

**To cite this article:** Faden Gürbüz, N. (2021). Sylvia Plath's Journals' Correlation with the Film Sylvia. International Journal of Social and Humanities Sciences (IJSHS), 5(1), 69-82

**Submitted:** May 05, 2021

**Accepted:** June 12, 2021

## SYLVIA PLATH'S *JOURNALS*' CORRELATION WITH THE FILM *SYLVIA*<sup>1</sup>

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### ÖZET

Bu makale, Sylvia Plath's *Journals*'i ile Christine Jeffs'in yönettiği ve John Brownlow'un senaryosunu yazdığı *Sylvia* filmi arasındaki ilişkiyi, filmin anıları seslendirme ve ekrana taşıma açısından ne kadar etkili olduğunu incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Sylvia Plath's *Journals*, hem oto biyografik bir metin hem de edebi bir metin yönü taşımaktadır, edebi bir kişilik yönü olan şair Plath tarafından kaleme alındığı için. *Sylvia* filminin Plath'ın *Journals* eseri ile nasıl bir ilişkisi olduğuna dikkat çekilerek, film uyarlamasının sosyal temsilin bir sonucu olarak edebiyat, okuyucular üzerinde etkileri olduğunu ortaya çıkarmak ve ne derecede etkili bir iletişim biçimi olduğu araştırılacaktır. Ayrıca, *Journals*'ta ön plana çıkan kadın rolleri, psikolojik ve entellektüel düşüncelerinin ekrana yansıtılırken hangi araçlar ve yöntemler kullanıldığı belirlenecektir. Yapılan analiz, günlüklerden ve Plath'ın çalkantılı yaşamından uyarlanan filmin şairin özellikle belirgin yönlerini psikolojik sorunlarını gün yüzüne çıkarmış olduğunu ve günlük okuyucuları ve film izleyicileri arasında oluşan çeşitli farklı algıları incelemeyi teşvik ediyor.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Sylvia Plath, Dergiler, şiir, otobiyografi, film.

### ABSTRACT

This article aims to examine the relationship between Sylvia Plath's *Journals* and the movie *Sylvia*, directed by Christine Jeffs and written by John Brownlow, and how effective the film was in voicing and bringing memories to the screen. Sylvia Plath's *Journals* has both an autobiographical text and a literary text aspect, as it was written

<sup>1</sup> A shorter version of this article was presented at the International Conference on Language, Literature, and Culture (5th, Mehmet Akif Ersoy University, Burdur, Turkey, May 12-14 2016).

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by the poet Plath, who has a literary personality aspect. By drawing attention to how the movie *Sylvia* relates to the work of *Journals*, it will be investigated to reveal the effects of the film adaptation on literature and readers as a result of social representation and to what extent it is an effective form of communication. In addition, it is aimed to explore which tools and methods are used while reflecting the women's roles, psychological and intellectual thoughts that appear in *Journals*. The analysis, adapted from diaries and Plath's turbulent life, has brought to light the particularly salient aspects of the poet, her psychological problems, and encourages the examination of the various perceptions that emerge among daily readers and film audiences.

**Keywords:** Sylvia Plath, *Journals*, poetry, autobiography, film.

Dying is an art,  
Like everything else.  
I do it exceptionally well.  
“Lady Lazarus” (Plath, Collected Poems 244)

## INTRODUCTION

This study aims to examine the correlation between the *Journals* of Sylvia Plath and the film *Sylvia* (2003). It is possible to obtain information concerning Sylvia Plath through different sources such as her *Journals*, poems, one novel. However, I argue that it reaches a different perspective when we see the film *Sylvia* that presents a visual advantage and is prone to become more critical in the case of representing the life of Sylvia Plath. The film has also been a controversial issue for her children, especially for Freida Hughes. It is said that her children claimed that the movie represented their father as an indifferent figure to his children which was not so true in their opinion. As it has been argued many times not only by her family but also by her readers, the film is required to be analyzed in terms of containing a correlation with the journals of Sylvia Plath. Partially, I believe that the *Journals* offer many details concerning Plath's life and of her inner world and the unknown facts related to main events. In this article, I will examine how Journals have been reflected in the film *Sylvia* and at what points these two works present a consistent understanding for the readers and audience. Sylvia Plath is one of the well-known characters in the

twentieth century universally recognized as literature and culture. Inarguably, Plath published many works among them only one collection of poems, *The Colossus* (1960), and one novel, *The Bell Jar* (1963), 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 are possible to transmit a clue relating to her life.

The bare facts of her life come to us from multiple sources—from her Journals and Letters Home, her stories and prose essays, her novel, *The Bell Jar*, and of course from the poems themselves. In addition to this, it is like to obtain clues and information from biographies and memoirs, from critical commentaries and, of late, from other people's poems (notably Ted Hughes's 1998 "Birthday Letters") or fiction (Kate Moses's 2003 *Wintering*) or film (Christine Jeffs's 2003 *Sylvia*). Most importantly, her *Journals* published in 1982 which is represented as an autobiography and a written work, and on the other hand the Film made in 2003 *Sylvia* standing as a visual story of Plath's a part of life are the major works to be discussed in terms of Plath's life story. In this paper, I will analyze the correlation between the Plath's *Journals* and the film *Sylvia* by analyzing the Journals' main points through the film.

### **Sylvia Plath and *The Journals***

Sylvia Plath had a passion for writing for all the times in her life. Plath's journals have been called as the largest suicide note ever written. Presumably, Journals act as an autobiographical resource to the literature audience.

As it is well known, Sylvia Plath was an American poet who succeeded to be a notable figure in both English and American Literature studies. Both characteristically and in terms of her produced works, being very sentimental, Plath had an impact on her readers. Probably Plath's tragic life story managed to draw attention along with her valuable poems and writings. For this reason, it has been an interest of film makers and other media components, studying the life of Plath and demonstrating it with the public.

Plath's suicide does not prove that she actually wanted to commit suicide, as she had tried it twice before and used this action as a tool for her writings. Presumably, it would not be wrong to argue that Plath attempted to suicide for an adventure or a try, she was expecting to return to life after this try; however, it could not be possible

upon her last trial. It is surely beyond doubt that many of her readers would wish her to stay alive in order to produce more excellent works.

In her Master Thesis, Nilgün Marmara, a Turkish philologist, where she analyzes the suicide of Plath in the context of her poesy, states that, “Perhaps, it is an attempt of protection of herself to commit suicide, it is a kind of scream to receive love, a search for a possibility of living happily.” (Marmara 2011: 19) This idea is figuratively touched in many parts of Plath’s Journals and we can clearly feel the struggle that Plath experiences throughout her young adult years in order to resist to be an ordinary piece of this universe.

Furthermore, in the article of Deborah Smith Bailey who discuss the “Sylvia Plath Effect” states that: “Kaufman found that poets--and in particular female poets --were more likely than fiction writers, nonfiction writers and playwrights to have signs of mental illness, such as suicide attempts or psychiatric hospitalizations.” (2003, Vol 34, No. 10) This effect is said to be the cause of Nilgün Marmara, the Turkish poet’s suicide as well. The melancholic mood which is required for a poet can result in a desire to end her own life.

*The Journals* involve Plath’s personal writings from 1950 to 1960. Karen V. Kukil states that in her Preface to *the Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath 1950-1962*, “She began keeping diaries and journals at the age of eleven and continued this practice until her death at the age of thirty. It is her adult journals from 1950 to 1962 that comprise this edition.” (Kukil 2000:1) As it is known, “Her interest in writing emerged at an early age, and she started out by keeping a journal. After publishing a number of works, Plath won a scholarship to Smith College in 1950.” The age of eighteen could be considered as the most valuable and exciting time of a young girl. The journals contain the years that Plath lived with full of action. Her experience with writing, her desire to be a good poet and her interest in publishing her poems and books, her desire to find a good match for her life and trying to overcome all her psychological problems. These all have been squeezed in the years 1950 – 59 which means Plath experienced many different events in a short time.

I want to love somebody because I want to be loved. In a rabbit-fear I may hurt myself under the wheels of the car because the lights terrify me, and under the dark blind death of wheels I will be safe. I am very tired, very banal, very confused. I do not know

who I am tonight. I wanted to walk until I dropped and not complete the inevitable circle of coming home. I have lived in boxes above, below, and down the hall from girls who think hard, feel similarly, and long companionably, and I have not bothered to cultivate them because I did not want to, could not, sacrifice the time (Plath, 2000, p. 115).

The significance of being informed of Plath's Journals is beyond argument as it provides us the best opportunity to reach the one-person's inner self that is reflected frankly. Therefore, we learn and understand better what Plath has gone through.

In her *Journals*, Plath generally narrates her anger or opposition to men who have a lot more privileges than women. She indicates in many parts of her journals, her desire to be the only ruler of her life. "I will not submit to having my life fingered by my husband, enclosed in the larger circle of his activity, and nourished vicariously by tales of his actual exploits. I must have a legitimate field of my own, apart from his, which he must respect." (Plath 2000: 56). Plath's disappointment of her unpublished poems could give an idea how ambitious she is to publish a poem. Plath mentions her worries and desire to write poems in her Journals very often. "So I am led to one or two choices! Can I write? Will I write if I practice enough." (Plath 2000: 56). Throughout the Journals, we feel her concern for writing, being able to write efficiently and productively. Also, Plath gives herself instructions from time to time in her *Journals*.

Read a story: Think. You can. You must, moreover, not continually run away while asleep - forget details - ignore problems - shut walls up between you & the world & all the gay bright girls -: please, think - snap out of this. Believe in some beneficent force beyond your own limited self. God, god, god: where are you? I want you, need you: the belief in you and love and mankind. You must not seek escape like this. You must think (Plath, 2000, p. 119).

Plath's writings present a kind of inculcation to herself by suggesting being strong in any case. Another pointer of these words is that Plath seems to be lacking a consultant or advisor in her daily life; this could be interpreted as a confident person who would pay attention to her and listen to whatever she tells without complaining or judging. Plath also narrates her feelings and thoughts very often regarding her boy-friends and relationships. Roger Bradford Decker in 1952 and Richard Laurence Sassoon in 1955 are two of the persons who deeply had a sensational relationship, although this part of her writings has completely been missed from the film *Sylvia*.

### **The Film *Sylvia* (2003)**

The film opens with the poem *Lady Lazarus* – 'Dying is an art'. The main stars of the movie are Gwyneth Paltrow, Daniel Craig who perform the characters Sylvia and Ted successfully and the director is Christine Jeffs. The screenplay was written by John Brownlow. The director, Jeffs has an experience as a director with two films before, "Stroke" and "Rain" which of them, "Rain" is an adaptation of a literary work and has a high level of success. Jeffs claims herself with a self-interest approach to film studies. "I don't particularly take reference from any director. I'm inspired by real people and everyday situations." says Christine Jeffs on NZ On Screen.<sup>3</sup> Jeffs has a series of award-nominations and two won prizes from 1995 New Zealand Film and Television Awards and 2002 Asia-Pacific International Film Festival (Belgium). In an interview on the film *Sylvia* with Christine Jeffs, when it is asked how she became involved in this film, she answers as follows.

Well, I didn't develop the project. Alison Owen sent me the script, which she developed with another director and a writer, John Brownlow. I'd read Sylvia Plath in my late teens, so I already knew her work, though I hadn't read Ted Hughes' poetry. So when I was sent the script it brought back many memories and seemed like a fantastic film to be involved with. The script dropped out of the sky, which had its blessings and its curses, because it's such a different kettle of fish to become involved with a project at such a late stage—rather than one you sat with

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<sup>3</sup> NZ On Screen is the online showcase of New Zealand television, film and music video.

and dreamed with and worked on for years. It's a much different process. (www.poets.org)<sup>4</sup>

As an ordinary reader of Plath, Jeffs directed a project which suddenly dropped into her lap and was welcomed with pleasure. In any case, this film would be regarded as a general assumption on Plath's life and her relationship to Hughes. Therefore, the project is not only a matter of film to entertain people, but also dealing with a person's real-life story. The film *Sylvia* is also protested by Sylvia Plath's daughter, Frieda Hughes with a poem in which she thinks that her mother is a kind of sacrificed to the popular cinema:

Now they want to make a film  
 For anyone lacking the ability  
 To imagine the body, head in oven  
 Orphaning children.”  
 “The peanut eaters, entertained  
 At my mother's death, will go home,  
 Each carrying their memory of her,  
 Lifeless - a souvenir.  
 Maybe they'll buy the video.”  
 “They think I should give them my mother's words  
 To fill the mouth of their monster  
 Their Sylvia Suicide Doll.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, the film has also been criticized by many Plath readers and film critics as a study of Plath's life story conducted failingly. The main actress Gwyneth Paltrow has been found too 'sexy' and 'erotic' to act the Sylvia character. Plath's poetic

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<sup>4</sup> The Academy of American Poets is the largest membership-based nonprofit organization fostering an appreciation for contemporary poetry and supporting American poets. For over three generations, the organization has connected millions of people to great poetry through programs such as National Poetry Month, the largest literary celebration in the world; Poets.org, one of the leading poetry sites online; American Poets, a biannual magazine; an annual series of poetry readings and special events; and its education programs.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2003/feb/03/bbc.film>



figure has apparently been kept in the background regarding the readers' expectations. It is possible to state that the scenario is rather based on Plath's madness and suicide. Respectively, many readers are disturbed not to clearly find the real Sylvia Plath and see in the film. On the other hand, the film has an importance in terms of a couple of facts: Sylvia is the first film in which real-life mother and daughter Blythe Danner and Gwyneth Paltrow play mother and daughter (Aurelia and Sylvia Plath) respectively. Danner and Paltrow previously starred together in *Cruel Doubt* (1992), but they were not as mother and daughter ([www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com))<sup>6</sup>.

While evaluating the movie, I will prefer to use Ted and Sylvia names as a character figure in the film, rather than as a literature artist. It is certain that these characters are poets and should be addressed as Plath and Hughes but the representation of the characters in the film could be considered differently.

Firstly, the opening scene starts with a poem by Sylvia with a sentimental music, it sounds quite impressive.

Sometimes I dream of a tree,  
 And the tree is my life.  
 One branch is the man I shall marry  
 And the leaves are my children.  
 Another branch is my future as a writer  
 And each leaf is a poem.  
 Another branch is a glittering academic career.  
 But as I sit there, trying to choose,  
 The leaves begin to turn brown and blow away  
 Until the tree is absolutely bare. (*Sylvia*, 2003).

This is not an actual poem by Plath. It was a poetic interpretation from her book, *The Bell Jar*:

I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig-tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous

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<sup>6</sup> IMDb started in 1990 as a hobby project by an international group of movie and TV fans.



poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and off-beat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out.

I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig-tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to describe, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet (Plath, 2006, p. 40).

In this sense, the film *Project* does not only seem to benefit from one type of source, but also took advantage of different works of Plath. Accordingly, in the following scene, we see Sylvia cycling most probably to school or college in a hurry in which she clearly seems to be in her 20s. For this reason, it could be a missing point not to demonstrate or at least to summarize the years before this age, as her *Journals* start with her writings at the age of 18<sup>th</sup>. It is clear that the film is significantly focused on the relationship between Sylvia and Ted. The idea of this perception is based on the opening scene and the first day of the film which is the day when Sylvia meets Ted. However, in her *Journals* where Plath starts writing at the age of 18 and before meeting Ted Hughes, she mentions a series of her former stories regarding the university choice, being a writer and poet, finding a good match and boyfriend. Probably, this part could be summarized within a narrator in a general view.

Sylvia Plath meets Ted on 26<sup>th</sup> February 1956 according to her *Journals* which dates to 1950 that contains missing six years of narration in the film *Sylvia* when compared to the *Journals*. It is a fact that these six years reflect a great deal of psychological and physical experiences of Sylvia Plath in order to understand her condition of thoughts and philosophy. Consequently, the film starts with a gloomy music in which

Sylvia reads a poem. After that we see the Cambridge, England in 1956 Sylvia cycling to school. Between the years 1950-1956 in her *Journals* Plath usually mentions finding a partner who would suit mentally and physically.

### **Ted Hughes**

The meeting of the couple is screened as it is narrated in Plath's *Journals* which correspondingly symbolizes a realistic scene.

.....whose name I had asked the minute I had come into the room, but no one told me, came over and was looking hard in my eyes and it was Ted Hughes. I started yelling again about his poems and quoting: "most dear uncatchable diamond" and he yelled back, colossal, in a voice that should have come from a Pole, "You like?" and asking me if I wanted brandy, and me yelling yes..... (Plath, 2000, p. 161)

In their first meeting, after being a couple, Sylvia talks about her suicide and Lady Lazarus which demonstrates Sylvia having psychological problems, therefore it gives the impression that Ted is needed to be attentive.

### **Window Scene**

Another scene which is completely and successfully reflected in the movie is the 'window scene'. We see here, Ted and his friend, Lucas come to Sylvia's apartment and throw a stone to her window. This scene is screened as it is exactly narrated in the *Journals*. Missing point here is that Plath writes down that she was with someone called Hamish and drinking out. This part is probably omitted as it is probable to be caused by Plath's attitude. Even she does not pay attention to this person by narrating this person only once or twice in her *Journals*.

Sylvia and Ted are on a sandal visiting around the river. Sylvia reads the poem "Wife of Bath". Although this scene presents a well-designed flirt time moment, it is unlikely to encounter or notice such an anecdote related to this scene. Even so, in a couple of parts in her *Journals*, Plath touches this work indifferently.

"I have thought: a pox on my "She thought-she felt" banal novel. Read "The Horse's Mouth": that's it. For now, at least. Break

into a limited, folksy, vivid style that limits the girl, defines her: humor, vivid, but serious: "at bottom really grave." Wife of Bath. Better read "Herself Surprised". Make your own style, don't copy. But a richer Laundromat Affair style (Plath, 2000, p. 201).

### **Sylvia Plath's Mother**

Sylvia Plath feels quite happy to know that Ted's poem is agreed to be published by a journal. "And here I am: Mrs. Hughes. And wife of a published poet. O I knew it would happen - - - but never thought so miraculously soon." (Plath, 2000: 198) After receiving good news from the journals, the couple decide to marry and move to the US. Consequently, they started living in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1960. There it comes almost the most important moment, to meet the bride's mother. Seemingly, having heard a lot of praise of Ted Hughes, Sylvia's mother says "So this is the "Übermensch" when she meets Ted. As a reaction of every normal girl, Sylvia asks her mother's impression for Ted, but she is surprised with her mother's quite nervous reaction. Because she replies, "I don't know, he is very.... different." This scene gives the feeling that Sylvia's mother does not totally approve of Ted but only keeps silent for the sake of her daughter's happiness. Sylvia's mother most probably seems to be mocking the word "übermensch" in German.

Sylvia's mother: Do you love him?

Sylvia: I love him.

Sylvia's mother: Then I like him. (*Sylvia*, 2003)

It is clear that Sylvia has gone through hard times with writing while Ted Hughes and she lived by the sea in the US, Massachusetts. Sylvia makes a cake, but this surprises Ted, because he was expecting Sylvia to work on writing poems.

In the conference scene, after Ted's talk, ladies show a big interest in him and this does not escape Sylvia's notice. In this scene we start to think of Sylvia as a jealous person who cannot even bear the sympathy of Ted's readers or audience. This also led us to perceive Sylvia as a devoted woman to her husband and this actually is reflected in her *Journals*, too.

.....yet is not enjoyed fully, is the endless deep love I live in. And the unique and almost bottomless understanding of Ted. Without that, I would rush about, seeking solace, never finding it, and not keeping the steady quiet deadly determined center I have even now at the end of one of my greatest droughts: It will come. If I work (Plath, 2000, p. 207).

These lines demonstrate the great passionate love of Sylvia for Ted and also a big desire for writing. After Ted's talk, women around him ask questions related to his poems which flutters Ted extremely. He tries to answer the ladies with pleasure while Sylvia feels disturbed and out of favor. At that time Sylvia teaches English at Smith College which dramatically harasses her as she is in a keen study on her poems. Witnessing the ladies' attention on Ted, Sylvia leaves the campus and arrives home full of complex feelings, such as anger, anxiety, fear, and sadness. Seeing the house in a mess, Sylvia seems to have been already too tired of the housework. This night is actually a runner for terrible news, then a young lady knocks the door and asks for Ted which deeply surprises Sylvia and increases her worries upon her husband.

As soon as Ted comes, Sylvia starts fighting and reflecting her unusual anger to Ted through the questions she asks with a loud noise. This brings Sylvia to a point where she was expecting a vivacious and delighted marriage life with Ted to a disappointment and insecurity with the person, she most trusted. This scene has a great importance on Sylvia's life as many things in her life start to change and Sylvia goes into a more depressive life by moving away from Ted. There comes the moment we pity Sylvia a lot and blame Ted for being cruel to such a weak, full of love and kind of a wounded bird girl. Plath describes the so-called conference scene as follows in her *Journals*;

Ted reads his poems at the University last night – a queerly unsatisfying affair; a small glittery room in the hive-roomed student union, with the rumble & distraction of a meeting going on next-door, and three other 'poets' – except Dave Clarke, "who rises to a gloss & delicacy of ear and philosophical play, embarrassingly bad – Ted shone: the room dead-still for his reading –

he came third: and I felt the genuine gooseflesh, the tears filling my lids, the hair standing like quills: I married a real poet, and my life is redeemed: to love, serve & create. But there, everybody walks & lives in rooms with such low ceilings he who is a foot taller is no god, but an embarrassing and uneasy visitation (Plath 2000, p. 253).

In London, England around 1960 Sylvia and Ted have a child when both are in a hard day's work.

## CONCLUSION

The film *Sylvia* is intended to be in a high accordance with the Journals of Plath, regardless of the writings before 1956. Produced and presented for a limited time, the films are no doubt subject to reflect every detail in a written work. Therefore, it is possible to state that the film *Sylvia* succeeded in taking in consideration and highlighting key points of Plath's life as narrated in her Journals. However, one key point related to Plath's psychological problems and treatment does not appear clearly in the film. Plath narrates her therapy talks with her doctor, Ruth Beuscher in the year 1959, in addition Plath's anger against her mother is presented more deeply in the Journals than in the film *Sylvia*.

As a result, the film reflects a well-organized general assumption on Plath through her literary works and personal life, however; it is required to support the story with a background coming from her works, poems, books and similar literary basis. Plath always regarded herself with half, undone works, unreached goals. Therefore, it is a fact that we will never come to an end of discovering her world and understanding her philosophy completely. "I can never read all the books I want; I can never be all the people I want and live all the lives I want. I can never train myself in all the skills I want. And why do I want to? I want to live and feel all the shades, tones, and variations of mental and physical experience possible in my life." (Plath 2000, p. 31)

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