

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO



SYLVIA PLATH

Edited by Jo Gill

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The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath

The controversies that surround Sylvia Plath's life and work mean that her poems are more read and studied now than ever before. This *Companion* provides a comprehensive and authoritative overview of Sylvia Plath's poetry, prose, letters and journals and of their place in twentieth-century culture. These newly commissioned essays by leading international scholars represent a spectrum of critical perspectives. They pay particular attention to key debates and to well-known texts such as *Ariel* and *The Bell Jar*, while offering original and thought-provoking readings to new as well as more experienced Plath readers. The *Companion* also discusses three recent additions to the field: Ted Hughes's *Birthday Letters*, Plath's complete Journals and the 'Restored' edition of *Ariel*. With its invaluable guide to further reading and chronology of Plath's life and work, this *Companion* will help students and scholars understand and enjoy Plath's work and its continuing relevance.

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PREFACE

The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath offers a critical overview of Plath's writing (predominantly the poetry, but also fiction, letters and journals) and of its place in twentieth-century literature and culture. The eleven specially commissioned essays in the collection are the work of leading international scholars in the field and represent a spectrum of critical perspectives and practices.

The book is divided into two sections. The first section discusses Plath's writing in relation to relevant contexts and perspectives (exploring the temptations and limitations of reading her work biographically, the insights to be gained by examining its historical and ideological contexts, the difficulties and rewards of adopting a psychoanalytic perspective and the influence of her writing on contemporary American and British poetry). The aim here is to show that Plath's work is not entire unto itself; that it emerged in particular historical, ideological, literary and personal contexts, and, moreover, that the figure of Plath we may think we know is a product of a complex, mutable and contested tissue of discourses. These essays combine a critical awareness of key issues and debates in Plath studies with incisive readings of the poetry and prose; their intention is to inform and to stimulate the reader's own engagement with the writing.

The second section discusses a range of Plath texts in turn – from her earliest collection *The Colossus* to the poems of the *Ariel* period to *The Bell Jar* and the manuscripts of *Letters Home* – raising a number of important and challenging issues, and proposing a variety of reading positions. This section is interested in both the diversity and the detail of Plath's work, in its richness, its craft and its technical complexity, and it focuses on Plath's concentrated and ambitious use of poetic form. It draws attention to its sometimes overlooked variety and it alerts readers to Plath's sustained manipulation of a range of genres and voices and her development of a sophisticated and linguistically self-aware poetics. It reflects on the publishing history of specific volumes and the construction of a Plath 'canon' and highlights recent critical debates about agency

and ownership, about the politics of editing and the ethics of criticism. The essays in both sections are informed by an awareness of gender as a factor in the production and reception of Plath's work.

Like others in the series, the *Companion to Plath* draws on and – implicitly or otherwise – assesses previous scholarship in the field. This critical heritage is examined in detail, where relevant, in the chapters which follow (and a comprehensive list of sources is provided at the end of the book). Nevertheless a brief survey of the field of Plath studies is useful at this point as a way of setting the scene and of demonstrating, first, that approaches to Plath's work change over time and second, that there is no orthodoxy of critical opinion. Some of the earliest studies of Plath's writing – for example, C. B. Cox and A. R. Jones's 1964 article 'After the Tranquillized Fifties' and Al Alvarez's 1967 'Beyond all this Fiddle' – considered it in the context of the newly emergent 'confessional mode' of poetry (the name was coined by M. L. Rosenthal in a review of Robert Lowell's 1959 *Life Studies*) with which Plath – rightly or wrongly – was typically associated. Plath was an acquaintance of Lowell's, had studied alongside poet Anne Sexton in his Boston University writing workshops and seemed, particularly in the poems which culminated in *Ariel*, to belong within this frame. Such an association seems now to be rather limiting, although recent revisions of confessionalism in the light of, say, Michel Foucault's work and in the context of Deborah Nelson's reading of the mode as a product of Cold War anxieties about privacy and surveillance suggest the potential value of revisiting Plath's work in the light of a revised definition of the term.

Contemporaneous with this (and perhaps an inevitable consequence both of the turn to the personal and private in this period, and of the particular circumstances of Plath's death) were early and persistently influential biographical accounts. Memoirs by family and friends featured in Charles Newman's 1970 collection *The Art of Sylvia Plath* (which reproduced articles originally published in a 1966 special issue of the journal *Tri-Quarterly*). This was followed by Al Alvarez's recollections of Plath's last days, *The Savage God* (UK 1971/US 1972), and some years later by Anne Stevenson's controversial *Bitter Fame* – the latter ignited arguments about authority and ownership of truth which continue to smoulder to this day. A characteristic of such works – although we should note that this is not a problem unique to Plath studies – is a worrying conflation of poet and speaker, of lived experience and poetic text. Of late, more sophisticated treatments (Janet Malcolm's *The Silent Woman* (1994) and Jacqueline Rose's *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (1991), which she later supplemented with an essay entitled 'This is Not a Biography') take a step back and question the status, value and purpose of literary biography.

Another early approach to the study of Plath was through the lens of mythology. Judith Kroll, author of one of the first book-length studies of Plath's work, *Chapters in a Mythology* (1976), cites the profound influence on Plath (through Hughes) of Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*. Steven Gould Axelrod, however, demurs, arguing that 'Plath never actually cared much about *The White Goddess* except when she was feigning an interest in topics of interest to her husband' (*Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 46).

A psychoanalytical approach to Plath's life and writing seems always to have proved tempting. David Holbrook's *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence* (1976) examines the poetry in the light of what it diagnoses as the poet's schizoid personality – a condition which Holbrook wishes to ameliorate or neutralize in order to protect her vulnerable readers: 'these works may be offering falsifications or forms of moral inversion which are absurd, or even deranged, and may even do harm to the sensitive and responsive young person' ((London: Athlone Press, 1976), p. 2). In the same year, Edward Butscher's contentious *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness* appeared. More recent psychoanalytical accounts, for example Jacqueline Rose's *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, Elisabeth Bronfen's *Sylvia Plath* (1998) and Christina Britzolakis's *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning* (1999), have developed a rather different approach, one inflected by the insights of post-structuralism and feminism. Here, as in contemporary literary studies more generally, the shift has been away from analysing and pathologizing the author to an acknowledgement of the uncertainty of truth, the slipperiness of language and the indeterminacy of the subject.

Plath's writing coincided with the emergence of the second wave of feminism and thus her work has frequently been read in terms of its recognition and representation of the conditions of life for women of the 1960s onwards. Studies by Alicia Ostriker, Jan Montefiore, Suzanne Juhasz and many others established Plath's importance in a newly validated tradition of women's writing. More recent feminist approaches have challenged some of the assumptions of such criticism. Renée Curry's thought-provoking account of representations of whiteness in modern women poets, *White Women Writing White: H. D., Elizabeth Bishop, Sylvia Plath and Whiteness* (2000), critiques the essentialism and the colour blindness of Plath's poetry.

Plath's historical context and her engagement with issues of political, cultural and ideological concern have often been overlooked in the enthusiasm for reading her work as merely private and introspective – as 'mirror-looking' to use her own scornful term (*PS*, p. 170). Stan Smith's important book *Inviolable Voice: History and Twentieth-Century Poetry* (1982) redresses this, seeing the poetry as located very much in a particular place

and time, and as engaging in affirmatory or contestatory ways with large questions of history, society, responsibility. Deborah Nelson's reading of Plath and her contemporaries in the context of Cold War cultures of privacy and surveillance (*Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America*, 2001) and Robin Peel's study of Plath's preoccupation with the political anxieties of the 1950s and early 1960s (*Writing Back: Sylvia Plath and Cold War Politics*, 2002) have also proved influential. In each of these cases, Plath is read as a politically engaged poet. Like T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden and others (Denise Levertov and Thom Gunn of her own generation), Plath shifted cultures by moving across the Atlantic. Of late, Tracy Brain and Paul Giles have read Plath's language and themes in terms of this dislocation (Brain posits the notion of mid-Atlanticism and draws attention to the equivocal or liminal voices of Plath's writing).

To all these must be added the numerous studies of Plath's work which, while sometimes drawing on some of the broad approaches outlined above, develop their own perspectives and areas of interest. These include major studies by Marjorie Perloff, Helen Hennessy Vendler, Tim Kendall, Linda Wagner-Martin, Lynda K. Bundtzen, Susan R. Van Dyne and many, many others. What is striking in summarizing this heritage is its breadth and its diversity. *The Companion* treads a confident path through this rich and heterogeneous material.

Of particular importance to this *Companion* – and thus of real value to its readers – has been the recent publication of three key texts. *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath* is the first study of Plath to be able to make use of all these resources. The first of these is Ted Hughes's 1998 collection of poems *Birthday Letters*. This revisits the life and, more importantly, the work of Plath, in poems such as 'The Rabbit Catcher', which writes back to her well-known and fiercely contested poem of the same name, and 'The Beach', which offers a different perspective on the scene explored in her 1961 'Whitsun'. It is too simplistic to say that this is Hughes's version of the story of their marriage, or that this is Hughes in dialogue with Plath (if we think it important to register the nuances of Plath's poetic voices and to flag up the noncoherence of poet and speaker, surely we should adopt a similar approach in considering Hughes's work?) Nevertheless, what *Birthday Letters* does do, in what I regard as a profoundly self-conscious, troubled and troubling way, is remind us of the shared difficulties – for writer and reader alike – of engaging with this material, with these issues. Analysing the complexity of their creative partnership is the approach Diane Middlebrook takes in her book *Her Husband: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes – A Marriage* (2003).

The second key text to emerge of late, in 2000, is the more complete edition of Plath's extant journals (known as *The Journals of Sylvia*

Plath: 1950–1962 in the UK and *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* in the US). Edited by Karen Kukil, the Associate Curator at Smith College, the new *Journals* reproduce for the first time Smith College's extensive holdings of Plath's diaries. Running to almost 700 pages, the *Journals* are hugely valuable to our understanding of Plath's writing practices and sources, although as Bonnie Costello cautions of the work of Marianne Moore 'this multiplicity of sources is quite different from the multiplicity of references' (*Marianne Moore: Imaginary Possessions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 6).

Finally, what has been perceived by some as a troubling gap in Plath's oeuvre is closed by the publication of *Ariel: The Restored Edition – A Facsimile of Plath's Manuscript, Reinstating Her Original Selection and Arrangement* (2004) with a 'Foreword' by Frieda Hughes. As Ted Hughes disclosed in his 'Introduction' and 'Notes' to Plath's *Collected Poems*, the edition of *Ariel* which had been published posthumously in 1965 (UK/1966 US) did not follow the order, or even include all the poems, which Plath had planned (CP, pp. 14–15). The significance of Hughes's alterations to the trajectory of the volume are considered at length in Marjorie Perloff's 1990 article 'The Two *Ariels*: The (Re)making of the Sylvia Plath Canon' and Lynda K. Bundtzen's book *The Other Ariel* (2001).

In her 'Foreword' to the restored edition of *Ariel*, Frieda Hughes expresses concern about the repeated 'dissect[ion]' by readers of some of its key poems (her anxiety replicates Ted Hughes's own point, in defence of his editing of the 1965/66 version of *Ariel*, that he would have left more poems out had he suspected that they would ever be 'decoded' (WP, p. 167)). There is an anxiety in both of these cases about reading – about the power of other people's reading to yield unexpected, proliferating and uncontrollable meanings. Interpretation is experienced (or interpreted) as an attack on the hermetic body of the text, on the singular truth which is presumed to hide there. What I wish to argue here is that the text – Plath's poetry, any writing – cannot exist outside of such interpretative processes; it does not 'mean' alone. To suggest that it does is, arguably, to deny the complexity and richness of the writing, to reduce it to singularity. On this point I disagree with Frieda Hughes's suggestion that the *Ariel* poems 'speak for themselves' (*A Rest.*, p. xvi). What they 'speak', I would contend, depends on who is listening and when, how and why they are read.

As a counter to these arguments against interpretation, I propose a plea for interpretation. *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath* seeks to stimulate a plethora of ongoing readings – of primary and secondary sources alike (for biographies and critical studies, like poetry, reward careful and critical reading). Rather than positing a definitive truth about Plath's work, the essays

PREFACE

collected below introduce relevant contexts and issues and offer diverse reading practices – all in the service of a multiplicity of interpretations. For it is only by interpretation, by reading, thinking, writing about and discussing these poems, that their richness, complexity and resonance will adequately be recognized.

Jo Gill

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ABBREVIATIONS AND TEXTUAL NOTE

Unless otherwise indicated, poems discussed in this volume are from Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (London: Faber and Faber; New York: Harper & Row, 1981). Where there is a difference in pagination or contents between English and American editions (for example, in the case of *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*) the edition used is indicated in an endnote.

- A Sylvia Plath, *Ariel* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965; New York: Harper & Row, 1966).
- A Rest. Sylvia Plath, *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, ed. Frieda Hughes (London: Faber and Faber, 2004).
- BJ Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (London: Heinemann, 1963 (under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas); London: Faber and Faber 1966; New York: Harper & Row, 1971 (as Sylvia Plath)).
- BL Ted Hughes, *Birthday Letters* (London: Faber and Faber; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998).
- C Sylvia Plath, *The Colossus and Other Poems* (London: Heinemann, 1960; New York: Knopf, 1962).
- CP Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (London: Faber and Faber; New York: Harper & Row, 1981).
- CW Sylvia Plath, *Crossing the Water* (London: Faber and Faber; New York: Harper & Row, 1971).
- J Sylvia Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath: 1950–1962*, ed. Karen V. Kukil (London: Faber and Faber, 2000); *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Anchor, 2000).
- J Abr. Sylvia Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, ed. Ted Hughes and Frances McCullough (New York: Dial, 1982) (abridged edition).

- JP* Sylvia Plath, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams and Other Prose Writings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1977; New York: Harper & Row, 1979).
- LH* Sylvia Plath, *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950-1963*, ed. Aurelia Plath (New York: Harper & Row, 1975; London: Faber and Faber, 1976).
- PS* Peter Orr (ed), *The Poet Speaks: Interviews with Contemporary Poets* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966).
- WP* Ted Hughes, *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*, ed. William Scammell (London: Faber and Faber, 1994).
- WT* Sylvia Plath, *Winter Trees* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971; New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

CHRONOLOGY OF PLATH'S LIFE AND WORK

- 1932 Sylvia Plath born 27 October in Boston, Massachusetts, the daughter of Aurelia Schober and Otto Emil Plath. Aurelia was first-generation American, Otto had emigrated to the US from the German-speaking Polish corridor as a young man. Aurelia Plath worked as a teacher and as a secretary. Otto Plath was Professor of Entomology at Boston University and an expert on bees.
- 1935 Birth of Sylvia's brother, Warren.
- 1939 Outbreak of World War II.
- 1940 Death of Otto Plath after complications arising from diabetes.
- 1941 Pearl Harbor; US enters World War II.
- 1942 Aurelia, Sylvia and Warren move to Wellesley, Massachusetts.
- 1945 Atomic bombs detonated at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. End of World War II.
- 1950-1 Plath attends Smith College, Northampton (majoring in English) on a scholarship granted by novelist Olive Higgins Prouty.
- 1950-3 Korean War.
- 1950-4 McCarthyism.
- 1953 Early January: Plath fractures her leg in a skiing accident.
June: Execution of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg for espionage.
Summer: Plath takes up a guest editorship at *Mademoiselle* magazine, New York. Returns home exhausted and close to breakdown, ECT administered, suicide attempt and hospitalization.
- 1954 Post-World War II food rationing in Britain ends.
- 1955 Graduates from Smith College *summa cum laude* and travels to England on a Fulbright Scholarship to study at Newnham College, Cambridge.
- 1956 25 February: meets Ted Hughes at the launch party for a student magazine.
16 June: marries Ted Hughes in London. Honeymoon in Benidorm, Spain.