

Sylvia

Reviewed by **Patricia L. Gibbs, Ph.D ©2005**

Introduction: “Daddy,” Hughes, and Projective Identification

The movie “Sylvia” is best seen as portraying a segment of Plath’s life – that which was spent with Ted Hughes. Because of this focus, the film omits crucial aspects of Sylvia Plath’s life and gives us a distorted and incomplete picture. Many of Plath’s poems have been understood as having feminist themes; however, I believe the film does not reflect this interpretation adequately. Nor does the film understand the complexity of Plath’s character from a sophisticated psychoanalytic perspective, or describe adequately the toxic effects Ted Hughes had upon Plath.

Plath’s poem “Daddy” is understood to reflect her belief that Hughes was a replacement for her father, who died when Sylvia was only nine years old. The poem, written after Plath discovered Hughes’s affair, is an angry depiction of her hostility towards her father and Ted, as well as her own self-destructive attraction to sadism. Plath writes: “Daddy, I have had to kill you. You died before I had the time. . . Every woman adores a Fascist, The boot in the face, the brute, Brute heart of a brute like you. . . Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through.”

The sadomasochistic nature of Plath’s relationship with Hughes can certainly be understood in unconscious, intrapsychic terms. In understanding Plath’s life, however, it is also important to consider environmental influences. I would like to consider some possible interpersonal processes between Plath and Hughes that may have affected Plath deeply. I think it is interesting that the woman in the film with whom Hughes had his affair later also committed suicide, and murdered the daughter whom Hughes had

fathered. I believe that understanding Plath's intrapsychic capacities within the intense interpersonal processes that were played out between herself and Hughes is essential. We do not live within the vacuum of our own intrapsychic processes, and the destructive forces of Hughes's deception and infidelity cannot be ignored. Our psychoanalytic theory explains this process, called projective identification, as having both intrapsychic and interpersonal aspects.

In considering of the force of Hughes's personality on Plath, I would like to mention a curious discovery I made while reading of one of Plath's books, entitled *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*. The book was originally published in 1952, and was copyrighted by Sylvia Plath from 1952 through 1962, until her death, in her name. Because Plath was still married to Hughes at the time of her death, under British law he inherited her estate, including all the rights to her manuscripts. In 1977, Hughes printed *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, assuming the copyright name in 1977 and 1979. In the introduction that he then dared to write for Plath's book, he says: "No doubt one of the weaknesses of these stories is that she did not let herself be objective enough." Plath's comment in the movie that her problem is that she has "a husband who thinks he can tell her how to write" takes on significance in this context.

I would argue that there is something simply WRONG about Hughes's betraying and deceiving Plath as he did and then offering any criticism or claiming any ownership of any kind, over her work and its merits or weaknesses.

The Feminist Perspective

Once Hughes took possession of Plath's work and copyright, the Estate severely restricted access to her material. Several authors made charges of censorship. In his introduction to her "Collected Poems," published by Hughes in 1982, he states that he "omitted some of the more personally aggressive poems from 1962," and he says he might have omitted one or two more, if Plath had not previously published them in magazines. And this is where I would say the feminist viewpoint has a legitimate claim against the corruption of male privilege and power. Can we imagine that any writer would want her creative products to be criticized – how else to say this – OBJECTIVELY? Hughes's allegation that Plath's weakness lies in her lack of objectivity should be applied to himself. The fact that he so intimately knows his author, and has been the very subject of so many of her resentments and hatreds, would seem to immediately disqualify him as a fair and objective critic of her work. Hughes's possession and control of Plath's work after her death, and his restriction and manipulation of it, is completely absent in the film. I believe this omission can be seen as reflecting the very sexism that still defines many aspects of our culture – including the sexism involved in biographical depiction in the film industry.

The movie hints at the possibility of misogyny and sexism as a theme of importance in understanding Plath's life, but falls well short of developing these into a clear themes or opinions. I believe this omission can be seen as reflecting the very sexism that still defines many aspects of our culture – including the sexism involved in biographical privilege in the film industry. Hughes' possession and control of Plath's work after her death, and his restriction and manipulation of it, is completely absent in

the film. History is written, some would argue, by whoever owns history. In this case it is HE who owes her story – there was no her story without Hughes judging what was to be written and published.

Murderous Rage and Psychosis

The murderous rage that was such an important part of Plath's unconscious self-destructiveness is best understood in psychoanalytic terms. Aspects of Plath's relationship with her mother will help us understand some of this murderous rage. The movie does not reveal the enormous role Sylvia's mother had in her becoming a writer. Aurelia actively encouraged her daughter to become a writer, bought her diaries, and entered her in writing contests as an adolescent. Plath writes in her early diaries of hating her mother; however, her deep and frequent lifelong correspondence with her mother continued right up to her suicide. The movie illuminates none of this for us.

The failure to understand Plath in terms of her most widely known work, *The Bell Jar*, is, I believe, another major failing of the movie. The novel allows us to understand Plath's murderous rage much more meaningfully than does the movie. At one point in the novel, which Plath did consider to be autobiographical, Ester sleeps in the same room with her mother. In the streetlight filtering through the blinds, Ester describes the pin curls on her mother's head, as "a row of little bayonets." Sleeping with her mouth open slightly, her mother begins to snore. "The piggish noise irritated me," Ester says, and she tells herself the only way to stop it would be "to take the column of skin and sinew from which it rose and twist it to silence between my hands." Tragically, Plath's unconscious murderous rage motivated her to repeatedly seek revenge, destruction, and death, throughout her life.

Indeed, Marjorie Perloff, in reviewing Plath's work and life, states: "Plath's suicide was inevitable . . . it was brought on, not by her actual circumstances, but by her essential and seemingly incurable schizophrenia." Her novel *The Bell Jar* is considered by many to offer insight into the experience of schizophrenia and psychotic depression. It also reveals the impact that Plath's hospitalization and electroshock treatments had upon her. The movie, unfortunately, tells us little about Plath's work on *The Bell Jar*, or anything at all about her nervous breakdown, hospitalization, and treatment.

Harold Searles is a psychoanalyst who has developed our most comprehensive psychoanalytic understanding of schizophrenia. Searles speaks about the schizophrenics' constant experience of what he calls, "the inevitability of death." This aspect of the schizophrenic experience can certainly be seen throughout Plath's life. The movie, unfortunately, tells us little about Plath's work on "The Bell Jar," or anything at all about her nervous breakdown, or the effects of her hospitalization and treatment. Ronald Hayman; however, in his biography of Plath, claims that the shock therapy that Plath received after her 1954 breakdown changed her relationship with her mother forever, whom she blamed for authorizing the ECT. In *The Bell Jar*, Plath speaks about the shock treatments, saying: "When Ester tries to smile, she finds her skin has gone stiff, like parchment. The doctor fits metal plates on either side of her head, buckles them into place with a strap. . . She shuts her eyes, . . . something shakes her like the end of the world, shrilling through an air crackling with blue light . . . to make it feel like her bones would break and the sap fly out of her." The movie's avoidance of the pain involved in Plath's breakdown, suicide attempt, and psychiatric treatment is striking, and gives us an inauthentic reflection of her life.

Plath's Motherhood and the Unconscious

Finally, I'd like to offer a brief consideration of Plath's motherhood. The particulars of Plath's suicide force us to remember that she was a mother who killed herself. Hayman says that Plath's last poems were filled with hate towards her mother. I frankly see more man-hating than mother-hating in Plath's last poems, such as "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus." But it doesn't matter, of course, since conscious experiences reflecting hate and murderousness are always associated with an unconscious experience of a hateful and murderous SELF. There is no difference between the self and the object unconsciously. So, perhaps Plath's last poems do help us understand something about her experience of motherhood.

Borrowing again from psychoanalysis, we know that those we consciously claim to hate, we unconsciously identify with. And every mother knows the mixed feelings involved in seeing one's own mother in ourselves as we mother our children. I believe that loving mothers commit suicide MOSTLY because they are convinced that their children are better off without them. Plath would be horrified to see herself filled with the very hatred and murderousness she saw in her own mother, Hughes, or anyone else.

The movie's focus on Plath's relationship with Hughes lends itself to an understanding of Plath that is incorrect and incomplete. Feminist themes are undeveloped, and exclude Hughes's posthumous control and manipulation of Plath's work. Psychodynamic influences pale in the movie's understanding of Plath. A psychoanalytic understanding of Plath's unconscious murderous rage and self-destructiveness would have added valid insight into the film's depiction of Sylvia Plath.