

Sylvia Plath's Fiction

A CRITICAL STUDY

LUKE FERRETT

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A Critical Study

Luke Ferretter



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For Mackie

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations have been used in this book for works by Sylvia Plath:

- BJ* *The Bell Jar* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963)
CCS *Collected Children's Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001)
CP *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981)
J *The Journals of Sylvia Plath, 1950–1962*, ed. Karen V. Kukil
 (London: Faber and Faber, 2000)
JPBD *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams, and Other Prose*
 Writings, 2nd edn. (London: Faber and Faber, 1979)
LH *Letters Home* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975)

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Introduction

There are two major ways of thinking about Sylvia Plath's work in contemporary criticism. One way, dominant since the publication of *Ariel*, is to think of this work as a progression towards the greatest poetry of Plath's career, the poems of 1962 and 1963. Plath herself said that these poems 'will make my name' (*LH* 468), and critics continue to think of her work, in Nancy Hargrove's words, as a 'journey toward *Ariel*'.¹ Tim Kendall writes of her 1954–55 poems, 'Were they not produced by the author of *Ariel*, the poems would hardly merit attention'.² In the introduction to their collection of Plath's visual art, *Eye Rhymes*, Kathleen Connors and Sally Bayley describe the contributors' interest in Plath's early work as 'an attempt to answer the question, How did Plath arrive at *Ariel*?'.³ During the last decade or so, another way of thinking about Plath's work has also begun to emerge, which can best be described, in the title of Tracy Brain's study, as an investigation of 'the other Sylvia Plath'.⁴ This kind of approach is exemplified in studies like those of Al Strangeways on Plath's intellectual work, of Robin Peel on her politics, of the contributors to *Eye Rhymes* on her visual art and of the contributors to Anita Helle's collection *The Unraveling Archive* on Plath's unpublished materials, as well as Brain's work on her environmentalism, national identity and literary influences.⁵ These studies do not suggest that *Ariel* is not Plath's finest work. Rather, they are interested in her large and diverse body of work as a whole, and focus their attention on less frequently discussed texts within this body of work, in order to build up a complete picture of the kind of thinker and writer that Plath was.

This is the approach I take in this book. Whilst *Ariel* is Plath's single greatest achievement, in my view, it is the achievement of a woman who wrote a great number of works in a great number of genres, indeed whose creativity was not limited to the written word, but who sketched, painted, made collages, decorated her furniture, indeed simply could not stop creating in whatever medium was to hand. Plath's large and

multi-generic *oeuvre* is worth knowing and understanding as a whole. That is the principle behind this book, a study of Sylvia Plath's fiction. Plath spent her entire creative life, from before her teenage years to the last weeks of her life, working on some form of fiction. Ted Hughes described her 'ambition to write stories' as 'the most visible burden of her life'.⁶ Plath wrote some seventy short stories and worked on three novels. There is to date no detailed study of these works. There are student guides to *The Bell Jar*, and there is Pat Macpherson's sociological discussion, *Reflecting on The Bell Jar*. We lack a comprehensive study, however, of Plath's lifelong work as a writer of fiction. This book is that study. Its aim is to provide a clear and comprehensive sense of the place of fiction in her life and work as a writer. In my opinion this fiction is altogether worth reading, enjoying and understanding in its own right. There is no question that it is a crucial and central part of Plath's complete and complex creative work.

Short Stories

There was no time in Plath's life, from the time she was a teenager, during which she was not writing fiction. This lifelong body of work can be considered in the following chronological groups.

1. *Juvenilia* (1946–50)

It is difficult to give a precise number of the stories of Plath's that survive from this period, since there is a fluid continuum of manuscripts, from notes for plots, through unfinished stories and character sketches, to completed typescripts. Six stories survive from 1946, written when Plath was just thirteen, and in some cases fourteen, years old.⁷ There are also four incomplete works held at Smith College, which are undated and incomplete, but clearly early works, as the juvenile handwriting of some of them suggests.⁸ The most interesting of Plath's stories from this period is the twenty-two page fairy story, 'Stardust', in which the young heroine, Nancy, walks up a staircase of snowflakes in the sky to an ice palace, and encounters a series of magical characters. The underwater imagery in the story – Nancy follows the fairy beneath the ocean to visit the Queen of Sea – is a precursor of the image of the better world under water that Plath would develop in her mature poetry. In Ted Hughes' children's story 'Billy Hook and the Three Souvenirs' the motif of a child walking up a staircase in the sky to a palace where the fairy queen lives remains.⁹ Plath was already beginning to publish these early stories:

'Victory' appears in the *Wellesley Townsman* and 'A Morning in the Agora' in *The Phillipian*, the literary magazine of the Alice L. Phillips Junior High School.

The second period of Plath's early fiction spans her last three years at high school, during which she was in Wilbury Crockett's English class. Seven stories dating from 1948, eight from 1949 and four from 1950 survive, as well as an undated monologue called 'Watch My Line', whose style and content suggest that it also belongs to this period.¹⁰ These stories are most interesting for the ways in which they prefigure the concerns of Plath's mature work. As Linda Wagner-Martin writes, 'The pervasive themes of Plath's fictional *oeuvre* appear here in miniature'.¹¹ In 'The Dark River', from 1949, a woman tells the narrator about a strange river which has come between her and everyone she has loved. When she was young she had been sure that her desires would all be fulfilled, but she has come to realise that the dark river that fascinates her will always prevent her from true relationship with others. At the end of the text, the woman who tells the narrator her story fades into the narrator's own imagination, which has been playing upon the real river in front of her.¹² In this early story, Plath sets up a powerful symbol of an inexplicable break in relationship between the heroine and those around her. 'East Wind', from the same year, develops this symbolism. The heroine is called Miss Minton, and her story ends in a similar way to that of her namesake in Plath's later story 'Sunday at the Mintons'. She follows a mysterious child, as fascinated by him as the heroine of 'The Dark River' is by the river, and the wind blows her hat into the river in her own city. She leans over a bridge and looks down, tempted to end her dull, disappointing life for ever. As with Elizabeth Minton, she imagines the ecstasy of floating out over the water, borne up by the air. She almost decides to throw herself over but, again like Elizabeth Minton, her joyful and aggressive fantasies turn out to be no more than fantasies. Ashamed of her excessive desires, she steps back from the edge.¹³ This story prefigures the symbolism of mature poems like 'Full Fathom Five' and 'Lorelei', in which the speakers are attracted by the better world to be found, through drowning, under water. Plath's later concerns with gender roles are also evident in a story like 'The Visitor', from 1948, in which the question of whether a woman should choose marriage and family or a creative career is explored.

2. *College Stories to 1953 (1950–53)*

Plath took several creative writing courses at Smith College. In her sophomore year she took Eng 220a and 220b, Practical Writing. In her

junior year, she took Eng 347a Style and Form, with Robert Gorham Davis. In her senior year, she took Eng 347a Short Story Writing with Alfred Kazin, and Eng 41b Poetry with Alfred Young Fisher. For the first four of these courses she produced a considerable body of fiction. The fiction she wrote for these courses, as well as that which she wrote on her own time, underwent a marked change in maturity after her breakdown in the summer of 1953 and her recovery in McLean hospital during the autumn. When she returned to Smith in Spring 1954, she was beginning to develop her mature fictional voices and styles. Before the summer of 1953, she wrote one truly fine story, 'Sunday at the Mintons', in April 1952. In addition, by my count, there remain twelve more works of fiction which Plath wrote between entering Smith in September 1950 and June 1953, as well as two that are now lost and fragments of a further two that have survived on the verso of other documents.¹⁴ Three of these stories, 'Den of Lions', 'The Perfect Setup' and 'Initiation', were published in *Seventeen*.¹⁵ In the best of them, such as 'The Perfect Setup', 'Brief Encounter' and 'The Estonian', Plath was beginning to develop some of her mature themes, dealing with the complex and difficult emotions that exist under the surface communications of social life. These stories are also notable for their diversity. 'Marcia Ventura and the Ninth Kingdom', from December 1952, is a futuristic moral allegory. 'Dialogue', from January 1953, is a seventeen-page philosophical exchange between two college students about a range of subjects from love to identity to ethics. 'I Lied for Love', from April 1953, is a long romance about a farmer's daughter who is misguidedly seduced by a wealthy boy but, after his death leaves her a fallen woman, ends up with the honest farmworker who has loved her all along.

3. *College Stories (1954–55)*

Following her return to Smith in February 1954, Plath began to develop her mature fictional styles. In this period she wrote, by my count, ten stories, almost all of which are significant works in themselves. The stories published in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams, and Other Prose Writings*, which include five of this group, are ordered thematically rather than chronologically, and sometimes dated by publication rather than by composition. I list the stories from this period here in the closest possible approximation to their chronological order, along with the most precise dates that it is possible to establish:

'Among the Bumblebees' (September–December 1954)

'In the Mountains' (September–December 1954)

- 'Superman and Paula Brown's New Snowsuit' (September–December 1954)
- 'The Day Mr Prescott Died' (29 January 1955)
- 'Tongues of Stone' (29 January 1955)
- 'The Smoky Blue Piano' (15 January 1955)
- 'Home Is Where the Heart Is' (26–29 January 1955)
- 'Tomorrow Begins Today' (26–29 January 1955)
- 'The Christmas Heart' (29 January–12 September, 1955)
- 'Platinum Summer' (July – c. 9 August, 1955).

The first five of these were written for Plath's short story class during the Fall 1954 semester. 'The Day Mr Prescott Died' and 'Tongues of Stone' were rewritten shortly before 29 January 1955 (*LH* 155). 'The Smoky Blue Piano' was probably written during the Christmas vacation of 1954–55 and then rewritten by 15 January 1955.¹⁶ Plath told her mother on 29 January 1955 that she had written 'Home is Where the Heart Is' and 'Tomorrow Begins Today' 'in the last three days' (*LH* 155). She first referred to the story that became 'The Christmas Heart' on 29 January 1955 (*LH* 155) and finished it by the time she left America for Cambridge on 12 September. She referred to working on 'Platinum Summer' on 28 July, 1955, and had finished a draft by 9 August 1955, telling her mother that day that she would perfect and revise one or two passages and then submit the final copy.¹⁷ 'The Smoky Blue Piano', 'The Christmas Heart' and 'Platinum Summer' are all romances written for the women's magazine market. 'Home is Where the Heart Is' and 'Tomorrow Begins Today' are stories with a moral message written as such for a contest run by the Christophers, a Christian organisation (*LH* 155).

4. *Cambridge Stories (1956–57)*

From her writing honeymoon in Spain in July and August 1956, through her second year as a Fulbright scholar in Cambridge, and then in her second writers' vacation in July and August 1957 on Cape Cod, Plath again produced a considerable body of mature fiction. Much of this now exists only in fragments, preserved on the verso of Ted Hughes' papers at Emory University, and some has been lost. This is a list, in the best possible chronological order and with the most precise possible dates, of these stories. (F) indicates that the story exists in fragmentary form. (L) indicates that the story, although completed by Plath, is currently lost.

- 'The Matisse Chapel' (F) (17 January–19 February 1956)
- 'The Black Bull' (F) (22 July–21 August 1956)

- 'Remember the Stick Man' (F) (22 July–21 August 1956)
- 'That Widow Mangada' (22 July–21 August 1956)
- 'Afternoon in Hardcastle Craggs' (F) (post-September 1956)
- 'The Invisible Man' (F) (8–12 October 1956)
- 'The Wishing Box' (8–12 October 1956)
- 'All the Dead Dears' (September–October 1956)
- 'The Fabulous Room-Mate' (L) (10 August 1956–18 March 1957)
- 'The Laundromat Affair' (F) (9 January–18 March 1957)
- 'The Trouble-Making Mother' (L) (18–24 July 1957)
- 'Operation Valentine' (F) (18 July–5 August 1957)

'The Matisse Chapel' is a story based on Plath's visit to the Matisse chapel in Vence in Southern France with Richard Sassoon during her first Christmas vacation at Cambridge. On 17 January 1956, she told her mother she had sketched out the plot of the story (*LH* 208).¹⁸ By 19 February she had submitted it to the *New Yorker* (*J* 201), which rejected it. During her writing honeymoon in Spain, Plath wrote 'The Black Bull', 'Remember the Stick Man' and 'That Widow Mangada'. On 16 October 1956, Plath told her mother that she had written some of her finest stories that week, including 'The Invisible Man' (*LH* 278), and that Hughes had criticised these stories in London the previous weekend, 13 and 14 October, which means that they must have been finished by Friday, 12 October. In a letter of 9 October to Plath, Hughes referred to an idea of Plath's about a story whose heroine cannot dream, indicating that she has told him in her letter of the previous day that she was writing 'The Wishing Box'.¹⁹ 'All the Dead Dears', based on Plath's experience of meeting Hughes' family in Yorkshire in September 1956, was planned during that visit (*J* 579), and is probably one of the several stories Plath completed by 12 October. 'Afternoon in Hardcastle Craggs' is also based on this visit to Yorkshire. The single page that survives deals with similar events to those in the first part of the poem 'The Snowman on the Moor'. The heroine, Olwyn, has stormed out of the hero's mother's house onto the moors, angry with the hero, Gerald, who spends his time composing poetry and listening to Beethoven. Olwyn reflects ruefully on her husband's brilliant mind and daydreams about his future fame.²⁰

'The Laundromat Affair' and 'Operation Valentine' were written for the women's magazine market. Plath was working on the first of these in January 1957 (*LH* 290) and submitted it to the *Ladies' Home Journal* on 18 March (*LH* 303). They told her that they would reconsider the story if she revised the ending, which she did by 9 August (*LH* 312; *J* 295). 'Operation Valentine' is the story Plath refers to in her journals as

a story about a mother's helper (J 288); she submitted it to the *Ladies' Home Journal* on 5 August (LH 326). The two lost stories from this period are 'The Fabulous Room-Mate' and 'The Trouble-Making Mother'. The first of these, begun in August 1956, contrasted the lives of the heroine and her room-mate, a character based on Nancy Hunter, Plath's own room-mate at Smith and Harvard Summer School in 1954 and 1955.²¹ Plath continued to work on the story during the Christmas vacation of 1956–57, describing it as one of her 'love stories' aimed at the women's magazine market (LH 290). She submitted it to the *Ladies' Home Journal*, along with 'The Laundromat Affair', on 18 March 1957 (LH 303). 'The Trouble-Making Mother' was completed by 24 July 1957, when Plath called it her only well-written story in several years (J 291). She submitted it to the *Saturday Evening Post*, which rejected it (J 295), with plans then to submit it to *McCall's*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *Good Housekeeping* and *Woman's Day* (J 291). The story was autobiographically based, set over the course of a single day, during which there are several 'flashbacks triggered by telephone calls' (J 290). It is based on the 'Ira and Gordon crisis' of summer 1954, and emphasises the relationship between the heroine and her mother (J 287). Initially, Plath had planned to have the heroine dye her hair platinum blonde in order to distinguish herself from her mother (J 288). The relationship between the heroine and her psychiatrist, based on Plath's own therapist, Ruth Beuscher, is also a significant part of the story, and the first draft of the story ended with a long dialogue between the two (J 291).

5. *Boston and Yaddo (1958–59)*

This is the period in which Plath wrote most of her best short fiction. The period really begins in Northampton, in the summer of 1958, after Plath had finished her year as an instructor at Smith. Once this year was done, despite recording in her journals more or less constant frustration with her inability to write fiction to her satisfaction, Plath wrote a considerable body of short fiction, which includes some of her very finest stories. These are the most detailed dates for them that it is possible to establish. (F) indicates that the story, although completed, exists only as a fragment. (L) indicates that, although completed, it is now lost.

'Mrs McFague and the Corn Vase Girl' (F) (21 August 1957– c. 19 July 1958)

'Mrs Cherry's Kitchen' (26 January 1958)

'Stone Boy with Dolphin' (c. March 1958)

'The Bird in the House' (L) (19 July–27 September 1958)