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## Finding Sylvia:

A Journey to Uncover the Woman within Plath's Confessional Poetry

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ENGL 491: Independent Study

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The life and work of Sylvia Plath has been of great interest since her suicide in 1963. While her poems and short stories had been published in a variety of journals and magazines before her death, it was not until the posthumous release of *Ariel* that Plath's true depths were discovered by a large audience and she gained popular acclaim. Critics now claim that *The Colossus and Other Poems* was Plath's discovery of her own voice and her taking on of "the world of what is important to her" (Kendall 9), but that it is *Ariel* that un-repentantly reveals Plath's true emotions (Butscher 341). The "Sylvia"<sup>1</sup> identity that arose from the ashes of Plath's suicide was someone new to critics and friends alike - as Bere says, there are "obvious discrepancies between the [public] Sivvy of the letters 'singing' her 'native joy of life' and the violent, destructive poet of *Ariel*" (Wagner-Martin 61); however, there is something undeniably real about the "Sylvia" that appears in *Ariel*. The *Ariel* Sylvia was not the put-together Sylvia that would have tea in one's living room nor the doting daughter who would write letters home from England nor Hughes's Sylvia who "had a great capacity for happiness" (Becker 48). Instead, *Ariel*'s "Cut," "Edge," and "Daddy" focus on death, hatred, and pain - not topics someone "remorselessly bright and energetic" (Butscher 341) would fixate on.

While some artists have placed their identity farther from their work, Plath is known for her confessional style poetry – a form of poetry which, according to Steven Gould Axelrod, consists of three essential elements: "an undisguised exposure of painful personal event . . . a dialectic of private matter with public matter . . . and an intimate, unornamented style" (Axelrod 98). Unlike other styles of poetry that are set apart by form or specific themes, confessional poetry is defined by the author's "expression of personal pain" such as "destructive family relationships; traumatic childhoods; broken marriages; recurring mental breakdowns; alcoholism

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<sup>1</sup> "Sylvia" refers specifically to Plath's identity, whether that be a false or true identity. It does not speak to Plath's work or legacy, but rather, who she was as a person.

or drug abuse” (Collins 197). Born out of feelings of lost individuality that arose in the 1950s and 60s, confessional poetry aimed to “embody the individual perception in direct ways,” setting itself apart from previous forms because “rather than creating masks or different personae, they [confessional poets] began to speak from a position which was unambiguously their own” (Collins 199). For these reasons, writing confessional poetry requires an understanding of one’s own suffering, along with an ability and willingness to capture that personal pain in an honest and vulnerable form of poetry – after all, it has been coined “confessional poetry” because it requires that the author “confess” painful truths regarding him or herself.

A single glance at poems such as “Daddy” and “Lady Lazarus” shows that Plath was a textbook example of the confessional poet – her writing (especially at the end of her life) focused on her own painful struggles with loss, a dying marriage, mental illness, and other challenging areas of her life. One such autobiographical poems is “Words heard, by accident, over the phone,” a poem that discusses Plath’s actual experience of answering the phone and having her husband’s lover ask to speak to him. The poem describes the speaker receiving a call from an unnamed individual who asks, “Is he here?” It is a seemingly harmless question, but the poems describes the words as “plopping like mud,” implying – in a heavy-handed fashion – that there is something about these words in this context that is dirty and sullies the speaker’s home. The speaker then asks, “how shall I ever clean the phone table?” (Plath, *Collected Poems*, 202), bringing to light the speaker’s desire to clean her household of the incident, which she considers to be filthy and unhealthy. It also demonstrates a hopelessness that this stain could ever be removed from them, as the speaker finds no answer for how to clean the phone table. As is typical of confessional poems, there is very little masking of the real-life event in this poem, and the speaker is not invented, but rather is interchangeable with Plath herself. Just like the speaker

in the poem, Plath historically answered the phone in 1962 only to have Assia, Hughes' lover, ask her "Is he here?" about Plath's husband.

As demonstrated by "Words heard, by accident, over the phone" above, Plath adopted a very personal style of poetry, tying her poems to her identity in a way that many authors would not dare, and bringing her identity into the spotlight with the success of *Ariel*. Like "Words heard, by accident, over the phone," countless other poems by Sylvia Plath including "Suicide off Egg Rock," "Edge," and "Cut" are inspired by her experiences. For this reason, it can become easy to view her poems as biography or fact, when they are actually creative works. While it is true that Plath's poems are often emotionally relevant to her, the emotions that she conveys were never meant to be expressed as singularly her own. Rather, she intended to write poetry that would echo both her own emotions and the emotions of her audience. The sheer number of drafts that Plath produced is evidence that she was not simply describing her experiences during sudden bursts of emotional turmoil, but rather striving to create poems that spoke to something that she wanted to be understood through careful choice of words and tone. On one account, she created seven boxes worth of drafts from 67 poems, all of which were full of markups and changes (Brain 22). *The Collected Poems*, winner of a posthumous Pulitzer Prize, is further evidence of how Plath's poems, though emotional, are intensely controlled. E. Lucas Myers describes the text, saying, "There is not an imperfectly finished poem in Sylvia Plath's book" (31). While many writers perfect the form and tone of poems that they plan to publish, Plath perfected every poem that she wrote, leaving no poem unfinished or unedited, even when she did not intend its publication.

It is apparent from the amount of effort Plath put into her work that her poems were not diary entries, but rather a meticulous art form that she designed to carry her voice and

experiences. She best explains herself when she says, “[M]y poems immediately come out of the sensuous and emotional experiences I have, but...I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying...with an informed and an intelligent mind” (Plath, Orr interview). For these reasons, researcher and Plath expert Karen Kukil believes that Plath intelligently designed her poems so that they could become universal (Kukil)— being born from Plath’s personal experiences and molded into an expression of human emotion that she believed all people share. Through thorough editing and painstaking re-writing, Plath strived to pour her emotions into poems that would reverberate with her readers’ deepest selves. As Collins says, “the individual in Plath’s work is often an explicit part of history” (Collins 205), not speaking only for Plath herself, but being a voice for the era as well. While Plath’s poems are certainly related to her experiences and can be insightful when regarding her life, they are intelligently edited in order to step away from raw emotion and create something both meaningful and mindful. For this reason, it would be a disservice to Plath to directly use the content of her poems as autobiographical, as it would ignore her thoughtful editing process and hours of meticulous editing. Rather, Plath’s poems demonstrate her use of her experiences in the same way that a sculptor uses a slab of marble - using her experiences for raw material and intelligently carving her voice from the slab of her emotions.

Plath’s meticulous editing of her poems in no way discredits her as a confessional poet, in fact, Collins comments that although confessional poets used their own experiences as a basis for their work, “it is neither true nor useful to imagine that their lives appeared in their poetry unmediated by the creative power to shape and transform” (Collins 199). Though capturing an emotional experience, most confessional poems are in no way written solely in the heat of the moment with nothing but feeling driving them. Although Plath and other confessional poets may

give off the impression of having a very casual style, behind that façade is the reality of a “finely tuned appreciation of form and an ability to manipulate line and stanza to give the effect of unedited emotion” (Collins 199). It is important to realize that a confessional poem is not the feeling the poet experiences, but rather a carefully designed recreation of a feeling, hopefully so well constructed that it induces in the audience the same emotion that the poet once experienced. Instead of being like a photograph, poems like Plath’s are more like well-constructed forgeries of emotional experiences.

Plath’s arguably confessional novel, *The Bell Jar*, is also often misunderstood as autobiography. The mistake is understandable, as there are many obvious parallels between the novel and Plath’s own life, such as her relationship with Dick Norton compared with Buddy in the text, the suicide attempt of taking pills and climbing under the house, the internship at a popular women’s magazine, the time spent at a mental hospital, each of them having dates that nearly rape them, and breaking a leg while skiing. While none of these parallels are a coincidence, there are enough fictional material within *The Bell Jar* to reveal that it is not a description of events exactly as they happened. While there is some transparent fictionalization, such as the changing of Dick Norton to Buddy and the changing of Ruth Beuscher to Dr. Nolan, there are many more complicated fictionalizations within the text, for example, the descriptions of the near-rape and the skiing accident.

In some ways, the near-rape descriptions in *The Bell Jar* and Plath’s journals are disturbingly similar. Plath’s Journals recall how a blind date took her on a walk to separate her from the rest of the party then pushed her down in an attempt to rape her (42). *The Bell Jar* describes how her date, named Marco, also separated her from a party and then “threw himself face down as if he would grind his body through [her] and into the mud” (85). In both cases, she

is set up with a man that she does not know, who removes her from a party and then physically pushes her down in order to take advantage of her. The accounts of the skiing accidents in *The Bell Jar* and Plath's Journals are also too full of similarities to be coincidence. Plath's journals describe how she goes on a trip with Dick Norton and "breaks her leg skiing" (157), while *The Bell Jar* similarly describes how Esther "dug the spikes of [her] poles into the snow and pushed [her]self into a flight [she] knew [she] couldn't stop by skill or any belated access of will," breaking her leg in the subsequent crash (76-77).

While these similarities exist, there are key differences between Plath's real-life experiences and the occurrences in *The Bell Jar*, which demonstrate that Plath was writing fiction for an audience, not relating a true account of her life. For example, the rape attempt shared in Plath's journals takes place well before Plath's internship with *Mademoiselle Magazine* (42), while Esther is attacked during a party in New York during her internship (*The Bell Jar* 82-86). While the timing of this shared event may seem fairly insignificant, it demonstrates that Plath was more focused on writing a story inspired by her experiences than providing accuracy. Although based off of a horrific event in her own life, the near-rape in *The Bell Jar* is used to provide information about Esther, rather than focusing on the inherently traumatic aspects of the event. Plath invents elements such as the diamond that Esther tries to steal from Marco, the tango, Marco's being in love with his cousin, and Marco's threat to kill Esther (83-86) to further dramatize the event and highlight Esther's detachment from reality. While also appalling, Plath's true account of the near rape is lacking in these theatrical elements (*Journals*, 42), setting it apart as a record rather than a fictional piece of literature written for an audience.

The account of the skiing accident in *The Bell Jar* is another example of Plath's creative license taking advantage of her true-life experiences within the text. When Esther describes



choosing to go down the ski slope, she describes a calm acceptance of potential death, saying, “The interior voice nagging me not to be a fool -- to save my skin and take off my skis and walk down...fled like a disconsolate mosquito. The thought that I might kill myself formed in my mind coolly as a tree or a flower” (*Bell Jar*, 76). Once again, the description of the dramatic and violent event is meant to highlight Esther’s detachment and emphasize her casual view of death. The account given within Plath’s journals are not so dark – there is no mention of casual thoughts about death, and instead Plath states that she went down the hill only because she “would not assert her will and communicate” with Dick when he suggested that she go down the hill (*Journals*, 157). The real life account lacks the passive suicidal thoughts that are key to understanding Esther in *The Bell Jar*, marking the difference between the real-life account in the journals, and fictionalized account in *The Bell Jar*.

Plath certainly takes events from her own life to fuel her novel, but, as with her poetry, she uses her experiences as raw material for *The Bell Jar*, making changes in order to create a piece of literature that can live beyond her experiences. According to Aurelia, Plath said of *The Bell Jar*,

What I’ve done is throw together events from my own life, fictionalizing to add color...I think it will show how isolated a person feels when he is suffering from a breakdown...I’ve tried to picture my world and the people in it as seen through the distorting lens of a bell jar” (Note 294-95).

This quote from Plath demonstrates how she intentionally changed and embellished her own life events in order to create the narrative of an individual experiencing loneliness and

depression. She claimed to apply the distorting bell jar to her own memories and experiences in order to write *The Bell Jar*, which implies that the level of distortion present in *The Bell Jar* is Plath's invention, not a description of her reality. For this reason, *The Bell Jar* cannot be viewed as an autobiography or definite means of understanding Plath's experiences, since it is proven to be fictional.

Thanks to Plath's incredible skill when it came to accurately depicting her emotional experiences through poetry and prose, people continue to resonate with her writing even decades after her death. Her ability to paint such intimate pictures of human emotion makes many individuals curious about Plath herself, and many are interested in learning what she experienced that led to her having such extensive knowledge regarding certain emotions. As they are based on her own experiences, both Plath's poetry and *The Bell Jar* invite the reader to learn about "Sylvia" - Plath's most true identity that is closest to her deepest felt emotions and desires. However, those enthralled by Plath quickly find these creative works to be unsatisfactory means of learning who Plath truly was, both because they are fictional, and because they only depict the most dramatic and disturbing aspects of her life and personality. For this reason, those looking to understand Plath and the source of her poems often turn to biography and her personal writing such as journals and letters in order to understand the relationship between Sylvia and her work.

Thankfully for those interested in Plath, she was a very prolific writer in her personal life as well as her professional career, and many journals and letters can serve as more reliable references for those trying to understand Plath as an individual. As they were written only for her own eyes, Plath's journals offer great insight into Plath's personal experiences. However, her journals are surprising – although there appears to be no intended audience, her fantastic portrayals of daily activities are so common that even getting out of bed deserves this vivid

description: “The girl sat up in bed and swung her feet to the floor...Her seersucker pajamas fell in damp folds about her body, clinging to her skin which felt slick, greasy and unclean, polluted by contact with the foul air” (82). As a teenager and young woman, Plath describes her relationships with boys melodramatically, such as with her short love affair with Bobby when she relates, “loving terribly at once his young, dear, clean-cut idealistic faith: seeing in it the salvation of him from so much of the repetitive meaningless rot in the world” (136). The journals hold intense detail regarding her social life, such as when she attends a party at James Hall and names many individuals in attendance, stating, “The whole evening was made more enjoyable by renewing myself in the public eye of various strategic people by appearing in such a favorable light” (29). The teenage and young adult journals of young Sylvia Plath reveal a great deal about her character and desires through their romantic and over-enthusiastic tones. Compared to her later dark and violent writings, her early journals are extremely whimsical and entertaining – almost as though she is writing for an audience rather than giving straightforward accounts of her life occurrences. Although she may appear naïve or overly hopeful, there is a sincere longing behind her writing during this period of her life, something undeniably human that spills from the pages through the overdramatic form.

This romantic Sylvia transforms after Plath’s hospitalization at McLean from 1953 to early 1954, changing from idealistic and glamorous to more plain and realistic. Her journals during her time at McLean Hospital are notes she takes on the other patients and simple descriptions of events that she witnesses. There is a sense of detachment in these journals that is reminiscent of Esther’s attitude in *The Bell Jar*. Plath’s journal entries after her hospitalization lose their more dramatic qualities and instead describe sensual experiences in vivid detail, as when she relates “sitting on the rough wooden seats by the blue & purple fire, listening idly to

nearby conversations, staring up at the tawny orange ceiling” (271). Although she provides great detail of her physical experiences in entries such as the one above, there is almost no mention of how such experiences affect her mentally or emotionally. Instead, she meticulously recalls seemingly minor aspects of her life, such as what she eats and wears, and spending a great amount of time writing about specific meals. On one page of her journal, she writes a very long paragraph describing her breakfast in detail, and at the end writes the short sentence, “A terrible depression yesterday” (501). It is not uncommon for her journals to vividly depict meals eaten within a day and only spend a sentence or two on the serious mental issues that she was dealing with at the time.

Many arguments can be made for why Plath changed so dramatically during her hospitalization: perhaps she was rejecting her romantic self for fear it would lead to re-hospitalization; maybe she was rejecting her idealism in order to describe life as she actually perceived it; perhaps she had matured; or perhaps she was attempting to perform the identity of “sane.” It is challenging to determine which of these is the most likely, especially since her journals are the primary source of knowledge as to what Plath was experiencing, and they themselves appear to be detached from her reality. Researcher and Plath expert, Karen Kukil, however, believes that Plath’s journals can be trusted as genuine accounts of her reality, saying, “They are personal and very honest,” arguing that they demonstrate Plath’s experiences from her point-of-view (Kukil). It seems likely that Plath’s apparent personality alteration during her time at McLean is a true expression of her change in experience rather than an attempt to convince the unnamed reader, or even Plath herself, of her sanity. Whether this shift in tone resulted from a freeing of the self or a hiding of the self is difficult to determine; however, other examples of Plath’s writing can be insightful to exploring the extent to which Plath gives herself freedom of

true self-expression.

Plath's letters are another insight into her life and how her work was inspired by her experiences. Unfortunately, the full collection of her letters has not yet been published; however, Aurelia Plath released a collection of nearly all of the letters that she received from her daughter, titled *Letters Home*. These letters from Sylvia to Aurelia are typically upbeat, trying to keep her mother believing that even when life grows challenging, Sylvia keeps a positive approach and fights through it. She often discloses personal struggles to her mother, but typically concludes her letters on a hopeful note, encouraging her mother that she is capable of overcoming all challenges. An example of this occurs when she writes to her mother during her time with *Mademoiselle Magazine* and describes herself as "exhausted, scared, incompetent, unenergetic and generally low in spirits" and claims that she feels "completely uprooted and clumsy." However, she completes her letter by trying to reassure her mother, saying, "Don't worry about me" (*Letters* 88). It is only a few short months after this letter is written that Plath makes her infamous suicide attempt where she overdoses on pills and hides in the crawl space, so it is very apparent that Aurelia Plath actually had every reason to be worrying about her daughter.

Even in adulthood, Plath tries to paint her problems in a very positive light for her mother, commenting lightly on serious issues and instead choosing to sound hopeful. It is clear from her journals and eventual divorce from Ted Hughes that their marriage had serious problems, but Plath only admits to Aurelia: "Ted and I have sometimes had violent disagreements, to be sure, but we are so very joyous together and have such identical aims and expectations of our lives that we never have conflict over any serious issues" (*Journals* 290). While Plath's descriptions in her letters appear fairly true to her experiences, a cross-examination of Sylvia's journals and letters reveals an inconsistency in character and description, which raises

many questions for those looking for the “true” Sylvia. There are moments in Plath’s journals where she undergoes intense struggles without writing to her mother about it, instead pretending that her life is going exactly according to her plans. The most extreme instance of this is when Plath discovers Hughes’s infidelity but does not inform her mother of it, rather including relatively unimportant events in her letters like "a horrid, raw damp east wind" that would not go away and "one glorious day when [she] had the babies out and ate out and gardened from sunrise to sunset" (*Letters* 450). It was not until Aurelia visited Sylvia and Ted and viewed their relationship firsthand that she "sensed a tension between Sylvia and Ted" (458), but still Sylvia proudly tells Aurelia, "I have everything in life I've ever wanted: a wonderful husband, two adorable children, a lovely home, and my writing" (458). It was only later in the visit that Aurelia learns that "Ted had been seeing someone else and Sylvia's jealousy was very intense" (458).

Near the end of her life, Plath opens up to her mother about how she is suffering while not only facing the dissolution of her marriage, but also catching the flu. She writes, "I must have someone with me for the next two months to mind the babies while I get my health back...I need help very much just now. Home is impossible" (*Journals* 468). However, her next letter begins, "Do ignore my last letters!" (470) and claims "I honestly must have been delirious to think I could uproot other people's lives to poultice my own." (470). It is unlikely that Plath was truly much better than when she had written Aurelia desperately asking for help, but apparently she was unwilling to request help from Aurelia under any circumstances. One of the most disturbing discrepancies between Plath’s letters and journals directly involves her relationship with Aurelia. In her journals, Plath writes, "I need a mother. I need some older, wiser being to cry to" (199), and yet she has Aurelia. For some reason, Plath does not perceive Aurelia to properly fill this

role, and so believes herself still in need of a mother figure. Her letters however, dote on Aurelia, saying things like: "I realize how terribly much I have missed you" and "lots of love" (*Letters* 458). These completely different views of her mother makes Plath an even more challenging individual to understand, and further complicates the reliability of her letters to Aurelia as a means of understanding her.

Plath's relationship with Aurelia was certainly a complicated one, and one that is challenging to understand. *Giving Up*, a memoir written about Plath's last days by her friend, Jillian Becker, explains that Plath expressed dislike for her mother because she perceived Aurelia as having a need to control her life (29). Becker comments that "a need to impress her mother had been a driving force" for Plath, and that she'd felt she "had to present her [Aurelia] with success after success" (29), even at the end of her life. Collins similarly states that "Plath's relationship with her mother was particularly fraught with the difficulties inherent in maintaining a pretense of personal fulfilment and academic excellence during periods of inner turmoil and severe disappointment" (Collins 204-205). As there is little access to Aurelia's own writing to her daughter, one cannot truly agree or disagree with Sylvia Plath's beliefs about her mother's expectations; however, it is clear that Plath's letters to her mother, though still revealing, are not free from her felt need to impress Aurelia. Although she likely still considered Aurelia to be a confidant, her letters to Aurelia were undoubtedly designed to give off a specific impression and achieve a purpose other than simply relaying the truth.

One would think that a writer who wrote hundreds of journal entries, hundreds of letters, hundreds of poems influenced by her own emotions and life events, and an entire novel inspired by her own experiences would be easy to understand, but Sylvia Plath proves the opposite to be true. The numerous inconsistencies between both her personal and professional writing reveal a

very complex individual who is far from easy to explain or describe, although many have tried, myself included. Countless debates have been started over who Plath really was and how she can be understood, and many scholars agree that Plath displayed divided desires and personality traits. In her journals, Plath herself describes her disunited longings to be a writer, a wife, and a mother, questioning if she would be willing to sacrifice a writing career so that “living and feeding a man’s insatiable guts and begetting children occupies [her] whole life” (*Journals* 93). She felt that she needed to have an intimate, physical relationship that society will approve of (99) but she also worried that marriage would take away from her writing (100). Plath describes herself as having two personalities – her blonde and brunette personalities, which are respectively charming and responsible. Like Esther in *The Bell Jar*, Plath was uncomfortably aware of her many disjointed desires and felt that choosing between them was nearly impossible.

Surprisingly, Plath was also torn over whether or not she had the potential to become a successful writer. She describes her writing as “poor, rather unsatisfactory” (*Journals* 83) and “unimaginative” (99) but also claims to be “a genius of a writer” (*Letters* 468). However talented she may have believed herself to be, she knew that writing was her passion, saying, “I live for my own work, without which I am nothing” (*Journals* 347). She constantly fought for the ability to continue her work, sacrificing a teaching position at Smith College so that she could continue producing poetry, then later working in the early hours of the morning to write before her children awoke. This dedication to her writing, in both the creative and personal forms, demonstrates her intense passion and need to share her voice with the world. Her writing was where she discovered her meaning, which may explain why it is intimately tied to her own experiences and emotions.

The inconsistencies between Plath’s letters, journals, and poetry are very strong evidence



of Plath's divided desires, and some critics use these discrepancies to argue that Plath herself was divided into multiple identities. Many critics, such as Edward Butscher, Tim Kendall, and Frederick Buell, believe that there was a "performative Sylvia" that remained in control during most of Plath's experiences, but that the "real Sylvia" was able to escape through Plath's creative work. The idea that a "true Sylvia" identity was suppressed by a sort of "Sylvia superego" (with exception of Plath's poetry) has become a fairly typical lens through which to view Plath since her death. Butscher's early biography of Plath, *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness*, has had especially strong influence on many Plath theorists, especially those who argue that Plath not only experiences split yearnings, but that her identity was split into multiple selves. He argues that Plath had a divided personality: "Sylvia the modest, bright, dutiful, hard-working...; Sylvia the poet, the golden girl...; and Sylvia the bitch goddess" (67), and that the "modest Sylvia" and "poet Sylvia" struggled to overcome the "bitch goddess Sylvia," who Butscher believes to be the "real Sylvia" (67). Butscher also argues that as Plath drew closer to death, more and more of her true self – the "bitch goddess" – was revealed and able to take control, allowing her public mask to fall off (125).

Scholars of Sylvia Plath know that the idea of the "masked Sylvia" or "Sylvia the performer" has become a common one that is shared by many critics with understanding of Plath's biography and personal writing. Some of these critics argue that she not only suppressed her true self, but she was also destructive towards it: for example, Frederick Buell claims that Plath attempted to "fix, freeze, and ultimately annihilate her natural self" (147) in order "to appear, more *to be* perfectly natural, a perfection of naturalness" (142). He claims that she strived to bury her "true self" in order to give off the appearance of society's false, perfect self, defined by "success, popularity, and marriage" (142). Similarly, in *Sylvia Plath: A Critical*

*Study*, Tim Kendall argues that Plath's "poems arrived against immense internal resistance" (8) from the Sylvia that wants to conform (49) and that her inhibition keeps her from reaching her true potential early in life, denying her "authentic voice ('what I really feel') and 'power'" (9). He agrees with Buell's diagnoses of Sylvia's stifling of the true self, but further believes that this self-destruction leads not only to insincerity, but also takes away from the strength of her writing. Critics with similar beliefs to Butscher, Buell, and Kendall claim that Sylvia Plath was constantly at odds with her own identity, allowing a false identity to control her in her personal life, but allowing her true identity to be revealed in her creative work, namely her poems<sup>2</sup>.

Theories such as Butscher and Buell's are interesting because they assumed that certain aspects of Plath's identity had to be sacrificed to others – the "bitch goddess" is forced to submit to the "poet" and "modest Sylvia", and "true self" must hide behind society's "false, perfect self." They assume a level of awareness within Plath that there is a true, natural Sylvia, who Plath wishes to destroy in order to create a false, perfect Sylvia. Butscher's theory in particular is intriguing because it reveals Plath's dual nature, yet rejects the "poet Sylvia" and "modest Sylvia" as false selves that try to hide the true "Sylvia bitch goddess." In order to understand Sylvia, he assumes that one could not truly be a poet, modest, and controlling all at once, but rather that only some of Plath's complicated desires could be "real". Rather than complex, he sees her as performative and manipulative, concealing her true self behind a mask. His theory dismisses Plath's struggle to understand herself and discover her passions and voice, simplifying her and leading to an underdeveloped sense of who Plath was. It denies her very real nature of being both structured and polite along with intensely emotional at times.

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<sup>2</sup> The theories of Plath's divided-self described above may be obliquely alluding to Plath's mental illness, another lens through which Plath is often viewed in order to explain her "true" self through her pathology. However, since these theories do not directly claim that the disunity within her personality is dependent on her mental illness, I have not commented on the fetishization of Plath's mental illness nor critics' mistake of diagnosing Plath instead of reading Plath.

Like Butscher, theorists such as Buell and Kendall assume that “a divided Sylvia cannot stand”, and that Sylvia desired to annihilate her raw, multi-desirous self in order to create an image of perfection. She is assumed to be aware of her true self and trying to kill it – rather than an individual trying to find her voice through art, these critics paint her as attempting to extinguish herself. However, to claim that anything, “true Sylvia” or otherwise, was able to “escape” through Plath’s writing process is ridiculous – her extremely edited poems were much more heavily monitored than her day-to-day interactions and journal entries, which these critics claim were controlled by the false, “perfect Sylvia”. The “Sylvia” identity that is revealed in Plath’s poems was, without a doubt, heavily fostered by Plath; rather than arriving against great resistance, it was carefully grown and groomed in her work. The theory of the “emotional Sylvia” being true and the “responsible, intelligent Sylvia” being false denies Plath’s dual characteristics and ignores Plath’s successes as an intelligent and responsible wife, mother, and writer. There is no reason for erasing parts of Sylvia in order to fit her into a predesignated category in this way. If one hopes to understand the complexity of Plath’s identity, it is required that one investigate the reasons for discrepancies between her different types of writing and attempt to remain true to her own descriptions of herself and the descriptions provided by those who actually knew her.

As both are forms of personal writing, Plath’s letters and journals can be an especially large stumbling block for those trying to understand Plath by placing them in dialogue with one another. There is a clear difference between the ways in which Plath describes her experiences in her journals compared with her letters to her mother, and it is easy to see Sylvia as secretive because of the information she keeps from her mother. As mentioned earlier, these letters were greatly influenced by Plath’s relationship with her mother in which Plath constantly felt the need

to win Aurelia's approval (Becker 29). However, these are not all of Plath's letters, and while she plays a certain part for her mother, her letters to other friends are often more honest and revealing. Along with letters to Aurelia, certain letters to Plath's brother, Warren, were also published in *Letters Home*. In one letter, she admits the façade that she puts forth for Aurelia, beginning the letter saying, "This letter is only for you...I have hacked through a hard vacation, shared really only the best parts with mother, not the racking ones" (240). Here the audience is shown not only that Plath filters the descriptions of her experience for a difficult audience, but also that she has other individuals with whom she is more willing to reveal her true experiences. She is well aware that her identity is somewhat performative and excluding certain unpleasantness in regards to Aurelia, but she is not self-deceptive. Instead she consciously tries to avoid upsetting her mother by revealing only certain amounts of truth, while she does not have to worry about causing such disruptions when writing in her journal and to other friends.

Many critics use the incongruities between Plath's letters and journals to argue further for her split personality, for example, Jo Brans points to the differences between Sylvia's journal self and letter self to argue that descriptions of events in these writings "are so disparate as to lend complete credibility to the theory of the divided self" (Wagner-Martin 57). Such critics argue that the elimination of certain events and feelings in Plath's letters to her mother demonstrates that she was trying to destroy her true self and create a false, perfected self. However, it is important to consider Plath's purpose of her letters in comparison with her journals before assuming that her desire was to eliminate her true voice. Kukil states that "Plath wrote her letters to entertain their recipients" (Kukil), arguing that the letters were meant not only to be self-revealing, but also enjoyable to read. Although her letters were meant to be less criticized than her creative work, Plath had a passion for language, as shown by the countless hours she spent

writing. Rather than performing in order to create or conceal an identity, Plath used her word choice and descriptions to provide enjoyment to her friends and family - as do many writers in their literary letters. Using her knowledge of her friends and family, Plath “crafted her voice, tone, and subject matter to fit the personality and interests of each different correspondent” (Kukil). She held an awareness of the interests of those she was close with, and so attempted to write in diverse ways that would appeal to different confidants, revealing both Plath’s understanding of her friends and her ability to play different social roles such as daughter, sister, wife, and friend. She was not eliminating the “true Sylvia” by writing in this manner, rather her careful word choice and desire to entertain reflect core personality traits that Plath demonstrated throughout her lifetime. Writing in this way was likely the most “Sylvia-like” action she could have taken.

As with her letters, it is also important to consider the genre of Plath’s journals when using them to understand Sylvia. As they are written mainly for her own eyes, they were a place where Plath likely felt safe to reveal her true self, but also a space where she could experiment with new ways of describing her experiences without having to worry about misunderstandings from critics, friends, or family. In *The Other Sylvia*, Tracy Brain comments that “Plath used her Journals as a writer’s notebook where she tried out various forms and experimented with ways of injecting her writing with different emotions” (13). The journals were not only documentation of Plath’s feelings and life events, but also a place where Plath had freedom to represent herself in different ways without having to consider her audience’s perception. She constantly used her journals not only as a means of recording personal experiences, but also experimenting with possible content for prose and poetry. As someone passionate about writing, Plath could not help but investigate her style within her journals, and so it is understandable that her journal entries

may appear more dramatic or stranger than her letters, which had a wider audience and were designed to entertain specific individuals.

At times, it is challenging to gauge the intent behind young Plath's journals, as it seems impossible for anyone to experience life as she describes it. Brain comments that "[m]uch of the writing in her *Journals* is carefully crafted; there is too large a gap between her 'real' experience and the meditation of writing for us to use the *Journals* as simple documentary evidence of her mental state or emotions" (11). Due to her use of creative voice and experimentation with tone, Plath's journals lose some credibility when describing her mental state and emotional experiences, furthering complicating how one is meant to understand Plath. However, even if Plath does not document her mental state and emotions in a simple way, she still consistently relates her physical experiences within her journals – not altering or eliminating life events from what historically happened. While she incorporates creative writing techniques into her journals, her journals are still used to give an account of her life events, and are dependable for those investigating her through a simple biographical lens.

When attempting to prove Plath's identity as a masked figure whose true self is eventually allowed to escape, many critics argue that her poetry dramatically shifts from strict and formal to revealing and emotional towards the end of her life. However, the two claims that this argument makes – 1) that Plath's early work is not revealing and emotional; and 2) that Plath's later work is not strict and formal – are both false. To claim that Plath only revealed herself in her later poems is to ignore her works like "Female Author" and "Jilted," passionate poems inspired by her own life and written even before she had known Ted Hughes. While it is true that she continued to discover and develop her voice during the course of her life, in no way was *Ariel* the revealing of the "true Sylvia bitch goddess" (125). The poems from *Ariel* were

written during a very emotional time in Plath's life – she was struggling with depression, single-motherhood, and the dissolution of her marriage – and these revealing experiences were certainly incorporated into her poetry; however, despite all of this hardship, she still retained her strict adherence to form and edited her drafts until she believed them to be perfect. While struggling for her life, Plath continued to wake up in the early hours of the morning in order to pursue her writing before the awakening of her children, demonstrating the self-discipline and love of poetry that Butscher dismisses as false “Sylvias”. *Ariel* is remarkable, not because it reveals Plath's true self as an uncontrolled “bitch goddess,” but because Plath was able to craft her emotions and suffering into incredible poems that still resonate with readers to this day. As Collins states, “There is nothing casual about Plath's art...yet in the extremity of her final months she managed to combine emotional tension with a remarkable clarity of purpose” (Collins 206). Because of Plath's great sacrifices to pursue and perfect her writing during intense heartbreak, *Ariel* represents the merging of Plath's stricter self, through form, with her emotional self, through content. Indeed, *Ariel* is an achievement that reveals the “true Sylvia,” a unique individual who was able to beautifully combine the seemingly contradictory elements of her personhood into a collection of moving poems. In *Ariel*, she was able to understand and embrace herself as the multifaceted woman that she was.

Ironically, those that are captivated by Plath in *Ariel* and who go searching for her true voice in her personal writings are likely to find themselves where they began – at *Ariel*. Although it has been demonstrated that her poems are not true depictions of her experiences, *Ariel* is still an expression of her true self, as it is able to combine her differing desires – describing being a wife and mother through writing, demonstrating strict use of word choice while depicting emotion, and being honest about personal struggles while also providing

entertainment. These dissimilar personality traits (which are so confounding in her journals and letters) are all parts of the “real” Sylvia: a woman who held many desires and who searched for methods in which she could balance and combine all her passions. Rather than being an expression of Plath’s true experiences, the poems of *Ariel* are true expressions of her experience, capturing her most deeply felt emotions and longings. While biography and the reading of Plath’s letters and journals can help one understand her literature and her relationship towards it – no amount of time spent immersing oneself in Plath’s creative work and personal writing will allow one to completely understand such a complicated individual as Plath. We can acknowledge her many complicated yearnings and examine the way in which she sorted them, but the “true” Sylvia will always remain elusive as someone that only Plath knew. What is revealed instead is the true power of confessional poetry such as Plath’s – that poems are able to stand on their own as expressions of the inmost, private, and true self, not needing to be backed by biography. In-depth analysis of writers like Plath remind us that we will not find a person within their writing; but, we will find the work that they have left behind, which is, in a way, a piece of them.



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