
Sylvia Plath: The Elusiveness of the Author

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Abstract

This essay explores the meaning of the 'author', an idea already raised by Foucault and Barthes, as well as the effect of Genette's concept of 'paratexts', through the case study of Sylvia Plath. Though many have attempted to read her works as autobiographical, we cannot assume that Sylvia Plath, the person behind the author, can be directly accessed through her works, even through her journals and correspondence. Our understanding of Plath is also coloured by Ted Hughes, who has wielded immense influence over her posthumous perception and publications, and obscured much of her early life.

Key Words

Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, authorship, American literature, 20th century literature

Introduction

Sylvia Plath was an author whose works overshadowed her person. Though she died at the premature age of thirty, she produced an abundance of poetry, a novel, journals, and letters. Though her talent was celebrated in her lifetime, it was only after her death that her fame grew and turned her into one of the most important and widely recognised American writers. This was in no small part due to her estranged husband, Ted Hughes, himself an esteemed poet, who rigorously published what he believed to be her most worthy poems. The most prominent of her posthumous publications are *Ariel* in 1965 and *The Collected Poems* in 1981, the latter of which earned Plath the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1982. Plath's death by her own hand was another matter that continues to haunt and fascinate. Rose comments on the readers who believe her works are autobiographical, and seek some kind of premonition in her writings:

There are those who pathologise Plath, freely diagnose her as schizophrenic or psychotic, read her writings as symptom or warning, something we should both admire and avoid. Diagnosis of Plath tends to make her culpable – guilt by association with the troubles of the unconscious mind. (Rose, 1991, p. 3)

Then there were her journals and letters, published over a decade after her death despite some of them retained and destroyed by her family, which offer some insight on Plath as a person. Amidst all this, there is difficulty in distinguishing Plath from her fictionalised self in her works. How much can we trust her works, and hope to catch a glimpse of Plath, the person, behind the author? This essay will discuss whether the 'true' author can be found through Plath's works.

The Author and the Text: A Symbiotic Relationship

There can be no author without a text, just as there can be no parent without a child. The assertion of paternal rights of the author through the Moral Rights clause in the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988 technically names the author as the parent of their work. Beyond the author is their own person – the identity who has existed even before the publication of their very first work (termed ‘author-person’ for the rest of this essay). Gardiner has identified the author-person as the other ‘author’ in Barthes’ ‘The Death of the Author’: ‘a name that circulates independently of the individual and functions at once as the signed assertion of a property right, and as a vehicle for whatever significance of reputation that name has come to acquire’ (Gardiner, 2000b, p. 256). As such, the idea of an author can be said to exist between the author-person and the text.

The idea of the author is realised when a reader reads the text, but the idea can differ immensely between readers. The idea of the author can also evolve throughout time, as the reader reads another of their work and as what are termed by Genette as ‘paratexts’ – external elements surrounding a text which readers can derive from their copies – are altered by the publisher, bookseller, and all the other means a text goes through before reaching the reader, as illustrated in Darnton’s ‘The Communications Circuit’ (Darnton, 2002, p. 12). Though Plath died at the young age of thirty in 1963, Plath as the author continues to evolve due to posthumous publications, mostly due to the efforts of Hughes, and evolving paratexts, including the award of the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1982 for her work *The Collected Poems*, readings and reviews from critics, and decisions on newer formats and cover artworks by the publisher. The reader can understand these paratexts, even subconsciously, through their copy of the text. Beyond paratexts there are also epitexts, which may not be immediately understood from the copy of the text, but are nevertheless relevant to an author as meticulously studied as Plath. Epitexts are defined as ‘any paratextual element not materially appended to the text within the same volume but circulating, as it were, freely in a virtually limitless physical and social space’ (Genette, 1997). According to Gardiner, these can include reviews, responses, commentaries, and also ‘private epitexts – the correspondence, oral confidences and diaries of the author’ (Gardiner, 2000b, p. 258). Although these epitexts are not usually accessed by the casual

reader, memoirs of Plath's acquaintances and her now published *Journals* continue to alter more serious critics' idea of the author.

While we have accepted that the author comes into being with the reading of a text, it remains open to question what texts should be associated with the author. Michel Foucault asks that, even when an individual has been accepted as an author, whether everything they wrote, said and left behind should still be considered their work. 'The word "work" and the unity that it designates are probably as problematic as the status of the author's individuality.' (Foucault, 1980, p. 143-44) Examples of these questionable texts can be as wide-ranging as their unpublished grocery shopping lists. The idea is especially pertinent to Plath, when a great bulk of her work remained unpublished at her death. Furthermore, the 'hierarchy' of their works also affects the reader's perception of the author: for many decades, poems that have been labelled as 'juvenilia' by Hughes and relegated to the end of the posthumous *The Collected Poems* have been generally perceived as less important by readers. This is due to the conflation of Plath and Hughes as the author, and subsequently the reader is led to believe that the author-person of Plath has accorded the same importance, or lack of, to the selection of juvenilia, and hence dismiss them in their process of constructing the idea of Plath as an author.

Convergence of the Two 'Authors': Autobiographical Readings

While we have established that idea of the author, created by the reader from the text, is independent from the author-person beyond the text, the boundaries of the two can become hazy when the text is interpreted as an autobiography, and the psyche of the author and the author-person is thought to be one and the same. Plath's works have frequently been interpreted as autobiographical. Her family has complained about the proliferation of books, articles, documentaries and personal memoirs that take an autobiographical interpretation and created what can be said to be a 'Plath exploitation industry' (Bassnett, 2005, p. 1). However, such readings are understandable, especially when we consider how Plath herself has encouraged it by developing an 'inner myth' that hinges on her personal life. According to Bassnett:

Plath wrote in a highly individualistic way, developing her own private mythology through the use of keywords and symbols, weaving together themes and images in ways that are not always immediately obvious to the reader [...] Many studies of her writing seek to make connections with episodes in her life, and it is certainly true that on one level, Plath was a strongly autobiographical writer. (Bassnett, 2005, p. 2)

Critics have identified potent parallels between her works and her real-life incidents. The villanelle 'Mad Girl's Love Song' was written in 1953, after one of her many boyfriends, Myron Lotz, failed to show up on a date. Plath's suicide attempt in the same year by an overdose of sleeping pills is echoed in Esther Greenwood's attempt in *The Bell Jar*. The character Buddy Willard from *The Bell Jar* was inspired by another date, Dick Norton, who shared Buddy Willard's medical background and, according to Plath, hypocrisy towards women's sexuality. The poem 'Daddy' from *The Collected Poems* expresses rage against her father Otto Plath, her husband Hughes, and oppression from the male sex. According to Helen McNeil, though the elements of the poem do not entirely correspond to Otto Plath, its power lies in its ability in 'generating a duplicate of Plath's presumed psychic state in the reader, so that we reexperience her grief, rage masochism, and revenge, whether or not these fit the "facts".' (Stevenson, 1989, p. 265) Therefore, even when the reader recognises that the facts in the poem are not wholly autobiographical, they still believe they are connecting with the author-person's psyche. The poem 'Medusa' from the same collection, written a day after 'Daddy', attacks the mother of her inner myth. The autobiographical stance of 'Medusa' cannot be denied: Plath's mother, Aurelia, had joked with her about the two meanings of her name – 'golden' and 'jellyfish'. *Medusa* is also the name of a species of jellyfish, *aurelia*. The meaning of the attack would not have been lost on Plath's mother.

However, despite these autobiographical links, we should not be so ready to conflate the author and the author-person. In one of her journal entries, written at the age of eighteen, Plath exclaims:

I love people. Everybody. I love them, I think, as a stamp collector loves his collection. Every story, every incident, every bit of conversation is raw material for me. My love's not impersonal, yet not wholly subjective either. I would like to be everyone, a cripple, a dying man, a whore, and the come back to write about my thoughts, my emotions as that person. (Kukil, 2000, p. 9)

Indeed, many of her poems consist of her using the first person narrative to explore different consciousness, and bear no significance on her personal life.

Between these autobiographical and non-autobiographical readings, our interpretation is still limited by other works of Plath's, her journals and correspondence. They offer the most fruitful grounds for determining how much her other works correspond to her real life, so much that most critics automatically assume that her journals are a mouthpiece of the author-person, wholly truthful and artless. But let us now return to Foucault's question: what should be considered to be within an author's *oeuvre*? Arguably, since Plath did not intend to have her journals and letters published, they could be considered to be epitexts that add to our understanding of her poetry and novel, but it would be dangerous to believe that they lead us directly to the author-person. Memoirs, too, cannot be treated as a bridge between the author and author-person. A boyfriend, Gordon Lameyer, wrote in an unpublished memoir: 'I liked to see her as [a] combination of opposites: a Nasikaa who wanted to be a Calypso, a Dido who verged on being a Circe, an Artemis who was not far from becoming an Aphrodite.' (Wilson, 2013, p. 10) Some of her friends have also remarked on her elusiveness, how each has come to know a different version of Plath. Lameyer's quotation illustrates the slipperiness of memoirs: even his language is coloured by Plath's

poetry, reflecting her penchant for Greek mythology. The message is that through words alone, no matter how truthful the source seeks to be, we cannot fully access the author-person.

Is it Plath? Or is it Hughes?

Earlier, we have already briefly discussed the conflation of Plath and Hughes. After Plath's suicide, he became Plath's literary executor, and was responsible for how she was perceived, and he has for a while been accused of exercising too much control over her writings. His poetry collection, *Birthday Letters*, was published in 1998 and openly explored his relationship with Plath after many years of silence. However, his most powerful influence on the perception of Plath was how he decided what works were to be published or destroyed, since the distinction of Plath as the author and Hughes as the executor could not be immediately seen.

Hughes' greatest influence rested in his power to decide which works to publish. He was determined to market *Ariel* as the crowning glory of Plath's poetical career, while dismissing her earlier works, especially works written before their first meeting. 'In Hughes' view, the poetry she wrote towards the end of her life was the most important; anything that came before was mere dress rehearsal. Stories, letters, journal entries, poems – hundreds of them – were nothing more than "impurities", "by-products" of a process of transformation,' writes Wilson, whose book sheds light on Plath's early years which Hughes has buried. (Wilson, 2013, p. 5) Instead, Hughes has relegated her earlier poems to a small section at the end of the collection, and argues that Plath herself, had she been alive, would have conceded to this decision and even rejected these early poems. His argument is not entirely convincing, since Plath had written that the villanelle 'Mad Girl's Love Song' remained one of her favourites.

By destroying her earlier journals under the pretext that they were not suitable for their children's eyes, Hughes was effectively reshaping Plath as an author-person. Many of these attempts emphasised Hughes' importance in Plath's life, and erased her earlier years. For

instance, in his introduction to Plath's *Collected Poems*, Hughes claims that 1956, the year they met, marked the year when Plath started to move away from 'juvenilia'. (Wilson, 2013, p.6) These gestures mean that the importance of Plath's years before Hughes is diminished, even though Plath has literally dated hundreds of men before Hughes, and the experiences shaped her works. 'The implication is clear. Plath, as a poet (perhaps even as a woman) did not exist – so the argument goes – before she created these late poems.' (Wilson, 2013, p. 5) Robert Lowell, in his preface to *Ariel*, insists that Plath only became 'herself' when she wrote these poems. Hughes' great influence on Plath's posthumous works poses an obstacle in our understanding of both Plath the author and the author-person.

Conclusion: Sylvia Plath Today

After the death of Hughes in 1998, and with the great majority of her surviving works published, there now comes a limitation on how much our idea of Plath as an author can evolve. It is worth pondering whether paratexts still hold as much influence: *The Bell Jar*, possibly Plath's most widely read work, has gone through many editions and paratextual changes since its publication in 1963. There is the iconic 1966 Faber and Faber edition, whose monochromatic and disconcerting cover design reflects the heroine's downward spiral into depression. Then there are more innocent designs, depicting the face of a young girl, a flower, or a silhouette of New York City, which may appear to be more welcoming to readers. 2013 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *The Bell Jar*. Many have decried the sensual redesign by Faber and Faber that seems to trivialise the subject matter, but others also argue that the idea of Plath is so strongly entrenched that a new cover cannot alter our perception of the novel. For many readers, their understanding of Plath the author and author-person has been so established by Hughes, previous publishers and booksellers, and Plath herself that the power of paratexts is diminished.

While we can certainly endeavour to glean as much insight as possible about the context of Plath as an author and her works, it would be futile seeking to arrive at a fully objective outlook. Even in seemingly truthful texts such as journals and letters, and even to her contemporary acquaintances, we cannot expect Plath the author-person to fully emerge.

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