

# Do We Know Sylvia Plath Yet?

## The Letters Bring Us Closer

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*The Letters of Sylvia Plath Volume I: 1940-1956* (2017, Faber and Faber)

*The Letters of Sylvia Plath Volume II: 1956-1963* (2018, Faber and Faber)

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Critiquing *The Letters of Sylvia Plath* after all the other reviews are out presents special challenges. With *Plath Profiles*' audience in mind, I write here for the Plath scholar, reflecting on what has not yet been mentioned.

After some uproar over-sexualizing Plath in the bikini shot on the British cover of Volume I, the British Volume II has no such scandal. And yet, look closely. Plath's scar from her suicide attempt at age twenty is just visible on that left cheek turned toward the camera. It is a visual marker of Volume 1 continuing its tale.

What's next to be published by Sylvia Plath? Her school papers, diagrams, and doodles? Maybe a collection of her book reviews and published essays? Her childhood journals? The missing journals? Lost Plath poems turn up every so often, hiding in archive folders or rising from the inky depths of carbon paper. One has to believe that she cringes somewhere, wishing they hadn't been found since she did not keep working on them.

Over these many years, the Abridged Journals have become Unabridged. And now, the censored *Letters Home* has been replaced with a two-volume, 1,400-letter collection. Still, more letters surfaced after the publication was finalized. When will we reach the end of Sylvia Plath materials? The memoirs, biographies, and essays may continue forever as her work and character are better understood and the veils of stilted cultural perceptions lifted. Today we can talk about gender inequality, domestic abuse, sexuality, the occult, and other subjects that were taboo until only recently. As society changes, there will undoubtedly be more scholarship on this remarkable young woman, her prodigious output of work, and her too-short, dramatic life.

Ever since the first printing of *Letters Home* in 1975, where we glimpsed pieces of some of the letters we can see now in full, Sylvia Plath has often been criticized for her false cheeriness, to her mother especially. In *The Letters of Sylvia Plath*, Plath's

correspondence still contains that forced cheer, yet with many other emotions on display. In three decades of letters across these two books, Plath evolves from a confident teen to pressured young woman to a happily married mother to a suffering, angry exile who has lost all confidence. In Janet Burroway's essay, "I Don't Know Sylvia Plath," Burroway explained that this bright, positive, censored tone was how *everyone* wrote to home and family in the Fifties and Sixties (There is a quick note from Plath to Burroway in Volume II, giving directions to her apartment for a spaghetti dinner). Cheeriness was a generational protocol, not Plath's deception. Everything must be taken in context, and it's a context today's generation can't know without asking their predecessors.

Volume I presents Sylvia Plath as a girl and young woman of appetites: food, lists of expenditures, clothes, art, men, and knowledge. She becomes more conscious of world events, working them into poem through metaphor and symbolism. She maps out the layers of meaning in a poem to Gordon Lameyer and explains her "news" topic poems to her mother (V1; 882, 917).

Volume II moves into darker territory, with Plath's political consciousness and war metaphorically juxtaposed with the crumbling of her marriage to Ted Hughes, all images she used to the hilt in her collection *Ariel*. We see her humanity in her meanness and mistakes, including a typo in a letter to Cambridge (!) which somehow was overlooked (V1; 897). Plath plays Ouija and tarot, games that are not games, depending on who she writes to. She is unequivocally atheist to some, yet "inclined to be too metaphysical" (V1; 458), calls herself pagan, and is ever-spiritual in her use of bibliomancy and tarot cards.

There are moments in these letters and footnotes that the reader cannot ignore: the fact that Dr. Beuscher divorced her first husband for "extreme mental cruelty" (V2; 452) and how the doctor may have empathized and even projected her feelings onto Plath. Beuscher also had a closeness with Plath that broke many professional ethical standards today. Plath psychoanalyzed herself regarding her series of surrogate mothers in Mary Ellen Chase, Olive Higgins Prouty, and Mrs. Cantor; and then surrogate fathers in her husband, Ted Hughes. One might also look at other father-figures in professors such as Alfred Kazin, her older boyfriend Edwin Akutowicz, and even Father Carey, who she insisted on calling "Father" once she learned what his "Fr" prefix meant (V2; 926).

There are the interesting parallels, such as how both Sylvia Plath and Aurelia Plath had a girl and a boy, and how history repeated itself in bad marriages. Plath's mother came to life as her daughter's rescuer during this time in a way that repulsed her daughter. Plath said her mother "laid down her life" for her children, (V2; 831) and of course, Plath ultimately did the same, only in the literal sense. But it's not all

tragedy. There are also all the various fun predictions that did come true, such as her future children speaking in a "RAW\*THRE BRRRITISH OXCENT" (V1; 801).

Sylvia Plath wrote many times in Volume II of how she hated England: the weather, the people, the sheer deadness of it. Yet she returned to this country cheerfully and dutifully with her husband and baby Frieda on the way, taking on the British spellings and terms, everything from *nappies* to *navvys*. Many times, the reader stops and says: "If only." *If only* Plath had her week in person for therapy with Dr. Beuscher. *If only* she went to Ireland or Spain instead of London. This is a story we keep reading, knowing how it will turn out, but wanting it to end differently somehow.

It is hard to read the letters to Dr. Beuscher in Volume II, with the passion and anger over Plath and Hughes' love and their life together destroyed. Years ago, when I read the unpublished letters to her mother in the Plath archives at the Lilly Library in Indiana University, I got a crushing headache. I needed to get up and stretch, to stop and rest periodically. Here it was again in letters to Dr. Beuscher, even worse. Just too much after having spent many hundreds of pages inside her head. Also tough to take are the details of Hughes' domestic abuse. In addition to Plath, Hughes hit his sister Olwyn (V2: 565), and there is confirmation of things scholars guessed that Plath probably knew, such as Hughes' affair with Susan Alliston. Until the publication of the letters to Dr. Beuscher, to my knowledge, Plath had never written the F-word.

*The Letters of Sylvia Plath* Volumes I and II bring Plath back to us in all of her voices, passions, and personas. We can imagine how at home Plath might be today, comfortable with mixed races despite social and political troubles. And, angry at the government and never-ending wars, wars, wars. "What a world!" she said then and would say now. Today she might fulfill her dream of purple hair (V2; 807) and fit right in with the hipsters. She'd march the women's marches, glad to finally live in a society where she didn't need a male escort, and she could have sex before marriage with whomever she wanted. As the antiquated paradigms collapse, Sylvia Plath once again becomes a spokesperson, now for the #MeToo generation and for battered women. What next might she help us through?