

The light of the mind: a review of Heather Clark's *Red Comet: The Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath* (2020).

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In the fall of 1959, at the prestigious writers' colony of Yaddo in the United States, Sylvia Plath found herself free from her domestic chores and finally able to separate her writing from her husband's, liberating herself from the role of Ted Hughes's wife or agent, and owning her voice as a writer. This is one of the many experiences of her literary life. As she once explained in a letter home and as quoted on the epigraph of her newest biography, she had to “earn the name of ‘writer’ over again, with much wrestling” (*Letters Vol. 1* 1261). From the magical “Stardust” to the lost remains of “Double Exposure,” Plath wrestled her whole life; and her blazing journey as a writer is the story that *Red Comet: The Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath* (2020) tries to tell. Published by Knopf on October 27, 2020 (what would be Plath's 88th birthday), Heather Clark's new book is a celebration of Plath's artistic life and literary development. The author has already published another book on Plath, *The Grief of Influence: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (2011), focusing on the poet's marriage with Hughes and their literary partnership.

In the book's prologue, Clark argues that Plath's resilience and hard work are usually shadowed by her suicide, as the public recognition of this literary figure is often linked with her precocious death, or even to her beauty – a “Marilyn Monroe of the literati” (Prologue loc390). When the biographer decides, then, to break with these notions and write a book that will trace Plath's “literary and intellectual development rather than her undoing” (Prologue loc408), she surely delivers. In a conversation with Amanda Golden at the Irish launch of *Red Comet*, Clark reveals that she focused the eight-year writing process of her work on one question: “how did Sylvia Plath become the writer that she became?” (“English Department Maynooth University,” 00:20:34-00:20:37). This simple but powerful inquiry is the backbone of this thought-provoking book, which puts Plath's astonishing literary life and academic work into

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the spotlight, instead of just her struggles with mental health or the tragedy of her death. In “offer[ing] an alternative narrative to the Plath myth” (Prologue loc433), Clark manages to “recover what Plath gave to us rather than what she gave up” (Prologue loc425).

In fact, with frequent and attentive recourse to archival sources, published and unpublished, such as her letters, journals, poems, scrapbooks, schedules, teaching and reading notes, finished and unfinished manuscripts, photographs, and various interviews (of Plath, by Plath, and of people who knew her) a variety of voices, including Plath’s own, echo in this book. Clark is exceptional in dealing with documents as both biographer and literary critic, attending not only to the later works that would win her a posthumous Pulitzer but also to Plath’s early writings, composed much earlier than even the ones Hughes selected for the “Juvenilia” end section of the 1981 *Collected Poems*. This is the biography of a creative artist and the work is considered just as much as the life: there is a continuum between the attention given to letters, journals and interviews, and the analysis of the poems and short stories, connecting their genesis, form, and content to a creative reworking of Plath’s life. One example is when the biographer analyses “Sunday at the Mintons,” one of Plath’s successful early short stories, written in the spring vacation of 1952. After explaining the plot and showing the connection between the author, her boyfriend, and the main characters of the story (“[she] contrasted her emotional and subjective self against Dick’s rational, scientific self” (193)), Clark uses the work to explain how “Plath hid in plain sight the truth she dared not admit: the thought of a future with Dick was suffocating” (193). Here, we go beyond the representation of Dick Norton as Buddy Willard in *The Bell Jar* (1963), and we perceive how years before her first novel, Plath would already project people from her life into characters, using her fiction to understand herself, her thoughts, and feelings.

Concerning her poetry, the development of Plath’s poetic voice is also emphasized by Clark’s analyses. In her reading of “A Winter Sunset,” a poem written in 1946, Clark observes how we can perceive “the first sound of Plath’s mature poetic voice” (80), and the “several tropes that would reappear in [her] later work: a cold moon, liminal evening light, winter frost, and black, menacing trees” (80). We also become more familiar with Plath’s poetic work through Clark’s organization of her vocabulary (“bones, mist, ice, sun, blood, stone, skulls, hags, moons, stars, hearts, flames, wind, and flowers” (356)), common themes (“spring (and false springs), unrequited love, time passing, ennui, storms, and death” (356)), and their development throughout her life (“Plath ended *Ariel* with “Wintering,” making the last word “spring”—the symbol of rebirth and regeneration that had been an aesthetic leitmotif and touchstone since childhood” (770)).

Readers and scholars interested in life writing will also delight themselves in finding transcriptions of Plath’s juvenilia. As an avid reader of Plath’s personal writings and as someone researching how she would construct her (many) identities through her narrativization of life, having the opportunity to read some of the content of her

early journals and scrapbooks proved to be one of the many gifts that this biography brings. This allowed me to see little details of her life that already pointed to the kind of poet she would become, such as when she describes the “gooseflesh” she once felt when her mother read her a poem in 1940: “I did not know what made it. I was not cold. Had a ghost passed over? No, it was the poetry” (qtd. in Clark, 38). Moreover, with the biographer’s meticulous work as a literary scholar, it was possible to see how the scrapbooks and journals helped to create her fiction. We can observe this when Clark juxtaposes Plath’s love for the ocean, as detailed in her 1940s scrapbook (“I gradually developed a love for the stormy, turbulent ocean that few people can understand” (qtd. in Clark, 36)) and in her 1949 short story “The Green Rock” (“as she stared out at the ocean, she wondered if she could ever explain to anyone how she felt about the sea” (qtd. in Clark, 36)). Clark concludes that the story seems to “come straight out of [Plath’s] scrapbook” (36), which helps us understand better how her life writing, fiction, and poetry can work together, unified by Plath’s ardent urge to record, make sense, and write.

The making of a writer also implies her journey as a reader: constant mentions to Plath’s readings fill out the pages of *Red Comet*. Clark argues that “her reading had influenced her sense of self” (183): more than simply references that inspired her, the books she read were in constant conversation with her life experiences and the themes in her writing. Throughout the book and just like in Plath’s works, reality and fiction intertwine as stories and myths shape her perceptions of the world and the people she met. This biography also helps categorize all the “male muses” (65) and “psychic brothers” (96) that Plath had, and the mythical associations she would bring to each of them. This detail aids passionate readers of her diaries and journals who, like me, would sometimes have difficulty keeping track of her lovers, as Plath would often date different men at the same time. Names, feelings, and experiences would frequently overlap in her private writings. Instead of seeing Plath’s relationships with men simply as “dating,” Clark sees the importance of these male figures in her life and poetry, organizing the imagery that Plath attributed to each one of her “gods”: “Eddie Cohen was Plath’s first beatnik” (143); “Dick Norton would be a blond god, Mallory Wober Hercules, Ted Hughes Adam” (65); Gordon Lameyer was her Joycean lover, Richard Sassoon “she saw as Rimbaud” (381); and, finally, “Al [Alvarez] was Gulliver” (808).

If literature helped frame Plath’s understanding of the various male lovers, it was also crucial in other aspects of her life, from her choice to move to one of W. B. Yeats’s houses in London to her attempt at understanding her own mind in her Smith senior thesis on Dostoevsky. Clark considers how “[Plath] tried to understand her own depression intellectually through the work of Fyodor Dostoevsky, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Virginia Woolf, Thomas Mann, Erich Fromm, and others. Self-medication, for Plath, meant analyzing the idea of a schizoid self in her honors thesis on *The Brothers Karamazov*” (Prologue loc457-459). This would also be repeated later on in 1963, when Plath would use Erich Fromm’s *The art of loving* (1956) to try to understand the dissolution of her marriage with Hughes. The book, recommended by Dr. Beuscher

(Plath's psychiatrist), gave her insights on how she felt about her husband: "She feared that she had suffered from what Erich Fromm ... called 'Idoltrous Love': 'I lost myself in Ted instead of finding myself.' She had made him 'both idol & father.' Still, ... she wanted to take charge of her own life" (868). This biography can then be considered to surpass the function of merely telling a story of Sylvia Plath's life to show how literature and writing helped her in hard times. Whether it was to romanticize her life or to understand her mind, books played an essential role in Plath's life and art, and Clark makes sure to emphasize all the many instances of this.

Even though the biography follows a chronological order of Plath's life, past, present, and future are constantly contrasted in the chapters, which helps to bring intimations of who Plath would become as opposed to the person, writer, and reader she once was. We can thus identify the aforementioned leading question in the biography and piece together how Sylvia Plath became the writer she became. The use of multiple sources, some documentary and others from interviews, creates a composite image of Plath that goes beyond the "Plath myth" of beauty and tragedy. Clark is just as careful in handling Plath's writings, stories, poems and notes as she is with the testimony of others, either granted during the research for the biography or in previously conducted interviews by various Plath scholars. Clark allows for contradictions to emerge, revealing that the work of memory can produce different versions of a given anecdote or event. It is not the case that most of the sources Clark uses were previously unavailable; Plath scholars and readers experienced a similar excitement when Karen V. Kukil published *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* in 2000 and, more recently, with her and Peter Steinberg's two volumes of *The Letters of Sylvia Plath* (published in 2017 and 2018). Clark's feat is in the juxtaposition of these and other materials in the 35+ chapters that compose this book, managing to emphasize Plath's artistic journey as she tried to be the perfect writer, wife, and mother in a world that was male-dominated and restrictive to ambitious and perfectionist women like her. Although often overcome by shadows, Clark shows how Plath would always seek "the light of the mind," trying to "feed this clarion flame with literature, art, philosophy, drama, travel, love—anything to prevent its extinguishment" (896). *Red Comet* is the biography Sylvia Plath deserves.

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