation
 - Defence mechanism – denial
 - Suicidality
- **↑** References to other people (sometimes)
 - Post-trauma: sense of community
- Time references: **↑** Past, **↓** Present + Future
 - Psychological distancing from topic / emotional balance (in combination with reduced self-reference)



PAST TENSE SPN

“Somehow, sitting there in the light blue Plymouth, your Grandmother beside you, your mother in back, you cried with love for them because they were your own people, your own kind. Yet not all your own kind, but you were of their blood and bone, and no barriers were between. You talked, and cried a little, as you sat, for the beauty of the wild, lanky yellow flowers, and the rain, trickling down the blurred and wavy windows, rushing in streams down the windows. This hour was yours, to steer through the narrow crooked streets, to sit and talk and watch the rain, to absorb the love of kin, of rain, of the masts of sloops and schooners.”

(Entry 85, Kukil, 2000)



INSTANTANEOUS PRESENT SPN

“You fool — you are afraid of being alone with you own mind. You just better learn to know yourself, to make sure decisions before it is too late. 3 months, you think, scared to death. You want to call that man — You earned enough money to go. Why don't you go? Stop thinking self-ishly of razors & self-wounds & going out and ending it all. Your room is not your prison. You are. And Smith cannot cure you; no one has the power to cure you but yourself. Be an introvert for 3 months — stop thinking of noise, names, dances...”

(Entry July 6, Kukil, 2000)



INSTANTANEOUS PRESENT SPN ALTERNATIVE

“You are an inconsistent and very fright-ened hypocrite: you wanted time to think, to find out about yourself, your ability to write, and now that you have it: practically 3 months of god-awful time, you are paralyzed, shocked, thrown into a nausea, a stasis. You are plunged so deep in your own very private little whirlpool of negativism that you can't do more than force yourself into a rote where the simplest actions become forbidding and enormous. Your mind is incapable of thinking.”

(Entry July 6, Kukil, 2000)



CONCLUSIONS

SPN can be an expression of mental states in self-narratives

SPN can represent various mental states – more interdisciplinary research is needed.

SPN should be further subdivided to differentiate between the different functions.



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THANK YOU!

QUESTIONS? COMMENTS?

Contact: z.demjen@lancaster.ac.uk

