

**EPISTOLARY MYTHOLOGIES:
THE SYLVIA PLATH / TED HUGHES MARRIAGE
IN THE AMERICAN WRITER'S CORRESPONDENCE**

GABRIELA GLĂVAN

West University of Timișoara

***Abstract:** The public fascination with Sylvia Plath's marriage to Ted Hughes is an integral part of the American writer's legacy, one that is constantly reinterpreted by new generations of critics. The publication, in 2018, of Sylvia Plath's previously unknown correspondence revealed new aspects of one of her most influential relationships – her marriage to English poet Ted Hughes. My aim is to explore the articulation of this biographical element as an essential part of the mythology surrounding her life and work.*

***Keywords:** marriage in literature, correspondence, mental illness, autobiography, maternal relationships*

1. Introduction

A consistent part of Sylvia Plath's correspondence was published in 2018, a significant addition to the already published *Letters Home* (1975), creating new opportunities for relevant scholarship on her complex biography and fictional work. Moreover, the fourteen previously unpublished letters Plath wrote to her psychiatrist, dr. Ruth Beuscher, revealed new aspects of one of her most influential relationships – her marriage to English poet Ted Hughes. My aim is to explore the articulation of this biographical element as an essential part of the mythology surrounding her life and work. I shall specifically focus on her correspondence with Dr. Beuscher and her own mother, Aurelia Schober Plath. The two women stand out as the essential female presences in Plath's life – the former as mother-figure and the latter as maternal presence in a direct sense. Despite the apparent linearity and predictability of such an endeavour – to explore Plath's understanding of her marriage as revealed by her correspondence to Aurelia Plath and Ruth Beuscher – it is, in fact, a complex task, since the letters often give partial or minimal context to the events narrated by their author. Moreover, readers and critics do not have access to the other “narrator” (Plath's interlocutor), whose replies remain mysterious and unknown. Another challenge is to avoid a certain degree of contamination between scholarly academic investigation and the fiction-prone tonalities of the many Plath biographies available at the moment.

Sylvia Plath's suicide at the age of 30 gave rise to one of contemporary literature's most enduring myths, reloaded, in the six decades since her death, on many voices and in various discursive patterns, like a perpetually fascinating

riddle. The largely autobiographical nature of her writings, her massive body of correspondence with family, friends, editors, etc. and the overwhelming number of Plath biographies and works inspired by her life and activity (Hughes' *Birthdays Letters* (1998) included) consistently contributed to the Romantic myth of the young American writer's untimely death. Moreover, Sylvia Plath became an emblematic figure for postwar generations of women, who struggled for validation in a contradictory cultural context – one that apparently valued academically bright young women, while at the same time suggested that their supreme accomplishment would be marriage, children, and domesticity (Gill 2008: 26).

Plath's early life was not without adversity, as her father died when she was eight, paving the way for an ambivalent relationship with her mother. Both parents had been academics, and Plath's constant effort for intellectual excellence can be understood as an echo of this familial context. All these elements would gain new meaning and relevance once she embarked on a passionate but troubled marriage to English Poet Laureate Ted Hughes. Despite the centrality of the mother-daughter relationship in Plath's biography (it has been read as "the backbone of the narrative" unfolded in her correspondence (Steinberg, Kukil 2018: 23), it is her marriage to Hughes that shaped her adult life and literary affirmation, greatly influencing posthumous readership as well. The 1956-1962 period was the interval in which she matured into her own literary style and published her most relevant work, but the period also coincides with the articulation and demise of a fundamental personal relationship – her marriage. The close intellectual bond she had with Hughes left a unique mark on her writing, yet the collapse of their emotional ties probably influenced her state of mind in the final months before her death. Her marriage is the founding story of the Sylvia Plath mythology, one that gained new meaning after the letters she sent her psychiatrist were included in the 2018 edition of her correspondence.

Besides their confessional value, they also surfaced controversial details of possible physical and emotional abuse – Plath directly accused Hughes of violent behaviour in the final year of their marriage, as she began to suspect infidelity on his part. Her long-debated mental illness appears clear and incontestable – her violent mood swings, concealing a severe form of depression, as it generally happens with bipolar disorder, become textually visible. According to Brian Cooper, a researcher and psychiatrist interested in Plath's literary and psychiatric case, her most significant pathological symptoms were "recurrent severe disorders of mood (depressive and/or manic)" (Cooper 2003: 296). The specters of her clinical pathology were "apparently spontaneous in onset, the depressive phase being accompanied by psychomotor retardation, feelings of guilt and unworthiness, early-morning waking and somatic changes" (ibid.). As Cooper later declared in interviews, her London GP, Dr. John Horder, whom she mentions on her cryptic suicide note ("Call Dr. Horder") remembered that Plath's mental health was clearly poor: "I believe, indeed it was repeatedly obvious to me, that she was deeply depressed, "ill", "out of her mind", and that any explanations of a psychological sort are inadequate..." (Horder in Cooper 2003: 296).

2. The mythologies of a marriage

Letter writing is an essential part of Plath's oeuvre, however debatable its literary essence may be. It greatly influenced her style and thematic range, often recurring as a stylistic strategy that problematized the conflict between her real self

and the various versions that she deemed to be her acceptable, social facades (Ellis 2011). J. Ellis (2011:16) considers that “Plath’s letter-writing self is equally in control and just as staged”. She was a prolific writer in this particular niche, as her published correspondence consists of over 1200 pages. It details the complex background of her literary oeuvre and it significantly challenges critical notions concerning the relevance of the biographical context in literary creativity. Correspondence has long been a reliable instrument for documenting the role of biography in shaping a writer’s vision and work. Private writing is difficult to integrate in a critical approach to Plath’s works, despite the often revelatory nature of certain details illuminating a deeper meaning of her literature. The fluid limits between a private audience and a larger, public one become evident once the correspondence is published. Plath wrote extensively about domestic and emotional aspects, but, upon closer inspection, it becomes evident that these details contribute to the articulation of a vaster perspective, adding nuances and depth to the fictional corpus. Correspondence has been tackled theoretically as a distinct literary genre, presenting particular challenges to analysis and conceptualization. Plath’s letters have often been read in light of her mental illness and premature death and such readings tend to omit the relevance of the fundamental element of her life – her diverse and sophisticated relationships, constantly changing under the massive pressure of her creative metamorphoses, her vitality and constant drive to excel, her friendships with fellow writers and critics, and, no less significantly, her ambivalent attitude towards treating her recurrent mental crises and depressive episodes.

Sylvia Plath’s marriage to Ted Hughes has been a point of constant reference in the rather numerous biographies detailing the major elements of her life. It has been sensationalized to such an extent that, in 1989, Hughes broke his apparent vow to refrain from comments on his shared life with Plath and glacially replied to an article published in *The Independent* about this sensitive issue. His “Letter to the Editor” was published on April 20, 1989, two weeks after an inflammatory article written by two Plath scholars – Julia Parnaby, of the University of Lancaster, and Rachel Wingfield, of the University of Cambridge, and roughly seven months before his death. Over the years, he had firmly defended his decision to comment solely on his former wife’s literary work. In this case, though, the English poet felt that a line had been crossed – the two critics deplored the fact that Plath’s headstone was missing from her grave, leaving it unmarked, and that she and Hughes had, in fact, signed divorce papers before her death on February 11, 1963. Hughes felt compelled to reject this mystification, firmly stating that there were no divorce plans and they were still married when Plath died. He also refuted the “Fantasia” created around Plath’s life and death, a narrative spun around the various ideologies interfering with uncertain biographical facts.

However trivialized by various commentators who chose to ignore the necessary balance in biographical readings of confessional literature, the six-year interval during which they were married is of cardinal importance to a comprehensive perspective on Plath’s confirmation as a writer. A transformative experience for both parties involved, the symbiosis of marriage became her absolute project of personal and artistic validation. Most of the numerous Plath biographies, published in the half century since her death, emphasized the role her marriage to a fellow poet had in her intellectual and artistic becoming, yet they tended to circumscribe it solely to the biographical perimeter. My aim is to argue in favour of this element as a consistent, emblematic narrative, having the force and

significance of a myth, an archetypal paradigm that shaped the American poet's oeuvre and life trajectory.

Besides an imperatively necessary mapping of the marriage story in Plath's *Letters Home*, I shall also focus on the manner in which this essential relationship appears in the new epistolary material published in the second volume of *The Letters of Sylvia Plath* in 2018, and I shall seek to identify the contrasts and transformations in tone and perspective in a comparative analysis of the same issue explored by the writer in her letters to her mother. The new body of correspondence consists of fourteen letters Plath sent to Dr. Ruth Beuscher between February 18, 1960 and February 4, 1963. Dr. Beuscher treated Sylvia Plath at the Boston mental hospital, where she was taken to after her suicide attempt at the age of twenty, in 1953, ten years before her death. As Dan Chiasson (2018) argued, "the study of these new documents make the object of a case study in Plath's legacy".

A critical observation of the manner in which Plath wrote privately about her marriage to Hughes must take into account three different types of discourse: her letters to her mother from 1956-1960, which projected an idyllic, sometimes hyperbolized experience of married life; her letters to her mother from 1962, when Plath gave her mother scarce details of her marital troubles; and her letters to Dr. Beuscher from 1961-1963, when Plath often performed thorough and in-depth analyses of her marriage. These three bodies of correspondence project a complex image of the protean relationship between the two writers. Besides exploring the new details of the marriage mythology in these letters, my intention is also to question their value as literature, that is as a distinctive part of Plath's work, worthy of academic attention that goes farther than the mundane aspects of her marital and existential troubles.

3. Letters home, the Beuscher letters and the Plath/Hughes conundrum

In her *Preface* to the 2018 edition of Plath's correspondence, Frieda Hughes, the daughter of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes, shared her thoughts regarding her decision to agree to the publication of her mother's private writings: "I decided to let people make up their own minds and, hopefully, find the kind of understanding that my mother was working towards near the end, despite the return of the 'madness' that took her anyway" (Hughes 2018: 7). She goes on by detailing that

those fourteen letters were snapshots of my parents' passionate relationship and subsequent marriage; the finding of a city home, the birth of children, their move to the country and the adoption of what would be an unsustainable idyll, followed by my mother's suspicion of my father's affair, the confirmation of that suspicion, her decision to separate, the strengthening of that resolution, the apparent realization that they had been living in what I think of as a hermetically sealed bubble in which they ran out of oxygen, then the decision (following Ruth Beuscher's written advice) that divorce was the best option, and finally, the letter I feared most, the letter in which my mother's madness returns just before she kills herself. (Hughes 2018: 7)

She confessed: "I simply wept over the contents" (idem: 3).

A critical approach to private literature is a particularly difficult task. David Young, a prolific Plath critic, warned of the pitfalls of reading the writer's work through a biographical lens:

...before one has read much of her work, one has tumbled into the gossip, into the tabloid flattening of her artistic accomplishment, and the poems have begun to line up as lurid illustrations, vivid diary entries, exhibits for the defense or the prosecution if she or her former husband, her mother and father, or anyone else, happens to be on trial.” (Young 1998: 18)

Such excesses can be avoided, especially when the hyper-sensitive issue of the Plath-Hughes marriage is discussed, by a careful handling of facts and a balanced perspective on the influence of biography on writing and literature.

A careful reading of Plath’s correspondence with her mother promptly reveals the daughter’s intention to conceal the negative aspects in her life and filter them through a more optimistic lens. Plath’s interest in domestic issues – from child rearing to cooking and household management – seems overpowering and, at some point, far-fetched. A cruel irony arranged that Aurelia Plath be present in the Hughes’ residence in Devon, at Court Green, in the summer of 1962, when her daughter discovered her husband’s affair with Assia Wevill. The details surrounding the collapse of Plath’s marriage to Hughes are absent from the mother-daughter correspondence for the simple reason that Aurelia Plath was a witness to the events that took place at the time. It was a dramatic moment that made visible the magnitude of the cracks in her daughter’s idyllic narratives of domestic bliss and marital success. Marjorie Perloff (1979: 156) argues that this was a pivotal moment, one that made Plath decide to renounce the saccharine nickname “Sivvy”, which she had used to sign her letters to her mother and go for the mature form of her own name, Sylvia. Critics noted a radical change in her creative regimen as well: “The truly dramatic changes between those college-era poems, like ‘Circus in Three Rings’ and ‘Two Lovers and a Beachcomber by the Real Sea’, and such late poems as ‘Applicant’, ‘Purdah’, and ‘Lady Lazarus’ were both shocking and inexplicable” (Wagner-Martin 2007:198). Following this argument, Harold Fromm (1990: 251) states that Plath’s trademark was her inability “to forge a coherent self from the multiple and warring fragments of her psyche”, most clearly visible in her private writings: “Her journals and letters home are blatant documents of this phenomenon, which is the most pervasive characteristic of all her writings.” (ibid.)

As revealed by her letters to Aurelia Plath, Sylvia Plath’s relationship with Ted Hughes seems the sole focus of her emotional life, a dramatic storm of events and feeling that possibly nourished her final literary awakening – the unprecedented outburst of creativity that led to the writing of the *Ariel* volume of poetry. Written in the autumn of 1962, as her marriage was dissolving and separation seemed unavoidable, the *Ariel* poems are the cornerstone of Sylvia Plath’s canonization as a major modernist poet. However bitter its end, in the initial stages of their relationship, Plath’s writing about her marriage bears the signs of the immense pressure she felt to inhabit her ideal projection of emotional and erotic fulfillment. The ecstatic tone of her letters to Aurelia Plath, detailing her adoration for her beloved, recurs tirelessly, with the sheer force of religious devotion: “The most shattering thing is that in the last two months I have fallen terribly in love” she wrote to Aurelia Plath on April 17, 1956, “which can only lead to great hurt. I met the strongest man in the world, ex-Cambridge, brilliant poet whose work I loved before I met him, a large, hulking, healthy Adam, half French half Irish, with a voice like the thunder of God – a singer, story-teller, lion and world-wanderer, a vagabond who will never stop” (Plath 2010: 229). There is a perceptible aesthetic preoccupation in Plath’s tone, as if the encounter with Hughes and their subsequent

falling in love and marriage was a moment that had to be written about with a full display of mannerisms and elevation in style, similar to a significant event worthy of becoming literature. Later that year, as they had got married in June, Plath's emphatic accents grow even further, and the result is not far from an oversimplified narrative of early marital bliss:

If only you knew how happy I am with Ted. I have been with him every minute for over four months, and every day I love him more and more. We ... never run out of growing conversation. We talked the whole day on our bus trip to London, and it is so exciting, both of us writing, producing something new every day, criticizing, dreaming, encouraging, mulling over common experiences. I am walking on air; I love him more than the world and would do anything for him ... We want to work and work ... success will never spoil either of us. (Plath 2010: 267)

After secretly getting married, despite Plath's fears that the Fulbright commission would terminate her scholarship on grounds of her new status, the couple lived apart for two weeks, while Hughes pursued a teaching position in Spain and Plath remained in England. The separation proved unbearable for both. Sylvia's account of the short interval they lived apart is described in hyperbolic terms of biblical proportions, as proof of the incontestable truth of the myth describing the divine creation of Eve from Adam's rib:

... Have been back here exactly a week and am going through the most terrible state, but stoically, and will somehow manage. It is the longest I have ever been away from Ted and somehow, in the course of this working and vital summer, we have mystically become one. I can appreciate the legend of Eve coming from Adam's rib as I never did before; the damn story's true! That's where I belong. Away from Ted, I feel as if I were living with one eyelash of myself only. It is really agony". (Plath 2010: 267)

Weeks later, looking back at their unbearable ordeal, Plath declares with equal emphasis: "Both of us have been literally sick to death being apart, wasting all our time and force trying to cope with the huge, fierce sense of absence" (Plath 2010: 267)

Plath's need to hyperbolize her emotional overcharge involves a need for exceptionalism, as she declares the uniqueness of their bond. There is a clear struggle to validate their emotional connection in the same terms their literary and artistic minds connected – in an original manner that separates them from the ways in which ordinary couples function:

We are different from most couples; for we share ourselves perhaps more intensely at every moment. Everything I do with and for Ted has a celestial radiance, be it only ironing and cooking, and this increases with custom, instead of growing less ... Perhaps, most important, our writing is founded in the inspiration of the other and grows by the proper, inimitable criticism of the other, and publications are made with joy of the other. What wife shares her husband's dearest career as I do? ... Actually, I never could stand Ted to have a nine to five job, because I love being with him and working in his presence so much...." (Plath 2010: 272-273)

Aurelia Plath's relationship with her daughter seems to have imposed a certain canon of communication, a rather inflexible paradigm in which her

daughter felt compelled to perpetually excel and impress. Her marriage is “written” like one more success story, a complete immersion into an intellectual euphoria in which the two partners support each other unconditionally. Plath’s account of their mutual respect for a strict work schedule and their perfectly sealed symbiosis, unaffected by external factors, often sounds like the narrative of an ingenue amazed at the plenitude of feeling she experiences:

We have such lovely hours together ... We read, discuss poems we discover, talk, analyze – we continually fascinate each other. It is heaven to have someone like Ted who is so kind and honest and brilliant – always stimulating me to study, think, draw and write. He is better than any teacher, even fills somehow that huge, sad hole I felt in having no father. I feel every day how wonderful he is and love him more and more. My whole life has suddenly a purpose... (Plath 2010: 281)

Newlywed bliss, however overwhelming and satisfactory, is not without its first signs of instability and conflict. The young couple start to have verbal clashes, and Sylvia’s need to alleviate her first symptoms of suffering at the realization that her marriage may be different from what she had imagined become visible in her tireless odes to her beloved:

Ted and I sometimes have violent disagreements, to be sure, but we are so very joyous together and have such identical aims and expectations of our lives that we never have conflict over any serious issues. I really don’t know how I existed before I met Ted.... (Plath 2010: 281)

Almost a year later, her thirst for endless descriptions of her husband’s qualities and phenomenal talent seems unquenched: “He combines intellect and grace of complex form, with lyrical music, male vigor and vitality, and moral commitment and love and awe of the world. O, he has everything.” (Plath 2010: 291)

In February 1961, Plath suffered a miscarriage. The unfortunate event coincided with a severe form of appendicitis, and she had to undergo surgery. She does not miss the occasion to praise Ted’s unabated availability and devotion: “I’m staying in bed and Ted is taking wonderful care of me. He is the most blessed, kind person in the world” (idem: 400). In September 1962, after Hughes left for London to continue his affair with Assia Wevill, Plath remembered the same period in a radically different light: “Ted beat me up physically a couple of days before my miscarriage: the baby I lost was due to be born on his birthday” (Plath 2018: 765). All controversy aside, the factual truth of the events will probably elude critics and readers, as it is not the purpose of solid criticism or thorough reading to unearth painful details in a tragic life story. It is, however, obvious that Plath often resorted to various strategies that helped her accept and overcome difficult details about her marriage, and it is the rule rather than the exception that she chose to overstate the situation in her letters to her mother. These details remain problematic, though. In her preface to *Plath’s Letters of 2018*, Frieda Hughes (2018: 13) questions “what [...] would qualify as a physical beating? A push? A shove? A swipe?”; she reinforces her opinion that, given the “vital” context that Plath’s marriage was collapsing, she was more inclined to hyperbolize its shortcomings.

There are many layers in the scholarship about the literary reflection of the Plath-Hughes marriage, and they have been outlined in earlier publications in the

1960's and the 1970's. Feminist critics like Marjorie Perloff (1979) and Jeannine Dobbs (1977: 23-24) highlight the political value of Plath's work as criticism of the 1950's American society, observing that the violent imagination of her *Ariel* poems are targeted towards her departing husband. He is the patriarchal oppressor who buried Plath in housework and child rearing, while he enjoyed public attention and the company of various other women. Others, like Harold Fromm, underline the relevance of her mental illness (Fromm 1990: 251). From this perspective, the breakdown of her marriage was the unavoidable consequence of her mental health issues, which ruined their relationship, not necessarily Hughes' extramarital affairs and emotional abandonment of his wife. In fact, upon reading these private texts, one can notice Plath's oscillation between an accusatory tone and a conciliatory one – she remarks that it is impossible to have a passionate marital relationship for six years, trying to normalize the cooling period they were experiencing in the summer of 1962.

The letters written to dr. Ruth Beuscher, published after decades of speculations regarding the volatile nature of the Plath-Hughes marriage, confirm that Sylvia Plath perceived some of her husband's acts as violence and abuse. Frieda Hughes was concerned that her parents' past would be exposed to public scrutiny, continuing a tradition of controversy that accompanied her mother's name like a bad spell. Since Plath trusted her psychiatrist with her most intimate thoughts, it is only reasonable to integrate her marital struggle within this paradigm of confessional exclusivity. As she declared in interviews after her patient's suicide, Beuscher destroyed some of Plath's letters, as she felt she needed to ease the burden of the immense guilt she felt after Plath's death. As it was later revealed, it was Beuscher who plainly advised Plath to divorce Hughes, encouraging her to extract herself from the malignancy of a relationship weakened by betrayal and abandonment.

In the final letter Plath wrote to Beuscher, on February 4, 1963, there were clear signs that she was willing to accept the demise of her marriage to Hughes. In a scholarly exercise meant to rationalize her irrational fixation with Hughes, Plath had read Erich Fromm's *The Art of Loving*, and identified her "idolâtrous love" for Hughes. However convulsive the final part, the marriage between the two writers was a significant catalyst, a transformative intellectual partnership that shaped both their careers and destinies as writers. Their divergent paths became evident once the pressure to publish, earn money, write, and manage a house, while raising two small children, started to put a strain on their relationship. Their apparently indestructible union started to falter and ultimately collapsed when Hughes openly pursued an affair with Wevill. Plath's desire for erotic exclusivity, complete devotion, and unabated support in their careers as writers was irreversibly damaged by Hughes' decision to follow the overpowering need to "experience everything and everybody" (Fromm 1990: 731). This much-debated document seems to warn of the impending fatal moment that would happen barely a week later. Plath wrote Beuscher that she felt the same way she did when she first attempted suicide, a decade earlier: "What appalls me is the return of my madness, my paralysis, my fear and vision of the worst – cowardly withdrawal, a mental hospital, lobotomies" (Plath 2018: 882). Eight years after the fateful events of February 11, 1963, Al Alvarez, a London literary critic and friend of the Hugheses, wrote that Plath's death was an unfortunate cry for help gone bad (Alvarez 1971: 36) A close reading of the impact her marital breakdown had on her mental state proves this claim might be disputable.

In the most relevant letters for the issue, written to Beuscher in the summer of 1962, Plath recreates an anatomy of her marriage that bears little resemblance to the picture painted in her letters to her mother. It is uncanny, though, that, in 1961, Plath described her domestic life in terms similar to those present in her letters to Aurelia Plath. The same fantasy of domestic happiness emerges, recurring like a fundamental need that must be fulfilled: “We want a town house, a Cornwall seaside house, a car & piles of children & books & have saved about \$8 thousand simply out of our writing in the past five years toward these dreams & feel in the next five years we may nearly approximate them.” (Plath 2018: 541)

Plath’s third letter, dated March 27, 1962, reloads the same scenario of idealized family life. The purchase of an old manor in dire need for restoration, but surrounded by luxurious vegetation, seems like another step towards the culmination of their dream to write, work, and raise their children in the proximity of nature. The simple life at Green Court, after the birth of their son, Nicholas in January 1962, is described like made up of essential events in Plath’s longed-for pastoral: “I have never felt the power of land before. I love owning bulbs & trees & all the happiness of my 17th summer on a farm comes back when I dig & prune & potter, very amateur” (Plath 2018: 695). She mentions the loss of a child suddenly, as if it were a foreseeable occurrence: “I had lost the baby that was supposed to be born on Ted’s birthday this summer at 4 months, which would have been more traumatic than it was, if I hadn’t had Frieda to console & reassure me. No apparent reason to miscarry, but I had my appendix out 3 weeks after, so tend to relate the two” (Plath 2018: 695). The event would be recounted in different terms in the autumn of 1962, when she mentioned Hughes’ violent outburst that may have led to the pregnancy loss.

Plath’s marital and mental struggle seems to evolve together in a toxic, dangerous connection, described in vitriolizing terms in her correspondence with Beuscher. To her disbelief, Hughes cynically affirms his unwillingness to guide his life and choices according to the emotional dynamics of his partner: “why should I limit myself by your happiness or unhappiness?” (idem: 731) Plath feels an intense need to examine herself in a harsh light, a symbolic punishment for having failed in making the idyll reality: “I have been a jinx, a chain” (ibid.) The logic and language of her letters to her mother resurface in bitter terms: “How could a true-love ever want to leave his truly-beloved for one second? We would experience Everything together.” (idem: 736) As a patient, Plath doesn’t hesitate to prove to her doctor that she was aware of the shortcomings of her life as Hughes’ wife: “For fear he would desert me forever, like my father, if I didn’t watch him closely enough.” (idem: 738) Plath’s arsenal as a woman scorned turns eviscerating once she writes about the woman who seduced her husband in a femme fatale manner: “What has this Weavy Asshole got that I haven’t, I thought: she can’t make a baby (and really isn’t so sorry), can’t make a book or a poem, just ads about bad bakery bread, wants to die before she gets old & loses her beauty, and is bored” (idem: 738).

Paradoxically, the whole disaster had some liminal beneficial effects on her, as if the suffering had a curative, revitalizing effect: “this great shock purged me of a lot of old fears. It was very like the old shock treatments I used to fear so: it broke a tight circuit wide open, a destructive circuit, a deadening circuit, & let in a lot of pain, air and real elation. I feel very elated” (ibid.) Hughes’ infidelities stimulate Plath’s destructive need to annihilate their idealized connection and turn it into a common urge – physical lust: “I have in me a good tart, as distinct from a bad tart.”

(*ibid.*) She appreciates Hughes' honesty in admitting guilt, as he had told her the "truth about the femme fatale, which freed my knowledge to sit about in the light of day, like an object, to be coped with, not hid like some hairy monster" paves the way for a perilous state of mind. "And I didn't die" (*ibid.*), Plath says of her reaction to her husband's confession. The brutality of the observation bears an important symbolic significance – ultimately, Plath did die, and her husband's betrayal and distancing from their family and home had a certain role in her suicidal act.

Plath's despair to normalize her situation and its myriad psychological implications become visible in discourse. Thus, letter-writing is instrumentalized as a therapeutic tool, a means to alleviate the catastrophic pressure of a massive inner landslide. Her statement that she no longer felt suicidal was, in fact, an alarming symptom, as Plath, the patient, clearly tried to restore her mental balance in the midst of what proved to be a fatal storm:

I don't think I'm a suicidal type any more, because I was really fascinated to see how, in the midst of genuine agony, it would all turn out & kept going. I really did believe it was the Worst Thing that could happen, Ted being unfaithful; or next worst to his dying. Now I am actually grateful it happened, I feel new. (Plath 2018: 737)

Her domestic fantasy suddenly turned empty and devoid of meaning, as the central player in her imaginary fairytale was suddenly absent: "All the stupid little things I did with love - baking bread, making pies, painting furniture, planting flowers, sewing baby things - seem silly and empty to me without faith in Ted's love." (Plath 2018: 737) Her correspondence with Beuscher from the summer of 1962 repeatedly warns, overtly or in a poorly disguised manner, of the major breakdown her marital woes were about to cause. Despite Hughes' practical support (he accompanies Plath in her search for a London flat, as owners were reluctant to let to a single woman with children) and a certain amiable code in which they agreed to manage their parental duties, Plath's mental crisis loomed large and insurmountable: "I have been at a nadir, very grim, since my last letter to you" (*idem*: 742), she confessed in letter from July 1962, adding, two months later, that "a legal separation may just set Ted whirling into this wonderful wonderful world where there are only tarts and no wives and only abortions and no babies and only hotels and no homes (*idem*: 757)".

4. Conclusion

The comparative reading of Silvia Plath's letters to her mother and her correspondence with her psychiatrist, cumulatively covering the 1956-1963 interval, reveals a double narrative regime: to her mother, Plath wanted to present a luminous, successful marriage, adding to her long string of accomplishments – academic, artistic, social, erotic and emotional. In April 1961, shortly after the alleged incident that led to her miscarriage, Plath declared triumphantly: "It is so marvelous having married Ted with no money and nothing in print and then having all my best intuitions prove true!" (Plath 2010: 410) It is a process described with an undeniable effort to create a novel-like narrative, if not directly a fictional account that fits the unrealistic dimension of Plath's fantasy of absolute marital communion, mutual support, and artistic growth. On a divergent note, the fourteen

letters she wrote to Ruth Beuscher can be read like a dystopian counterpoint, the opposite, grim version of the narrative created to impress her mother and possibly maintain, at least on a discursive level, the illusion of a compensatory fantasy that started to falter rather early in their marriage. In light of the newly published letters from the writer's ample correspondence, the Plath-Hughes marriage should be displaced from its limited role as life context, object of fascination and source of endless speculation for biographers, and reread as part of the personal mythology growing around the figure of one of last century's most important women writers.

References

- Alvarez, Al. 1971. *The Savage God. A Study on Suicide*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Chiasson, Dan. 2018. "Sylvia Plath's Last Letters" in *The New Yorker*, October 26, 2018. [Online]. Available: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/11/05/sylvia-plaths-last-letters> [Accessed September 10, 2022].
- Cooper, Brian. 2003. "Sylvia Plath and the Depression Continuum" in *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 96 (6), pp. 296-301.
- Ellis, Jonathan. 2011. "Mailed into Space: Sylvia Plath's Letter Writing" in Sally Bayley, Tracy Brain (eds.). *Representing Sylvia Plath*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 13-31.
- Fromm, Harold. 1990. "Sylvia Plath, Hunger Artist" in *Hudson Review* 43 (2), Summer 1990, pp. 245-256.
- Dobbs, Jeanine. 1977. "'Viciousness in the Kitchen': Sylvia Plath's Domestic Poetry" in *Modern Language Studies* 7 (2), pp. 11-25.
- Gill, Jo. 2008. *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hughes, Frieda. 2018. *Foreword to The Letters of Sylvia Plath*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Hughes, Ted. 1989. "The Place where Sylvia Plath should Rest in Peace". [Online]. Available: https://uploads.guim.co.uk/2016/03/18/Ted_Hughes_Sylvia_Plath_Letter_Guardian_20_April_1989.jpeg [Accessed September 17, 2022].
- Hughes, Ted. 1998. *Birthday Letters*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Perloff, Marjorie. 1979. "Sylvia Plath's 'Sivvy' Poems: A Portrait of the Poet as Daughter" in Gary Lane (ed.). *Sylvia Plath. New Views on the Poetry*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 155-178.
- Plath, Sylvia. 1975. *Letters Home*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Plath, Sylvia. 2018. *The Letters of Sylvia Plath*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Steinberg, Peter, Karen V. Kukil. 2018. *Introduction to The Letters of Sylvia Plath*, vol. 2. 1956-1963. New York: Harper Collins.
- Wagner-Martin, Linda. 2007. "Plath's Triumphant Women Poems" in Harold Bloom (ed.). *Blooms' Modern Critical Views. Sylvia Plath*. New York: Infobase Publishing.
- Young, David. 1998. "Tree with an Attitude: Reading Plath Irreverently" in *Field Contemporary Poetry and Poetics* 59, Fall, pp. 18-23.