

# Sylvia Plath Conference Summary

*by Dorka Tamás, conference organizer*

The “Sylvia Plath Across the Century” online conference took place on 11-12 March 2022, almost 4 and a half years after the “Sylvia Plath: Letters, Words and Fragments” conference in Belfast in 2017. “Sylvia Plath Across the Century” celebrated Plath’s 90<sup>th</sup> birthday and looked at how her writing and legacy have been read and re-read across the century and the many ways in which she related to life in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century from cultures, gender roles, food, to the natural environment. One of the advantages of conferences since the COVID-19 pandemic has been to bring together truly international speakers and audiences; we had speakers from each continent represented. Nevertheless, that made the scheduling challenging.

The conference ran across two days with speakers who are well-established in Plath Studies to many post-graduate researchers, students, and new faces from many countries. There were parallel panels and a keynote speech at the end of each day. There were familiar topics discussed, such as motherhood and domesticity and gender and feminist approaches to Plath, and several panels with under-represented topics like Plath’s receptions and Plath’s short stories and children’s stories. The panels produced fruitful discussions on, for example, Plath’s archives, food and femininity, and Plath’s writings of geographical places, particularly in England. The conference also gave space to two dramatic-artistic productions, which highlighted the many ways Plath’s legacy as an artist influences her readers. The first day ended with Amanda Golden’s keynote speech, “Office Hours: Sylvia Plath, Pedagogy, and the Archive,” which explored Sylvia Plath’s identity as a teacher and discussed Plath’s pedagogical

style and notes from the archives.

The conference celebrated Plath’s influence on other writers and examined some aspects of Plath and magic. If we want to understand Plath’s legacy, we have to look at popular culture. The fascinating talks around #SylviaPlath on social media and Plath’s influence on music showed her queenly presence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We might have seen it, but now we have heard some uncanny observations in Plath’s works from baldness to thresholds. New interdisciplinary works have also made their way to the conference; for example, the much-needed medical humanities reinterpretation of Plath’s experiences and writings on therapy and medications. Sarah Corbett closed the event with her keynote talk “After Sylvia: An Anthology and a Festival to Celebrate Sylvia Plath’s 90<sup>th</sup> birthday,” on the upcoming Sylvia Plath Literary Festival 21-23 October in Hebden Bridge. The conference finished with a magical and international celebration of Plath which shows that studying Sylvia Plath is much needed and relevant today. We are looking forward to the next opportunities to celebrate our favourite writer.