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978-0-521-86726-9 - The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath

Jo Gill

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*The Cambridge Introduction to
Sylvia Plath*

Sylvia Plath is widely recognised as one of the leading figures in twentieth-century Anglo-American literature and culture. Her work has remained constantly in print in the UK and USA (and in numerous translated editions) since the appearance of her first collection in 1960. Plath's own writing has been supplemented over the decades by a wealth of critical and biographical material. *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath* offers an authoritative and comprehensive guide to Plath's poetry, prose and autobiographical writings. It offers a critical overview of key readings, debates and issues from almost fifty years of Plath scholarship; draws attention to the historical, literary, national and gender contexts which provide the framework for her writing; and provides informed and attentive readings of her work. Accessibly written, this book will be of great value to students beginning their explorations of this important writer.

Jo Gill is Lecturer in Twentieth-Century Literature at the University of Exeter.

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Preface

Sylvia Plath is widely recognised as one of the leading figures in twentieth-century literature and culture. Although in her lifetime she published only one collection of poems, *The Colossus*, and one novel, *The Bell Jar*, the posthumous publication of the magnificent poems of *Ariel*, of her edgy and finely crafted stories and sketches, and of her *Letters Home* and *Journals* have consolidated her position as one of her age's most important and influential writers. As Marjorie Perloff puts it: 'This is a body of work quite unprecedented in twentieth-century American poetry.'¹

From its first appearance, Plath's writing has remained constantly in print on both sides of the Atlantic and in numerous other countries in translated editions. The Plath catalogue continues to expand, with recent unabridged editions of the *Journals* and a new 'restored' edition of *Ariel* offering further material for readers to consider. From the outset, her work has been accompanied by a plethora of scholarly responses and interpretations and each new Plath edition stimulates yet more. The first aim of *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath* is to offer new readers an accessible, authoritative and comprehensive guide to Plath's writing. The second is to provide an incisive and insightful overview of key tendencies and developments in Plath criticism. This is an immense and varied field. I have tried in the discussions that follow to offer fair summaries of distinct and valuable perspectives and to present a representative range of critical voices. In my analyses both of the primary work and of the secondary criticism, it has been necessary to be selective. In the case of the latter, the guide to further reading which closes the book offers a list of critical resources that students who wish to continue their studies independently can pursue. In the case of the former, the aim of this *Introduction* has been to cover as wide a range of poems and stories as possible, while reserving sufficient space to address key texts in the detail they deserve. Inevitably, there are poems that this introductory book has not had space to consider or to read as fully as the poems themselves demand. Nevertheless, I hope that the examples, arguments and resources that are included will inform and inspire readers' own further readings and evaluations of a range of additional works.

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The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath begins with an overview of Plath's life and of the literary and historical contexts in which her work was produced and read (Chapters 1 and 2). The next three chapters assess the early poetry, *Ariel* and later poems, and *The Bell Jar* and other prose in some detail. Chapter 6 examines the background and substance of Plath's *Letters Home* and *Journals*, while the final chapter surveys biographies of Plath and provides an analysis of the critical reception of her work.

Inevitably, an *Introduction* such as this owes a debt to the many excellent scholars who have gone before. Their contributions to Plath studies and to my own understanding of the field are acknowledged throughout the book. Finally, this book is intended as an introduction for students and general readers of Plath and is conceived as a supplement to the primary texts. This *Introduction* aims to open out Plath's writing to nuanced and informed interpretation, not to replace a close reading of her own words.

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Abbreviations and textual note

Unless otherwise indicated, poems discussed in this volume are from Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (London: Faber and Faber; New York: Harper & Row, 1981). References to this and other primary sources are to the English editions.

- A Rest.* Sylvia Plath, *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, ed. Frieda Hughes (London: Faber and Faber, 2004).
- Bib* Stephen Tabor, *Sylvia Plath: An Analytical Bibliography* (London: Mansell; Westport, CT: Meckler, 1987).
- BJ* Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (London: Heinemann, 1963 (under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas); London: Faber and Faber, 1966; New York: Harper & Row, 1971 (as Sylvia Plath)).
- BL* Ted Hughes, *Birthday Letters* (London: Faber and Faber; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998).
- CP* Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (London: Faber and Faber; New York: Harper & Row, 1981).
- J* Sylvia Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath: 1950–1962*, ed. Karen V. Kukil (London: Faber and Faber, 2000); *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Anchor, 2000).
- J Abr.* Sylvia Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, ed. Ted Hughes and Frances McCullough (New York: Dial, 1982) (abridged edition).
- JP* Sylvia Plath, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* (London: Faber and Faber, 1977; New York: Harper & Row, 1979).
- LH* Sylvia Plath, *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950–1963*, ed. Aurelia Plath (New York: Harper & Row, 1975; London: Faber and Faber, 1976).
- LTH* Ted Hughes, *Letters of Ted Hughes*, ed. Christopher Reid (London: Faber and Faber, 2007; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2008).
- PS* Peter Orr, ed., *The Poet Speaks: Interviews with Contemporary Poets* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966).

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- WP Ted Hughes, *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*, ed. William Scammell
(London: Faber and Faber, 1994).
- WT Sylvia Plath, *Winter Trees* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971;
New York: Harper & Row, 1972).