Primary and Archival Material: Sylvia Plath

#1 The Collected Poems by Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes (Editor)

This collection of poems is a later edition of a curated collection of poems chosen, edited and annotated by Plath's husband Ted Hughes. It is one of the most comprehensive collections available, including all of her work written after 1956 until her death in 1963. Hughes had access to all of the works Plath left behind after her suicide and according to the introduction of this collection, to his knowledge, “she never scrapped any of her poetic efforts. With one or two exceptions, she brought every piece she worked on to some final form acceptable to her” (13). Hughes claims this collection contains every piece she wrote after 1956, so as to consolidate all of Plath's poetry into a single volume, “and to set everything in as true a chronological order as possible” (15). Hughes also chose to include nearly fifty pre-1956 works of Plath's and assembled them into an appendix at the back of this collection. The edition we located is relatively new, published in 1992, but still relegated to the Special Collections section of Young Research Library, leading us to believe copies of this specific collection of poems are scarce. As it was assembled and commented on extensively by Hughes, one can deduce certain biases on his part, as he was Plath's husband. As we perused this material, we questioned whether or not Hughes left certain works out purposely. He had full autonomy in the case of this collection and could easily have manipulated certain works, though he claims he “resisted the temptation to reproduce the drafts of these last poems in variorum completeness” (17).

How We Found It

We found this resource while inputting the search terms “Sylvia Plath,” “The Bell Jar,” “Sylvia Plath Poetry,” and “Ariel” into the UCLA library catalog. This selection was located in Special Collections, so we had to request to view it and wait for it to become available. Again, the obstacles we encountered were related to a scarcity of material regarding Plath. There are extensive commentaries on her works, but very few truly enlightening ones such as this.

What We Learned

We learned that even newer poetry collections in perfect condition can be archived in Special Collections if they are considered rare or of importance. This collection was in perfect condition and relatively new, so we were surprised we had to go to the
trouble of requesting and waiting for it. But it proved to be a relatively eye opening read and gave us a bit of insight into Plath's marriage, which interestingly, was ultimately not enough to keep her from committing suicide. That said, this resource might help us understand why. This is one of the most comprehensive collections of Plath's poems available.

Citation:


**Item #2: A Recollection of Meeting Sylvia Plath in 1959**

**Item Description**

This short narrative is May Swenson's recollection of meeting Sylvia Plath at Yaddo during the fall of 1959. Swenson was a poet herself and had published two collections of poems when she met Plath. Swenson would gain recognition as one of the great female poets of the 20th century as she continued to publish works through the 1980s, experimenting heavily in poetic form and appearance and the use of precise imagery. Swenson recollects meeting Plath while staying with Plath and her husband at Yaddo, a community that provides residency for creative artists to work in a peaceful environment. Swenson notes that she did not know who Sylvia Plath was "let alone who she would be, or what wide impact her poetry would make in both America and England." Swenson goes on to describe the evening she met Hughes and Sylvia, who was sick and pregnant at the time. Swenson tells of how she found Sylvia sitting in bed "under the hooded yellow light of the floorlamp," and surrounded by “books and notepads, papers, pens, magazines, a box of tissues, a bowl of apples and grapes nestled among the blankets.” While Swenson does project her own opinions and experience into the memoir, it does provide us with an idea of what it would have been like to meet Plath and view her as a person rather than a famed author. We are given an idea of her appearance and emotional state in late 1959, especially when Swenson writes: "After a handshake and the flash of a smile, Sylvia's head dropped, her blue eyes lidded, and she looked down into her lap.”

**How We Found It**

We found this item by running a search online in the Digital Public Library of America for “Sylvia Plath,” “journals” and “letters.” Listed on the page were a few items that met our search, including the recollection by May Swenson from a contributing institution. We were then brought to the Washington University St. Louis Digital Gateway: Image Collections and Exhibitions. The site provides detailed information on the background for this narrative, which was sent to Peter Davidson in 1987.

**What We Learned**

Through looking for primary materials related to Sylvia Plath, we learned about the Digital Public Library and how to go about searching the archives. In looking for resources for this category, we also had to consider what constituted primary material. We considered this first person account of meeting Sylvia Plath to be an interesting take on primary material. It is typed on a typewriter and there are several typos throughout, indicating that the piece has not received editing and is merely a compilation of thoughts and impressions. There is also a note written by the author on the top of the page, connecting it even further to the author. We were also inspired to look into Plath's connection to Swenson, which brought us to looking into Yaddo and investigating this period of Plath's life. We researched May Swenson and Yaddo to gain more context for this piece of primary material.

**Yaddo:** This image is a postcard picturing the Yaddo Mansion, a residence and retreat for creative artists located in Saratoga Springs, New York. Plath and Hughes held residence here in 1959 for a few months.

**Citations:**


Item #3: Sylvia Plath's Journals

Item Description

This book, The Journals of Sylvia Plath, provides journals beginning in 1950 during Plath's time at Smith College and ends with her time in England in 1962. The cover of the book displays the subtitle “In her own words, the true story behind The Bell Jar.” The book of journals was edited by Ted Hughes and Frances McCullough and there is a foreword written by Ted Hughes. While the journals are written in her own words, it is interesting that there were two editors. She was married to Hughes and McCullough was a close friend, so both of the editors knew Plath well. However, it is interesting that they chose to edit these journals instead of releasing them without edits. It leads one to wonder what changes were made, from small spelling corrections to the potential removal of entire sections of the original journals. We also noticed that the journals end in 1962, the year before Plath's death. This led us to investigate the issue more, and there has been speculation as to whether Hughes destroyed the last volume of the journals and because the journals end before the year of her death. Among the first pages is a short passage from one of Plath's journals from 1953 written in her own handwriting, with a small sketch to accompany the words. The text of the book itself is typed and organized into sections. The journals are arranged chronologically and are divided by time periods in her life, such as her time spent in Boston and England.

How We Found It

We found this item in the English Reading Room on the third floor of the Humanities Building. After inquiring about Sylvia Plath material and The Bell Jar in particular, the attendant at the front desk ran a search and informed us of where we could locate Plath-related material in the book stacks. We found 6 books in total, and one of them was the paperback edition of Sylvia Plath's journals. While we are not allowed to check anything out of the reading room, we were able to spend some time examining the book and taking photos, which are provided in the gallery above. We had initially searched for journals in special collections through the UCLA Library Catalog but did not find this item listed, so we did not expect to find the book of journals when we went to the Reading Room.

What We Learned

We thoroughly enjoyed the experience of exploring the English Reading Room and seeing what they had on reserve. Reading about Sylvia Plath's life in her own words allows us to understand the voice behind the speaker in her works, especially The Bell Jar which critics have frequented speculated to be somewhat autobiographical. Looking directly at the journals of an author does provide important context for understanding the author’s works, so we were fortunate to be able to find these journals.

Citations


Item #4: A Letter from Sylvia Plath to Olwyn Hughes
This letter was written in June of 1962 by Sylvia Plath to Olwyn Hughes, who was Ted Hughes' sister. In the letter, Sylvia writes on several topics ranging from her son's baptism to their family finances and her persistent sinus infection. She writes briefly about her own work, saying that she just finished writing a poem and is looking forward to writing longer pieces. Plath also shares about being a mother and the burdens that come along with keeping her house in fair order, while preparing to move to London. She says that she and Ted are preparing to spend their first days in London together. Plath writes about their plans in London, remarking on the price of the train tickets and the upcoming engagements she and Ted have on British programs. Plath also writes about their summer plans, sharing that her mother is coming to visit and that the help around the house and with the children will be appreciated. The letter is written informally and the tone is similar to that found in her journals. In reading the letter, one can gather that she and Olwyn had a close relationship and had been corresponding regarding several topics in the letter, including certain poets. Physically, the letter is written on a single piece of yellowing paper, with several creases and water stains. The writing is legible except for a few words which were more difficult to decipher. The subjects of the letter were rather scattered and ranged in their focus throughout the letter.
Questions

When looking at primary materials, how do you deduce what is legitimate fact versus what is opinion? How do you determine external history or social circumstances for a piece while remaining impartial and allowing the work to speak for itself?

Encyclopedic Entries: Sylvia Plath

MAY 14, 2015  
JORDAN DAKIN  
LEAVE A COMMENT

#1 A History of Twentieth Century British Women's Poetry

How We Found It

Approaching librarians at Powell Library, we asked about the best way to go about finding encyclopedias with entries regarding Sylvia Plath. One recommended Reference Universe, which then became an indispensable tool in locating these entries. This compiled history of female poetry was located in Young Research Library, in the language and literature section (which is denoted by a P). This resource gave us a much deeper insight into the literary climate surrounding Plath, including people she admired and read frequently, as well as her opinions about postwar life.

What We Learned

We learned how to go about locating physical encyclopedias, a skill none of us had previously acquired. Reference Universe can be accessed on any computer and is relatively easy to use. Our first search, in which we used the term “Sylvia Plath,” yielded six
or seven viable options. The only difficulty came with locating some of these encyclopedias, many of which were not in their respective spots in the library.

Citation


#2 Encyclopedia Brittanica

5/15/2015

_Sylvia Plath_ biography - American author -- Britannica Online Encyclopedia


Plath published her first poem at age eight. She entered and won many literary contests and was still in high school sold her first poem to the _Christian Science Monitor_ and her first short story to _Seventeen_ magazine. She entered Smith College on a scholarship in 1951 and was a cowinner of the _Mademoiselle_ magazine fiction contest in 1952. Plath enjoyed remarkable artistic, academic, and social success at Smith, but she also suffered from severe depression and underwent a period of psychiatric hospitalization. She graduated from Smith with highest honors in 1955 and went on to Newnham College in Cambridge, England, on a Fulbright fellowship, in 1956 she married the English poet Ted Hughes. For the following two years she was an instructor in English at Smith College.

In 1960, shortly after Plath and her husband returned to England, her first collection of poems appeared as _The Colossus_. Her novel, _The Bell Jar_, was published in 1963 under the pseudonym "Victoria Lucas." Strongly autobiographical, the book describes the mental breakdown, attempted suicide, and eventual recovery of a young college girl and parallels Plath's own breakdown and hospitalization in 1955. In 1962 Plath and Hughes separated.

During her last three years Plath abandoned the constraints and conventions that had bound much of her early work. She wrote with great speed, producing poems of stark self-revelation and confession. The anxiety, confusion, and doubt that haunted her were transmuted into verses of great power and pathos borne on flashes of incisive wit. Several poems, including the well-known "Daddy," explore her conflicted relationship with her father, Otto Plath, who died when she was age eight. In 1965, after this burst of productivity, Plath took her own life.

_Ariel_ (1965), a collection of her later poems, helped spark the growth of a devoted and enthusiastic following of readers and scholars. The reissue of _The Bell Jar_ under her own name in 1966 and the appearance of small collections of previously unpublished poems, including _Crossing the Water_ (1971) and _Winter Trees_ (1971), were welcomed by critics and the public alike. _Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams_, a book of short stories and prose, was published in 1977. The _Collected Poems_, which includes many previously unpublished poems, appeared in 1981 and received the 1982 Pulitzer Prize. Making Plath the first to receive the honour posthumously, Plath had kept a journal for much of her life, and in 2000 _The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath_, covering the years from 1950 to 1962, was published. A biographical film of Plath starring Gwyneth Paltrow (_Sylvia_) appeared in 2003. In 2009 Plath's radio play _Three Women_ (1962) was staged professionally for the first time.

Many of Plath's posthumous publications were compiled by Hughes, who became the executor of her estate. However, controversy surrounded his editing practices, especially when he revealed that he had destroyed the last journals written prior to her suicide.

How We Found It

We had knowledge of Encyclopedia Brittanica, but had never had to use it for any schoolwork. Inputting "Sylvia Plath" into the search engine was straightforward and led us to this standard entry. This entry helped us corroborate certain details that had been speculation previously, specifically in terms of Plath's life, marriage and her inspiration for the novel.

What We Learned

This entry gave us insight into Plath's life overall, and we found it was much more specific than the Wikipedia entry that commonly comes up when searching for information regarding Plath. We learned that it is worth it to search for more specific encyclopedia entries using databases like Reference Universe because the information is often times more reliable and more is available. Going forward in other research, we all indicated that we would happily use Reference Universe again, especially now that we know it exists.

Citation


In Summation

The sections in the gathered history of British women's poetry regarding Plath shed some light on her relationships with other female writers, including those she truly idolized, like Stevie Smith. There were also a few opinions of Plath stated by other authors, specifically in the section “The Postwar Generation and the Paradox of Home.” One part discusses Plath's “vision of domesticity,” stating that her “expectations for her emotional life came straight from glossy magazines” (129). We found this to be a much closer look at where Plath stood among other writers, as well how she had been affected by the world around her. This entry talked a lot about the role of female writers after the war, and their beliefs about family and home life. It implied that Plath's seemingly superficial outlook might account for her depression, as her life failed to live up to her shiny expectations. Interestingly, though Plath was American, she is included in a few British histories of literature as she spent so much time, and eventually died, in London.

The Encyclopedia Brittanica entry was very straightforward and offered a textbook summary of Plath's life. Still, we found it to be much more in-depth than any Wikipedia entries could be. This one was very specific in terms of her life shortly before she died, pointing out that she wrote very quickly and with brute honesty up until her death. This entry is also very clear about each of her published works, and provides a helpful timeline as to when they were published and the effects they had on her readership. What is especially interesting is the last few sentences of the entry regarding Plath's husband. They maintain that Ted Hughes destroyed some of Plath's last works, a fact iterated by other publications, but one we had not trusted until we read it in this entry.

A Question

How does one discern which encyclopedias or databases are most reliable? How are entries compiled and what discerns whether certain information should be included in these compilations or not?
The above article is entitled “An Angry Language: A Stylistic Study of the Images in Sylvia Plath's 'Daddy'.” It provides detailed analysis of men and the role that they play in her poems and indicates her overall views on men. More specifically, it explores the influence of her father's death and her subsequent loss of faith after his passing. Although she was raised as a Unitarian Christian, her father's death made her view on religion and faith became irresolute. It also became the catalyst that launched her disdain for men. The poem addresses the oppression that women face and the idea of masculine entrapment and argues that the only desire men have is to dominate. This article addresses her overreaching looming nature-based themes of death. The scholarly book that we found and will describe more in depth in the next section tells us that she wrote the poem “Daddy” after learning of her own husband's infidelity shortly before her death in 1962. Thus, the poem is a reflection on her past experience of loss as well as the tragic situation she was experiencing at the time.

How We Found It

This article was found after funneling our research from broad ideas about Plath to the more nuanced details of Plath's works. We started with Plath's biography and noting her history of clinical depression as well as any impacting moments in her life. The impacting moments in her life included her father's death, her educational history, her suicide attempts, as well as her marriage to Ted Hughes. Her works mirror her attitudes towards these specific moments in her life and as a result has influenced the dark themes that umbrella her works. From here we focused in specifically on her style and found articles that critique and analyze Plath's specific style. We used the MLA research database, specifically ProQuest, to narrow down our search. The hardest part was sifting through articles that simply provided historic accounts and biographical details in order to find analytical journals.

What We Learned

The poem “Daddy” as analyzed in this article follows Plath's typical route. It mentions love. She mentions her father's premature death, an event she clearly hangs on to with sentiment. Simultaneously, she uses her father to umbrella her feeling of oppression when it comes to men and her resentment towards their dominance. She showcases the inevitable love for men, while portraying them in a dismissive light through her father. She addresses her father as a constant presence, calling him “Daddy”,
addressing her inferiority, whilst continuing to include physical features, showcasing masculinity. Plath weaves her feeling of subjugation with a feeling of adoration. Her style in this poem syncs with her typical nature-based imagery as well as her dark themes.

Authors are often influenced by major events in their lives. For Plath, this is exceptionally true. Plath was deemed clinically depressed, having exhibited signs of depression and having many suicide attempts. As a result, many of her works encompass a theme of death, resurrection, and redemption. The darkness in the themes of her works mirror the same darkness she faced as she lived. Her style is violent and destructive. It is dark and looming. It is depressing. She made the style of confessional poetry famous, a style that suits her perfectly. It focuses on moments of impact, moments of intensity, whether it be something as risque as sexuality or something as controversial as mental illness. Confessional poetry served as an indulgent outlet for Plath.

After her father’s death, Plath’s view on faith significantly wavered, despite being raised as a Unitarian Christian. Her works show no sign of faith, not even a mention of religion or any credit to a higher power. Plath discusses her life and experiences through the lens of imagery that is based on the dark side of nature – the moon, blood, life, the absence of life. She paints a scene where death is constantly looming over. Similarly, following the departure of her husband, Ted Hughes, the subsequent 40 poems that she wrote were laced with anger, despair, retribution, and yet tinged with love. Plath disguises the emotion of love within negative emotions.

A Question

Had Plath’s father not passed away at such an early stage in her life, how would her poems have been different? Would her poems still contain the same melancholy themes and introspective attitude? The passing of her father was a traumatic experience for her, an experience that left its mark in her memory, inspiring the many themes behind her works. However if he had passed away later, perhaps Plath would not have the same dark themes. Perhaps her works would be more religious and would give more credit to faith. Perhaps she would not have viewed men as the dominating species that only seeks to control women. Perhaps taking away the catalyst to her downward spiral of depression would instead give Plath an outlet where her poetry reflects the happiness she feels in life.

Citation

Retrieved from: http://search.proquest.com
How We Found It:

Our group decided to look at some of the old projects that the English professors put in the reading room in the Humanities Building. While there, we decided to look to see what Sylvia Plath books the reading room had and found not only *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, talked about in Part 2 Item #3, but also this scholarly book. We asked the librarian for help to locate the section on Sylvia Plath and she gave us the ID number to simplify the process of searching the book stacks. The reading room ended up being a valuable source for information, as we found 2 different sources for the project there. The only disadvantage to the Reading Room is that you are not able to check out books and can only make scans of the books while there, as well as take photographs.

Description:

The book, *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words*, by Steven Gould Axelrod, approaches its scholarly analysis of Sylvia Plath as a psychoanalysis of Plath's struggle for voice. The author discusses his approach in the preface of combining, “Plath's personal experiences, her cultural conditions, and the institution of literature” (ix). The book is separated into three main parts of Plath's life and then discusses the texts that emerged as a result of her personal experiences. The first part of the book discusses her family life, with a particular focus on her father and how her specific works such as *Snakecharmer*, *The Colossus*, *Daddy*, and *Words* were influenced by her father's death. Her father died at a young age after refusing treatment for diabetes and Plath felt "lost and betrayed" (25). Her works after her father's death chronicle how the "I" submits to and then rebels against a father figure, mostly because "as she wished to idealize her father...she also needed to deflate his memory, to keep him small, impotent, and distanced" (28). Plath's father's death was an organizing theme in her psychic life and her first point of vulnerability. The author notes how every subsequent loss that she had later in life reminded her of her father, as Plath writes in her journal, "Crying and crying with this terrible pain; it hurts, Father, it hurts, oh, Father I have never known; a father, even, they took from me" (27). Sylvia's father's death not only inspired a great tragedy in her life, but a source for creativity in her poems, such as "Daddy." She wrote it after her husband left her, but it also reflects on the, "woman poet's struggle with 'daddy-poetry'" and ultimately the theme of men abandoning in her life, starting with her Father (52).

The next part discusses her ambiguous relationship with her mother and other maternal figures in her life. The author closes the language of the text and then connects it to Plath's personal life: the author notices imagery linked with mouths and eating. In her poem *Ariel*, the speaker recalls the separation from her mother just as her mother stopped feeding her at a young age. This is reflected in Plath's life, as the author explains how, "Plath's writing physically sustained her, just as her mother's nurturing had done during her first years of life. Both satisfied her voracious need for love" (7). Plath's relationship with her mother is complicated and this is portrayed in her texts. In her poem "Medusa," the mother figure is a jellyfish mythic monster who Freud analyzes as a symbol of horror (85). Yet, in other texts like "The Bell Jar" and the mother in "Journals," the mother is consciously loving (85). This contrast is due to the fact that "not only she and her mother have nothing in common but also that there is nothing dividing them" (85). Furthermore, the author discusses how Plath realizes that her mother is an extension of
herself, even if she does not want her to be. This is shown in Plath's *Journals* where the character's views reflect Plath's as she says, “I wish...I could be sure of what I am: so I could know what feelings I have, even though some resemble hers, are really my own” (85).

The last section of the book is focused on Plath's relationship with her husband, Ted Hughes. Plath's marriage was ultimately a loss of identity, as she started to define herself in the context of the relationship, rather than individually. The author explains how Plath sought connection and care in a marital union, yet Hughes was marked by a need for distance and isolation. Plath was initially attracted to him as "a colossal statue of a poet" and that she wanted to be "married to a poet" and implicitly, to poetry itself" (180). However, as their marriage progressed and Hughes was caught with infidelity, this caused a dramatic shift in Plath's life as chronicled in her journals: "Her first reaction to Hughes's infidelity was to repudiate suicide as a solution" (182). Ultimately, Plath's marriage with Hughes not only affected her identity, but also her creative life, “deferring to her husband and her frequent unhappiness with him inhibited her writing. Her marriage became one long writer's block” (191). Essentially, the creative drive it took to produce *Ariel* and *The Bell Jar*, arose with her final separation with her husband.

This book, *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words*, is unique in that it is not just a simple biography outlining Plath's life, but rather it combines Plath's personal life and tragedy and offers it as evidence for the different works she produced. The author essentially close reads Plath's poems, books and her personal journals to offer evidence and serve as a mirror reflecting what was happening in Plath's life at the time. Furthermore, the text uses Freud's philosophies to analyze Plath's relationships with her parents and husband, which could be seen as limiting as the author uses a single philosopher by analyzing Sylvia's personal life from one perspective. Another critique against the book is that it is not entirely in chronological order, instead combining texts from all periods of her life. Lastly, the book not only focuses on Plath's life in the 3 major categories outlined above, but also compares texts from Emily Dickinson and Virginia Woolf, like doing a comparison of “The Bell Jar” and “Mrs. Dalloway” which seemed misplaced in the author's interpretation of Plath's life and texts.

**What We Learned:**

The scholarly book provided valuable insight into Sylvia Plath's life by critiquing in a unique form through the use of psychoanalysis and explaining how Plath's life and works were influenced by 3 major people: her father, her mother, and her husband. As opposed to just letters people have written about Plath, like in category 2, a scholarly book provides an in depth analysis of the author's life as a whole and offers more of an opinion and a critique rather than just an observation someone makes about her in a letter like May Swanson did noted above. Furthermore, with a literary celebrity as influential as Sylvia Plath, it was hard to choose which scholarly book to pick for the category to analyze Plath since there are so many written that either focus on her life, her books, or her poems. We choose this particular book because we thought it combined a lot of different analytical approaches such as personal descriptions of how her mother and father and husband shaped her writing, and in depth close reading of her different works and journals to provide an overall synthesis of Plath as a writer.

**A Question:**

Since this book was published in 1999, well after her death in 1963, how would a scholarly book be different if it was written closer to the time of her suicide? Would the immediate tragedy of her death influence the way the author would critique and analyze Plath's works?

**Citation:**

She collected sea shells, I collected sand
She searched for the perfect one I reached down my hand.
I carried a bucket A basket
Read More. © Chris Green.