

WRITING, DOMESTICITY, AND SUICIDE: A BIOGRAPHICAL COMPARISON OF
VIRGINIA WOOLF AND SYLVIA PLATH

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Abbreviations

AROO	<i>A Room of One's Own</i> by Virginia Woolf (1929)
BL	<i>Birthday Letters</i> by Ted Hughes (1998)
BTA	<i>Between the Acts</i> by Virginia Woolf (1941)
LH	<i>Letters Home</i> by Sylvia Plath (1975)
LOVW	<i>The Letters of Virginia Woolf Volume IV: 1936-1941</i> (1980)
MD	<i>Mrs. Dalloway</i> by Virginia Woolf (1925)
MOB	<i>Moments of Being</i> by Virginia Woolf (1976)
TBJ	<i>The Bell Jar</i> by Sylvia Plath (1971)
TCP	<i>The Collected Poems</i> by Sylvia Plath (1981)
TTL	<i>To the Lighthouse</i> by Virginia Woolf (1927)
UJ	<i>The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath</i> (2000)

“Every secret of a writer’s soul, every experience of his life, every quality of his mind is written largely in his works.”

- Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography*

Two women; two writers; two literary periods; two husbands; two fathers; two mothers; two suicides; two geniuses. The project of biographically examining the lives, deaths, and works of Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath came about, as most things do, coincidentally—as a result of nagging curiosity, a question, or rather, a series of questions: Why did two of my favorite writing women choose to end their lives? What could have prevented it? Is suicide a natural consequence of being an extremely prolific and proficient female writer?

These questions were what initially fueled my search for answers, but gradually this project evolved into much more than mere speculation. There are similarities between Woolf and Plath, which, I will argue, cannot necessarily be ignored if one is to consider the physical and psychological effects of being a writing woman—a writing genius. Yet, just as there is sameness, there is difference—striking polarities that, when taken in contrast with each other, provide further illumination about each writer in her own context.

The relevancy and pertinence of both Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath to literary, gender, and even political studies today is evident in their being namesakes of their crafts, hallmarks of the literary periods in which they wrote, and some of the most recognized and referenced literary names in popular culture. The more research that can be done on both of these writing women, the more insight we will gain on what it means to be not just a working genius, but a *female* working genius.

As a modernist, Virginia Woolf changed the nature of the novel forever. Her importance both literarily and politically altered the course of not only female authorship but of *being* a

female author to the sincerest extent: no pseudonyms, no second jobs, no writing in secret beneath dining room tables. There are, of course, a number of factors which allowed Virginia to *be* a writer—factors which will later be discussed—but nevertheless she encapsulates what it means to have been a working, writing woman—and a successful one at that.

As modernism gave birth to postmodernism, Woolf's genius gave way to Plath's genius: geniuses indeed of a very different kind, yet unquestionably alike in their intensity. Sylvia Plath was of the generation that grew up reading and responding directly to modernist novels; she is thus, as I will argue, Woolf's literary daughter, her apprentice. Plath's significance is perhaps most apparent in the cultish following she has gained over the years. As a kind of gateway into the literary world, Plath is relevant, even essential to the anxiety-fueled young person with any kind of lettered inclination. And if it is at all denoting, Plath is the one who initially led me to Woolf.

Biographical research is not and cannot be simply just about the individual alone. It requires more context and more knowledge of familial, marital, and parental relationships than what one might originally believe. Over the course of my research, I examined the roles of daughter, wife, and mother both fulfilled and unfulfilled by Woolf and Plath and determined how much these roles did or did not affect their productivity as writers in addition to their mental wellbeing.

There is, however, a certain degree of complexity to an individual—especially to Woolf and Plath—that should not be simplified, compared, or stretched to fit the form of a thesis. It is not my intention to create symmetrical molds out of these women, but to attempt to provide studied comparisons and distinctions so that they may be regarded in the rich, edifying light they so very deserve. This research does not so much provide “answers” as it does an exploration, an extensive study of the lives of two influential and celebrated writing women.

PART I: Virginia Woolf

I. St Ives and 22 Hyde Park Gate

Who was I then? Adeline Virginia Stephen, the second daughter of Leslie and Julia Prinsep Stephen, born on 25th January 1882, descended from a great many people, some famous, others obscure; born into a large connection, born not of rich parents, but of well-to-do parents, born into a very communicative, literate, letter writing, visiting, articulate, late nineteenth century world. (MOB 65)

As objectively stated herself in her posthumously published collection of autobiographical writings *Moments of Being*, Virginia Woolf was neither firstborn nor lastborn, rich nor poor; she was born into a life of culture at 22 Hyde Park Gate with a critical, literary father and a beautiful mother who came from a distinguished imperial family. “Wild and impish,” as a child Virginia had an unfettered imagination—from early on it was expected that Virginia would be a writer, just as her sister Vanessa was presumed to be a painter (Spater 10). Starting her first familial publication at age nine in 1891, the *Hyde Park Gate News*, Virginia wrote prolifically from the outset. Much later, near the end of her life, she contemplates in *Moments of Being* the specificity of certain memories, with perplexity as to why some recollections surface while others do not (their level of exceptionality entirely undetermined). She recalls clearly her summers at St Ives from 1882 to 1894, the lucidity of which is evident in her novel *To the Lighthouse*, published in 1927.

There is ample evidence that *To the Lighthouse* is reminiscent of/inspired by Virginia’s summers with her family at St Ives, the most significant of which, perhaps, is her statement, “Until I was in the forties—I could settle the date by seeing when I wrote *To the Lighthouse*, but am too casual here to bother to do it—the presence of my mother obsessed me” (MOB 80). It was not until Virginia was 44, after her writing of *To the Lighthouse*, that her preoccupation with her mother ended—a cathartic release through characters and words: “when it was written, I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her” (MOB 81). The

allegory runs genetically deep, as supported by Elizabeth Hardwick, who expounds on the relation between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay and Virginia's father and mother, stressing particularly the likeness of Mr. Ramsay and Leslie Stephen (Hardwick 135).

Just as Virginia was obsessed by her mother, so she was by her father, finding herself "arguing with him, raging against him" until *To the Lighthouse*, where she "rubbed out much of his memory there too" (MOB 108). After Julia Stephen's death in 1895, when Virginia was just 13-years-old, Leslie took on the role of "the tyrant father—the exacting, the violent, the histrionic, the demonstrative, the self-centered, the self pitying, the deaf, the appealing, the alternately loved and hated father" (MOB 116), much alike Mr. Ramsay, when, after Mrs. Ramsay's death, he crowds Lily Briscoe at her canvas, "his immense self-pity, his demand for sympathy pour[ing] and spread[ing] itself in pools at her feet" (TTL 152). Yet to assume the relationship between Virginia and her father was entirely parasitic is an oversimplified claim. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, walking near Regent's Park, Peter Walsh thinks of Clarissa and more wholesomely how "women live much more in the past than we [men] do...They attach themselves to places; and their fathers—a woman's always proud of her father" (MD 55). Leslie and Virginia's relationship (and perhaps every one of Leslie's relationships with his children) is a relationship of polemical extremity: she was indeed proud of him, in a certain sense—"felt his attractiveness...from his simplicity, his integrity, his eccentricity" yet she very much detested his "godlike, yet childlike, standing in the family...an extraordinarily privileged position" (MOB 111). Leslie Stephen's extreme tyranny, however, was much as a result of Julia Stephen's death, the effect of which is literarily and autobiographically evident in the almost unbelievable, irreplaceable absence of Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*.

The unreality of Mrs. Ramsay's death in *To the Lighthouse* is apparent in the deserted, forlorn summerhouse at Isle of Sky. A house once so full of life was nothing but a crumbling old

structure without the centrality of Mrs. Ramsay to permeate it. Indeed, the Stephens ceased going to St Ives after the death of Julia. She was “central...she was the whole thing; Talland House [at St Ives] was full of her; Hyde Park Gate was full of her” (MOB 83). Virginia’s first mental breakdown occurred after her mother’s death in 1895—a tragedy so dismal not because “it made one, now and then and very intensely, unhappy. It was that it made her unreal” (MOB 95). Stella Duckworth was the one who more or less took the place of Julia Stephen. Yet death in the Stephen household was a cruel commonality; about two years after the death of Julia, Stella fell victim to peritonitis a mere fortnight following her marriage to Jack Hills. Virginia, Vanessa, Thoby, and Adrian, referring to themselves as “us four,” were united by the death of their mother and Stella: “We never spoke of them...This silence, we felt, covered something; something that most families had not” (MOB 125). Nevertheless, the continual absence of a maternal figure during the midst of Virginia’s teenage years had its effect—especially considering Leslie Stephen’s demanding, tyrannical presence. The shift from life at 22 Hyde Park Gate to 46 Gordon Square in Bloomsbury follows the death of Leslie Stephen in 1904 (Virginia was 22) and effectively marks a kind of termination of Virginia’s adolescent years.

II. Bloomsbury and Androgynous Femininity

Bloomsbury: a place from which to start anew—to escape the dismal past, to refute entirely their father’s outdated and stifling Victorianism. The move to Bloomsbury was not immediate; in order to assuage Virginia’s guilt about Leslie Stephen’s death (she felt she could have done “so much more for him while he was living”), her siblings took her abroad to Wales, Italy, and France for a couple of months (Spater 37). After a few more moves, Vanessa Stephen made the decision to relocate their now parentless family to 46 Gordon Square in the autumn of 1904. It was not necessarily that the Stephen children set out to make their residence in

Bloomsbury the hub of the Apostolic wheel; this happened quite naturally and one could even say inevitably, given the intellectual vigor of the Stephens, particularly Virginia and Vanessa. Cambridge intellectuals like Lytton Strachey, Saxon Sydney-Turner, Clive Bell, Leonard Woolf (albeit briefly), and many other disciples of the emphatically-revered G. E. Moore flocked to 46 Gordon Square almost every Thursday evening for two years to discuss issues ranging from “the nature of good” to “buggers” and adulterers (MOB 186, 196).

Elizabeth Hardwick attributes the “almost smothering” femininity of both Virginia and her fiction to Bloomsbury (Hardwick 137). Yet Bloomsbury was what liberated the Stephen sisters from George Duckworth-esque gendered commentary: “They [the Cambridge intellectuals like Strachey and Bell] criticised our arguments as severely as their own. They never seemed to notice how we were dressed or if we were nice looking or not” (MOB 191). Virginia was not so much overtly feminine as she was anti-masculine. Concluding “that life is both transitory (ever changing) and whole (never changing),” Woolf “associated the masculine with the shifting, the feminine with the solid” (Bazin 21, 23). What constitutes a writer of true genius, in Woolf’s mind, is one who combines the masculine with the feminine to form an androgynous vision. Shakespeare wrote androgynously, as did Proust, Keats, Wordsworth; these men of genius pulled from a “man-womanly mind” to create works that “transmit emotion without impediment,” that are “naturally creative, incandescent and undivided” (AROO 109, 98). Is this not a perfect summation of the Virginia Woolf novel?

Call it a joke, call it a mock biography, call it “the longest and most charming love letter in literature” (Nicolson 202), *Orlando* is anything but conventional—it is a manifestation of the Woolfian call to androgynous writing. It transcends the bounds of both time and gender. Logistical issues of time travel and sex change are of no consequence, and it doesn’t matter anyway, for when one can experience the pleasures of every age and every sex, why worry about

the details? Gender is a label for Orlando; innately she *is* both man and woman (I merely refer to her with the feminine pronoun for readability reasons and for “convention’s sake” (*Orlando* 103)).

She had, it seems, no difficulty in sustaining the different parts, for her sex changed far more frequently than those who have worn only one set of clothing can conceive; not can there be any doubt that she reaped a twofold harvest by this device; the pleasures of life were increased and its experiences multiplied. From the probity of breeches she turned to the seductiveness of petticoats and enjoyed the love of both sexes equally. (*Orlando* 161)

It is important to note, however, that though Orlando’s gender may alter, fundamentally she remains the same: “the change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity” (*Orlando* 102). Woolf severs the traditional association of gender as an integral part of identity and gives it a new meaning—as something that can be as fluid as one’s personality or tastes. Nevertheless, Woolf’s preference for femininity is tangible in Orlando’s questioning of “Which is the greater ecstasy? The man’s or the woman’s? And are they not perhaps the same? No, she thought, this [the woman’s] is the most delicious” (*Orlando* 114). Orlando certainly seems more feminine, (a decidedly futile term but one which will have to do for now), though perhaps this is because she was inspired by the novel’s dedicatee, Vita Sackville-West.

Virginia’s affair, or as some say, flirtatious friendship with Vita began in late 1925 and lasted on and off for about ten years. Their relationship was much like that of actresses in the theater—“They cast each other, and themselves, in dramatic roles...Vita was the mother, Virginia was the child” (Lee 479). These roles were significant: considering Virginia’s unyielding, if subconscious, search for a maternal presence (Vanessa, Stella Duckworth, Violet Dickinson), Vita most certainly fit the bill. Virginia was attracted by her long legs, “her aristocratic manners and her capacity for lavishing the ‘maternal protection which, for some reason, is what I

[Virginia] have always most wished from everyone” (Lee 487; qtd. in Woolf: 440). *Orlando* is Vita immortalized: the house at Knole, the ancestry, the legs, the gendered ambiguity—she “herself wrote Woolf after first reading the book praising her for having ‘invented a new form of Narcissism,—I confess,—I am in love with Orlando—this is a complication I had not foreseen” (DiBattista xlix; qtd. in Sackville-West: 289). *Orlando* is loveable, as are most of Virginia Woolf’s characters—and if not loveable, at least affecting and relatable.

III. Writing Woolf

Perhaps one of the most influential pragmatic assertions of the 20th century, Woolf’s illustrious line, “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” is even more discerning in the context of her own life and literature (AROO 4). Born of “well-to-do” parents, not rich parents, Virginia had capital enough for her and Leonard to live as writers without the need of any outside income. Following her marriage to Leonard, however, Virginia’s illness resurfaced with great force in the years 1913-1915 and thus altered their circumstances. There was need of a house and servants—and room enough for Virginia to rest and to write comfortably—that caused their budget to skyrocket. Nevertheless, Virginia and Leonard continued to write, Virginia completing reviews for the *Times Literary Supplement* and Leonard working odd jobs to cover the bulk of their expenditures.* After their formation of The Hogarth Press and as Virginia’s popularity as a novelist and essayist increased, particularly after *A Room of One’s Own* was published in 1929, the Woolfs were able to live comfortably, Virginia being the primary earner with royalties reaching up to £3,000 (Spater 118). Not only did Virginia now have enough money and a room of her own to write, but she was the one who actualized such a

* It should nonetheless be noted that the majority of their “income,” as it were, came from Virginia’s patrimony.

possibility. It is no surprise, then, that *A Room of One's Own*, with its unconventional thesis, was published just around the time that Virginia gained financial independence and domestic tranquility.

Indeed Virginia's emphasis on character over plot is what altered the nature of the novel forever. Her writing captures the transience, the beauty, the profundity, the interior of life in its essence. If there is "danger" in her vision of "all chorus and no plot" (Hardwick 134), it is intentional. As Isabella and the rest of the audience ponder the eclectic disorder of the play in *Between the Acts*, she comes to a climactic realization: "Did the plot matter?...The plot was only there to beget emotion. There were only two emotions: love; and hate. There was no need to puzzle out the plot....Don't bother about the plot; the plot's nothing" (BTA 90-91). Character, not plot, is Virginia's focus. These characters are never one-dimensional, but "complicated men and women, creatures of intricate feeling, and they are seen more or less on their own terms, from the inside, profoundly, since this, the inside, was the thing she valued" (Hardwick 129).

The idea that "what is inside the woman is nothing if it is not writing" (Armstrong 244) is evident in the prodigiousness of Virginia's career as a writer: she wrote and wrote and wrote. The writing of many books naturally begets the amount of criticism being produced on the subject of those books, and for a sensitive writer like Virginia, coupled with the physical exhaustion of writing, this was enough to catalyze her madness again. There was forever drama in a book finished and another to begin; she was "always close to the edge of sanity, fearful that she would be 'found out' and adjudged mad by insensitive critics" (Spater 68). Part of what produced her mental and emotional exhaustion (in addition to the physical exhaustion of writing, as it can indeed be a very physical pain) is due to the fact that when she finished a book, she simultaneously gave up living through her characters. This cycle of madness fluctuated from the publishing of each book she produced, some more so than others (i.e. *To the Lighthouse* and *The*

Years). Soon after their marriage and Virginia's subsequent relapse, Leonard Woolf devised a system of ameliorating the effects of her illness—a contemporarily controversial step but one which ultimately prolonged her life.

IV. **The Caretaker**

Contrary to what might be commonly thought, Virginia and Leonard did not form a relationship in the midst of the Bloomsbury meetings. He visited the Stephens at 46 Gordon Square once in November of 1904 before leaving for Ceylon where he worked in the Colonial Service from 1905-1911. Coincidentally, their initial courtship panned out by post via Lytton Strachey, with whom Leonard kept consistent communication throughout his time in Ceylon. Around 1909, Virginia had several suitors including none other than Strachey himself, Saxon Sydney-Turner, Walter Lamb, Hilton Young, Sydney Waterlow, and Harry Norton (Spater 55). Strachey nevertheless failed to win Virginia over, and in the summer of 1909 he wrote to Leonard, urging him to act fast: ““You must marry Virginia. She’s sitting waiting for you, is there any objection? She’s the only woman in the world with sufficient brains; its a miracle that she should exist; but if you’re not careful you’ll lose the opportunity”” (Spater 56). It wasn’t until a weekend in September of 1911 that Leonard and Virginia truly spent a large amount of time together.

In January of 1912, Virginia experienced a significant breakdown; it is important to note that this occurred before their marriage in August of 1912, not as a result of it. Temperamentally speaking, Virginia truly needed and desired to be loved, but her propensity for loving was not as great; much “like her father, [she] desperately needed the constant support and protection of one whose devotion was unquestioned. Leonard was in so many respects qualified to fit this role, in

big ways and little” (Spater 62). The Woolfs’ marriage, comprehensively, was one “which [was] worked at; a working marriage; and a marriage which work[ed]” (Lee 315).

Leonard’s support throughout their courtship and marriage was essential to Virginia’s health and temperament. As “doctor, nurse, parent, semi-husband and chief literary adviser” to Virginia, Leonard took on the role of primary caretaker in her life (Spater 70). He pragmatically observed the characteristics of her relapses and developed a strict regimen to curtail its effects, the principal features being rest, rations, and reassurance—a procedure that “certainly turned him, over the years, into more of a guardian than a lover” (Lee 332). Despite a few minor illnesses after her breakdown of 1913-1915, there were no serious relapses “for the next 24 years—persuasive evidence of the efficacy of Leonard’s system and the rigour of its enforcement” (Spater 70). Contrary to Susan Kenney’s view that Leonard lacked insight into Virginia’s complex temperament, that after their marriage in 1912 she “fell into the abyss” (271), Leonard did what he thought was best for Virginia, and though “he may have constrained her,...he also provided conditions favourable for writing” (Lee 332).

The task in itself—the role of primary caretaker—was not simple or without its effects on Leonard; nevertheless, he was incredibly patient, his “endurance of Virginia’s famous frigidity...altogether to his credit” (Hardwick 128). He comprehended Virginia’s constant need of reassurance, her intense vulnerability after completing a novel at the mercy of critics, and very unselfishly devoted much of his life to the cultivation of Virginia’s wellbeing. Despite her struggle with madness and depression, Virginia did not altogether lead an unhappy life; on the contrary, “she thought of herself as an unusually happy person: ‘I think perhaps 9 people out of ten never get a day in the year of such happiness as I have almost constantly’” (Spater 74). Notwithstanding, the intensity and emotional duality of Virginia’s illness ultimately, tragically ran its course; just as there was emphatic elation, so there was debilitating melancholy.

V. Madness and The World Wars

Throughout the course of her life, Virginia had what can be comprehensively summed up as four major breakdowns, each of which was generally-speaking as a result of either the death of a loved one, the finishing of a novel, or the effects of war. The first breakdown occurred after her mother's death in 1895 when she was 13; the second after her father's death in 1904, the third beginning in 1912 as a result of the anxiety produced by publishing *The Voyage Out* and extending until 1915, prolonged by the development of the first world war; the fourth and final in 1941 after she finished *Between the Acts* and much as a result of the stressors of World War II. After almost every novel Virginia produced, there was a struggle with her illness, particularly after *To the Lighthouse* and *The Years*, but Leonard Woolf more or less effectively dealt with these mini-relapses with his strict regimen.

There were a number of factors leading to Virginia's suicide in 1941, perhaps most influential of which was the awful and proximate reality of World War II. Their house in London was bombed in the Battle of Britain in September of 1940 and so the Woolfs were forced to relocate completely to Monks House in Rodmell, where the air raids continued at a steady interval until November of 1940. The threat of invasion was increasingly great, and as Leonard was a Jew, his being sent to a concentration camp was a very real prospect. In addition to receiving fatal doses of morphia from Adrian Stephen, "in the Monks House garage a supply of petrol was kept 'for suicide should Hitler win'" (Spater 181). The scarcity of food weakened the effectiveness of Leonard's usual regimen, adequate nourishment being an essential part of Virginia's mental wellbeing. She was moreover "tortured by the thought that since she had gone mad in the First World War it was likely that the same things would happen during the Second" (Spater 182).

Despite Virginia's diaries being filled with wartime news around the time of 1940, *Between the Acts* mentions the war only about half a dozen times; her writing, then, was used as a distraction to and defiance of the war: "she wanted to place the emphasis on what happened in the background and between the acts, to give the audience, both the onlookers in the novel and the readers of it, the sense that in spite of the threat of war, madness, and death, harmony is possible and hope is justified" (Kenney 278). Yet the heaviness of the life and art in *Between the Acts* coupled with the threat of death, or perhaps even worse, the threat of Nazi invasion, was enough to set off the madness again.

On the morning of March 28, 1941, Virginia drowned herself in a nearby river. She had written two letters, one for Leonard and one for Vanessa—"the two people she loved best" (Spater 184)—and left them on the mantelpiece, soon thereafter around 11.30 slipping out of the house to the river. Virginia's last letter to Leonard speaks much for itself and of her gratitude for his goodness to her, of her appreciation of their happiness and of their life spent together. Indeed the whole of Virginia's life can be summed up by her own striking words: "To look life in the face, always, to look life in the face, and to know it for what it is...at last, to love it for what it is, and then to put it away."*

*This would have made a perfect ending, would it not have? The words are pervasive, some of Woolf's most powerful lines...only, Virginia didn't actually write them. At the end of the Oscar-winning film *The Hours* based on the Michael Cunningham novel of the same name, Nicole Kidman as Virginia Woolf steps into a wide, flowing river, hatless and cane-less, the warmth of the setting sun casting a hazy glow about the water as these lines are voiced over in Kidman's deep, husky tone. The scene is beautiful, no doubt. But the scene is an entirely false, romanticized depiction of the cold reality that was Virginia Woolf's suicide. In an article for The

Guardian, Hermione Lee criticizes the film's ending as "grotesquely prettified. Woolf drowned herself on a cold day in March in a dangerous, ugly river that runs so fast, nothing grows on the bare banks. She was wearing an old fur coat, wellington boots and a hat. Whether she jumped or walked, dropped under or struggled, we don't know" ("Ways of dying"). And the words—the words that are not even Woolf's own yet so commonly mistaken for her voice—the words are from Cunningham's novel. This is often the way, nevertheless, with writers, artists, celebrities in the public light who have or have not passed: renditions are made, the subjectivity of popular culture bulldozes objectivity. It is true for Woolf herself, whose "story is reformulated by each generation. She takes on the shape of difficult modernist preoccupied with questions of form, or comedian of manners, or neurotic highbrow aesthete, or inventive fantasist, or pernicious snob, or Marxist feminist, or historian of women's lives, or victim of abuse, or lesbian heroine, or cultural analyst, depending on who is reading her, and when, and in what context" (Lee 758). And it is undeniably true for Sylvia Plath.

PART 2: Sylvia Plath

I. Plath as Esther Greenwood

Sylvia Plath is a writer whose work is inseparable from her life. As Elizabeth Hardwick candidly puts it, “We cannot truly separate the work from the fascination and horror of the death” (118). Given the fact that Plath committed suicide on February 11, 1963, a mere month after the publication of *The Bell Jar*, her one and only novel, it is nearly impossible for readers to have taken the novel purely—without the significance of Plath’s death as a dictating, allegorical influence on its interpretation. Originally published under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas, *The Bell Jar* is intensely autobiographical; even Ted Hughes “disapproved of the satiric portraits of living people” (Middlebrook 152) in the novel. This “destructiveness toward herself and others” is described by Plath’s mother as “the basest ingratitude” (Hardwick 106). But Plath drew inspiration—of a kind both maliciously powerful and traumatically eerie—from her own experiences and from those around her.

The fierce undercurrent of electrotherapy throughout *The Bell Jar* is debatably a result of Plath’s own experience with the treatment after her summer internship at *Mademoiselle* magazine and subsequent downward spiral, the details of which form the basic plotline of the novel. Pre-electrotherapy, Esther Greenwood wonders how it would feel to be electrocuted like the Rosenbergs, “being burned alive all along your nerves. I thought it must be the worst thing in the world” (TBJ 1). Post-electrotherapy, at the hands of “smiling” Doctor Gordon, Esther (presumably the vehicle through which Plath draws on her own experience) describes that very feeling: “...something bent down and took hold of me and shook me like the end of the world. Whee-ee-ee-ee-ee, it shrilled, through an air crackling with blue light, and with each flash a great jolt drubbed me till I thought my bones would break and the sap fly out of me like a split plant. I wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done” (TBJ 143). Not dissimilar to pre-

electrotherapy Esther, in “The Tender Place” from *Birthday Letters*, a volume of poems addressed to Sylvia written over the span of 25 years, Ted Hughes imagines the harrowing experience of his deceased wife’s treatment:

... Somebody wired you up.
 Somebody pushed the lever. They crashed
 The thunderbolt into your skull.
 In their bleached coats, with bleached faces
 They hovered again
 To see how you were, in your straps.
 Whether your teeth were still whole. (BL: “The Tender Place” 12)

Sylvia’s parallel to Esther does not end with electrotherapy; at a ski slope on Mount Pisgah, Esther recklessly speeds down the hill, despite being a beginner: “The thought that I might kill myself formed in my mind coolly as a tree or a flower” (TBJ 97). Plath herself went through a very similar experience in the winter of 1951, breaking her leg whilst skiing boldly down the slope, and remarks after the fact in her journal, “I AM GLAD I BROKE IT!...I realize now that I was really more crippled, mentally, all last fall, than I am, physically, now” (UJ 159).

The detached coldness of Esther’s character makes her somewhat difficult with which to empathize—there is always a strong sense of otherness in her stark outlook, despite the relatability of her depression as a “bell jar, with its stifling distortions” (TBJ 241). “The person who comes through is merciless and threatening” (Hardwick 241), not unlike Plath herself at times, who was described by her housemother at Smith as “self-centered and very selfish” and by an ex-boyfriend as “courting, conquering, and then scoring” men (Shulman 8). After her iconic meeting with Ted Hughes, he even “considered her too ‘forward,’ at first. She was opinionated, impatient, sometimes arrogant, and always on the move” (Middlebrook 11). The death of Otto Plath when Sylvia was just eight-years-old is certainly an event worthy of inspection, the effects of which are evident in Sylvia’s character.

II. “Daddy, daddy...I’m Through”

Though the language of the poem is enough to make your blood run cold, to get the full effect, the full intention of Sylvia Plath’s renowned “Daddy,” a reading by the poet herself is paramount. Of a group of recordings from her last and perhaps most significant volume of poems, *Ariel*, “Daddy” is particularly bone-chilling, the voice of the poet so acute, so pointed, that if the listener had no knowledge of the English language, it would be enough to comprehend the poem’s pernicious intent.

But who is “Daddy?”—“Not God but a swastika,” a “Fascist,” a “brute,” a man with a “fat black heart,” a “bastard” (*Ariel* 57-59). Plath wrote the poem the day after Ted Hughes left, no, “deserted” her and the children at their home in Court Green; no wonder why “Daddy” is charged with rage as it is (Middlebrook 187). Although at first glance, the poem seems most assuredly about Plath’s own father, it is more than just “a daughter’s tender nostalgia for a father loved, feared, and lost early in life, and that daughter’s enraged recognition, at thirty, of the cost of her emotional collaboration with domination by a strong man” (Middlebrook 187)—it is personal trauma turned into art. Among many others, Hughes recognizes Plath’s powerful, albeit destructive, way of making art out of tribulation, the volume *Birthday Letters* his “tribute to that power in Plath” (Middlebrook 173).

Nevertheless, there is a great deal of Otto Plath in “Daddy,” a particular stanza of which more or less accurately sums up the circumstances of their relationship:

I was ten when they buried you.
At twenty I tried to die
And get back, back, back to you.
I thought even the bones would do. (*Ariel*: “Daddy” 58)

Although Otto Plath died when Sylvia was eight, not ten, she did attempt suicide at twenty—an attempt that would later form the dramatic climax of *The Bell Jar*. This sense of getting “back,

back, back to you” leads to a conclusion that, for Sylvia, death and Otto Plath were one in the same (Shulman 10). In times of distress or despair, Sylvia would revert back to her father’s abandonment, as it were, penning the agony within: “it hurts, father, it hurts, oh father I have never known; a father, even, they took from me” (UJ 223).

At Court Green in Devon, Ted and Sylvia had a large, sprawling garden out back filled with laburnums, lilacs, cherries, honeysuckle, raspberry bushes, gladioli, zinnias, budding rosebushes, even an orchard of 72 apple trees. Sylvia also took on the project of beekeeping in their Eden-like paradise. Otto Plath was an entomologist with a specialty in the study of bees, and just as Plath was searching for her absent father in other men, her beekeeping likewise “becomes a way of symbolically allying herself to him, and reclaiming him from the dead” (Alvarez 35).

But if Plath had an absent father, her relationship with her mother Aurelia embodied a presence, so to speak, of the acutest kind. Sylvia’s correspondence with her mother was so prolific it eventuated in an entire 500-page volume of assembled letters, nearly a thousand in count (*Letters Home: Correspondence 1950-1963*). Aurelia Plath was a hardworking, ambitious woman, earning herself an instructing position in stenography at Boston University, where Otto Plath had previously been a professor of etymology; her parsimonious nature is what allowed for Sylvia and her younger brother Warren to attend prestigious universities, she at Smith and he at Harvard. Sylvia was very close with her mother, almost symbiotically so (Middlebrook 35), but “it had always been important to Plath that her mother receive only the positive signals from Plath’s complicated emotional circuitry—especially regarding the choices Plath had made about her marriage and her decision to live in England” (174). Sylvia’s letter to Aurelia around the time that she and Ted were considering getting married (~1956) is almost an exercise in justification:

...I am living for Ted, and Ted before all else, and if he would think it good to reveal our marriage and go through the official red-tape, I would move out of Whitstead and into no-matter-what lodging to work and write and study with him. I feel it is wrong to live apart six of the best months of our lives; we are very miserable apart...Now I would like to know how you feel about this. I will decide things with Ted this weekend. You could...say to friends, Ted got a job in Cambridge or London, and we felt it ridiculous not to get married here and now... (LH 279-80)

Stemming in part from Sylvia's cheerful, A-ok façade toward her mother is her obsession with accomplishments—and consequent need of continually seeking Aurelia's approval (Shulman 6). This ambitious drive, however, is much of the reason why we have the amount and quality of Plath's writings that we do today, despite her tragically short life.

III. **The Heartless Observer**

From an early age, eight years to be exact, Plath showed an interest in writing, getting her first poem published in the children's section of the *Boston Herald*. By the time Plath entered Smith College in 1950, she already had an impressive number of poetry prizes of which to boast. She was productive in every sense of the word, in addition to being inordinately hard on herself: "I have such a damned puritanical conscience that it flays me like briars when I feel I've done wrong or haven't demanded enough of myself" (UJ 215). Indeed her journals are littered with self-corrective, ambitious goals for improvement. "Capable of the most rigorous discipline, the most productive concentration in making use of the time she allocated for writing" (Middlebrook 157), she wrote at one point at least a poem a day—all at 4 AM, no less, to balance both motherhood and her writing. Plath favored learned precision over natural ability, particularly at the start of her career, a belief exemplified by her well-loved copy of *Roget's Thesaurus*, of which she "would rather live with on a desert isle than a bible" (UJ 196). As Plath matured as a

poet, however, she relied less and less on her thesaurus and more on her intuition, a shift evident in the speed and precision with which she composed the poems of *Ariel*.

Coined by Elizabeth Hardwick, the term “heartless observer” is a quintessential description of Plath and her poetry, which is “quite literally irresistible. The daring, the skill, the severity. It shocks and thrills” (113, 116). Plath can be uncommonly cruel yet ingeniously frank in her observations, à la her description of a blind man in “Little Fugue”:

The eye of the blind pianist...
At my table on the ship.
He felt for his food.
His fingers had the noses of weasels.
I couldn't stop looking. (*Ariel*: “Little Fugue” 78)

This fearless style presented in *Ariel* is what Plath is famous for; her earlier poems in *The Colossus*, first published in 1960, were seen as something that bored her, the volume a product of her “apprenticeship” as a poet (Alvarez 39). The moment Plath began to break from the influence of Hughes and D.H. Lawrence, around May of 1962, is when she in turn developed enough confidence to pursue her very own style: “In the handful of poems she wrote that spring, Plath’s talent has been transformed into what I think we can agree to call Plath’s genius: the extreme, clenched assertion of metaphorical thought traveling in short stanza-bursts, each line a snare closing on emotional quarry” (Middlebrook 170).

Plath’s almost corrosive style is further enhanced by that of which she writes; she used her own “private horrors...like a stimulant: the worse things got and the more directly she wrote about them, the more fertile her imagination became” (Alvarez 41). Previous suicide attempts, fights with her husband, electrotherapy, failure, jealousy, desperation: all of these things Plath turned into powerful stories or poems, effectively time capsuling and making them, rather dangerously, all the more accessible. Sylvia’s speed toward self-destruction by way of documentation stemmed largely, if at first unconsciously, from a visit from Assia and David

Wevill in May of 1962—coincidentally the moment when Plath’s poetry took a more intrepid, less guarded route.

IV. Hughes and Infidelity

The Wevills visited the Hugheses at Court Green in Devon for a weekend in the middle of May—Assia was strikingly beautiful, of Eastern European decent and “walked in clouds of Chanel”; David was a professor at the London School of Economics (Middlebrook 164). The first evening of their visit Assia had captivated Hughes:

We didn’t find her – she found us.
She sniffed us out...
...I saw
The dreamer in her
Had fallen in love with me and she did not know it.
That moment the dreamer in me
Fell in love with her, and I knew it. (BL: “Dreamers” 158)

The fact that Assia “sniffed” Ted and Sylvia out is more or less accurate; “according to one of Assia’s confidants, Assia had joked about setting out for Devon that weekend in “war paint,” to seduce Ted Hughes” (Middlebrook 166). Soon afterward the affair took root; when Plath inevitably found out, she cast him out of the house, cleared his attic study of every manuscript, letter, and scrap of paper, and set it all alight in the courtyard. Despite Aurelia Plath’s being there when this fit of rage occurred, when she [Aurelia] returned home, Sylvia’s letters were forcibly cheerful and positive, as if nothing were the matter. Aurelia comments on this in an explanatory note in *Letters Home*, claiming the “letters were, of course written under great strain. They were meant, as were her many phone calls to me during this period, to reassure herself as well” (LH 459). Characteristically, Plath put on her untroubled façade, particularly when Hughes came around to visit the children, and in many senses she was doing quite well—this is the period when she would rise early to pen the poems of *Ariel*. She changed her hairstyle, moved to

London, and exuded an air of cool collectivity, especially at literary events, whereat one in particular, she “startled a whole roomful of London writers...when she went around the room systematically informing acquaintances that Hughes was having an affair with Assia Wevill, and that she was divorcing him” (Middlebrook 194). Hughes’s moral compass was not necessarily due north—“True North in Hughes’s libido was the position of the predator” (Middlebrook 171); he viewed his affair as instinctual. While Hughes packed his bags to go, he was allegedly humming (184). But this stroke of cruelty was not a quality with which Sylvia was unfamiliar: “‘cruel’ is a word she uses several times to characterize him...[and] moreover, she intends to reform him with her love” (Middlebrook 36).

The morning after Ted and Sylvia met at a party in Falcon Yard at Cambridge, she wrote about it vividly in her journal, still fueled by its violent aliveness:

Then the worst happened, that big, dark, hunky boy, the only one there huge enough for me, who had been hunching around over women, and whose name I asked the minute I had come into the room, but no one told me, came over and was looking hard in my eyes and it was Ted Hughes...And then it came to the fact that I was all there, wasn’t I, and I stamped and screamed yes...and I was stamping and he was stamping on the floor, and then he kissed me bang smash on the mouth...And when he kissed my neck I bit him long and hard on the cheek, and when we came out of the room, blood was running down his face. (UJ 211-12)

Plath knew that “Hughes was the biggest seducer in Cambridge”—he left the party that night with his girlfriend, blood down his face and all—but this didn’t stop her from pursuing him; in fact, it was part of the whole allure (Middlebrook 6). The two quickly became serious, Plath actually being the one to propose, and inevitably Ted became a part of her story. Yet just as Plath “*gains* power in connecting to Hughes; he *has* power no matter what” (Middlebrook 43)—an important aspect that later materializes in Sylvia’s death and Ted’s survival.

V. “Please Call Dr—”

There are several theories as to why Plath took her life that cold morning of February 11, 1963, but no theorizer has taken the subject with as much tact and candor as Al Alvarez, an acquaintance with which Plath and Hughes were familiar, a poetry critic for the *Observer* who had gotten many of Ted and Sylvia’s poems published, and ultimately a trusted friend of them both. In autumn of 1962, after Sylvia had moved to London with the children, she made more frequent visits to Alvarez, sitting in his study, reading him the poems she had clacked out all those early, early mornings. Despite her exuberant air, Alvarez could tell she was lonely, yearning for some kind of companionship, or at least “someone to acknowledge that she was coping exceptionally well with her difficult routine life of children, nappies, shopping and writing. She needed even more, to know that the poems worked and were good” (Alvarez 42)—she needed, characteristically, reassurance and praise. Christmas Eve, 1962 was the last time Alvarez saw Sylvia; visiting her at her flat, he remarked on the stark chilliness of the rooms—Sylvia had abandoned her usual color scheme of red, red, red for snow-white walls and deep blue floors. The winter of 1962-63 was also one of the worst London had seen in years and years. Plath did not yet have a telephone installed, the pipes would freeze and not produce running water—“disastrous in a household with two children still in diapers” (Middlebrook 206)—electricity failed, gas failed: the season was unforgettable in its absolute frigidity. Alvarez noted the change in her; she was strained, reading him her new poems like usual, one of which was “Death & Co.,” a biting, frosty poem that thoroughly convinced Alvarez of her defenselessness. He went about his routine critiques, trying

in a futile way, to reduce the tension and take her mind momentarily off her private horrors – as though that could be done by argument and literary criticism! She must have felt I was stupid and insensitive. Which I was. But to have been otherwise would have meant accepting responsibilities I didn’t want and couldn’t, in my own depression, have coped with. When I left about eight o’clock to go on

to my dinner-party, I knew I had let her down in some final and unforgivable way. And I knew she knew. I never again saw her alive. (Alvarez 47-48)

It is important to remember that *The Bell Jar* was published in January of 1963.

Extremely sensitive to criticism, or really anything other than positive, reassuring feedback, Plath took the lukewarm reviews—not a knockout but generally approving—as blows to her career. Even worse, *The Bell Jar* was published in the same issue as Hughes's poem "Full Moon and Little Frieda," which got much more attention and praise at the time than Plath's novel under a pseudonym. (This was mostly due to the fact that the novel was extremely autobiographical and had the potential to damage many relationships, not that the pseudonym kept people from knowing and getting hurt.) In combination with the fact that Plath was now taking the antidepressant Parnate, prescribed by her general practitioner John Horder and a drug which, according to Hughes, she had a bad reaction to in the U.S., her response to these criticisms on *The Bell Jar* was a full-fledged depression; although "we do not have whatever journal notes she made, because Hughes burned this journal...she had written to her psychiatrist in Boston the terrible words, 'I can feel my mind disintegrating again'" (Middlebrook 207).

The morning Plath committed suicide, she took every measure to keep her children safe: she set bread and milk by the beds of little Nicholas and Frieda, opened their window wide, taped the seal of their door, then returned to the kitchen where she covered the window and door to keep the gas from seeping out, and opened the oven door.

Alvarez is under the impression that Sylvia did not intend to die. Rather, her attempt was a cry for help. That morning she "was expecting two visitors...the nurse dispatched by Dr. Horder, as well as Katherine Frankfort, an acquaintance who had agreed to mind the children while Plath went out to lunch with a literary editor" (Middlebrook 209)—not as Alvarez insinuates, the *au pair*, whom Plath had fired earlier in February for finding her "in bed with a

boyfriend, ignoring the children” (205). Plath had left a note with the doctor’s telephone number, “Please call Dr—,” and Alvarez concludes, “there is no doubt she would have been saved. I think she wanted to be; why else leave her doctor’s telephone number?” (Alvarez 53). If this was the case, Plath’s contemporary cultish following, who glorifies her suicide as a performance and fetishizes her depression as something despairingly beautiful, unjustly overdetermines the circumstances of her suicide, the complexity of her depression. The last thing Sylvia Plath wrote was a message of their doctor’s telephone number to the children, or to the nurse, to Katherine Frankfort, to *someone*—it was a message for help—and so we have good reason to believe Alvarez’s claim: Sylvia did not want to die; she wanted help.

PART 3: Virginia and Sylvia

I. **Motherhood = Womanhood?**

An interesting link between Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath is the question of womanhood. For Plath, true womanhood was achieved only after motherhood; she idealized fertility, planned on having lots of babies, thought her maternity liberating: “I shall be one of the few women poets in the world who is fully a rejoicing woman...I am a woman and glad of it, and my songs will be of fertility” (LH 256). Virginia, though very friendly with children, was not able to have any due to her instable condition—various doctors feared pregnancy would be too much of a risk considering her dubious mental history. Naturally, Virginia took her infertility quite hard, confessing in her diary that she was jealous of childbearing women (Spater 152). Plath derided infertility, even made a list of writing women who bore children and those who did not (Middlebrook 127). In “Childless Woman,” Plath effectively mocks the infertile: “The womb / Rattles its pod, the moon / Discharges itself from the tree with nowhere to go” (TCP 259). The moon is the egg monthly-released, the tree the maker of that moon, the ovaries—healthily at work is the female reproduction system of the infertile, but with no final destination, no ultimate purpose. Plath’s confidence as a writer escalated after the birth of her first child Frieda, producing “a momentous, surprising effect in [her] art. It extricated her imagination from the overwhelming influence of Ted Hughes, investing it in the instinctual process of being female” (153). Al Alvarez, too, noted a change in Plath after the birth of her second child Nicholas: “No longer quiet and withheld, a housewifely appendage to a powerful husband, she seemed made solid and complete, her own woman again” (Alvarez 28). Each birth renewed her confidence, strengthened her pride in being female.

Plath’s sexual life was no less fruitful: “she had unhesitating confidence in gratifying what she regarded as a healthy sexual appetite” (Middlebrook 40). In everything Sylvia did, she

did it with astonishing alacrity—she was supercharged. Craving “a life of conflict, of balancing children, sonnets, love and dirty dishes; and banging banging an affirmation of life out on pianos and ski slopes and in bed in bed in bed” (UJ 225), Plath took to words like she took to sex—always in repetition, again and again, “as routine domestic comfort” (Middlebrook 94). Regular sex was something entirely absent, on the other hand, in the marriage of Virginia and Leonard: “What had been a passive attitude by Virginia at the outset shortly developed into a complete affirmative rejection of the sexual act. Thereafter they lived ‘chastely’” (Spater 177), which is absolutely not to say it was a loveless marriage. On the contrary, while talking to an old friend and as though speaking a soliloquy, Virginia asked:

What do you think is probably the happiest moment in one’s whole life?...I think its the moment when one is walking in one’s garden, perhaps picking off a few dead flowers, and suddenly one thinks: My husband lives in that house—And he loves me. (Spater 62)

Virginia’s sexual immaturity may have been heavily predetermined by the circumstances of her youth, specifically the erotic fumbings of her stepbrother George Duckworth, who “had become after my [her] mother’s death, for all practical purposes, the head of the family. My father was deaf, eccentric, absorbed in his work, and entirely shut off from the world. The management of affairs fell upon George” (MOB 168). The mockery and disgust with which Vanessa and Virginia later spoke of their stepbrother was much a result of his

...nasty erotic skirmish. There were fondlings and fumbings in public when Virginia was at her lessons and these were carried to greater lengths—indeed I know not to what lengths—when, with the easy assurance of a fond and privileged brother, George carried his affections from the schoolroom into the night nursery. (Bell 43)

The sisters were powerless and thus fell victim to his easily disguised advances: “How could we resist his wishes? Was not George Duckworth wonderful?...Society in those days was a perfectly competent, perfectly complacent, ruthless machine. A girl had no chance against its fangs”

(MOB 157). Virginia's subsequent frigidity, as it were, though perhaps just part of her nature, can indeed be viewed through the lens of child sexual abuse.

II. Woolf's Apprentice

Born in 1932, Sylvia Plath was part of the generation directly influenced by Modernism. Given the fact that Aurelia Plath raised her children with the classics, and that Sylvia was an avid reader, it is only natural that she would later turn to Woolf's prose as a source of inspiration for her own writing—Woolf being one of the hallmarks of British Modernism alongside Joyce. In fact, “among the female writers of fiction, Plath designates only one rival in her journal, ever, from beginning to end: Virginia Woolf” (Middlebrook 127). From a journal entry in 1957 (Plath would have been 25 at the time), she turns to Woolf for help, claiming, “her novels make mine possible” (UJ 289). At a literary party in London, Plath reminisced about Virginia Woolf with the editor of *London Magazine* John Lehmann, and several journal entries mention a Woolf novel she is currently reading or has just finished. Plath evidently takes comfort in the fact that there existed a female writer of as much genius as her own, even looks to her as a sort of mentor: reading Woolf's journals, “Plath notes that after a publisher rejected one of Woolf's manuscripts, Woolf went straight to the kitchen, which she cleaned, then cooked up a mess of haddock and sausage” (Middlebrook 132, 90). Similarly, Plath clung to her copy of *The Joy of Cooking*, used cooking as a stress-reliever and a kind of empowerment; she dominated this traditional gender role with as much ferocity as she cranked out the poems of *Ariel*. Yet there is an obvious polarity to consider between the time periods in which Woolf and Plath lived: the Woolfs kept servants at Monks House, thus most of the cooking was prepared not by Virginia herself (this was also due to her volatile mental health), and though Plath and Hughes hired nannies at times, Sylvia generally cooked all the meals. Nevertheless, there existed between the two that *urge* to excel at

domesticity—at traditionally female activities. Virginia, “far from adept with the needle,” after successfully sewing stockings for the first time in 1939 (she would have been 57), “cried out, ‘Oh Leonard, look! Wait till Vanessa sees what I’ve done!’” (Spater 162). Domestic success was still low on the two’s priorities list, naturally: they rightfully devoted the bulk of their energy to perfecting their craft.

“What is my voice? Woolfish, alas, but tough...I shall go better than she” (UJ 315, 286), Plath muses in her journal. It is no secret that Plath was competitive—“she was opinionated, impatient, sometimes arrogant, and always on the move” (Middlebrook 11). In a brief comparison of the many different kinds of genius that there are, Al Alvarez allocates Sylvia among names like Eliot and Keats to the kind whose “particular gift is to clarify and intensify the received world...Her intensity was of the nerves, something urban and near screaming” (45). Virginia also was competitive in almost everything she undertook, a somewhat amusing example of which takes form in her and Leonard’s games of bowls, which they played on the Monks House lawn: “She hated to lose to Leonard at bowls; but lose she did, time after time” (Spater 163). In terms of writing, competitiveness coupled with prolificacy results in good work and much of it. Both Plath and Woolf were extremely sensitive to criticism, but invariably the more they wrote the more they were criticized on what they wrote. Virginia’s cyclical relapses, occurring after almost each novel she produced, are evidence of not only the mental and physical strain of writing itself but of her anxiety-ridden wariness of what critics would say. In her diary entry for June 23, 1922, Virginia “doubts...her own judgment. ‘Now what *will* they say about *Jacob*?...Mad I suppose: a disconnected rhapsody; I don’t know’” (Spater 70). Reassurance is what Virginia craved, needed—what Leonard supportively provided. Plath’s sensitivity toward criticism, as already stated, is rooted in her suicide a mere month after the publication of *The Bell Jar*; she too “needed constant reassurance” (Middlebrook 100), which Hughes liberally supplied

her. Sylvia and Ted, Leonard and Virginia maintained intellectual, literary relationships—an aspect that inevitably came with its benefits and its hindrances.

III. Power Couples

A unique and rather precarious characteristic of the Woolfs as well as Plath and Hughes is that each couple was intent on supporting themselves purely by writing. Income, particularly in the early stages of their relationships/careers, was thus meager at best and strict bookkeeping in order. Plath and Hughes, “careful managers of their money” moved to Court Green in Devon, despite the fact that “Plath wanted very much to remain in London” (Middlebrook 117, 142); Leonard and Virginia moved to Richmond, partly due to the expensiveness of London lodging but mostly because of Virginia’s suicide attempt in 1913, the countryside seen as a little pastoral haven for recovery.

It was in Richmond where the Woolfs formed one of the most important publishing houses of the twentieth century, The Hogarth Press. Named after their home in Richmond, Hogarth House, the endeavor originally began as a hobby, first with the Woolfs’ excited fascination with their new miniature printing press from which they hand-printed a story by Virginia, *The Mark on the Wall*, and one by Leonard entitled *Three Jews*. Though the beginning profits were scant, as is to be expected, within “the first four years of its existence The Hogarth Press published the works of four individuals whose names cannot be omitted from any history of writing in the twentieth century: Virginia Woolf, T.S. Eliot, Katherine Mansfield and E.M. Forster” (Spater 110). The Press was a project for Leonard and Virginia outside of writing, yet still within the literary realm—something at once mechanical and intellectual into which they could pour their energies together: Virginia was the type-setter and Leonard did the machining, as his shaky hands prevented him from accurately setting type. More than just a hobby and

supplemental mean of income, The Hogarth Press “is, in a way, the story of the marriage: Leonard’s anxiety for her health, their mutual interests, their areas of division, and, reflected in the list, their cultural and political life” (Lee 357). It was an impressive, intellectually and financially rewarding venture that reflected the Woolfs’ bohemian yet pragmatic lifestyle; “few husband and wife pairs could have done what the Woolfs were able to accomplish” (Spater 109).

After leaving the United States for London in December 1959, Plath and Hughes found an affordable but tiny flat in Chalcot Square, where there being no desks or really much working space at all, the strain of two competitive, prolific poets writing in entirely too close of quarters took root. In a rather humorous account of Hughes to his friend Lucas Myers, Ted claims Sylvia “had called out one hundred and four times in the course of one morning” (Middlebrook 112). Despite the lack of breathing room, Plath and Hughes devoted everything to writing. Their creativity was so in sync, so alike in its genius, Hughes genuinely thought he and Plath shared “‘one single mind’ that each accessed by telepathy, and on which each drew for different purposes. This was an idea he held throughout his life, one he spoke about often” (Middlebrook 157). Hughes’s inspiration from Plath is clear in his poem “The Owl” from *Birthday Letters*:

I saw my world again through your eyes
As I would see it again through your children’s eyes.
Through your eyes it was foreign.
...You were a camera
Recording reflections you could not fathom.
I made my world perform its utmost for you.
You took it all in with an incredulous joy
Like a mother handed her new baby
By the midwife. Your frenzy made me giddy. (BL: “The Owl” 33)

Particularly when Plath and Hughes left Chalcot Square in London for Court Green in Devon, their true compatibility and success as a literary couple flourished. With more space to write and actual desks on which to write, Plath and Hughes settled into an efficient routine of splitting responsibilities between writing, housework, and childcare. Yet interestingly enough, Sylvia was

at her most productive—the quickness and genius of *Ariel* a testament to this fact—when she was living alone with the children after Ted had left them in July of 1962: “She had written twenty poems that month alone, a dozen of them since Hughes’s departure—‘Terrific stuff,’ she reported to her mother, ‘as if domesticity had choked me’” (Middlebrook 193). Hughes’s abandonment is what catapulted Plath into the passionate rage with which she banged out the renowned poems of *Ariel*—how she turned her original fear of desertion into the powerful, declarative art of “I’m through.”

IV. Death and Loneliness

Incomprehensible is the death of a loved one; infuriating and seemingly unreal is the death of a parent. Both Plath and Woolf experienced the death of a parent at a young age: Sylvia was just eight-years-old when her father died, Virginia thirteen at the death of her mother. Even more, Stella Duckworth, who had taken up the role as caretaker in the Stephen household, died a mere two years after Julia Stephen; Leslie Stephen died when Virginia was twenty-two. All this death—“Henry James called 22 Hyde Park Gate ‘that house of all Deaths’” (Spater 25)—took its toll, as Woolf elaborates on in *Moments of Being*, the knock from the death of not only Julia but Stella that made one feel

...as if one had been violently cheated of some promise; more than that, brutally told not to be such a fool as to hope for things; I remember saying to myself after she died: “But this is impossible; things aren’t, can’t be, like this”—the blow, the second blow of death, struck on me; tremulous, filmy eyed as I was, with my wings still creased, sitting there on the edge of my broken chrysalis. (MOB 124)

The despair, the frustration with which Sylvia regarded her father’s death litters her work. How does one make sense of the death of a parent? How does one cope with the misery? “God knows what wound the death of her father had inflicted on her in childhood, but over the years this had been transformed into the conviction that to be an adult meant to be a survivor” (Alvarez 34). To

live was to survive.

Aurelia Plath made the decision to keep Sylvia from attending her father's funeral. As Esther Greenwood (and assumedly Plath herself) recounts, "his death had always seemed unreal to me" (TBJ 165). Moreover, Virginia reflects on the unreality of her mother's death: "The tragedy of her death was not that it made one, now and then and very intensely, unhappy. It was that it made her unreal" (MOB 95). The death of one parent results in an attachment symbiotic in nature to the other; while this is not necessarily true for Virginia and her father, it is an oft-used expression that accurately describes Sylvia's relationship with her mother. Nonetheless, "Virginia had always had a strong attachment to her father, and although she resented his demands, she could appreciate his integrity, his underlying humility and his intelligence" (Spater 36). The absence of Virginia's mother throughout her teenage years materializes in the continual reappearance of the centric, all-knowing mother figure in Woolf's fiction: Mrs. Ramsay, Mrs. Dalloway, Mrs. Hilbery, Mrs. Ambrose...Likewise Plath utilizes her absent father as a poetic and prosaic tool, commemorating him in poetry and in fiction as a kind of career-long extension of mourning (Shulman 5).

It is easy to be angry at the dead for their cruel desertion: one is left alone, raw, nothing remaining save for the festering guilt of being alive and a very real fear of future abandonment. Plath developed two strategies to submerge this fear: "One was to date as many men as possible and abandon any one of them before he abandoned her...Plath's other strategy was to let slip the controls on a burning core of anger at the perfidy of a man" (Middlebrook 46). Interestingly enough, "the principal feature of Virginia's ravings during her mad spells was criticism of others—of men in general, of Leonard in particular" (Spater 68). The difference lies in the manner with which this anger was dealt: Plath's fury often fueled her—it was an abundant source of creativity that lead her to produce some of her finest work—while Virginia was

discouraged from any writing at all when she relapsed into illness. But fear, the underlying root of this anger, can always be traced back to the inevitability of not just the deaths of others, but the death of oneself: “Did it matter then, she asked herself, walking towards Bond Street, did it matter that she must inevitably cease completely? All this must go on without her; did she resent it; or did it not become consoling to believe that death ended absolutely?” (MD 9)

V. The Final Acts

The line between sanity and insanity for creative geniuses like Plath and Woolf is not so much a question of clarity as it is a question of where to draw it and whether or not it should be drawn at all. “Virginia Woolf was a sane woman who had an illness,” says Hermione Lee (171). “Diagnostic labels such as “bipolar” and “schizoaffective with predominately depressive features” have been attached with great confidence to Plath herself,” Diane Middlebrook asserts (111). It is easy to diagnose with labels, labels, labels, but at the end of the day, what do those labels truly mean, and how do they help the patient but to make her feel even more estranged? The spells were cyclical for Plath and Woolf, induced first by death and then predominately by a strong sensitivity toward criticism. For Plath it was around every ten years, beginning with the death of her father when she was eight, climaxing with her autobiographically recorded suicide attempt at twenty, and ending with her successful suicide at thirty. For Virginia, “one cannot help noting the nine-year cycle of the principal attacks: 1895, 1904 and 1913 with a desperate (but successful) struggle against a breakdown in 1922” (Spater 71).

Sylvia’s death in 1963 was precipitated by “an unspeakable winter, the worst, they said, in 150 years” (Alvarez 48). The Woolfs relocated permanently to Monks House—“even in good weather it was never a comfortable house, and in cold weather it was extremely uncomfortable” (Spater 180)—after being bombed out of their London house in September 1940; thus the winter

of 1940-41 was spent in extremely cold, fearful conditions. The weather, though, for both Sylvia and Virginia, was a mere factor among many that contributed to their demise.

For the onlooker, the husband, the parent, the suicide of a loved one is impossible to fathom. It is difficult to explain or to understand objectively: “the processes which lead a man to take his own life are at least as complex and difficult as those by which he continues to live” (Alvarez 143). Hardwick contrasts the suicides of Woolf and Plath, Virginia’s as more passive—a letting go, as it were—and Sylvia’s as “a performance...There is no apology or fearfulness. Suicide is an assertion of power, of the strength—not the weakness—of the personality. She is no poor animal sneaking away; giving up; instead she is strong, threatening, dangerous” (111).

Does this mean, because Virginia wrote an apologetic suicide letter to Leonard and Vanessa, that she is the “poor animal sneaking away?” Certainly not—Virginia filled her pockets with stones and drowned herself in a shallow river: a deliberate, painful way to go, no doubt. “Nothing anyone says can persuade me,” she wrote (LOVW 487).

Plath, on the other hand, left no note, but a phone number for the doctor, used the gas from the oven to knock her out quick and cold. Even so, whether one leaves this world with a bang or a whimper is not only in the long run insignificant but insensitive, an unjust romanticism. What is important is what remains: the inordinate amount of letters, novels, journal entries, poems, and essays—testaments to these two prolific, influential, and emblematic writing women.

Despite the tragedy of suicide, the frustration in knowing that if Plath or Woolf had lived even a year longer there might have been another work of genius produced, there is something—indeed there is always something—to be gained. Perhaps most of all it is the idea that, in spite of choosing to leave this world, one is still oneself: Plath left behind bread and milk for her

children, the freshly bound manuscript of *Ariel* on her desk—she didn't stop being a mother or a writer for death. Virginia's epitaph bore the last words of her novel *The Waves*: "Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!" (LOVW 487), appropriately displaying that it was her *choice* to die, her unyielding choice. And though Virginia died at 59 and Sylvia at 30, they both lived rich, meaningful lives. How is one, after all, to measure the value of a life? Not by its length, but by its essence, its quality.

Sylvia Plath and Virginia Woolf, despite their generational difference, represent truly what it means to have been a 20th-century working woman. I hope to have conveyed, moreover, the view that their literary marriages were indeed a large part of what contributed to their respective success. Virginia received unconditional support and reassurance from Leonard; Ted's abandonment, coupled in part with her emergence into motherhood, is arguably what led Plath to produce her finest work. And then childhood: there were early experiences with death, which led convincingly to Sylvia's incessant search for a father figure and Virginia's for a mother figure. The fear of what critics would say, the constancy of working, writing, producing, the madness looming cyclical, always in the background, threatening to emerge again: these are, these were the struggles of the 20th-century writing woman. Perhaps more than anything, though, the lives of Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath have proved unmistakably "that what is inside the woman is nothing if it is not writing" (Armstrong 244).

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