

“*The Life and Work of Sylvia Plath: An Essay*”

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My mother remembers the weekend I fell in love with Sylvia Plath in this way: her 16-year-old daughter moody and anti-social, ignoring the family and sulking on the couch for two straight days over the Thanksgiving holiday. What I remember is that *The Bell Jar* changed my life that weekend, and no matter how rude or inconsiderate my cousins and uncles and grandparents considered me, putting down the book was frankly impossible.

Soon after reading her most famous piece, I read the *Johnny Panic* collection of short stories and then many of her poems. I read *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*--the edition edited by Karen V. Kukil, not realizing at the time the significance of having her journals appear unabridged; only after reading some biographical material did I understand the myriad of controversies surrounding her work and the legal constraints and restrictions of her estate.

Sylvia's writing gives me a deeper understanding of myself; while reading passages from her journals, I feel as though she's explaining myself to me. I find I can read and reread her words and still find something new and illuminating each time. She has influenced my writing in powerful, visceral ways. I am not afraid to use material from my own life for my writing and severely dramatize my experiences, as she did hers. I am not afraid to confront my inner and awful truths, as she did hers. Ted Hughes once wrote that he admired that part of his wife's writing perhaps more than anything else.

This collection of books has grown out of my love for Sylvia--both her life and her work. Of course with Sylvia, more than many other writers, it is obvious how closely the two are in constant conversation with each other, how the two breathe life into each other. This is a fact Sylvia was well aware of:

The dialogue between my Writing and my Life is always in danger of becoming a slithering shifting of responsibility, of evasive rationalizing; in other words: I justified the mess I made of life by saying I'd give it order, form, beauty, writing about it; I justified my writing by saying it would be published, give me life (and prestige to life).¹

Reading essays and biographies allows me to think about Sylvia in different senses, and judging by how many books have been written about her life, her death, and her work, I am not the only reader she has transfixed. Her life has inspired dozens of biographies, essays, and fictitious accounts of the last few years of her life. Writers as fascinated by her as I am attempt to understand a talented woman driven to write, but tormented by issues of depression, and drawn, inexorably, to a preoccupation with death. Sylvia frequently identified herself with Virginia Woolf--another writer attempting to create through such dark barriers. Woolf also found this kind of life ultimately insurmountable.

¹From Sylvia Plath's Journals, 25 February 1956