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# An Ode to Sylvia Plath

## Multi-Genre Project

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When assigned the Multi-Genre Project this semester, I knew exactly whom I wanted to focus on: Sylvia Plath. In the prior semester, I presented on Plath's poem, "Lady Lazarus," and an introductory biography on her life in American Literature II. Also, in my Introduction to Literary Studies course, I read and annotated Plath's poem, "Daddy." These instances sparked personal interest of Plath's writing and life.

Her personal life and war with mental illness and suicidal ideations developed a strong connection between her and I. Having gone through mental treatment and battling mental illnesses myself, I felt a bond between Sylvia Plath's writing and myself. I could absorb her words and what she had to say. Reading her works and about her life, I felt like I could understand and relate to what she needed to say.

Choosing Sylvia Plath has allowed me to find many subjects and topics I enjoy talking about creatively and allowed me to find different routes to show my audience what I know instead of a standardized assessment.

I learned and experienced a lot doing this project and I enjoyed every minute. I have gained so much information about Sylvia Plath, but I also found more about myself as a writer. I write creatively on a daily basis, so that wasn't new. The new stuff for me was finding more outlets to write creatively, developing new abilities and projects to express my knowledge and creativity, and ways to assess and teach my future students.

When completing my project, some unifying elements arose quite profoundly: mental illness, suicide, and struggling. Sylvia Plath tried to live life, but ultimately couldn't bear pushing through any longer. Although her life was a short thirty years, she accomplished so much while struggling through so many barriers. These attempts, hardships, and pressures throughout her life were greatly infused in my project and definitely are significant unifying themes.

When writing “Hide and Seek,” I wanted to base a poem off of her first suicide attempt on August 24<sup>th</sup>, 1953, at the age of 20. According to Sylvia Plath’s Biography by Connie Kirk, she took a bottle of sleeping pills with her and hid in the crawl space underneath the front porch (75). Kirk notes, when they found her they calculated, “that the young writer had swallowed forty pills in her effort to end her life” (79). She had survived. Kirk explains her survival was due to “the pills [making] her vomit, and the vomiting expelled much of the drug out of her system, actually saving her” (79). This is a profound event in her life. Newspapers and the town knew about her missing and search parties were out to find her. This is where I came to the title “Hide and Seek”.

I attempted to capture the feelings of Plath underneath the porch, but as well, see what was happening around her, as people couldn’t find her. I wanted to let the reader feel the emptiness she felt in the crawl space as well as the franticness of people searching for her, but in a dark, almost mournful way—a way she would put it: dark and despairing, which is what I got from her writing. I also took the number forty from the number of pills she consumed and incorporated that into this poem.

My next piece, “Quotes,” I thought about bringing Plath’s words to new light. I decided to do a found poem using quotes from her, which I collected from BrainyQuote. I literally copied and pasted quotes from the website onto the page in no particular order. From there I left them where they were, but I took out singular words here and there and the occasional quote that didn’t quite fit. I added some line breaks and stanza throughout and, miraculously, all seemed to fit so well. I admired how her words were put together like a puzzle. The poem was so interesting because the lines weren’t just her words, but they became new again through this

process. I appreciated this piece a lot because of its use of her words and how the meanings that they originally conveyed, now had a different glow to them.

“Weeds” was my first piece that I completed for my Multi-Genre Project, and started my project explosively. Proud of this piece, I sent the work in for publication. Although it was rejected, I am still very pleased with my poem.

To write this poem, I listened to Sylvia Plath reading her poems; predominately, I listened to her read “Daddy” and “Lady Lazarus,” as well as reading them myself. (These recordings and poems have been cited in the ‘Annotated Bibliography’). Her voice captures her mood, style, and the effervescence of her words. I felt, through reading and listening to her poems, analyzing how she writes and use of word choice, and getting a more in-depth understanding of her as a poet, I felt that I encapsulated Sylvia Plath in this poem.

“Weeds” is further influenced by a diary entry from her published journals, which she titled “Lookout Farm” dated July 1950 (3). She writes about the beauty around her although she, herself, is not all that amazing in the ever-changing and gorgeous world (4). This inspired me to write like her as well as a good point to write from. I think the poem’s theme, words, and direction brings out the essence of Sylvia Plath.

I did take a few of the images she describes and incorporated them into the poem like the milk (3).

My fourth piece is titled, “Teddy.” “Teddy” is a punchy, short poem related to her husband, Ted Hughes. Ted Hughes had an affair with another woman while married to Sylvia Plath, which inspired the topic of this writing. I wrote this poem inspired from Plath’s poem, “Daddy”, therefore the name, Teddy, comes into play. As well, Plath’s poem, “Daddy”, plays with the metaphor of the Holocaust, as well as her father, Otto Plath, as a Nazi, and Sylvia Plath

as a Jew. This metaphor I wanted to revive and extend as I related “Teddy” to Sylvia’s distain with the men in her life and towards him for cheating on her. I think the metaphor was pushed rather quickly and harshly compared to “Daddy,” which was a much longer poem. Having consulted my peers, though, the brevity of “Teddy” seemed to pack a greater and more forceful punch and my goal was achieved strongly.

I felt that having “Teddy” precede “Dear Ted,” a letter I wrote as Sylvia from the grave to Ted Hughes, was a fitting choice. It not only emphasizes the pain and hurt she felt towards him, but also pushes a message of how harmful he was on her life. Ted Hughes silenced and edited much of what Sylvia had to say. The forewords to her journal and comprehensive collection of poems, which were both written by Ted Hughes, Hughes manipulated, changed, and destroyed a lot of Plath’s work after she committed suicide. According to the foreword of the collection of her poems, Plath wrote and completed *Ariel*, a book of poems she had produced before she died (15). Having laid out and created the book to her exact specifications, Plath left it to be published (15). She never wished for the project to be changed. Hughes ruined it. He played around with the layout, took out and edited poems, and published it in a way Plath had not anticipated (15). Hughes describes for doing this to *Ariel* was because of how “personally aggressive” the poems were (15). As well, as he states in his foreword to her journals, that he was in possession of the notebooks that contained Plath’s journals leading up to three days of her death, but destroyed them (xiii). He attempts to rightfully justify himself by claiming, “I destroyed [the notebooks] because I did not want her children to have to read it (in those days I regarded forgetfulness as an essential part of survival).” (xiii).

For my piece, “Dear Ted,” I wrote as Plath to Ted from beyond the grave. I wanted to spew my own dislike for Hughes through Plath’s voice. I, personally, am upset and almost

offended that Ted Hughes took the liberties to practically destroy Sylvia Plath's work and voice. I wanted to give that power back to her.

I mention Frieda Hughes giving back Plath's voice in "Dear Ted." Frieda is Plath and Hughes's daughter. Since Ted Hughes's death in 1998, she has gone back and put Sylvia Plath's work back to its originality and gave life back to Plath's intended voice. One of these instances was reconstructing and producing the unabridged and correct version of *Ariel*. I address this through the letter to Ted Hughes.

In "I Will Be Heard," I address Sylvia Plath's final months alive. Pouring her heart out, Plath continuously wrote as much as she possibly could. In a frenzy of writing, she wanted to make sure her final works were masterpieces that were quality works to her. After having gone through and composed *Ariel* to have it be what she intended it to be, Sylvia ultimately committed suicide by carbon monoxide asphyxiation on February 11<sup>th</sup>, 1963 (*Sylvia*). I wanted to give a sense of an inner pleading to be heard and noticed, which is a common feeling for some suicidal people, although the wanting to be seen or recognized may not be completely visible, if at all. This poem not only encompasses her thoughts during this time of mass creativity and writing, but almost describes an inner monologue towards Hughes. As well, the poem addresses Ted not taking her words seriously and manipulating and rearranging *Ariel* against her posthumous wishes she had in place for the collection of work. The end of the poem, then, alludes to her suicide, which is her resort for "[her] burdens to be lifted."

The last piece I completed is a diary entry of the day on her death. I wanted to explain, emotionally and physically, how she could've seen her last moments. Going through with suicide, the person knows that whatever they see, do, hear, or smell before they execute their attempt will possibly be their last experience. I wanted to embody that with this journal entry. I

wanted, through the voice of a journal entry, explain her last moments before her untimely death. I wished to described what she saw, felt, smelled, tasted, and experienced the short moments before initiating the steps towards her suicide.

As far as we know, as Ted Hughes states in his foreword, he destroyed the last journals of Sylvia Plath (xiii). There may have been a journal entry on the day of her death or the night before. I hoped to capture what she may have written or thought about before committing her suicide.

The movie, *Sylvia*, with Gwyneth Paltrow, inspired this journal entry as well. Near the end of the movie, Paltrow stands outside the flat of the old man below her. She looks up and stares at the light bulb above her. This continues into her death scene. I thought: “What did Sylvia Plath notice or find significant in the moments before her death?” Understanding Plath through the many works I consulted, I believe she would have taken in her surroundings before ending her life. She was one to observe nature and the beauty in the world because of the absence of beauty she felt within herself. These were the thoughts I had when creating the final journal entry and last piece to my Multi-Genre Project.

The final piece consists of a funeral program. It is presented in a flattened form for this project. When I was researching for an obituary for Sylvia Plath, nothing was found. Many other researchers have turned up with the same results. I believe the reason was the cause of death’s severity. When talking about Sylvia Plath, many know she committed suicide, but that’s usually when her story stops. I thought it’d be intriguing to create a funeral program that also consists of Plath’s missing obituary and a legacy of her life. On the back is a quote by Ted Hughes, “That’s the end of my life. The rest is posthumous.” I thought this was a fitting quote for Plath’s funeral

program because of the nature of her works and many findings and publishing of her writing post-death.

After all this research and creation of eight pieces, I felt that a repitend of a typewriter would be fitting. The typewriter is time period appropriate and Plath used hers often to write and type up manuscripts. As well, I chose typewriter keys to be the page numbers to pull the last threads of the project together.

This project had many elements that made me find the process enjoyable, entertaining, and educational. Recognizing a connection between Sylvia Plath and myself also supported me through this project. I may have done more research and investigating than was required of me, but I absolutely love learning and reading about Sylvia Plath. Her darkness, spookiness, and depressing yet energetic momentum envelopes my interest; doing this project on her was a breeze with many exciting and engaging challenges throughout.



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## *Hide and Seek*

Cold as my icy soul,  
here, under the porch.

But the warmth  
of a long, soothing rest  
can't come soon enough.

Mother  
fearfully, dreadfully,  
reads the note I scribbled.

Everyone's been searching for me  
as I slumbered so, so deeply  
in my hopeful grave.

The only peace  
I reached for in life,  
disrupted by an unending  
willingness to live.

Forty  
I thought was enough.

Forty  
couldn't put me into darkness.

Forty  
more and I would've had one  
success in my life.

## *Quotes*

Kiss me,  
you will see how I am.

I am too pure for you or anyone.  
How frail the human heart must be—  
a mirrored pool of thought.  
Perhaps when we find ourselves wanting everything,  
it is because we are dangerously close to wanting nothing.

When you are insane, you are busy being insane—  
all the time.  
[Take] a deep breath and listen  
to the old bray of my heart:  
*I am. I am. I am.*

It is as if my life were magically run by two electric currents:  
joyous positive and despairing negative—  
whichever is running at the moment dominates my life,  
floods it.

If you expect nothing from anybody, you're never disappointed.

I have the choice of being constantly active and happy  
or introspectively passive and sad.  
Mother believed that I should have  
an enormous amount of sleep,  
so I was never really tired when I went to bed.  
This was the best time of day, when I could lie in the vague twilight,  
drifting off to sleep,  
making up dreams inside my head  
the way they should go.

I don't believe that the meek will inherit the earth;  
The meek get ignored and trampled.

I shut my eyes  
and all the world drops dead;  
I lift my eyes  
and all is born again.

I love people.  
Everybody.  
I love them,  
I think,

as a stamp collector loves his collection.  
Every story, every incident,  
every bit of conversation  
is raw material for me.

I want to live  
and feel all the shades,  
tones, and variations  
of mental and physical experience  
possible in my life.  
I am horribly limited.

Wear your heart on your skin in this life.  
Perfection is terrible;  
it cannot have children.

I talk to God but the sky is empty.

## *Weeds*

An eternal conflict  
of passion and distress.

The beauty that surrounds me;  
I am a dead rose  
in a sea of sunshining sunflowers.

The world  
is cruel, cruel, cruel.

If only I was  
the sweet milk in my glass,  
I've grown sour.

Life haunts me,  
flames burn  
as tears sting.

The gorgeousness  
of a plump blueberry,  
I'm only plump,  
no sense of kindness, like the berry.

The universe—  
contradicting me—  
refuses to let me go  
but my soul wishes to leave.

*Teddy*

You wave good-bye—  
all I see is hatred,  
a Nazi's salute.

Got what you wanted,  
your Eva Brawn,  
didn't you? Mr. Hitler.

Dear Ted,

You were just like Daddy. Stifling my voice, censoring my work, and editing my life! I'm just glad you put my name on the covers, but ever since my death, your name accompanies mine on every publication. My journals, my poetry, found under your name, not mine.

I put Ariel together, just the way I wanted it. You were always a sneaky, good-for-nothing screw! You bastard. The poems you took out because you always had control over women, didn't you? Over me? The edits you made like how you always manipulated me? Destroying my final will and testament to the world, claiming that you didn't want our children to bear what happened. Why not?

Because you were the cause. The darkness that brought me six-feet under.

Until you died, of course.

Frieda, bless her heart, took care of my work and of me once you left this world. Lucky her, lucky for humanity. She published my art and put Ariel back to how **I** wanted it. She put me back together after you ripped me apart. She and Nicholas are the only gracious things you ever gave to me in the hell you created.

I'm not sitting well in my grave because of you, Ted! You son of a bitch. I guess you got what was coming for you: a damn heart attack. Your wife must be heart broken. I know I was at one point because of you.

You took my work and covered my mouth as you put all of my writing out there. All the books, all the journals, say "Sylvia Plath", but really, no one knew me until Frieda let my voice be free and my mind be completely at rest. Now I am known without your leeching name.

Never yours,

*I Will Be Heard*

Won't you listen to me?

I don't have much time  
before I go.

I've been consumed  
by writing and poetry.

There were some words  
I had to expel before I expire.

But it's too late.  
You never listened to me anyway,

and now the burden  
lies on our children.

Good-bye.  
Just a quick nap  
and all will be fine.

*My* burdens have ended.



*February 11<sup>th</sup>, 1963*

You never realize when the last time is. But I see it. Feel it.

The bulb glowing as usual, today, shines new light. The way the books I've had for years smell today; the ink within them, the dust that lines them, fill my nose strongly—differently today. How my children smile at me, and I smile back. There's a special sparkle in their eyes and teeth.

My last meal: a weak soup and a hearty piece of bread with a particular smear of hard butter. It's never been much, but today, it fills me to the point of bursting of enjoyment and nourishment. The same watery cabbage soup that's bland and tasteless. The bread, soft yet seedy with wheat and grains. Both typically unsatisfying, handed over gratification.

I sit at my desk, staring off. The uncomfortable, uneasy, and uptight chair, now feels like sitting on a cloud. No more poems, no words left to spill, left to pound on father's old typewriter. A mind becoming free; a soul being free, no longer trapped, strapped down.

This last feeding of my children, placing milk and bread with butter next to their beds, ready for them when they awake while I rest. They will be happy, fine without me. I seal them in their room like I seal them in my heart. They will be free. I will be free. This rolled up towel, a makeshift pillow, feeling like absolute joy, absolute bliss. The last time. My last sleep. No tears, pain either. I realized my last time. I see it. I feel it.

*In memory of*



*Sylvia Plath*

*October 27, 1932 – February 11, 1963*



*"That's the end of my life.*

*The rest is posthumous"*

*~Ted Hughes*

*Born October 27<sup>th</sup>, 1932, Sylvia Plath was the child of Otto Plath and Aurelia (Schober) Plath.*

*First published at the age of eight, Sylvia continued writing every day up until her passing.*

*Sylvia suffered most of her life. Having tried electric-shock treatment and a handful of suicide attempts, Sylvia tried to give the world what she could before she had to leave.*

*Sylvia received her degree at Smith College in 1955, where she came back to teach in 1957.*

*Sylvia passed away on February 11<sup>th</sup>, 1963 from a successful suicide attempt at her home.*

*Not only leaving behind her two children, she is leaving behind a legacy of writing and poetry.*

*Sylvia Plath is survived by her husband, Ted Hughes, her children, Frieda and Nicholas Hughes, her mother, Aurelia (Schober) Plath, and her many readers who continue breathing her every word.*

## *Legacy:*

*Sylvia Plath produced many powerful entities while she was alive.*

*Her first book of poems, "The Colossus and Other Poems", published in 1960 boosted her into the spotlight.*

*She wrote The Bell Jar, which was released under the pseudonym, Victoria Lucas, was the final work Sylvia published in her lifetime.*

*She has graciously left behind work to be published, so her words can be carried on.*

*Sylvia survived many hardships; from school, to mental treatments, broken relationships, being a single mother, and finding herself, Sylvia always put everything she had into the short time she had on Earth.*

*Sylvia will always be remembered through her incredible development of the confessional writing movement along with Anne Sexton and Robert Lowell.*

*Sylvia's word will lead on for a long time to come.*

## Annotated Bibliography

Kirk, Connie A. *Sylvia Plath: A Biography*. Prometheus, 2009, pp. 75-79. *Sylvia Plath: A*

*Biography*, by Connie Kirk maintains a basic, well organized, and thoughtful explanation of the details of Plath's life. Kirk discusses periods of Plath's life more categorically than chronologically, although she does present a timeline of events at the beginning of the book. Beginning with parts of Plath's parents' lives, this biography analyzes many important, crucial pinpoints throughout Plath's life; definitely an important read to understand her on a timeline, mechanical-like level.

This work made me think about the order of life in general, and the importance and accuracy of details. Many points of time get lost in between translation and recording, keeping track of the facts can be problematic at times; it is important to maintain the truth and knowledge.

Plath, Sylvia. "Daddy." *The Collected Poems: Sylvia Plath*. Edited and forward by Ted

Hughes. Harper Perennial, 1981, p. 222-224. "Daddy" is one of Sylvia Plath's later poems. This dark piece uses many instances of metaphors and similes to compare herself and her father to the Holocaust. This dark poem highlights how she sees her father, herself, and their relationship. The strength and denseness of her words reinforces her as a writer as well as glimpses into her mind.

This work highlights the idea of confessional writing, which Sylvia Plath was well-known for. In other words, being able to present thoughts, feelings, and experiences about topics that could or are considered taboo like sex, drugs, mental illness, gender, homosexuality, to name a few. Plath was one of the icebreakers in

this field of writing, and was a great change to the field of writing. This was an important factor to notice when doing this entire project.

---. *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*. Edited and foreword by Ted Hughes. Anchor, 1982, pp. xiii-5. Sylvia Plath's journals create an in-depth and personal look into Plath's life in a way that an autobiography could never achieve. Going through events alongside Sylvia Plath within her mind brings new aspects to her timeline than a chronological record. The journals allowed me to understand events not only have a technical side, like a biography, but also has fluidity and minute details that a historical record may not consider, or a side of the story that may not be present.

This collection of journal entries served many purposes. The journal gave me insight into her way of personal writing, her thought process, and how she perceives certain things. Within the first journal entry, she observes the beauty around her, but she continues to mention how defiant and unappealing she was in such a gorgeous scene.

---. "Lady Lazarus." *The Collected Poems: Sylvia Plath*. Edited and foreword by Ted Hughes. Harper Perennial, 1981, p. 244-247. Not only does "Daddy" put me into the shoes of Sylvia Plath, "Lady Lazarus" does as well. "Lady Lazarus" strongly highlights Sylvia Plath's look on her life and suicide. This piece is important to observe due to Plath's history of suicide and conflicts with mental illness.

Using this completed my journey to fully understand the voice and mind of Plath. The dark literary excellence in Plath's speech and word choice cannot be matched, but reading these poems, along with listening to her recordings, can bring significant acumen to her as a persona and writer.

---. "Sylvia Plath Reads 'Daddy'." *YouTube*, uploaded by mishima1970, 29 Dec. 2006, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=6hHjctqSBwM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6hHjctqSBwM). This YouTube video is a recording of Sylvia Plath reading her poem "Daddy". This recording has Plath's genuine voice, which can be described as distinct and enticing. Her grim speech and unique accent enlightens the words and depressing yet aggressive messages.

I used this recording to deeply strengthen my knowledge of how Plath would read her poetry, so when I would write like her, I would reflect on her recordings and read my writing in my head through her voice. This aided in capturing Plath within my pieces.

---. "Sylvia Plath Reads Lady Lazarus." *YouTube*, uploaded by Mishima1970, 21 Oct. 2006, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=esBLxyTFDxE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=esBLxyTFDxE). This recording, as well as the previous recording, presents Plath reading her poetry. Neither recording shows a video of her personally, which would have been more beneficial because that could've shown her body language and facial expression.

This recording was also influential to my writing and getting into the mindset of Sylvia Plath.

*Sylvia*. Screenplay by John Brownlow, performance by Gwyneth Paltrow and Daniel Craig, Focus Features, 2004. *Sylvia* was a great representation of Plath's life, how she experienced events and struggles she endured. This film was a great watch for me to get a visual look into a representation of her life. The performances, demonstrations, and explanations of Plath and moving through her life were phenomenal. I encountered a stronger connection to Plath having seen aspects of her that went well with the audio recordings and writings of hers.