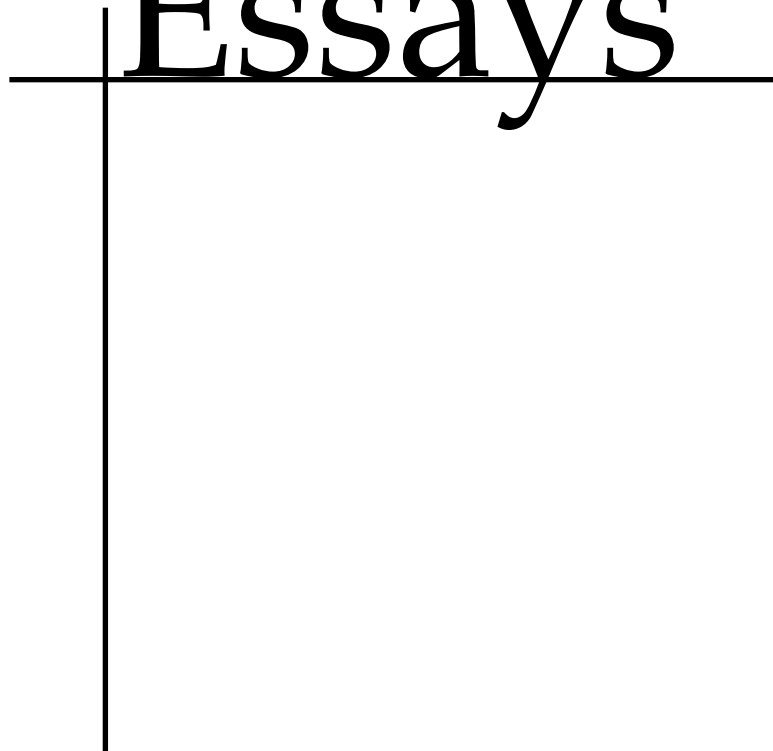


Plath Profiles

Essays



“I Never Will Need Shorthand”

Sylvia Plath and Speedwriting

by Catherine Rankovic

In an aerogramme from London dated September 23, 1960, 27-year-old poet and short-story writer Sylvia Plath asked her mother, Mrs. Aurelia Plath, to find among Plath's possessions back in Wellesley, Massachusetts, her yellow paperback speedwriting book, and mail it.¹ An American living in London with her husband and infant, Plath was competing for informal temporary clerical jobs and finding them closed to applicants without shorthand or another kind of rapid-writing skill. In Britain, the most basic clerical title was not, as in the United States, “typist” or “secretary,” but “shorthand typist,”² spelling out the skills required.

“Shorthand,” also called “stenography,” denotes a written language—using symbols, which was developed for professional note-taking for business purposes. In the U.S., and in the writings of Sylvia Plath, “shorthand” refers almost always to Gregg shorthand—the most efficient of several competing 20th-century shorthand systems. A stenographer typically met with her boss and, using shorthand, captured his dictated words, verbatim, and in handwriting, ideally kept pace with the normal speaking speed of about 120 words per minute. Mastering Gregg shorthand requires six months to two years of study and practice, and this is as true now as it was a century ago when Gregg was new.³

¹ *The Letters of Sylvia Plath*, vol. 2, p. 513.

² Cryer, P. (n.d.) Shorthand-Typing: A Common Employment for Women in 1950s Britain [Web log post]. Retrieved September 9, 2016 from www.1900s.org.uk; and Plath, S., letter to Aurelia Plath, January 27, 1961; *Letters*, vol. 2, p. 571.

³ “The Four Shorthand Pitfalls,” *Shorthand and Typewriter News*, vol. 2, no. 2, February 1914, p. 30: “Make up your mind that you cannot expect to become much of a shorthand writer in less than a year of hard work; the chances are that it will be nearer eighteen months before you are ‘worth your salt’.”

Over the 2000 years stenography has been known to exist, it had most of the time been used by males; mainly for courtroom reporting or its equivalent. As such, it was considered an accomplishment and a manly art. Samuel Pepys and Charles Dickens, for their own reasons, wrote in shorthand. President Abraham Lincoln's two male secretaries took his dictation in shorthand. Female stenographer-typists entered the full-time U.S. workforce in significant numbers between 1870 and 1880. By 1890, the business-office hierarchy was stratified by gender into those who dictated and those who took dictation and typed it up; already the percentage of stenographer-typists who were female was 64 percent and typewriting and shorthand skills were devalued proportionately.⁴ Stenography became aspirational not for males, but for females. In a popular youth novel published in 1904, eight-year-old Nan Bobbsey, a businessman's daughter, declares she is going to become a stenographer when she grows up. Nan's father has a female stenographer.⁵

⁴https://www.officemuseum.com/office_gender.htm, table "US Stenographers and Typists, 1870-1930." Retrieved 19 November 2017.

⁵ *The Bobbsey Twins: Merry Days Indoors and Out*, p. 8.

Soon after the first mass entry of women into the U.S. business workforce, most office jobs for females were clerical and most clericals female, and that was the case in Plath's time and now.⁶ In the mid-20th century, even the most highly educated women expected to start their careers as clericals. Plath wrote in her journal of June-July 1953, "When I apply for jobs after college, or after graduate school, I will want to know typing and shorthand. . . my bargaining power will be much better" (*The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, 543; ellipsis in original).

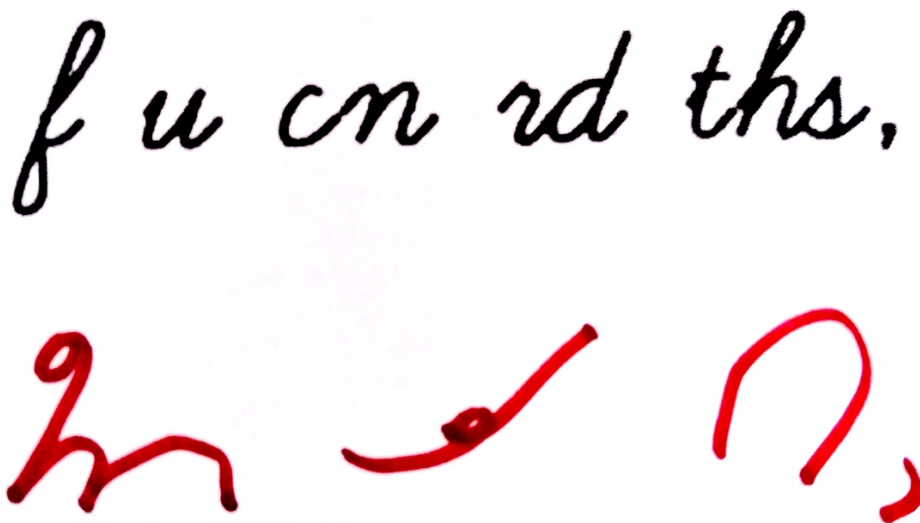
Sylvia Plath resisted learning shorthand and in fact never learned it. In *The Bell Jar*, Plath's autobiographical novel set in the year 1953, Plath's protagonist Esther Greenwood, a college English major like Plath, is repelled by her glimpse of Gregg shorthand symbols in one of her mother's teaching textbooks

⁶ England, Kim and K. Boyer, "Women's Work: The Feminization and Shifting Meaning of Clerical Work." *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 43, No. 2, pp. 307-340; and Kurtz, Annalyn, "Why Secretary Is Still the Top Job for Females." CNN Business, January 31, 2013. https://money.cnn.com/2013/01/31/news/economy/secretary-women-jobs/index.html?iid=HP_LN, retrieved June 18, 2019. Web.

(*The Bell Jar*, 61). They remind her of the “hideous, cramped, scorpion-lettered formulas” and abbreviations, such as those in the periodic table, taught in her college physics and chemistry courses. Esther explains, “What I couldn’t stand was this shrinking everything into letters and numbers” (29). Gregg’s silent language of “scribbled little curlicues” was a ticket for ambitious young women into clerical jobs better paid than those without it, or jobs more compatible with their interests. Esther cannot imagine herself in any job using shorthand (100).

Yet the job market finally forced Sylvia Plath to acquire skill in something resembling shorthand: speedwriting.

Speedwriting is a form of rapid writing using the cursive Roman alphabet. Technically, then, it is longhand rather than shorthand. But speedwriting could be learned in weeks rather than months or years, and in a pinch could pass as “shorthand” on the job. Learning speedwriting wedged open one of the few doors that Plath found closed to her.



f u c n rd ths,

h u c n rd ths,

Fig. 1. Speedwriting, in black; the identical words in Gregg shorthand in red.

While living with her husband Ted Hughes in Boston in 1958—both of them beginning to try to write full-time—Plath for the first time wanted a clerical job to “give [her] life a kind of external solidity and balance” it apparently did not have on its own (*Complete Letters*, vol. 2, 266). Unused to an unprecedented amount of unstructured time, she agonized in her journal about feeling unable to write fiction. In her journal on Sunday, September 14, Plath resolved to follow a strict writing schedule starting the next day. It dissolved in panic and creative paralysis. She wrote that she had not lived enough to have something to write about. “I don’t want a job until I am happy with writing—yet feel desperate to get a job—to fill myself up with some external reality” (*Journals*, 420, 422). She wrote to the Smith College vocational office in September 1958, asking for help and giving references, but received no answer until she wrote again in April 1959.⁷

In the meantime, Plath went to an employment agency that, in October 1958, placed her in a temporary job in Massachusetts General Hospital’s department of

adult psychiatry.⁸ The job would prove pivotal to her creative work.

Why Plath Hated Shorthand

In *The Bell Jar* Plath, through her protagonist, details her reasons for resisting from all quarters pressure to learn shorthand. For aspiring writers Sylvia Plath and Esther Greenwood, who narrates *The Bell Jar*, “shorthand” carried baggage beyond being gendered, servile, utterly foreign-looking and commended by their mothers—the real and the fictional—who both taught shorthand professionally at a business college. Esther says her mother told her that “Nobody wanted a plain English major” unless she knew shorthand (*Bell Jar*, 61).

Esther internalizes this pressure. By comparison with business-college students who have learned shorthand, Esther, a student at an elite women’s college and a prizewinning writer with professional editorial experience, judges herself as unskilled and unprepared for the job market she must face after graduation, in which bosses, almost always male, literally dictate to female clericals (*Bell Jar*, 62).

⁷ Sylvia Plath to Alice Norma Davis, letters of September 24, 1958 (*Complete Letters* vol. 2, 277) and April 28, 1959 (*Complete Letters* vol. 2, 315).

⁸ *Journals*, October 14, 1958, 424.

A taker of shorthand must also transcribe the boss's dictation and polish it using exacting language protocols and editorial skills, then format and type the document to perfection. Only perfection would do. Mid-century employers seeking clericals, in want-ad columns labeled "Women," asked for quantifiable skills such as typewriting and shorthand, but tended to gloss skilled language labor as "attention to detail," and allied with other "soft skills" such as congeniality or neatness: traits desirable in a clerical worker yet not worth recognizing or compensating. When the boss accepted and signed the finished document, he was claiming his clerical's language skills as his own.

The prospect of learning shorthand threatens Esther more than most because pressure to accept female-gendered para-literary jobs feels to her like pressure to surrender whatever authorial agency she has and prepare for an amanuensis role. "I wanted to dictate my own thrilling letters," she says (*Bell Jar*, 62).

Plath's journal entries from 1953 and Esther's first-person narrative, also taking place in 1953, show both accepting shorthand lessons as a way of salvaging a disappointing summer that both hoped to devote to creative writing. Yet their capitulations are not the same. Plath

mentioned planned summer shorthand lessons in a letter to her mother dated April 24, 1953 (*Letters* vol. 1, 596); her tone is light. Plath spends June in New York City working in her dream job, returning home disillusioned and depressed. That and a disappointment related to her writing has her imagining a future so diminished that learning shorthand that summer is a must, something to cling to (*Journals*, Appendix 5, pp. 543-546).

According to Mrs. Plath, Sylvia after four lessons showed no aptitude for shorthand and was only more deeply depressed when they agreed to give up (*Letters Home*, 124). Mrs. Greenwood talks her depressed daughter into learning shorthand starting that same evening, the same day Esther tried and failed to start writing a novel (*The Bell Jar*, 99).

Esther Greenwood cuts short her one and only shorthand lesson, pleading a headache, and goes to bed but lies awake considering multiple new life plans. That night she imagines strangling her sleeping, snoring mother, whose pincurls gleam "like a row of little bayonets" (*Bell Jar*, 100). Even while sleeping, Mrs. Greenwood is a partisan for the system that would welcome Esther only as a scribe for men.

Sleepless Esther attempts to read *Finnegan's Wake*, the topic she has chosen for her senior thesis, but the letters on the page, as if animated, take on "fantastic, untranslatable shapes, like Arabic or Chinese" (*Bell Jar*, 102) or like the chemical and mathematical symbols Esther has already told the reader she loathes, or like Gregg shorthand. Finding with *Finnegan's Wake* that even the English language eludes her, Esther considers changing her college major and track. Despairing of that, she thinks of taking a break from college and working full-time for a year. Yet as Esther sees it, a female who has not learned shorthand has only two job options: waitress or typist (*Bell Jar*, 103).

Esther's conclusion about the job outlook for women in the summer of 1953 might now seem reductive and outdated, but only because in the 21st century we call a waitress a server and a clerical an administrative assistant. Clerical work in 2018, 65 years later, was in the U.S. the third most common occupation for women and the most gendered of the top ten full-time occupations: 94.1 percent female.⁹

⁹U.S. Department of Labor Women's Bureau, Most Common Occupations for Women:
<https://www.dol.gov/wb/stats/employment-earnings-occupations.htm> - largestshare, retrieved June 18, 2019;

In July 1958, five years after her mental breakdown, two years into her marriage and less than a month into her writing year, Plath consulted her mother about possible jobs both interesting and lucrative. Mrs. Plath gave her shorthand-resistant daughter information about yet another rapid-writing system: stenotyping, or keyboarded shorthand. It required formal training. Plath considered it but wrote to her mother she did not want to have to take a course to qualify for a job.¹⁰

Esther Greenwood had been annoyed that Gregg shorthand reduced perfectly fine words into crabbed little "curlicue" symbols. When compelled by the job market to learn some form of rapid writing, learning speedwriting instead of shorthand allowed Plath at least to use the language she had mastered, not a language she hadn't. And her choice spited or at least bypassed her mother because speedwriting

"Why Secretary is Still Most Common Job for Women,"
https://money.cnn.com/2013/01/31/news/economy/secretary-women-jobs/index.html?iid=HP_LN retrieved June 18, 2019.

¹⁰ *The Letters of Sylvia Plath*, vol. 2 (August 1, 1958), 267.

was neither shorthand nor stenotyping, and Plath taught herself from a yellow paperback self-teaching manual.

What Is Speedwriting?

Speedwriting in its trademarked form was developed by Emma Belle Dearborn (1874-1937), a shorthand instructor whose students complained that learning shorthand was time-consuming and expensive. Dearborn announced what she called "Brief English" in 1923.¹¹ She renamed the product Speedwriting in 1924 and sold it directly to the public as a correspondence course. Below is a detail of an advertisement for Speedwriting in the November 1924 issue of *Popular Science* magazine. It contrasts Gregg and Pitman (the standard shorthand in the United Kingdom) with Speedwriting.¹² [Figure 2]

¹¹ "Woman Inventor". (1923, October 22). *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, p. 28. Retrieved September 4, 2017 from www.newspapers.com

¹² "Can You Read This?" [Advertisement]. (1924 November). *Popular Science Monthly*, Vol. 105 No. 5, p. 25. The first 34 pages of this issue are advertisements, including classifieds.

POPULAR SCIENCE MONTHLY 25

Can you read this?

(Translation: In this system you must first learn your symbols.)

Can you read this?

(Translation: Also in this system you must first learn your symbols.)

Now read this—
n spdrig u lr no u smbs.
(Translation: In Speedwriting you already know your symbols.)

THE last line is *Speedwriting*, a remarkable new discovery that takes the place of shorthand. Now everyone can write shorthand the new easy way. All the business world needs shorthand because shorthand saves time. Time is money. Timesaving means success. Shorthand should be a business tool not only for the commercial stenographer, but the typist, the office worker, the business executive, professional men, the writer, the news reporter. You should be able to put thought on paper with the speed of thought itself. But few in the business world can read national authorities on the leading methods employed in these systems. But these years of classroom teaching in such leading educational institutions as Columbia University, Simmons College, University of California, Rochester Business Institute, etc., convinced Miss Dearborn that ordinary shorthand systems would always remain too difficult for mastery except by the few with a special aptitude or willingness to give a special amount of time to learning them. She decided therefore, to develop a shorthand system without the usual shorthand symbols. From her research and experiments finally came the discovery and per-

Dearborn's was not the first such system, but with similar, persistent advertising that by 1928 had cost her company nearly half a million dollars, Speedwriting became a stunning success. Hundreds of schools in the U.S. and Canada bought franchise rights to teach it under that proprietary name. Endorsements from Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., and Admiral Richard E. Byrd—whose polar-exploration team Dearborn taught in person—helped pitch Speedwriting to males and management for whom shorthand was women's work.^{13,14,15}

¹³ Brett, H. "'First the Public, Then the Schools!' Key to Success of a Remarkable Woman". (1928, October 28). *Business Journal*, p. 16. Retrieved September 3, 2016. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/23722800.1928.10771228>

Dearborn's thriving Speedwriting business suffered during the Great Depression and from numerous imitations and piracy. In 1931 a circuit court ruled that Speedwriting had no claim to copyright because it was not a system but merely a way to string letters together.¹⁶ During a setback in the economy, on July 28, 1937, Dearborn jumped from her apartment window. She was among the eight suicides who reportedly

leaped from windows in New York City that day. She was 63.¹⁷

School of Speedwriting ads, much smaller than those of the 1920s, continued to appear, demoted to the glamorless classified-ad pages in the back pages of magazines. A classified ad in the September 1944 issue of *Popular Mechanics*, page 53A, lists Speedwriting's selling points after 20 years in business:

SHORTHAND in 6 weeks at home. Famous Speedwriting system, no signs or symbols. Easy to learn; easy to write and transcribe. Fast preparation for a job. Surprisingly low cost. 100,000 taught by mail. Used in leading offices and civil service. Write for free booklet. Speedwriting, Dept. 1510, 274 Madison Ave., New York 16.

In the same issue of September 1944, large illustrated ads, picturing males, advertised all types of vocational courses, including stenography, as preparation for postwar employment. Despite Speedwriting's targeted campaigning, stenography was

¹⁴ "Getting Ready to Write South Pole Story" [Captioned newspaper photograph]. (1928, August 9). *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, p. 2. Retrieved July 27, 2017.

¹⁵ "Modern Woman a Radical in Business Says Anne Morgan—'No' Says Roosevelt". (1927, March 21). *The Daily Notes* (Canonsburg, PA). Web. <http://i.imgur.com/m7egntq.jpg>. Retrieved July 27, 2017 from i.imgur.com

¹⁶ *Brief English Systems vs. Owen*, U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit - 48 F.2d 555 (2d Cir. 1931) (1931, April 6), <http://law.justia.com/cases/federal/appellate-courts/F2/48/555/1569115>. Retrieved August 2, 2017 from law.justia.com

¹⁷ "Eight Killed in Falls from N.Y. Windows". (1937, July 30). *Ottawa Journal*, p. 1. Retrieved August 2, 2017.

women's work. To see that, all anyone had to do was enter a business office. In 1930, 96 percent of all stenographer-typists in the U.S. were female; in 1964, counting the stenographer-typists by that time more commonly called "secretaries," 97 percent.^{18,19} Sylvia Plath's era, and the social class her education permitted her to access, framed shorthand as a skill educated women could deploy should more ambitious career plans fail, so for Plath and Esther Greenwood learning shorthand was preparing for defeat. Yet what *The Bell Jar* does not say or see is that for women without college educations, rapid-writing skill offered an alternative to domestic service or other physically taxing employment. Until 1940 the largest category of employment for women in the U.S. was domestic service.²⁰

¹⁸ *Gender and the office*. Retrieved August 2, 2017 from http://www.officemuseum.com/office_gender.htm

¹⁹ Wirtz, W. Willard, U.S. Department of Labor. *Background Facts on Women Workers in the United States*. (1965, September). p. 8. Retrieved August 2, 2017 from fraser.stlouisfed.org

²⁰ May, Vanessa. "[Domestic Workers in U.S. History](#)." Oxford Research Encyclopedias, "American History." Web. Retrieved June 19, 2019.

Shorthand or speedwriting to many women meant not a step down into servility but a step up from what otherwise might be literal servanthood.

School of Speedwriting ads targeting females featured photos of well-groomed young women and the now iconic Speedwriting slogans "bkm a steno & gt a gd jb & hi pa" (later revised to say, "bkm a sec & gt a gd jb") in general-interest and women's magazines and on placards in buses and subway cars. These persisted until the 1970s, when in the U.S. inexpensive portable dictation machines such as the Dictaphone and Dictabelt eroded the market value of rapid-writing credentials. The latest School of Speedwriting ad I could find appeared in the September 1977 issue of *Mademoiselle*. It said, in plain block lettering, "Yes, I went to college. But Speedwriting got me my job."

The Speedwriting slogan's rewording, from "bkm a steno" to "bkm a sec," reflects also the advancement of the job title "secretary" over "stenographer." The single female business-office "steno," not a sidekick or Gal Friday but a professional, was occasionally glamorized in books and movies up through the 1930s; one aspired to become a stenographer as one

might aspire to become a nurse. The title and profession of “stenographer” dissolved into the catch-all title and job of “secretary,” formerly a title for males. *The Bell Jar* tells us that by 1953 stenography was an entry-level skill.

Plath’s Choice

Dearborn’s Speedwriting correspondence course, in six slender volumes, like Gregg shorthand inspired dozens of competitors. These courses fed a demand for vocational rapid-writing training so enormous it is hard to imagine today. Profits came from textbook sales. Speedwriting-type alphabetic systems introduced in the 1950s include Stenoscript (1950),

Quickhand (1953), the School of Speedwriting’s authorized update, Speedwriting Shorthand (1954), Forkner Alphabet Shorthand (1955), and Carter Briefhand (1957).

Because no samples of Plath’s speedwriting have been discovered it isn’t certain which system she chose to learn, but Emma Dearborn’s School of Speedwriting ads reliably appeared for Plath’s entire lifespan in the women’s magazines Plath read, wrote for, and always aimed to write more for—including the issue of *Mademoiselle* Plath guest-edited, August 1953—and Plath and her mother both capitalized “Speedwriting” when writing the word, Mrs. Plath the most consistently. [Figure 3]

Mademoiselle for August 1953

...quite clear that if I didn't take this
...could starve for all she cared.
...first night as a waitress in X House
...ghastly for them too. Being hu-
...they all looked up when I entered the
...Then, recognizing me, they all
...room. Then, I died a thousand deaths
...down again, I died a thousand deaths
...soup and dessert.
...you can get used to anything. The
...a terrible sort of deference.
...showed me a by-line in the *Daily* the
...time I got a dinner and announced it.
...they rose at dinner and announced it.
...the girls would all sing "Hail to Sarah!"
...I blushed and felt miserable. They were
...singing something.

...the summer between freshman and sopho-
...years I got a job on our home-town pa-
...got a lot of experience, earned almost
...hundred dollars and fell in love with a
...He treated me like an adult. We
...about the world and not about college,
...the only time the word sorority was ever
...mentioned he snickered and said: "Do they
...go in for that nonsense?" It was the first
...I ever had that an attractive man could
...different to sororities. At the end of the
...er he asked me to marry him. I said yes,
...back to school and my house job.
...nestly, if I ever thought Rush Week was
...ating from the outside, it really seemed
...m the inside. First of all the members
...a lot younger than they had before.
...been used to them only at dinner—all
...up and on their best behavior. But
...louching around in sloppy blue jeans,
...ere almost too immature to be true.
...of the old X girls came back too to
...ith the rushing. When I say old I
...omen in their forties, fifties and even
...I thought this was a touching sign of
...until it became clear that these alum-
...e just promoting daughters and nieces
...ers who were being rushed that year.

**LEARN SHORTHAND
IN 6 WEEKS
As I Did!**

Miss Dulcie Kaufman
25 Central Park West
New York 23, New York

"Six weeks after enrolling for Speed-
writing, I could take dictation at the
rate of 120 words per minute and
transcribe it accurately. Through
Speedwriting's Placement Service, I
was interviewed and hired for a sec-
retarial position at a salary that ex-
ceeded any I had earned previously. I
unhesitatingly recommend Speedwrit-
ing to anyone desirous of acquiring
good stenographic skills."

u k re 120
wpm + ul gt
mo pa if u ln

Speedwriting
FAMOUS ABC SHORTHAND®
120 WORDS PER MINUTE

**NO SYMBOLS —
NO MACHINES —
Uses ABC's**

IN 6 WEEKS

TYPING AVAILABLE

SPEEDWRITING, THE ABC SHORTHAND can
be completely mastered in one-fifth the time required
by symbol systems and is far easier and more accurate
to write and transcribe. Tens of thousands of shorthand students, discouraged

[School of Speedwriting ad from *Mademoiselle*, August 1953, p. 375 (detail), with an exaggerated claim about Speedwriting speed. Cursive lettering's backstrokes and ligatures forced Speedwriting's high end down toward about 80 words per minute. Gregg shorthand dispensed with such obstacles.]

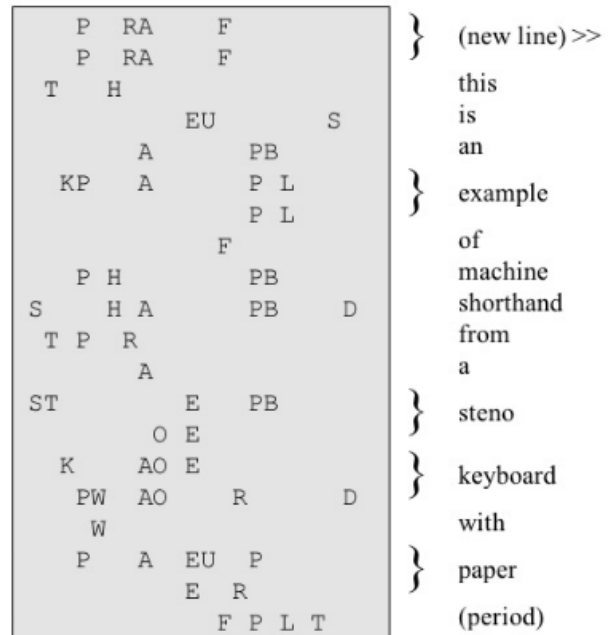
Some employers weeded out humbler applicants by making shorthand, a lengthy and expensive course of study, a job requirement whether the position demanded it or not. That was my own experience. Rapid-writing skill also confirmed the candidate's lack of resistance to preparing for and accepting highly skilled, responsible, and gendered work with a gendered salary and little to no chance of advancement

into jobs gendered male. Rapid-writing systems proliferated as they did because, like Esther Greenwood, females seeking employment either learned a form of rapid writing or faced futures as waitresses or typists, who forewent the extra dollars shorthand skill could bring. When former Fulbright scholar, Smith College and Cambridge graduate and former *Mademoiselle* guest editor Plath sought office work in

Boston and later in London, even those qualifications did not allow her to defy job-market norms. Plath briefly considered learning stenotyping. Plath's August 1, 1958 journal entry shows Plath urging herself to work on both writing women's short fiction and "even stenotyping." Any zest for stenotyping was fleeting. On December 12, 1958, Sylvia fumed in her journal that for her birthday [October 27] her mother had offered her \$300—in 2017 dollars, \$2,500—to take a stenotyping course. By this, Plath wrote, her mother had insultingly implied that because Ted Hughes seemed uninterested in regular gainful employment, Plath would have to be the family breadwinner (*Journals*, 434). Mrs. Plath was acting on a longstanding concern. In a marginal note written in Gregg shorthand on Plath's letters—Mrs. Plath made many such notes—Mrs. Plath left proof of her worry about the Hughes's financial future even before the couple had married. On a letter from Sylvia dated May 16, 1956, in reference to Sylvia's typewritten words "Our children will have such fun," Mrs. Plath wrote in Gregg, "if they don't starve first."²¹ (The couple married on June 16, 1956.)

²¹ Rankovic, Catherine, "Aurelia Plath Shorthand Transcription Table from Correspondence in the Lilly Library Plath Archive Plath mss. II", ID #76,

Court reporters master highly specialized stenotype keyboarding able to record up to 225 words per minute, and can decipher its cryptic output [Figure 4]



The Hugheses were living in London with their six-month-old daughter when Sylvia on November 19, 1960 wrote a second time to her mother that by brushing up her speedwriting she could qualify for "amusing" odd jobs (*Letters*, vol. 2, 542). Plath nagged her mother for the speedwriting book in further letters dated December 17 and December 24, 1960, suggesting finally, "Couldn't you invent some pretext to get the book from the school as a teacher? I never will need shorthand as this will would

epublications.marquette.edu/AureliaPlath, accessed June 19, 2019. Web.

cover all my needs. I'm dying to get hold of it."²²

Mrs. Plath hadn't been lax about finding and sending the book. She habitually responded to her daughter's requests without delay. The book Plath wanted wasn't among the items Plath had left in Wellesley because it wasn't her book. In *Letters Home*, page 348, in a note appended to Plath's letter to her of August 1, 1958, Mrs. Plath wrote that Plath in 1958 taught herself speedwriting from books lent by "a mutual friend," identified in Mrs. Plath's original manuscript of *Letters Home* as author Mary Stetson Clarke, and this is confirmed by letters of thanks Sylvia Plath and Mrs. Plath sent to Clarke in spring 1959. Both letters say Ted Hughes provided Plath with dictation for practice.²³

²² Letters of December 24, 1960, *The Complete Letters of Sylvia Plath*, vol. 2, p. 556.

²³ Plath mss. II, Box 9, folder 8, p. 45, Sylvia Plath Archive, Lilly Library, Indiana University-Bloomington; Aurelia Plath to Mary Stetson Clarke, letter, March 15, 1959; *The Complete Letters of Sylvia Plath*, Vol. 2, letter, Sylvia Plath to Mary Stetson Clarke, April 10, 1959, p. 309-310. Footnote 2 on p. 309 of *Complete Letters* says Clarke bought for Plath "a book on learning shorthand," but Plath herself in the April 10 letter calls it a speedwriting book,

The "Johnny Panic" Breakthrough

Plath was elated by her new temporary secretarial job in the Adult Psychiatric Clinic at Massachusetts General Hospital. She interviewed incoming patients, transcribed doctors' case notes and letters, and kept patients' records. In her October 14, 1958 journal entry she wrote that her job:

gives my day, & Ted's an objective structure . . . the job is good for me . . . my objective daily view of troubled patients through the records objectifies my own view of myself. I shall try to enter into this schedule a wedge of writing—to expand it. I feel my whole sense & understanding of people being deepened & enriched by this: as if I had my wish & opened up the souls of the people in Boston and read them deep (*Journals*, 424). In other words, the job was a win-win.

By December 16, 1958 Plath had finished the first of two short stories inspired by her hospital job

and Aurelia Plath says in *Letters Home* (348) that the "books" were lent. Linda Wagner-Martin states in *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* (1987; p. 157) that Plath in 1958 "relearned" speedwriting, but there is no evidence that Plath learned it before 1959.

(*Journals*, 441). The narrator, never named, of "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams" is a clerical worker who transcribes, types, copies and compiles psychiatric patients' accounts of their fearsome dreams, both as part of her job and secretly. She does this in the service of an invisible authority, Johnny Panic, god of fear. Plath actually did keep her own private notes about patients' ills and dreams. As she had wished, she discovered in her job raw material for her writing (*Journals*, Appendix 14, "Hospital Notes," 624-629). The story's narrator interviews new patients and takes dictation from recordings made and played back on an audiograph (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, 160), an office machine probably trademarked Audiograph, then the most common make. Plath refers again to an audiograph in a 1959 story about hospital clerical workers, "The Daughters of Blossom Street" (*Johnny Panic*, 129).

The boss using an audiograph can voice-record at any hour dictation onto a vinyl disk the typist can play and replay. Boss and typist need never meet, and encoding communications in handwriting and then transcribing them is not necessary. Plath wrote her mother about having used speedwriting while employed at Harvard University (*Complete Letters*, vol. 2,

542), but never wrote in fact or fiction about using speedwriting at the hospital, although Mrs. Plath claims Sylvia used it there (*Letters Home*, 348). The audiograph was one of a growing family of office machines soon to drive rapid writing out of the workplace.

Recording technologies for office work were not new. In her introduction to *Letters Home*, Mrs. Plath wrote that during the summer between her high school graduation and college, the summer of 1924, she had her first full-time job: transcribing dictation from recordings made on wax cylinders. She swore then that no child of hers would have to do such dull and grueling work (*Letters Home*, 5).

In the story "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams" Plath's first-person narrator spiritualizes her clerical job. By imagining herself the scribe of a god, not a man, her nine-to-five job in a psychiatric clinic is not mundane or servile but an indispensable source of valued material she smuggles home, where she is editing a bible of horrifying dreams.

In a routinized and clinical work environment dedicated to easing suffering, the narrator alone appreciates patients' agonizing dreams and fears as Johnny Panic's artworks, copying them into

notebooks or memorizing recorded dictation for later transcription into her bible (*Johnny Panic*, 160). It seems she began her secret copywork along with her job, because she fears being caught and "losing my job and all my source material" (164). For patients who present no dream, the narrator unearths one, relishing the chance. Her own "dream of dreams" is of viewing, from above, a reservoir filling with all humanity's bad dreams, a turgid cesspool of dragons, snakes and floating body parts, a "sewage farm of the ages" (158). Working all day with distressed people and systematically keeping records, meanwhile she dreams of a smoking, chaotic landscape inhabited only by monsters. The narrator credits her god Johnny Panic with injecting "a poetic element into this business you don't often find elsewhere. And for that he has my eternal gratitude" (161).

Christian imagery—a device later to function exquisitely as fretwork in Plath's poetry—begins to swamp the story when the male Clinic Director discovers Plath's narrator reading and transcribing old case studies after hours. Firmly taking her arm, the Clinic Director escorts the narrator to a fourth-floor hall "empty as a church on Monday" (167) and to its Observation Ward and its

monstrous secretary, Miss Millravage. Also present are Johnny Panic's priests, in straitjackets; the narrator, clutching her notebook and hoping they recognize her, raises it and says to them, "Peace. I bring to you. . ." "None of that old stuff, sweetie," says Miss Millravage (*Johnny Panic*, 170).

Crooning "My baby," Miss Millravage embraces the narrator, who fights. Once subdued, the narrator is stripped and robed in sheets for electroshock therapy intended to punish and cure her devotion to Johnny Panic. Miss Millravage fits the narrator's head with "a crown of wire" and on the narrator's tongue lays "the wafer of forgetfulness." Electroshock therapy is presented as a Christ-like torture, and in its throes the narrator has an epiphany, seeing Johnny Panic in all his glory. He has not abandoned her.

This story of a clerical worker reaches farther than any other into Plath's imagination, fantasies and memory. She did not write another like it. Looking back, Plath fans might excitedly call "Johnny Panic" a preview of *The Bell Jar*, yet in the context of 1958 "Johnny Panic" was a story about a creative nonconformist sacrificed to a conformist environment by enforcers of the status quo. Although nimbly

told, the story's theme was a trope of that era, the beatnik era. Its two-dimensional rendering—like a fable it has no subplot, and the narrator has no past, no friends or family, and never mentions money—and tone-deaf religious references did not appeal to any of the publishers Plath sent it to. The story was not published in her lifetime. Plath in October 1960 disparaged "Johnny Panic" as "a sort of mental hospital monologue ending up with the religious communion of shock treatment" (*Letters* vol. 2, 530).

Plath until "Johnny Panic" labored to write fiction about adolescents or young couples. Her journals of summer 1958 show her struggling to take a step forward. "Johnny Panic" is Plath's step forward, tied by subject and date of composition to the secretarial job begun in October. Plath wrote on December 16, 1958 that the story was complete and polished. She did not have high hopes for it, calling it "queer and quite slangy," (*Journals*, 441), a voice she does not yet recognize as her own—not at all. In February 1959 Plath wrote in her journal that she will have made a step forward when she writes a story for *Ladies' Home Journal* (471).

The story's narrator, however, is a new figure in Plath's fiction: an adult wage-earning female, age 33, older

than Plath, nourished by her employment and retaining her personal agency even while taking dictation. She keeps an uncompromising sense of mission in an anti-creative environment. Plath's fictional clericals, including the secretary in the 1962 verse play *Three Women*, are not unhappy workers yet recognize their workplaces as fundamentally inhumane, and transgress by saying so.

From February through April 1959 Plath worked at a second part-time job, in which she did use speedwriting. On May 2 she wrote in one day *The Bed Book*, a children's book (*Journals*, May 3, 1959, 480). On May 31 she wrote in her journal, "I have written six stories this year, and the three best of them in the last two weeks!" (*Journals*, 486). The three includes "This Earth Our Hospital," later published under her new title, "The Daughters of Blossom Street." It is again a first-person hospital story, but realistic and without flair. A group of hospital secretaries responsible for the paperwork about the hospital's dying and dead cannot bring themselves to acknowledge morbidity when facing it—which even their lowly office boy can do. The story's narrator is one of the secretaries, and no different. In November when she sold the story

Plath wrote *The London Magazine's* editor giving her new choice of title saying it better described "the Secretaries being almost ritual, attendant figures in the euphemistic ceremonies softening the bare fact of death."²⁴

The Second Voice of *Three Women*, a dramatic poem about pregnancy and birth written in 1962, is a pregnant secretary who criticizes her male co-workers in the office as "cardboard" and "flat":

That flat, flat flatness from which
ideas, destructions,
Bulldozers, guillotines, white
chambers of shrieks proceed,
Endlessly proceed – and the cold
angels, the abstractions. (*Collected Poems*, p. 177)

To herself, Plath called "The Daughters of Blossom Street" her best story, "full of humor, highly colored characters, good, rhythmic conversation. An amazing advance from 'Johnny Panic'" (*Journals*, May 31, 1958, 487). This is an overestimation. By October 6 her journal entry lumps it with other stories she has written that prove "duller than tears." "Johnny Panic,"

however, bears her re-reading (*Journals*, 515).

Getting There

In her January 10, 1961 letter (*Complete Letters*, vol. 2, p. 567), Plath thanked Mrs. Plath for sending a Speedwriting book, and on January 27 wrote her mother about enjoying her temporary job doing copyediting and layout for the special spring issue of *The Bookseller*, London's "organ of the book trade" (p. 571). In 1976 its editor remembered Plath's initial visit to the office:

What I recalled particularly was the real indignation with which she insisted that she was offering no literary qualifications but formidable typing and shorthand skills.²⁵

Plath seemed confident that her refreshed speedwriting skill could pass for shorthand. Whether she used speedwriting on that job is not known. On February 2, 1961, Plath thanked her mother for the yellow speedwriting book, and then on February 9 for "all the speedwriting

²⁴ Letter to John Lehman, November 12, 1959, *The Letters of Sylvia Plath*, vol. 2, p. 368.

²⁵ *The Bookseller*, March 27, 1976, p. 1761. News clipping held by Smith College.

books," and does not mention speedwriting again.²⁶

Plath had a miscarriage on February 6, 1961, and would have an appendectomy on February 28. She wrote the poem "Tulips," which Ted Hughes called a breakthrough poem and herald of her "Ariel voice," on March 18. In April she began drafting *The Bell Jar*, which opens by describing her office co-workers.²⁷

Plath's office jobs fed her confidence and the confidence fed her fiction. It can be argued that after hospitalizations for her own ills Plath wrote poems inspired by those stays, from a patient's point of view, simply writing what she lived soon after she lived it. But her medical poems are not critiques of the medical world. They are contemplative.

²⁶ The upper- and then lower-case "s" in "speedwriting" are Plath's own. See also *Letters Home*, p. 400. Mrs. Plath in her editing of Plath's letters created consistency by capitalizing all instances of the word "Speedwriting," suggesting that Plath learned the version trademarked by Emma Dearborn.

²⁷ Letter from Sylvia Plath to Ann Davidow-Goodman and Leo Goodman, April 27, 1961, *Letters* vol. 2, 614).

Psychiatrist Roger Gould wrote that "One of the appeals of a business career is that the business world has banned human frailty." It sanitized the workplace biologically and also, for the successful, expunged from their record any human flaws.²⁸ If that is true, Plath's office stories and references to office life and practice are critiques from the unexpected point of view of one whose minor role in the business world was destined and enforced, who could therefore afford to explore human frailty in such settings, and in common language anyone could read.

²⁸ Gould, Robert, *Transformations: Growth and Change in Adult Life*, p. 230.

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