In the Depths with Sylvia Plath's “Mushrooms”

Sylvia Plath's “Mushrooms” first drew my attention when I thumbed through the book because of its intriguingly flowing language. Made up of eleven stanzas, each set of three lines is short and, despite the lack of a rhyme scheme or other pattern, flows well. Unlike mushrooms, digging deeper into the poem reveals much beneath the surface.

Let us first take a look at the surface meaning of the poem. The first stanza, “Overnight, very / Whitely, discreetly / Very quietly,” sets the scene by establishing the darkness and quiet that mushrooms call home. The second, “Our toes, our noses / Take hold on the loam, / Acquire the air,” tells two of the main activities a mushroom takes part in, holding itself in the sandy ground and taking in air. “Nobody sees us, / Stops us, betrays us; / The small grains make room,” emphasizes the loneliness a mushroom must experience, but at the same time emphasizes that they live a life undisturbed even by the ground beneath them. The next set of stanzas begins “Soft fists insist on / Heaving the needles, / the leafy bedding / Even the paving,” likely referring to a gentle wind disturbing the loose foliage around them while the next section, “Our hammers, / Our rams, / Earless and eyeless, / Perfectly voiceless, / Widen the crannies, / Shoulder through holes” describes how steadfast the fungus and its roots are. “We diet on water, / On crumbs of shadow, / Bland-mannered, asking / Little or nothing,” tells how little the mushroom needs from its environment, simply a little bit of moisture and “crumbs of shadow,” or the bits of decaying material that hide out of the way in the forest. The next segment reveals that, despite how little they ask for from their environment, they can serve many purposes: “So many of us! / So many of us! / We are shelves, we are / Tables, we are meek, / We are edible, / Nudgers and shovers / In spite of
ourselves”. The last few lines tell the real purpose for mushrooms’ existence, to increase their numbers: “Our kind multiplies: / We shall by morning / Inherit the earth / Our foot's in the door”.

It is at the conclusion of the poem that it became clear the poem's theme did not involve mushrooms. A brief look into the author's life reveals that Plath was a feminist, which unearths the feminist ideas buried within the poem. Looking back at the words of the poem, the idea seems clear, the words could certainly be used to describe a woman's place in society when the poem was written. “our noses...acquire the air” in the second stanza implies that women are testing the air and have found that “nobody sees..., stops..., [or] betrays [them].” Similarly, “Our toes... take hold on the loam” and “the small grains make room” could imply that women are taking their place within society and the “small grains”, or men, are unknowingly making room. The next three stanzas further describe women's unnoticed edging into power and the following lines tell of strategy: ask for little from men and they will overlook your quest for power. The last few stanzas could be furthering the same idea, that there are many women hiding in plain sight, or describing their supporting role. Without the support of women, men would be nowhere. The most important lines in the poem are those at its conclusion: “Our kind multiplies: We shall by morning inherit the earth; our foot’s in the door”. When the poem was published in 1960, it may have only taken a united front for women to gain considerable power. After all, the meek (26) shall inherit the Earth.

After much consideration, it becomes clear that Plath was not writing about mushrooms; her use of first person throughout the poem indicates that she is talking about a
group to which she belongs, and it makes sense that the group would be women as opposed to mushrooms. The intended reaction is likely the one I had, realization of the truth. As described throughout the poem, women have always been in a position to take control of their lives. Plath has inspired the manipulation of men that generations of women have used and will continue to use until the end of time.