

Sylvia

Dir: Christine Jeffs, UK, 2003

A review by Diane R. Wiener, University of Arizona, USA

I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart: I am, I am, I am."

Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*.

While there was attention paid to her -- however inadequate it may have been -- during her short lifetime, since the famous death of the actual person Sylvia Plath in 1963 there has been a plethora of complex and often competing 'Sylvia Plaths' that have been re-presented to members of consuming global audiences. Plath's life and death are filtered through an industry of media images, autobiographical and literary analyses, and feminist theories of various orientations and persuasions.

Sylvia Plath was apparently familiar with the ambivalences attendant to representation when she wrote her autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas. As has been argued in myriad texts, in *The Bell Jar*, like in many of her earlier works and diaries, Plath also seemed keenly aware of her fraught and not uncommon positionality as a conflicted, intelligent middle class woman living in a suburban landscape during a time of trenchant gender expectations in England and the United States (Evans, 2000). These particular aspects of her persona are disturbingly but befittingly highlighted in the latest Plathian cinematic rendering, Christine Jeffs' *Sylvia*.

As Jeffs' film indicates, Plath's posthumous symbolic potential is seemingly endless, as is the range of its instantiations -- Plath (or, rather, her re-presentation) has become, among other things: an icon for the generationally varied dissatisfactions and difficulties in being a mid-to-late twentieth and early twenty-first century (middle class) "wife and mother" who also has aspirations as a "career woman"; a poster child to demand societal aid for suicidal parents; a theoretically strategic straw (wo)man for some feminist critics and teachers who are understanding of and/or angry at her choice to end her life, and who assertively seek out and want "better role models" than Plath for young women in the academy and elsewhere; a seething commentary on the tragedy of premature death and abandoned children; and a wholesale plea to combat gender inequity. Many of these paradigms are suggested or evidenced in Jeffs' film.

Judith Butler remarks, "It is one of the ambivalent implications of the decentering of the subject to have one's writing be the site of a necessary and inevitable expropriation" (Butler, 1993: 241). Symbol, icon, poster child, straw (wo)man, commentary, plea, and so on, the gathering of stories fashioned out of "Plath" -- a collectivity of "decentered," ongoing, and complex discursive interplays between Plath's self-told story in her own writing, her truncated life, and her death -- like her novel *The Bell Jar*, is constructed from stretched out and varied pluralizable narratives, which in turn may be read as sites or illustrations of "expropriation."

Sympathetic viewers and readers may wonder how the embodied, material, or "real" person Plath might respond if she could to *Sylvia*, as well as to the other images and tales made of or woven about her. Moreover, the obsessive curiosity -- and perhaps sometimes the well-meaning empathy -- revolving around Plath's legacy may be extended to ask how her children have fared, and how they feel today in the wake of the perpetual interpretive hype surrounding (or ensnaring?) their mother's memory, to which I am now also contributing.

In the latest of these mainstream image set incarnations, Christine Jeffs' *Sylvia* at times plays rough and dirty with the perception that Plath indeed surrendered her rights entirely when she put her life to pen and then took that life but not what she had written about it. In Jeffs' film, it is as if Plath did not just take her own life one cold day and thus terribly absent herself forever from the wretchedly depicted Ted Hughes and their children, friends, and family, but that "Plath" as trope and person in her unwitting and non-consensual ironic endlessness is being simultaneously honored and punished in paradoxical ways for taking herself away from "us," the expectant and voyeuristic viewers, the public world.

The film's deeply uncomfortable nude scenes exemplify this honor and punishment framework, and they are accomplished with creepy skill by Gwyneth Paltrow (as Plath). These unsubtle and largely predictable scenes are offered for our consumption by means of melodramatic excesses, using a familiar blending of dim lighting and mournful, dramatic music. The brief scene of Plath naked and alone on her couch is teeming with well-rehearsed stereotypes and presumptions regarding her isolation, sense of rejection, and resigned state of unrelenting pain and injury.

The scene of Plath alone on her couch immediately follows and is explained by a sexually explicit scene between Plath and a fed-up, openly unfaithful Ted Hughes (Daniel Craig), who is visiting at her desperate request but from whom she is already separated. The film explains that Hughes has understandably abandoned her in his impatience and defeat because she is so difficult to live with, and he has sought the love of another woman whom he refuses to leave because she is pregnant with his child. After he and Plath have had sex, he unblinkingly explains his reasoning for his choice not to leave his lover, and it is implied that he will not return to Plath. Hughes' admission is uttered after he first confesses that he has "missed" Plath when, while lying in his arms on the couch, she has naively explained to him how she and he are destined to be together forever.

During and after the sex scene, Hughes as seen from Plath's point-of-view has engaged in a "pity fling," while Plath is depicted as having pathetically tried to win him back. In the two nude scenes, which occur shortly before the suicide scene, Hughes' demonization is presented to heroize and honor the victimized and wronged Plath. This victimization is specifically emphasized in the scene of Plath alone after Hughes has left her yet again. However, the film also unequivocally and differentially genders Paltrow's sexualized body as "negative" and Craig's sexualized body as "positive." Paltrow as Plath is coded as weak, frail, and submissive in close-ups and medium shots both on her own and in contrast with Craig. Conversely, and not surprisingly, Craig as Hughes is exoticized as strongly muscled, virile, and "hunky." The dialogue, sequencing, bodily messages, and manipulative lighting and music deployed in these scenes are both honoring and punishing of Plath.

The entire film and the nude scenes in particular index a representational chasm between two sets of tropes and truisms: Plath as a living private person with a multifaceted existence who happened to take her life; and Plath in her posthumous life as it has been maneuvered and

partially taken from her by a morbidly fascinated viewing public. As suggested above, among those who are familiar with Plath as both a person and a presence, there has of course always been a range of reactions to and feelings about her and her brief life's end. Some members of this film's audience probably feel unforgiving, angry, upset, intrusive, ravenous, and just plain judgmental. Others in this imagined audience are perhaps understanding and have a modicum of sympathy for Plath, and a few may have mixed feelings, too.

In its conclusion, the film problematically stakes a disturbing ideological claim: Hughes' abandonment and betrayal of and refusal to return to Plath were the ultimate precipitating factors in her decision to commit suicide, and beyond being "the last straw," this set of behaviors on his behalf were the most important causative elements for her death. Hughes is convincingly portrayed by Craig as having a nuanced combination of qualities including frustration, disappointment, compassion, and exploitative, selfish meanness. The film's screenplay was largely influenced by what has been described by critics as Hughes' "response" to Plath in his accounting of their life in *Birthday Letters* (1998). Thus, a specific version of the Plath story is perpetuated by the end of Jeffs' project: Plath was a victim, in her deliberate death she victimized her children, and we as audience members should be upset at how she suffered and was betrayed, but ought not to forgive her for the ghastly decisions she made in the wake of her pain.

Earlier scenes in the movie allude to Plath's relationship with an abusive father and effectively bear witness to the impossibility of her pleasing her difficult mother (played by Paltrow's mother, Blythe Danner). The film likewise attempts to create a picture for the audience of Plath's inner worlds by showing her frustration with her domestic entrapment, her dissatisfaction with a sexist literary environment, her history of despair, and the problems attendant to living with a pushy, charismatic, selfish, dishonest, unhappy, and ultimately privileged husband. Unfortunately, Jeffs eventually lets us down by letting us know that it was "really" (and mostly) Plath's failed marriage that did her in. Despite the potential for a complicated set of audience reactions that exist on a spectrum, and the ways that the film does portray the variegated course of Plath's rich life, Jeffs ends with and encourages a troubling stance toward Plath and her remembrance that is as disrespectful as it is simplistic.

References:

Butler, Judith (1993) *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* New York: Routledge.

Evans, Mary (2000) Extending Autobiography: A Discussion of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, in Tess Cosslett, Celia Lury, and Penny Summerfield (eds.), *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 76-88.