



## Sylvia Plath's Teaching Syllabus: A Chronology

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- Sylvia Plath returned to Smith College as an instructor of freshman English for the academic year 1957 to 1958.<sup>1</sup> The chronology below draws on Plath's teaching notes (housed at the Lilly Library, Indiana University), correspondence, and journal entries. In addition to information Plath recorded, 1957 and 1958 calendars also provided dates and days of the week.<sup>2</sup>
- Plath taught three class sections that met at nine and eleven in the morning and three in the afternoon (UJ 388-9). Her afternoon classes met on Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays and her morning classes met on Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays.<sup>3</sup> Following her first class meeting with the Wednesday afternoon section (LH 326), the three class sections progressed at slightly different paces. At points in her teaching notes Plath indicated the amount she had covered in specific class sessions and what to address next. In addition to the readings the students prepared for class meetings, Plath also assigned different texts for the students' essays. When possible, the chronology acknowledges the material she covered by day and course section as well as the texts she assigned students to navigate independently.
- The unwieldy sheaf that comprises Plath's teaching notes includes lists of page numbers, notes from secondary sources, and drafts of her lecture notes that progress to typed lectures. The more developed, typed versions may represent what she called in a letter, "little brief 5-minute lectures on topics" (328). Plath composed some of her teaching notes on the pink Smith College Memorandum paper that she recounted in her journals stealing from the history department supply closet for a novel she was struggling to write (UJ 344). Her teaching notes include a list of the texts she taught, typed on half a page of memorandum paper. On an additional page, Plath listed poems she planned to teach through the end of

the term. Perhaps as the poetry unit progressed, she crossed out poems and revised the number of class days to devote to individual poets. The chronology indicates the time period Plath devoted to each poet, and both the poems she selected to teach and those she eliminated.

- Plath's teaching notes illustrate the meticulousness that she devoted to so many aspects of the creative process. The listings in this chronology present a more complete record of when she was preparing and revisiting texts, and enable further consideration of her journal entries, correspondence, poetry, and prose. In addition, Plath's teaching notes record the reception of modernist literature at mid-century.<sup>4</sup>

### 1957

- During her second year as a Fulbright Scholar at Newnham College, Cambridge University, Robert Gorham Davis offered Plath a teaching position at Smith the following year (LH 300). In June, Plath received a book list from Smith (318).

#### September and October:

- **William James:** Varieties of Religious Experience, two chapters (LH 327).<sup>5</sup> Plath wrote that she was preparing James on Tues. 10.1 (UJ 618, 620).<sup>6</sup>
- **Nathaniel Hawthorne:** Plath taught the following stories, "The Birthmark," "Rappaccini's Daughter," "Ethan Brand," "Lady Eleanore's Mantle," and "Goodman Brown" (Thurs.-Sat. 10.10-12) (UJ 620).<sup>7</sup>

#### November:

- **Henry James:**<sup>8</sup> Stories, "The Pupil" (Thurs. 10.31) and "The Beast in the Jungle" (10.31, Fri. 11.1, Sat. 11.2, Fri. 11.8).<sup>9</sup>
  - When considering the days on which she would teach James, she placed a question mark beside Wed. for "The Pupil."



- Plath indicated for “Oct. 30 (31)” a “Library Assignment” in Seelye Hall, the building in which the English department was located. The students defined terms from James’s “The Pupil” in the Oxford English Dictionary, his French vocabulary in Fowler’s Dictionary of Modern English Usage, and compiled from the Dictionary of American Biography details from James’s background relevant to the story (*TN*).
- **D.H. Lawrence:**<sup>10</sup> Stories, “The Rocking-Horse Winner” (11.8), “The Blind Man” (11.8) “The Prussian Officer” (c. Thurs. 11.14) and “The Princess” (Fri. 11.15) (*TN*).<sup>11</sup>
  - Plath noted in her Journal Fragment of November 5, that her former poetry professor, Alfred Young Fisher would be observing her class on her first day teaching Lawrence (Fri. 11.8) (UJ 622).
  - On her first page of notes for Lawrence’s stories, she noted to go over “The Beast in the Jungle” and address chapters 5 and 6 (*TN*).
  - For their essays, the students selected from Lawrence’s stories, “The Woman Who Rode Away,” “Mother and Daughter,” “The Man Who Loved Islands,” and “The Horse Dealer’s Daughter.”<sup>12</sup> The thousand word essays were due Fri. 11.22 and Sat. 11.23 (*TN*).
- **James Joyce.** Stories, “The Sisters,” “Grace,” “Araby” (Thurs. 11.21), “A Little Cloud” (Thurs. 11.21), “A Painful Case” (Fri. 11.22), “Clay” (Sat. 11.23), and “The Boarding House” (Sat. 11.23). “Ivy Day in the Committee Room” and “The Dead” indicated, “Thurs. and Fri” may have been 12.5 and 12.6 (*TN*).
  - One page of notes on “A Painful Case” indicates points in the story “newspaper / life’s feast” for the Wednesday afternoon section and “Average / common” for the morning classes. In addition a page of notes on “A Painful Case,” give the date “Dec. 5” [Thurs.] above a list of stories, “Clay,” “The Boarding House,” and “Ivy Day in the Committee Room” (*TN*).

## 1958

**January**

- **Fyodor Dostoevsky:** Crime and Punishment (c. Wed. 1.8-Sat.1.18) (*LH* 334-5). She planned to divide the novel into “A Part a day” (*TN*).<sup>13</sup>

**February:**

- **Joyce:** A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man<sup>14</sup> (c. Thurs. 2.6 to Fri. 2.14).<sup>15</sup>
- **Sophocles:** Oedipus (Fri. 2.21) (*UJ* 335).<sup>16</sup> Antigone (Thurs. 2.27) (*TN*) (340).
- **Webster and Tourneur:** The Duchess of Malfi and Middleton and Tourneur, The Revenger’s Tragedy (Fri. 2.28) (*UJ* 339).<sup>17</sup>

**March:**

- **Henrik Ibsen:** Ghosts, Rosmersholm, and The Master Builder (*TN*). In her journal, Plath noted completing her preparation of Ibsen on Wed. 3.5. She may have taught Ibsen from Thurs-Sat. 3.6-8 (*UJ* 344).<sup>18</sup>
- **August Strindberg:** Miss Julie, A Dream Play, and Ghost Sonata (Thurs. 3.13, afternoon) (*UJ* 348) (*TN*).

**April:**

- **Gerard Manley Hopkins:** In her journal, Plath noted covering three Hopkins poems a class session for a week (*UJ* 363). She wrote and circled a number six [days] above the Hopkins poems on her list for the unit. Some of the poems she underlined, placed in parentheses, or noted with check marks (“v”) or asterisks, which the symbols below indicate.<sup>19</sup>
  - Hopkins poems, “Pied Beauty,” “Spring,” “Hurrahing in Harvest,” “Inversnaid,” “\*God’s Grandeur,” “\*What I do is Me,” “The Caged Skylark,” “(Felix Randall),” “(Heaven-Haven)” “\* Spring & Fall,” “No, Worst, There is None” ”vThou Art Indeed Just, Lord,” “vThe Habit of Perfection,” “v The Windhover,” “That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection” (Thurs.-Sat. 4.3-5) (*TN*).



- **W.B. Yeats:** In her list of poems for the term, Plath planned to devote four days to Yeats's poems, “(\*Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen),” “\* The Second Coming,” “Leda and the Swan,” “\* Sailing to Byzantium,” “\*Among School Children” (Sat. 4.26 (UJ 373), Wed. 4.30)], “An Irish Airman Foresees His Death,” “Crazy Jane on God,” and “A Friend Whose Work Has Come to Nothing” (*TN*)
  - Plath noted for Wednesday afternoon class to cover “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” with “The Second Coming” on what may have been 4.30 (*TN*).

### May:

- **T. S. Eliot:** (c. Fri. 5.2-Sat. 5.10) (*UJ* 377). “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and “Journey of the Magi” on Fri. 5.2 (*TN*).
  - In her list of poems to teach, Plath crossed out “The Hollow Men.”
  - Plath planned to devote five class sessions to Eliot, with four on The Waste Land (*TN*).<sup>20</sup>
    - For one day teaching The Waste Land, Plath noted the following stopping points for the nine a.m., eleven a.m., and three p.m. classes, “Here she said / is your card,” “Madame Sosostris,” and “Belladonna” (*TN*).
    - The following session, she indicated that the nine and eleven a.m. classes covered “to Lil’s Husband” and “The Fire Sermon,” respectively (*TN*). Plath also noted in her journal that she taught “The Fire Sermon” on Sat. 5.10. (UJ 380).
- **Dylan Thomas:** Plath initially scheduled three days for Thomas’s poems, which she later shortened to two. On her list of poems, she placed some of the titles in parentheses or preceded the titles with asterisks, indicated in the symbols below.
  - Poems, “\*The Hand That Signed the Paper Felled a City,” “\*The Force through which the Green Fuse Drives the Flower” “\*The Hunchback in the Park,” “\*Twenty-Four Years,” “(In Memory of Ann Jones),” “\*Fern Hill” and “Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night,” and “Over Sir John’s Hill” (*TN*).

- Plath eliminated “The Hand that Signed the Paper Felled a City” and “The Force through which the Green Fuse Drives the Flower” (*TN*).
  - Poems for students’ papers on one of the following poems due Wed. 4.16 and Thurs. 4.17: Thomas, “A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London” and “And Death Shall Have No Dominion” and Auden, “Chorus from a Play” and “Lay Your Sleeping Head My Love” (*TN*).
- **W.H. Auden:** For one day on Auden’s poems, Plath listed the following poems, indicating some with markings, “\*In Memory of W.B. Yeats,”<sup>21</sup> “\*Law, Say the Gardeners is the Sun,” “\*Musee des Beaux Arts,” “Look, Stranger,” “\*As I Walked Out One Evening,” and “—Fish in the Unruffled Lakes” (*TN*).
  - A later list for Fri. and Sat. of Thomas and Auden’s poems, “The Hunchback in the Park,” “Twenty-Four Years,” “Fern Hill,” “Over Sir John’s Hill,” “Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night,” “In Memory of W.B. Yeats” [Fri. afternoon class], “Musee des Beaux Arts,” “Law, Say the Gardeners, is the Sun,” and “As I Walked Out One Evening” (*TN*).
- **John Crowe Ransom:** Two days for the following poems, “\*Painted Head” “\*Winter Remembered,” “Parting Without Sequel” “\*Captain Carpenter,” “Antique Harvesters,” “(Bells for John Whiteside’s Daughter),” and “\*Prelude to an Evening.”
  - Plath gave what she called an “hour exam: open book” on Ransom’s “The Equilibrists” on Thurs. 5.1 (*TN*) (UJ 376, 378).
- **e. e. cummings:** For the final day of class, Plath initially selected “Chanson Innocente,” Portrait,” and “Poem, or Beauty Hurts Mr. Vinal” (*TN*).
- **Additional Poems:** Beneath the heading “If Possible,” Marianne Moore, “Poetry” and “Nevertheless”; Wallace Stevens, “Sense of the Sleight-of-Hand Man”; Elizabeth Bishop, “The Fish”; Richard Wilbur, “Potato” (*TN*).<sup>22</sup>
- **Remainder of Poetry Unit:** Essays due Fri. 5.16 analyzing two to three of the following poems, Stevens, “The Motive for Metaphor” and “The Idea of Order at Key West”; Moore, “The Mind is an Enchanted Thing” and “Nevertheless”;



- Ransom, “Bells for John Whiteside’s Daughter,” “Here Lies a Lady,” and “Janet Waking” (*TN*).
- **Final day of class** (Thurs. 5.22): Plath listed the following poems: Ransom, “Captain Carpenter,” “Winter Remembered,” and “Parting Without Sequel”; e.e. cummings, “When God Lets My Body Be,” “Portrait,” and “Chanson Innocente”; Edith Sitwell, “Aubade”; Bishop, “The Fish”; (Wilbur, “Potato”) (*TN*) (UJ 388-9).

### Abbreviations

UJ: The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath.

LH: Letters Home.

*TN*: Teaching Notes.

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<sup>1</sup> My research in the Sylvia Plath Collection at the Lilly Library, Indiana University was aided by the Everett Helm Visiting Fellowship. Karen V. Kukil enabled my access to the Sylvia Plath Collection in the Mortimer Rare Book Room at Smith College and brought Plath's teaching notes to my attention. Susan Van Dyne introduced the notes to Kukil. Ellen Nodelman shared with me her recollections of Plath's teaching. I would like to thank Kukil, Brian M. Reed, and Anita Helle for reading versions of this chronology and Dr. Terry Kidner.

<sup>2</sup> Even as they draw on available sources, the dates are approximations and draw on the online calendars at the following sites: <<http://www.hf.rim.or.jp/~kaji/cal/cal.cgi?1957>> and <<http://www.hf.rim.or.jp/~kaji/cal/cal.cgi?1958>> 16 August 2008. In addition <[http://home.comcast.net/~s.astorino/Calendars/1957\\_Calendar.htm](http://home.comcast.net/~s.astorino/Calendars/1957_Calendar.htm)> and <[http://home.comcast.net/~s.astorino/Calendars/1958\\_Calendar.htm](http://home.comcast.net/~s.astorino/Calendars/1958_Calendar.htm)> 7 July 2009

<sup>3</sup> Unpublished portion of Plath's September 23, 1957 letter to her mother housed at the Lilly Library (LH 326). Email of 7.10.09 from David K. Frasier of the Lilly Library.

<sup>4</sup> A fuller treatment of Plath's reading and teaching of modernist texts is in Golden, Annotating Modernism: The Reading and Teaching Strategies of Sylvia Plath, John Berryman, and Anne Sexton.





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<sup>5</sup> In his letter to Plath of June 11, 1957, Daniel Aaron, Director of English 11, noted that the two chapters from James were “The Religion of Healthy-Mindedness and “The Sick Soul.” Kukil found this letter. Smith College Archives.

<sup>6</sup> Plath’s copy of Varieties of Religious Experience (1902; 1929) is in the Mortimer Rare Book Room at Smith College. A paper clip mark in her copy noting approximately pages three to twenty may indicate the portion that Plath taught.

<sup>7</sup> Plath may have used Hawthorne’s Short Stories (1955) to teach. Her copy is at Smith (Library Thing).

<sup>8</sup> See also Tintner.

<sup>9</sup> The page numbers in Plath’s teaching notes correspond with Leon Edel’s edition of Henry James’s Short Stories.

<sup>10</sup> See also Bayley.

<sup>11</sup> Plath taught Lawrence’s stories using Diana Trilling’s edition of The Portable D.H. Lawrence (TN).

<sup>12</sup> Plath annotated these stories in her copy of Lawrence’s short stories at Smith, which Kukil checked.

<sup>13</sup> See also UJ 305, 308-9, 312.

<sup>14</sup> Plath taught Joyce’s stories from Dubliners and his novel, Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, using The Portable James Joyce (1955). Her copy is in the Lilly Library.

<sup>15</sup> Plath noted the following entries in her journal regarding her preparation of Portrait of the Artist. Dates are in brackets: 2 chapters [Thurs. 2.6] (UJ 324); “finish 3 chapter Joyce outline tomorrow” [for Mon. 2.8] (UJ 327); “outlining this week’s first chapter of Joyce –

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two more to go” [Tue. 2.10] (UJ 329). In her teaching notes, she added, “Thursday & Friday” for Chapter 4 (*TN*).

<sup>16</sup> See also Plath’s journal entries regarding Sophocles (UJ 331), *Oedipus*, and *Antigone* (UJ 333).

<sup>17</sup> Plath’s copies of Webster and Tourneur, Ibsen, and Strindberg are at Smith.

<sup>18</sup> See Bundtzen regarding the role of Ghosts in The Bell Jar. See also UJ 344.

<sup>19</sup> In her teaching notes Plath noted that the students used Elizabeth Drew, Poetic Patterns: A Note on Versification (*TN*). She also mentioned Harcourt Brace poetry books; the page numbers she provided correspond with Louis Untermeyer’s Modern American and Modern British Poetry (1955) (*TN*).

<sup>20</sup> See also UJ 377.

<sup>21</sup> See also UJ 358.

<sup>22</sup> See also Axelrod.

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