

*Aims and Objectives of SYLVIA PLATH & PLATO*

I am applying for a sabbatical to complete the research and writing for a second monograph on American poet Sylvia Plath, and to write and teach for the spring 2022 semester at Aristotle University in Thessaloniki, Greece, on a Fulbright fellowship. I was originally awarded the fellowship for spring 2021, but all European Fulbrights were delayed a full year because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

A brief description of both the monograph and the Fulbright project, which are linked, follows:

I will use my time in Greece in part to work on a new book project about the influence of Plato's dialogues on Sylvia Plath. This has a special tie-in to Fulbright, since Sylvia Plath encountered Plato's philosophy for the first time when she studied on a Fulbright at Cambridge University.

My sabbatical project will expand and revise an existing long paper I completed in graduate school, a comparative literary analysis about the influence of Plato's dialogues on Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* poems, which are generally understood as her masterpiece. Poems such as "Ariel," "Elm," "Totem," "Tulips," "Fever 103 Degrees" and many others will be deconstructed in light of Plath's close reading of Plato while at Cambridge, with special attention paid to the *Republic*, the Allegory of the Cave and the *Crito*. Plath's *Ariel* poems deal with multiple Platonic ideas, like achieving purity; achieving a state of ultimate knowledge; the forms; and suicide. The *Crito* is essentially the narrative of Socrates' suicide; some of Plath's late poems were famously written within days of her death by suicide. Previous psychological or biographical studies have attributed this only to depression—new work by biographers like Carl Rollyson and Heather Clark have reframed Plath's suicide as an act resembling something more like stoicism, or pragmatism, ideas explored by Socrates as he faces death by the state, but which he must achieve by drinking poison by his own hand.

I plan to conduct the majority of the research for the book in fall 2021. This work will necessarily include at least two trips back to the Mortimer Rare Book Room at Smith College, which houses all of Plath's editions of Plato. I will look at Plath's poems in light of the marginalia in these personal editions of Plato's dialogues. I spent a brief period looking at these in 2016 when I was at Smith doing research for *LOVING SYLVIA PLATH*, and noted that Plath wrote extensive notes in the margins of these books, many of which connect Plato to her personal experiences of studying abroad, and falling in love with British poet laureate Ted Hughes, whom she married during her Fulbright, in spring 1956. In this way, the marginalia give us a glimpse into Plath studying on her Fulbright in real time, and shed new light on her *Ariel* poems, which are its converse: they were composed in 1962-63, and Plath's and Hughes's marriage has fallen apart by that time.

In addition to the monograph, I plan to present portions of this research at a "Sylvia Plath and Fulbright" symposium, which will take place at Aristotle University in May 2022, and which was funded as part of the Fulbright fellowship.

*Background Work Already Accomplished*

My book *LOVING SYLVIA PLATH* is under contract with W.W. Norton & Co., and due out at the end of 2021. The Fulbright fellowship is devoted entirely to research, writing, and teaching a course on Sylvia Plath. Most recently, I received a travel fellowship from Emory University's Rose Library to spend another week there once it reopens, working in both Plath's and Hughes's archival collections.

In addition to completing both an undergraduate and graduate thesis on Plath, in the last three years I've published six articles about her in the influential journal *Literary Hub*: "Why Are We So Unwilling to Take Sylvia Plath at Her Word?" (2017), "What We Don't Know About Sylvia Plath" (2019), "Lessons From a Newly Discovered Sylvia Plath Story" (2019), "Sylvia Plath and the Communion of Women Who Know What She Went Through" (2020), "A New, Monumental Biography Shows Sylvia Plath As A Woman Of Her Time" (2020), and "No One Gets Sylvia Plath."



“Why Are We So Unwilling to Take Sylvia Plath at Her Word?” went instantly viral in literary and feminist writing communities. It was reprinted or cited by *Publishers Weekly*, the *Poetry Foundation* blog, “For Harriet,” Stanford University’s *The Book Haven*; *Longreads*; *Via Negativa*; *The Women’s Review of Books*; *Affinity*; and many other places. An excerpt from it has been used as the epigraph to Chelsea Dingman’s poem “Fugue,” from her recently released book *Through A Small Ghost* (University of Georgia Press, 2020), and cited in an article she wrote about the composition of the poem for *The Adroit Journal*. Additionally, it was cited by Emily Temple, a senior editor at *Literary Hub*, as her favorite essay of the year, and listed by *Literary Hub* as their third most-read article that year. Similarly, “What We Don’t Know About Sylvia Plath” (2019) was widely read and admired, and reblogged by the Modern Language Association. It is also quoted at length in scholar Carl Rollyson’s biography, *The Last Days of Sylvia Plath*, (University of Mississippi Press, 2020). Again, *Literary Hub*’s Emily Temple cited it as her favorite essay of the year.

Other work on Plath, including my essay for *Electric Literature* on “BikiniGate” (or the controversy about the UK cover of the first volume of Plath’s *Letters* featuring a picture of a 21-year old Plath in a bikini), has been well-received (the *Electric Literature* piece was also on their year-end Most Read list). In 2018, I was interviewed about my work on Plath by *The Smart Set*, a magazine published by the honors program at Drexel University, with the caveat that I was the editor’s favorite writer on Plath. In 2018, I was asked by *Harvard Review* to review the second volume of Plath’s *Letters*; this review was published July 9 of 2019.

The success of the writing discussed above has allowed me to work closely with some of the best living Plath scholars. In 2017, supported by a Provost Opportunity Grant, I was the first day’s anchor speaker at the *Sylvia Plath: Letters, Words, Fragments* conference at Ulster University in Belfast, Northern Ireland, where I was able to meet the co-editor of Plath’s *Letters*, Peter K. Steinberg. Peter and I have since worked together on an exhibit of the “Beuscher Letters,” or the last letters Plath wrote to her therapist, which were unknown to the public until 2016; the exhibit was displayed at Stockton University for six weeks in spring 2019. Peter and I also collaborated in spring 2019 on four classroom visits about Plath’s life and work, which culminated in a public lecture about the *Letters*. This project was funded by a 2020 Learning grant.

### *Procedures & Methodology*

This monograph is one of many new projects in Plath studies looking to explore previously uncredited influences in her poems and prose. It is primarily informed by archival/recovery research. Plath’s work has too often been pigeonholed as strictly “confessional,” or the anguished cry of a woman obsessed with death. This misunderstanding was worsened by limiting access to her archive during her husband Ted Hughes’s life time. As a result of this censorship, Sylvia Plath’s intensive literary and scholarly ambitions (her most recent biographer, noted scholar Heather Clark, calls her “one of the most educated women of her day”) have been largely overlooked; there is a vacuum of critical work on her intellectual influences. Despite the clear textual and archival evidence that Plath was heavily influenced by Plato, there is no published work on this topic. When I visited Smith College in 2016, the curator of her papers told me I was the first scholar to ask to see her editions of Plato in her 20+ years of working in the collection.

Since Hughes’s death in 1998, new primary materials by Plath have come out approximately every two years, with a huge archive made available for the first time by Emory University in January 2020. This slow trickle of new material also figures into my work on Plath in that I employ these new materials, but also write about how scholarly and popular misunderstandings of Plath arose because we went so long without them, in the tradition of feminist recovery work in the humanities.

The writing of this monograph will also use a combination of comparative literary theory and personal narrative. The majority of my work on Plath combines a scholarly interrogation of her writing and the reception of her writing with my own experience of being a Plath scholar and super fan. This book will be no different. It will weave personal narratives of my experiences into a continuous inquiry of how Plato’s



dialogues helped shape Plath's writing between 1956-1963. How, it will ask, do Plato's questions about suicide, the state, the nature of reality, and romantic versus Platonic love figure into Plath's work? How is Plath applying Platonic questions about politics to her contemporary political world (*Ariel*, for instance, was composed during the Cuban Missile Crisis)? How did Plath adopt and adapt Plato's ancient concepts for a modern, 20<sup>th</sup> century audience, and her unique poetic form? How has our neglect of this influence and these crucial questions led to a colossal misunderstanding of this landmark poet? And what does it mean for us to ask these questions in the America of Donald Trump's presidency and COVID-19?

Procedurally, I plan to complete the research for this book during summer and fall 2021, and write the bulk of the manuscript in Greece in spring 2022. I am only teaching one course in Greece, so will have the majority of my professional time there to complete the writing of the book.

### *Value Of SYLVIA PLATH AND PLATO*

For more than half a century, Sylvia Plath has been misunderstood as a woman on an inevitable path to suicide, a maniacal, grim depressive, obsessed with death. The truth is that she was a vibrant, innovative woman both of and well beyond her time. New work like *Red Comet: The Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath* (Knopf, 2020), the 1065-page biography of Plath by Heather Clark, has started the long process of understanding how Plath was influenced not just by her contemporaries like Anne Sexton and Robert Lowell, but by Eugene O'Neill, Thomas Hardy, Margaret Mitchell, and many others. Plath is something of a "red-headed stepchild" in the academy because she is often perceived as an intellectual lightweight. Sylvia Plath and Plato will join a chorus of voices correcting this wrong, and making Plath continuously relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### *Further Research or Study*

Most recently, I was invited to present a paper about Sylvia Plath at the forthcoming, first-annual Sylvia Plath Literary Festival in Hebden Bridge, West Yorkshire in October 2021. Last year I began a novel, tentatively called *1975*, about a character based loosely on renowned Plath scholar Judith Kroll, which begins when she receives a call from a rare books dealer in England, claiming to have Plath's last, burned journals.

### *Outcome*

The contract for *LOVING SYLVIA PLATH* contains a second, non-fiction book option; I am optimistic it will be used to publish this project.