

# Open Research Online

---

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

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

### Conference or Workshop Item

How to cite:

Demjen, Zsofia (2009). The role of second-person narration in Sylvia Plath's Smith Journal. In: International Conference on Narrative, 4-6 Jun 2009, Birmingham, UK.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2009 Zsofia Demjen

Version: Version of Record

---

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

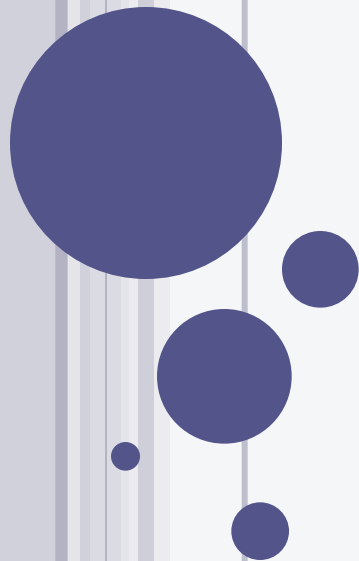
---

[oro.open.ac.uk](http://oro.open.ac.uk)

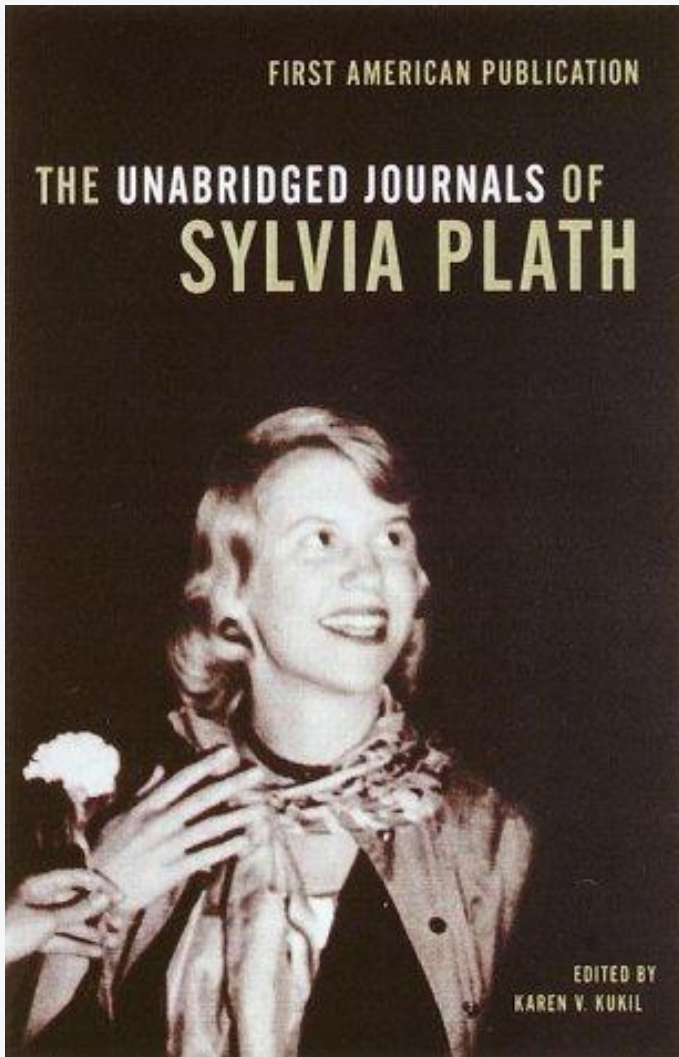
# The Role of Second Person Narration

*In Sylvia Plath's  
'Smith Journal'*

Zsófia Demjén,  
Lancaster University



# THE 'SMITH JOURNAL'



October 6  
1962 (1)

3. Stings  
Bare-handed, I hand the combs.  
The man in white smiles, bare-handed -  
Our cheese cloth gloves, ~~are~~ wet & sweet,  
The throat of an wrist ~~is~~ <sup>is</sup> ~~like~~ <sup>like</sup> flies.  
~~The hand writes~~ ~~as~~ ~~the~~ ~~black~~ ~~writing~~ ~~machine~~  
He & I, he and I  
Have a thousand clean alle between us,  
Eight ~~combs~~ <sup>combs</sup> of yellow cups,  
And he hives itself ~~to~~ <sup>to</sup> a teacup,  
White ~~to~~ <sup>to</sup> ~~be~~ ~~enough~~, with pink flowers on it, ~~with~~  
with excessive love I cherished it  
Thinking "Sweeters, sweeters,"  
~~Some~~ ~~to~~ ~~the~~ ~~black~~ ~~man~~  
The broad alle, ~~grey~~ <sup>grey</sup> as the fossil of shells  
frightened me, they seemed so old.  
What ~~is~~ <sup>is</sup> I buying, <sup>what</sup> ~~is~~ <sup>is</sup> ~~the~~ ~~money~~ ~~for~~?  
Is ~~there~~ <sup>there</sup> any queen at all in it?  
For there is <sup>she</sup> <sup>is</sup> <sup>old</sup>, ~~there~~  
Her wings ~~to~~ <sup>to</sup> ~~the~~ ~~straw~~, her long body  
Ruffled of its plush -  
Poor & bare, ~~page~~ <sup>page</sup> ~~is~~ <sup>is</sup> ~~brave~~ <sup>brave</sup> ~~and~~ <sup>and</sup> ~~even~~ <sup>even</sup> ~~shameful~~.  
~~I think I am being cheated~~  
I stand in a ~~old~~ <sup>old</sup> ~~man~~  
Of winged, unmiraculous women,  
Honey-budgers. ~~I am no judge~~  
I am no judge  
Tough for ~~so~~ <sup>so</sup> years I have, eaten dust  
And dried places with my dense hair.  
And seen my strangeness ~~escape~~,  
Blue dew film dangerous skin.  
Will they ~~love~~ <sup>love</sup> me,  
These women who only ~~scare~~,  
Who ~~knows~~ <sup>knows</sup> is the open ~~cherry~~ <sup>cherry</sup> ~~of~~ <sup>of</sup> ~~the~~ ~~open~~ ~~cloves~~?

To \_\_\_\_\_  
In re \_\_\_\_\_

---

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

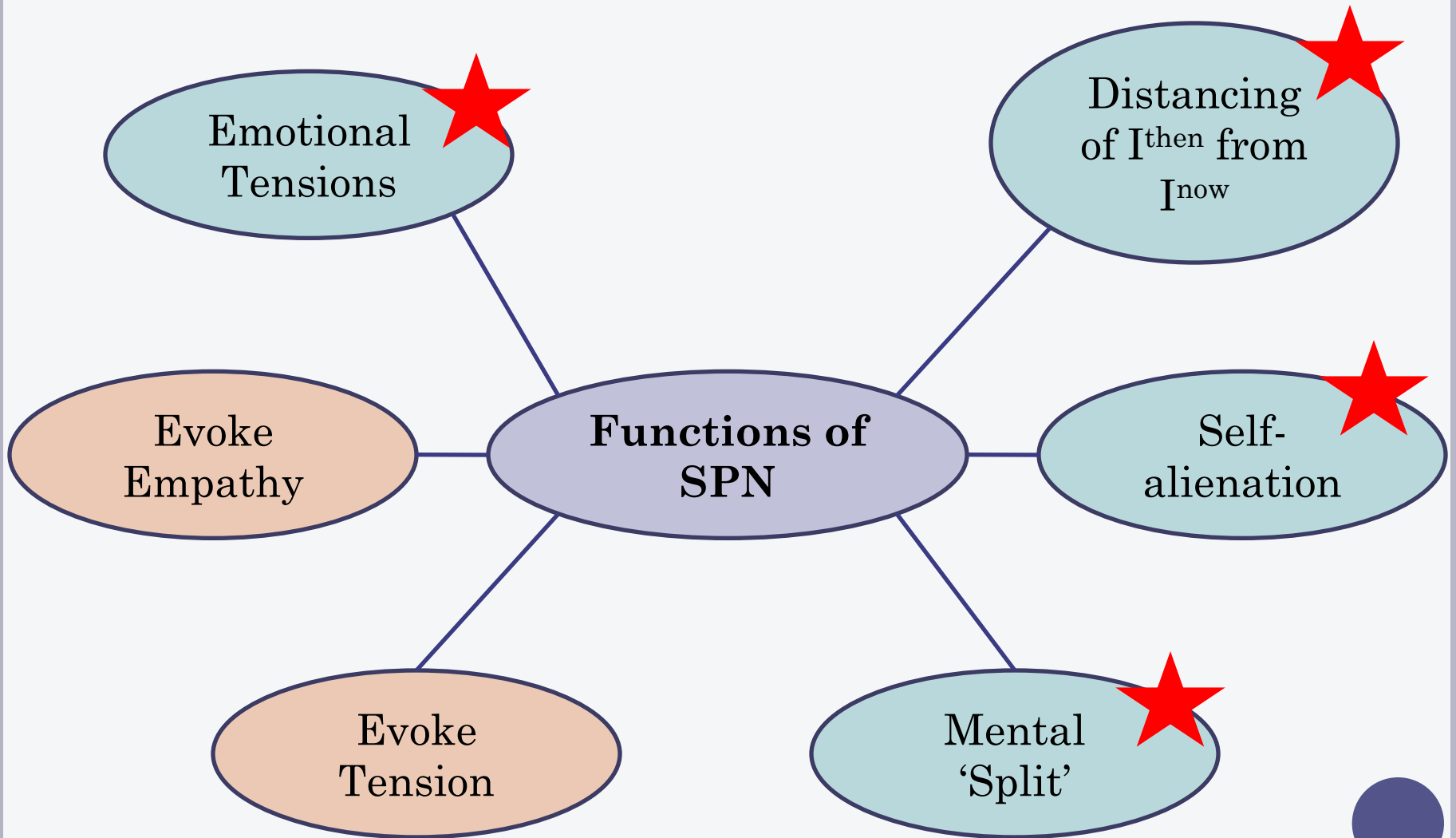
“You wonder about your eighteen years, ricocheting between a stubborn determination that you've done well for your own capabilities and opportunities . . . that you're competing now with girls from all over America, and not just from the hometown: and a fear that you haven't done well enough — You wonder 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)

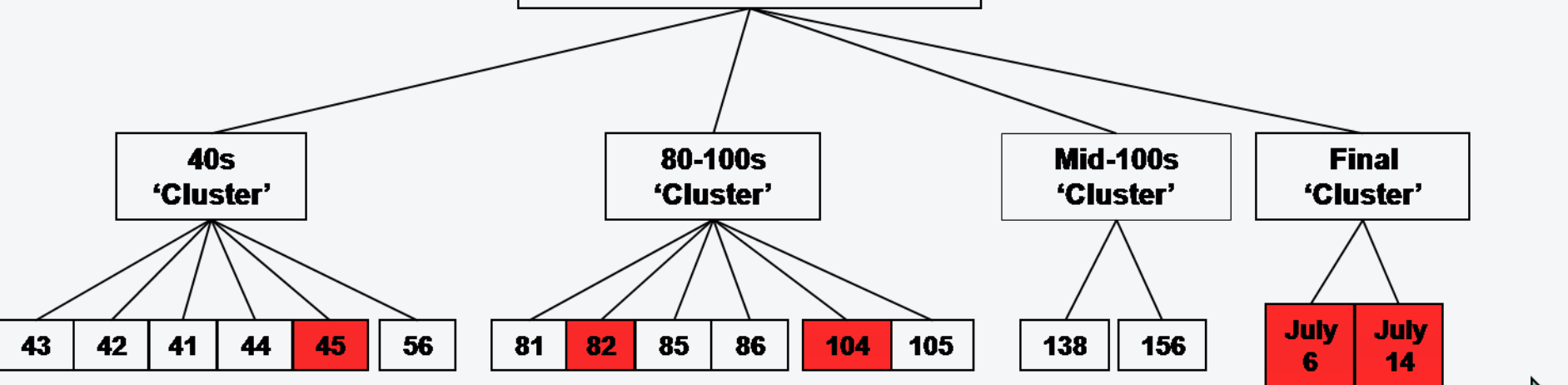


In General

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 2<sup>nd</sup> year at Smith**

**July 1953**  
**End of 2<sup>nd</sup> year at Smith**  
**Editor of 'Smith Review'**  
**Wins summer editorship at 'Madmoiselle' in New York**

**1953 August 24<sup>th</sup>**  
**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.



# SELECTED REFERENCES

- DelConte, M. (2003) Why You Can't Speak: Second-Person Narration, Voice and a New Model for Understanding Narrative. *Style*. Vol.37, Iss.2, pp.204-219.
- Fludernik, M. (1994b) Second-Person Narrative as a Test Case for Narratology: The Limits of Realism. *Style*. Vol.28, Iss.3, pp.445-477.
- Hargitai, R., Naszódi, M., Kis, B., Nagy, L., Bóna, A., László, J. (2007) Linguistic Markers of Depressive Dynamics in Self-Narratives: Negation and Self-Reference. *Empirical Text and Culture Research*, Iss.3, pp.26-38.
- Kukil, K. (eds.) (2000) *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*. New York: Anchor Books
- Margolin, U. (1990) Narrative 'You' Revisited. *Language and Style*. Vol.23, Iss.4, pp.425-446
- G Pennebaker, J.W. and Lay, T.C. (2002) Language Use and Personality During Crises: Analyses of Mayor Rudolph Guiliani's Press Conferences. *Journal of Research in Personality*. Vol.36, pp271-282
- Pennebaker, J.W., Mehl, M.R. and Niederhoffer, K.G. (2003) Psychological Aspects of Language Use: Our Words, Our Selves. *Annual Review of Psychology*. Vol 54. pp547-77.
- Rude, S.S., Gortner, E-M. and Pennebaker, J.W. (2004) Language use of depressed and depression-vulnerable college students. *Cognition and Emotion*. 18, 8, 1121-1133.

THANK YOU!

QUESTIONS? COMMENTS?

Contact: [z.demjen@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:z.demjen@lancaster.ac.uk)

