

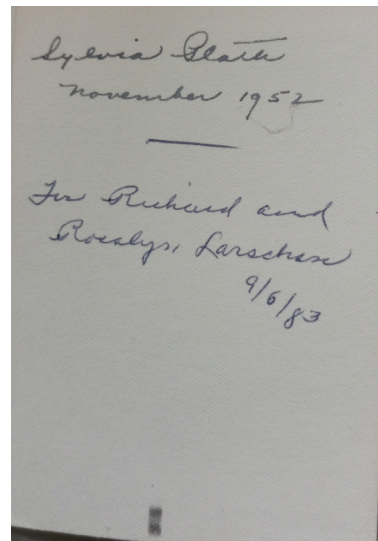
Sylvia Plath's Caduceus acquired by Julia Gordon- Bramer, Tarot Reader and Plath Scholar

Julia Gordon-Bramer has acquired a wooden Hermetic Caduceus, hand-carved in 1947 or 1948 by then fifteen-year-old Sylvia Plath, as a gift from its previous owner. Plath's tarot cards were auctioned off by Sotheby's last year for over \$207,000, emphasizing the importance of this object to Plath's history. The Hermetic Caduceus is considered an original sculpture and is in the process of being appraised.



"I never dreamed of acquiring it," said Gordon-Bramer, who explained that the previous owner,

Dr. Richard Larschan, wanted the next person to possess what he playfully calls Plath's "letter opener" to appreciate the caduceus for its occult significance. Larschan sought out Gordon-Bramer through a mutual scholarly acquaintance. In the gift, Larschan also included a 1952 school photograph of Sylvia Plath inscribed to him by Plath's mother, Aurelia. Provenance papers verify the connection from Aurelia Plath to Larschan.



Over the last several years, objects previously owned by Plath have broken records in auction houses as Plath's daughter Frieda Hughes has sold off letters, photos, manuscripts, furniture, clothing, jewelry, books, and other possessions.

Some items were autographed, but none were made by Sylvia Plath's own hand, unlike the caduceus.

A Hermetic Caduceus is a kind of magic wand, Gordon-Bramer explains. In Greek myth, the god Hermes was the god of writers and poets, so "you can understand Plath's attraction," Gordon-Bramer says. Hermes was said to possess a magical rod with two snakes entwined at its base. Sylvia Plath carved these snakes into the base on one side of the caduceus, and her initials, SP, prominently into the base on the other side. The object has been the subject of academic publications and much speculation.

Plath's mother Aurelia wrote a dissertation for her master's degree on the first and most famous alchemist, Paracelsus. Her mother claimed that Sylvia Plath had read every one of Aurelia's schoolbooks, and Plath's journals, calendars, and book annotations from childhood on are full of notes and contemplations about spirituality and the occult. Plath also may have known that the alchemical symbol for spirit includes the letters SP, says Gordon-Bramer, who has made some guesses about what the other symbols carved into the caduceus mean: fire, water, and sun, perhaps, but these are not definitive.

In 1983, Aurelia Plath gifted the caduceus and some other materials to Dr. Richard Larschan as he was a close friend of the family and a helpful neighbor. Larschan, a professor emeritus at UMass-Dartmouth who held a Fulbright fellowship at Trinity College in Dublin and another at the University of Wales, Lampeter, has presented on Plath in the "Poets of New England" PBS series and written several articles on Plath.

Julia Gordon-Bramer has published three books on Plath to date: *Fixed Stars Govern a Life: Decoding Sylvia Plath* volume 1 (2014, Stephen F. Austin State University); *Decoding Sylvia Plath's "Lady Lazarus": Freedom's Feminine Fire* (2017, Magi Press); and *Decoding Sylvia Plath's "Daddy": Discover the Layers of Meaning Beyond the Brute* (2017, Magi Press). Gordon-Bramer has two books forthcoming with Inner Traditions Press: *The Magician's Girl: The History and Mysticism of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*, and *The Tarot Diaries*. *The Magician's*

Girl will explore the mysticism Plath grew up with and how spirituality throughout Plath's work is missed as the world continues to view her through the narrow lens of her tragic autobiography.

"Plath's work inhabits its readers," Gordon-Bramer says. "People who don't understand mysticism can still feel it—in her poetry especially. For a self-proclaimed atheist, Sylvia Plath was the most spiritual atheist ever." Plath was famously photographed with a crystal ball, and together with her husband Ted Hughes, they played with Ouija boards, cast horoscopes, performed automatic writing, and read Tarot cards. Gordon-Bramer's work argues that tarot greatly influenced the meanings of the *Ariel* poems. Since her adolescence, Plath regularly wrote of premonitory dreams, sought to learn astrology, practiced meditation and breathing techniques, and at the end of her marriage, held witchy bonfires with chants and curses, using her husband's dandruff, hair, and fingernails in rituals.

"This is the side of Sylvia Plath that academics are extremely uncomfortable with," says Gordon-Bramer. "After over fifteen years of work, I can confidently say that I've built the case that Plath was a mystic from almost the very beginning."

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Julia Gordon-Bramer can be found on Twitter and Instagram at @jgordonbramer. For advance copies of *The Magician's Girl* and/or *The Tarot Diaries*, please contact Inner Traditions.

