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SIGNIFICANCE AND CONTRIBUTION

Why do we need another biography of Sylvia Plath? Although several have been published since her death in 1963, a definitive, critical biography of America's best-known, 20th-century woman poet still does not exist. Because biographies of Plath tend to be inaccurate and sensationalist, there is a need for an in-depth, meticulously researched biography that resists caricature and helps restore Plath to the prominent place she deserves in American letters. *Sylvia Plath: The Light of the Mind* will recover Plath the writer.

The celebrated biographer Hermione Lee has noted, "Women writers whose lives involved abuse, mental-illness, self-harm, suicide, have often been treated, biographically, as victims or psychological case-histories first and as professional writers second."¹ This is especially true in Plath's case. Like Marilyn Monroe, who died six months before her, Plath is an enigmatic, paradoxical symbol of female power and helplessness, an expert performer whose life was subsumed by her afterlife. She has been mythologized in movies, television, and even biographies as a high priestess of poetry, obsessed with death. These distortions gained momentum in the 1960s when Plath's seminal collection *Ariel* was published. Most reviewers didn't know what to make of the burning, pulsating metaphors in poems like "Lady Lazarus," or the chilly imagery of "Edge," so they resorted to cliché. *Time* called the book a "jet of flame from a literary dragon," while the *Washington Post* dubbed Plath a "snake lady of misery."² The poet Robert Lowell characterized Plath as a Medea figure hurtling toward her own destruction. Even Plath's closest reader, her husband Ted Hughes, often portrayed her as a passive vessel through which a dangerous muse spoke. Plath's most recent biographer called her "a sorceress who had the power to attract men with a flash of her intense eyes, a tortured soul whose only destiny was death by her own hand."³

These caricatures have calcified over time into the popular, reductive version of Sylvia Plath we all know: the suicidal writer of *The Bell Jar* whose cultish devotees are young women clad in black and full of angst. But the most famous female poet of the twentieth century was neither fragile ingénue nor femme fatale. Rather, she was a highly disciplined craftswoman whose singular voice helped transform American and British poetry. *Sylvia Plath: The Light of the Mind* rejects the grim, unstable, death-obsessed version of Sylvia Plath, and recovers the ambitious poet whose innovative verse gave new energy to the burgeoning literary and cultural revolutions of her time.

Over the last half-century, Plath has drawn and sustained the attention of some of the most respected critics in the field of poetry. Recent scholarship has revealed a much more nuanced and ironic writer than the "sorceress" of the public imagination. We see more clearly now how Cold War politics, environmental concerns, and surrealist art shaped Plath's work, and how she veered from other "confessional" poets. Plath challenged the Romantic notion that the moorland outside her door was more sublime than her baby's nursery. She pioneered the poetry of motherhood, opening a new, untapped vein, as Mary Cassatt did in painting. She redefined the

¹ Hermione Lee, *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. pp. 128-9.

² "The Blood Jet is Poetry," review of *Ariel*, *Time*, 10 June 1966, pp. 118-120. p. 118; Webster Schott, "The Cult of Plath," *Washington Post Book World*, 1 Oct. 1972. p. 3.

³ Andrew Wilson, *Mad Girl's Love Song: Sylvia Plath and Life Before Ted*. New York: Scribner, 2013. pp. 13-14; 80.

elegy in “The Colossus” and “Daddy,” making space for anger as well as love and pathos. Her poems about depression’s ravages—“Tulips,” “Elm,” “The Moon and the Yew Tree,” “Sheep in Fog,” “Edge”—are some of the finest in the language. They, and Plath herself, deserve a dispassionate reappraisal. Plath’s best poetry is as aesthetically accomplished, groundbreaking, and reflective of its historical moment as the poetry of her idols, W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot. She ought to be remembered for her transcendent, trailblazing poems, not gassing herself in her kitchen.

I am writing this biography because I want to reframe the public perception of Sylvia Plath. Plath was not a doom-laden hysteric, but one of poetry’s celebrants. My goal was to offer a revisionist account of her work and life, not necessarily to discover new secrets. Yet I have been surprised by the exciting new material I have uncovered: excerpts from Plath’s letters to her psychiatrist, Dr. Ruth Beuscher, in the months before she committed suicide; letters from Dr. Beuscher to others about Plath’s treatment; chilling new details from Plath’s inquest that will change the way we understand her suicide; and the only surviving copy of Plath’s suicide note. All of this was thought lost to history. New material is also arriving at Plath’s archive at Smith College; Karen Kukil, Plath’s archivist and editor, has been kind enough to show me this material before it is processed. I now know where Plath was on the night of February 8th, 1963, two nights before she died, thanks to an entry in a London guestbook recently donated to Smith. Her whereabouts on this night had always been a mystery. Two caches of Plath letters recently donated to Smith have helped fill in other blanks. Damning information about her psychiatric care has emerged from my visit to the McLean Hospital archives and from my interview with McLean’s former Director, Dr. Francis de Marneffe, who shared an office with Plath’s psychiatrist in the 1950s. I have also learned much from the newly opened *Bell Jar* trial deposition papers of Ted Hughes, Dr. de Marneffe, and Jane Anderson.

There is much new material in Ted Hughes’s archives at Emory University and the British Library as well. At the British Library, there is a 5,000-line unpublished sequence about Plath by Hughes called “Black Coat, Opus 131,” and other unpublished poems about Plath in the style of Hughes’s *Birthday Letters*, the bestselling poetry collection of all time. These works have never been discussed in a Plath biography. Finally, I am the only biographer to have read Plath’s early love letters to Hughes, which belong to their daughter Frieda Hughes and have never been made available to the public.

My interviews with Plath’s American contemporaries have shed new light on stories that had calcified over time. A high school friend offered a corrective to one of Plath’s major life events; a close Smith friend provided an intimate memory of Plath’s suicide attempt and electroshock therapy; two Cambridge peers presented a vivid picture of the university’s postwar poetry scene, and gave me copies of private letters they had written about Plath when they were students. Women who worked with Plath at *Mademoiselle* in 1953 helped me separate fact from fiction in *The Bell Jar*. Plath’s former students showed me notes they had taken in her class. Interviews with Ted Hughes’s closest friend in London yielded confirmation of Plath’s secret affair with another man while she was writing her famous *Ariel* poems. A female friend who was with Plath on the Friday and Saturday before her death—unbeknownst to the public—shared poignant new details about Plath’s last weekend alive.

WORK PLAN

I am now in the final stages of my biography. I have examined all the relevant archival collections, and visited all the sites in America and England associated with Plath’s life. Four out of twenty chapters remain to be drafted.

Chapters 1-2, 1850-1932: I begin with an account of Plath's parents, Otto and Aurelia, who have received little attention in previous biographies. I examine their backgrounds in German-Austrian immigrant families, and show how their intense work ethic and high educational standards influenced their daughter's unrelenting drive to succeed.

Chapters 3-5, 1932-1950: When Plath was eight, her father died and the family moved from Winthrop to Wellesley, Massachusetts. Moving on through Plath's childhood and adolescence, I examine her social life and intellectual influences, and explain the role her teachers, friends, boyfriends, family, and literary models played in her early creative development.

Chapters 6-8, 1950-1955: At Smith College, Plath's increasingly sophisticated command of her academic subjects corresponded to a worsening anxiety and depression that resulted, after a summer as a guest editor at *Mademoiselle*, in her first suicide attempt and subsequent hospitalization at McLean. These were the events that inspired *The Bell Jar*. At McLean, she endured electro-shock therapy, but also found Dr. Ruth Beuscher, a sympathetic young female therapist who aided her recovery. Beuscher has long been hailed as Plath's savior, but serious questions have emerged about her professional integrity.

Chapters 9-10, 1956-57: Upon graduating from Smith, Plath traveled to Cambridge University on a Fulbright Scholarship. There, she met and married Ted Hughes after a tempestuous, whirlwind courtship. Plath began sending Hughes's work out to contests and magazines. Thanks to these efforts, Hughes published *The Hawk in the Rain* in 1957.

Chapters 11-12, 1957-59: After Plath finished her Cambridge degree, the couple left England for America. There, Plath taught full-time at Smith and Hughes taught part-time at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. After a year, both decided to quit teaching and move to Boston, where they befriended poets like Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, Richard Wilbur, Robert Frost, Stanley Kunitz, and Adrienne Rich.

Chapters 13-14, 1960-61: After spending the autumn at Yaddo, Plath and Hughes returned to England. In London, Plath gave birth to her first child, published *The Colossus*, and wrote *The Bell Jar*. Hughes published *Lupercal*. They befriended London writers such as Al Alvarez, Ruth Fainlight, and Alan Sillitoe, and began working for the BBC. I argue that Plath's relationship with Hughes changed the course of her life and work, and show how she and Hughes, as creative partners, helped re-invigorate Anglo-American poetry as they moved between literary circles in London and Boston.

Chapters 15-16, September 1961-April 1962: In the autumn of 1962, Plath and Hughes moved to Court Green, an old manor house in rural Devon. After the move and the birth of their second child, tensions in the marriage increased. As Hughes's star ascended, Plath's career plateaued; her depression and anxiety returned as she struggled for recognition in Hughes's shadow.

Chapters 17-18, May-December 1962: When Hughes left Plath for Assia Wevill in 1962, Plath channeled her grief and anger into her poetry. On her own, with two small children, she wrote *Ariel*, one of the finest poetry collections of the twentieth century. In December 1962, Plath moved to London with the children, where her relationship with the critic Al Alvarez deepened.

Chapter 19, 1963: In the dead of winter, sick and exhausted from taking care of two toddlers alone amidst frequent power, heat, and water outages—and upset by lukewarm reviews of *The Bell Jar*—Plath took her own life. She left her *Ariel* manuscript stacked neatly on her desk.

Chapter 20: In my final chapter, I tell how Hughes's reorganization of *Ariel*, as well as other editorial decisions regarding Plath's work, caused controversy over the coming decades as Plath became a feminist icon.

I am applying for the maximum award for 12 months (Sept. 1 2017-Sept. 1 2018). The NEH fellowship would allow me to finish the book during the 2017-18 academic year, during which time I will write Chapters 17-20 and revise previous chapters.

COMPETENCIES, SKILLS, AND ACCESS

My academic field is postwar British, Irish, and American poetry. My first book, *The Ulster Renaissance: Poetry in Belfast 1962-1972* (Oxford UP, 2006), explored the work of Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, Derek Mahon, and Paul Muldoon. My second book, *The Grief of Influence: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (Oxford UP, 2011), focused on Plath and Hughes's competitive and collaborative poetic relationship. The research I undertook for this project, which was funded by a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities, prepared me to write a biography of Plath efficiently.

After writing two prizewinning scholarly monographs, I wanted to reach a broader audience. My experience writing book reviews for the *Times Literary Supplement* and the *Harvard Review*—as well as my broadcasts about Sylvia Plath on NPR—gave me the confidence to tackle a biography. Given my knowledge of Sylvia Plath's work, and 20th-century poetry generally, I felt I was in strong position to write about her life.

Since 2012, I have worked full-time on my biography. I am currently a Fellow at the Leon Levy Center for Biography at CUNY, and a Visiting Scholar at the Oxford Centre for Life-Writing. I am also a scholarly advisor for an upcoming BBC television documentary about Plath, and an exhibit of Plath's manuscripts at the Grolier Club in Manhattan. My work on these projects will bring Plath to a wider audience.

My academic credentials have helped persuade Plath's contemporaries—many of whom are wary of biographers—to speak with me. Several have mentioned that, like Plath, I was raised and educated in Massachusetts and did my graduate work in English literature at Oxbridge. I believe this coincidental parallel has helped open doors that might have remained closed to me.

I have made multiple trips to the major Plath and Hughes archives at Indiana University, Emory University, Smith College, and the British Library, where I have good working relationships with the archivists. Frieda Hughes, Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes's daughter, has given me permission to scan all of Plath's published and unpublished material at the Lilly Library, Indiana University. I am the first Plath biographer to be given such permission. Carol Hughes, Ted Hughes's widow, has also given me permission to scan Ted Hughes's published and unpublished work. Both the Plath and Hughes Estates approved all my permissions requests for my previous book on Plath and Hughes.

FINAL PRODUCT AND DISSEMINATION

I will deliver the final manuscript to Knopf in late 2018. Knopf will publish the book in 2019 as specified in the commitment letter included in this application. Knopf plans to run a major marketing campaign befitting a 700-page biography of one of America's most famous writers. The Leon Levy Center for Biography and the Oxford Centre for Life-Writing will also help publicize my book. Both Knopf and I hope to reach the largest audience possible, and to change clichéd perceptions of Sylvia Plath. I will offer a fresh perspective, free of theory and jargon, informed by newly available archival material and current scholarship. I hope my readers come away with a better sense of Sylvia Plath's commitment not to death, but to art.