

The Real Sylvia Plath

Kate Moses

Editor's note: This article was originally published in Salon in May 2000. As the original was published in a journalistic academic style, references and citations were not published. This piece was first published within those looser strictures and efforts have been made to identify quoted sources.

It's the tally of "my lusts and my little ideas," wrote nineteen-year-old Sylvia Plath in her journals, where she confessed her thoughts, her "test tube infatuations," her story notes, her cake baking, her jealousies, her dreams and her fears from the age of twelve until days before her death by her own hand at the age of 30 (103, 144). Not merely coy in retrospect, Plath's characterization of her journal stands in stunning contrast to the monumentally revealing document that she created. Her journals amount to more than a thousand pages scattered through various handwritten notebooks, diaries, fragments, and typed sheets, the sum of it an extraordinary record of what she called the "forging of a soul," the creation of a writer and a woman whose many veils and guises have succeeded in forestalling anyone from knowing who she really was, despite her lifelong frenetic, fanatical quest to discover the answer for herself (230).

"You walked in, laughing, tears, welling confused, mingling in your throat. How can you be so many women to so many people, oh you strange girl?" (137). Plath asked herself in the summer of 1952 when she was about to enter her junior year at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts.

With the publication of Plath's unabridged journals, which were released in England and the U.S. in 2000, we are closer than ever to knowing the identity of this disappointed wife and bereaved daughter, this suicidal mother of two, this poet of electrically charged perceptions and amplified imagination, this woman "enigmatical/ shifting my clarities," this Lady Lazarus who evolved out of her own inner torment, the record of which now opens fully, or almost, before us Plath, *Collected Poems* 242).

The publication of *The Journals of Sylvia Plath 1950-1962*, edited by Karen V. Kukil, was a watershed event. They allowed us, for the first time, to see this dazzlingly, maddeningly



fragmented woman as an integrated being. The Plath that emerges here is paradoxically at once saner – less a creature of willful mental excess – and more buffeted by forces beyond her control. Those forces, it seems tragically clear, were not just familial, but chemical. Almost from the day she died, readers and scholars, faced with the huge, faceless enigma of her suicide, have been perplexed and thwarted by Plath's mental condition. The unabridged journals and other new information, some of it published here for the first time, lend credence to a little-noticed theory that Sylvia Plath suffered not just from some form of mental illness (probably manic depression) but also from severe PMS.

In the fall of 1962, during the final flood of creativity that preceded her death by a few months, Sylvia Plath alluded to her first suicide attempt in "Daddy," now her most widely recognized poem. "At twenty I tried to die," she wrote, "...But they pulled me out of the sack, / And they stuck me together with glue" (224). Four decades since Plath killed herself on the morning of February 11, 1963 (just a month after the British publication of her autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*), it seems more accurate to say that she's been stuck back together with paper. Tons and tons of paper: her own posthumously published poetry collection, the fierce and mythic *Ariel*, which indeed, as she predicted, made her name; the maternally softened "corrective" of her dutiful, chirpy *Letters Home* edited by her mother, Aurelia Plath; her Pulitzer-prize winning *Collected Poems*, which builds inexorably from polite surface poise to crackling, incinerating force; a smattering of fairly neutral stories and telling journal fragments in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*; and her journals, published in heavily edited form in 1982 that, depending on whose side you were on, made Plath appear either mad or victimized.

All of Plath's work, including her three additional poetry collections, remains vigorously in print. But even more voluminous than Plath's impressive output is the critical response her writings have generated -- about a dozen biographies and "recollections" and hundreds of articles, critical studies and cultural commentaries. What's most noticeable about the veritable industry of books and articles about Plath is that none of them succeed in creating an integrated portrait of their subject. She is variously portrayed as a fragile, brilliant immigrant's daughter scarred by overarching ambition and her father's early death; a righteous proto-feminist shrugging off husband, children and the crippling reins of culturally prescribed domesticity; an unreasonable perfectionist whose outrageous demands alienated everyone who crossed her path;

a devoted wife and mother shattered by her idolized husband's betrayal; and an unbalanced artist who would use and sacrifice everything, including her own life, in service to her art.

This multiplicity of Plath's is understandable; by her own admission she was a woman of many masks, someone who felt it necessary to reveal only facets of herself in any given situation, social or professional. Her husband, the late British Poet Laureate Ted Hughes, wrote in the foreword to her 1982 journals, "I never saw her show her real self to anybody -- except, perhaps, in the last three months of her life" (xii).

Hughes, as it is almost impossible to have missed, has been the central figure and object of suspicion, even persecution, in the vitriolic forty-year-old controversy regarding the "real" Sylvia Plath. In the summer of 1962, the Hughes' marriage broke down when Plath discovered that Hughes was having an affair. According to Hughes' infrequent comments regarding his relationship with Plath, theirs had been a mutually creative, valuable symbiosis from the very start: "Our minds soon became two parts of one operation," he told the *Paris Review* in 1995 (theparisreview.org). But things went very wrong, as his 1998 poetry collection addressed to Plath, the internationally best-selling *Birthday Letters*, attests. When they separated traumatically in September 1962 after six years of marriage, the couple were parents of a two-year-old daughter, Frieda, and an eight-month-old baby son, Nicholas; Hughes moved to London, while Plath remained with the children at their house in the English countryside. With only sporadic childcare and often ill with fevers, flu and infections, Plath wrote the bulk of the *Ariel* poems in a seven-week rush during the pre-dawn hours before her children awoke. When Plath died, she was still legally married to Hughes, and the responsibility of conducting her literary estate fell to him. In 1969, Hughes' lover, Assia Wevill, mimicked Plath's suicide by gassing herself as well as the young daughter, Shura, whom she shared with Hughes. Hughes wrote to Plath biographer Anne Stevenson in 1989: "...I saw quite clearly from the first day that I am the only person in this business who cannot be believed by all who need to find me guilty."

He was right. As Hughes eked out Plath's posthumous works – which succeeded in winning for Plath an enormous readership as well as entry into the canon of American twentieth century poetry, a status she had decidedly not held during her lifetime – he was viciously attacked by scholars and critics, feminists in particular, who read the blistering *Ariel* poems and later the fragmentary 1982 journals as an indictment against him: he was controlling, egotistical, faithless and selfish; he had tried to shame Plath, a poetic genius, into sewing on his buttons.



Hughes has since been consistently criticized for his "censoring" and "stifling" of Plath through his editorial decisions, which notably included, in ascending order of presumed criminal intent, refusing permissions and access to materials to legitimate Plath projects through his "bad cop," his sister Olwyn Hughes, who until 1991 acted as literary agent to the Plath estate ("the vulture perched atop Plath's grave" as one critic put it); the trimming and reordering of Plath's *Ariel* manuscript, which changed its tone and theme from one of transformative rebirth to one of inevitable self-destruction; and the most condemned deed of all, destroying Plath's final journal from the last three months of her life. "I did not want her children to have to read it," Hughes wrote in his introduction to the journals in 1982; in 1995 he reiterated his feelings in the *Paris Review*: "...it was just sad. I just didn't want her children to see it, no. Particularly her last days" ("Foreword" xiii, theparisreview.org). Another journal, covering late 1959 through the fall of 1962, or the pivotal *Ariel* period, was said by Hughes to have "disappeared," though it "may...still turn up" ("Her Journals" 177).

When *Birthday Letters* was published in 1998, it was considered by critics a landmark act of "breaking silence" on Plath by Hughes, who died of cancer within the year. In that collection, Hughes seems both anguished and distant, his memories of Plath crystalline, though the usual tautness of his poetry had slackened and gone murky, as if he were not quite sure of the indelibility of all of his conclusions, as if the unifying theme of the book rang just short of true. That theme was that Plath's self-destruction at the altar of her long-dead father was unstoppable, and Hughes remained helpless, despite his best efforts, to change it. The appearance of *Birthday Letters* roughly coincided with Hughes' transfer of practical control of the Plath literary estate to his children, who had owned the copyrights to their mother's unpublished works since 1992. Prior to his death, Hughes also sold his own substantial archives to Emory University, which officially opened its Hughes collection in April 2000.

When news broke earlier that year that the British publisher Faber & Faber intended to release the unabridged journals of Sylvia Plath, the announcement engendered a flurry of speculation about what other Plath bombshells might be in the offing – the discovery of the disappeared journal perhaps, or more likely, all of the imagined juicy details of insufferable husbandly domination and adulterous calumny that Hughes had cut from the journals in 1982 to save his own reputation. Hughes's admission that he'd destroyed the journal had predictably nurtured the

assumption among his critics that the editing of the journals had been for his own benefit, rather than to eliminate what Frances McCullough, editor of the 1982 journals, characterized as the less relevant material as well as the "nasty bits" that would have caused unnecessary pain or embarrassment to Plath's surviving relatives, friends and colleagues ("Editor's Note" ix).

For many years after Plath's death, Hughes justified his slow and piecemeal posthumous publications of materials left in Plath's literary estate as a result of his obligations first toward her family and second toward her best work, obligations that he noted were "just like hers, in fact" ("Publishing Sylvia Plath" 163). By the late '70s, he had apparently begun to consider the release of even Plath's most personal writings as critical clues to what he had come to regard as her most central project and problem: the creation – and ultimately the expression, in her mature work – of her "true self." In 1979 he wrote, "I am more and more inclined to think that any bit of evidence which corrects and clarifies our idea of what she really was is important, insofar as her writings persuade us of her importance" ("Introduction" 8). In 1982, Hughes explained the release of Plath's selected journals as an attempt to illuminate Plath's most difficult work, the poems of "Ariel," with a clearer picture of Plath herself – a picture obscured by the circumstances of her death, by the acid-bitten, archetypal denunciations and ingenious internal patterning of the poems, and by the multitude of insistent (mostly marginal) voices peddling their own narrow slices of Plath's story, the "peanut-crunching crowd" Plath anticipated in "Lady Lazarus" (245).

Hughes likened Plath's creative process to an alchemical one in which her immature writings, her highly mannered early poetry and the stiff stories into which she desperately tried to breathe life, are "like impurities thrown off from the various stages of the inner transformation, by-products of the internal work" ("Foreword" xi). "Ariel" and the related final poems, by dramatic contrast, are the voice of the true self, "the proof," he wrote in the 1982 journal's Foreword, "that it arrived. All her other writings, except these journals, are the waste products of its gestation" (xii). The journals, on the other hand, were, according to Hughes, Plath's private record of her many camouflages, the stylistic personalities she tried on, the trial identities, the roles and defenses she assumed; the journals reveal "her day to day struggle with her warring selves" (xiii).

"A real self, as we know, is a rare thing. The direct speech of a real self is rarer still," Hughes wrote of Plath's "Ariel" (xii). But surely Plath's voice in the journals of 1962 and early 1963, one of which Hughes destroyed, the other lost, also bore witness to "the direct speech of a



real self" – perhaps too directly, at the time, for the stunned father of Plath's motherless children. Whether his actions simply reflected, as he consistently maintained, his obligations towards his children, or whether they also were motivated by self-interest (an emotion which under the circumstances could be considered reasonable) can never be known. Certainly the fact that Hughes himself admitted destroying the journal is exculpatory.

And yet in destroying the journals, Hughes forever silenced the record of the process he considered so essential to Plath's poetic achievement, and to Plath herself, of whom he wrote in 1971, "I feel a general first and last obligation to her" ("Publishing" 163). Did he never consider locking the journals up in some secure and distant locale, out of the reach of his vulnerable children (and equally out of reach of his vilifiers)? Perhaps the last word is best left to Hughes, who famously wrote of the lost journals: "in those days I regarded forgetfulness as an essential part of survival" ("Foreword" xiii).

The publication of the unabridged journals brings the paradox of Hughes' decisions on behalf of his children to full circle. By 1998, his daughter and son no longer needed his protection; in fact, Hughes had come to defer to their judgment. "This was really Frieda's and Nicholas's decision in conjunction with their father," said Karen Kukil, editor of the *Unabridged Journals*, in an interview with Salon. Frieda Hughes called Kukil, who has been curating Smith College's 4000-page Plath collection and assisting scholars since 1990, in the spring of 1998 to ask Kukil to edit a complete, unexpurgated volume of all of her mother's journals in the Smith library.

Faber & Faber released those journals in Britain in March 2000; the American edition from Anchor Books appeared a few months later. Unlike the 1982 journals, which were shaved down to about a third of their actual volume, Faber's "unabridged" edition, edited by Kukil of the Mortimer Rare Book Room at Smith, home of one of the two primary Plath archives available to scholars, brings together every extant journal from 1950 onward (Plath's earlier journals are collected in the Lilly Library at Indiana University). The unabridged journals do not include the famously missing journal from 1959-62; it is not, according to Hughes' agent Roy Davids, among the contents of a container in Emory's Hughes collection that is to remain sealed until 2023, though even Frances McCullough, interviewed by *Newsweek*, said, "I find it hard to believe he really destroyed those things" (newsweek.com). What they do include serves to vindicate both the anti- and pro-Hughes camps. More important, they give Plath's readers their

first-ever opportunity to experience the uncensored breadth of Plath's imagination in its richest medium, the private testing ground of her relentlessly self-reflective artistry.

The unabridged journals do contain enlightening material on Plath, material with scholarly rather than merely prurient value, as the anti-Hughesers always protested. But it is also obvious that much of it was rightly censored to spare the feelings of Plath's friends and family, in particular the parts too hurtful for prior publication. The unabridged volume includes in their entirety Plath's two consecutive journals from the fall of 1957 through November 1959, the period of time when Plath returned with Hughes from England to teach miserably for a year at Smith followed by a year spent living in Boston, where she resumed psychoanalysis with Ruth Barnhouse Beuscher, who had treated Plath during her recovery from the 1953 suicide attempt. During 1957-59, a time of revisiting old ghosts and old haunts, Plath uncovered first her scornful disdain for her Smith friends and colleagues ("Botany professors forking raw tongue with dowdy seat-spread wives" is one of her milder observations), and second her deep hatred and resentment of her "vampire" mother, whose death in 1994 presumably made publication of this vitally illuminating portion of the journals palatable to the Plath Estate (*Unabridged Journals* 315, 429).

The unabridged journals confirms the anti-Hughes camp's assumption that Hughes censored details about himself, but his elisions appear to be dictated by a concern for basic privacy rather than the need to conceal damning information. Nothing about Hughes that is new to the unabridged journals reveals him as any worse than he already had allowed himself to be seen in earlier books, though it's easy to imagine why anyone, especially England's future poet laureate, might have wanted to censor his wife's nattering on about his "sweet skin smells," infrequent hair washing and "hairy belly" (328). It is, in fact, poignant if not downright shame-inducing to find oneself a voyeur to the details of the Hughes' honeymoon in Spain, or the morning when they'd received the telegram telling them that Hughes' first poetry manuscript, *The Hawk in the Rain*, had won the Harper & Row first publication contest. "All Saturday was a daze of joy & conjecture," Plath writes. "We burnt a whole pot of milk to a black bubbling acrid crisp on the stove in the process of calling up our mothers" (271). When you consider how frequently Hughes, as his dead wife's literary executor, was faced with the untenable dilemma of revealing not just Plath's but his own moments of private joy or pain, his grimly resentful attitude toward the "Plathifiers" is all too understandable.



As edited by Kukil, Plath's journals are significantly different from the 1982 volume in other ways as well, primarily because Kukil and her colleagues worked directly from the journals themselves, rather than from a prepared typescript. "Fran McCullough has actually never seen the original journals," said Kukil, noting that in 1982 McCullough had edited from a typed transcript prepared by the Plath Estate. Kukil and two colleagues on the library staff spent three months in the fall of 1998 preparing an exact transcription of the original journals, preserving Plath's misspellings, grammar, spot illustrations, capitalization and punctuation. The Faber edition, then, is an absolutely faithful rendering of Plath's words – pure, unadulterated Sylvia Plath for the first time.

Sensational as it was at the time, the 1982 volume is thin stuff by comparison. To be sure, all of the major themes of the journals were present in the 1982 journals – among them, Plath's precocious and unwavering ambition as a writer, which drove her mercilessly toward artistic growth and publication; her boy-crazy social whirl in college and her attendant preoccupation with the limitations of marriage and gender roles in the cramped cultural mind of the 50s; the familial demons of her childhood (her father's death from a complication of diabetes when she was eight, and her conflicted relationship with her widowed mother); the emotional, psychological, and artistic enormity of her relationship with Hughes; and most compelling, her indefatigable struggle to wrestle control over her chaotic emotional life, what Hughes twenty years ago called "her will to face what was wrong in herself, and to drag it out into examination, and to remake it" ("Her Journals" 182).

And yet the 1982 journals didn't feel whole. Despite Hughes' stated intentions, Plath still seemed vague and fragmented, her poems only dimly illuminated. The admissions by McCullough and Hughes that they had in turn drastically edited the material down and destroyed some of it or lost more was only the beginning of the 1982 edition's problems. The readers of *Ariel* already knew that Plath was a woman of veils and deceptions. "My house of days and masks," Plath called her life in the 1982 journals; "Masks are the order of the day" (*Journals* 196, 63). What, then, could be confidently known about Plath when the primary document with which we could map her inner life was itself incomplete? "If you only knew how the veils are killing my days," Plath wrote in "A Birthday Present," the thirtieth poem in the elaborately symbolic *Ariel* manuscript, written during the thirtieth year of her life (*Collected Poems* 207). The 1982 journals felt figuratively as well as literally elliptical, and into those ellipses could be

injected all sorts of strange and dark and terrible fantasies, possibly stranger and darker than the truth. "More terrible," the Plath of "Stings" might say, "than she ever was" (215).

It's not the "true self" of Sylvia Plath that comes rushing at you with vivid immediacy as you begin to read her unabridged journals -- not the true self as Hughes defines it, a Sylvia Plath distilled into pure, ferocious, luminous essence. It is also not the vague, half-glimpsed Sylvia Plath of the earlier journals, whose dybbuks seemed flat or unfathomable, whose longings and crises and furies didn't quite add up, whose mouth we could see moving but whose full womanly voice was cut off by erasures. Instead, it is the IMAX version of Sylvia Plath who appears from the very first pages of the journals -- the exaggerated, high-voltage, bigger-than-life personality and imagination that no one, not a single one of her detractors or friends, has denied was consistently evident (if frequently hard to take) in the flesh. This feverish Sylvia Plath floods the reader's senses as her own were flooded throughout her life: on wave after wave of ecstatic or crashing experience, on sparkling details she seems helpless, at every moment, to ignore. "Eyes pulled up like roots" is how poet Anne Carson characterized Plath, and the image carries its shock of authenticity (191). "I've talked to alumni who knew Plath," says Kukil, "and they say that everything she did was at the same intense level. Everything she did, she experienced to the hilt." "It's getting so I live every moment with terrible intensity," wrote to pen pal Ed Cohen in 1950. "Then it hit me and I blurted," Plath writes of a conversation with an ambivalent date, "I like people too much or not at all. I've got to go down deep, to fall into people..." (*Unabridged Journals* 18). This Plath still falls, even ricochets, and now you can see the full range of her trajectory.

Twenty years ago, it may have seemed to Hughes and McCullough that preserving Plath's rush of quotidian detail -- the icebox cheesecakes she immortalized, the epiphany over a story in *Cosmopolitan* magazine that gave her the idea to write *The Bell Jar* ("I must write one about a college girl suicide. ... There is an increasing market for mental-hospital stuff."), her obsessive bemusement about dog shit, the noting of cold water and salt in which were soaked the sheets bloodied by her newborn son's afterbirth, the fifty-four descriptions of what the moon looked like *that minute* -- would diminish the impact of her unique genius in the journals rather than enhance it (495). The opposite is true: it is the most ordinary details of Plath's daily life that now give her such astonishing depth and balance and make her seem, within the thrum of her intensity, refreshingly sane and vibrant. Teeming as they are with prescient observations and, as Plath puts



it, "foolishness," the unabridged journals are no less her artistic "Sargasso" for the jumble of "my gabbling" – they are, in fact, more so. Plath's is a personality integrated by cumulative effect, and the details pull forward not just toward the poems, but toward a fuller and more distinct picture of the woman who wrote them: they add immeasurably to Plath's artistic and psychological stature.

Even so, there are many passages whose previous excisions are understandable, lines and whole entries redolent with the whiff of taboo of one kind or another. Hilarious as it is to envision now, no doubt Hughes didn't relish the idea of letting it be known that Plath had in 1958 – after he'd won the attention of W.H. Auden, Stephen Spender and Marianne Moore with his first book -- entered their poems in jingles contests run by food companies: "the dole pineapple & heinz ketchup contests close this week, but the French's mustard, fruit-blended oatmeal & slenderella & Libby-tomato juice contests don't close till the end of May. We stand to win five cars, two weeks in Paris, a year's free food, and innumerable iceboxes & refrigerators and all our debts paid. Glory glory" (365). Some of the 1982 cuts were simply Plath's caustic sniping and thinly disguised jealousies - there is a wonderfully sulky account of a lunch with fellow poets, drooling unattractive babies, and spilled tea that ends "Too much salt in a fruit salad. We ate, grumpily, and left" (356).

When Plath's journal was first published in 1982, much was made of the marital episode of May 19/22, 1958, in which Plath records her shock and disgust at her discovery of Hughes' feet of clay. On that day, her last day of teaching at Smith, Plath and Hughes had made plans to meet at their car after her last class. When Hughes didn't show, Plath had one of her "intuitive vision" that she would see him walking with a college girl on the campus; not only was she right, but the girl literally ran away and Hughes made no attempt to introduce her (390). Because Hughes and McCullough left quite enough material to make Hughes look like a cad if not a downright adulterer and further piqued suspicions by inserting into the text numerous "OMISSION" flags that glowed malignantly within the passage, many readers and critics have understandably assumed that the elisions would point directly to Hughes' infidelity. Instead, the reinstated omissions make clear that what really upset Plath was Hughes' open display of vanity – that on her special day, he put his own ego (only figuratively stroked by a fleeing co-ed, "bare thick legs in khaki Bermuda shorts") ahead of hers (390). Hughes, "whose vanity is not dead, but thrives," "a liar and a vain smiler," definitely comes out looking all too human, but the 1982

journals' edited version had made him seem truly sinister (386-87). It's ironic that in this memorable instance Hughes cut references to his vanity (and his saggy pants and greasy hair and the universally condemnable smarminess of his "heavy ham act ... 'let's make up'") presumably in order to assuage his self-regard, and yet by doing so he planted for Plath's readership the seeds of his early-and-often abuse of Plath's faith in him (391-92).

The reasons behind some deletions are less traceable to the casual reader, for example the sole missing word or line from a two-page passage in which 20-year-old Plath recounts her revelatory meeting with "my First Author," an afternoon of coffee and hard-boiled advice at the book-strewn shack of an obscure novelist who ran the local bookmobile (125). Plath records the particulars with liturgical care and at the center of her description is the previously deleted "The kittens, the books all over, she has built and painted, the braided rug unfinished. A provider. The stories, and the winters" (132). Another of the many eerie instances of Plath's seeming clairvoyance, the sentence is a precise foreshadowing of the life she was living just before her death, right down to the kittens and the painting and the unfinished rug, and so details that may have been simply unbearable to Hughes. An even more wincingly obvious choice for deletion from the 1982 edition, reinstated by Kukil, is Plath's prophetic appraisal upon listening to the recorded voice of the late poet Gene Derwood: "For what reason? To haunt us with her live words, her live voice, her live face, she who lies some-where rotten, unstitching stitch by stitch? He sends her ... words to us. So, blown ghost, she comes to our tea, more substantial then [sic] many inarticulate mortals. That is strange: the deadness of a stranger who is somehow never dead - the knife of death unfelt, the immortals hover in our heads" (314-15).

As one reads, it becomes obvious that Plath's journals were her magic cauldron, the receptacle where she stewed the observations that would help her give shape to her life in its myriad desired guises. It can be seen burbling away in her eavesdropping on an adult cocktail party at the summer home of the Mayos, a family for whom she worked as a mother's helper during the summer of 1951: "From Freddie's window I peered with a delicious shiver as I pulled down the blind. By leaving just a crack between the blind and the windowsill, I could satisfy my curiosity. ... One woman leaned against the railing, hands crossed in front of her, dressed in dark blue, with a red rose at the point of a low V-neckline. Mrs. Mayo sat and talked with a group of women, while Doctor Mayo merged into the tan, gray, beige line of men. What were they talking



about? What was the subtle line that marked you from entering a group such as this? ... I can hear the voices coming up to me, laughter, raveled words. Up here, on the second floor porch, the air blurs the syllables and continuity of conversation like sky-writing..." (72-3).

Other passages previously omitted in the 1982 version of the journals now illuminate Plath's apprenticeship in her life as well as her art to the degree that their previous removal now seems peculiarly shortsighted. Among the themes fleshed out by the unabridged journals are Plath's ongoing struggles with the concept of marriage, which she both feared as stultifying to her creativity and desired for its sexual and emotional intimacy; related to that is her "hatred" of men, oft-cited by critics. That hatred now appears more accurately as an envy borne of the frustratingly confining fifties-era sexual mores that made it impossible for Plath to seek the experiences she wanted: to be as sexually free in her thought and actions as men could be. The passages on her two summers as a mother's helper display Plath's early connection to children and her ability to be both objectively perceptive and deeply touched by them, while later as a young married woman, Plath easily articulates the polarity between her desire to mother versus her protectiveness of her professional ambition -- belying the theory circulated in some circles that Plath's ambivalence toward motherhood was something short of normal. The increased 1957-59 entries also reveal the depth of Plath's awkwardness with people, as opposed to the outward "golden girl" gaiety typically ascribed to her. While teaching at Smith, Plath instituted a program of social interaction to compel herself to interact. "People: eyes & ears not shut, as they are now," she coached herself, "I apart, aware of apartness & a strange oddity that makes my coffee-shop talk laughable -- we are inviting people to dinner: four a week, 16 a month: I shall not go sick or nervous or over-effusive..." (319).

Throughout the early years of the journals, Plath's lack of experience is sometimes cringingly obvious, her early attempts at hammering the episodes of her life into fictional or poetic shape hilariously sophomoric. During her college years, Plath often recorded her life in scenes addressing herself as "you" or in a frequently self-congratulatory third person: "Outwardly, all one could see on passing by is a tan, long-legged girl in a white lawn chair, drying her light brown hair ... Tonight she will dress in the lovely white sharkskin hand-me-down dress of last summer's employer and gaze winningly at her entranced Princeton escort..." (108). On the occasion of the end of a brief infatuation, Plath threw herself with full intensity into a melodramatic chunk of doggerel:

"The slime of all my yesterdays
Rots in the hollow of my skull:

And if my stomach would contract
Because of some explicable phenomenon
Such as pregnancy or constipation
I would not remember you" (57).

Misbegotten moments of romance were frequent subjects for Plath's youthful stabs at developing a literary self. Not infrequently even the worst of them hint at the writer she would later become. In the unintentionally funny 1952 passage "... night thickening, congealing around her in her loneliness and longing like an imprisoning envelope of gelatin ..." one can hear the echo of 1962's "A Birthday Present," in which she repurposed the word "congeal" to much better effect: "... It breathes from my sheets, the cold dead center / Where spilt lives congeal and stiffen to history" (113, *Collected Poems* 207-08).

She was not unaware of her early failures to transform the prosaic moments of her life into art; in fact, wherever the craft of writing was at issue Plath was notoriously hard on herself. After a paragraph that began, "What is more tedious than boy-girl episodes?" Plath snidely interrupts, "After this charming little bouquet of idyllic description ..." (*Unabridged Journals* 52). But what the young Plath lacked in experience she made up for in imagination and most decidedly in will. Throughout her writing life Plath tried desperately to shake off the sour-breathed monkey of her own subjectivity in favor of a wider worldview. At eighteen, she scolded herself: "... I am a victim of introspection. If I have not the power to put myself in the place of other people, but must be continually burrowing inward, I shall never be the magnanimous creative person I wish to be. Yet I am hypnotized by the workings of the individual, alone, and am continually using myself as a specimen" (76). Her journals are rife with her exhortations to get over herself and get on with the work beyond. "Oh, it is this indwelling with others, this meticulous gripping of detail to anchor the vague, unseen flaws & faults in internal geography, that must be done daily. Exercise, practice. Set tasks," she hectors in 1958 (312).

A few days later, she returns to the same theme: "God, to lift up the lid of heads" (313). And yet despite her constant vigilance to "flay" herself into the writer she knew she could be, the most fluid writings in Plath's journals are those in which she is, perhaps contradictorily, unselfconsciously subjective, getting straight to the business of telegraphing her thoughts and



feelings without sculpting them into something suitable for the *Saturday Evening Post*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, or – the twin heights of her literary Olympus – *The New Yorker* and *Ladies' Home Journal*. During a grim winter afternoon at Smith during her teaching year, Plath has coffee alone in the coffee shop of her youth and notices "music souping from jukebox, melancholy, embracing" (309). In the spring of the same year, an explication of strange dreams during an afternoon nap ends with Plath waking "in darkness, the sky a memory of orange light" (380). On a trip to Paris in 1956, Plath writes of walking along the Seine's right bank when a masher in a "lowslung" black car "oozed alongside while he begged me to come for a ride" (558). And three months later, on her honeymoon in Spain, every detail of her notes shimmers with sensory vividness, in perplexing contrast to the handful of stories she fretted over from that time, and for which her notes were intended.

In keeping with the theme of Plath's eerie prescience about herself and her future, on the third page of text in the unabridged journals a 17-year-old Plath, enjoying her last summer before being swept into college and adulthood, observes: "I would like to be everyone, a cripple, a dying man, a whore, and then come back and write about my thoughts, my emotions, as that person. But I am not omniscient. I have to live my life, and it is the only one I'll ever have. And you cannot regard your own life with objective curiosity all the time ..."

Not that she wouldn't try. Planted throughout the journals like walls to be scaled are Plath's long, neurotic litanies of material to browbeat into stories and poems, peppered not with the "delicate" goat droppings she described seeing on her Spanish honeymoon but condemnations, motivational drills, and hortatory pep talks (253). "Jimmy Beale & his drowned sister. Vacant lot – field of raspberries and daisies. Catalpa tree. Collecting tin cans & keys for war effort ... Each memory dragged up drags up another. Exercise: not just naming but recreating. ... Red berries on fir trees. Wandering jew & iris roots. Not enough, not enough" (306). The more vigilant Plath became in her struggle to write, the worse her apprentice efforts sound. A particularly terrible story idea is the one for "The Day of Twenty-four Cakes," the plot of which emerged during the weeks prior to the dread Smith teaching year, a time when Plath sensed the creative silence her return home was going to impose on her. In the breathless paragraph that outlines the story (Plath characterizes the potential audience as "Either Kafka lit-mag serious or SATEVEPOST aim high"), Plath's heroine sounds like nothing less than a naked reflection of her own desperation: "Wavering between running away or committing suicide:

stayed by need to create an order: slowly, methodically begins to bake cakes, one each hour, calls store for eggs, etc. from midnight to midnight. Husband comes home: new understanding. ... Try both styles: do it to your heart's content" (288).

Plath's stilted admonishments to herself to lift up the world in tweezers and examine it from every angle, to make it "gem-bright," "jewel-like," "diamond-edged," "diamond faceted," "jewelled," "gem-bright," "glittering" could not bully her work into taking on those qualities. And yet those qualities, so evident in her later poetry, were quite obviously within her grasp. It was not just the evolutionary force of her will, not just her fine education and her studied knowledge of literary style, but her innate gifts that she ultimately imposed successfully on her poetry, which do indeed exist like gems buried in their crudest form in the journals.

At seventeen, Plath tells of a consoling game she played with two small neighbor children, a game that "[filled] up the cracks in [my] self assurance" while she sat on her front steps "uneasy with fear and discontent" (51, 17). After standing shyly by, the children began to pick petunias out of the yard and place them in Plath's hair. "I closed my eyes to feel more keenly the lovely delicate-child-hands, gently tucking flower after flower into my curls ... the faint pungent odor of the petunias was hushed and sweet. And all my hurts were smoothed away. Something about the frank, guileless blue eyes, the beautiful young bodies, the brief scent of the dying flowers smote me like the clean quick cut of a knife. And the blood of love welled up in my heart with a slow pain" (18). The end of this passage reads like a holographic image of the end of "A Birthday Present," the poem from September 1962 that ushered in the "official" Ariel period, in which the narrator cajoles and pleads and teases the subject to

Only let down the veil, the veil, the veil.
If it were death

I would admire the deep gravity of it, its timeless eyes.
I would know you were serious.

There would be a nobility then, there would be a birthday.
And the knife not carve, but enter

Pure and clean as the cry of a baby,
And the universe slide from my side. (*Collected Poems* 208)



An unmistakable foreshadowing of Plath's "Daddy" emerges in the most inflammatory section of Plath's psychoanalysis notes from 1958-59. "Every woman adores a Fascist," Plath wrote in "Daddy," "The boot in the face, the brute/Brute heart of a brute like you" (223). "She figured he was such a brute she couldn't, didn't love him" Plath writes condemningly of her mother after returning to weekly sessions with Dr. Beuscher in December 1958 (*Unabridged Journals* 429).

Hughes has written that the germs of almost all of her late poems can be found within the pages of the journals. This is perhaps the most exciting aspect of a close reading of Plath's journals: the thrill of watching the laboratory of her mind at work, watching her coax her raw materials toward their concentrated final form. And knowing that once she got her "self" going – her electrified intellect, that piercing imagination – that she would unleash the unstoppable poetic force of a runaway train. Yet until the point when her true self took flight in the *Ariel* period, Plath was plagued by the "fatal" feeling that "I write as if an eye were upon me" (511). That eye may now be ours, the audience she literally dreamed of, but while Plath was alive, the eye was her mother's.

Plath's relationship with her mother has been unwrapped layer by layer by dramatically incompatible layer through *The Bell Jar*, the vicious poem "Medusa," the carefully selected saccharine burlblings in *Letters Home*, and then the 1982 journals, which included judiciously pruned, disembodied chunks of the psychoanalytic notes of 1958-59. Talk about veils: McCullough and Hughes included a tightly worded preamble to the therapy notes, explaining Plath's relationship with her mother as a "deeply supportive union of great complexity in which it may not always have been easy to feel a separate person" followed by Mrs. Plath's clearly anguished nod of assent to the release of the edited material (*Journals* 265). In her own apologia in *Letters Home*, Mrs. Plath had explained that "Between Sylvia and me there existed ... a sort of psychic osmosis which, at times, was very wonderful and comforting; at other times an unwelcome invasion of privacy" (266).

Plath's real feelings about her mother are no longer cushioned by careful edits that subvert her sharp opinions; it is no longer a matter of Dr. Beuscher giving Plath "permission to hate your mother" or Plath admitting hatred "for ... all mother figures" (*Unabridged Journals* 429, 435). Plath unhesitatingly states that she hates – as well as pities and desires the approval of – her mother, and in turn feels her mother's envy and lack of unconditional love. "What to do

with her, with the hostility, undying, which I feel for her? I want, as ever, to grab my life from out under her hot itchy hands. My life, my writing, my husband, my unconceived baby" (433). Plath understood that her mother lived vicariously through her daughter and her daughter's achievements, and that her 1953 breakdown and suicide attempt was in large part a reaction to her unhealthy "union" with her mother: "I lay in bed when I thought my mind was going blank forever and thought what a luxury it would be to kill her, to strangle her skinny veined throat which could never be big enough to protect me from the world. But I was too nice for murder. I tried to murder myself: to keep from being an embarrassment to the ones I loved and from living myself in a mindless hell. How thoughtful: Do unto yourself as you would do to others. I'd kill her, so I killed myself" (433).

Not that critics and readers hadn't already suspected as much. In 1979 the literary critic Marjorie Perloff, author of some of the most influential articles on Plath, made the point that the shallow perfection of Plath's early work and her later metamorphosis into the writer of the inimitable *Ariel* poems was traceable to Plath's struggle to shrug off the burden of pleasing her mother, who had forfeited her own life for her two children, Sylvia and Warren. When Otto Plath died a few days after Sylvia's eighth birthday, the family was left virtually destitute: Aurelia Plath sold their house, moved in with her parents, and got a job. She was determined that her children not suffer, that they not be exposed to frightening displays of emotion, and that they get the best educations available. Mrs. Plath worked tirelessly to achieve those goals while suffering from bleeding ulcers that erupted during the years of her marriage to autocratic, demanding Otto Plath. The pay off, as Sylvia came to understand it, was that in return for their mother's uncomplaining slave labor – their mother's life – for the benefit of the children, the children would feed back accomplishments. Plath became an achievement junkie, living for two and never sure of her mother's love. No amount of laurels could ever be enough to satisfy that doubt; the psychological ante was upped with every "gift" of good grades or publication.

Aurelia Plath states in *Letters Home* that her husband had no part in the children's daily care or play, though he "loved them dearly and took great pride in their attractiveness and progress" (16). After Otto Plath's death, Aurelia and Sylvia Plath shared a bedroom until Sylvia left the U.S. for Cambridge when she was twenty-two. It seems that from Sylvia Plath's infancy, her primary parent gave Plath no model for having a self that could either maintain its autonomy or exist beyond meeting other people's needs. What Plath had instead was one big boundariless,



free-floating ego, a self utterly dependent on inflation by the selfless parent, and all psychic roads, ultimately, led right back to Sylvia. Plath spent her entire adult life trying to trace the ego boundaries for herself that her mother's example neglected to impose. "She is, in many ways, like an empty vessel," Perloff said of Plath in an interview with Salon. "It's really no wonder that she erupted with all these strong feelings and reactions, the guilt and the rage and the incredible hatred that comes out, first, in *The Bell Jar*."

In Perloff's article on Plath's "Sivvy" self – "Sivvy" was Plath's family nickname, and the name she used in signing the hundreds of letters home in which she highlighted her conquests and accolades -- she makes the point that Plath could no longer maintain the good girl/achiever mask after her mother's visit to England, where Plath and Hughes had returned at the end of 1959 prior to the birth of Frieda. By a stroke of unbelievably bad luck, Aurelia Plath was present when Sylvia discovered her husband's infidelity. "It was not until the summer of 1962," Perloff wrote, "when Aurelia Plath became an inadvertent witness to the actual dissolution of the Plath-Hughes marriage, that Sylvia finally stopped 'producing' poems as she had produced babies, in order to please and impress her mother, and, by extension, 'all our friends and relatives,' editors, and contest judges" (156). Surely not coincidentally, the first letter signed "Sylvia" in *Letters Home* is from September 1962, after her mother had returned to Massachusetts following the truly disastrous visit. In October 1962, Plath mythologized her mother's trip to England in "Medusa":

I didn't call you.
I didn't call you at all.
Nevertheless, nevertheless
You steamed to me over the sea,
Fat and red, a placenta

Paralysing the kicking lovers. (*Collected Poems* 225)

Given Plath's awareness of her uncomfortable "osmosis" with her mother, it must have been horrifying for her, as Perloff points out, to realize that "by that summer she had become ... a 'widowed' young mother with very slender financial means – in short, *she had become her mother*. Even the sex of her two children – first a girl, then a boy – repeated the Sylvia-Warren pattern. Only now, one gathers, did Sylvia fully grasp the futility of her former goals. And so she had to destroy the 'Aurelia' in herself ... In the demonic Ariel poems, she could finally vent her

anger, her hatred of men, her disappointment in life. 'Dearest Mother' now becomes the dreaded Medusa ... " (162-63).

Yet Plath's most blatant and repeated statements regarding her personal myth have been pointed at getting "back, back, back" to her dead father – the broken "Colossus" she tried to reassemble in her first poetry collection, the reason, she tells us in "Daddy," that she tried to die in 1953 (*Collected Poems* 224). Why did Plath write of her scorn for her mother in such scathing terms in the journals and make hardly a peep about her father? Why has the default position on Plath's psychology – the theory subscribed to even by Hughes, who presumably knew better – been for many years a suspiciously inadequate theory that Plath suffered from a Freudian Electra complex, which explained Plath's suicide as a result of unresolved mourning for "the bee king," Otto Plath? Her poetry leaves no doubt that Plath was indeed obsessed with her father, but the trail of crumbs left in the journals leads elsewhere: Plath, who never failed to pointedly examine her own motivations, appears markedly resigned to her longing for her father. "My obsession with my father," she says; "it hurts, father, it hurts, oh father I have never known" (*Unabridged Journals* 223). You might say she "gets" her longing for her father, as she "gets" her fury at her mother.

What seems a more logical explanation for Plath's enigmatic relationship with her parents is not that one or the other was her demon, but that due to circumstance she remained psychologically dependent on and victimized by both of them. Her father's death left her not only with a hoard of unresolved grief, but it also left her defenseless against her mother's unintended vampirish harm. She had only her mother to rely on until she began a second symbiotic relationship with Ted. Plath's depressions and rages, her restlessness and feeling of entrapment seem appropriate reactions, at least to a degree, to her family situation.

What is still hard for many of her readers to believe is that such an intuitive, perceptive and nuanced person as Sylvia Plath, who had at her disposal so many interior tools to understand her own traumas, would ultimately self-destruct. Yet the journals show, now more than ever, the extent to which she grappled helplessly with her high strung emotional life, how tortured she was by her own intensity despite her desire to cultivate her "weirdness" and transform it into art. What is most constant about her inconstant emotions is her attempts to wrestle them down, to find a plane on which she could exist in relative psychic comfort. There is a palpable urgency, even a poignant heroism, to her mission to understand -- and to control by sheer self-discipline –



her uncontrollable moods. The 1982 journals were not lax in highlighting this theme in Plath's life; "God, is this all it is," Plath wrote in 1950, "the ricocheting down the corridor of laughter and tears? Of self-worship and self-loathing? Of glory and disgust?" (*Journals* 13). And in 1951: "I have the choice of being constantly active and happy or introspectively passive and sad. Or I can go mad by ricocheting in between" (24). And in 1953, accompanied by a photograph of herself pasted onto the page of her journal: "Look at that ugly dead mask here and do not forget it. It is a chalk mask with dead dry poison behind it, like the death angel. It is what I was this fall, and what I never want to be again. ... I smile now, thinking: we all like to think we are important enough to need psychiatrists. But all I need is sleep, a constructive attitude, and a little good luck" (67). And in 1958: "I have been, and am, battling depression. It is as if my life were magically run by two electric currents: joyous positive and despairing negative – which ever is running at the moment dominates my life, floods it. I am now flooded with despair, almost hysteria, as if I were smothering" (240). Numerous times after her marriage Plath warned herself to learn to manage her own emotions, to keep her problems to herself, to "not tell Ted" despite her all-consuming neediness and her sense of his soothing effect on her nerves; in the unabridged journals, ironically just a month before the disillusioning May 1958 co-ed incident, Plath wrote of Hughes, "He is ... my pole-star centering me steady & right" (292, *Unabridged Journals* 365).

Despite Plath's desperate hope that determination alone could steer her ungovernable emotions, the real key to Plath's lifelong struggle with her mind may lie in a little-noticed medical theory -- one that does not just shed light on her poetic obsessions, but that allows us to see something few have observed in the life of this scrutinized, tortured, impossible, frighteningly brilliant writer: courage.

As a teenager, Sylvia Plath had a vivid understanding that her mind and her body were steering her days. "If I didn't think, I'd be much happier," she wrote in her journal in 1950; "if I didn't have sex organs, I wouldn't waver on the brink of nervous emotion and tears all the time." (21). Ten days before her death, she had come to believe that "fixed stars/Govern a life" (270). It turns out that Plath was probably right – more right than she could have possibly known – about her biology *and* her fate. But when Plath's journals were first published in 1982, what was most obvious about her was the supercharged nature of her emotions. Whatever causal agents that may have been governing Plath's life were blown back by the force of her personality.

As unmistakable as were Plath's volatile emotions in the 1982 journals, the heavy editing of the published text necessarily made it hard to discern the patterns to her moods. Even so, there did seem to be a detectable pattern, and it did not seem then, nor had it seemed to the people closest to her during the last years of her life, to be merely a function of temperament. In the weeks before her suicide, Plath's physician, Dr. John Horder, noted that Plath was not simply deeply depressed, but that her condition extended beyond the boundaries of a psychological explanation. In a letter years later to Plath biographer Linda Wagner-Martin, Dr. Horder stated: "I believe ... she was liable to large swings of mood, but so excessive that a doctor inevitably thinks in terms of brain chemistry. This does not reduce the concurrent importance of marriage break-up or of exhaustion after a period of unusual artistic activity or from recent infectious illness or from the difficulties of being a responsible, practical mother. The full explanation has to take all these factors into account and more. But the irrational compulsion to end it makes me think that the body was governing the mind."

For at least since the publication of the edited journals in 1982, it has been generally assumed that Plath fit the schema of manic-depressive illness, with alternating periods of depression and more productive and elated episodes. In the epic 1990 textbook "Manic Depressive Illness" by Frederick K. Goodwin and Kay Redfield Jamison, Plath is footnoted in a table listing major 20th century poets with documented histories of manic depressive illness. Though Plath was never treated for episodes of mania, Goodwin and Jamison concur that she would probably have been diagnosable with one of the two types of manic-depressive illness, known as bipolar II. The description of manic-depressive illness in the first paragraph of the book sounds strikingly like Plath: "Manic-depressive illness magnifies common human experiences to larger-than-life proportions. Among its symptoms are exaggerations of normal sadness and fatigue, joy and exuberance, sensuality and sexuality, irritability and rage, energy and creativity ... To those afflicted, it can be so painful that suicide seems the only means of escape; one of every four or five untreated manic-depressive individuals actually does commit suicide." Dr. Jamison, a leading expert in the field of affective illness, further includes Plath in her 1993 book, *Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament*.

There are many reasons to believe that Plath was classically bipolar II, the less severe of the two bipolar illnesses. Bipolar II, which is the affective disorder most commonly associated with creative personalities, is defined as the presence or history of at least one major depressive



episode as well as the presence or history of less severe manic episodes, or hypomanias, in which the individual experiences increased productivity and energy, elevated or fluctuating moods and optimism, sharpened and unusually creative thinking, decreased need for sleep, and general excessive involvement in pleasurable activities along with poor judgment. (Bipolar I is characterized by full depressions and full manias severe enough to cause pronounced impairment in personal or professional functioning, grandiosity, utter lack of judgment, psychosis, and almost invariably hospitalization.) Somewhat paradoxically, there is a higher risk of suicide for people with bipolar II than bipolar I.

In addition to fitting the current diagnostic criteria both for hypomania and major depressive episodes (characterized by diminished pleasure in activities, slowed thinking, lethargy and a sense of futility, sleep and appetite disorders, and suicidal thoughts), Plath's life history also supports the likelihood of bipolar II. From early childhood, Plath displayed the same intensified temperament and behavior she later manifested as an adult. She began reading at age two and a half, wrote her first "tragic" poem upon the occasion of having a pastel drawing smudged by her grandmother, and drew and hand-painted a dazzling collection of paper dolls with over 100 original costume changes -- behavior which may indicate that she had a so-called "cyclothymic" personality, a common precursor to developing full-blown manic-depressive illness. Plath, of course, had a history of hospitalization for a suicide attempt and severe depression, from which she recovered "miraculously" after electroconvulsive shock therapy, coincidentally the primary and most effective treatment for bipolar disorders in the 1950s, though at the time no attempt was made to treat or assess Plath for anything but depression. She also had a family history of mental illness and hospitalization for mental illness on her father's side, one of the most telling indicators of the highly hereditary affective disorders (though Plath's mother never revealed this vital fact to either her daughter or any doctors).

During what could be considered "hypomanic" periods of great artistic productivity she completed her two most successful works: Plath wrote the novel *The Bell Jar*, the autobiographical story of her descent into madness and recovery from a suicide attempt, in just four months while also taking care of her toddler daughter and newly pregnant with her second child. A little more than a year later, she wrote thirty of the forty-one poems in her *Ariel* sequence -- plus a handful she didn't include in the manuscript -- in less than two months, sometimes finishing two and three poems a day before daybreak. Furthermore, Plath's generally

mercurial temperament and the uncontrollable mood swings even she remarked upon are typical not just of the extreme aspects of bipolar illness, but also of the hallmark "mixed states," the undulation of moods frequently present as individuals move from one polar state to another.

Also typical of affective disorders are seasonal mood shifts, which Plath frequently noted (among many examples, "that old fall disease;" her sense of "coming to life" every year on April 1; the prophetic "I must stop identifying with the seasons because this English winter will be the death of me") (*Unabridged Journals* 506, 193). Even her artistic concerns support her oscillating emotional life. Plath's hyperacusis, what Hughes called her "genius for love" – an intensified, even ecstatic awareness of objects within an individual's physical environment – is manifest in her poetry ("Viciousness in the kitchen!/The potatoes hiss."); it is also a frequent symptom of hypomania and mania. Like many artists suffering from bipolar illness, Plath too focused on regenerative cycles, or the theme of "man against himself." In both *The Bell Jar* and *Ariel* Plath explores the cycle of ritual death and rebirth – and the subject of both books, of course, is Plath herself.

The hypothesis that Plath suffered from a bipolar disorder is persuasive. But in late 1990, another, even more intriguing medical theory emerged. Using the evidence of Plath's letters, poems, biographies and the 1982 journals, a graduate student named Catherine Thompson proposed that Sylvia Plath had suffered from a severe case of premenstrual syndrome, or PMS. In "Dawn Poems in Blood: Sylvia Plath and PMS," which appeared in the literary magazine *TriQuarterly* (1990), Thompson theorized that Plath's mood volatility, depressions, many chronic ailments, and ultimately her suicide were traceable to the poet's menstrual cycles and the hormonal disruptions caused by PMS. "Accurate medical knowledge of PMS has become available in the United States only in the last ten years, and Plath herself could not have known that her psychological experience was a result of a hormonal condition," Thompson wrote. "Yet the concerns of her work and the imagery of her poems suggest that she did have at least an intuitive understanding of the relationship between her fertility and her suffering" (221-22).

In addition to cycles of death and rebirth and the motif of true and false selves, the major recurring themes to be found in Plath's self-reflective and ritualized poetic mythology are those of female fertility and power, and the controlling force of a feminine moon goddess. Citing extensive medical research, including that of pioneering PMS researcher Katharina Dalton, to



corroborate the results of her examination of Plath's symptoms in relationship to cyclic hormonal changes in PMS sufferers, Thompson argued that some of Plath's poems, in particular those of the *Ariel* period, were not just figurative, abstract expressions of Plath's preoccupation with female fertility, but were directly correlated with Plath's biology. "Metaphors for ovulation and menstrual blood are prevalent in her late work," noted Thompson, "and the thematic oscillation from suffering to rebirth in these poems appears to follow the phases of Plath's own menstrual cycle" (222).

Proposing that an important poet's works were significantly influenced by PMS is likely to exercise a number of people, for quite different reasons. Aesthetic purists tend to attack all such biological-influence theories as reductionist, while others dispute the scope – and even the existence – of PMS itself. Heated controversies continue to rage around PMS – whether it is a medical condition or a psychological one, whether its cause is a lack of progesterone or an inability to metabolize fatty acids, whether it is an admissible tool for legal defense or an excuse for criminal conduct, whether it is treatable by hormone therapy, Prozac or liberal doses of St. John's Wort, whether it is a step forward in understanding women's health or a politically retrograde tool for shoring up tiresome gender stereotypes.

While the controversy rages, the medical establishment has accepted PMS as a bona fide condition. According to the most current clinical handbook of psychiatric diagnoses, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Fourth Edition (DSM-IV) published by the American Psychiatric Association in 1994, "at least 75% of women report minor or isolated premenstrual changes." The DSM-IV estimates that 20-50 percent of menstruating women suffer from some form of PMS (other sources put the number as high as 75 percent), while three to five percent of women are estimated to suffer from the most severe form of PMS, PMDD, or Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder.

Over 150 separate physical and psychological symptoms have now been categorized as indicators of PMS when experienced cyclically for two to three consecutive menstrual cycles, or during most of the cycles for a year. Symptoms are considered premenstrual if they appear during the luteal phase of the cycle (the 14 days between ovulation and menstrual flow), begin to remit within a few days of menses, and are totally absent in the week following menses. The most common symptoms include irritability, anxiety, tension, mood lability, hostility and depression. There are also a variety of physical symptoms, ranging from miscarriage to asthma.

In order to meet the diagnostic criteria for PMDD, a woman must have at least one severe emotional (as opposed to physical) symptom each month, the severity of which must be great enough to have a major negative impact on normal functioning.

Thompson pointed out that Plath unwittingly recorded experiencing on a cyclical basis all of the major symptoms of PMS, as well as many others, including low impulse control, extreme anger, unexplained crying, and hypersensitivity. She also suffered many of the physical symptoms associated with PMS, notably extreme fatigue, insomnia and hypersomnia, extreme changes in appetite, itchiness, conjunctivitis, ringing in the ears, feelings of suffocation, headaches, heart palpitations, and the exacerbation of chronic conditions such as her famous sinus infections. She compared Plath's reported mood and health changes to the journals, letters, and biographies and found that her symptoms seemed to appear and disappear abruptly on a fairly regular schedule, with clusters of physical symptoms and depressive affect followed by dramatic changes in outlook and overall physical health. Those patterns can be directly linked to the dates of Plath's actual menses, particularly in 1958 and 1959, when she most habitually noted her cycles. Judging from the pattern of Plath's depression and health in the late 1952 and 1953 until her August 24 suicide attempt, Thompson posited that "it seems reasonable to conclude that this suicide attempt was directly precipitated by hormonal disruption during the late luteal phase of her menstrual cycle and secondarily by her loss of self-esteem at being unable to control her depression" (246).

Thompson also shows that a well-known journal entry from February 20, 1956 is clearly traceable to Plath's menses, to which she refers directly a few days later. The journal fragment takes on new meaning in light of having been written during the physically and emotionally debilitating luteal phase of Plath's cycle: "Dear Doctor: I am feeling very sick. I have a heart in my stomach which throbs and mocks. Suddenly the simple rituals of the day balk like a stubborn horse. It gets impossible to look people in the eye: corruption may break out again? Who knows. Small talk becomes desperate. Hostility grows, too. That dangerous, deadly venom which comes from a sick heart. Sick mind, too" (202). On February 24th, the same day she notes in her journal that she has a sinus cold and "atop of this, through the hellish sleepless night of feverish sniffing and tossing, the macabre cramps of my period (curse, yes) and the wet, messy spurt of blood," Plath wrote a letter to her mother blaming her dark mood on her physical health: "I am so sick of



having a cold every month; like this time, it generally combines with my period ..." (206, *Letters Home* 217).

By perhaps fateful coincidence, Plath's February 24, 1956 period is the first menstrual cycle that she mentions specifically in her entire journal; the next day, she met her future husband, Ted Hughes, at a party. Thompson explains that disruptions in the menstrual cycle, particularly pregnancy and breastfeeding, can have a dramatic hormonal impact on PMS sufferers; in the two and a half years between June 1959 and January 1962, Plath experienced three pregnancies, one which ended in miscarriage. In addition, she breastfed both of her babies for lengthy periods (ten months for Frieda, about eight months for Nick according to letters to her mother) and probably experienced very few normal menstrual cycles during that time. Wrote Thompson, "Her reproductive history almost guaranteed some form of extreme emotional disruption once she began menstruating again after the birth of her second child, with a probable further disruption following the cessation of breastfeeding. Like many women with PMS, Plath seems to have experienced relief from cyclical symptoms during the last two trimesters of pregnancy and to have suffered from lengthy postpartum depressions" (Thompson 230-31). That last disruption, in the fall of 1962 when she weaned Nicholas, would have coincided with the writing of the *Ariel* poems.

Thompson's close reading of the *Ariel* poems in terms of Plath's menses noted the discernibly cyclic pattern of a rise and fall in mood and tone in the poems as well as their many images and themes of barrenness, fertility, psychic pain, bleeding, and relief, always controlled by the overseeing influence of the inspiring but uncaring and all-powerful moon goddess. "If I could bleed, or sleep!—" (Collected Poems 203). Plath wrote in "Poppies in July" shortly after the discovery of her husband's adultery in July 1962, presumably a time when Plath was not just emotionally distraught but was also experiencing suppressed menstruation because of her young baby's breastfeeding. By the fall of 1962, the poems (which Plath carefully dated as they were completed) seem to follow a pattern of metaphorical renewals and optimistic transformations for roughly two to three weeks of artistic production, then jagged, seething accusations and aggression for a couple of weeks. (As can be seen in the unabridged journals, for at least two years prior to the beginning of her first pregnancy in 1959, Plath's menstrual cycles had regulated to cycles of 30-35 days, which corresponds with the timing of the "cycles" of the *Ariel* poems.) Thompson's article closes on a note of tragic irony: Dr. Katharina Dalton, who had coined the

term "premenstrual tension" in 1954 and who was the only physician successfully treating women for severe PMS in 1963, practiced in London. Plath, who had moved to London from her country home in December 1962, "died in the only city in the world where she could have received effective medical treatment" (Thompson 244).

Thompson's PMS theory has been largely ignored by Plath scholars. But it immediately gained two important supporters: Anne Stevenson, Plath's controversial biographer, and Olwyn Hughes, Plath's former sister-in-law, whose letters were published in a subsequent issue of *TriQuarterly*. Stevenson's unhappy collusion with the agenda of Olwyn Hughes in the writing of the notorious biography *Bitter Fame* made Plath out to be an impossible harridan despite whatever contradictory thoughts Stevenson might have had about her; the book brought condemnation down upon Stevenson's head from many parties, and she may for this reason have used her defensive letter to somewhat gratuitously needle Thompson on the point that she was "not the first to suggest that the fertility cycle... exercises primary control over women's psychology" ("Two Letters" 212). However, Stevenson does commend Thompson for her "invaluable contribution to Plath scholarship ... Certainly no future study of Plath will be able to ignore the probable effects of premenstrual syndrome on her imagination and behavior" and states that she wishes she had been able to utilize Thompson's insights in the writing of her own work on Plath (212).

The letter from Olwyn Hughes also congratulates Thompson for her scholarship, but unlike Stevenson, Hughes practically stumbles over herself in amazement over the PMS theory. Hughes, who was quoted in Janet Malcolm's book *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* as characterizing her long-dead sister-in-law as "pretty straight poison," writes to Thompson: "It is quite a shock to digest all this – after thinking for so long that Sylvia's subconscious mind was her prison, and to suddenly realise it may well have been in part, or wholly, her body. But it certainly tallies with Ted's mentions – he has always felt some chemical imbalance was involved" ("Two Letters" 212). Hughes further points out that Ted Hughes had spoken of Plath's ravenous appetite just prior to her periods and asks, "I wonder if that is a known characteristic of PMS?" (210) (According to the PMS literature, it is.) But most tellingly, Olwyn Hughes explains that "One of the reasons I was so bowled over by your piece is that Sylvia's daughter, very like her physically, suffers quite badly from PMS but is, in these enlightened times, aware of it and treats it" (210-11).



Dr. Glenn Bair, one of the leading experts in PMS treatment and research in the U.S., confirmed to Salon that PMS is typically passed from mother to daughter. In a rare interview about her parents, Frieda Hughes told the *Manchester Guardian* in 1997 that after the "collapse of her health," including extreme fatigue and gynecological problems, she underwent a hysterectomy in her thirties (Jones 6).

Salon interviewed pioneering researcher in PMS Dr. Katharina Dalton, who had recently retired from medical practice in London after fifty-two years. In that interview Dalton revealed for the first time that in early 1963 she had, in fact, been contacted by Plath's personal physician, Dr. John Horder, to set up a consultation with Plath. According to Plath biographies by Stevenson and Wagner-Martin, Plath only revealed her psychiatric history and the extreme nature of her current depression to Horder in late January, 1963. "John Horder and I had known each other for some time," Dalton said. "He was fully aware of my work, and was with me the first time I ever spoke in public about premenstrual syndrome in 1954, at the Royal Society of Medicine. We were on the Council of General Practice together for twenty-five years." After calling Dalton regarding his patient, Sylvia Plath, Dalton says that Horder "referred her to me. You don't have to tell me about Sylvia Plath. I was to see her, but she had killed herself before I could." After reviewing the information in Thompson's article and asked her opinion of the possibility that Plath may have suffered from PMS, Dr. Dalton said, "There is quite a lot of evidence. Oh yes, I think she had it. But the only one who really did understand [Plath] was John Horder. That's why he had called me."

Both Wagner-Martin and Stevenson, as well as several other Plath biographers, have written that Dr. Horder set up an appointment with a female doctor, sometimes referred to as a psychiatrist, in the last few days of her life. Plath refers to her plan to see a female doctor in a letter written a week before her death. Whether or not Horder had contacted both a psychiatrist and Dalton is unknown; when reached for comment, Horder declined further statement on Plath's death, citing his decision several years ago to say nothing more and expressing his lingering regret at what he considers his "breach of confidentiality" when he spoke publically of Plath on an earlier occasion.

Glenn Bair, who studied with Dalton, gave his opinion about Horder's decision to contact a PMS specialist when Plath was in an acute state of distress. "You have to consider this about John Horder. He is and was very well connected," said Dr. Bair. (Horder is the highly respected

former President of the Royal College of General Practitioners in London.) "He most likely had access to five hundred psychiatrists and a thousand other specialists. The odds of him picking Dalton are very small -- but you don't send a patient to a colleague without having a strong belief that their specialty will help that patient. For one minor point, doctors don't have the time to take blind referrals for patients not applicable to their specialty. Neither do the patients -- especially patients in dire need of help." After a careful review of Thompson's article and a seven-page monthly breakdown of Plath's symptoms for 1958-59 as well as the verifiable evidence of Plath's pregnancies and postpartum symptoms of 1959-62, Dr. Bair said, "If you hack through the PMDD criteria, I think that you'll find that she fits the PMDD profile."

With the publication of the *Unabridged Journals*, even more of Plath's biographical record can be assessed in light of Thompson's PMS theory. In particular, the more thorough and accurate dating of entries in journals for 1958-59 corroborate the prevalence and patterning of Plath's numerous references to her physical symptoms and feelings. Among the dozens of Plath's commentaries that appear to be unique to the luteal phase of her cycles are these: "Am I living half alive?" "A peculiar hunger and thirst upon me..." "I have an ominously red, sore & swollen eyelid, a queer red spot on my lip -- and this enervating fatigue like a secret and destructive fever --" "My eyelid's hot stinging itch has spread ... to all my body: scalp, leg, stomach: as if an itch, infectious, lit and burned, lit and burned. I feel like scratching my skin off. And a dull torpor shutting me in my own prison of highstrung depression ... I feel about to break out in leprosy ... my eyes are killing me -- what is wrong with them" (*Unabridged Journals* 324, 351, 383, 385-86).

The notorious 1958 incident with Hughes and the co-ed on Plath's last day of teaching took place, as Thompson had earlier suggested and the unabridged journals now confirms, during the luteal phase of Plath's cycle; so did the memorable "button-sewing quarrel" between Plath and Hughes that raised an outcry among feminists when the journals were released in 1982. Plath's "unexplained" fevers, which would recur and become immortalized in the *Ariel* period, are recorded exclusively in the luteal phase of her cycles as are a vast majority of her chronic sinus troubles. Using both the unabridged journals to assess cyclical patterning and Plath's calendars from 1952 and 1953 (housed in Indiana University's Lilly Library), in which she recorded her periods through July 1953, it seems overwhelmingly likely that Plath was, as



Thompson contended, in either the luteal or perimenstrual phase of her menses at the time of her 1953 suicide attempt.

Even incidents that occurred during the time covered by journals now destroyed or lost can be illuminated by Thompson's PMS theory, coupled with outside documentary evidence. For example, the due dates of Plath's second and third pregnancies and her weaning schedule for Frieda in 1960, all noted in her letters, clarify that three of Plath's most disastrous episodes of violent or antisocial behavior occurred during the luteal phase of her cycles, which was made even more acute by pregnancy. Plath's December 1960 argument with Olwyn in Yorkshire, after which the sisters-in-law never saw each other again, took place when Plath was newly pregnant for the second time, but in what was hormonally the late luteal phase of her cycle. One month later, in an irrational fit of jealous rage, Plath destroyed her husband's most precious possession, his leather-bound copy of the Oxford Collected Shakespeare, as well as all of his papers and works in draft on his desk; a few days later, Plath miscarried. Five months later, now pregnant for the third time, Plath wreaked chaos during a vacation to France at the summer home of W.S. Merwin and his wife Dido; Plath's most forgivable antic was that she ate a lunch intended for three people. Again, the trip's date places Plath in the late luteal phase of her cycle.

The unabridged journals reveal that on March 20, 1959, Plath's psychoanalyst, *Ruth Tiffany Barnhouse*, told her that "cramps are all mental after arguing against natural childbirth, saying pain was real," which could only have served to increase Plath's inability to connect her symptoms to a cause that was beyond her control (475). Though Plath's cramps and many more of her symptoms were physically, palpably expressed, their impact on her interior, "mental" life was equally real. Plath endlessly noted her agonizing symptoms, castigated herself for her inability to gain control over her life, even dreamed frequently about her periods, and yet could not make the connection between her cycles of fertility and cycles of torment. "Yesterday was a horror," Plath wrote in the luteal phase of her cycle in March 1958. "Ted said something about the moon and Saturn to explain the curse which strung me tight as a wire and twanged unmercifully" (348-49). A month later, Plath describes a nightmare in which she watches a "diamond moon" passing by before she becomes a moon herself: "...I was lifted, up, my stomach & face toward earth, as if hung perpendicular in mid-air of a room with a pole through my middle & someone twirling me about on it. ... & my whole equilibrium went off, giddy, as I

spun & they spun below & I heard surgical, distant, stellar voices discussing me & my experimental predicament & planning what to do next" (362).

Plath's unabridged journal is crowded with references to the moon, which notably worked itself into her poetry; a journal entry from 1950 that had appeared in the 1982 edition takes on even greater metaphoric meaning in light of the PMS theory: "Tonight I wanted to step outside for a few moments before going to bed, it was so snug and stale-aired in the house. I was in my pajamas, my freshly washed hair up on curlers. So I tried to open the front door. The lock snapped as I turned it; I tried the handle. The door wouldn't open. Annoyed, I turned the handle the other way. No response I twisted the lock ... still the door was stuck, white, blank and enigmatic. I glanced up. Through the glass square, high in the door, I saw a block of sky, pierced by the sharp black points of the pines across the street. And there was the moon, almost full, luminous and yellow, behind the trees. I felt suddenly breathless, stifled. I was trapped, with the tantalizing little square of night above me, and the warm, feminine atmosphere of the house enveloping me in its thick, feathery smothering embrace" (16).

In her recounting of her son Nicholas's birth, Plath records that "his head shaped up beautifully — the skull plates had overlapped to get him through the boney door," which recalls her many references to the moon goddess's "hood of bone" and yet again connecting her own fertility, as well as her artistic inspiration, to the planetary force by which it was partially dictated (648, *Collected Poems* 273). The unabridged journals now dates Plath's writing of "Moonrise," a poem metaphorically meditating on the "bony mother" moon and hopes of pregnancy ("The berries purple / and bleed. The white stomach may ripen yet."), as having been written in Plath's luteal phase, as the poem "Metaphors" — the metaphors being those for pregnancy — was completed on March 20, 1959 in the perimenstrual phase, presumably begun when Plath still thought she might be pregnant ("March 20, Friday. Yesterday a nadir of sorts. ... Pregnant, I thought. No such luck.") (98, *Unabridged Journals* 474). Another poem, "A Life," in which a woman drags her shadow around the moon but has been exorcized of "grief and anger" was completed on November 18, 1960, and so was written during the week in which Plath (according to the dates she gave her mother) must have ovulated and become pregnant for the second time (*Collected Poems* 150). Because Plath's subject matter in these poems is so blatantly and directly linked to the phase of her menstrual cycle at the time the poems were written, their specific dating and the circumstances of their production gives more credence to Thompson's conclusions



about Plath's menstrual cycles affecting the creation of poems during the *Ariel* period, for which there is no dated evidence of menstrual cycles.

The unabridged journals reveal some problems with Thompson's theory, but they are mostly minor dating mistakes, which do not ultimately undermine her findings. The more important point made evident by the unabridged journals is that Plath's mood swings were not as predictable, vis a vis her menstrual cycle, as Thompson assumed. Though Plath's physical symptoms evaporate almost miraculously with the onset of her periods, her emotional turmoil remains unpredictable throughout the month. The diagnostic definitions for PMS and PMDD in the DSM-IV state that symptoms "are always absent in the week after menses"; however, Dr. Bair has noticed in clinical practice that depression "is the slowest symptom to clear, and in fact seems to build up over time," coupled with the decline of a woman's self-esteem as she finds herself unable to control her emotions. Numerous studies on PMS corroborate Dr. Bair's clinical observations.

The years for which we have the most consistent and detailed menstrual data for Plath, 1958 and 1959, are unfortunately years in which Plath was also sunk in a long-term depression over her teaching job and her consequent writer's block. It is, then, almost impossible to sort Plath's emotional responses to potential PMS from her ongoing depression. The years 1952 and 1953, two years for which we also have accurate dating of Plath's menses, are years in which Plath's emotional life is far more varied and the trajectory of her deepening depression is easier to detect; and yet even during these early years Plath's moods do not consistently correspond to her cycles in a way that points unquestionably at PMS. It may be, as is often the case with PMS sufferers, that Plath's PMS worsened as she grew older; it may also be that something else was at work in Plath's biological war with her selves.

There is a striking overlap and similarity between the symptoms of severe PMS and the depressive phase of bipolar II that apply in Plath's case: insomnia and hypersomnia, appetite changes, low impulse control and irritability, mood lability, restlessness and anxiety, fatigue and lethargy, feelings of inadequacy and magnified guilt, and suicidal thoughts and action. Since a diagnosis of bipolar II fits Plath's behavioral and hereditary profile without explaining her cyclical physical symptoms or her artistic preoccupation with her fertility, while PMS does not fully account for Plath's overall fluctuation of moods and her hypomanic states, it seems

reasonable to hypothesize that Plath may have suffered both from bipolar II disorder and a severe case of PMS.

Medical and psychiatric researchers have been investigating connections between affective illnesses and menstruation in recent years. In a 1996 published study by PMS researcher Kimberly Yonkers, M.D. entitled "The Association between Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder and Other Mood Disorders," the author notes that PMDD has been "included in the category of 'depressive disorders not otherwise specified' in DSM-IV ... PMDD was placed in the same category as other mood disorders because it was felt that PMDD had much in common with them." The PMDD criteria of the DSM-IV itself states that women with recurrent major depressive disorder [MDD], bipolar I or bipolar II or even a family history of such disorders may be at greater risk for PMDD.

PMS researcher Yonkers and other researchers have studied the overlapping nature of symptoms for PMS and mood disorders as well as the comorbidity of the illnesses (the number and likelihood of women having both illnesses at once, as well as how the illnesses affect each other). Not surprisingly, because of the similarities between premenstrual symptoms and depressive aspects of mood disorders, analyzing the ways the illnesses interact is extremely complicated. One notable finding in terms of Plath is from Yonkers' study: "Not only is history of mood disorder common among many women with PMDD or PMS, but these women are also at high risk for eventually developing an episode of MDD."

Other findings include that women with MDD or rapid-cycling bipolar disorder commonly experience "premenstrual exacerbation" of their mood symptoms; that PMS may trigger affective episodes and that PMS is possibly a unique form of affective disorder; that women with past or current psychiatric illness, principally affective disorders, report a higher incidence of PMS than normal controls; that PMS is not simply always a premenstrual worsening of affective illness but has validity independent of other affective syndromes; that there tends to be a cycle-to-cycle worsening of premenstrual symptoms and depression prior to prolonged episodes of MDD; that women with postpartum depression are more likely to develop premenstrual depressions several months after the resumption of menses; that some women may have a biological vulnerability for mood disorders that is "triggered" by menstrual changes; and that the relationship between PMS and bipolar illness does not always stay static over a woman's



lifetime: the cycles do not necessarily coincide, and in some phases the woman may have "pure" PMS/PMDD while at other times she has premenstrual worsening of her mood disorder.

One of the most disturbing similarities between bipolar II and severe PMS is the potentially lethal nature of both illnesses. Goodwin and Jamison's *Manic-Depressive Illness* reports that "patients with depressive and manic-depressive illnesses are far more likely to commit suicide than individuals in any other psychiatric or medical risk group," and that women appear far more likely than men to attempt suicide. Though 20-25 percent of untreated bipolar sufferers succeed in killing themselves, up to 50 percent have tried suicide at least once, and 90 percent of those attempts are serious enough to warrant hospitalization. The suicide statistics on PMS sufferers are equally catastrophic. Some studies have shown that up to one-third of severe PMS sufferers have attempted suicide. According to a 1993 study entitled "The Menstrual Cycle and Mood Disorders" by Jean Endicott, M.D. of the New York State Psychiatric Institute, there is evidence that suicide attempts are more likely during the premenstrual phase of the cycle, and "there is evidence from autopsies that completed suicide is more likely to occur during the late luteal phase of the cycle." Another study, "Premenstrual Tension Syndrome in Rapid-Cycling Bipolar Affective Disorder" by Price and DiMarzio, notes that "The paramenstruum, the 4 days preceding and the first 4 days of menstruation, is associated with increased rates of medical, surgical, and psychiatric hospitalizations; increased rates of suicide attempts; and increased severity of suicidal intent." These findings supports those of Dr. Dalton, whose studies of British women have shown that suicide attempts increase seventeen-fold during the luteal phase as opposed to the preovulatory phase of the cycle.

Just as scientific researchers have noted that there is a relationship between bipolar illness and PMS though they have not yet clarified the parameters of that relationship, it can be cautiously concluded that there is strong evidence that Plath suffered from some degree of both affective and premenstrual illness. Yet how those two illnesses may have corresponded is impossible to detect.

Why does it matter? Why try to understand who Plath was, beyond what rises immediately to the surface in her poetry? Perhaps the answer lies first with Plath's ceaseless desire to understand the dendritic and operatic machinations of her psyche, her "million filaments," and how that quest for self became not just the driving force behind her creativity but also the undeniable key to the richly textured artistry it produced (*Collected Poems* 245). Plath

was ultimately as much an enigma to herself as she is now to us; during the weeks before her death she was fervently engaged in putting together the puzzle of her "Ariel" poems, giving them a logical sequence, a narrative cohesion that amounted to a mythic performative utterance – she was putting them in an order that would tell her the story of her own survival, her Phoenix-like eruption from the ashes of her destroyed marriage and the shed skin of her "false" selves. "Will the hive survive, will the gladiolas / Succeed in banking their fires / To enter another year?" she had asked herself in "Wintering," the poem, almost a prayer, that she chose to end her *Ariel* manuscript in December 1962. "The bees are flying," the poem concludes, "They taste the spring" (219). Plath wanted to know that she would survive that English winter; she willed herself, as she had done countless times before, toward the spring of her inner life.

Understanding Plath's biology underscores her very human, as opposed to iconic, instinct toward self preservation; if one accepts the possibility that Plath's true demon was not something of her own making but a force, or forces, she was quite powerless against, her fearlessness in attempting to juggle the details of her daily life, to care for herself and her small children alone and furthermore to programmatically write "dawn poems in blood" to save her sanity seems nothing less than courageous (qtd. in Thompson 237). It also hints at the possibility that Plath's seemingly numinous sensitivity and notable premonitory abilities (*according to people who knew her, Plath verged on being telepathic*) may have arisen in some part from a subconscious understanding that her psychological suffering was also the source, in a very material way, of her internal artistic fire – the fire that would finally burn hot enough to work the alchemical change that Hughes described.

What is breathtaking about the possibility that Plath may have suffered both bipolar II and PMS is that in tandem, *these* two illnesses integrate her daily and imaginative life, her artistic fascinations and her emotional despair, her life as a woman and as a writer, and they do so without diminishing Plath's achievement in any way. Her *ars poetica*, not just brilliantly executed but brilliantly won despite unbelievable odds, leaps into focus in even more astonishing detail than ever before.

As Jamison remarks of the mystic poet William Blake in *Touched With Fire*, "suggesting the diagnosis of manic-depressive illness for Blake does not detract from the complexity of his life; it may, however, add a different kind of understanding to it. Likewise, it does not render his



work any the less extraordinary, or make him any less a great visionary or prophet. [The diagnosis] may not explain all or even most of who he was. But, surely, it does explain some." In Plath's case, the conjectural diagnosis of manic-depression and PMS may explain almost everything. And it only makes more miraculous what Hughes once described as "the truly miraculous thing about her," a thing he directly attributed to Plath's fertility, an event precipitated by the births of her two children: "...in two years, while she was almost fully occupied with children and house-keeping, she underwent a poetic development that has hardly any equal on record, for suddenness and completeness. ... All the various voices of her gift came together, and for about six months, up to a day or two before her death, she wrote with the full power and music of her extraordinary nature" (Hughes, "Sylvia Plath" 162)

In a stunning turnabout, her devastating illnesses may have not just inspired Plath but also enhanced her ability to apprehend her material and shape it: Plath's subterranean connection to her female biology seems to have been aligned with the expansive flourish of hypomania's supple thinking, its flights back into the caves and coves of the mind. While she was writing the poems of *Ariel* in the fall of 1962, being "pulled through the intestine of God" as she called it in a letter, she was also carefully correcting the galleys for *The Bell Jar* – in other words, she was engaged in both a creative act requiring the limitless probing of psychic depths and in the organizational feat of logic and objectivity demanded by editing. When one considers the precision and feverish grace of Plath's last six months of writing, it is impossible to imagine her as anything but utterly in control of that gift. One might say that Plath was able, for a finite and delicately balanced period, to use her illnesses to keen artistic advantage. "I feel like a highly efficient tool, or weapon," Plath marveled that fall.

Plath's fertility, to which she may have gained greater figurative access through bipolar illness, then became both her darkness and her glory – her artistic salvation and her downfall, a double-faced gift she thematized, whether consciously or unconsciously, in her poetry. No one has ever written more uncannily of motherhood than Sylvia Plath, or captured so perceptively the shock of maternal otherness – its frightening and awesome complexity and distance, feelings as genuine and "normal" as love and connection. Plath understood and experienced motherhood as "much deeper, much closer to the bone" than love or marriage, and yet her hypersensitive awareness of what is closest to the bone – the aspect of motherhood that is subjective and strange and dictated by blood – taps into a vein of truth not easily embraced by the usual exalted

sentiments (Plath, "Nine Letters" 50). "I'm no more your mother," Plath wrote, "Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow/Effacement at the wind's hand" (*Collected Poems* 157). This recurring maternal imagery of chthonic separation, apparent even to a casual reader of Plath, is a clear manifestation, at some level, of the mixed blessing of Plath's female body. It is also why so many critics have accused her of ambivalence toward motherhood – a crude misapprehension of Plath's deeply anguished and profound relationship to her own fertility.

Ultimately, the foremost reason to try to understand Plath is because it leads us unflinching back to her poems, the work she knew qualified her as "a genius of a writer" (*Letters Home* 468). As insulated against easy access as Plath's poetry remains, it is astounding to note how many passionately moved readers she has won over forty years, and how often women, in particular, will say that they first read her in school, perhaps voyeuristically, and later came to "understand" her and value her writing on a deeply intuitive level only after marriage and children. The excitement of Sylvia Plath is that her poems continue to reward reading after reading, year after year after revelation – they remain as multifaceted, mysterious and bristling with life as the enigma of their creator, who was in her deepest being a woman, a mother, and an artist.

"They saved me," Plath told Hughes in December 1962, speaking of the fury and agony she poured into *Ariel* ("Her Journals" 188). "One can see a great revival of spirits in her letters," Hughes wrote many years later to Aurelia Plath of those bleak months after Plath and Hughes split up, Plath insisting that she would settle for nothing other than a divorce. "And that was the front she presented to me at the time," Hughes continued. "But as I've said it was only in that last week that her front crumpled and I realised the whole thing was a bluff. But then she was going off for the weekend and Monday morning was too late." When she wrote her last letter to her mother, Plath was on antidepressants and Dr. Horder, who was scrambling to get her a hospital bed, was calling or seeing her daily. Plath's friends in London have reported that she seemed distraught and desperate and was so distracted that she could no longer care for her children's daily needs. On February 4, 1963, one week before her death, Plath wrote reassuringly to Aurelia, "I am going to start seeing a woman doctor, free on the National Health, to whom I've been referred by my very good local doctor, which should help me weather this difficult time. Give my love to all. Sivvy" (*Letters Home* 500).



On February 7 she wrote with brisk efficiency to friends in Devon that she was coming back ("I long to see my home") and to ask that they have Frieda's kittens neutered in preparation. Between those letters, Plath composed her final poem, "Edge," in which the unmoved moon observes the "perfected" body of a dead woman:

"The moon has nothing to be sad about,
Staring from her hood of bone.

She is used to this sort of thing.
Her blacks crackle and drag." (*Collected Poems* 272-73)

To the very end, Sylvia Plath hid behind her masks, pulling her veils around her even into death. One can only wonder who, that last winter Monday, she thought she was then.

Works Cited

- Carson, Anne. "Sylvia Town." *Grand Street* 8.3 (Spring 1989): 191. Print.
- Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-IV*. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 1994. Print.
- Endicott, Jean. "The Menstrual Cycle and Mood Disorders." *Journal of Affective Disorders* 29 (1993). Print.
- Gates, David. "Back to the Ted and Sylvia Show." *Newsweek*. 17 Apr. 2000. Web. 11 Oct. 2010. <<http://www.newsweek.com/2000/04/16/back-to-the-ted-and-sylvia-show.html>>.
- Goodwin, Frederick K., and Kay R. Jamison. *Manic-Depressive Illness*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990. Print.
- Hughes, Olwyn. "Two Letters on Sylvia Plath and a Reply." *TriQuarterly* 82 (1991): 210-217. Print.
- Hughes, Ted. "Foreword." *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*. Ed. Fran McCullough. New York: The Dial Press, 1982. Print.
- . "Introduction." *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*. New York: Harper & Row, 1979. Print.
- . "Publishing Sylvia Plath." *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*. Ed. William Scammell. New York: Picador: 1995. Print.
- . "Sylvia Plath: Ariel." *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*. Ed. William Scammell. New York: Picador: 1995. Print.
- . "Sylvia Plath and Her Journals." *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*. Ed. William Scammell. New York: Picador: 1995. Print.
- Hughes, Ted and Drue Heinz. "The Art of Poetry No. 71." *The Paris Review* 135. Spring 1995. Web. 9 Oct. 2010. <<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1669/the-art-of-poetry-no-71-ted-hughes>>.
- Jamison, Kay R. *Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament*. New York: Free Press, 1993. Print.
- Jones, Nigel. "One Hundred Per Cent Me." *The Guardian*. 8 Nov. 1997: 6. Print.
- McCullough, Frances. "Editor's Note." *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*. Ed. Fran McCullough. New York: The Dial Press, 1982. Print.



- Perloff, Marjorie. "Sylvia Plath's 'Sivvy' Poems: A Portrait of the Poet as Daughter." *Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry*. Ed. Gary Lane. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979. 155-178. Print.
- Plath, Aurelia. "Introduction." *Letters Home: Correspondence, 1950-1963*. New York: Harper & Row, 1975. Print.
- Plath, Sylvia. *Letters Home: Correspondence, 1950-1963*. Ed. Aurelia S. Plath. New York: Harper & Row, 1975. Print.
- . "Nine Letters to Lynne Lawner." *Antaeus* 28 (Winter 1978): 31-51. Print.
- . *The Collected Poems*. Ed. Ted Hughes. New York: Harper & Row, 1981. Print.
- . *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*. Ed. Fran McCullough. New York: The Dial Press, 1982. Print.
- . *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath, 1950-1962*. Ed. Karen V. Kukil. New York: Anchor Books, 2000. Print.
- Price, W.A., and L. DiMarzio. "Premenstrual Tension Syndrome in Rapid-Cycling Bipolar Affective Disorder." *The Journal of Clinical Psychiatry* 47.8 (1986): 415-17. Print.
- Stevenson, Anne. "Two Letters on Sylvia Plath and a Reply." *TriQuarterly* 82 (1991): 210-217. Print.
- Thompson, Catherine. "'Dawn Poems in Blood': Sylvia Plath and PMS." *TriQuarterly* 20 (1990 91): 221-49. Print.
- Yonkers, Kimberly. "The Association Between Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder and Other Mood Disorders." *The Journal of Clinical Psychiatry* 58 (1997): 19-25. Print.