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**INK GODDESS: THE NARRATIVIZATION AND DRAMATIZATION OF LIFE,  
LOVE, AND THE SELF IN SYLVIA PLATH'S JOURNALS AND LETTERS**

Florianópolis  
2022

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LOVE, AND THE SELF IN SYLVIA PLATH'S JOURNALS AND LETTERS**

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**Ink goddess: the narrativization and dramatization of life, love, and the self in Sylvia  
Plath's journals and letters**

O presente trabalho em nível de mestrado foi avaliado e aprovado por banca examinadora  
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Certificamos que esta é a **versão original e final** do trabalho de conclusão que foi julgado  
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Coordenação do Programa de Pós-Graduação

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Profª. Dra. Maria Rita Drumond Viana,  
Orientadora

Florianópolis, 2022.

Dedico essa dissertação aos meus afetos; sejam eles de sangue, de laços ou de tinta.

## PREFACE

### “Stings & Honey”



They thought death was worth it, but I  
Have a self to recover, a queen.  
Is she dead, is she sleeping?  
Where has she been,  
With her lion-red body, her wings of glass?  
  
Now she is flying  
More terrible than she ever was, red  
Scar in the sky, red comet  
Over the engine that killed her ----  
The mausoleum, the wax house.

— Sylvia Plath, “Stings”

I have always believed that strength and delicateness could never blend. That I, as a sensitive person, could never really be strong or tough because I was too *affected* by the world. I mean – isn’t that what we are constantly being reminded of? *Don’t show your emotions. Don’t trust anyone.* I’ve been taught, over and over again, to protect myself from feeling. To stop getting too enthusiastic about life or too attached to the pain of others. I thought I was protecting myself when I decided to shrink myself and my sensitivity into a small dot of ink. I silenced my voice and I put the ocean of me inside a tiny bottle. I put my dreams on hold, my emotions on the lowest shelf of my bookcase. But then – I started reading Sylvia Plath’s work. I met people who reminded me to meet myself. I came back to my writing and I learned the language of the stars. With every person, story, and delicateness that contacted my fingerprints, the ink came back to my blood, my blood came back to the sea... And I overflowed.

Sylvia Plath’s journals and letters came to me in the rise of the pandemic. Stuck in my small bedroom for almost two years, I devoured her work like it contained all the secrets of the world. I found and lost myself in her words. I felt like Lady Lazarus, dying and being reborn so many times with her. She reminded me about my own passion for words, people, possibilities, books, places, life. Meanwhile, people were dying. I was scared in the most humanly and primitive ways. I was scared for the world, my country, my family, my friends... And I was

also scared for myself. I orbited between a sense of “afraid-all-the-time” to a sentiment of numbness, of non-existence and emptiness. But the fact that I am writing this now and you are reading this now gives me the sincerest feeling of awe. A *miracle*, I dare to say. Nothing to do with religion, nor a celebration. It could never be a celebration. But a miracle in its bare and brutal sense: vast gratitude for you and I here, with the deepest respect and love for those who have left. I remember you. We remember you.

In her book *All About Love: New Visions* (1999), bell hooks writes that “to truly love we must learn to mix various ingredients – care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, and trust.” Have I, then, truly loved my Master’s degree? I mean – I cared about it. I was affected and full of affection for it. I respected and recognized its power, its secrets. And most importantly, I was really *committed* to the blisses and woes of it. Well, then, there it is: I think I’ve truly loved my Masters. That doesn’t mean it was fun or easy. In fact, many moments, it was a *torment* for me. I don’t know how many times I cried thinking about how I didn’t belong in the academic world. I had to transform my pain into other things – texts, poems, ideas, growth – to navigate it. I’ve deconstructed it with all my might and today, with a brave and delicate smile on my face, I can say: it is not, anymore, about how many theories I’ve learned or how many names I know by heart. It’s about the fears that I faced and the loved ones who held my hand. It’s about my connection with Plath and her work and the universes that they brought me. The classes I’ve taken, the ideas I’ve gotten in contact with, the infinite expansion I’ve been through. I learned that it is *okay* to be a little different (unconventional, even!): to dream about watercolors and to embrace my own creativity. And, slowly and abruptly, two years have passed. It is both painful and rejoicing to write the last lines of this work.

Plath’s writing reminds me that putting life into words can mean healing. That sensitivity can mean resilience, and caring can mean being brave. She has taught me that writing with your whole self can become an armor to live this life with more affection and courageousness. It takes guts to love in this world and it takes your whole body to live it wholeheartedly. By acknowledging Plath’s power as an ink goddess, I get closer and closer to acknowledging mine. Her work travels through time and space, it touches the most profound realms of my inner oceans. And, in the commitment, words, and ideas of this research, I have written my own diary here and my own love letter for you, me, and her.



*Ink Goddess (capa da dissertação) – Isabel Tomaselli, 2022*



## SOBRE A ILUSTRAÇÃO (*amorosidade, vozes & processos criativos*)



I have a special place in my heart for the ocean. I like the way the water changes from one mood to another – from high waves on dark, stormy days, to tranquil ripples on sunny days. I still remember a night that I spent on a lonely beach with a few other girls . . . I felt, somehow, very small and inconsequential in comparison to the endless space of sky, sand, and sea.

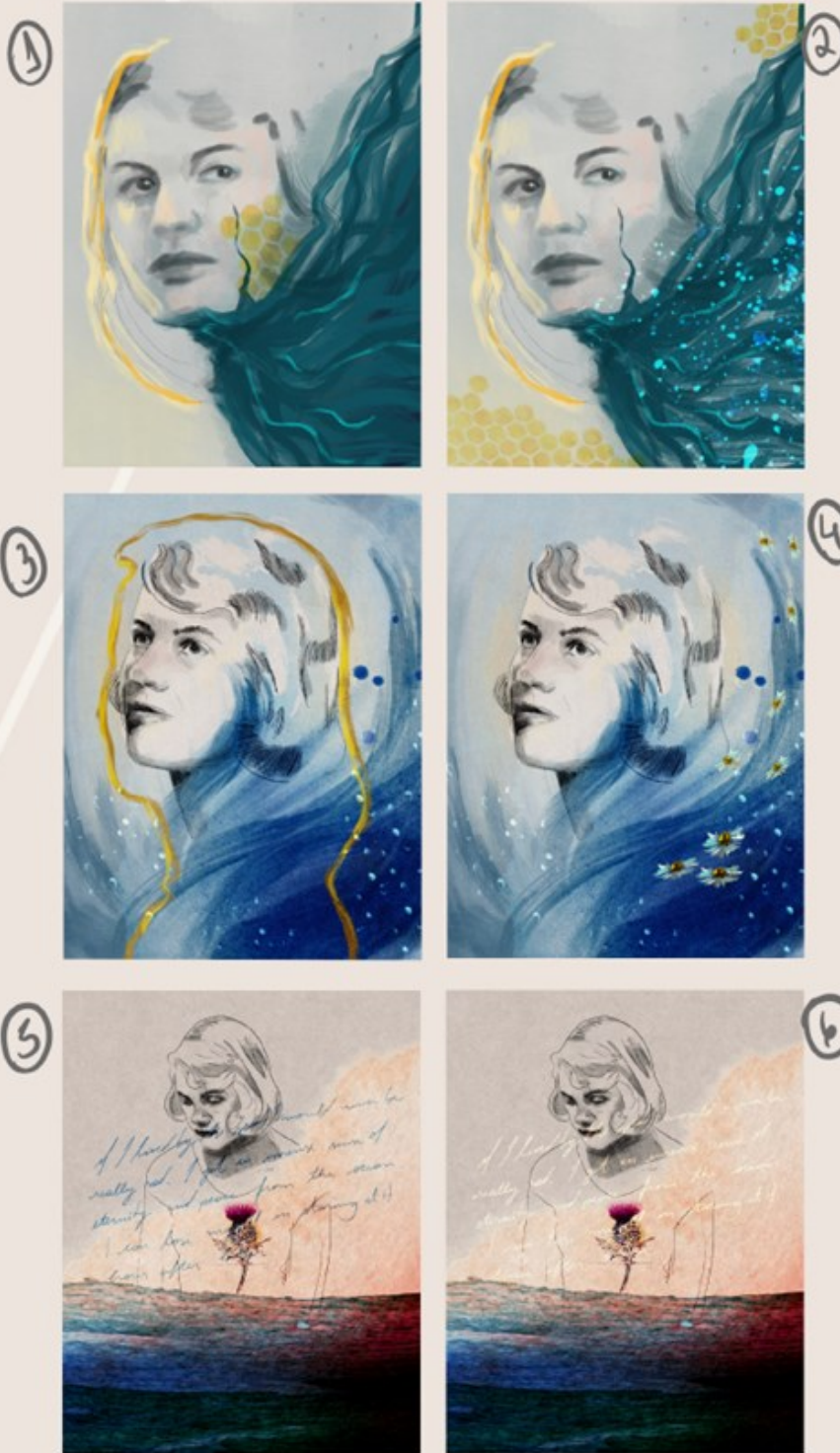
— **Sylvia Plath**, in a letter to Hans-Joachim Neupert, 1948

A capa desta pesquisa foi elaborada pelas mãos e talento da minha amiga e artista Isabel Tomaselli. Tenho certeza que nenhuma outra pessoa poderia ter traduzido de forma tão bela o que a Sylvia Plath, a minha pesquisa e o mestrado na PPGI significa(ra)m pra mim. Durante um pouco mais de um mês, a ilustração passou por várias transformações, trazendo-nos novas perspectivas, aprendizados e olhares. Eu poderia dizer que esse processo começou em janeiro de 2022, mas isso significaria que essa é “só” uma aquarela – e ela está longe disso. Esse retrato começa, de certa forma, no dia 27 de outubro de 1932: o dia do nascimento de Plath. Ele carrega consigo os traços, os símbolos e as cores dela e da história dela. Ele ecoa no seu legado, na sua escrita e nas pessoas que mantêm o seu trabalho vivo. Ele canta, no seu próprio ritmo e tom, junto a todas as pessoas envolvidas nessa dissertação: seja pela UFSC e a PPGI, pelas minhas professoras e colegas, ou pelo financiamento da CNPq. Ele mergulha na vida e na história da Isabel, no momento preciso em que ela abraçou seu talento e resolveu mostra-lo ao mundo. Na paixão e nos ensinamentos da minha orientadora, Rita Viana, que um dia (em meados de 2016) me disse que era possível, sim, trabalhar com escritas de vida na literatura; e que era possível, sim, expressar minha voz na minha pesquisa. E ela mergulha também em mim e em tudo que vem junto dos meus oceanos: meus afetos, minha história, meus momentos de caos e de inspiração. Ela é uma aquarela de muitas vozes.

Nos primeiros esboços (ver abaixo), nos deparamos com uma imensidão de Plaths: a Sylvia dos *journals*, tantas vezes introspectiva e intensa (5 & 6); a Sivvy das *letters home*, refletindo o relacionamento de Plath com sua mãe (3 & 4); e a Sylvia Plath “deusa de tinta”, com seu olhar subversivo e sua profundidade oceânica (1 & 2). Na versão final (que está na

capa dessa pesquisa), os significados da *Ink Goddess* transbordam. Agora, o favo de mel, insistente, passa pelo lado esquerdo do seu rosto, onde ela ficou com uma cicatriz depois da sua primeira tentativa de suicídio. Ele encontra, então, o oceano – um dos locais preferidos dela –, trazendo atenção ao desconhecido e à profundidade do seu trabalho. Lá, vemos algumas margaridas flutuando: elas são as pessoas que leem, amam e emergem do seu trabalho. Somos representadas por flores para nos lembrarmos daquele momento de arrepio quando suas palavras nos tornam infinitamente belos e infinitamente frágeis. Na água, uma frase do seu diário, nos convidando a pensar na potência das escritas de vida: “writing makes me a small god: I re-create the flux and smash of the world through the small ordered word-patterns I make”. O vermelho (nas suas próprias palavras, “the blood jet is poetry / there is no stopping it”) brinca com a conexão sangue-tinta-oceano, os três elementos principais dessa deusa de tinta. Por fim, o contraste entre o vermelho-sangue e o azul-oceânico novamente ecoa essa combinação de delicadeza e força, sensibilidade e resiliência, afeto e coragem. Nossas vozes se conectam na amorosidade e na violência da escrita da Sylvia Plath. E assim, de repente, nas entrelinhas dessa pesquisa e nas tonalidades dessa aquarela, nos tornamos deusas de tinta também.

esboços *Ink Goddess*



*Esboços da Ink Goddess – Isabel Tomaselli, 2022*

## AGRADECIMENTOS

### “Aos meus afetos” (*uma carta de amor*)



**Joinville, 27 de fevereiro de 2022**

*Queridos afetos,*

Gostaria de ter escrito essa carta à mão. Aliás, eu fiz isso. Mas eu errei tantas vezes que, quando a tinta da minha caneta acabou e o sol se pôs, achei melhor digitar. Deixo aqui, portanto, a imaginação da minha caligrafia, dos meus rabiscos, e das florezinhas que fiz nas margens do meu cansado caderninho de dissertação cor-de-rosa.

*Aos meus afetos de sangue*, obrigada por serem minha base, meu centro, meu Sol. À minha mãe, **Hilomi Zetehaku**, que me mostra continuamente que gentileza & força podem – e devem – andar juntas. Aos meus irmãos, **Rafael** e **Renato Zetehaku Araujo**, por me ajudarem e me apoiarem sempre, cada um do seu jeito e à sua maneira. Aos meus sobrinhos, **Leonardo** e **Joaquim Martins Zetehaku**, e minhas sobrinhas, **Ana Maria** e **Elisa Meyge de Brito Zetehaku**, que com um “Tia Ga! ❤️” e um sorrisão já conseguem fazer meu dia (e a minha vida) melhor. Ao meu pai, **Carlos Alberto de Araujo**, que me ensinou a amar livros, viagens, comidas e ideias; e por ter me ajudado a entender o significado do sentimento “perdão”. Aos **Zetehakus** (勢理客), meus tios, tias, primos e primas maravilhosos; e também aos meus antepassados e à família que nunca conheci: vocês estão nas entrelinhas do meu ser. E também ao **Matheus Rutzen Reiser**, meu parceiro e melhor amigo. Você me ensina, todos os dias, o que é ser família e o que é amor.

*Aos meus laços mais afetuosos*: obrigada por sempre me manterem em órbita (vocês sabem que eu tendo a sair um pouquinho dela de vez em quando!). **Carolina Veras**, **Flávia Ramos** e **Felipe Huang**: sem vocês, não sei como teria sido meu mestrado. Obrigada por me ouvirem e me apoiarem sempre, por lerem meus rascunhos sem nem mesmo entender sobre o que eu estava falando, por ouvirem meus planos mirabolantes e por compartilharem comigo os seus também. **José Miguel Grabowski** e **Laila Dutra**: obrigada por serem meus companheiros-de-vida desde 2012 – a nossa amizade-irmandade é um dos meus maiores tesouros. E também: **Marcel Vinotti**, **Bruna Mayer** e **Juliana Macedo** pela nossa amizade desde o ensino fundamental. Vocês são os donos de muitas das minhas memórias, histórias e gargalhadas preferidas. **Gabriela Pinheiro** e **Julia Grillo**: desde que nos conhecemos, na angústia do

terceirão e na alegria da M30, vocês se tornaram as melhores parceiras de vinho, conversas noite afóra e risadas até a barriga doer. A todos os amigos e amigas que estão comigo sempre (alguns dias mais que outros): **Natália Coelho**, por sempre me envolver com seu carinho e um gelato; **Thales Furtado**, por ser sinônimo de alegria, simplicidade e conexão; **Lincoln Reinert**, por sempre me lembrar de ser autêntica e artística; **Guilherme Prudente**, por ter sido a melhor parceria no meio do caos pandêmico; **Fernando Conceição**, por ter se tornado um amigo insubstituível; **Diogo Mendonça**, por ser dono das melhores conversas e trocas filosóficas; **Kendji Takemoto**, por sempre irradiar alegria e carinho no mundo e nos nossos encontros; **João Legal**, por fazer as melhores comidinhas e me ensinar tanto; **Adrian Valentim**, por ser o melhor amigo-escritor-leitor da história das amizades; e **Nicholas Triana**, por sempre me recordar dos pequenos detalhes artísticos da vida. Agradeço, também, aos **Rutzens** por todo apoio sempre; a todos os meus **amigos-memória** que um dia fizeram parte da minha vida; e a todos os **alunos** que acreditam nas minhas aulas-conexão: obrigada por tanto, o nome de vocês transborda aqui.

**Aos laços acadêmicos & de acasos do Universo:** um agradecimento mais-que-especial para minha orientadora, **Maria Rita Viana**. Rita, você me deu liberdade e espaço para experimentar as ideias mais mirabolantes que eu tive para essa pesquisa. Abriu uma imensidão de portas literárias. Quando eu estava perdida, você me lembrou que eu não era só academia, era também escrita, ensino, família, Gabriela. Você me fez ressignificar o que é uma qualificação, uma defesa, um mestrado – e eu não tenho palavras para agradecer a “mãe acadêmica” que você se tornou para mim. A **Melina Savi** e **Romulo de Sousa**, *the ecocritics*, pela amizade que criamos em meio à academia e à pandemia. Para **Marília Torres**, cuja doçura, atenção e delicadeza me ajudaram a ressignificar minha relação com as línguas, com a escrita e com a minha dissertação: fazer parte da sua pesquisa não foi só uma honra, como um movimento de contato & afeto muito especial para mim. Também às companheiras de graduação, **Elisa Ramos** e **Gisele Tyba**: meu coração nunca esquece vocês. À **Isabel Tomaselli**, por fazer a ilustração mais perfeita possível. À minha psicóloga, **Natália Soares**, por tudo e tanto. A te, **Elena Bergia**, per essere una amica e persona bravissima: imparo sempre con te. To you, **M. Lee Alexander**, for being a great friend and mentor. To the **Sylvia Plath Society**, for keeping the mighty and lovely work on Sylvia Plath. Aos meus caderninhos e **afetos de tinta**. E à **minha banca**, ao **PPGI**, à **UFSC** e ao financiamento da **CNPq**: sem vocês, nada disso teria sido possível.

De coração inteiro,

**Gabriela Zetehaku Araujo** ✨

I want to write because I have the urge to excell [sic] in one medium of translation and expression of life. I can't be satisfied with the colossal job of merely living. Oh, no, I must order life in sonnets and sestinas and provide a verbal reflector for my 60-watt lighted head. Love is an illusion, but I would willingly fall for it if I could believe in it . . . God, let me think clearly and brightly; let me live, love, and say it well in good sentences.

**Sylvia Plath**, *The unabridged journals of Sylvia Plath*

Sylvia Plath sought always the light of the mind. That light was her lodestar in the face of depression, when all went “cold and planetary.” She tried to feed this clarion flame with literature, art, philosophy, drama, travel, love— anything to prevent its extinguishment.

**Heather Clark**, *Red comet: The short life and blazing art of Sylvia Plath*

One of the most magical things about Plath's writing is how it can affect and reach and help so many people across the world. Despite languages and borders and wars and everything else, she speaks across the generations. It's something I've always been in awe of; that she can pull us all together.

**Peter K. Steinberg**, in an e-mail written to the author of this research

## ABSTRACT

Letters and diaries are forms of writing that mingle life and fiction, public and private, the real and the imaginary. They are part of the field of life writing, an area that involves many dimensions of one's memories, identities, and perceptions of the self and the world. Both are difficult to define and, as they have been historically perceived as "feminine," they are often attributed as inferior or secondary genres in literature (DIAZ, 2016; HENDERSON, 2019). Besides writing professionally to get published and paid, Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) was also an avid diarist and correspondent. In these auto/biographical writings, it is possible to observe both her passion for the craft and the recording of life – "writing is the first love of my life" (2017, p. 880) – but also the importance of the written word in her survival: "that is where my writing comes in . . . it is as necessary for the survival of my haughty sanity as bread is to my flesh" (2000, p. 100). More than simply narrating and representing herself in her journals and letters, I believe that Plath *narrativized* and *dramatized* life itself in the page; crafting herself and people of her life into characters and actors, making sense of life, love, and the world through inscriptions, and even recreating Time and performing life through what I define as the "stage of life writing". Therefore, in this research I aim at describing how Plath narrativized and dramatized her life, love, and herself through the practice of letter and diary writing. By analyzing her journal entries and correspondence, I discuss her "ink relationships" with her affections (lovers, loved ones, and even writing and literature) and her transformation to what I define as an "ink goddess": a woman writer who used diaries and letters as spaces for subversion of a patriarchal society and male-dominated literary world. I argue that it was through her transformation into an ink goddess and through the performativity of life through the written word that Plath experienced her writing life, sexuality, and freedom.

**Keywords:** Life writing. Sylvia Plath. Narrativization. Dramatization. Autobiography written by women. Diary. Letter.

## RESUMO

Cartas e diários são formas de escrita que misturam a vida e a ficção, o público e o privado, o real e o imaginário. Esses gêneros fazem parte da área de escritas de vida, um campo que envolve as diversas dimensões das memórias e identidades de uma pessoa, bem como de suas percepções de si e do mundo. Ambos são difíceis de definir e, como historicamente tenham sido conceituados como tipos de escrita “femininos,” são frequentemente atribuídos como gêneros inferiores ou secundários na literatura (DIAZ, 2016; HENDERSON, 2019). Além de escrever poemas e prosa profissionalmente para ser publicada e paga, Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) também escreveu uma numerosa quantidade de cartas e diários. Nesses escritos auto/biográficos, é possível observar tanto sua paixão pelo ofício da escrita e registro da vida – “escrever/a escrita é o primeiro amor da minha vida” (2017, p. 880, tradução minha) – como também a importância desses na sua sobrevivência: “é aí que entra a minha escrita . . . ela é tão necessária para a sobrevivência da minha alta sanidade como o pão é para minha carne” (2000, p. 100, tradução minha). Mais do que simplesmente narrar e representar a si mesma nos seus diários e cartas, alego que Plath *narrativizava* e *dramatizava* sua própria vida na página em branco; criando-se e transformando as pessoas em personagens ou atores, dando sentido à vida, ao amor e ao mundo por meio da escrita e até mesmo recriando o Tempo e performatizando a vida através do que defino como o “palco das escritas de vida”. Portanto, em minha pesquisa tenho o objetivo de demonstrar e discutir as formas como Plath *narrativizava* e *dramatizava* sua vida, seu amor, e a si mesma por meio da prática da escrita de cartas e diários. Através da análise de seus diários e correspondências, discuto seus “relacionamentos de tinta” com suas ligações afetivas (amantes, entes queridos, e até mesmo a escrita e a literatura) e a sua transformação no que defino como uma “deusa de tinta”: uma escritora que usava diários e cartas como espaços de subversão de uma sociedade patriarcal e de um mundo literário dominado por homens. Argumento que foi por meio de sua transformação em uma deusa da tinta e pela performatividade da vida através da escrita que Plath vivia e experimentava sua liberdade, sexualidade e vida de escritora.

**Palavras-chave:** Escritas de vida. Sylvia Plath. Narrativização. Dramatização. Autobiografia escrita por mulheres. Diários. Cartas.



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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

J *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* (2000)

L1 *The Letters of Sylvia Plath, Vol. 1 – 1940-1956* (2017)

L2 *The Letters of Sylvia Plath, Vol. 2 – 1956-1963* (2018)

LH *Letters Home* (1975)

TBJ *The Bell Jar* (1963)

RC *Red Comet: The Short Life & Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath* (2020)

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## 1 CHAPTER ONE: SPILLED INK

The blood jet is poetry

There is no stopping it

— Sylvia Plath, “Kindness”

### 1.1 OVERFLOW

Letter- and diary-writing are practices that mingle the public and the private, the real and the imagined, and the intricacies of life and fiction: effervescent forms of life writing that play with many dimensions of one’s memories, identities, and perceptions of the self and the world. This, I argue, is especially significant for writers<sup>1</sup>, as their life is linked so closely with imagination, fantasy, and creativity, as well as the function that life writing may occupy in the interpretation of themselves, of their experiences, and of their craft. Moreover, because of the liminal and hybrid character<sup>2</sup> of these genres, it is difficult to define them and to find their place in literature: should we read them as documents, literary works, or both? As historical evidence, art, or something in between? And how can we create other ways for interpreting them beyond the dualistic binary definition of “fact” or “fiction”? Many unanswered questions are present in the area of life writing, opening up space for new ideas and discussions to take place. It is in this mysterious and enigmatic space that I situate this research.

Just as it is complex to define life writing, understanding what a “writing life” (DILLARD, 1989) is (here understood as a life mediated and motivated by the craft and the love for writing) also opens space for discussion. In the famous scene of the film *Dead Poets Society*, Professor Keating, played by Robin Williams, evokes a romanticized vision of writing that serves as a hymn for many of aspiring writers nowadays: “We don’t read and write poetry because it’s cute. We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race. And the human race is filled with passion. What will your verse be?” (WEIR, 1989, 0:25:33). This passionate perspective of writing is also present in many creative writing books, such as

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<sup>1</sup> I am not defining “writer” as published author. More than that, I am proposing the idea of “writer” *as a person who writes* – fiction or nonfiction, poetry or prose, a diary or a novel – and to whom the act of writing feels as an *essential* part of their life. One’s love and urgency for writing does not need to be validated by publication.

<sup>2</sup> Although two opposing characteristics (where hybridity emphasizes mixture and liminality the space in between), I situate this research in this paradoxical space. I explain this better in the following chapter.

Stephen King's (1947- ) widely-known *On Writing* (2000) where he argues that writing is about enrichment: "enriching the lives of those who will read [our] work, and enriching [our] own life, as well" (p. 269). To others, however, more than a practice that heightens life and enhances experience, writing gives an absolute sense of survival. In her book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), Chicana writer and scholar of feminist and queer theory Gloria Anzaldúa (1942-2004) embraces this sturdy and delicate link between living and writing: "I cannot separate my writing from any part of my life. It is all one" (p. 73). The Brazilian linguist and writer Conceição Evaristo (1946- ) also stresses this, emphasizing that writing is about survival: "escrivência<sup>3</sup>," as she defines it. This portmanteau combines two words in Brazilian Portuguese: "escrever" (verb: to write) and "vivência" (noun: the experiences, sensations, and apprenticeship of living). It is life that is written in the experience and place of each person, and it is one's writing amidst these experiences and places.

Whether discussing the craft and possibilities of a writing life or reflecting about the complex field of life writing, the words "life" and "writing" together open up many discussions. One writer that navigated between these complex elements was the U.S. American poet, novelist, short story writer Sylvia Plath (1932-1963). Besides writing professionally to get published and paid, Plath was also an avid diarist and correspondent throughout almost her whole life, and these genres were of great importance to her. In these auto/biographical writings, we can observe both her passion for the craft and the recording of life – "writing is the first love of my life" (*The Letters of Sylvia Plath, Vol. 1 (L1, 2017)*, p. 880) – but also the importance of the written word in her survival: "that is where my writing comes in. It is as necessary for the survival of my haughty sanity as bread is to my flesh" (*The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath (J, 2000)*, p. 100, in a journal entry of 1951). To Plath, besides experiencing, experimenting, and enriching life through the written word, the ways that she *narrativized* and *dramatized* life onto paper were a way of surviving, of healing, and subverting the male-dominated literary world. It was how she transformed herself into an *ink goddess*.

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<sup>3</sup> In an interview with Itaú Social, Evaristo emphasizes that, when developing this term, she had in mind the image of African women and their slaved descendants. She also emphasizes that their story and the act of "escrever" is not meant to be a pretty concept; rather, it exists to disturb, unsettle, and give discomfort. It is a reminder of her voice and of all the black people, especially (Brazilian) women, that she represents. Not translating this term is essential for not erasing this. (The interview is available at the Itaú Social website.)

## 1.2 INKWELL

In this research, I aim at investigating how Sylvia Plath experienced, narrativized, and dramatized her life, love, and self on the paper; made sense of herself, creating personae, casting people as characters (or actors), and performing life on the setting (or stage) of her journals and letters. In other words, I seek to identify Plath's re-creation of herself, her relationships, and her life in the practice of writing these auto/biographical genres. The main objective of this research is, then, to identify and analyze the ways that Plath transformed herself into what I define as an "ink goddess" – a woman writer who understood, experimented, and performed life through diary and letter writing, as well as someone who experienced her freedom (artistically, emotionally, sexually) in diary and letter as a way of subverting the patriarchal and male-literary world.

The specific objectives of my research are:

- To examine Plath's published journals and letters, identifying how she transformed herself into an "ink goddess";
- To investigate the ways that Plath transformed experiences and relationships into writing (what I call as "ink experiments": for instance, when transforming herself or other people into characters/actors in the narrative/play of her life);
- To analyze how Plath understood love and made sense of loving through her journals and letters (by focusing on the idea of "ink relationships" with her affections: her lovers, loved ones, and even writing and literature);
- To describe the idea of "narrativizing" and "dramatizing" life, love, and self on paper, as I analyze the likenesses and contrasts between the two actions and how they connect to Plath's practices of letter and diary writing;
- To explore the main differences and similarities between journals and letters in Plath's narrativization and dramatization of life;
- To examine how subjective elements (such as memory, identity, personae, and Time) are understood, experienced, and performed in Plath's life writing; and

- To understand the ways that letter and diary can be a part of what I define as “the stage of life writing,” working as “spaces for subversion” to the patriarchal literary world, with Sylvia Plath as an example for this.

The primary corpus of this research consists of the most recent volumes of her diaries and letters, namely: *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* (2000), edited by Karen V. Kukil; and *The Letters of Sylvia Plath Vol. 1: 1940-1956* (2017) and *The Letters of Sylvia Plath, Vol. 2: 1956-1963* (2018), both edited by Peter K. Steinberg and Karen V. Kukil. Selections of her journals and correspondence have been published before, such as Ted Hughes’s *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* (1982) and Aurelia Plath’s *Letters Home* (1975). These editions, however, present issues about what her husband and her mother, as editors and people involved in her life, decided to omit or put into evidence. Since auto/biography is linked with life – and therefore with real people and events –, auto/biographical texts are fraught with complex ethical concerns. After Plath’s suicide in 1963 and the posthumous publication of her book of poems *Ariel* (1965), both Ted Hughes (1930-1998) and Aurelia Plath (1906-1994) had to struggle with Plath’s growing fame and the weight given to her suicide. Therefore, editing her life writing was, in many ways, a way of building and manipulating different versions of her life to the public. For instance, as Clark (2020) argues, for many of Plath scholars, Aurelia Plath’s *Letters Home* seemed like “a betrayal, for it gave the impression of cheerful young woman who had never known depression, much less attempted suicide” (Loc<sup>4</sup> 26799). In this way, the selective cutting out of portions of letters or journals (such as Aurelia Plath’s removal of many passages of Plath’s letters where she complained or expressed negative feelings) plays an important role in the narrative that is being told.

Because of this, in this research I decided to work with the unabridged versions of her extant writings, in an attempt to let Plath’s voice emerge, as much as possible, from the mass of this work. I would also like to note that in this research I do not aim at analyzing or reporting Plath’s life, but rather *how she makes sense of her life* as written in her personal writings. This research focuses on what she wrote and what she *described as true* in both letter and journal, and, because of this, my analyses include her spelling, grammar and punctuation mistakes, use of lowercase words, abbreviations, misquotations, among others. Moreover, I use both the terms

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<sup>4</sup> Kindle edition (Loc strands for location, which is the digital page of the e-book).



“journal” and “diary,” but I emphasize the first word to discuss the personal writings per se – as it is the term that Kukil has used in her anthology of Plath’s unabridged journals (2000) – and diary to refer to the genre. I discuss these concepts in the following chapter.

There are many reasons why I chose to work with Sylvia Plath. First of all, I believe that she embraces a range of personae in both letter and diary, portraying the complexity behind the autobiographical “I” – for instance, the perfect daughter in most of her letters home in contrast with the woman who hates her mother in some journal entries. Secondly, as I argue that diary and letter can be spaces for subversion (chapter two), focusing on a woman and a writer highlights issues of gender and the possibilities of life writing. Thirdly, although I have seen some work on the possibilities of autobiography (such as Raíssa Galvão’s article on the multiplicity of identities and self-creation in Plath’s journals<sup>5</sup>), most of the work on the fictionalization and narrativization of the self is centered on her novel *The Bell Jar* or on her so-called confessional poems. I am not aware of academic research in Brazil that has dealt with both her letters and journals, particularly on the idea of narrativization and dramatization of the self in auto/biographies written by women.

I have also decided to work with Plath because I wanted to give her a scholarly treatment that goes beyond the lens of her looks or suicide. Even though nowadays she is read and studied widely, her fame was mostly increased after her death in 1963, following the publication of *Ariel* and her personal writings, such as her family letters and excerpts of her journals. Similar to what Heather Clark observes in Plath’s newest biography, *Red Comet: The Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath* (2020), I am also eager to “recover Sylvia Plath from cliché—to offer an alternative narrative to the Plath myth, to debunk the sensational and melodramatic rhetoric that surrounds her, and, finally, to examine her life through her commitment not to death, but to art” (*Red Comet: The Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath* (RC, 2020), Loc 429). Although I acknowledge that it is difficult not to identify her life with her tragic death (as the public consumption of her literary figure has done this for years and many of her writings deal with depression-related themes), an attempt to break with this limiting perception is of great importance. In this way, with this work I hope I can contribute positively to her legacy, emphasizing the complexity of her literary life rather than of her tragic death. Finally, as this research is in the area of life writing, and since I decided to work with a writer

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<sup>5</sup> Raíssa Varandas Galvão, “Máscaras, a ordem do dia: a multiplicidade do eu nos escritos de Sylvia Plath” published at *Darandina Revisteletrônica*, v. 10 n. 1 (2017).

whose writing was so close to her existence; it is impossible not to add here my personal preference for Plath. Henderson (2019) explains that “the sense of connection between readers and diaries/diarists helps to explain why so much academic writing about diaries involves a personal component” (p. 16). Adding letters and correspondents to this affirmation, I continue her sentence: “scholars frequently write reflectively about their experiences of discovering, reading, or researching diaries, and in many cases the research narrative turns into a discussion of the scholar’s own diary” (*idem*). In many ways, Plath illustrates the power behind sensitivity to me, and during this strange period of the 2020 pandemic, she has meant healing<sup>6</sup>, affection, and resilience. I hope this is reflected in the lines of this thesis.

I decided to work with both letter and diary for three reasons: firstly, because both played essential and yet different roles in Plath’s life, as I discuss throughout the chapters; secondly, because I wanted to see the ways that these two complex forms of life writing could complement and differ from each other; and finally, because I argue that diary and letter together give a better approach for understanding the role of auto/biographical writing in Plath’s life. In my undergraduate thesis<sup>7</sup> “Virginia Woolf Diary-Keeping Practice and the Creative Process of *Mrs Dalloway* (1925)”, I researched the diary-keeping practice of writer Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), and I noted that Woolf’s and Plath’s approaches to diary writing were very different. Woolf’s diaries were – at least from the period of 1922 to 1925 – more methodical and linear in comparison to Plath’s, whose journals worked more as compilation of ideas, outbursts, lists, reading diaries, advice to herself, pieces of manuscripts, and fragments of letters (to herself and other people), among other things. In a chronological and practical sense, Plath’s correspondence works much more as what is often understood as the diary function than her journals: since Plath constantly wrote letters to her mother, her correspondence follows a more linear order, while many breaks and gaps occur in her journals (see Table 1). These are, of

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<sup>6</sup> In my research, I use the word “healing” as an abstract, subjective, and non-definable concept, as it can mean several different things to different people. However, since I emphasize this verb many times throughout my thesis, it is important to note here what I understand by this word. In this way, “healing” is related to writing and its ability of relieving one’s chest from burdens through the written word (here exemplified by Plath’s own writing processes that helped her to deal with her depression, emotions, and problems). In addition, besides the idea of finding comfort through writing, here this concept is also connected to *subversion*, as I argue that writing can offer the possibility of women and minority groups to find their voices and their identity on the written page. I discuss all of these possibilities throughout the following chapters.

<sup>7</sup> *Virginia Woolf Diary-Keeping Practice and the Creative Process of Mrs Dalloway (1925)* defended in December 2, 2019 and advised by Dr. Rita Viana at the Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina (UFSC). In this research, I traced the creative process of the widely-known novel *Mrs Dalloway*, creating a timeline of its development as recorded in Woolf’s diaries. In 2021, I transformed my thesis into an essay, which won the 2021 Angelica Garnett Undergraduate Essay Prize and will be published in the Spring 2022 issue of the *Virginia Woolf Miscellany*.

course, not only a result of her practice, but also of the more fraught survival history of her journals. In this way, I believe that my ambitious choice of working with and analyzing more than 600 pages of journals and 2295 pages of letters, although not easy, was one that I found worthier of Plath's life and legacy. I also maintain that working with both helped create a more detailed and complete analysis of the three concepts I have tried to develop here, including the possibility of an "ink goddess" transformation, the ideas of "narrativization" and "dramatization" in the "stage of life writing," and the proposal of letter and diary as "spaces for subversion" in a male-dominated literary world. As it is a very ambitious and extensive corpus, in order to pursue these objectives, I categorized the segments of Plath's life according to major events and where I can find them, as follows:

Table 1 – Segments of Sylvia Plath's life (organization for analysis)

<b>Years</b>	<b>Major events</b>	<b>Available on</b>
1940-1949	Wellesley, Massachusetts. Adolescent years.	Letters, Vol. 1
1950-1952	Smith College.	Letters, Vol. 1; Journals
1953	Manhattan, Wellesley, McLean Hospital. Working at Mademoiselle. First suicide attempt. Electroshock therapy.	Letters, Vol. 1; Journals (fragments)
1954	Smith College and Harvard Summer School. Meets Richard Sassoon. Writes thesis on Dostoevsky.	Letters, Vol. 1
1955-1956	University of Cambridge. Meets and marries Ted Hughes. Travels through Europe.	Letters, Vol. 1; Journals
1957-1959	Boston, Massachusetts, U.S.A (road trip). Yaddo writer's colony. Teaches at Smith College. Becomes pregnant with Frieda.	Letters, Vol. 2; Journals
1960-1961	London, Court Green. Gives birth to Frieda Plath Hughes. Publishes <i>The Colossus</i> . Becomes pregnant with Nicholas.	Letters, Vol. 2; Journals (fragments)
1962-1963	Court Green, London (Yeats's house). Gives birth to Nicholas Farrar Hughes. Publishes <i>The Bell Jar</i> . Writes last letters and entries. Commits suicide on February 11, 1963.	Letters, Vol. 2; Journals (only 1962, fragments)

**Source:** the author (2021)

I have, however, decided to focus on Plath's life before her marriage to Ted Hughes on Bloomsday 1956. In the 1982 preface to the selected *Journals of Sylvia Plath*, Hughes writes that Plath's "real self" (HUGHES, 1982, qtd. in MALCOLM, 1992, Loc 67) only emerged in

the last half year of her life, which gave her a literary reputation, and that everything that she wrote before that was part of her “false selves”. As Malcolm (1992) describes, in Hughes’ perspective, Plath’s work before *Ariel* – “the short fiction she doggedly wrote and submitted, mostly unsuccessfully, to popular magazines; her novel, *The Bell Jar*; her letters; her apprentice poems, published in her first collection, *The Colossus*” (Loc 71) – were like “impurities thrown off from the various stages of the inner transformation, by-products of the internal work” (HUGHES, 1982, qtd. in Malcolm). In addition, Wilson (2013) explains that Plath viewed her husband as a kind of colossus and, to this date, his presence continues to obscure numerous facets of Plath’s life and work. In this way, choosing to work with her writing before *Ariel* and before Hughes is a way of giving visibility and highlighting the power behind the writings from earlier periods of her life. I also wanted to understand the ways Plath conceptualized and understood love before getting married, and I argue that by focusing on this period of time and on her romantic relationships with her “male muses” (*J* p. 365; p. 381; *RC* Loc 2430; Loc 15471; Loc 19418) and “psychic brothers” (*LI* p. 720; p. 727; p. 762; p. 781; p. 1012; *RC* Loc 3390; Loc 9441; Loc 9780; Loc 11155), I can emphasize better the ways that she transformed herself into an ink goddess to live, survive, and experience her freedom without a ring on her finger. Although I mention him several times, in this research Hughes functions more as the central character/actor of the “creative marriage” masterpiece that the ink goddess Plath creates than an autonomous self.

My analyses were conducted in several stages. Firstly, I read both journals and letters chronologically and interspersedly, noticing how Plath multiplied herself in the different social roles she occupied and examining how she created a multidimensional autobiographical “I” in her journals and letters. In this first stage, I came to understand the main personae that Plath displayed in her personal writings, which included *Sivvy* (daughter, granddaughter, niece, sister), *Sylvia* (student, friend, lover), *Sylvia Plath* (writer, professor, researcher) and *Mrs. Hughes* (wife and mother), among many others (including subtler ones, such as *Sivvy* from the fairy tale that she creates with her mother or the “sylvan goddess” (*J*, p. 177) from her love letters to her boyfriends). Secondly, I analyzed and compared how she narrativized and dramatized her life and love in different ways, comparing letter and journal and delineating an idea for narrative and performance. To interpret this material, I relied on discussions about epistolary discourses (such as Altman’s (1982), Stanley’s (2004), and Diaz’s (2016)), and on diary-keeping practices and the diary’s functions, emphasized by Lejeune (2014), Abbott

(1984), and Henderson (2019). Understanding the complexities of life writing and its connection with gender and cultural studies (especially with Smith and Watson's work (1998; 2001)) was essential to the third stage, when I developed the aforementioned idea of diary and letter as spaces for subversion and the possibilities for narrativization and dramatization in these genres. In addition, I have separated these kinds of love into three main areas: romantic (platonic lovers, boyfriends, and husband), familial (children, father, brother, mother, and other mother-figures, such as her psychologist, Dr. Ruth Beuscher, and her benefactor, Olive Higgins Prouty), and literary (love for writing and literature). This helped me to come upon the idea of Plath's transformation as an ink goddess in multiple ways. Because of limitations of time, I could not put all of these kinds of love in this research, and I decided to focus on her relationship with writing, literature, her mother, and her lovers.

Finally, it is also important to note that even though in her journals and letters there are some comparisons between a Judeo-Christian God and Plath's discussions about religion, god, and the possibility of being godlike; in my analyses I propose the idea of being godlike *as the freedom and possibility of doing what she wanted* (including being free to write and to explore her sexuality, living multiple lives, experiencing every aspect of her life, being omniscient, stopping Time, among others). In this way, when I refer to an "ink goddess," I am not describing a specific religious figure, but rather this representation of freedom and creation.

The overview of my thesis is as follows:

In this first chapter, "Spilled ink," I have introduced and given an overview of the main aspects of this research, stating my general and specific objectives, hypotheses, procedures, and motivation. It was my attempt to put an overflow of ideas into an inkwell.

In the next chapter, "Inking the self," I discuss several aspects that ground this thesis. In the first part, "Like moths to a candle: flickers of Sylvia Plath," I situate Plath in this research, discussing the multitude of Plaths that constitute her legacy. I also give a note on biography, briefly explaining its role in my thesis and reflecting on the genre. Next, in "Diaries and letters, spaces for subversion," I give an overview of both letters and diaries, and their complexities as I explain the reasons I believe they both can be subversive places, especially for women and members of minority groups. In the third part, "Life writing on stage," I propose what I define

as “the stages of narrativization and dramatization,” differentiating the two terms as I insert them in the “stage of life writing”.

In the third chapter, “Ink love,” I analyze some of Plath’s affections. Just as Plath experimented in her life writing, in this part I experiment with the ways that she conceptualized and performed her life, love, and her own self. I have divided this chapter into two parts: “ink experiments,” where I demonstrate her love for writing (section one) and for literature (section two); and “ink relationships,” where I show her relationship with her mother (section three) and lovers (section four). I discuss several subjects in this chapter, such as: writing as a way of resisting and healing, Woolf’s and Plath’s diaries and their attempt to pin down Time, the fairy tale that Plath created with her mother, the idea of reinventing oneself through love letters (and the possibility of making them a form of art), among others.

Finally, in the fourth chapter, “Ink Goddess,” I focus on the idea of gender in contact with romantic love. Here, I analyze Plath’s transformation into an ink goddess in two parts: 1) the rehearsals or drafts with pieces of her “male muses” and “psychic brothers”; and 2) the creation of her masterpiece: a creative marriage (where Hughes is transformed/cast as the main character/actor). I argue that this idea of living vicariously through her lovers was a way of exploring freedom in a patriarchal society: loving men was a way of becoming them and, through them, she was capable of loving herself and living the life she wanted as a writer. I conclude, therefore, that Plath’s need to become an ink goddess was intrinsically connected to her position as a woman who wanted to be a writer, wife, and mother in a society that would frequently demand her she to choose only one option.

In the last chapter, “(Ink)conclusion,” I discuss this research in three “acts”: 1) “the girl who wanted to be god,” where I reflect upon Plath’s own ideas about being “godlike;” 2) “a journey into the ink ocean,” where I propose an (ink)conclusion, presenting a visual scheme of the discussions of this thesis in one hand, and suggesting the open-endedness of this work in the other; and finally, 3) “denouement,” where I reflect and discuss ideas for further research, give some final remarks and describe my findings and limitations.

## 2 CHAPTER TWO: INKING THE SELF

‘Are you mythological, too?’

‘Not exactly,’ he replied, ‘but I certainly hope to be some day.

Being mythological does wonders for one’s ego.’

— Sylvia Plath, “Initiation”

### 2.1 LIKE MOTHS TO A CANDLE: FLICKERS OF SYLVIA PLATH

#### 2.1.1 An ocean of Plaths

In a 1962 interview<sup>8</sup> with Peter Orr for the British Council’s *The Poet Speaks* series, Sylvia Plath says that she wrote her first published poem when she was eight years and a half; and she explains that writing has always been a part of her life. During her life, she published many stories and poems to magazines, as well as two books, *The Colossus and Other Poems* (1960) and the widely-known novel *The Bell Jar* (first published in 1963 under the pseudonym of Victoria Lucas). Plath always worked hard to write professionally and live by her writing (“to earn the name of ‘writer’ over again, with much wrestling” (*LI* p. 1261, in a letter to her mother)); however, discussing her work and her public figure can be complicated, especially because her most famous work was published after her suicide in 1963. As her daughter Frieda Hughes (1960 -) explains in the preface of the restored edition of *Ariel* (2004), when Plath committed suicide on February 11, 1963, she “left a black spring binder on her desk, containing a manuscript of forty poems” (p. xi). She is referring to her mother’s manuscript of *Ariel*, the book that is nowadays considered by many scholars one of the most important collections of poetry of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. When Hughes published it in 1965, however, he took out twelve of the planned poems and added other twelve to the U.S. American edition (HUGHES, 2004, p. 14). Because Plath was still legally married to him at the time of her death, Hughes was in charge of her writings and documents, including her journals, letters, and manuscripts; and he was the one responsible for publishing many of her works (and, perhaps, for the disappearance<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> London; October 30, 1956. The interview is available on YouTube.

<sup>9</sup> There is much debate in regard the disappearance of Plath’s work. For instance, according to Clark (2020), at the end of her life Plath was working at a third novel called “Double Exposure”, which was going to tell the

of some of them too). There are many debates concerning Hughes' rights over his wife's work, particularly because of his affair with Assia Wevill (1927-1969) around the time of Plath's suicide. Moreover, ethical aspects about her texts also play an important role in these discussions, especially because her work deals with autobiographical content, which can be sensitive to people in her life who were, or still are, alive. As Janet Malcolm explains in the biography *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (1992), "the concept of privacy is a sort of screen to hide the fact that almost none is possible in a social universe" (Loc 142): all these issues are certainly present in her story, legacy, and literary figure.

In addition, the name "Sylvia Plath" evokes a sense of mystery, a riddle full of symbolisms that we try to solve by attempting to fit her into boxes or keywords: "poetry," "suicide," "beauty," "tragedy," to name a few. Bayley and Brain, in their essay collection of *Representing Sylvia Plath* (2011), explain that "Plath's image hovers around our contemporary imagination, perpetuating various forms of myth" (p. 6). In fact, in the introduction of the 1966 edition of *Ariel*, the confessional poet Robert Lowell (1917-1977) echoes some of this imagery: "[in this book, Plath] becomes herself, becomes something imaginary, newly, wildly and subtly created – hardly a person at all, or a woman, certainly not about 'poetess,' but one of those super-real, hypnotic, great classical heroines" (vii). He continues by showing the variety of voices that her poems bring – "now coolly amused, witty, now sour, now fanciful, girlish, charming, now sinking to the strident rasp of the vampire" concluding that Plath is "a Dido, Phaedra, or Medea" (*idem*). The association of Plath with Greek myth highlights the mythologization of her figure – something that was done not only by critics and scholars, but also by people close to her. For instance, Clark (2020) explains that Lowell was not the only one who portrayed her as a "Medea, hurtling toward her own destruction" (*RC* Loc 386), as her husband Ted Hughes also "often portrayed her as a passive vessel through which a dangerous muse spoke" (*RC* Loc 388). Many times, these mythological associations can happen because of themes in her poetry (and here it is emphasized by the fact that both of these men were poets themselves), but Clark also sheds light into some common imageries that have been attributed to Plath throughout the years. She mentions, for instance, the common perception of Plath as a

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disintegration of her marriage with Ted Hughes. As Clark explains, "the 130-page draft (or partial draft) of this book, like most of Sylvia's late journals, disappeared after her death—though not before Assia [Hughes' lover], Olwyn [Hughes' sister], and possibly Ted had read it. Ted may have destroyed it, as Assia wished him to; *it may* have burned in a 1971 fire at his Yorkshire home, Lumb Bank; or *it may* have been taken" (Loc 21155, my italics). As it possible to note, it is not possible to affirm or deny Hughes' role in its disappearance.



“crazed poetic priestess” (*idem*), one that is often viewed through the “clichéd image as the Marilyn Monroe of the literati” (*idem*) and whose “caricatures have calcified over time into the popular, reductive version of Sylvia Plath we all know: the suicidal writer of *The Bell Jar* whose cultish devotees are black-clad young women” (Loc 394). Who is, then, the person behind these so many identities? Is she Medea or Ariel? The Sivvy, from her letters home; Mrs Hughes, the wife of the famous poet; or Sylvia Plath, a poet herself? Is she a destructive muse or a poetic priestess? Who is this person that is “hardly a person at all” (LOWELL, 1966, p. vii)? And is it possible to have a single, true person to be found?

In the introduction of first volume of *The Letters of Sylvia Plath*, published in 2017, the editors Steinberg and Kukil explain that “Sylvia Plath was many things to many people: daughter, niece, sister, student, journalist, poet, friend, artist, girlfriend, wife, novelist, peer, and mother” (p. xxiii), reminding us that “poet” was just one of the many social roles that Plath occupied. These identities put into evidence that Plath was much more than her suicide, her writing, her looks, or any of the aforementioned mythical associations. In addition, in the online panel “Writing about Plath: Challenges and Pleasures,” hosted by The Sylvia Plath Society and which took place at the Sylvia Plath 88th Birthday Party on 24 October 2020, Steinberg also argues that there is not a “definitive Plath . . . [as] each of us has a Plath” (01:50:20). He emphasizes that, every single time that he approaches her (through books, archives, and her works), he learns more about her, filling in the gaps, putting together pieces of her puzzles.

Linda Wagner-Martin (2004) writes that the story of Sylvia Plath, “the brilliant woman writer who was a suicide at the age of thirty, poses a conundrum: like moths to a candle . . . we keep reading the biographies . . . as if we are desperate to find a different narrative, as if pouring *our* energies into her life will create a new ending for it” (p. ix). According to her, it seems as if there is an “archetypal story” (*idem*) in her life (and in her writings, I add) to which “we all respond, regardless of generation, profession, or gender” (*idem*). Indeed, the great number of biographies, essays, creative responses, and research on Plath highlights the importance of her legacy and shows how vast her work is, even if she had a brief life. For instance, the work on Plath includes many biographies, academic monographs – that range a variety of subjects such as Dorka Tamas’ research on the supernatural in Plath’s poetry at the University of Exeter; Maria Rovita’s Ph.D. dissertation on Plath and critical menstrual studies at Penn State University; and Elis Cogo’s thesis on the plurality of voices of *Three Women* at the Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, to name a few – and even creative ones, such as Kate

Moses's *Wintering: A Novel of Sylvia Plath*<sup>10</sup> (2003), an imagined portrait of Plath's life after Hughes.

Kukil and Steinberg (2017) explain that “perhaps the most overlooked feature of [Plath's] life was that she was *human*, and therefore fallible. She misspelled words, punctuated incorrectly, lied, misquoted texts, exaggerated, was sarcastic, and sometimes brutally honest” (p. xxiii). Relying on this, I believe that Plath's journals and letters put into evidence the errant human being that tries to portray herself and others through words, and with these works, we get in contact with subtleties and nuances that go beyond myths and symbolic representations. Nonetheless, it is also important to note that even though I am relying on a material where, supposedly, Plath “speaks for herself” (KUKIL, 2000, p. ix), as I analyze, interpret, and hypothesize her as an ink goddess, I am also attributing identities and personae to her. I acknowledge, however, that the Sylvia Plath that I evoke here is one that constitutes many voices, each one with its own multiplicities, particularities, and volatilities: an *ocean of Plaths*, as I entitled this subchapter. I use the word “ocean” to evoke Plath's own passion for it but also to remind ourselves that rather than just one myth, imagery, or concept, Plath is an expanse: poet and diarist, Medea and ink goddess, woman and writer, daughter and mother. Reading and interpreting her work, we shape and create our own “Plaths” to make sense of herself and ourselves.

### 2.1.2 A note on biography

Since my work is linked so closely to events and people in Plath's life and the nuances of life and fiction, I have relied on multiple biographies to write this thesis. As mentioned before, I do not seek to determine what has *actually* happened in her life, but rather to discuss the ways that she recorded and reflected on these events in her journals and letters. However, having an overview of the main events of her life – or “experiences,” as I explain in the last topic of this chapter – is important to grasp the ways in which she transformed herself on the written page. In this way, seeking to loosely define the “veracity” of these real-life events, I have leaned on some biographies of her, always bearing in mind that each one is evoking its own narrative (and the biographer's subjectivity). Because of this contradicting and complex

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<sup>10</sup> Brazilian edition: *Inverno*, translated by Ana Carolina Mesquita and published by A Girafa in 2005.

aspect, I believe that it is essential to take a brief look at how some biographies (especially *Red Comet*) have helped me to conduct this research and also how I perceive the genre. As Maria Rita Drumond Viana (2021) explains in the introduction of her interview with biographers Hermione Lee and Roy Foster, “biographies are still regarded with suspicion in the academy in Brazil; life writing is not a concept many Brazilian literary scholars recognise easily” (p. 348): since one of my aims is to discuss the complex area of auto/biographical writing, giving a note on my readings of the biographies of Plath is essential at this point of this research.

Diane Middlebrook’s *Her Husband: Hughes and Plath – A Marriage* (2003) helped me understand better the literary marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Hughes, which was essential for me to contextualize better Plath’s own views on gender and marriage, as well as to construct the idea of a “creative marriage” as her “masterpiece” (chapter four). Andrew Wilson’s *Mad Girl’s Love Song: Sylvia Plath and Life Before Ted* (2013) opened up my perspective for Plath beyond Hughes, as their marriage often shadows her life before him, which aided me to choose to focus on Plath’s life before her marriage. In addition, my emphasis on male muses, love letters, psychic brothers, among other ideas come from this period of her life, and understanding it thoroughly was of great importance. Janet Malcolm’s *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (1992) was essential for me to deconstruct these aforementioned perspectives by understanding the limits of a biography, which she controversially defines as “a flawed genre” (Loc 160). While analyzing many biographies about Plath, Malcolm highlights the hidden narratives behind them. This helps to illustrate the scramble of voices which Lee (2008) identifies in biographies in general, through which “history, politics, sociology, gossip, fiction, literary criticism, psychoanalysis, documentary, journalism, ethic, and philosophy” (p. 2), as well as fictionalized versions and different personae can be seen, discussed, and created in a biography’s story. Anne Stevenson’s *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* (1989) aided me to better understand the common perception of Plath as a “beautiful” yet “tragic” figure. Words such as “bitter” in the biography’s title, emphasize the biographer’s own perception of Plath’s life as somewhat attributed to anger, pain, and unhappiness – emotions that are until nowadays attributed to her –, where Plath becomes a sort of romantic symbol of beauty and suicide. Reading *Bitter Fame* has helped me to decide to focus on Heather Clark’s *Red Comet: The Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath* – a more than one-thousand-page biography of Plath

published in 2020 – in my thesis. As I mentioned in my book review<sup>11</sup>, Clark’s meticulous work as both a biographer and a literary scholar, focusing on Plath as a woman, writer, mother, daughter, among many other identities, makes *Red Comet* a celebration of Plath’s artistic life and literary development, and is, to date, the more comprehensive and scholarly biography available, a biography that I believe that Sylvia Plath always deserved.

Lee (2021), in the aforementioned interview with Viana, argues that biography is always “reactive . . . [as biographers] are writing [their] book in the light of how [the biographee] has been treated . . . in [their] lifetime” (p. 356). To exemplify this, she says that in her biography *Virginia Woolf* (1996), she was “writing out of a resistance or a reaction against the way [she] felt that she [Woolf] had been infantilised by a particular kind of psychoanalytical treatment in the 1980s and 90s” (*idem*). The biographer was trying, then, to “re-professionalize” [sic] Woolf. Forster (2021) says a similar thing: according to him, in his biography of Yeats, *W. B. Yeats: a life* (1997), he was “trying to take him [Yeats] back from critics like Cleanth Brooks, who say that the life has absolutely nothing to do with the work” (p. 357). He concludes by arguing that people “cannot read a line of Yeats or of his letters without knowing that the life and the work are completely interwoven with each other” (*idem*), an argument that sheds light not only in the area of life writing and on auto/biographical texts, but also light in this research, as I argue that Plath’s writing was as intrinsically connected to her life as Yeats’s. Applying these discussions to my thesis, this argument can also explain the idea that I mentioned in the previous chapter about Clark’s (2020) need to emphasize Plath’s life and work instead of her suicide: *Red Comet* is, then, in many ways, reactive to other biographies (as well as to the public assumption and the Plathian scholar treatment) that were written before it.

Moreover, every biography tells a particular story. The subject may be “the same,” but each book will be embedded in a different social-historical context, changing according to the biographers’ own life and the questions they ask, ideas they underline, and materials that they choose to emphasize and/or omit in their books. Even though many complex aspects enfold the stories behind a biography – ranging from the complicated task of analyzing texts such as diaries and journals, the gaps and different versions of people’s memories, the connections among reality, memory, fictionalization, and imagination, and even the blend between the biographer’s and biographee’s life –, there is a human being, a body, a person behind all these

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<sup>11</sup> “‘The light of the mind’: a review of Heather Clark’s *Red Comet: The Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath* (2020)”, published at *Ilha do Desterro*, v. 74 n. 2 (2021): *Life Writing*.

subjectivities. As Hermione Lee describes in her book *Body Parts: Essays on Life Writing* (2008), “through all the documents and letters and witnesses, the conflicting opinions and partial memories and fictionalised versions, we keep catching sight of a real body, a physical life” (p. 2). With this in mind, I have used these biographies, especially Clark’s, as a way of understanding the process of dramatization and narrativization of the self in Plath’s journals and letters, always bearing in mind and reflecting upon the idea that biography is a complex genre. It is also important to note here that I acknowledge how, even though I have tried to focus on Plath’s own voice in her personal writings, the voices of all these biographers as well as *my own* all intermingle in the lines of this research: the Sylvia Plath and the material that is being analyzed, interpreted, and hypothesized here is one that constitutes many voices.

## 2.2 DIARIES AND LETTERS, SPACES FOR SUBVERSION

Just as it was difficult to define the multiple voices of Sylvia Plath, putting a definition to the complex field of life writing is not an easy task. Letters, diaries, biographies, memoirs, personal essays: the possibilities for mixing life and written words are endless, branching through numerous and hybrid genres. According to Smith and Watson (2001), life writing can be defined as a “a general term for writing of diverse kinds that takes a life as its subject” (p. 3); however, although apparently definable, this discussion is very complex. The authors emphasize that auto/biography deals with an on-going process of self-reflection, one that is mediated by the context in the moment of writing (temporal and spatial) and by memory, experience, and identity. Similarly, Dalmaso et al (2021) also propose “common threads in its weaving of lives through writing: self, truth, and memory” (p. 11) – subjective elements that are essential in the field and that I explore throughout this research. For instance, because life writing can be marked by its retrospective glance (in larger or shorter periods of time), experiences, always meditated through memory and language, work as a “[re]interpretation of the past and of our place in a culturally and historically specific present” (p. 24). While this is more obvious the farther way the moment of living is from the moment of writing, such as in most auto/biographies, it is also true that what correspondents and diarists remember, how they remember, and what they choose to remember is always marked by the reinterpretation of their experiences. Likewise, identities also must be put into context, as personal writings are always in contact with time and space. In this way, there is no unique coherent “self” that writes, but

rather a conjunction of a number of “selves” marked by many categories, such as gender, race, sexuality, ethnicity, abilities, among others.

The complexity of taking someone’s life as a subject, emphasized by the retrospective characteristic of life writing, can be observed in Evaristo’s reflections on the preface of her auto/biographical novel, *Becos da Memória* (2006). The writer affirms that her book can be read as “fictions of one’s memory” (p. 10), as she feels a great urge for reinvention when memories are lost. She also emphasizes that between an experience and its narration there is “a space of deep profoundness, and it is *precisely in this place that invention explodes*” (p. 11, my italics). Although talking about a life seems apparently simple, this “explosion” of invention explains why life writing is a form that is constantly dancing to the beat of life and fiction. As Smith and Watson (2001) describe, “to theorize memory, experience, identity, embodiment, and agency is to begin to understand the complexities of autobiographical subjectivity and its *performative nature*” (p. 48, my italics). How people remember, how they choose to write about their experiences, and which identities they convey through their writing, are just some fundamental reflections that we must consider to start understanding the nuances behind this area that combines life and writing.

Another important aspect to highlight here is the somewhat contradictory ideas of life writing as a *hybrid genre* that exists in a *liminal space*. Although seemingly opposed (hybridity emphasizing biological mixture and liminality the physical space between two other places), it is somehow in this paradoxical space that Plath could become an ink goddess. To start, hybridity is much more emphasized in the area of life writing: as I demonstrate in the following sections, diaries and journals are public and private, professional and personal, real and imagined. Jolly and Stanley (2005) affirm in their essay “Letters as/not genre” that “‘the letter’ as a genre type immediately dissolves into messy or hybridic forms once actual examples come under analytic scrutiny” (p. 94). Similarly, Smith and Watson (2001) cite numerous examples of auto/biographical hybrid works, emphasizing the “desire of autobiographical subjects to splinter monolithic categories that have culturally identified them, such as ‘woman’ or ‘gay’ or ‘black’ or ‘disabled,’ and to reassemble various pieces of memory, experience, identity, embodiment, and agency into new, often hybrid, modes of subjectivity” (p. 109).

The idea of liminality, moreover, comes from works like Brigitte Diaz’s *O gênero epistolar, ou o pensamento nômade* (2016), where the author argues that letters are a kind of

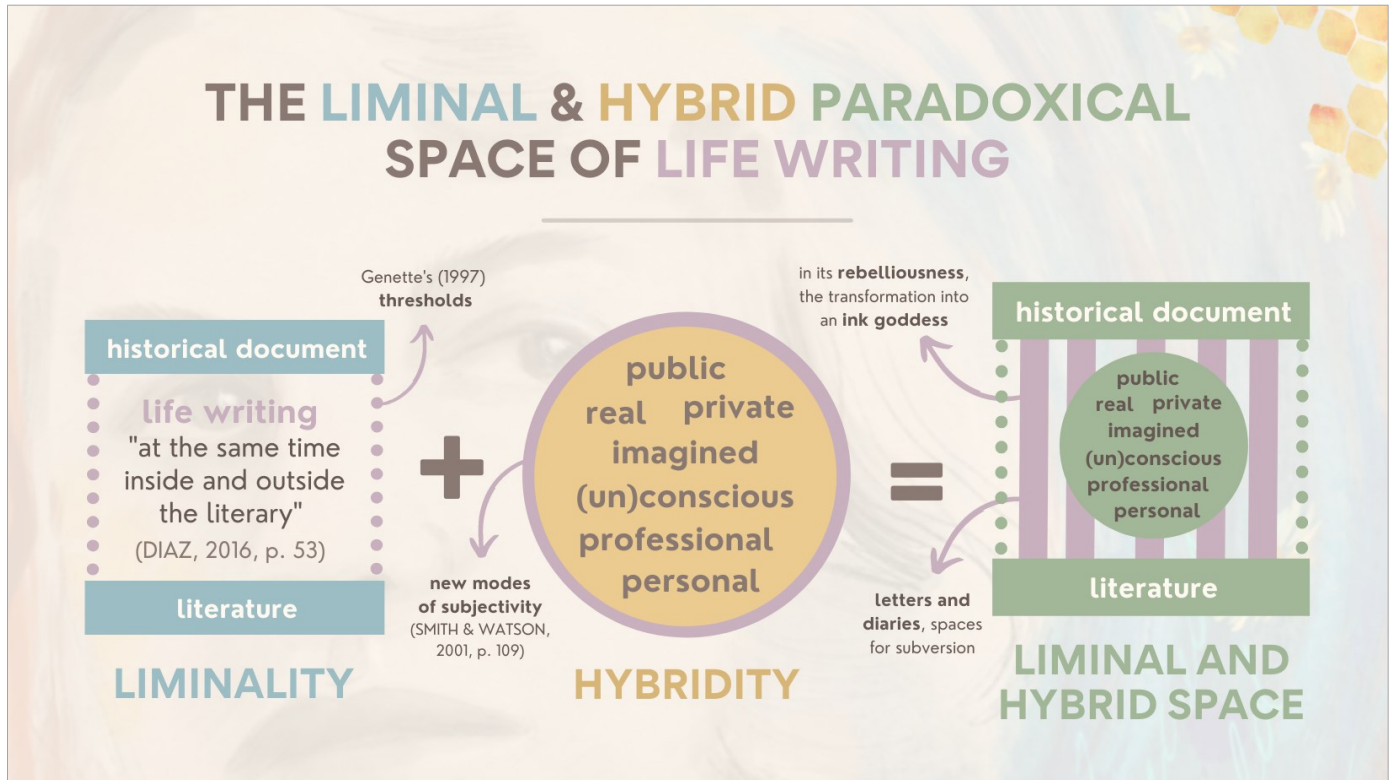
writing that is “rebellious to any generic identifications” (p. 11, my translation<sup>12</sup>), a kind of “anti-genre” (p. 50) that exists in “a borderline space – at *the same time inside and outside the literary*” (p. 53, my italics). Moreover, I am also evoking here Gérard Genette’s *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (1997). According to him, “the paratext is what enables a text to become a book” (p. 1). This concept is composed by the formula “Paratext = Peritext + Epitext” (p. 5), the first one being everything that exists inside the book but it is not the text itself (such as the cover, illustrations, the type of paper, the title page, among others) and the second one consisting of everything that exists outside of the text but that contribute and comment on the book as a whole (such as interviews and magazines in the public domain, and letters and diaries as private epitexts). Genette affirms that paratexts live in the threshold (hence the title of the book), in a sort of “fringe . . . [that] constitutes a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of *transition but also of transaction*” (p. 2, my italics). In the preface of the book, Richard Macksey (1997) highlights that although Genette is delighted by systematic categories and functions, he is “even more fascinated by the fringes and borderlands between regimes that these explorations open up” (p. xix). In addition, to Genette, the epitext do not have precise limits: “*fringe of the fringe*, it gradually disappears into, among other things, the totality of the authorial discourse” (p. 346); and it is precisely in this ambiguous, rebellious, and liminal threshold space that I situate the richness of diary and letter as hybrid forms of writing that navigate in the fringes.

In this way, although apparently contradicting, these two characteristics work together to embrace a transient locus that refuses to be defined, which opens up space for it to become a space of subversion for women and minority groups, as I explain next. It is also important to note that Smith and Watson (2001) already put these two elements together, as they mention that the area of life writing gives space for writers around the globe to propose “new concepts of subjectivity, as transcultural, diasporic, hybrid, and nomadic” (p. 132). The dynamics of these features can be observed as follows:

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<sup>12</sup> As I am using a Brazilian edition and all quotations from this book were translated by me.

Figure 1 – The liminal and hybrid paradoxical space of life writing



*Source: the author (2022)*

Moreover, when thinking about auto/biography and women's studies, the complexity of life writing goes beyond the overlapping place of life and fiction that it occupies. According to Friedman (1998), since women have an identity that "merges the shared and the unique" (p. 76), their autobiographies cannot be read and understood in the same way that we do with life writing by men (this is, as she explains, writing that was historically focused on individualism and the expressions of the self, at least in the Western culture). Her argument is that individualism, for women, is an illusion, as women's autobiographical selves are always linked to a sense of "shared identity with other women, (...) [which] exists in tension with a sense of their own uniqueness" (p. 79). The understanding of the particularities of women's autobiographical selves is essential to a better interpretation, for example, of Plath's life writing, as her position as a writer was always in tension with her identities as a woman who wanted to be a poet, wife, and mother in a male-dominated literary world. As Clark puts it, "Sylvia Plath took herself and her desires seriously in a world that often refused to do so" (RC, Loc 335). Plath's uniqueness, then, was always in contrast and in contact with her shared identity as a woman.



Therefore, it is possible to note that life writing is a field where many complex relationships mingle and dance; and this is tied to – as well as constantly breaking with – many layers of truth, subjective aspects, nuances, and relations of power. To understand this liminal and hybrid space of life writing, its possibility to be a space of subversion, and how it connects with Plath’s transformation into an ink goddess, we need to take a deeper look into the particularities of the diary and the letter.

### 2.2.1 What is a diary?

“Dear diary...”: to whom do you imagine writing this familiar combination of words? Philippe Lejeune (2014), the seminal scholar of life writing, paints a picture of the imagined writer behind these words: teenage girls, with their prototypical feminine diaries – pink notebooks with little padlocks. As the author explains, this imagery comes from historical impositions, such as what could be observed in nineteenth century France, when educators encouraged middle class teenage girls to keep a diary. Simons (1990) also emphasizes how diaries came to have a special value for women, as many did not have access to other forms of writing – especially during the eighteenth and nineteenth century – when diary-keeping practices “came to have special value as a personal space in which to negotiate [the] delicate boundary between private opinion and its open articulation” (p. 11). As these examples show, even though diary writing has been considered as an activity for girls, it is not an inherently feminine action, but rather that this association has roots in historical and social conventions. As Desirée Henderson argues in her *How to Read a Diary* (2019), diary writing is a *feminized* practice, one that has gone through a historical process that constructed a “gendered character for the diary and its authors” (p. 54). She also calls attention to what she defines as the “gender paradox” of the diary: even though this practice has been characterized as feminine, the diaries that have long been most celebrated and considered canonical were written by men, such as Samuel Pepys’s or Henry Thoreau’s.

Defining a diary is not an easy task. Firstly, it can become a place for many different practices, such as analyzing oneself, speculating about ideas or theories, writing down memories and events, unburdening thoughts or feelings, organizing and planning life, resisting during unfavorable times, among others (LEJEUNE, 2014). Moreover, Henderson (2019) lists some words that are usually attributed to the genre, including “private,” “truthful,” “feminine,”

and “unliterary,” (p. 1), calling attention to the fact that defining it through these generic words often takes off its importance and complexity. For instance, the idea of “privacy” raises a range of debates: invasion of privacy (and the fact that having one’s space is a luxury for many people), the case of shared diaries and their restricted readership, and ethical issues in relation to publication, to name a few. In addition, the issues behind the word “feminine,” and “unliterary” are connected, as they both deal with what Henderson (2019) describes as the “gender paradox” (abovementioned) and “genre paradox” of the diary. As the author explains, writing styles and techniques have traditionally only been recognized through the lens of white, male, Western literary tradition, and we must reflect upon what makes diaries (and letters, as I add in this research) literary or not. Questioning, then, why some diaries and letters are considered literary while other are not is of great importance, especially if we discuss these aspects with an interdisciplinary approach that considers class, race, and gender intersectionally. In this way, if we start to recognize these forms as genres possessing artistic and aesthetic characteristics, embedded in their own uniqueness that defy the literary tradition, we can start to open up space for writers who have been historically excluded to be “studied, taught, and read” (HENDERSON, 2019, p. 63).

Moreover, both diaries and letters have had their significance mostly attributed to their function in the study of literature as historical evidence, as sources to find more about an author, the meaning of a literary work, or a particular time in history (as has once been proposed by historicists in literary theory). Attributing them truth-value just because they deal with real-life events can be very problematic, as they are subjective practices that deal with many variables (layers of time, space, memory, identity, and experience, to cite a few) that affect the perception, recall, and inscription. How can we “measure,” then, the veracity of these genres? As Henderson (2019) notes, in the case of the diary the most careful response would be to understand the truth in it as subjective: “it would be more accurate to say that diaries present truths about the diarist or diarist’s own perception of truth, without necessarily fulfilling an ideal of historical fidelity” (p. 127). When diarists (and correspondents, as I highlight in the last subtopic) put their memories, thoughts, stories, experiences, and emotions onto paper, cultural information, imagination, desires, justification of one’s own perceptions, expectations and account of others and themselves, among other elements, are playing an important role in the inscription. In this way, instead of looking at these genres to find historical facts, we must learn

to read them as subjective works mediated by subjective functions, as explained by Smith and Watson (2001):

Sometimes people read autobiographical narratives as historical documents, a source of evidence for the analysis of historical movements or events or persons. From this perspective, autobiographical narrating and history writing *might* seem to be synonymous. Although it can be read as a history of the writing/speaking subject, however, *life narrative cannot be reduced to or understood only as a historical record*. While autobiographical narratives *may* contain “facts,” they are not factual history about a particular time, person, or event. Rather they offer *subjective “truth” rather than “fact”* (p. 10, my italics).

The notion of “truth,” therefore, is fluid in the diary form, as it is socially and historically situated, contextual, and it depends on aspects such as memory, readership, identity. As Dalmaso et al (2021) explain, “life writing is as much about the truth as it is about *discourses of the truth*” (p. 12, my italics), which reflects on the idea that “truth” is social and therefore connected to the weight of aspects such as the name of the author and their social status. Thus, defining what a “diary” is brings all of this into debate. Henderson (2019) loosely defines it as “both an action meant to accomplish something for diarists and a fuzzy genre that borrows from many different, preexisting forms” (p. 6). Because it is a “fuzzy genre,” having in mind these discussions, as well as some possible diaristic frameworks (the diary subject, its contents, possible readers or audience, the diary time, its structure and medium, among others) is essential to analyze and interpret them. However, I also argue that it is precisely in this space of non-definition, and of hybridity, flexibility, and openness that the diary can become so transformative, where diarists change themselves and the genre as they create new possibilities through the written word.

### **2.2.2 Diary or journal?**

There is much debate concerning the difference between the terms “diary” and “journal”. Henderson (2019) mentions how some scholars refer to diary writing as a more emotional and expressive practice, and journaling as more factual form of writing – but there are others who argue that it is exactly the opposite. As a researcher who has also analyzed Virginia Woolf’s (1882-1941) diary-keeping practice, I believe that diaries can be both factual *and* emotional, as Woolf used her diaries not only to talk about her life and feelings, but also to plan her writing, create schedules, and organize her life. Regularity may also attempt to

differentiate these two terms: whereas “diary writing” usually implies a somehow more daily, structured, and linear writing practice, “journaling” is often related to a more fragmented and open-wide action. This openness is even more emphasized with current growth of the genre and its hybridity, which can be highlighted through practices such as bullet journaling (a famous practice that involves writing and drawing goals and to-do pages, monthly calendars, daily tracks, among other organizational and self-improvement habits), therapeutical writing (the act of using writing for understanding oneself and healing), and having other specific types of notebooks (dream, travel, or gratitude journals, for instance). In the actual practice of diary and journal writing, however, I believe that regularity, structure, hybridity, and other functions overlap, and it is difficult to define where a journal finishes and a diary starts. This debate becomes even more complex when we take into consideration technology and digital diaries, where the practice can be done in several ways and in different media and support, such as the web, computers, and specific apps. As Lejeune (2014) describes, diarists try to compose an image with “small discontinuous brushstrokes” (p. 346, my translation<sup>13</sup>) and, therefore, factors such as factual or emotional writing, (in)constancy and gaps mingle and intertwine in a (dis)continuous painting of life.

I use both of these words in this research: “journal” to refer to Plath’s diary-writing practice (as it was the word that Kukil and Hughes chose when they published them) and “diary” to discuss the action and the genre. I chose focus on “diary” to talk about the practice because of three reasons: 1) to not cause confusion, since journal can have other different meanings, such as to refer to academic periodicals; 2) to resignify the assumption that diaries are less important than journals; and 3) to call attention to gender and the sociohistorical aspects behind diaries, recovering the word from a “feminized, minimized, and even shameful form of writing” (HENDERSON, 2019, p. 3). In a world where Western “Literature” (and its respected forms, with poetry at the pinnacle of prestige) has historically been accessed mostly by white men, I insist on using the word “diary” to refer to the genre as a way to emphasize the sociohistorical aspects behind its definition. As Henderson (2019) explains, the “pejorative perception of the word diary is linked to misogynist and homophobic attitudes that deserves to be dismantled”

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<sup>13</sup> All quotations by Lejeune are from *O Pacto Autobiográfico* (2014), a compilation of the French author’s texts translated into Portuguese by Jovita Noronha and Maria Guedes for Editora UFMG. There are editions of his works in English, however, because of matters of time and accessibility to the material, all quotations included here are from this edition and were translated by me.

(p. 3). Emphasizing the power relations concerning gender and life writing is crucial to my thesis; therefore, like her, I also insist on making this differentiation<sup>14</sup>.

### 2.2.3 A space for subversion?

As I argue that Plath's ability to transform herself into an ink goddess is related to her position as a woman writer, choosing to call attention to the word "diary" is also a way of defining it as *a space for subversion*. A subversion against what? The patriarchal, white, ableist and heteronormative society, the one that left Plath no choice but to become an ink goddess to be a woman writer in her time, and the same that still silences many minority writers. This idea can be observed, for instance, in the aforementioned discussion of the openness of the genre, and of how the diary has historically been this space for many women who could not be a part of the patriarchal literary world. As Simons (1990) describes, the diary became a tool for women to express themselves in an oppressive society; a place some of them had for psychological relief and self-definition: "in an age when silence was generally considered to be a female virtue . . . it was to their journals that women turned, when other channels of communication were closed to them" (p. 3). In this way, more than a way for women to express themselves, diary writing – a practice that patriarchy would deem innocent and pure, and, therefore, a great activity for women – came to be resignified as a way of resisting the culture of silence. Moreover, as mentioned before, there are some complex social issues behind the practice itself: for instance, writing implies knowing how to write and access to education, and the privacy of the diarist involves leisure and safety, luxuries not available to all. However, for those who have the possibility of having a diary, it can be a space where writers find "courage and support" (LEJEUNE, 2014, p. 92).

Even though literary studies have historically concentrated in diaries written by heterosexual white men in the "West", the diary-keeping practice may be considered as a way for minorities to find their own voices. The diary can be a space for subversion because its characteristic as a somewhat safe place, where the page can become a margin where writers can be and experiment being themselves, no matter their gender, religion, race, and sexuality. The

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<sup>14</sup> This discussion can also be connected to a Brazilian context: as in Portuguese we only have the word "diário" (meaning both "diary" and "journal"), we can ask ourselves what the gendered aspects of this term are and how it is connected to its practices. This also reflects on the possibility of using the term in English, which emphasizes not only Henderson's discussion, but also an issue of (un)translatability.

diary can be, thus, a “particularly valuable as a form of resistance for individuals impacted by political trauma or oppression” (HENDERSON, 2019, p. 152), and a way for them to break the silence and own their voices. For instance, when discussing reasons why people should read and study diaries, Henderson (2019) lists:

Because they tell us stories that are not often told in other forms of literature. Because they tell us stories in ways that defy our expectations and require us to read differently. Because, in their *refusal to conform to literary norms*, they remind us of the amazing capacity of language. Because many people only had the option of writing diaries, when *no other form of writing was available to them*. Because, for many people, writing a diary was their last, most heroic act of *witness and resistance*. Because many readers [and writers, I add here] are also diarists, and seeing yourself mirrored in literature is a powerful affirmation. Because they invite us to experience a deep sense of identification and intimacy – even to fall in love. (p. 18, my italics)

I argue that the reasons she lists can also be considered as the ways that the diary can be a place for subversion. Because of what Henderson describes as the “refusal to conform to literary norms,” diarists can find their own ways of making sense of themselves through the hybridity, flexibility, and possibilities of this multifaceted practice. It is precisely the idiosyncratic characteristic of the diary that makes it a place that “accommodates a wide range of writing styles, authorial personas, and individual, social and political goals” (HENDERSON, 2019, p. 5), where the diary-keeping practice becomes a safe place open to any person or story. In many ways, it emphasizes the fact each person’s story is valuable and deserves to be told, and diaries can be a place for people to matter or simply *to exist*, as “the act of claiming selfhood through writing is laden with political and ideological significance” (HENDERSON, 2019, p. 67). One famous example that shows this is Anne Frank’s (1929-1945) diaries: through them, which were addressed to her imaginary friend “Kitty,” she could glimpse a possible life whilst hiding in a concealed room for more than two years before being taken into a concentration camp. Even though it is impossible to know whether Frank actually believed this or not, it could be that through her diary-keeping practice, she exercised what Henderson (2019) explains as the diarist’s feeling of “self-consciously understand[ing] themselves to be participating in the writing of history” (p. 153).

Finally, this subversion can also be found in the diary’s potential as a place for self-understanding and healing, where the written word may be a way for diarists to transform themselves. In many ways, the process of healing and self-loving is an act of resistance,

especially for minority groups, which is why the diary's characteristic as a space for healing emphasizes its function as a way of resisting too. In his book *Diary Fiction: Writing as an Action* (1984), Abbott explains that one reason diary writing helps writers is because putting ideas into words often helps to reestablish order in one's existence, as "to go on writing is to go on living" (p. 92). In addition, when describing how diaries can take form of personal empowerment, Henderson (2019) explains that self-expression can resist sociocultural messages, constituting a positive self-image that highlights the diary as a space for "articulating a counter-narrative wherein the diarist determines the defining features of their identity" (p. 156). All these ideas emphasize the power that diarists, especially those who were denied other forms of writing, have attributed to the genre – a way of subverting power relationships, of transforming themselves, of mattering, existing, healing, transforming, and of expressing themselves and finding their voices, even if on the paper. As Plath often found her ways of existing and navigating through the world with the help of inscription, I argue that her life writing helped her heal, resist, and to claim herself as an ink goddess.

#### 2.2.4 What about the letter?

Although so far I have discussed the diary form, many of the discussions above can also be applied to correspondence, in slightly different ways. For instance, defining what a letter is also subject to discussion. In their attempt, Jolly and Stanley (2005) affirm that this genre has as the main characteristic a "tantalising . . . engagement with life, where public and private, professional and personal are so happily confused" (p. 1). Similarly, Diaz (2016) argues "letters are hybrid texts . . . an indefinable literary genre, they fluctuate between vague categories: archives, documents, testimonies" (p. 11); shedding light in the fact that just as it is difficult to define a diary, the characteristics of letter and its rebellious character is always up to debate.

The complexity behind "truth" can also be applied to correspondence, as letters also have been considered a place to find veracity or historical truth by literature scholars and historians. Just as Smith and Watson (2001) define an idea of "subjective truth" in life writing, while reading, analyzing, and interpreting letters we should also keep this idea in mind. As Jolly and Stanley (2005) explain, it is not the case that letters are lies, but that we must "be suspicious of the assumption that they are spontaneous outpourings of the true self [since they are a] subtle interchange between *fantasy*, writing and *relationship*" (p. 3, my italics), especially because

defining a “true self” is already a tricky job. In addition, the authors also argue that “the ‘truth’ of the writing is in the relationship rather than in its subject” (p. 3), and that epistolary scholars have developed other terminologies to describe this idea, such as “epistolary ‘performance’ or ‘personae’” (*idem*), an aspect that I explore in Plath’s love letters. As it is possible to note, both letter and diary deal with the subjectivity of truth; however, in the case of correspondences, truth lies not only in what the writer believes (or chooses to believe) it is true, but also in the *relationship* between addresser and addressee:

In autobiographies, diaries and journals, tensions between art and artlessness are rooted in the ambiguous status of a writing that is both creative and historical, that lies between disciplines of fact and those of fiction. By contrast, in the letter those tensions represent not so much the ambiguity between history or fiction as that *between the utilitarian and the aesthetic aspects of writing more generally*. Philippe Lejeune has theorised autobiography to be founded on a ‘pact’ between the writer and reader, as a promise of truth, even if the truth may be interior and subjective in nature. But the letter-writer promises only that they will *communicate with their reader*. This means that *the letter’s truth status is even more ambiguous than that of the auto/biographer or diarist*. (JOLLY and STANLEY, 2005, p. 2, my italics)

In this way, although both diary and letter deal with the impossibility of defining “truth,” the relationship between writer-reader, addresser-addressee, and the utilitarian aspects behind the social and textual conventions of correspondence also play important roles in the construction of a “subjective truth”. The notion of sincerity becomes, therefore, much more relevant than simply the definition of “true” or “not true,” as understanding veracity actually turns into interpreting the letter dynamics and the relationships that are “mediated by both fantasy and writing” (JOLLY and STANLEY, 2005, p. 14). In addition, in the space of “confluence between images or representations of the self and the other” (ANDRADE & VICENTE, 2021, p. 310) that the letter shelters, many identities and personae may emerge, and addressers and addressees can become actors and actresses embodying these personae. These ideas contribute to what I call as Plath’s “ink relationships” with her correspondents, as I exemplify in the next chapter.

The discussion about literariness and gender also plays an important role in this genre. Defining what is a letter and whether or not it can be actually considered a genre is already a complex subject because of the letter’s hybrid character, but this genre is also a gendered one. While diaries became important to women because they were denied other more prestigious forms of writing, the feminized process of letter writing was done through the binary notion of



private/public. As Diaz (2016) demonstrates, whereas letters written by men came to have a special value as a traditional and literary epistolary genre (therefore, studied and available to the public), letters written by women were simply undervalued as a private letter practice with no further functions. As the author explains, the epistolary genre for women can be described as a “closed space for family, where women are confined; and where being part of the public scene or being able to speak is still forbidden” (p. 27). Once again, the culture of silence that women are subject to has transformed the ways that we read, study, and perceive life writing nowadays; however, even though these gendered conventions took place in a similar way, once again the letter differs from diary because of its social characteristic that implies a relationship between correspondents.

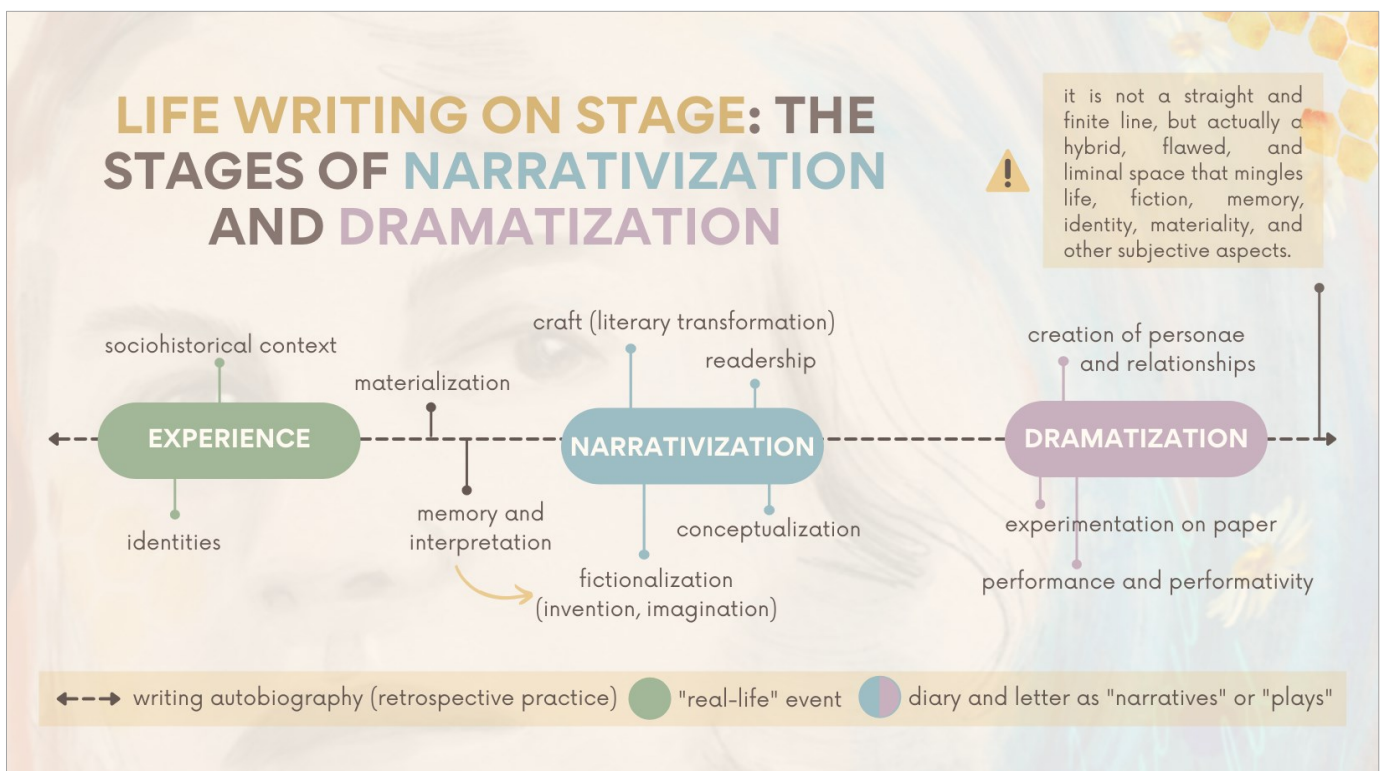
Although in this research I use Altman’s (1982) epistolary foundations to better interpret Plath’s letters, having in mind how letters float between the possibility and impossibility of being defined as a specific literary genre also contributes to the idea of an ink goddess, just as I explained before in the case of the diaries. In this way, letters navigate this liminal and hybrid space, once that implies a kind of nomadic thinking (DIAZ, 2016), traveling through the margins of the literary but not actually belonging to one. In *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), Gloria Anzaldúa emphasizes that some countries and minority groups are found in the *borders*, which serve to “set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*” (p. 17). According to her, the border is a “dividing line . . . in a constant state of transition, [where] the prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants” (*idem*). Although her discussion is focused on the Chicano experience in the physical (especially the U.S.-Mexican border) and emotional borders, her notion of this liminal space where minorities transit contributes to the idea of letter and diary as spaces of subversion. As Diaz describes, correspondence is present in a “bordering space – both inside and outside the literary” (p. 53), and it is precisely in this in-between space that I believe that Sylvia Plath experienced the limits of life and fiction. Finally, in their essay “Life writings as a possibility of resistance” (2021, my translation, in the original “Escritas da vida como possibilidades de resistência”), Guida et al analyze Maya Angelou’s (1928-2014) *Letter To My Daughter* (2008), emphasizing the letter’s hybridity; and they conclude that Angelou’s “auto/pluribiographic” (p. 300, my translation) work contributes to a kind of collective writing that resists the patriarchy and “all power structures that try to colonize and erase the life writing of those who do not find themselves in the hegemonic narratives” (p. 303, my translation). It is, then, in the hybridity of

these genres and in the possibility of the echo of their narratives, that I situate both letter and diary as spaces of subversion.

### 2.3 LIFE WRITING ON STAGE

To better understand my analyses, it is essential to differentiate some terms that I use (and experiment with) in this thesis. I have somewhat separated them into three stages: 1) experience; 2) narrativization; and, 3) dramatization. Although I have detached them into different levels to understand them separately, in practice these terms mingle in Plath's writing of herself in her journals and letters; and they are connected through memory, interpretation, and the process of inscription. Because of its intrinsic connection to the idea of performativity and creation of personae in letters and diaries, I call this as "the stage of life writing" and its stages can be better visualized in the following visual summary:

Figure 2 – Life writing on stage: the stages of narrativization and dramatization



*Source: the author (2022)*

### 2.3.1 Experience (and a look at materiality and the fictions of memory)

Firstly, I connect the act of “experiencing” with *reality* or *real-life events* – this is, occurrences, episodes, and encounters that have actually happened in Plath’s life. These include major aspects – for example, publishing a book or becoming a mother – or daily matters, such as eating (Plath often transcribed her meals in great detail) or drawing (one of her favorite activities). The idea of experience is connected with two essential aspects: *identity* (which emphasize Friedman’s (1999) aforementioned idea about the illusion of individuality, and how women’s identity is always in contact with their gender) and *context* (sociohistorical: the time, the space, and the people involved). In other words, experience is always in contact and in conflict with one’s identity (in Plath’s case: woman, U.S. American, writer, white, able, heterosexual, among others) and its link with the context that they are inserted in (Smith College, *Mademoiselle*, Cambridge, etc., with specific people, situations, and in specific power relations). It is also important to note that since I am dealing with Plath’s inscription of her life as recorded in her life writing, and that diary and letter writing are retrospective acts, it is impossible not to link the acts of experiencing, narrativizing, and dramatizing with the subjectivity of *memory* and *interpretation*. In other words, the ways that Plath remembered and the things that she allowed herself to remember and write are different from the experience itself. As Smith and Watson (2005) explain, “mediated through memory and language, ‘experience’ is already *an interpretation of the past* and of our place in a culturally and historically specific present” (p. 24, my italics); therefore, in the act of narrating her life and her experience onto paper, the writer is always interpreting and reexperiencing it differently. Because of its crucial importance in both life writing and in this research, taking a further look at what “memory” signifies will help us understand this better.

Smith and Watson (2005) argue that “the writer of autobiography depends on access to memory to tell a retrospective narrative of the past and to situate the present within that experiential history . . . [where] memory is thus both source and authenticator of the autobiographical acts” (p. 16). The authors describe the many ways that this idea works in life writing, defining the politics of remembering, which includes *memory as meaning making* (in the act of remembering, the life writers reinterpret the past in the present and makes meaning out of it) and *memory as contextual and historically specific* (who remembers and how and when they are allowed to remember matters, where politics of remembering emphasizes that

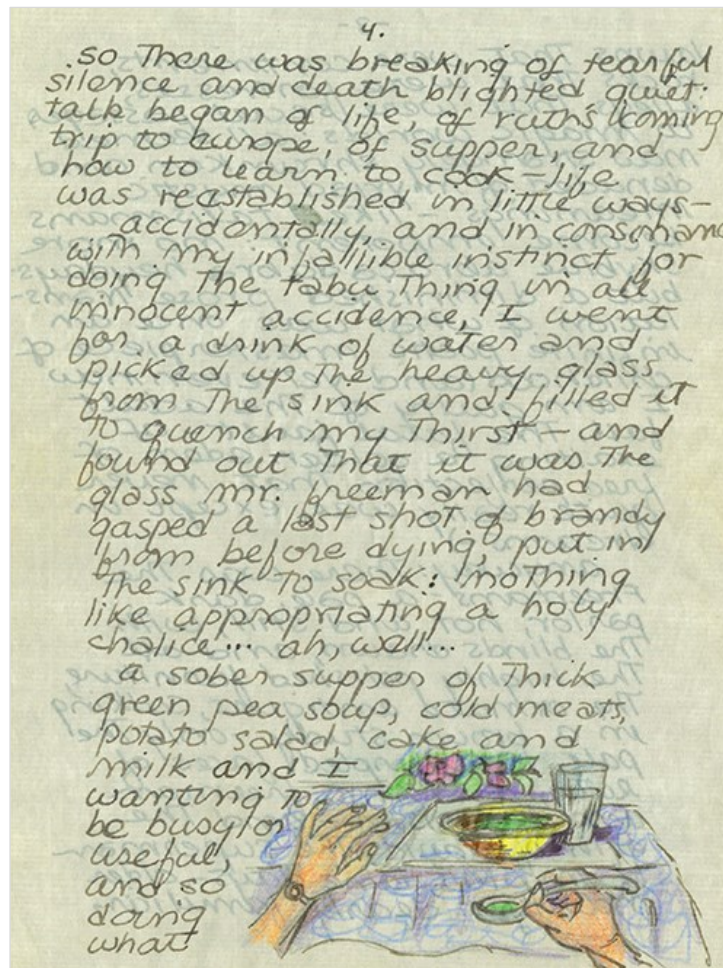
“what is recollected and what is obscured is central to the cultural production of knowledge about the past” (p. 19)). Dias and Júnior (2021) also shed light into the particularities of memory in life writing, connecting it to cultural translation. By relying on the work of the anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and his work on Amerindian perspectivism, the authors understand that memory is always an equivocation (*equivoco*, in Brazilian Portuguese); and they compare the act of remembering as the act of translating, which is always embedded in the difference of ontologies. As they describe, “the autobiographical text is always built by an intense process of *otherness* and *difference* instead of similarity, and its author as a translator of the past, one whose work becomes legible only because of the equivocation” (p. 91). Although I do not intend to focus on the vast and complex field of translation here, this connection between memory and its inevitable untranslatability helps to understand the complexity behind the (constant) (re-)interpretation of the past. In addition, although apparently elusive and immaterial, memory is also present in *materiality*, such as in our bodies, senses, and/or objects:

Memory, apparently so immaterial and personal and elusive, is always implicated in materiality, whether it be the *materiality of sound, stone, text, garment, integrated circuits and circuit boards*, or the materiality of *our very bodies*—the synapses and electrons of our brains and our nervous systems. Memory is *evoked by the senses*—smell, taste, touch, sound—and *encoded in objects* or events with particular meaning for the narrator. (p. 21, my italics)

Memory and materiality, thus, exist in the line of the stages of life writing, connecting experience with narrativization and dramatization. In this way, the idea of memory as being a contextualized and historically specific meaning maker, combined with its materiality in various ways, emphasizes the complex features behind the retrospective act of writing letters and diaries. Through her personal writings and the materiality of her notebooks, paper sheets, postcards, and letters, Plath wrote to remember, as well as to remember in different ways. The role of materiality is also interesting because Plath conceptualizes it in her life writing. For instance, when she was fourteen years old, she often pondered about her writing instruments and notebooks in her letters: “do you notice any difference in my printing. I have a new \$10 fountain pen that will last me a lifetime. It is green and gold and very ultra-modern” (*LI*, p. 41); “my diary is very punk. The pages measure 3½" × 6" and there are only 18 lines for writing. Most of the time I write double lines. At the beginning of the year I illustrated each page but now only have time for a sketch here and there” (*LI*, p. 44)). She also meditates about the materiality of writing, trying to understand the role of voice on paper (“you won’t be able to

distinguish the typescript, or perhaps even the *tone of voice*, but this is Sylvia speaking” (L2, *The Letters of Sylvia Plath, Vol. 2*, 2018, p. 124, my italics, in a letter shared with Ted Hughes to his brother and sister-in-law)) or the effects that a letter could have in her body: “your letter was like a shot of brandy or a shot in the arm, I’m not sure which, but wonderful” (L2, p. 964). In addition, Plath’s passion for drawing and illustrating appears in her letters and journals (see below) and the fact that she wrote her novel *The Bell Jar* in pink memorandum stationery<sup>15</sup> (that she took from the history department supply shelf of Smith College when she worked there (EBBETS, 2004)) also illustrates this, especially because she grew so fond of the pink sheets that they became ‘a fetish<sup>16</sup>’” (RC, Loc 15220) to her.

Figure 3 – Materiality in life writing (letter to Gordon Lameyer, 22 June 1954)



Source: *The Letters of Sylvia Plath, Vol. 1* (2017)

<sup>15</sup> The outline of the chapters is available for visualization at the British Library website.

<sup>16</sup> This word is mentioned in both her journals and in the biography *Red Comet*, but I wanted to note that the usage of this word highlights her own studies on Freud and psychoanalysis.

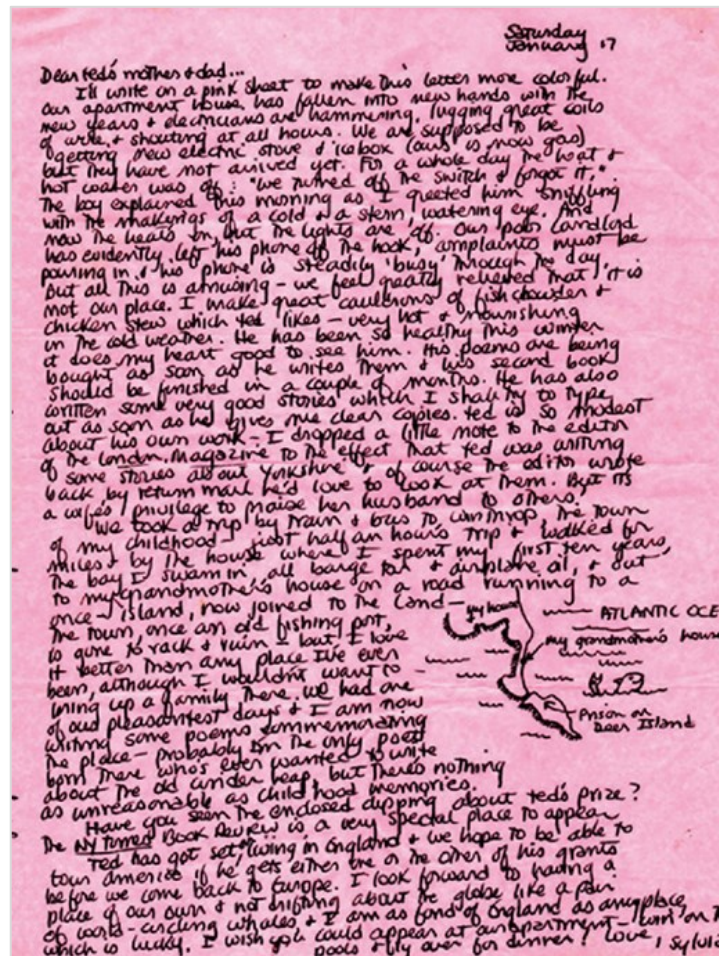


Figure 4 – Materiality in life writing (envelope to Aurelia Schober, 22 February 1956)



Source: *The Letters of Sylvia Plath, Vol. 1* (2017)

Figure 5 – Materiality in life writing (letter in pink paper to the Hughes, 17 January 1959)



Source: *The Letters of Sylvia Plath, Vol. 2* (2018)

We can see this affection for pink paper in several letters – “let this be a pink unofficial prelude (I am unable to resist the stocks of supply closet paper, hence write everything from letters to grocery lists to class notes on this)” (*L2*, p. 216); “I’ll write on a pink sheet to make this letter more colorful” (*L2*, p. 290, see above) – and also in a journal entry of March 3, 1958, one that makes genetic critics and enthusiasts of genetic criticism to delight themselves in the first glimpse of *The Bell Jar*:

Got a queer and most overpowering urge today to write, or typewrite, my whole novel on *the pink, stiff, lovely-textured Smith memorandum pads of 100 sheets each*: a fetish: somehow, seeing a hunk of that pink paper, *different from all the endless reams of white bond, my task seems finite, special, rose-cast*. Bought a rose bulb for the bedroom light today & have already robbed enough notebooks from the supply closet for one & 1/2 drafts of a 350-page novel. (*J*, p. 344, my italics)

The idea of memory is, therefore, marked by its materiality and constant re-interpretation; moreover, it is also intrinsically connected with the idea of *fictionalizing* life on paper (in other words, the act of turning life into fiction, which is connected to the writer’s imagination). As Smith and Watson (2001) explain, there are two selves in life writing: “one that others see – the social, historical person, with achievements, personal appearance, social relationships . . . but there is also the self experienced only by that person, the self felt from the inside that the writer can never get ‘outside of’” (p. 5). In the process of between these two “selves” – or among many selves, as I propose –, life, fiction, fantasies, expectations, memory, readership, and identity are combined in the act of narrativizing and developing the self. As mentioned before, memory is always an interpretation of the past; therefore, between the real-life event and its narration, there is always the possibility of fictionalizing one’s life, even if in small ways. For instance, in both letter and diary, Plath can make herself sound happier or stronger than she might actually be feeling, or simple days or events can become remarkable and magical on the page. It is also important to note here that although the term “fictionalization” can be connected to Plath’s own practice of turning her life into “fictional” narratives – she relied on her life writing and personal experiences to write prose and poetry, as we can observe in her short stories and in her auto/biographical<sup>17</sup> novel *The Bell Jar* –, in

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<sup>17</sup> Although commonly described as a “semi-autobiographical” novel by the general public, I use the term auto/biographical to emphasize the fictions of one’s memory and the act of fictionalizing oneself on the paper. By choosing not to work with the word “semi” – which implies a particular *quantity* of fact and fiction –, I highlight that these mingle, as I cannot apply levels to these matters. In other words, I cannot affirm that Plath’s *The Bell Jar* was more fictional than the personae that she created in her journals and letters, just as I cannot

this research, I focus specifically in the gap that the retrospective writing of diaries and letters creates, where life, fiction, memory, and invention intermingle and craft the “fictions of one’s memories” (EVARISTO, 2006, p. 10).

### 2.3.2 Narrativization (and a look at the literary craft)

More than simply *narrating* and representing herself on the page, I argue that Plath *narrativized* life itself, crafting herself and people of her life into characters, describing and recreating setting and time, and making sense of herself throughout this process. According to Monica Fludernik (2009) in her book about narratology, a narrative is a “representation of a possible world in a linguistic and/or visual medium, at whose centre there are one or several protagonists . . . existentially anchored in a temporal and spatial sense and who (mostly) perform goal-directed actions (action and plot structure)” (p. 6); which is precisely what Plath did, along with many diarists, by representing herself as the protagonist of her world in a linguistic medium (letter and diary), with other characters (people from her life and how she saw and described them) and describing a plot in a specific time and space (her “experiences,” as mentioned above). But in what ways did this narrativization impact her life?

In a journal entry of 1953, she writes, “I can’t be satisfied with the colossal job of merely living. Oh, no, I must order life in sonnets and sestinas and provide a verbal reflector for my 60-watt lighted head . . . Let me live, love, and say it well in good sentences” (*J*, p. 184). This short but powerful declaration in her journal is related to what these personal writings evoke and display: a need to put the experience of her life into words, to live both in reality and on the paper, fictionalizing her memories, turning events into stories and people into characters, narrativizing and conceptualizing her existence, and, as I propose here, even performing life, love, and herself in their dramatization. For Plath, living was not enough, as it was through the written word that she ordered her life. In this entry, we can take a look at Plath’s urgency to match life and writing, a sort of dynamic of writing to live and living to write that takes place in two stages: firstly, by experiencing the world (living and loving) and then putting these experiences into words (saying it well in good sentences). Some examples can be observed, for instance, at the times that she urged herself to be imaginative and to transform her experiences

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quantify or apply levels to fact and fiction. In addition, the fact that Plath published this novel through the pseudonym of Victoria Lucas also sheds some light in the auto/biographical aspects of her work.



into writing material: “I must discipline myself. I must be imaginative and create plots, knit motives, probe dialogue – rather than merely trying to record description and sensation” (*J*, p. 77); “it is only when these bits [of fragments of life and conversation] are woven into an artistic whole, with a frame of reference, that they become meaningful and worthy of more than a cursory glance” (*J*, p. 83). Therefore, I believe that these examples show not only her “wrestle” (*LI*, p. 1261) to write professionally (“as for me, I like to write. And I am determined to write well” (*LI*, p. 164), but also in a sense of *necessity*. As she explains: “How can I tell Bob [a boyfriend] that my happiness streams from having wrenched a piece out of my life, a piece of hurt and beauty, and transformed it to typewritten words on paper? . . . I am *justifying* my life, my keen emotion, my feeling, by turning it into print” (*J*, p. 22, my italics).

The ways that Plath narrativized her life range from more evident to subtler approaches. More apparent ways include how she took her experiences and transformed them into “fiction” or poetry, something that she did throughout her entire life. One widely-known example that illustrates this is Plath’s transformation of her first suicide attempt and her experience at the *Mademoiselle* magazine in 1953 in *The Bell Jar*, which she first published ten years later. In fact, a particular scene of the book puts into evidence Plath’s urge not only to do “the colossal job of merely living” (*J*, p. 184), but to actually experience life and make the most of it by “say[ing] it well in good sentences” (*idem*). This is represented in chapter seven, where the protagonist Esther Greenwood imagines a fig tree in front of her, each fig showing a possible life she could live:

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 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 offbeat 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 decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet. (*The Bell Jar (TBJ)*, 1963), Loc 1295-1303)

The fig tree also represents the possibility and potential of being all, living all, experiencing all, here evoked by her protagonist. This passage also highlights the (im)possibility of being both a “famous poet” and having a “husband and a happy home,” as

these figs were represented separately just as she would have to deal in her own life as a woman poet in a patriarchal society and in a binary culture that defines women into career-driven or homemaking ones. Subtler ways include how she picked up different genres and media, such as scrapbooks and diaries, and transformed them into fiction. Clark (2020) juxtaposes her love for the ocean in both her 1940s scrapbook (“I gradually developed a love for the stormy, turbulent ocean that few people can understand” (qtd. in *RC*, Loc 1515)) and 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” (*JP*, Loc 3728)). The biographer affirms that her story seems to have “come straight out of [Plath’s] scrapbook” (*RC*, Loc 1520), a conclusion that I believe highlights how Plath’s life writing, fiction, and poetry can work together, connected by her urge to record her life, make sense of it, and translate her experiences into writing (“I want to write because I have the urge to excell in one medium of translation and expression of life” (*J*, p. 184)). However, Plath did not need to transform herself into characters of her short stories or novels to narrativize and dramatize life. In both letters and journals, she reinvented other people and herself as she imagined, fantasized, or wanted them to be. In fact, it was in these particular spaces that she could become an ink goddess.

The act of narrativizing life is connected to the creative writing craft. In *The Norton Introduction to Literature* (2016), Kelly J. Mays argues that to understand a literary text we have to understand its formal textual features, which includes the *plot* (which always “hinge on at least one conflict” (p. 87)), *narration and point of view*, *characters*, *setting*, *symbolic and figurative language*, and the creation of *themes*. Although Mays is referring to fictional texts, these elements can also be applied in other genres, such as creative nonfiction, a growing area of writing that orchestrates the personal and the literary in a work. According to Gutkind (2009), the mission of the creative nonfiction writer is to talk about ideas and information that already exist into something less complex and more alluring. As he explains, to capture real life, people, and the ways they change the world, writers are “encouraged to utilize literary and even cinematic techniques, from scene to dialogue to description to point of view” (Loc 115). The author also mentions that these characteristics contribute to the ability to reshape improbable things into significant others, concluding that in a work of creative nonfiction “intimate details can be so specific and so special that it becomes unforgettable in the reader’s mind” (Loc 215). All of these elements can be seen in Plath’s life writing, as experience is turned into plots and descriptive settings (especially when she recreates daily events into meaningful experiences in

her letters home) and she experiments with different kinds of narration (transcribing dialogues, writing in the first or second person in her journals, or changing tone with each correspondent). This can also be seen in the construction of characters in her writing, not only in her short stories (“I even have a heroine named ‘Marley’ who is, of course, me” (*LI*, p. 456)), but also in the ways that she experiments different selves and makes sense of herself in her life writing (I explain these selves, or *personae*, in the next chapter).

The meticulous use of symbolic language, as well as the creation of themes can be better observed in the process of narrativization, one that implies the possibility of conceptualization. Fludernik (2009) explains that narratives aid us to have a “fundamental epistemological structure that helps us to make sense of the confusing diversity and multiplicity of events and to produce explanatory patterns for them” (p. 2); therefore, through the act of narrativization and the craft of letters and diaries, Plath could make meaning of her experience, giving “explanatory patterns” for them. For example, when she narrativizes her experience as a Smith student to Olive Higgins Prouty, showing how grateful she was for the scholarship, she writes that her “courses *fit[ted] together like a picture puzzle*, and life ha[d] suddenly taken on deeper perspective and meaning” (*LI*, p. 233). This helps to show how she attributed meaning to simple things in life when writing: courses were not simply classes, they were parts of a larger whole of her experience at Smith. Similarly, the transformation of everyday elements into metaphors also helped her to make sense of herself, such as when Plath broke her leg and saw her cast through metaphorical eyes: “I am obsessed by my cast as a concrete symbol of my limitations and separation from others. I would like to write a symbolic allegory about a person who would not assert her will and communicate with others, but who always believed she was unaccepted, apart” (*J*, p. 157). The narrativization of her life, therefore, helped Plath to *conceptualize* it: by crafting herself and her life on the page, Plath could make sense of herself (practicing self-knowledge) or of what she thought about certain themes (such as love, politics, literature, and religion: writing to make sense of abstract concepts). When analyzing George Sand’s (1804-1876) writings, Diaz (2016) affirms that it is “through the narrative, inclined through all her avatars, that she understands better the presence in the world” (p. 184). Plath did a similar thing, using writing to understand and conceptualize ideas and emotions. For instance, in the privacy of her journals, she used the diary writing practice to understand herself and the world, writing about subjects, people, and events; making lists of things that she loved or hated; and even describing how she should behave in her life. This can also be observed in

several examples of her correspondence, such as in Plath's early letters to her German pen pal Hans-Joachim Neupert, where she conceptualizes her identity as an U.S. American teenage girl: "her correspondence with Hans Neupert provided her with an alternative way of understanding her sheltered American existence" (*RC*, Loc 4657).

Although we can find points of connection among diary, letter, and creative nonfiction, writing the latter text is, of course, different from auto/biographical writing, especially to what concerns *readership*. Whereas in the creative nonfiction text the writer has a specific reader in mind (the intended public of a magazine, for instance), the audience of a letter or a diary is much more complex. In the case of the former, there are many nuances regarding the relationship between addresser and addressee, the possibility of loss in the correspondence, or even of having the letter caught in the wrong hands, is fundamental in this dynamic. Ellis (2011) explains that, since correspondence is marked by many variables (addressers and addressees, postal workers, censors, thieves, third parties, among others), "the idea of two human beings engaged in a private conversation through letters has always been something of a pretty fiction more than an observable fact . . . [as] the myth of two people . . . is in most cases a reality of more than five or six" (p. 16). Moreover, regarding the diary Henderson (2019) explains that the diary reader can be the diarists themselves (self-addressed diaries, a "rhetorical device that collapses the 'I' of the writer and the 'you' of the reader" (p. 68)); the text (where the diary almost comes alive by becoming the reader and creating a textual audience); among others. Henderson emphasizes that these audiences can be real (such as the case of diaries addressed to limited readers or specific people) or imagined: particular versions of the self, an imagined audience that motivates the writer, a character or person (such as Anne Frank's diaries to her imaginary friend Kitty), or even a possible future audience (since Plath read diaries from other writers and was a writer herself, future publication could also have been in her mind).

However, even though there are some nuances in the different audiences and readership among these forms of writing, I believe that taking a look at the aforementioned characteristics of creative nonfiction helps us to understand better the act of narrativization in Plath's journals and letters, especially because she is constantly reminding herself to write creatively; blending the personal (her experiences and her life writing) with what she considers the professional (short stories, poems, novels): "it was life in the raw, really . . . my experiences there, plus some intense conversations I had . . . will make terrific background material for those short stories I'm always trying to write" (*LI*, p. 420, in a letter to her lover Sidamon-Eristoff).

Narrativizing experience in her life writing also works as a practice-ground for her public-facing writing. As mentioned before, in my undergraduate thesis I have taken a look at Woolf's diary-keeping practice and the creative process of *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and, relying on the area of genetic criticism, I conclude that her diaries worked as a kind of laboratory for the construction of her novels. As Woolf (2019) herself explains in a diary entry, "it strikes me that in this book I practice writing; do my scales; yes & work at certain effects. I daresay I practised Jacob[’s Room] here,—& Mrs D.[Alloway] & shall invent my next book here; for here I write merely in the spirit—great fun it is too" (p. 1071). She also mentions that diary-writing helped her to construct her style as in the diary her "metaphors [would] come free" (*idem*) and the practice helped her to "loosen the ligatures" (*idem*), something that Plath herself also did in her auto/biographical writing. She used, for example, her journals to organize her writing ideas, which can be seen in her *description scenes* ("Benidorm: July 15: Widow Mangada's house: pale, peach-brown stucco on the main Avenida running along shore, facing the beach of reddish yellow sand..." (*J*, p. 239, the description goes on for six pages)); *schedules* ("break the jinx on my story writing this week, trying the bull-fight story and perhaps one on Window Mangada (funny?) along with chapters in my new novel that might do for articles for Harper's; also an article, with sketches, on Benidorm for the Monitor" (*J*, p. 249)); *practiced scenes* ("In the station, Marcia had revived over a steaming mug of coffee con leche, and she found the Spanish train a complete and refreshing change in atmosphere" (*J*, p. 251, it goes on for three pages and, according to the editor (KUKIL, 2000, p. 687), it is a fictional entry)); and *character studies* ("I've been filling my notebook with impressions & character studies" (*L2*, p. 584, in a letter to her mother).

We can also highlight this discussion between life writing and the craft by understanding the functions that she attributes to these practices. For instance, she describes how letter writing was a constant practice in her mind, highlighting the connection between living and writing: "I have been mentally writing you letter after letter all this past hectic term" (*L2* p. 34, in a letter to her Smith friend Marcia Brown Stern); "I realize, as I start to write, how many letters I've written you in my head" (*L2*, p. 238, in a letter to her brother, Warren Plath); "[I] started saving up things to tell you in a letter, and added this and that and . . . realize with a pang that a quarter of a year has slipped by" (*L2*, p. 312, in a letter to her friend Ann Davidow-Goodman); "I have been writing you a letter in my mind for months" (*L2*, p. 594, in a letter to Marion Freeman); "We [Plath and Hughes] are lousy correspondents & keep a kind of inner

monologue going in our heads which we count as sort of phantom letters!” (*L2*, p. 779, in a letter to their friends Marvin and Kathy Kane). Plath’s perceptive eye ready to transform life into writing can also be seen in a 1950 letter to Olive Higgins Prouty, where we can see the link between seeing-describing and the transformation of experience into descriptive settings: “I don’t just see trees when I bike across the campus – I see the shape and color outwardly, and then the cells and the microscopic mechanisms always working inside” (*L1*, p. 233).

Finally, in many passages of her journals, we can see Plath trying to conceptualize what her diary writing meant to her. In a 1951 letter to her mother, she explains that she could not get used to the other girls at Smith because she “could not completely be [her]self” (*L1*, p. 260), but that in her journals she could write “without having to justify [her]self” (*idem*). Plath also highlights that in her personal notebook she warmed up her writing, stimulating it and unburdening her writing paralysis: “no skipping after today: a page diary to warmup” (*J*, p. 284); “I write here, because I am paralyzed everywhere else” (*J*, p. 396); “I want to write, this is hardly the way to behave – in horror of it, frozen by it. The ghost of the unborn novel is a Medusa-head” (*J*, p. 401); “prose writing has become a phobia to me: my mind shuts & I clench” (*J*, p. 403). Following these lines, I argue that Plath’s narrativization of life was numerous: it served as a laboratory or practice ground to experiment with, but it was also a place where she could recreate her memories, conceptualize and make sense of herself, try out different selves or characters, and recreate life on paper. This leads us to the somewhat ultimate stage of the stage of life writing: dramatization.

### **2.3.3 Dramatization (and a look at personae and performance)**

Plath, indeed, transformed her life into narrative – in her auto/biographical writing, short stories, finished and unfinished novels, and in her poetry. But why do I differentiate the act of narrativizing from dramatizing in this analysis? Firstly, I believe that combining the idea of “narrative” with “play” helps to convey better Plath’s transformation into an ink goddess. The idea of *dramatization*, however, is much more visual and tactile than that of *narrativization*: a play is meant to be both seen and heard (BARNET et al, 2008, p. 947), which emphasizes better the aforementioned explanation on the materiality of memory and the sonorous aspects of autobiography (represented through the possibility of “hearing” Plath’s voice through her handwriting or signatures, the real-life dialogues that she transcribed, or reading letters and

diary entries aloud to oneself or other people). I also argue that dramatization is more related to many of the elements that I emphasize here, the most important one being “persona”. Defining this word is not easy, as it is a concept that can be linked to many areas, such as psychology, literature, music, and even marketing. If we search for this word at the Merriam-Webster dictionary, we find definitions such as “a character assumed by an author in a written work,” “an individual’s social facade or front that especially in the analytical psychology of Carl Gustav Jung reflects the role in life the individual is playing,” the personality that a person (such as an actor or politician) projects in public,” or “a character in a fictional presentation (such as a novel or play)” (PERSONA, 2022). Although with slight changes, all of these words evoke similar ideas: a character, an appearance, a social role. However, although these are all definitions that can be applied to Plath’s creation of personae that I am proposing here, if we take a look into the meaning of this concept in theater studies we come to understand it as “related to the idea of the theatrical mask as a strategic construction of an identity that is complexly metatheatrical and performed” (LUCKHURST & MAYER, 2019, p. 2). In fact, if we look into the etymology of the word, we discover that it comes from the Latin *persōna*, which is usually translated to “mask”. It is in this idea of theatrical transformation and strategic personae that I situate my work, which is why I believe that combining narrative with play highlights better the idea of *performance*, where Plath could narrate her life whilst trying on different masks and creating different personae through her writings. Finally, when explaining how we should read, write, and respond to drama, Mays (2016) describes:

In contrast [to literary fiction and poetry], drama is written primarily to be *performed*— by actors, on a stage, *for an audience*. Playwrights work with an understanding that the words on the page are just the first step— a map of sorts— toward the ultimate goal: a collaborative, publicly performed work of art. They create plays fully aware of the possibilities that *go beyond printed words and extend to physical actions, stage devices, and other theatrical techniques for creating effects and modifying audience responses*. (p. 1152, my italics)

We can see this performance in several parts of Plath’s life writing. For instance, she did this with places (the settings of her life/play), describing them in unique ways, as she does with Cambridge: “I want to begin writing again (I always have to digest experience first, before re-forming it) . . . *I must make my own Cambridge*” (L1 p. 969, my italics). In fact, in Plath’s new life in Europe – away from her home country and from familiar people –, she could experience and color her life and her selves into whatever she wanted, shaping different versions of herself and of her new home. Through her descriptions of life events to other people,

Plath could even overcome the barriers of fiction and become a character out of a James Joyce novel, just as she does when she travels like a “kind of feminine ulysses, wandering between the scylla of big ben and the charybdis of the Eiffel tower” (*LI*, p. 1046). Plath’s urge to “create her own Cambridge” also came with other important roles in the play of her life, mainly as a director and a playwright, both casting people from her life as characters and creating different masks for herself. This can be illustrated by one of her psychic brothers in England, represented by a lover who was the real-life version of a Dostoevsky character in her life: “his name is Mallory Wober, and he looks exactly the way I always imagined Dmitri Karamazov would” (*LI*, p. 1058). In a letter to him, Plath even admitted that describing her life (plot) in Cambridge (setting) was impossible without describing him (actor), emphasizing her role as the narrator (narrativization) and director (dramatization) of her life, as well as the protagonist (performance): “describing life at cambridge this term is impossible without presenting you acting in media res” (*LI*, p. 1046). This fantasy of Wober is a perfect example for illustrating how life and fiction, as well as different genres and techniques, overlap in the process of narrativizing and dramatizing her life, where in her letters and journals he becomes a descriptive laboratory for a short story, a small version of her life in *Brothers Karamazov*, and an attempt to create her own Cambridge.

As I demonstrate in the following chapters, Plath not only conceptualized and understood her life through her narratives, but she performed and experimented life itself: a performance on and outside of the page. By establishing a relationship with her audience (herself and her selves, her mother, her lovers, among others), she went beyond the printed word, creating a sort of “stage” in her life. It is important to note, however, that in practice these two actions (narrativizing and dramatizing) mingle and merge in my analysis. For instance, when she experimented her selves on the page, she transformed herself both in a character of a narrative or in an actress of a play; and when she functions as the narrator and character in a narrative, she also occupies the function of playwright, director, and actress. Nonetheless, precisely because of the “ink relationships” that she crafted in her diaries and letters, as well as of the performance and performativity of life on the “stage of life writing,” I find it useful to call attention to the idea of dramatization to differentiate it a little from narrativization. In this way, through the narrativization and dramatization of life, love, and the self, Plath becomes an ink goddess, as she creates characters or cast actors, create motifs or add props, and try out



different lives experimenting herself on the page or creating multiple personae on the stage of her letters and journals.

### 3 CHAPTER THREE: INK LOVE

Writing, then was a substitute for myself: if you don't  
love me, love my writing & love me for my writing.

— Sylvia Plath, in a journal entry of 1958, p. 448

In a journal entry of March 8, 1958, Sylvia Plath writes: “Writing a good poem will affect me like *a celestial love-affair*. Will it happen? Will it come?” (*J*, p. 346, my italics). This link between writing and love puts into evidence the possibility of joining them together, which is the objective of this chapter. In this way, in the following parts I show how love, writing, and Plath’s identity are combined in her journal and letters and how she conceptualized and performed life, love, and herself through their narrativization and dramatization (hence the combination of “ink” with “love”). When I use the word “love,” however, I am not referring only to romantic love, but rather to a range of things and ways of loving. In this chapter, more specifically, I analyze Plath’s “ink love” for writing (especially as a way of healing), literature (through its connection with Time and Virginia Woolf) and for her mother and her lovers.

I titled the first part as “ink experiments” as a way of showing Plath’s own experimentations, both in her life writing and in her writing life. As Annie Dillard describes in her book *The Writing Life* (1989), when writers write “the line of words fingers [their] own heart. It invades arteries, and enters the heart on a flood of breath” (p. 21). It is in this space of open-heartedness and of living to write and writing to live that I argue that Plath’s love for writing was one of the most important ones that she nurtured. This is intrinsically connected with her love for literature, as she constantly described in her journals and letters how much her favorite writers, stories, and books stimulated her own writing, and literature was also a way for changing and understanding her perceptions of the world.

In the “ink relationships” section I continue exploring the idea of an ink love; however, I focus more on her relationships with people. In “The Fairy Tale of Sivvy,” I focus on the perfect narrative that she creates with her mother in her letters home, and in “Love letters, celestial love affairs,” I discuss Plath’s love letters, demonstrating how they become a place for her magical relationships with men. Both of these subchapters have the word “ink” in the title to emphasize the ink goddess behind these experiences and relationships.

### 3.1 INK EXPERIMENTS

#### 3.1.1 Her love for writing: scribbling, typing, healing

I write only because  
There is a voice within me  
That will not be still

— Sylvia Plath, untitled poem, 1948

I argue that one of the most important reasons why Plath narrativized and dramatized her life was because of her love for writing itself. This affection is shown several times in her journals and letters, where she traces a sense of survival through the act of writing: “if I did not have this time to be myself, to write here, to be alone, I would somehow, inexplicably, lose part of my integrity” (*J*, p. 83); “that’s where writing comes in. It is as necessary for the survival of my haughty sanity as bread is to my flesh” (*J*, p. 100). Moreover, as she constantly emphasized how life felt meaningless without putting life into words (“it’s hopeless to ‘get life’ if you don’t keep notebooks” (*J*, p. 273, her highlight), I argue that scribbling, typing, and recording on her notebooks helped her to heighten her experience of life and make meaning of it. As Clark (2020) describes, Plath was “hungry for experience. She was determined to live as fully as possible—to write, to travel, to cook, to draw, to love as much and as often as she could” (*RC*, Loc 330), and she heightened these experiences through the written word. In her own words: “I’ve just Got to Express all this life I have inside me somehow in rhythm and patterns, freedom in discipline” (*L1*, p. 957),

To Plath, writing did not necessarily mean being published. The act of inscribing her life ran much deeper than public exposure: it was a “religious act” (*J*, p. 436). Not only did she feel “spiritually sick if [she was] not writing” (*L1*, p. 1088), but she also experienced a persistent need to give form to her experiences, as she tries to explain in a letter to her mother:

When I say I must write, I don’t mean I must publish. There is a great difference. The important thing is the aesthetic form given to my chaotic experience, which is, as it was for James Joyce, my kind of religion, and as necessary for me is the absolution of the printed word as the confession and absolution for a Catholic in church . . . But I am dependent on the process of writing, not on the acceptance. (*L1*, p. 1090)

This comparison between Catholic confession and writing to give form and aesthetic value to her experiences shows the significance of writing in her life, as well as the connection between this religious act and her ultimate transformation into an ink goddess. Plath herself described the practice as a holy one: “writing is a religious act: it is an ordering, a reforming, a relearning and reliving of people and the world as they are and *as they might be*” (*J*, 436). The act of putting life onto paper and becoming godlike represented a sense of cleanliness and purity to her, as it was an absolution, a confession, a way of putting order into the chaos of experience. Writing for “aesthetic order” (*LI*, p. 1102), therefore, helped her to give beauty and structure to the frenzy of her life – “I justified the mess I made of life by saying I’d give it order, form, beauty, writing about it” (*J*, p. 209) – which was essential not only to write better, but to live better: “the texture of my writing gets richer as I live more fully” (*LI*, p. 1085). Plath even attributes this order to a godlike feature – “cleanliness is next to godliness” (*J*, p. 372) –, and she argues that turning the “powerful physical, intellectual, and emotional forces” (*J*, 233) into creative outlets was an essential practice for her, otherwise, they turned “to destruction and waste” (*idem*).

Diaz (2016) describes this kind of relationship with writing as “graphomania” (an obsessive need to put the pen onto paper and write), and that writers like this tend to write “on all substrates and in all circumstances” (p. 128). Plath highlights this idea when she admits in her journal that her worst fear in life was “the death of imagination” (*idem*), since when she did not synthesize life or make up worlds “with more inventiveness than God” her existence went on “beating like a slack drum, without meaning” (*idem*). However, more than simply an obsession, I believe that her devotion to writing was also a way for healing and surviving. Many passages from her life writing highlight this idea, and she often connects writing with her mental health<sup>18</sup>. For instance, in a journal entry of 1958, Plath writes, “simply the fact that I write in here able to hold a pen, proves, I suppose, the ability to go on living” (*J*, p. 334), an analogy that some days later she repeats, “weary, weary to tears, a pen hardly held” (*J*, p. 340). These connections between writing and happiness and non-writing with weariness are something that she constantly repeats in her letters and journals. As Plath describes, she was “desperate when [she was] *verbally repressed*” (*J*, p. 510), and when she could put her life into words, she could

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<sup>18</sup> Although there are many works regarding this, I do not aim to give a psychoanalytical approach to explain the connection between writing and mental health. I acknowledge that there can be a link between writing and healing (such as with therapeutical writing, for instance); however, in this research I only seek to show the ways that she linked her writing to a sense of survival and to suggest the *possibility* of life writing and healing.

visualize how it was like to be free: “if IF I could break onto a meaningful prose, that expressed my feelings, I would be free. Free to have a wonderful life” (*idem*). In other words, writing a page, a letter, or a poem gave her strength and power, and reordering and rearranging the chaos of her experience onto words was her idea of happiness and freedom (“if I can only write a page, half a page, here every day . . . to come to a better life” (*J*, p. 466)). The connection between writing and happiness is something emphasized so many times in her life writing – whether calling her typewriter as a “blessed Olivetti” (*LI*, p. 1211), affirming that “typing free[d her]” (*J*, p. 470), highlighting that “writing [was] her health” (*J*, p. 523), or calling her study her “poultice, [her] balm, [her] absinthe” (*L2*, p. 785) that when she writes “my life is in my hands” (*J*, p. 399), it feels like a literal truth.

Through her poems, prose, scrapbooks, journals, and letters, Plath “managed to reconcile the parts of her identity that her doctors, and her society, did not believe could be reconciled” (*RC*, Loc 9129): more than simply a way of heightening her experience of life, Plath’s writing represented an urgency to live and survive. The craft gave her strength – “life is so difficult and tedious I could cry. But I won’t: I’ll just keep writing villanelles” (*LI*, p. 567) – and her writing was almost like an armor she had to put on to move on with her life. However, even though it is evident that writing poems and prose works were essential to her happiness, I believe that her journals and letters were even more important in her process of healing, as Plath could explore different parts of herself in the privacy of her journals and to the addressers that she trusted. In this way, her life writing helped her make sense of her life, rearrange and make meaning of her experiences, understand herself and, most important of all, to heal, as she justified her life “by turning it into print” (*J*, p. 22).

### 3.1.2 Her love for literature: orchestrating Time with Virginia Woolf

Those nine first years of my life sealed themselves  
off like a ship in a bottle—beautiful, inaccessible,  
obsolete, a fine, white flying myth.

— Sylvia Plath, “Ocean 1212-W”

Intrinsically connected with her love for writing, Plath’s affection for literature was also crucial in her life. Examples of this include moving to one of W.B. Yeats’s (1895-1939)

houses in London or trying to understand her mind in her thesis on Fyodor Dostoevsky's (1821-1881) *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880). In addition, Clark (2020) explains that 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" (*RC*, Loc 458). Reading her favorite authors also stimulated her own writing. For instance, in a letter to Prouty, she explains:

. . . when I began the teens I felt the need of expressing myself, so I naturally drifted into sketching and writing poems. I never thought much about it, for *it was always so natural to put my feelings for a snowflake or a sunset into rhyme*. . . I began to take a new delight in *recording my emotions*. I would catch myself observing my own reactions from a distance and *mentally taking notes*: "She said this" or "She wondered . . ." – all in the third person. Always I wanted to say something, *to twist out a chunk of my life and put it on paper in the most effective way possible*. I never thought much about style, but I was influenced, naturally, by the authors I read. For instance, there was a time when Edna St. Vincent Millay seemed to voice all my agony and joy of adolescence. And then Sinclair Lewis dawned on my horizons, and then Stephen Vincent Benet. And Virginia Woolf. I guess it's like that with everybody – the thrill of "discovering" a new writer. So I began sending my stories and poems out to magazines about two years ago. (*L1*, p. 234, my italics)

As mentioned before, Prouty was Plath's benefactress when she was at Smith and, besides funding her studies, she also became, in Plath's own words, a "literary godmother." In this first letter that they exchange, we can glimpse her first steps to a writing career (along with the first "delights" of narrativizing and dramatizing her life), as well as the first mentioning of Woolf's influence in her work. In a letter to her mother in 1957, seven years after the aforementioned passage, Plath writes: "have read 3 Virginia Woolf novels this week & find them excellent stimulation for my own writing" (*L2*, p. 161)). In fact, there are many passages in her journals that highlight her connection with this writer. In many ways, Woolf was a teacher for her, one that taught her how to live – "the life of a Willa Cather, a Lillian Helman, a Virginia Woolf. . . I not being them, could try to be more like them: to listen, observe, and feel, and try to live most fully" (*J*, p. 44) – and write: "Virginia Woolf helps. Her novels make mine possible: I find myself describing: episodes:" (*J*, p. 289); "I felt mystically that I read Woolf, read Lawrence . . . I can be itched and kindled to great work: burgeoning, fat with the texture & substance of life" (*J*, p. 337). But Plath's connection to her went beyond her novels, as she was also passionate for Woolf's diaries. In a letter to her mother, she writes that she got "courage by reading Virginia Woolf's 'Writer's Diary' . . . [as she felt] very akin to her" (*L2*, p. 101), an aspect that is illustrated several times in her journals, such as when she entitles it as "the blessed

diary of Virginia Woolf” (*J*, p. 269) or when she expresses her affection for her and her diaries: “bless her. I feel my life linked to her, somehow. I love her” (*idem*).

Like Plath, Woolf was an avid diarist, writing diaries for almost three decades. Simons (1990) defined them as the “consummate demonstration of the diary as art” (p. 18), and Shannon (2007) as “a rich, various, multifaceted, elegant, funny book, one that repays close scrutiny and illuminates the entirety of Woolf’s oeuvre” (p. 18). In one of the topics of my undergraduate research, I analyzed how Woolf used her diaries to reflect upon Time, in an attempt to stop It through her writing. I argue that she perceived time as something dismally beautiful (“over all this the bloom of the past descends as I write – it becomes sad, beautiful, memorable” (2019, p. 1084), yet haunting (“and death—as I always feel—hurrying near. 43: how many more books?” (*idem*, p. 1113). Relying on Lejeune’s (2014) idea that the diary is “methodical, repetitive and obsessive” (p. 343), I indicate that the agony of death and aging was one of Woolf’s obsessions of her diary. With this, I conclude that the functions of her diary practice went much beyond than simply writing about everyday life: as the pen touched the paper, she recorded memories and moments, in an attempt to stop and manipulate Time. In her own words, “I feel time racing like a film at the Cinema. I try to stop it. I prod it with my pen. I try to pin it down” (*idem*, p. 944).

Because of this strong connection between Plath and Woolf, I argue that this urge to “prod” or “pin down” Time was present in the diary-keeping practice of both. But to understand this, it is essential to see how I perceive this complex aspect called Time. I write this word with capital T because I seek to convey its power in three major aspects: firstly, as something inhumanly uncontrollable and impossible to catch or hang onto; secondly, as an important aspect in literature, whether for its subject as a trope (controlling time, time traveling, time and healing, aging, (im)mortality) or as a literary device (analepses, prolepses, linear or non-linear structures, parallel times); and thirdly, as a possible obsession in life writing (this is, keeping journals and/or writing letters in order to stop Time and encapsulate moments). In addition, I argue that all of these characteristics can be related to Plath’s life writing practices – Its uncontrollability in connection with her frustration that she could never be godlike, its connection to literature as a door to narrativization and dramatization, and the obsession as a common theme in her auto/biography. This is also reflected in an anguish of not having enough time to do everything, a struggle that Plath often mentions. Many times, she emphasizes how she wanted to do numerous things in her life: “learn: German, poets & poetry, novels &

novelists, art & artists. French also” (*J*, p. 406); “I want to write stories and poems and a novel and be Ted’s wife and a mother to our babies” (*J*, p. 436); “This summer I must devour crucial novels” (*L2*, p. 121); “To write, be a Renaissance woman” (*J*, p. 494). Once again, she used her life writing to express her anguish for not being able to do all of this – “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” (*J*, p. 43) – and writing becomes, then, a way to both comfort her and to give space for pinning down Time. I explain these ideas further with a little help from Virginia Woolf, Plath’s platonic and literary friend.

Plath mentions how she learned more about the passage of Time with Woolf’s novel *The Years* (1937): “suddenly a little girl is in her fifties with grey hair, and so we learn time passes, all moves. But the descriptions, the observations, the feelings caught and let slip, are fine, a luminous web catching it all in, this is life, this is time” (*J*, p. 485). In addition, as mentioned in chapter two, memory is a very important aspect when dealing with retrospective writing, especially because writing about the past is always an interpretation of it. Plath herself noted her own ideas about it in her journals: “memory is such a feeble thing – and blurs and distorts past impressions” (*L1*, p. 266). Lejeune (2014) explains that diarists use their notebooks to conserve memories: “the diary is a call for later reading: transmission to some lost alter ego in the future, or modest contribution to collective memory – bottle thrown into the sea” (p. 303). It is in this practice of throwing a bottle into the sea – thereby encapsulating moments in a glass, protecting memories from vanishing – that Plath and Woolf orchestrated Time. In other words, in the act of narrativizing and dramatizing their lives in life writing, they arranged a symphony of Time where they could manipulate It, making particular moments, insights, dialogues, and emotions bonded on paper. Plath calls her to do this in her life writing, including in a letter to her friend Eddie Cohen (which she transcribed in her journals):

Last night, driving back from Boston, I lay back in the car and let the colored lights come at me, the music from the radio, the reflection of the guy driving. It all flowed over me with a screaming ache of pain... *remember, remember, this is now, and now, and now. Live it, feel it, cling to it.* I want to become acutely aware of all I’ve taken for granted. When you feel that this may be the good-bye, the last time, it hits you harder. I’ve got to have something. I want to stop it all, the whole monumental grotesque joke, before it’s too late. *But writing poems and letters doesn’t seem to do much good.* (*J*, p. 19; *L1*, p. 170; my italics)

In this passage, Plath was expressing her antiwar concerns about the Korean War (1950-1953), which alerted her to remember every single detail of her life before it was too late.



She writes about this anxiety several times in her journals, expressing that the making “of the moment something permanent” (*J*, p. 338) was her “call, [her] work” (*idem*). In one of these alerts, she expresses that she had to do like Woolf did (“write down the passing thought, the passing observation . . . all this: raw, material. To be useful. Also, images of life: like Woolf found” (*J*, p. 286)), but better: “she: too ephemeral, needing the earth. I will be stronger” (*idem*). In other words, it was through the written word that both authors could deal with this obsession with Time, with the need to pin It down and to embrace the passing moment, as they “live[d] it, [felt] it, [and] cling[ed] to it”.

Just as Time is bewildering and ephemeral, this orchestra that Plath and Woolf attempted to arrange is fragile and nuanced. It relies on the feebleness of memory, which by itself is always an interpretation, and therefore fictive in many ways. Plath herself ponders the role of memory and fiction in her journals and letters, where at the same time that she uses her auto/biography as an extension of memory (“remember to save my cards and letters so that I can catch up in my Diary when I get back home” (*L1*, p. 95, in a letter to her mother)), these memories are re-created in the process of writing: “to describe a childhood incident by memory? I have no memory. . . 10 years of childhood before the slick adolescent years, & then my diaries to work on: to reconstruct. . . I have never learned to look at details. Recreate life lived: that is renewed life” (*J*, p. 305). Therefore, although her correspondence and journal entries served as a way of remembering, they were also somewhat fictional: “I make up forgotten details” (*J*, p. 316). This space between memory and its interpretation opens, then, a locus for invention that reminds ourselves that every single effort to pin down Time and memory is, from the very beginning, a failed attempt; and Plath was aware of this:

And there will be other summers, other band concerts, but never this one, never again, never as now. Next year I will not be the self of this year now. And that is why I laugh at the transient, the ephemeral; laugh, while clutching, holding, tenderly, like a fool his toy, cracked glass, water through fingers. For all the writing, for all the invention of engines to express & convey & capture life, it is the living of it that is the gimmick. It goes by, and whatever dream you use to dope up the pains and hurts, it goes. Delude yourself about printed islands of permanence. You’ve only got so long to live. (*J*, p. 130)

Here, we can observe her angst about the passing moment: things (summers, concerts) can happen again, but never as in the same way as before. This powerlessness of stopping life from happening (holding water through fingers, as she describes) not only connects to Plath’s frustration for not being omniscient or godlike (“Frustrated? Yes. Why? Because it is

impossible for me to be God” (*J*, p. 91)), but also to the vain attempt for trying it. I believe, nonetheless, that even though she would feel like a fool clutching her toy, this “delusion” of Time did not stop her – them – to write, narrativize, to capture life on the paper, and, in many ways, to become godlike. The persistent tick of Time may have been a constant struggle in her life – “at my back is always the mocking tick: A Life is Passing. My Life.” (*J*, p. 201) –, but it was not all terrible, as It made her aware of life’s transience and urged her to paint it with words. However fragile pinning down Time was, and even if only on the illusion of the page, Plath and Woolf still live in their writing, in their printed islands of permanence.

## 3.2 INK RELATIONSHIPS

### 3.2.1 The fairy tale of Sivvy

I’m no more your mother  
Than the cloud that distils a mirror to reflect its own slow  
Effacement at the wind’s hand  
— Sylvia Plath, “Morning Song”

In the introduction of *Letters Home* (1975), Aurelia Plath explains that between her daughter and her existed a “sort of psychic osmosis which, at times, was very wonderful and comforting; at other times an unwelcome invasion of privacy” (*Letters Home* (*LH*, 1975), Loc 527). This “psychic osmosis” happened, for instance, when Plath fused parts of her life with her mother’s (*LH*, Loc 117), an idea that highlights the blend between the two and the powerful intimacy of their relationship. This is, of course, Aurelia Plath’s version of the story; and it is one that caused much debate because of its depiction of Plath as a perfect and always cheerful daughter. Clark (2020) argues that this narration was exactly the objective of the editing of *Letters Home* – “the world knew Sylvia Plath as a dark, cynical depressive ‘case,’ and she wanted to show her daughter was not Esther Greenwood” (*RC*, Loc 26802); however, as Aurelia Plath’s efforts backfired, she became again “the woman who silenced Plath’s mercurial voice in death as she had in life” (*RC*, Loc 26803). The discussion between these two contrasting narratives – the ideal mother-daughter relationship versus the toxic family bond – can also be observed in the contrast between Plath’s joyous letters home and exasperated journal entries.

In this way, in this topic I exemplify the ways that Plath transformed her relationship with her mother into a kind of happy fairy tale in her letters home (building, therefore, an “ink relationship” with her from a distance), as well as how she experimented, experienced, and performed her hatred for her mother in the privacy of her journals. With this, I hope to illustrate the complexity of letter and diary as stages for the narrativization, dramatization, and performance of life, as well as the way that Plath transformed herself into an ink goddess in the ink relationship with her mother.

Firstly, it is important to note that her mother was the person that Plath wrote the most throughout her whole life (according to my count, there are 499 letters or postcards addressed to her mother in the first volume of her correspondence and 230 in the second one, which means that from 1940 to 1963 Plath wrote more than 700 times to her mother). As she left home at eighteen and did not live with Aurelia Plath since, Plath had a long-distance relationship with her mother, which was mostly made out of letters (according to Aurelia Plath, they could not always afford to telephone, and corresponding was also better because Plath loved to write (*LH*, Loc 108)). As a child, Plath yearly went to girl camps, where she sent numerous detailed letters to her mother, always emphasizing how happy, healthy, “plump,” and “tanned” she was. In her letters from 1943 to 1949 (from age 10 to around 16), for instance, she listed and described almost every meal, food, and drink she had eaten or drunk on that day at camp. In addition, she also demonstrated, with much pride, all the amazing experiences she was having:

The water was very cold at first but once I ducked in it was so comfortable. *The water was the most beautiful color that I have ever seen!* The pure white sand gleamed through its crystal, pale, blue-green depths. The only thing I missed at supper was butter! I ate: fresh spinach, sliced turkey, 2 baked potatoes, brick (vanilla, strawberry, chocolate) icecream, and four cups of milk! *I am well and overwhelmingly happy.* <drawing of heart> (*L1*, p. 22, in a 1945 letter to her mother, editor’s intervention, my italics)

In fact, the combination “overwhelmingly happy” describes the tone of the majority of the letters that Plath wrote, even after she became an adult. Throughout her whole life, her letters home frequently emphasized the wonderful experiences in every aspect of her life, where Plath narrated events with great enthusiasm, inviting her mother to imagine them and feel proud of her (“that is why I am spilling out at such a rate – to try to share as much as I can with you” (*L1*, p. 380)). She also used her correspondence to certify how happy and blissful she was, where she always comforted her mother not to worry about her: “I don’t want you to worry about things, mummy” (*L1*, p. 284). Even at the end of her life, alone with her two young

children after her separation from Hughes and facing one of the most difficult moments of her life, Plath managed to keep the fiction of a sort of the happy daughter alive in her correspondence with her mother. For instance, she asks her brother to show their mother that she was fine – “do try to convince mother I am cured . . . I am sound, fine & writing the best ever” (L2, p. 871, her highlight) and, after asking for help or for someone to go to England to take care of her, she takes it back: “do ignore my last letters! I honestly must have been delirious to think I could uproot other people’s lives to poultice my own” (L2, p. 864, her highlight). Even in her last known letter to her mother, one week before her suicide in 1963, Plath minimizes her suffering by saying that she had just been feeling “a bit grim” (L2, p. 963) and by continuing to show how fulfilled in life she was: “I have my beautiful country house, the car, and London is the one city of the world I’d like to live in” (*idem*).

The correspondence with Aurelia Plath had an extremely important role in their life. Their letters had such a strong impact on their relationship that even as a young girl in her camp stays, their “ink relationship” meant something to be proud of, as she explains in several letters: “I got your big fat letter . . . everybody envies me – receiving such meaty letters” (L1, p. 28); “I’m so proud – I’ve got more mail from home than anyone else in my tent” (L1, p. 117); “I was glad to get your letter! I am lucky!! I love you lots & realize how lucky I am to have you for a mother” (L1, p. 119, her highlight). The need to emphasize how special her mother’s letters were continued throughout Plath’s whole life, and she made sure to describe this, as she does numerous times (“your letters are a constant joy” (L1, p. 624), “your letters always cheer me up” (L1, p. 912); “you have no idea how happy your letters make mummy!” (L1, p. 938)), even after she became a married woman (“I look so forward to hearing from you, and read the letters aloud to Ted, & over & over to myself” (L2, p. 50); “your lovely plump pink letter came this morning & I read it aloud to Ted over coffee. We both enjoy every word you write so much” (L2, p. 55)). This pride and enthusiasm, however, also meant a constant obligation and need for confirmation, as Plath frequently found herself explaining why she had not yet written back. In a letter of 1951, she jokes: “could I be as presumptuous to say you sounded a wee bit frantic? No news may be good news from Warren [her brother], but that doesn’t mean that no news means I’m on my deathbed. If I were, *I’d at least have time to drop you a postcard*” (L1, p. 289, my italics).

Clark (2020) suggests that Plath felt that her mother was the “devil whispering in [her] ear that she [was] not sufficiently demure, popular, modest, or wealthy” (RC, Loc 1128), and

that she put so much pressure on her that “the only way to win her mother’s love was to outperform herself again and again; [and] because she could not sustain this cycle, she had no choice but to give up” (*RC*, idem). Although it is impossible to blame Plath’s perfectionism and self-pressure on only one thing and/or person, in a letter a friend she explains how she felt about her mother, showing us the kind of daughterly role she felt she had to perform in her letters home: “my mother’s purpose in life is to see me & my brother ‘happy and fulfilled’ . . . I’ve got to pretend to her that I am all right & doing what I’ve always wanted” (*LI*, p. 255). In the privacy of her journals she writes about these feelings too, trying to understand her need to earn her mother’s love through achievements, almost like her mother could only love her if she had some kind of reason to make her proud: “old need of giving mother accomplishments, getting reward of love” (*J*, p. 445); “I am experiencing a grief reaction for something . . . [that] isn’t there: a mother’s love. Nothing I do (marrying . . . ; writing) . . . can change her way of being with me which I experience as a total absence of love” (*J*, p. 446).

As mentioned, the epistolary discourse is marked by its hybridity and rebelliousness, and it is characterized by aspects such as the result of the union between addresser-addressee, the polarities of transparency/mask, and its finality in contrast to a sense of open-endedness (ALTMAN, 1982; DIAZ, 2016). I argue that these characteristics of the epistolary discourse (combined with the complexity of life writing stated in chapter two) are precisely what made the letter the perfect space for Plath to transform herself into an “ink daughter,” creating a sort of “fairy tale of Sivvy” (her nickname in her family) in her letters home. In other words, with the help of her correspondence and the conventions of epistolary discourse, Plath managed to craft an ink daughter that not only helped her to dissociate herself from her mother (as a way of letting go of the “psychic osmosis”), but also to perform a perfect blissful persona on the stage of her letters home. There, Plath could compose scenes of pure joy and happiness of her ink daughter character in the fairy tale of her life; and she fictionalized her character as the perfect daughter, mother, sister, teacher, writer, and friend. Through their ink relationship, she created pictures in her mother’s head, delineating perfect scenes that intended to bring tears of joy to her mother’s eyes in their letters, emphasizing the idea that letters are a result of the union of writer and reader (ALTMAN, 1982, p. 88).

For instance, in their correspondence, both mother and daughter became heroines: Sylvia for being strong, happy, and fulfilled (“I swallowed my salty sobs & grin bravely” (*LI*, p. 315)), and Aurelia for being the one who made her daughter like this (“you deserve the most

verdant laurels . . . [I] want more than anything to make you proud of me so that some day I can begin to repay you for all the treats you've given me in my two decades of life" (*LI*, p. 572)). In fact, Plath tries to "repay" her mother's heroism over and over again, by giving her publications ("mentally, I dedicate this Harper's triumph to you, my favorite person in the world" (*LI*, p. 603) and showing how happy she was all the time. In her letters home, Plath never walked or ran, she "[strode] *cheerfully* and *skippingly* [sic]" (*LI*, p. 315), the sun did not shine, it "[streamed] warm and slantingly golden into [her] lovely room" (*LI*, *idem*), and the events in her life were never ordinary, but fantastic and dreamy:

I can't face the dead reality. I still lilt and twirl with Eric, Plato, and my wholly lovely Constantine under Japanese lanterns and a hundred moons twining in dark leaves, music spilling out and echoing yet inside my head. To have you there in spirit! *To have had you see me! I am sure you would have cried for joy.* (*LI*, p. 380, *my italics*).

As it is possible to see, her letters played an important function in the creation of this kind of perfect daughter, and Plath frequently used an excessive number of adjectives, adverbs, and exclamation points, highlighting the joy of her fairy tale life. This dynamic was also essential for Plath's survival: as an in-person relationship with her mother might have felt unbearable to her, in the fiction of their letters they could love and accept each other. As Diaz (2016) explains, "the letter, as a symbolic approximation, produces a kind of closure on oneself and distancing from the other . . . paradoxically, the epistolary discourse is also a condition of the pleasure of the amorous discourse" (p. 64). She exemplifies with a sentence that highlights the aforementioned characteristic of the letter's polarity of distance breaker/distance maker: "I love you much more away from you than in your presence" (*idem*), a sentence that fits perfectly to their ink relationship. Finally, even the act of signing her name was a way of consolidating this personality and this fairy tale. Plath constantly evoked her emotions or situations in her life when signing her letters, and I argue that these identities in the epistolary discourse helped to create her ink relationship with her mother even in the nuances of her signed name: "your happy girl, Sivvy" (*LI*, p. 440), "love from a grateful Sivvy" (*LI*, p. 529), "your blissful daughter, Sivvy" (*LI*, p. 537).

Contrary to the fairy tale of letters home, Plath's journals portray a totally different narrative. For instance, whereas in her correspondence with her mother she frequently emphasized how Aurelia was her "favorite person" and a sort of heroine ("for it is you who has given us the heredity and the incentive to be mentally ambitious. Thank you a million times!")

(*LI*, p. 510)), in her journals Plath considered her mother literally an enemy: “my enemies are those who care about me most. First: my mother. Her pitiful wish is that I ‘be happy.’ Happy! That is undefinable as far as states of being go” (*J*, p. 98). Although it is not unusual for this to happen in the relationship of parents and children (in Plath’s own words from her journal, “weary from the late night and wrote a letter to mother which gave her *the gay side*” (*J*, p. 559)), the way that Aurelia and Sylvia Plath created their perfect connection in their letters highlight their need for an ink relationship. Clark (2020) gives an interesting explanation of the difference between letter and journal, emphasizing the different narratives that each genre conveys:

In letters to Aurelia, this emotional crisis was *coded* in talk of heavy workloads, lost sleep, and weekends alone in the library. These letters marked the beginning of a literary pattern that would characterize Plath’s writing life: all that was threatening and malignant was exorcised in her journal, while Aurelia received sunny, optimistic letters. It may not be the case that Aurelia demanded only good news from her daughter; more likely, mother and daughter were *coconspirators* in a scenario where one always tried to spare the other from worry. (*RC*, loc 5001, my italics).

This work as “coconspirators” emphasizes that, in her letters home, not only did Plath become an ink daughter as the addresser, but she also created an ink relationship with the help of her addressee, her mother. The aforementioned idea of fusion or “psychic osmosis,” as well as the fact that Plath was “so close to her mother that she sometimes did not know where Aurelia began and she ended” (CLARK, 2020, loc 5722), contributes to the urgency of this ink relationship. Plath herself wrote about how she felt that her mother “use[d her] as an extension of herself” (*J*, p. 448) and she even confides in a journal entry of 1958 that she tried to kill herself because she could not kill her mother (“I’d kill her, so I killed myself” (*J*, p. 433)). These passages, however gloomy, emphasize how important it was to maintain an ink relationship (or, a “satisfactory letter-relationship” (*J*, p. 449), as she describes) with her mother.

Even though her letters home highlight this possibility of transformation and performativity, I also argue that diaries were essential in the daughter-mother relationship. In many ways, I believe that the confidentiality of her journals worked beyond the idea of giving Plath security and a place to unburden her feelings regarding her mother. Much more than a private space, her journals became a space where she could break with this ink relationship bottle, and let the ink daughter dissolve. This can be exemplified by Plath’s professed hatred for her mother, and how her journals served as the stage for this dramatization to take place, for her hatred to be experienced and performed. Because of Otto Plath’s (1885-1940) death when

Plath was eight years old, the ghost of her father was always present in her auto/biography. Not only did she emphasize this anguish in her poems (“Daddy,” “The Colossus,” “The Beekeeper’s Daughter,” “Electra on Azalea Path,” to name a few), Plath also confided these feelings several times in her journals: “I rail and rage against the taking of my father, whom I have never known” (*J*, p. 230); “went to my father’s grave, a very depressing sight . . . felt cheated. My temptation to dig him up. To prove he existed and really was dead. How far gone would he be?” (*J*, p. 473); “there is your dead father somewhere in you, interwoven in the cellular system of your long body” (*J*, p. 64). In her journals, it is suggested that Plath believed it was her mother’s fault that he died, a possibility that she explored further, performing its veracity on the written word: “I never knew the love of a father . . . my mother killed the only man who’d love me steady through life . . . I hate her for that” (*J*, p. 431); “how do I express my hate for my mother? In my deepest emotions I think of her as an enemy: somebody who ‘killed’ my father, my first male ally in the world” (*J*, p. 433). This hatred for her mother is especially present in her 1959 journals, when she was around 26 years old and her psychiatrist, Dr. Ruth Beuscher (1923- ), told her it was okay to have these feelings. In these entries, it is possible to observe Plath’s relief over Dr. Beuscher’s permission – “ever since Wednesday I have been feeling like a ‘new person’. Like a shot of brandy went home, a sniff of cocaine . . . better than shock treatment: ‘I give you permission to hate your mother’” (*J*, p. 249) –, where she used the pages of her journals to explore this “new person” who could hate her mother. Finally, not only did she experiment this new feeling, but she also wrote to understand what to do with it – “I hate my mother: yet I pity her. How shall I act toward her without feeling a hypocrite? Or cruel?” (*J*, p. 436); “WHAT IS THE MATURE THING TO DO WITH HATE FOR MOTHER?” (*J*, p. 450) –, reflecting on the possibility of the diary as a place for self-reflection and re-creation of oneself.

Whereas magical exaggerations in the letters helped her construe the perfect ink relationship with her mother, the amplification of her hatred for her mother in her journals aided Plath to cope with what she felt as her mother’s lack of love. In this way, although they worked differently, in the narrativization and dramatization of life and of her relationship with Aurelia Plath, both letter and journal worked just as *performative*, showing a contrast and contact between journal and letter. More than just a place for unburdening these feelings and understanding herself, Plath’s journals gave her strength and resilience to endure her feelings for her mother, and their correspondence served as a way to perform love itself. As Diaz (2016) emphasizes, “in the epistolary discourse, ‘epistolographers’ . . . projects themselves in possible



identities that the addressee is obliged to recognize and even legitimate” (p. 65): in the narrative of their correspondence, at least, Plath could be Sivvy, the perfect daughter; her mother, her heroine; and they loved each other in the fairy tale of their words.

### 3.2.2 The craft of love

Please: I dream of talking to him again, under  
apple trees at night in the hills of orchards; talking;  
quoting poetry; and making a good life.

— Sylvia Plath, in a journal entry of 1953, p. 156

### 3.2.3 *Love letters, celestial slow-motion affairs*

In the part about Plath’s love for literature, I attempted to show the connection between writing and Time in her journals, delineating it with her connection and affection for Woolf. Although I exemplified with some excerpts of letters, I tried to focus more on aspects about Time and memory in Plath’s diary-keeping practice. Because of the presence of a projected reader, in her correspondence memories and experience are created collectively, linked to the relationship addresser-addressee. I argue, then, that Time works differently in these two genres: whereas in diary (and the description of some letters) there is an obsession with It as well as an attempt to pin It through Its narrativization; in letter these narratives are created through a collective memory between reader and writer, and time (this time with lowercase, as it is more a variable than an “obsession”) is a characteristic that opens up space for the dramatization and performativity of epistolary personae. Plath’s love letters highlight better this idea.

In her book *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (1982), Janet Gurkin Altman argues that, for us to consider correspondences as a literary genre, we must lay a foundation that will help us to interpret its meanings. She affirms that “the letter cannot be *histoire* without passing through *discours*” (p. 207): the letter form is so particular to its kind of discourse that to better interpret it we must have a frame for reading it. She argues that letters can be an “extremely flexible tool in the hands of the epistolary author” (p. 56), and because of this, the objective of her book is to dig into the “letter’s potential as an artistic form and narrative vehicle” (p. 3). Stanley (2004) proposes a similar idea in her attempt to define letters: she argues that even

though the “letter writing is characterized by fragmentation and dispersal” (p. 204), it is important to have an overview, or at least a provisional attempt to understand it (p. 205).

Relying on many works of epistolary fiction, Altman (1982) proposes six variables that must be taken into consideration when analyzing a letter: mediation, confidentiality, readership, discourse, closure, and narrativity. These concepts overlap and contradict themselves in correspondence, and many of them work in duality. According to her, letters have a kind of universe of their own, which can emphasize their “‘both-and,’ ‘either-or’ nature” (*idem*): this is, correspondents can choose whether they want to emphasize the bridge between one letter and the other, bringing reader and writer together, and/or the absence or gap between them, emphasizing the abyss between addresser and addressee. For example, regarding mediation, she emphasizes that the letter can work both as a distance breaker (bridge) or distance maker (barrier), and the letter has the power to “connect or interfere” (p. 22). Differences between time of narration and time of narrated action, where past (memory) and future (imagination) overlap, play an important role in the epistolary language. Confidentiality emphasizes the “letter’s dual potential for transparency (portrait of soul, confession, vehicle of narrative) and opacity (mask, weapon, event within narrative)” (p. 186). This ambivalence can also be observed in the letter’s narrativity as a whole, since its closure is constantly marked by its own finality (finishing the letter itself, sending it), and a sense of open-endedness (an overture for continuation, which is perhaps only ceased by closures such as death or the reunion of the correspondents). Precisely because the letter flows between these polarities, they “disturb binary distinctions” (STANLEY, 2004, p. 209): they are here and there, now and then, they are conversations but not quite.

Besides these ambivalences, contradictions, and paradoxes of the epistolary discourse, many aspects are particular to this genre. For instance, understanding readership is essential for interpreting letters, as the weight of the reader is fundamental in this relationship. When writing a diary entry, the dialogue is usually between the diarist’s “selves” and the medium (notebook, a sheet of paper, typewriter, computer, cellphone, among others) and diarists can decide to keep writing or never write again, to keep the entry or throw it away, among other actions. Writing a letter, however, works quite differently, as it usually involves: one or more drafts (where many letters may end up “dying” in the process as messages are thrown away in the trash), practical aspects (address, naming, signing), the act of sending-delivering-receiving (which can be interrupted by misplacements, thefts, and other possibilities), the addressee’s decision to read

it or not, answer it or not, and so on. As Altman (1982) highlights, letters are a “result of a union of writer and reader” (p. 88), where, in the exchange of letters, at some point the addresser becomes the addressee and vice-versa (if they decide to continue the correspondence, of course). Because of this movement where the decoder becomes the incoder, the reader-relationship of correspondence differs from other types of personal writing and we must, then, always be aware of the fact that letters change according to the different addressers and addressees, as well as to their relationships.

These characteristics can always change and are up for discussion. However, understanding the particularities of the epistolary discourse can help us interpret Plath’s letters better, especially in what regards to time. As Altman (1982) explains, “an exchange of letters is a dialogue *ritardando*” (p. 21), an idea that sheds light on the particular rhythm of correspondence. According to her, temporal and spatial dimensions play a crucial role in the epistolary discourse, as it is filled with hiatuses of all kinds: “time lags between event and recording, between message transmission and reception; spatial separation between writer and addressee; blank spaces and lacunae in the manuscript” (p. 140). Similarly, Stanley (2004) also sheds light on this aspect of the letter. According to her, time always influences epistolary discourse; and even though letters are always written in the present tense and are marked by their “quotidian present” (p. 208), all letters can be considered “‘dead letters’ that in a sense never arrive: the letter that was written and sent is rather different from the one that arrives and is read” (*idem*). In this space of complex and paradoxical spatial-temporal dimensions, as well in the hybridity and rebelliousness of correspondence, there is the love letter, and there are the epistolary personae.

In a 1954 letter to her boyfriend Philip McCurdy, Plath writes: “I am more myself in letters” (*LI*, p. 735), a sentence that describes Jolly and Stanley’s (2005) argument that “great letters come from a particular . . . kind of personality [that] . . . not only loves to write, but prefers to *love through writing*” (p. 13, my italics). Plath’s love letters to her lovers evoke exactly this idea: her need to love through writing, thus experiencing her love through her words, of loving her correspondents because they are, in fact, herself: “have you a capacity for love of someone beside yourself? I wonder, sometimes” (*J*, p. 66); “I do not love; I do not love anybody except myself” (*J*, p. 98). In addition, the letter’s particularities make it perfect for the romantic love. Altman (1982) argues that the “epistolary romance would be exactly the opposite of the libertine affair; by definition, it would be platonic” (p. 21) and she concludes that “the

epistolary romance is a slow-motion affair” (*idem*). The love letter is marked by its slowness. It is also characterized by its spatial gap, as it is (usually) only necessary to build a bridge between two lovers who are not in the same place at the same time. According to her, the “seduction” of correspondence lies in its “power to suggest both presence and absence, to decrease and increase distance” (p. 15), which highlights the possibility of seeing the letter as a platonic affair: imagination lies in seduction, and addressers and addressees can delight themselves in this space of life and fiction. In the words of the theorist:

The letter form seems *tailored for the love plot*, with its emphasis on *separation and reunion*. The lover who takes up his pen to write his loved one is conscious of the interrelation of presence and absence and the way in which his *very medium of communication reflects both the absence and presence of his addressee*. (p. 14, my italics)

This is connected to what Stanley (2004) describes as the “temporal slipperiness of the epistolary” (p. 209), which works as a paradox: the letter only exists because of the distance and the absence of the writer, but it is in the materiality and meaning of the correspondence that these writers are conjured (creating what she calls as the letter’s “metonymy and a simulcrum [sic] of presence” (p. 209). Diaz (2016) also illustrates this, as she argues that “the mask and the pen are the first *actors* of correspondence” (p. 115, my italics), illustrating this idea of dramatization and performance through the letter form. She also reflects upon the idea of the letter as an “‘ink mirror’ [a concept by French theorist Michel Beaujour], opaque and matte like that substance it’s made of” (*idem*). This explains why the identities and personae portrayed in the letter are much more about the addresser than the addressee: the ink mirror is a very particular one, as it “constructs exactly what it should reflect” (*idem*). In many ways, then, the letter becomes a space that she defines as the “correspondence identity laboratory,” (p. 116), where correspondents never truly portray their “whole body, but details, fragments of a fugitive and unfixed image” (*idem*). In an essay about James Joyce’s love epistolography and preformistic processes of epistolary personae, Andrade and Vicente (2021) explain that in every letter there is a work of “masking and theatrics . . . as the letter is always, in varying degrees . . . ‘fictionalization of the life of the epistolographer’ (HAROCHE-BOUZINAC, 2016, p. 197)” (p. 309, my translation). Relying on several scholars, including Jovicic (2010) and Moraes (2007), the authors explain that the letter is a kind of stage (*mise en scène*) that gives space for two aspects to take place: the epistolary persona (the correspondents, which become actresses or actors) and the representation(s) of the self(ves) (*mise en écriture*). Finally, Stanley (2004)

mentions a similar idea, emphasizing that letters “involve a performance of self by the writer, but one tempered by recognizing that the addressee is not just a mute audience for this, but also a ‘(writing) self in waiting’” (p. 212).

### 3.2.4 *For him, perfection with the name Sylvia exists (and so she is)*

All these aspects of the letter mingle with ideas about memory, fictionalization, identity, narrativization, dramatization, and life writing that I have been discussing so far, unfolding a space for the idea of an ink goddess to exist, especially one that was so “erotic and lyrical” (*LI*, p. 858, as she explains in a letter to her boyfriend Gordon Lameyer) in a society that scolded women who were like that. It is, then, in all of these paradoxical characteristics that I analyze Plath’s love letters, arguing that she used this space to understand and perform love through her epistolary personae, and to be free to explore her sexuality. As mentioned, in her adolescent years Plath had numerous boyfriends, dates, lovers, and admirers and, because of this, she also wrote many love letters. These were of great importance to her, and she used her journals to inscribe this. For instance, in a diary entry she puts in parallel the physical encounter of a date and the letters she had exchanged with this lover: “pulling me lightly to him, a kiss, experimental, tender, and then he circled me with his lean, ironsinewed arms . . . all the *words we said on letterpaper* – religious, philosophical, physical ideas – and the complete *concordance* there, we said with our hungry mouths” (*J*, p. 176, my italics). This passage reflects the “separation” and “reunion” aspect of the love letter, emphasized by the “concordance” between words (“religious, philosophical, physical ideas”) and actions (tender kisses and “hungry mouths”). In these letters, Plath and her lovers become actors, performing and experimenting with their ideas of romance, seduction, and love; and in this place that she transformed her lovers into “prince charmings”, and herself into a “sylvan goddess” (*J*, p. 177).

I believe that just as Plath’s poems and short stories were a way of fictionalizing her lovers into characters, her journal served as “ally” in the narrativization and dramatization of the epistolary personae of her love letters. For instance, one of her admirers was Constantine Sidamon-Eristoff, a man that Plath met and waltzed with (among many other magical things, including being called “milady” by him) at a party in 1951, as she describes in a long letter to her mother: “I really loved him that evening, for his sharing of part of his keen mind and delightful family, and for listening to me say poetry and for singing . . .” (*LI*, p. 380). She

transforms him into a “bronze boy” in a poem – “here is a fragmentary bit of free verse . . . gold mouths cry with the green young / certainty of the bronze boy / remembering a thousand autumns . . . Very rough. But I’ve got an evolving idea. Constantine is my bronze boy” (*LI*, p. 380-381) and, in her auto/biographical novel *The Bell Jar*, written almost twelve years after their encounter, he becomes a character (“Constantin”) in the story as she turns him into a translator at the United Nations (“I felt so fine by the time we came to the yogurt and strawberry jam that I decided I would let Constantin seduce me” (*TBJ*, Loc 1315).

More than simply a fictionalization of him, in her life writing the dynamics of his identity works more subtly: letter as a stage, journal as ally. When she receives a letter from him, she attributes fate and destiny to the piece of paper, as she describes in her journal: “6 Friday [October, 1951] – letter from Constantine! Fate, fate! Now to soaring, now to the heights! Will I become the wife of a handsome dark haired Russian oil magnate-to-be?” (*J*, p. 534). Plath’s description of him as a “handsome dark haired Russian oil magnate-to-be” emphasizes this fictitious lover, where she characterizes and transforms him into an actor of their epistolary “platonic slow-motion affair” (ALTMAN, 1982). To him, she writes that the letter was “a reassuring confirmation of [his] reality” (*LI*, p. 389), showing that the materiality of the paper and his words serve as a *certifier* of his existence: “I actually had begun to entertain the possibility of your being some sort of a young Georgian leprechaun conjured up especially for the occasion at hand, only to vanish forever at the first light of dawn, evanescent as the bubbles in champagne” (*idem*). Plath writes several letters about her relationship with Constantine, highlighting the magic of their encounter, and they exchange some letters that *perform* this fairy tale, where both (herself and her “gallant Georgian” (*LI*, p. 404)) become actors in a love play. Interestingly, there is even an audience for their love story. This includes her addressees – such as her mother (to whom Plath describes him numerous times) and Eddie Cohen, Plath’s friend, who makes “a terrifically good comment on Constantine . . . [as he writes:] ‘he reminds me, in a vague way, of . . . some romantic type critter I run into now & again who discusses love & literature & atomic power’” (*LI*, p. 392) – and even an outside audience, as Plath admits that “everybody [probably her friends at Smith] read Constantine’s letter” (*LI*, p. 388).

Another example that shows this is when Plath narrativizes a weekend that she had with Richard Sassoon, her “Parisian bohemian” lover who was a distant cousin of the poet Siegfried Sassoon (1887-1967) (I come back to him in the next chapter), in a letter to another friend and lover, Jon K. Rosenthal:

like cinderella, I was enchanted. christmas lights unbelievable, enormous four-ton tree with blazing red, yellow, orange lights in rockefeller center, skaters waltzing and twirling, silver and blue windows for windowshopping, brentano's for bookbrowsing, oysters for breakfast . . . you know, all exotic and alive, wind-in-hair, frost and wine . . . (LI, p. 850)

In the stage of this letter, Plath is no longer “Sylvia”, but a Cinderella; and her experiences are transformed into magical stories, “all exotic and alive.” Her correspondence with Sassoon also emphasizes this kind of fantastic love, however, since many of them were lost, we only have access through Plath’s transcriptions in her journals (which highlights these were important enough to her to merit reinscribing). In an excerpted letter of 1956, she describes a kind of faithful radiance that he emanates, one that “suddenly comes over you when [she] look[s] at [him] dressing or shaving or reading and [he is] suddenly more than the daily self [they] must live with and love, that fleeting celestial self which shines out with the whimsical timing of angels” (J, p. 195; LI, p. 1078). Here, Plath transforms his figure into a celestial angel, something she does many times with her other lovers: Gordon Lameyer is a “fantastically strong, like a lion. yet o, so gentle” (LI, p. 1040) and Mallory Wober is a “Jewish Hercules (age 19) who was born on Warren’s [Plath’s brother] birthday” (LI, p. 1043). I go back to these imageries and characterizations in the next chapter, however, I wanted to emphasize that the love letter was a place where these lovers could come alive. On the stage of her life writing, Plath could practice this transformation, and she even explains to Wober that it was a practice in which she was getting better at: “you probably have never been described so many times in your life. I am getting better and better at it, and perhaps may borrow you for a short story later: anything, so I can keep on writing about you.” (LI, p. 1046).

In the fiction of these lovers, she is even a sort of protagonist in a conflict of love letters, as she explains in a letter to her mother: “both Sassoon and his roommate, Mel (they hate each other) claim to be intensely in love with me: it’s a bit disconcerting to get *passionate metaphysical love letters from the same mailbox & two antagonistic roommates*” (LI, p. 747, my italics). Plath’s transformation of these boys into fantastical lovers in her love letters and journals highlights a godlike characteristic; however, more than simply creating a sort of prince charming, she actually shatters and breaks him into other lovers. In other words, Plath takes pieces of different men and creates a sort of fairy tale in the life writing stage, in the platonic slow-motion affair of love letters. An interesting work that highlights this idea is Suzie Hanna’s

*The Girl Who Would Be God*<sup>19</sup> (2007), a short film inspired by Plath’s juvenilia, especially a diary entry of 13 November 1949 (Annex A). After dancing and waltzing with a man at a ball, the protagonist leaves him, picks up a scissor, cuts his figure, and puts the paper-version of him on her toy theatre, next to a “Cinderella version” (HANNA, 2011, p. 213) of herself (00:05:04, see picture below). According to Hanna (2011), this is a celebration of “joy and power” (p. 213) in Plath’s journals, and “the girl’s selection and rejection of potential princes as partners . . . shows that she is in charge and that her own desires are paramount” (*idem*).

Figure 6 – The girl who would be god: cutting and carving prince charmings



*Source: Suzie Hanna’s The Girl Who Would Be God (2007), screenshot from Vimeo (Available at <https://vimeo.com/44538641>, accessed on 18 February 2022)*

In this picture, we see not only the paper man (prince charming) that the protagonist is manipulating in the paper reality (the life writing stage), but also a paper version of herself (a sort of Cinderella, as the director explains). Exemplifying with epistolary novels that develop a kind of “seduction plot” (p. 16), Altman (1982) argues that in the slow-motion characteristic of the love letter, correspondents may use the letter as “an extension of this barrier [between them]:

<sup>19</sup> An “animated film that was commissioned for the Sylvia Plath 75th Year Symposium 2007 held at the Rothermere American Institute Oxford. The inspiration for the film includes a journal entry made by Sylvia Plath on November 13th 1949, her juvenilia poems ‘Cinderella’ and ‘Aerialist’, her teenaged drawings and paintings and her own musical interests” (HANNA, 2013). Directed by Suzie Hanna (animation) and Tom Simmons (sound). Duration: 00:06:10. Available on Vimeo.



. . . [a] weapon of protection” (p. 16). Similarly, in Andrade and Vicente’s (2021) essay about James Joyce’s love letters and the creation of personae, they argue that the writer used his art as a way to “heal the functions of his immediate reality . . . [where he] aestheticizes life, entrenching itself in an imaginary universe, as a form of reaction to the unsatisfactory reality in which it finds itself” (p. 318, my translation). Seeking to be free and godlike, Plath not only transforms her lovers on the page, but also herself, and she makes use of the slowness and barrier/bridge paradox of the love letter to do this. In other words, through the eyes of her lovers, Plath could overcome her human condition and craft herself into the perfect character, as well as to create flawless male characters to be part of her play: “he doesn’t realize how you are transmuting him in your mind into a strong, brilliant man who desires you mentally & physically” (*J*, p. 162). As we can see in the picture, she is both the hand that cuts princes into pieces of lovers, the paper flawless princess, and the hand manipulating the puppets of the life writing play. She writes that she wants to be “silverly beautiful” (*J*, p. 177) for them, like a “sylvan goddess” (*idem*) and, in the fantasies of her love letters and fictions of her journals, she becomes just that. Plath would break the spell of her mortality and imperfection and become a goddess by making men see her as a perfect person; as she explains in a journal entry of August 22, 1952: “she is nonexistent, this girl he considers beautiful, soft, loving, intelligent, *perfection*. She is a dream vision I perhaps conjured up unwittingly . . . for him, perfection with the name Sylvia exists. *And so she is*” (*J*, p. 135, my italics).

### 3.2.5 *Alice in Wonderland, or, the antechamber of the literary space*

Plath’s love letters were also a place where she tried to create *art* within the amorous epistolary discourse and with her correspondents/lovers/actors. It is already difficult to define what a “letter” is and the debate is even larger about its role in literature and its artistic potential. Diaz (2016) emphasizes that there is an ambivalent aspect in the epistolary text, as it is both “pragmatic, because it enrolls in a communication process; but also poetic, because it engages the one who writes it in a relationship with writing” (p. 216). She also calls the act of writing a letter as “the beginning of an adventure with language” and that the letter is the “antechamber of the literary space.” In addition, the author also mentions that the letter can be a sort of “style school,” (p. 244) where writers can learn how to write in their own styles and tones (a passage that highlights the idea of ink experimentations). I argue that Plath’s love letters can illustrate

the potential of the letter as art, considering its figurative language, metaphors, and symbolism, as well as the *intention* of provoking an effect beyond the communicative purpose: as a “sylvan goddess,” a perfect Sylvia could exist, just as a letter could be art. Even though I emphasize that it was in the liminal space of life writing that she could become an ink goddess, it is also interesting to see how the realms of this antechamber worked for Plath. Thinking upon these matters, we can even think about her lovers as not only actors or characters in this amorous epistolary play, but as co-writers or and co-directors (which reflects on the addresser-addressee dynamics of the genre). Her letters to her boyfriend Gordon Lameyer illustrate this.

In a yellow memorandum sheet of January 10, 1954, Plath addresses her letter to “The Ancient Mariner” (*LI*, p. 659), calling herself “Alice-in-Wonderland” (*idem*). With this little detail, we can already notice the literary letter relationship that the couple cultivated. As Clark (2020) explains, Lameyer was an “Amherst senior majoring in honors English . . . [he] introduced himself and told Sylvia his mother had suggested he call on her after hearing her speak at Wellesley’s Smith Club” (*RC*, Loc 7037). The fact that both of them studied English perhaps shows the emphasis on their symbolic exchanges, as Plath and Lameyer engage in a platonic love letter relationship. In her correspondence with him, she uses poetic language to convey the worlds that his letters opened up to her, comparing them as a wish from a genius lamp: “like the servile vapor that sprouted from Aladdin’s lamp, bowing and scraping and murmuring, ‘At your service, master!’ the words sprang upward and leapt and danced and created kaliedoscopic mosaiced gordonian worlds. I read, I lived, I quoted it. I cut classes even, I did” (*LI*, p. 690). She also experiments and plays with language in these powerful exchanges, highlighting that she “shall be trying for a long time, no doubt, to be making up a new language for [him]” (*LI*, p. 762). For example, this can be seen when she plays with his name (and thus, identities, creating a range of personae in the virtuality of their exchange): “speaking of names, do you realize how many possibilities yours has? Just for kicks: e.g. God on la mer)” (*LI*, p. 645); “when it is very dark and very mysterious and very warm one can say onename and really mean another . . . a much more fundamental and psychically significant name . . . so gordon, gordon, gordon” (*LI*, p. 708).

Plath even admits to Lameyer that he had become a sort of “mythical figure” (*LI*, p. 758) to her: “an eclectic blend of ulysses, kilroy, icarus, neptune, ishmael, noah, jonah, columbus, and richard halliburton!” (*idem*), and she jokes that she “must, in all kindness, emphasize [his] mortal finitude when next [they] meet!” (*idem*). In addition, this playfulness

also emphasizes the possibility of creating a new sort of love through their love letters. When trying to define love in her journals, Plath affirms: “love is a desperate artifice. . . [however,] love is not this if you *make it something creatively other*” (*J*, p. 184, my italics); a sentence that connects perfectly with her idea of creating a new sort of love language with Lameyer, “every time I say ‘I love you Gordon,’ the word love is a new word, deeper, and rich as a plumcake with nuances of taste and texture” (*LI*, p. 770); “‘love’ is the biggest word I can think of for this insistent growing feeling – which is bigger than words used usually because it compares them all in an immense, fertile, bubbling, jolly Irish stew” (*LI*, pp. 770-771). She even emphasizes that, as “perpetually students” (*LI*, p. 770), they are “both learning, discovering and creating life . . . and *maybe even art*” (*LI*, p. 770, her highlight, my italics).

Interestingly, she also dramatizes her life as a sort of screenplay to him, telling stories of her life as if they were a playscript: “Next day: Scene: Logan Airport. Character: Young girl who never was up in big plane, only a little one once last spring. Props: Huge suitcase and Dostoevsky’s book, The Possessed. Destination: NYC: from Harlem to Greenwich Village” (*LI*, p. 716, her highlight). She also makes use of lowercase letters in many of their letters (“every now and then I am the victim of a compulsion to type à la e. e. cummings and ignore capitals and other conventions” (*LI*, p. 659)), identifies him as a sort of James Joycean lover (“dearest Ulysses . . .” (*LI*, p. 705)); and compares herself to Lewis Carroll’s (1832-1898) Alice in Wonderland (*LI*, p. 659; p. 741; p. 669; p. 769). Because of all of these elements, their correspondence become, then, a sort of “fetish” to her, emphasizing the aforementioned ideas about the pink paper and about the seductiveness and sensuality of the love letter: “without my typewriter I feel aesthetically and technically castrated (or perhaps unfertile would be more apt!) . . . yet, in my artistically crippled state I still want to communicate with you: a fetish, these letters” (*LI*, p. 769). Plath describes, then, her passion for their correspondence, suggesting that even God must had been interested in the sort of paper love that they were creating:

*How can one become enamored of a letter? is it like loving a poem or a symbolic piece of prose because of the subconscious rememberings and desirings of living heightened by the pleasurablepain of articulateness? . . . or is it linking the twodimensional mental work to the darkmysteriousmythicalphysicomentalempathy of bodyandmind???* *God knows what I’m trying to say. And even he is having a time at it . . .* (*LI*, p. 707, my italics)

As she enters these “mosaiced gordonian kaleidoscopic worlds” of their correspondence, they create a new language and love, make love, and are loved in their love letters, at the “antechamber of the literary space” (DIAZ, 2016, p. 216). “Like Alice-in-Wonderland, [Plath has] gone through the looking-glass” (*LI*, p. 1011) with her Joycean lover, trying out new languages and creating art in the stage of their correspondence. To finish, it is also interesting to take a look at the outcome of this ink relationship. As she explains in a journal entry – showing the contrast between the privacy of her notebooks and a shared correspondence – Lameyer’s weakness was symbolized by his misspelling: “I long . . . for Gordon, though his weaknesses, symbolized by his impotence, his misspelling, even though [he] sicken[s] me” (*J*, p. 200). Just as we have seen in “The fairy tale of Sivvy,” here the exaggeration of inscription in journal can be just as performative as through the epistolary persona. In this case, whereas Plath could be a sylvan goddess or Alice in Wonderland navigating the antechamber of the literary space with her Joycean godlike lover, she could also use her journals to perform her feeling of sickness of him. Finally, the fact that his weakness is symbolized by his *misspellings* also plays an important role in the understanding of the life writing as a stage of performance, as it suggests that Lameyer did not play his part in her fairy tale well as he misspelled words (the exact tool that make them become godlike, celestial, and infinite on the page).

#### 4 CHAPTER FOUR: INK GODDESS

I should have loved a thunderbird instead;  
 At least when spring comes they roar back again.  
 I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.  
 (I think I made you up inside my head.)

— Sylvia Plath, “Mad Girl’s Love Song” (1953)

Out of the ash  
 I rise with my red hair  
 And I eat men like air.

— Sylvia Plath, “Lady Lazarus” (1965)

In the last chapter, I examined Plath’s ink love through her ink experiments and ink relationships. I argue that these were ways of exploring and trying out her becoming of an ink goddess. Now, I want to demonstrate a next “step” (in quotation marks because I create these levels only to navigate these ideas, but in practice, they mingle) in her transformation: the action of living vicariously through men as she wrote them (and herself) on the page. I also emphasize the idea of gender in this part, as I argue that the urgency of the ink goddess is intrinsically connected to her identity in a patriarchal society. This chapter is separated into two parts: 1) drafts and rehearsals; and 2) the masterpiece. I argue that Plath’s “male muses” and “psychic brothers” were of great importance in her life: more than simply dating them, they were a way for her to catch the “pieces” of her lovers to create herself and her “colossus,” and to draft and rehearse her vicarious life and transform it into her masterpiece: the creative marriage that allowed her to live, write, and explore her sexuality and freedom.

#### 4.1 DRAFTS AND REHEARSALS

Gordon has the body, but Richard has the soul. And I  
live in two worlds . . . the perfectionist in me wants  
to combine them, but that seems impossible.

— Sylvia Plath, in a letter to her mother, 1956, p. 1141

As mentioned, Plath’s relationship with Ted Hughes is much more emphasized when studying and analyzing her life and work; however, before Hughes, Plath had had numerous boyfriends, lovers, and male friends – “a myriad of Plath’s early boyfriends who, over the years, have been obscured by the ‘dark, hunky’ presence of Ted Hughes” (WILSON, 2013, Loc 30) – and with whom she kept a frequent contact and correspondence. These lovers are so relevant in her development as a person that Clark (2020) organizes these male figures into the kind of mythical imagery observed in Plath’s own writing. Some examples include Lameyer as the Joycean lover (as we have seen in the previous chapter); Richard Sassoon as her Rimbaud; and her husband, Ted Hughes, as her Adam. In her correspondence with these men (along with the notes and descriptions in her journals, which makes the two genres complementary), we can observe how she narrativized and dramatized her life by turning her romantic interests into characters, actors, and/or metaphors, as well as casting them in the play of her life (the stage of life writing). Additionally, Plath frequently went out with these different men at the same time (“loving two boys in one day differently for different times. . . [they] not understanding how a girl could be honest at one hour with one and at another place later with another” (*J*, p. 134)), which highlights the importance of these dates and also the possibility of taking pieces of them together to create a perfect character for her masterpiece.

As seen, I have been using the words “psychic brothers” and “male muses” to refer to Plath’s lovers in this research. Both of these expressions were used in her own life writing (*J*, p. 365; *J*, p. 381; *LI*, p. 720; *LI*, p. 727; *LI*, p. 762; *LI*, p. 781; *LI*, p. 1012) and they are also highlighted in Clark’s (2020) biography (*RC* Loc 2430; Loc 15471; Loc 19418, Loc 3390; Loc 9441; Loc 9780; Loc 11155). The difference between these two titles lies in a fine line, especially because they seem to mingle in her life writing, and they also echo her identity as a woman writer. In a 1955 letter to her boyfriend Lameyer, Plath asks: “how do brilliant men find time to live, love, read and write? you tell me. I need too much sleep to be *godlike*” (*LI*, p. 943,

my italics). At the same time that she saw many features of herself in these men – such as the love for art, philosophy, literature, writing, among other things –, she was also a woman and could never be “godlike” like them, or live the way that they would. Brothers and muses, therefore, seem to coexist in the juxtaposition of similarity (brothers) and difference (muses). There are, however, some features that actually differentiate male muses from psychic brothers, as the former were often linked to Plath’s ideals, fantasies, and poetic associations to men; and the second to an intellectual relationship. Clark explains that Perry Norton (the brother of Dick Norton, one of Plath’s most influential boyfriends) was the first of Plath’s several psychic brothers, and the biographer defines psychic brotherhood as the “ideal example of pure male-female friendship” (*RC*, Loc 3389). Plath also comes to a description of this type of relationship in a letter to her Yale boyfriend Mel Woody, where she explains that even though they were different, there was a psychic brotherhood between them:

There is, I think, a psychic brotherhood, *a sort of amusingly ectoplasmic umbilical cord between us*, which makes it possible to pick up our thread of communication any time and any place, no matter how raveled it has become . . . you and I have the sort of intense relationships that make it possible to emerge from nowhere to see a friend for coffee and *passionate hard talk and then to disappear or be silent again for an indefinite and unexplained time.* (*LI*, p. 781, my italics)

Here, we can notice that Plath’s psychic brothers showcase the intellectual stimulation of her mind, a connection through an umbilical cord that bridged time and space. Her male muses, on the other hand, were paradoxically rarer and more present in Plath’s life, as they were abstract and unreachable fantasies that were constantly hovering over her imagination. When analyzing one of Plath’s high school poems, Clark argues that her transformation of schoolgirl crushes into heroes, kings, and other images show that “even as a young girl, she was inspired by the male muses around her” (*RC*, Loc 2430). This title, therefore, was much more personal to her than “psychic brothers” or “alter egos”, which can be suggested even more by the fact that she only wrote about male muses in the privacy of her journals; and they were more connected to two men closer to her: Hughes and her father.

These “male muses” and “psychic brothers,” therefore, were of great importance in Plath’s life. As it is suggested, they were not just boyfriends: her relationship with them surpassed romantic interest or attraction. More than simply dates, they were a way of stimulating Plath to grow personally and intellectually, as she confides multiple times in her journal: “you could list the thirty or forty boys you’ve gone out with in the last two years of

your dating existence – and append a . . . note of gratitude to each one for an increased education in conversation, confidence” (*J*, p. 66); “all I want to do is work & work at making myself interesting & capable enough to make his time worthwhile” (*J*, p. 298-299). In these journal entries, it is suggested that Plath attributed the importance of these men as a way to grow personally and intellectually. I argue that this idea of “education” and “stimulation” through male companionship was connected to her sense of worthlessness and limitedness that she associated with her gender, where she needed to grow her character through these relationships. Moreover, in this chapter I explain that these lovers functioned in other three important modes: as a way of Plath living vicariously through them, and as a manner of collecting pieces of them to create herself and her colossus, and to rehearse and draft the masterpiece of her creative marriage through them. All of these functions – to stimulate and educate, to live vicariously, to take pieces of them to create others, and to rehearse and draft her creative marriage – are connected with gender and her position as a woman writer in a patriarchal society, where Plath had to explore different ways for having freedom.

Plath’s relationship with Eddie Cohen – her first “psychic brother” – can better illustrate this idea. In 1950, after publishing a short story in the magazine *Seventeen*, she receives a fan letter from Cohen and, out of his message, they end up becoming long-term correspondents and friends. In August of 1950, during one of their first exchanges, she calls him a “magnetic correspondant” (*LI*, p. 165) and, later on, in a letter to her mother in November, she defines him as her “most loyal correspondent” (*LI*, p. 219). Clark defines Cohen as Plath’s “first beatnik” (*RC*, Loc 4741) and they exchanged letters from 1950 to 1954 (including a letter in which she writes about her first suicide attempt in detail). She also used their correspondence to conceptualize herself, understanding better what writing, sexuality, gender relationships, and her passage to adulthood meant to her. In one of their first letters, Plath tells Cohen that she was not aware that someone like him existed, even though she had met several intellectuals throughout her life: “never, in my seventeen (almost eighteen) short years of experience, have I come across such an absorbing combination of characteristics rolled into one” (*LI*, p. 165). She also used his letters to improve herself – as she explains, “you want to be worldly. You remember Eddie’s letters” (*J*, p. 42) – and their relationship and correspondence became an important feature on Plath’s understanding her own self through her writing, as well as in her idea of taking different pieces of men and turning them into one perfect whole.



Altman (1982) argues that corresponding can become not only ways to write, but to make us perceive how we are being read, since letters are “mirrors in which [the correspondent] develops awareness of how her self and her language appear to others” (1982, p. 28). This idea can also be related to online relationships (emphasized by the 2020 pandemics and our switch to a virtual existence), where people can hide, create, develop, pretend, and invent different selves and personae behind the screens of social media and technology. According to Henderson (2019), since the “self represented online is inherently multiple, shifting, adaptable, and reactive” (p. 135), the online space enhances the ability of creating and constructing one’s identity and oneself through digital media. Photoshop and filters, among other resources, can also contribute to this dynamic even in the visual images of ourselves, and an extreme example of this could be catfishing, where people deceitfully create fake identities to upset or affect another person. In the case of Plath, the letters become a way of creating and experimenting different versions of herself. Since Cohen’s correspondence represents one of her first long-term letter relationship with an intellectual man – and especially because for a long time they did not meet personally –, in their letters Plath could develop her tone, create the fantasy of who he *could* be, and also of who she herself could become in the materiality and limitless possibility of the written word. This can be observed in the following journal entry, where Plath describes the nuances of a relationship where she and Cohen became one through their letters:

Eddie’s bracelet was on my wrist. I held it up to the light. “See,” I said, “I love it. It’s me. It’s individual.” The silver caught the light and flashed out glinting white sparkles. The metal had absorbed the heat of my skin and was warm. Eddie, I thought. How ironic. *You are a dream; I hope I never meet you.* But your bracelet is the symbol of my composure. . . *I love you because you are me ... my writing, my desire to be many lives. I will be a little god in my small way.* (J, p. 22, my italics)

In this entry – part of a description of a date she had with her boyfriend Bob and which is filled with dialogue and descriptions – we can also notice her need to ascribe symbolic value to things, such as Cohen’s bracelet. This idea of narrativizing and dramatizing life through paper emphasizes the role that she plays as the narrator of her story or the director of the play of her life, where props (Eddie’s bracelet), costumes (her masks and personae according to her lovers), characters (her “male muses” or “psychic brothers”), settings and plots (the ways she narrativized and dramatized the experiences of her life) are crafted and developed in her journals and letters. Moreover, Jolly and Stanley (2005) argue that in correspondence “the other becomes an address to self” (p. 13), which can be perceived in the way that Plath conceptualizes

her love for him: she loves Cohen because he is, in fact, herself. He is the personification of her writing, of her desire to be many lives, and this culminates in the act of transforming herself into a little god, one that could craft people as characters in the play of her life. We can also notice Plath's urge to never meet Cohen in real life, as he was a "dream": in the written paper, he could be anything that she wanted him to be and, in the same manner that she was more herself in her letters, her relationships seemed to be more real to her when they were on the paper.

The fear of meeting in person was actually shared by both of them, as Cohen was afraid of seeing her in person since "two people of such sensitive & emotional natures' would no doubt get hopelessly involved" (*LI*, p. 270). Even though Plath reported having no romantic interest in him, the letters were seen as a safe net for both of them, and she even describes the emotional impact that their correspondence had on her, as it had a "peculiar power which excite[d] and encourage[d her]" (*LI*, p. 297). This can be better explained by Altman's (1982) aforementioned idea of the letter's dual potential as both transparency (portrait of the soul, confession) and opacity (mask, weapon). At the same time that both could benefit from the safe distance and infinite space of possibility and fantasies, knowing themselves only through letters also helped them to talk openly about their emotions. According to Clark, Cohen became to Plath "a priest behind a curtained confessional" (*RC*, Loc 4815), a person to whom she could confide her innermost secrets (such as not wanting to get married after college). The biographer also emphasizes that because of this confessional function of their correspondence, Plath's letters to Cohen would become almost like her journal, as they were both "outlet[s] for subversive self-expression without repercussions" (*RC*, Loc 4817).

Even though I believe that Plath saw Cohen as both a fantasy and, therefore, a priest, I also think that it is essential to differentiate the role of letter and diary writing in her life, especially in situations like these where they seem to overlap. As Henderson (2019) explains, "anticipating an audience, even a small and select one, will impact a diarist's self-presentation in a variety of ways . . . shift[ing] the function of the diary from a personal record to a social text meant to communicate with and be legible to an external audience" (p. 71). There is a great difference in writing to herself in her private notebooks, and writing, as a heterosexual woman to her male friend, one that she knows has some romantic interest in her. While both letter and diary writing work in tandem for Plath to live on reality and on the paper, they were not the same practice and, as different genres, they act differently in the dynamics of narrativizing her

life. Altman (1982) argues that the weight of the reader in correspondence is one of the most important things when analyzing letters, since the presence of a reader – imaginative and illusory as it might be in the addresser’s mind – “distinguishes the letter from other first person forms” (p. 87). Because of this, when we read and interpret letters, we must always interpret them “in the light of its intended recipient” (p. 92). The role of this reader is definitive in the construction of the letter, as the sender will set her tone, subjects, and the way that she writes according to what she imagines, fantasizes, and expects her reader to be. In this way, the way Plath she writes about Cohen and fantasizes about her version of him in her private notebooks is different from the way that she writes *to him* or even *about him* in her letters to other people.

To exemplify this, we can observe again Plath’s hesitation about meeting Cohen. Whereas in her journal she confides that she did not want to meet him because he was a dream, to her friend Ann Davidow she just jokingly confided that she would probably not get along with him if they met in person: “it’s pretty sad when a girl has to rely on typewritten words from a guy she’s never met (and no doubt would not get along with if she did) to send a little shiver of excitement and tenderness up her spine” (*LI*, p. 270). Even though Davidow was a good friend of hers, in their correspondence Plath only emphasizes how flattered she was by Cohen’s confession that meeting in person would make him fall in love with her. In the privacy of her journals, however, Plath adds many more layers to this platonic relationship, transforming Cohen not only into an admirer, but also into a dream, into her own self and her writing, and into her “desire to be many lives”. For these many reasons – his role as a priest, dream, fantasy, among others, along with his own fantasy of an idea of Plath (and his romantic interest for this persona) –, when he appears without notice in her dormitory in 1951, the impact of the dissolution of their ink relationship was enormous, as she admits to Davidow:

Even though he could talk to me about my private life more authentically than any of my friends, I just couldn’t get used to the idea that *this physical stranger was the guy I’d written such confidential letters to*. . . I was rather shaken and surprised by the whole unexpected encounter. . . I am now convinced that the process of knowing a person should be a combination of getting used to their ideas at the same time as their physical looks and habits. (*LI*, p. 318, Plath’s highlight, my italics)

Plath’s emphasis on her friend’s physical look is also an important aspect to observe, since the shock of seeing him in person was an effect of how she imagined him through his words and his materiality in real life. As Diaz (2016) describes, the epistolary communication is ideal because in it we talk to an “imaginary other, not as they are in themselves, but as we

imagine them to be” (p. 64). Whereas before she had seen him as a “dream” or a part of her own self, after meeting him she admits that Cohen “revolted [her] physically” (*J*, p. 163), and that she could even vomit if he tried to kiss her (a confession that she could never write in a letter to him). Plath’s disillusionment over Cohen’s appearance has a dual importance: it highlights her need to love through writing in the fantasies of her mind and paper, and it serves as an example for understanding how she often made literary associations out of her male muses, as she takes different pieces out of men and crafts ideals that could only exist in the written word. It is also impossible not to mention that Plath’s revulsion by Cohen’s appearance can also be related to another aspect – her stereotypical beauty standard of white American men, as described in her life writing. Words like “golden”, “blue-eyed”, and “blonde” are oftentimes present in the creation of her “gods”, such as when describing her long-term boyfriend Dick Norton: “not only is he the traditionally handsome blue-eyed blonde, but he is the most intelligent creature I’ve ever run across”; “I made him into a golden god physically, morally, and mentally” (*J*, p. 156)). In Plath’s newest biography, Clark (2020) calls attention to the fact that her beauty ideal was men who were “blond, blue-eyed, athletic, intelligent, ambitious, and a family friend” (*RC*, Loc 5298).

Eventually this slightly changed, especially after her suicide attempt in 1953, followed by her “rebirth” in 1954 (“she had almost died during the previous summer; this summer, post resurrection, was about embracing life” (*RC*, Loc 9904)). Although she continued seeking athletic and vigorous men, after meeting her French lover Richard Sassoon, moving to England in 1954, and starting to understand better her ideas about marriage and writing, different male muses started to enter her life. However, it is impossible not to mention that her ableist emphasis on strength and health was constantly a part of her writings, not only for her lovers but also for herself – all of which could also be related to her family’s health conditions, such as with her father’s death after a long period of illness and her mother’s constant ulcers. It is also important to note that Plath frequently highlighted these other types of beauty besides the stereotypical white American male, as her descriptions about Mallory Wober (one of her boyfriends in Cambridge) show: “I find an aesthetic delight in just looking at him: his blend of russian, syrian and spanish jew gives him a subtle strange *other-world aura* . . . I am just very happy to find a *strong*, original soul, we bike a good deal together, and walk, and eat apples and are most *healthy and strong and individual*” (*L1*, p. 1027, my italics, in a letter to her mother). These

changes, however, happen mostly in England and still cast these men as exceptions, their “other-worldly” characteristics being part of the new allure.

As mentioned before, Plath’s transformation and creation of personae can be seen in two ways: in her creation of herself as the “sylvan goddess,” or in the way that she transformed people into symbols and metaphors; as we can see in her transformation of boyfriends into gods or other more-than-human creatures. As Plath herself describes in her journals, through her writing she was able to live multiple lives, synthezizing people and their stories into her: “to know a lot of people I love pieces of, and to want to synthezize those pieces in me somehow, be it by painting or writing” (*J*, p. 37, my italics). I argue that when she picked up “pieces” of her lovers (“all these boys I love pieces of,” (*J*, p. 182)) to transform into other male figures (“he combines the loving gentleness of Bob with the athletic good cleanness of John Hall, and towers above the minds of them all, even Dick” (*J*, p. 163)), she was also synthezizing them in herself, as if she could live through them. This mythologization and transformation happens in many instances, such as with Dick Norton (“I don’t love him, I never did . . . I *made him* into a golden god physically, morally, and mentally” (*J*, p. 156, my italics)), with characters in her stories and poems (as Norton becomes Buddy Willard in her novel *The Bell Jar* (1963) years after this journal entry); or with literary characters mixed with her own lovers, as she calls her boyfriend Myron Lotz as a “Hercules,” attributing value to his actions as a sort of metaphorical happening: “physically: myron is a hercules: carrying [me] = symbolic” (*J*, p. 173, Plath’s highlight). From life to paper and paper to life, Plath works as a creator and lover of men, and through them, she creates herself and learns how to love herself. In fact, sometimes it seems as if she is almost aware of this godlike labor, as she admits to herself in her journal:

Let’s face it, I am in danger of wanting my personal absolute to be a demigod of a man, and as there aren’t many around, I often unconsciously *manufacture my own*. and then, I retreat and revel in poetry and literature where the reward value is tangible and accepted. I really do not think deeply. really deeply. I want a romantic nonexistent hero. (*J*, p. 182, my italics)

In the same way that the Judeo-Christian god takes a part of Adam to create Eve, the “God-that-is-Plath’s-alter-ego” manages to take pieces out of her “psychic brothers” to overcome her mortality, her imperfection, and her limited existence. In a male-dominated literary world, Plath had to gather these pieces by narrativizing and dramatizing her life and living it through these men. In this way, it was these manners of transforming people into characters and mingling reality with fiction that she could understand herself, her thoughts, and

feelings. Just like she managed to become an ink goddess, Plath found a way to live her creative life through her writing. By putting typewritten words onto paper she managed not only to live through her different boyfriends (“they [her lovers] enchant, they fascinate: I could *carve myself to the new worlds they imply*” (*J*, p. 145, my italics), but also to create godlike figures by taking pieces of each of them and crafting the perfect men she desired.

Before her husband Ted Hughes, the almost-perfect craft that combined all the pieces of her other lovers into the ideal man was Richard Sassoon, Plath’s French lover. Understanding her relationship with him helps to clarify how she lived her life through her lovers, especially in relation to what Sassoon represented to her – a bohemian Parisian life, surrounded by good food, adventures, wine, and poetry. In other words, Sassoon was the representation of the literary life that Plath wanted to have, one with freedom to write and enjoy life in a way that only men then could. The way that Plath describes her relationship with him to other people in her letters, constantly emphasizing the fact that he was French, bohemian, and related to the poet Siegfried Sassoon show what this relationship meant to her as a woman trying to live his life: “met Richard Sassoon (whose father is a cousin of Siegfried Sassoon) . . . a thin, slender Parisian fellow who is a British subject, and a delight to talk to” (*LI*, p. 732); “I have been seeing one of Siefried Sassoon’s descendants. . . Parisian born . . . never fails to come up . . . without a bottle of exquisite French wine and a few volumes of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Verlaine or Malarmé” (*LI*, p. 742); “I have been going out with little expatriate frenchmen . . . one of whom, a sensitive, intuitive. . . satanic relative of siegfried sassoon I find quite charming” (*LI*, p. 736-737). Even the language (French) that Sassoon spoke represented this, as Plath describes: “I felt the sensuous flow of the words and meanings, and plunged in them alone, longing to read him and live with him. Maybe someday French will actually be natural to me” (*J*, p. 226).

A prelude to her future husband, Sassoon was so influential in her life that she describes Hughes as “the one man since [she has] lived who could blast Richard” (*J*, p. 212). In fact, from all the psychic brothers and male muses that she dated, Sassoon was almost like the clay from which she would mold Hughes. In love with the Woman with capital W that he allowed her to be (“the Woman I am with richard: writer, poet, reader, sleeper, eater, and all” (*LI*, p. 1132)), Plath was determined to outdo him: “I will settle for nothing less than a great soul; it would be *sinful* to compromise, when I have known this” (*LI*, p. 1134). Sassoon did not want to marry her, however, and, in his absence, Plath started to combine pieces of him (and of all the boys that came before him), putting his image on different masks (“I made your image

wear different masks, and I played with it nightly and in my dreams” (*LI*, p. 1117; *J*, p. 216)). After living with Sassoon for ten days in Paris and having a glance of briefly experiencing the intense and literary life she wanted lead, Plath found it difficult to continue seeing her other lovers, since she could not accept anymore “the companionship of these much much lesser beings” (*LI*, p. 1113). Having lived this great love, all that “life, crying, kicking each other, madly in love, growing, and all that” (*LI*, p. 1105) with him, Plath had no other option than to craft a man who could overcome him. The ink goddess had rehearsed and practiced too much; and she had drafted too many. Now it was time to create her masterpiece.

#### 4.2 THE MASTERPIECE

Here I am: Mrs. Hughes. And wife of a  
published poet . . . Ted is an excellent poet: full of  
blood & discipline, like Yeats.

— Sylvia Plath, in a journal entry of 1957, p. 270

“The boy whom I ‘go around’ with. . . expected me to stay up at night and spend all my hours with him rather than on my studies! But I survived, and *it is much more convenient to write to him!*” (*LI*, p. 152), writes Plath in a letter to her penpal Hans-Joachim Neupert, in 1949, some days before she turned 17. Already at this early age, we can notice Plath’s emphasis on her studies as opposed to her romantic life, something that would later on take two extremes: her belief that marriage was going to be the death of her writing, and her ability to love through words. As Plath was beginning to feel attracted to men, she also started to notice the way that they saw women in society. In her journal, she describes her new insights about adult life, emphasizing how she was learning to leave the fairy-tale dream she once believed in and how she was beginning to note how harsh world the world could be for ambitious women in the male-dominated intellectual sphere. In 1951, she lists in her journal the things she yearned for in life: “art, music, ballet and good books . . . and an organism of the opposite sex to comprehend and heighten [her] thoughts and instincts” (*J*, p. 36), a sentence that puts men in a higher hierarchy and shows a kind of limitedness of her identity as a woman. In this same entry, she realizes that “most American males worship woman as a sex machine . . ., as a painted doll who shouldn’t have a thought in her pretty head other than cooking a steak dinner and comforting

him in bed” (*J*, p. 36). This awareness of her expected role as a woman was a constant idea in her mind, as she once admits in a letter to her mother: “I suddenly envied him [a boy from a blind date] very much – for the life he leads. Boys live so much harder than girls, and they know so much more about life. Learning the limitations of a woman’s sphere is no fun at all” (*LI*, p. 361).

This awareness can be seen in several aspects of her life writing, especially in regards to her sexuality. Entries about her sexual shame abound in her journals, such as when she writes a list of things she had to do to “win friends and influence people<sup>20</sup>” and the first ones were to not “drink much” because of “misfortunes” and to “be *chaste* and [not to] throw self at people” (*J*, p. 596, my italics). In a similar way, when writing about her friend Gary Haupt in her journals, Plath admits that she felt safe with him because she was “absolutely devoid of any physical attraction toward him” (*J*, p. 229). As she was “intellectual and platonic” towards him, she felt safe and relieved, suggesting the danger that sexual desire could bring to her life. She even compares “sleeping with whomever she wanted” and “living for the delight of the moment” as the same as “eating an apple whole”: “I must be whole and learn to eat days like apples only after making as sure as possible that no plague therein will give me future indigestion” (*J*, p. 556). This metaphor was written in 1956, at the same time that Plath was struggling with the idea that people might have been talking about her and Hughes, as she had slept with him a few days before (“now all Cambridge will be duly informed that I am Ted’s mistress or something equally absurd” (*J*, p. 554)). All these entries help to illustrate that as a woman in a patriarchal society, if Plath longed to have sexual freedom, she would have to keep her sex life a secret.

In addition, it is also important to note that this “safeness” can be connected to Plath’s fear of getting pregnant. For instance, in her journal she transcribes a conversation that she had with a boy: “I hate you. Damn you. Just because you’re a boy. Just because you’re never worried about having babies!” (*J*, p. 42). In this same entry, she emphasizes that wanting him was dangerous – “You want him, yet you remember: ‘Once a woman has intercourse she isn’t satisfied.’ ‘You need time and security for full pleasure.’ ‘You’ll be finished at Smith.’” (*idem*). Although it is not possible to affirm whose voices in quotation marks these are, it illustrates

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<sup>20</sup> This passage is from a journal fragment of April 1st, 1956. It is a part of her program “to win friends & influence people,” and it includes several rules that she had to follow to achieve this. Because this illustrates one of the points that I am trying to make in this research – the idea that diary and letter writing can be spaces for self-awareness and re-creation of the self, I decided to put this fragment in the annex section (see Annex B).



that she had to have security (get married, for instance) to explore her freedom, pleasure, and sexuality, otherwise, she could throw her college at Smith away. She ends this reflection by admitting that she hated this boy because of his position as a male – “But you will never take a walk. You will never be alone. And you hate him because he has deprived you of that: - - walks and aloneness. And you hate him because he is a boy” (*J*, p. 43). In this passage, we can highlight her self-awareness as a woman and also her hatred of what men’s freedom represented. These ideas lead to two other aspects: firstly, this sense of enviousness of men (as they represented this independence and liberty) and secondly, the need to create a “creative marriage,” which I define as the masterpiece of the ink goddess.

Plath frequently wrote about how she was “jealous” of men. She attributes “maleness” to a “conservation of creative power (sex & writing)” (*J*, p. 437) and she writes about how men were perceived to be both freer to write and to have a sexual life, as she explains in a letter to Ann Davidow: “I am envious of males. I resent their ability to have both sex (morally and immorally) and a career. I hate public opinion for encouraging boys to prove their virility & condemning women for doing so” (*LI*, p. 417). In a patriarchal society that judges a women’s character based on virginity, Plath’s journals and letters evoke the idea that she could only explore her writing and her sexual desires more freely if she were a man. In her journal, she describes this with more depth (and perhaps more hatred) numerous times, showing how it was a constant matter in her mind. These reflections range from early entries around 1950 – “I can only lean enviously against the boundary and hate, hate, hate the boys who can dispel sexual hunger freely” (*J*, p. 20) – to older ones, such as the following entry around 1952:

My greatest trouble, arising from my basic and egoistic self-love, is jealousy. I am jealous of men – a dangerous and subtle envy which can corrode, I imagine, any relationship. *It is an envy born of the desire to be active and doing, not passive and listening.* I envy the man his physical freedom to lead a *double life* – his career, and his sexual and family life. I can pretend to forget my envy; no matter, it is there, insidious, malignant, latent. (*J*, p. 98, my italics).

Plath characterizes her envy and jealousy toward men and their freedom as “malignant” and “latent” and, because of this, she both feared and desired marriage, as it was an ambiguous space that would allow her to have sex with one man, but that could kill her other sexual and creative desires. In other words, at the same time that through marriage she would have the possibility of having sex without being judged, her journals and letters suggest that she feared being married to someone could kill the creative part of her. This can be seen in her confession to Davidow in a letter – “I have a theory that all my sex energy is now sublimated

in studying, art and writing – which means that after I get married & sexually satisfied I will turn into a dumb, placid idiot!” (*LI*, p. 417) – and also in her journal: “marriage is self expression, but if only my art, my writing, isn’t just a mere sublimation of my sexual desires which will run dry once I get married” (*J*, p. 21). After her suicide attempt in 1953, however, followed by her “rebirth” in 1954, Plath tried to embrace this life that she longed so much for. Clark (2020) explains that, in an attempt to recreate her life, “Sylvia had finally found the courage to flout the repressive sexual double standard she described with such anger in her high school and early college journals” (*RC*, Loc 9977).

Nonetheless, even though Plath had found the courage to try to live more freely, she was still, it seems, a heterosexual woman and, therefore, felt unable to achieve these so-longed desires without a man. Her reflections on her limitations as a woman and her lack of sexual freedom eventually led to Plath’s constant struggle in relation to marriage, and she would often find herself writing how she would like to develop herself personally and intellectually before committing to someone else. Even at an early age, before turning eighteen, she had already described that her interest in a relationship relied on an exchange of ideas, as she describes to Neupert: “I think that spiritual companionship is very necessary in a world where so much is superficial – and so few attractions are genuine” (*LI*, p. 159). However, when she begins to realize how her ambition to be a writer was in conflict with her position as a woman, her life writing suggests that she started to believe that marriage could be the end of her creative life. In her personal writings, we can see how Plath began to understand marriage as “death” to her if it did not involve some kind of intellectual stimulation and personal freedom. She even suggests that marrying someone was the exact opposite of developing herself: “I probably won’t be married for a long long while yet. I have a lot of growing up to do still” (*LI*, p. 574, in a letter to her mother); “he is amazingly young yet . . . and I am Machiavellian enough to want to grow to the fullest” (*LI*, p. 867, in a letter to her friend Enid Mark, explaining why she did not want to marry Gordon Lameyer).

As Plath was getting older, and her friends were starting to get married, the pressure of finding a husband also began to weigh upon her, and she used her correspondence and diary writing practice to reflect upon the matter. For instance, in her letters to her friend Davidow, she comes up with reasons for not settling down with Dick Norton, as she did not want to be a “doctor’s wife”: “but I am afraid that if I eventually did settle down to be a Doctor’s wife, I would be sinking deeper into the track I was born in, leaving the world untried” (*LI*, p. 372);

“here I am – not wanting to get trapped in a too-early marriage, wanting to get a graduate fellowship abroad, or something & not ‘settle down’ as a country doctor’s wife” (*LI*, p. 417). Here, the idea of marrying is considered a dangerous trap, almost as if she would not be able to live anymore if she were to marry someone. In her journal, Plath realizes that she could not marry Norton because she needed to find someone with a career that would not demand social responsibilities as being a doctor’s wife, as she did not want to give up her love for herself and for her ambitions (her writing career, for instance). Perhaps grimmer than in her correspondence with her friend, in a journal entry Plath wrote about her fear of marriage: “I am afraid of love, of *sacrifice* on the altar. I am going to think, to grow, to sally forth, please, please, unafraid” (*J*, p. 154, my italics).

This fear, along with her urgency for writing and freedom, creates a sense of urgency and necessity to become an ink goddess. Through this transformation, Plath could create her masterpiece: a “creative marriage” that would somehow allow her to be a writer in a patriarchal society, as well as someone free to explore her pleasures and sexuality. As we have seen so far, Plath was certain that her joy in life depended upon her career as a writer, and soon enough she realized that the solution for these limitations was, therefore, to create this creative marriage with a man, an idea that she found ambitious: “I accept the idea of a creative marriage now as I never did before; I believe I could paint, write, and keep a home and husband too. Ambitious, wot?” (*J*, p. 164). In this way, once again, she had to find a way to overcome her perceived limitations; and she did so by relying on her passion for writing and her ability of turning life onto paper. In other words, just as she turned herself into an ink goddess to enable her living multiple lives, Plath figures out that the way that she could have a socially acceptable creative and sexual life as a woman writer was to find a man who could match this ambition. As Clark (2020) describes, Plath felt that “all of her reading was preparation . . . for great work – and great love” (*RC*, Loc 9440). Even Plath herself describes this idea in both journal and letter: “I dislike being a girl, because as such I must come to realize that I cannot be a man . . . I must pour my energies through the direction and force of my mate” (*J*, p. 54, in a journal entry of 1951); “I have a great faith that if I work and write now, I will have a rich, inner life, which will make me worth fine, intelligent men” (*LI*, p. 1093, in a 1956 letter to her mother<sup>21</sup>). In

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<sup>21</sup> The five-year difference between the two examples help to illustrate a consistency of opinion between the eighteen-year-old Plath (in the journal entry of around March 1951) and the twenty-three-year-old one (in the January 29, 1956 letter to her mother). In addition, it is also important to highlight that the fact that she is writing

other words, through her ideal of a creative marriage, of being a “richly creative wife and mother who [was] always growing intellectually” (*J*, p. 165) and of becoming “happiest writing . . . with a vital husband” (*LI*, p. 1144), Plath turns her fear of marriage, male jealousy, and lack of freedom into a creative aspect of her life; and her life writing was an ally in this battle.

In this way, once again, diary and letter writing also served as a practice for Plath to understand what she wanted in marriage, this time to create her “masterpiece,” a creative marriage with a man who could match her ambition. When reflecting about her relationship with Dick Norton in a letter to her mother in 1953, Plath describes how her ideal husband should be (almost like a prelude to the man she would marry a few years later):

Physically I want *a colossus*; hereditarily, I want a *good sane stock*; mentally, I want a *man who isn't jealous of my creativity* in other fields than children. . . I have always been very rational and practical about the prospect of marriage: *I feel that I can have the best; I won't take an inferior.* (*LI*, 570, my italics)

Two aspects can be noted in this passage from her letter: her certainty that her future husband had to excel not only in power, but also physically, hereditarily, and mentally; and that, since she could offer all of these characteristics, she was certain that he should also have them: “If only I can find him... the man who will be intelligent, yet physically magnetic and personable. If I can offer that combination, why shouldn't I expect it in a man?” (*J*, p. 21). With these ideals in mind, Plath embarks on a journey of finding this perfect man, as she turns herself into an ink goddess, and narrativizes and dramatizes her life in the paper; taking “pieces” of her lovers to create a new one, and rehearsing/drafting through her “male muses” and “psychic brothers,” as I have shown in the last section. By mingling life and fiction and taking out pieces of other men, Plath creates her the perfect character/actor for her masterpiece: her husband Ted Hughes, the “large hulking healthy Adam, half French, half Irish, with a voice like the thunder of God; a singer, a story-teller, lion and world-wanderer & vagabond who will never stop . . . [and who] makes all others mere puny fragments” (*LI*, p. 1161). Hughes is, in other words, the whole package; whilst her other lovers (or “rehearsals”) were merely “puny fragments”. In her letters to her mother, Plath explains that Hughes was “the only man [she had] met . . . who'd be

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to her mother is also an important one, as Aurelia Plath was eager to see her daughter marry (*RC*, Loc 3168; Loc 5371) and many letters, like this, portray Plath trying to express her feelings towards marriage.

strong enough to be equal with<sup>22</sup>” (*LI*, p. 1120) and, some months later, she describes that with Hughes she finally felt free:

For the first time in my life, mother, I am at peace; never before, even with Richard [Sassoon], did I cease to have little opportunist lawcourts in session in my head whispering: look at this flaw, that weakness; how about a new man, a better man? *For the first time I am free.* I have, ironically, been exposed this term to the handsomest, most creative and intelligent men in Cambridge (writers, artists, etc.) and in the midst of this, I am at peace, able to enjoy them as people, but utterly invulnerable. Even with Richard I had my eye out for a strong healthy man. This is gone, for the first time. (*LI*, p. 1185, my italics)

Hughes seemed like the perfect product for Plath’s existence as an ink goddess, the perfect actor for the play of her life, and the perfect sidekick to her protagonist in the fairy tale of her literary life. In fact, I also argue here that, as the colossal figure in the narrative/play of her life, Hughes seems almost like the one that allowed her to become a writer in a patriarchal society, as Plath “lived” through him to create her own literary legacy. In her descriptions of him in her letters home, Plath always combines her freedom to write with her love for him: “met a brilliant ex-Cambridge poet at the wild St. Botolph’s Review party last week . . . wrote my best poem about him afterwards” (*LI*, p. 1120); “it is this man, this poet, this Ted Hughes. I have never known anything like it: for the first time in my life I can use all my knowing and laughing and force and writing to the hilt all the time” (*LI*, p. 1164); “I can really write now. I have never been so alive” (*LI*, p. 1171); “all this fresh directive power and creativity is due to my growing love for Ted” (*LI*, p. 1191). The connection between her love for Hughes and for a literary life is so strong that when she describes him to her friend Pat O’Neil, she mentions how she “fell in love with [his] poems before [she] met him” (*LI*, p. 1203), a passage that suggests that her love for him was also her *love for writing*. Another important aspect between writing and falling in love with him is related to the fact that, for the first time in Plath’s life, she managed to write with a man next to her (which was the prerequisite of a creative marriage that she so longed for): “never before have I composed and worked with a man around, and I felt so at one with Ted, so happy and better able to work than ever before in my life” (*LI*, p. 1187); and, since “writing [came] first for both of [them]” (*L2*, p. 57), she could finally live her life as a writer next to her “brilliant writer man” (*LI*, p. 1239).

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<sup>22</sup> The idea of being “equal,” combined with the aforementioned quotations where Plath expresses that she would not take “an inferior” because she could offer the combination of “intelligent, physically magnetic, and personable” also show how she *already* had all of these features in her, but that she had to “transmute” them in a marriage in order to access them, to become a writer, and to be free in the society that she lived.

In addition, also in a letter to her mother, she writes about how she knew “with every critical fiber in [her]” (*LI*, p. 1200) that Hughes was going to be a brilliant poet, and that their children were going to rejoice with such a fertile imagination. In this same letter, Plath also says two important aspects that suggest how perhaps her love for him and for his poetry was connected to her lifetime desire of being free and to write in a world that denied her so. First of all, she writes about how loving him opened up a space to write poetry, as he represented a new part of her as well as a new language: “my poems sprout about him like shoots; even when he goes [to Australia], I shall go on, for what I have learned in loving him is part of me, now” (*LI*, p. 1181), “I cannot stop writing poems! They come better and better. They come from the vocabulary of woods and animals and earth that Ted is teaching me” (*LI*, p. 1167). Secondly, Plath also discusses her position as a writer who was going to be married to a poet, reflecting upon originality and her position as a woman: “I shall be one of the few women poets in the world who is fully a rejoicing woman, not a bitter or frustrated or warped man-imitator, which ruins most of them in the end” (*LI*, p. 1200). She then emphasizes how she was a “woman” and “glad of it,” a marked change from the journal where she admitted to hating being a girl and feeling jealous of men.

These dynamics of writing, crafting, and experiencing life on paper also appear when the Plath-goddess emerge in her letters to her mother when she describes how she believed she had changed Hughes “from a boy afraid of being vulnerable and committed (and therefore cruel and destructive) to the most loving, tender, careful, dear man in the world” (*LI*, p. 1191). She also emphasizes that she knew “how straight and good Ted [could] grow” (*LI*, p. 1190), and that it was her job to *make him* into the best: “to find such a man, to make him into the best man the world has seen: such a life work!” (*LI*, p. 1192). In her letters to her mother, Plath could even turn herself into Hughes’s savior, the one who has “saved him from being ruthless, cynical, cruel and a warped hermit because he never thought there could be a girl like [her]” (*LI*, p. 1190). In this way, in the narrativization and dramatization of her life through her life writing, Hughes becomes the perfect actor and protagonist of her masterpiece, one who was cast for a play in a role she had already rehearsed and drafted through the pieces of the lovers that came before him. His minor “flaws” could be, then, rearranged through her “life work” of making him into the “best man the world has seen.”

In addition, by shaping him in her letters to other people, Plath also shaped herself as the perfect playwright, director, narrator, poet, and character, as well as daughter, sister, friend,

wife, and woman. When writing to her friends and family, Hughes seems to have gotten out of a fairytale, as he is the ultimate combination of everything that Plath loved and admired in life and literature, both physically (“he is big, athletic (a discus-thrower, archer, plowman, etc.) with a voice that out-roads Dylan Thomas, knows all Shakespeare & Donne & Blake & Yeats & all my favorite writers by heart” (*LI*, p. 1203)) and mentally (“[he] can draw magnificently, witches & animals, portraits; can tell fairytales, ghost stories, legends about Irish heroes till the birds are struck dumb on the trees” (*LI*, p. 1203)). To her mother, moreover, she could finally show how waiting for her ideal man was worth her time, a great satisfaction for women who were constantly pressured to marry:

I know I was not meant to be a single woman, a career woman, and this is my reward for waiting and waiting and not accepting all the lesser tempting offers which would have betrayed my capacity for growing beyond thought into the fulness of my middle and late years. (*LI*, p. 1192)

It is interesting to note that during this time that Plath starts dating Hughes until she marries him in June of 1956, she barely updates her journals, but she writes many letters to her mother. It could be because the journals of this time were lost or destroyed, but it seems almost as if the perfect cast of her “masterpiece” could not be kept in the privacy of her journals, and it had to be out in the world for a larger audience through her correspondence. Now, she could finally live in the free universe she so longed for, one where she could write, wander, and “sing [her] songs in the world: creating stories, babies and poems and delectable meals” (*LI*, p. 1190); “living & teaching English in country after country, writing, mastering languages and having many many babies” (*LI*, p. 1192). Through her letters, Plath could shape Hughes’s character’s life story (“he is 25 and from Yorkshire, and has done everything in the world: rose-grafting, plowing, reading for movie studies, hunting, fishing” (*LI*, p. 1165)) and direct his staging (“he is a violent Adam, and his least gesture is like a derrick; unruly, yet creative as God speaking the world!” (*LI*, p. 1165)). She could also create props for the play of their life<sup>23</sup>, which consisted mainly of *food* (different dishes), *books* (especially fairytales), *typewriters*, and *drawings*: “we want food (and love to cook, eat, and will learn to catch or own), a roof, our books and typewriter” (*LI*, p. 1185), “we got two enormous books of Siberian fairy-tales & Magyar folk-tales out of the University library and are reading them aloud every evening” (*LI*,

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<sup>23</sup> In her journal and in a letter to her mother, Plath describes the “Mr and Mrs Hughes’ writing table”. For more insights on this relationship that is made of love and writing, blood and ink, see Annex C.

p. 1194); “we spent a whole afternoon looking at Arthur Rackham drawings for Rip Van Winkle and Peter Pan” (*LI*, p. 1194). Finally, in her letters Plath could set up costumes for her perfect husband and, through writing, she could not only put laurels on his violent Adam’s head (“I look at him and he is dressed in purple and gold cloth and crowned with laurel: and the world will come to see him in the light of my look<sup>24</sup>” (*LI*, p. 194)), but also present him as a colossal figure coming out of a Charles Dickens’ novel or like a “colossal Huck Finn” (*L1* p. 1188), a ragged god who came to change the world with his poetry:

He may shock you at first, unless you imagine a big unruly Huckleberry Finn: he hasn’t even a suit of clothes, he is so poor, and wears new dungarees and an old black sweater which I must mend at the elbows this week; he has his rugged handsomeness, his godlike voice, his brilliant mind. (*LI*, p. 1187)

Interestingly, in the ceremony of her marriage, Dickens appears again, almost like a blessing to their literary life and creative marriage. In a letter to her brother, she writes: “[our Reverend was] an old, bright-eyed man [who] lived right opposite Charles Dickens’ house” (*LI*, p. 1028) and, in her narration of her “new self” as a married woman – “Mrs. Sylvia Hughes, Mrs. Ted Hughes, Mrs. Edward James Hughes, Mrs. E. J. Hughes (wife of the internationally known poet and genius” (*LI*, p. 1207) – she describes the *perfect* beginning of her *perfect* marriage to her *perfect* husband. Costumes (“a lovely pink knitted suit dress” (*LI*, p. 1028)), props (“two gold wedding rings . . . a pink hairribbon and a pink rose from Ted” (*LI*, *idem*)); setting (“rain pouring outside in the dim little church” (*LI*, *idem*)); characters (the reverend who lived near Dickens’ house); and plot (“Ted . . . saying the most beautiful words in the world as our vows . . . kissing my cheek, and the tears just falling down from my eyes like rain” (*LI*, *idem*)) are all present in this description, almost as the epitome of Plath’s dynamics of narrativizing and dramatizing her life, love, and the self on the paper.

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<sup>24</sup> Once again, the idea of his perfect husband as being “equal” and/or a *reflection* of her own self. These ideas translate perfectly what Plath writes in a journal entry of January 14, 1958. After typing a bunch of Hughes’ poems, she writes, “I live in him until I live on my own” (*J*, p. 312), a sentence that highlights her *need* to live vicariously through him in her creative marriage in order to be free, write, and become herself.



## 5 CHAPTER FIVE: (INK)CONCLUSION

To be god: to be every life before we die: a dream to drive men mad. But to be one person, one woman – to live, suffer, bear children & learn others lives & make them into print worlds spinning like planets in the minds of other men.

— Sylvia Plath, in a journal entry of 1956, p. 306

### 5.1 ACT I: THE GIRL WHO WANTED TO BE GOD

On November 13, 1949, Sylvia Plath wrote a long reflection on “a few closely written, stapled sheets, entitled ‘Diary Supplement’, [which] could have been titled ‘Reflections of a Seventeen-Year-Old’” (*LH*, Loc 678). There, she calls herself “the girl who wanted to be God” (*LH*, Loc 692) and reflects about a range of subjects in the privacy of the page:

As of today I have decided to keep a diary again—just a place where I can write my thoughts and opinions when I have a moment. Somehow I have to keep and hold the rapture of being seventeen. Every day is so precious I feel infinitely sad at the thought of all this time melting farther and farther away from me as I grow older. *Now, now* is the perfect time of my life . . . Always I want to be an observer. I want to be affected by life deeply . . . I am afraid of getting older. I am afraid of getting married. Spare me from cooking three meals a day—spare me from the relentless cage of routine and rote. I want to be free—free to know people and their backgrounds—free to move to different parts of the world so I may learn that there are other morals and standards besides my own. I want, I think, to be omniscient . . . I think I would like to call myself “The girl who wanted to be God.” Yet if I were not in this body, where would I be—perhaps I am *destined* to be classified and qualified. But, oh, I cry out against it. I am I—I am powerful—but to what extent? I am I. I have erected in my mind an image of myself—idealistic and beautiful. Is not that image, free from blemish, the true self—the true perfection? Am I wrong when this image insinuates itself between me and the merciless mirror? . . . Never, never, never will I reach the perfection I long for with all my soul—my paintings, my poems, my stories—all poor, poor reflections . . . What career? I am afraid. I feel uncertain. What is best for me? What do I want? I do not know. I love freedom. I deplore constrictions and limitations. . . My life is still just beginning. I am strong. I long for a cause to devote my energies to... (*LH*, Loc 608-707, Plath’s italics<sup>25</sup>, my underline)

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<sup>25</sup> This entry was transcribed by Aurelia Plath in *Letters Home*. Because of this, it is not possible to affirm that the italicized parts were Sylvia’s or Aurelia’s (who could have wanted to highlight specific parts of the text). A further look into the original document would have to take place.

In these passages, we can observe a 17-year-old Plath using the written word to try to understand herself amidst the “rapture of being seventeen”. Here, many themes are thought, described, and reflected upon: Time and its “mocking tick” (*J*, p. 201); marriage and its connection to gender, where it becomes a synonym for “cooking three meals a day” or living in a “relentless cage”; the wish for omniscience and the distress of never being perfect and never achieving the “idealistic and beautiful” image of herself (which she would, alas, become in her epistolary personae and in the fairy tale of her letters and journals). All of these themes can be connected to the subjects we have seen so far through the analysis of Plath’s “ink experiments,” “ink relationships,” and her transformation into an “ink goddess” in the “stage of life writing”. In addition, this urge for omniscience can also be observed in several parts of Plath’s journals too, where she continues to explore the idea of being godlike. Even though Plath struggled with religion (she even calls herself an atheist in some of her letters (*L1*, p. 167; *L2*, p. 553; p. 917), she had an obsession with the idea of God, as she explains in a letter to Father Michael Carey (a priest who studied at Oxford and started sending her poems (*RC* Loc 23655)): “I am myself, ironically, an atheist. And like a certain sort of atheist, my poems are God-obsessed, priest-obsessed. Full of Marys, Christs, and nuns” (*L2*, p. 917). Just as her lovers were “psychic brothers,” “male muses,” and/or actors/characters of her fairy tales and plays, in her journals this godlike image was a sort of alter-ego: “who am I, God-whom-I-don’t-believe-in? God who-is-my-alter-ego?” (*J*, p. 91). As mentioned before, Plath’s idea of a godlike figure is not necessarily related to a Judeo-Christian God, but rather to an ideal of *freedom* – of being able to express herself and of living the way that she wanted. In this way, more than with a specific god or entity in mind, “god” works as a sort of “alter-ego” to Plath, where the word becomes a synonym to a universal figure: “it is impossible for me to be God – or the *universal woman-and-man*” (*J*, p. 91, my italics); a passage that describes both this genderless entity and Plath’s restlessness for not being able to be one.

This can be better observed in my aforementioned analyses, as well as in several different metaphors that she uses to express a kind of need for living different lives, experiences, and possibilities. For instance, she writes how she wanted to “try on different lives, like dresses, to see which fit[ted] best” (*J*, p. 101), a passage that gives us glimpses to a possible ink goddess who believed that one life, or her life, was not enough. Nonetheless, even though she was desperate to “live and feel all the shades, tones, and variations of mental and physical experience possible in [her] life” (*J*, p. 43), the girl who wanted to be god was only human (and a woman,

to make it more difficult!), a limitation that often caused her angst and bitterness: “. . . but I am not omniscient. I have to live my life, and it is the only one I’ll ever have” (*J*, p. 9). I argue, however, that it is precisely because of this inadequacy of self, where Plath felt limited in her own humanity (“perhaps that’s why I want to be everyone – so no one can blame me for being I” (*J*, p. 44)) that she transformed herself into an ink goddess. And writing was the way that she achieved that.

In a journal entry of 1956, she writes: “writing makes me a small god: I re-create the flux and smash of the world through the small ordered word-patterns I make” (*J*, p. 232). By narrativizing and dramatizing her life, Plath created new selves, new worlds, new possibilities, thus living multiple lives and achieving her longed-after omniscience, even if on the illusion of the paper. The idea of creating oneself through the practice of diary-writing has been mentioned elsewhere, such as with the diary-writing practice of writer and essayist Susan Sontag: “In the journal I do not just express myself more openly than I could do to any person; I create myself. The journal is a vehicle for my sense of selfhood” (2009, p. 166). Similarly, Middlebrook (2003), in her biography of the marriage of Plath and Hughes, describes an interesting definition of Plath’s journal as a writer. More than simply a diary to keep notes of life, Plath’s journals became a space to turn her life into a kind of novel or play, where she could compose scenes, sketch characters, and make sense of her experiences:

Ostensibly, the journal-keeper is making notes about daily life. But the journal of the writer is often more like the *barre of the ballerina*: she works out in front of a mirror, watching an *ideal version of herself* attempting difficult moves, trying to get them right. Trying to sketch a character. Compose a scene. Describe her surroundings: food, clothing, noise, furnishings, weather. Or, turning inward, *anatomize a grandiose fantasy*. Grope around in the middle of her conflicts. Encourage herself. Plath didn’t write poems in this journal. Her most frequent aim was to compose passages that might someday find their home in a certain kind of novel. (*J*, p. 21, my italics)

As mentioned in the process of “narrativization,” the way that Plath wrote in her journals through a “diary I” (*idem*), she composed passages for a future novel – the diary thus becomes a laboratory for her writing –, and she used them as a space where she could try out different selves (the other-lives, or “dresses”), seeking to find the “ideal version” of herself with the help of the written word (and her diary becomes, thus, a “laboratory” for her own life too). Interestingly, this transformation of the self with the idea of trying out “dresses” can also be seen in the way that she perceived clothes (or costumes, if we think about life writing as a stage). For instance, when she discovered that the magazine *Mademoiselle* had “awarded her

second prize in its latest round of guest editor assignments” (*RC*, Loc 7201) in 1953, Plath bought many clothes (a black silk shantung dress and jacket, a navy and white pinstripe suit dress, white linen shoes, and a brown linen dress (*RC*, Loc 7203)). To her mother, she explained: “I’ve never been so sure and Right about clothes before in my life . . . I feel I have grown up no end. no more dirndls or baby puffs for me” (*LI*, p. 605). Another example can be found in her journal entry of 1956, where Plath writes, “oh, the fury, the fury . . . The panther wakes and stalks again . . . I wrote mad girl’s love song once in a mad mood like this, and every time I am dressed in black, white and red: violent, fierce colors” (*J*, p. 233). Whereas in the first example we see the connection between her clothes as identities of possible life – where she creates the character and wears a costume of a professional and adult woman to her mother and the world – in the second one we see the link between fury and the clothes and colors that she is wearing: with “violent, fierce colors” Plath becomes a panther who writes sad villanelles like “Mad Girl’s Love Song” (1953). I argue, then, that she was a collector of a variety of possibilities, stories, and fantasies and it was through the written word that she could live and experiment these different lives. In fact, Plath saw herself as this kind of hoarder, as she describes in a journal entry:

I love people. Everybody. I love them, I think, as a stamp collector loves his collection. Every story, every incident, every bit of conversation is raw material for me. My love’s not impersonal yet not wholly subjective either. I would like to be everyone, a cripple, a dying man, a whore, and then come back to write about my thoughts, my emotions, as that person. (*J*, p. 9)

The way that she traces a connection between her love for people as if they were stamps in her collection (as well as the aforementioned idea between lives and dresses), not only show how she conceptualized people and experiences as writing material, but also her need to “adjust” life into metaphors, putting life onto paper. These similes represent a position of subject/object that comes from Plath’s writing, as people move from the role of living beings to typewritten characters, stamps, or dresses. I refer to, once again, the short film *The Girl Who Would Be God* (2007) to explain this. According to Bayley and Brain (2011), by “drawing attention to the young Plath’s experiments with cut-out doll versions of herself, Hanna’s film creates the tale of a doll theatre, a contemporary Bildungsroman of a Disney-style becoming” (p. 6). To better understand this, I suggest watching the film and reading Chapter 11 of the authors’ *Representing Sylvia Plath* (2011), where director Hanna explains the film’s creative process and inspirations. For here, however, I want to emphasize the idea that Plath could

become somewhat godlike by experimenting with her selves and different personae. According to Hanna (2011), by “casting herself as the protagonist in her own self-devised drama . . . she mines the power of her own enormous creative and intellectual potential . . . [and] she self-consciously plays at being God” (p. 203). This can be illustrated in the following picture:

Figure 7 – The ink goddess’ paper stage



Figure 5. ‘Toy Theatre’  
Still by Suzie Hanna from *The Girl Who Would Be God* (2007).

*Source: Bayley and Brain’s Representing Sylvia Plath (2011)*

As we can see in the picture, there is a connection between recreating herself and becoming godlike. The title and this still from the short film help to visualize better the idea of diary and letter as stages, where Plath transformed herself into an ink goddess by creatively crafting her life, taking pieces of different men, of stories and literature, loving through writing, and creating through her life writing practices. Finally, it is important to note that instead of being “the girl who wanted to be god,” as Plath described herself, in this short film she is “the girl who *would* be god,” and in my thesis she is the *ink goddess*.

## 5.2 ACT II: A JOURNEY INTO THE INK OCEAN

Besides working with such a sensitive writer at a such strange time period, there were some difficulties that I found along the way of this research, and one of them is in regard to the materiality of Plath's journals and letters. Stanley (2004) argues that many features of original letters (and diaries, as I add here) – including “mistakes, insertions and crossings out, emphases and super-emphases and so on” (p. 206) are potentially important for their interpretation, analysis, and understanding. I acknowledge the extensive and scholarly work of Kukil for the unabridged edition of Plath's journals (2000) and letters (2017; 2018, with Steinberg); however, a more thorough approach would certainly rely on the contact with the original material, which are mostly available at the Lilly Library at the University of Indiana (Bloomington, Indiana, USA) and at the Smith College (Northampton, Massachusetts, USA). As noted in the second chapter of this research, materiality is one of the fundamental aspects of life writing (SMITH & WATSON, 2001); and this is especially important because material aspects are constantly emphasized in Plath's writing (including in her preference for pink paper, the use of her favorite fountain pens, her passion for drawing, and the insertion of photographs). As aforementioned, I have selected a few images of her letters and journals to try to overcome this, but further research should include a trip to these places to conduct a more thorough analysis of her manuscripts, early diaries, scrapbooks, and original documents.

Moreover, the complexity of working with diaries and letters is also connected to their gaps. In the case of correspondence, this break is represented here by our imagination in regard to the answers of Plath's letters (for example, having access to her letters home but not knowing what her mother wrote back). This aperture in the study of letters leaves us with a monologue instead of a dialogue, which opens up space for imagination, for wondering what was written in the letters addressed to her. Another example is about the loss of some letters. Diaz (2016) affirms that when a correspondence is lost, a dual mourning occurs: one for the writing that is lost forever, and one for the person who wrote that letter and that could never go back. Since the letter is a “spiritual exercise” (DIAZ, 2016, p. 134), the passing inspiration and mode of expression is lost forever if the writing goes missing. In this way, working with letters and journals is not an easy task, as many personal writings are lost along the way of life and, especially with correspondence, the one who received a letter can choose to keep it or not. When Sassoon, one of the most influential people in Plath's life, affirms that the letters they shared

were gone (PLATH, 2017, p. 732), a part of her, of her flowing perceptions, expressions, confessions, and of her own self is lost forever too. The same idea can be applied to Plath's journals: as many of them were mysteriously lost, we can only ponder about what was written in these notebooks and sheets of paper. Because of these reasons – along with the idea of an “ocean of Plaths” and the complexity of an area that combines life and writing –, I believe that it is impossible to give a definite conclusion to this research. In this way, I much rather prefer to give my thesis a sort of “(ink)conclusion,” where I reflect upon the analyses that have been presented so far to create meaning (and, perhaps, for even proposing new ways for interpreting and understanding life writing in literature); but also to give space for the open-endedness of this research. Additionally, in the chapters of this research, I have tried to emphasize their core idea with an epigraph from Plath's journals, letters, poems, or short stories. According to Genette (1997), epigraphs are paratextual elements of a book that do a commentary or explanation on the work's title or text (p. 156). Commonly, we understand them after we conclude our reading, but they are also clues to the themes of what the text is going to be about. Relying on the idea that epigraphs occupy a magical place in a work – as Genette proposes, they are not inside nor outside of the text, but rather in the “thresholds” –, I wanted these epigraphs to evoke Plath's multiple voices in different genres, mixing my ideas with hers along the way of this thesis. I have also experimented and played with the word “ink” in the titles as a constant reminder of the hybridity and rebelliousness of life writing, as well as of Plath's own experimentations.

The chapters of this research were organized to form a sort of “journey” in Plath's becoming of an ink goddess. Firstly, we have dived into an overflow of ink, trying to fit it into an inkwell to navigate the possibility of Plath's transformation. Then, we have “inked” ourselves by immersing into an ocean of Plaths and into the complexities and subjectivities of life writing. This current has led us to try out some concepts, where the ideas of “narrativization,” “dramatization,” and “the stage of life writing,” were created, developed, and investigated with the help of Plath's auto/biographical writings. We have then swum through Plath's ink love, including her affection for writing and literature, the possibility of healing and pinning down Time through diary and letter writing and, in one of these “printed islands of permanence” (*J*, p. 130), we have floated and plunged as we read the fairy tale of Sivvy and the celestial love affairs of “silverly Sylvia” and her “psychic brothers” and “male muses” in her love letters. Finally, we have grounded ourselves as we peeped through Plath's rehearsals and

drafts, and then watched and analyzed her masterpiece as an ink goddess: her creative marriage, starring Ted Hughes. This ink journey can be visualized in two parts, as follows:

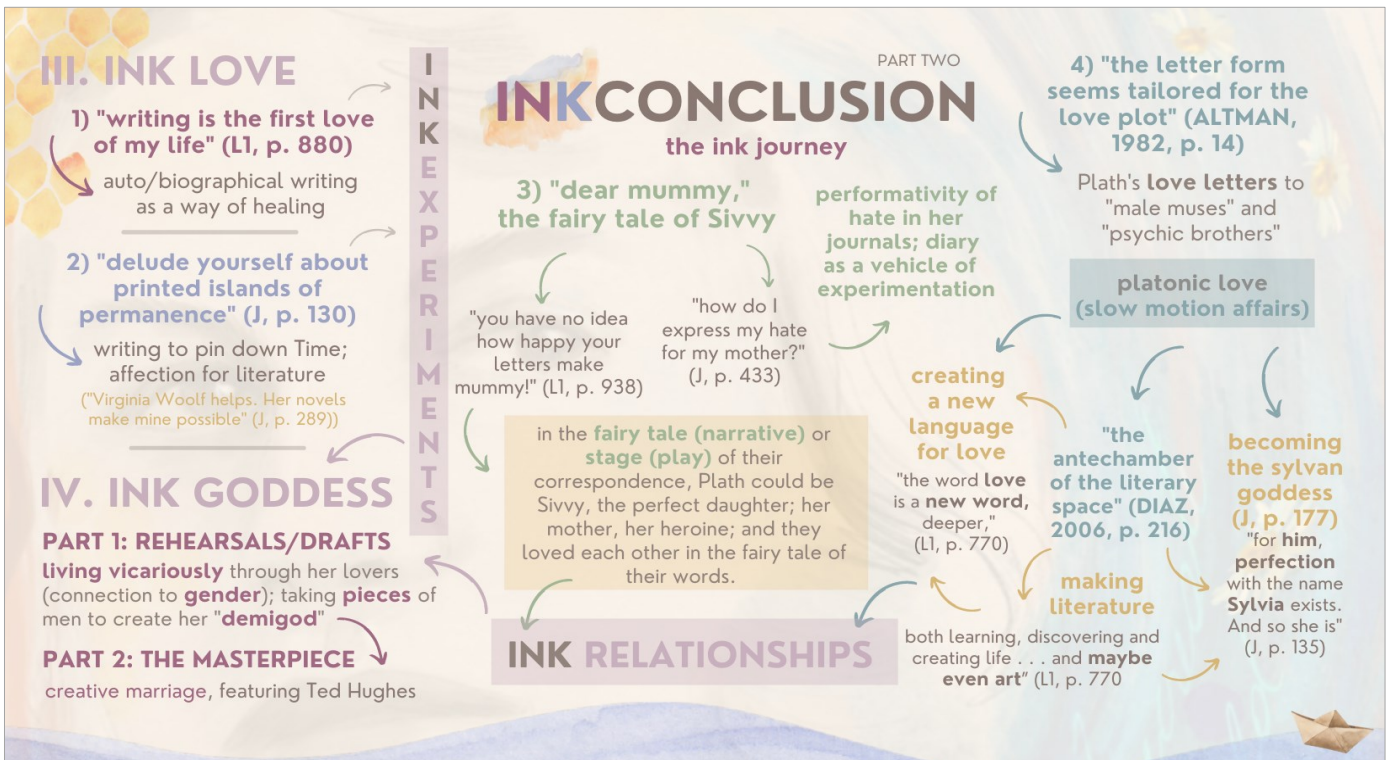


Figure 8 – (Ink)conclusion: a journey into the ink ocean (part one)



Source: the author (2022)

Figure 9 – (Ink)conclusion: a journey into the ink ocean (part two)



Source: the author (2022)

We now plunge into Plath's ink ocean again in this (ink)conclusion, reminding ourselves to make sense of the journey and its vastness and possibilities. To finish, I would like to add that, because of limitations of time, in this thesis I have focused on some particular kinds of love – for writing, literature, her lovers, her mother, herself. Further research includes Plath's *personae* as a mother, which can explore issues in relation to gender and motherhood, how she performed her love for her children on the page, and how she conceptualized herself as a mother (for instance, in a 1962 letter to her mother, she writes that she was “reborn with [her daughter] Frieda” (*L2*, p. 739)). Researching Plath's relationship with her father, Otto Plath, can also paint the idea of an ink goddess with different shades. For example, a future study could include her love for him in comparison and contrast with her love for her husband, as Plath connects them numerous times in her life writing (“my own father, the buried male muse & god-creator risen to be my mate in Ted” (*J*, p. 381)). This discussion could also bridge the outcome of her masterpiece: as she is divided between “writing & being a housewife” (*L2*, p. 191), she becomes “fascinated by the polarities of muse-poet and mother-housewife” (*L2*, p. 882) and she has to find a way to come back to her writing again, which has become a “part-time vocation” (*L2*, p. 266) for her, where she lost herself in the “purpose of cooking and cleaning house” (*idem*). In her journals, we can see Plath's fascination for her husband and his writing (“he is a genius. I his wife” (*J*, p. 420)), but we can also observe how she tried to get her independence from him: “how to develop my independence? Not tell him everything” (*J*, p. 445); “must try poems. DO NOT SHOW ANY TO TED” (*J*, p. 467); “dangerous to be so close to Ted day in day out. I have no life separate from him, am likely to become a mere accessory. Important to . . . go out on my own, think, work on my own” (*J*, p. 524). A question for further research could be: how come the ink goddess, the one who lived vicariously through her men, could now be needing to separate herself from the perfect character/actor of her masterpiece?

### 5.3 ACT III: DENOUEMENT

In this research I analyzed the ways that the writer Sylvia Plath used life writing as a space for subverting the gender roles, where she used her journals and letters to become an ink goddess; to perform her ink love through ink experiments and ink relationships; to live vicariously and rehearse and draft a perfect life and image of herself through her male muses and psychic brothers; and to take the pieces of these man to create the ideal character or actor

for her masterpiece: a creative marriage where she could be a writer, explore her freedom, and *become herself*. I highlight this last idea because I believe that the power behind Plath's transformation into an ink goddess is not only connected to her ability to craft her into an ideal or perfect version of herself, but rather *become her own self*, and to own herself as a writer. In other words, more than a way of developing herself and her *personae*, living magical fairy tales, creating a demigod of a man, or of pinning down Time, the ink goddess exists because it is the *only way* that she can survive and be herself. Similar to what I argue about writing and healing, Plath's becoming an ink goddess is her way of "justifying her life by turning into print" (*J*, p. 22), it was the style that she acquired to overcome the "colossal job of merely living" (*J*, p. 184) and, most importantly, it was a way of being herself in a world that denied her so. More than transforming herself into an ink goddess, Plath (re)claimed a title that was already hers.

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## ANNEX A – “Diary supplement”: the girl who wanted to be god

November 13, 1949.

As of today I have decided to keep a diary again—just a place where I can write my thoughts and opinions when I have a moment. Somehow I have to keep and hold the rapture of being seventeen. Every day is so precious I feel infinitely sad at the thought of all this time melting farther and farther away from me as I grow older. *Now, now* is the perfect time of my life.

In reflecting back upon these last sixteen years, I can see tragedies and happiness, all relative—all unimportant now—fit only to smile upon a bit mistily.

I still do not know myself. Perhaps I never will. But I feel free—unbound by responsibility, I still can come up to my own private room, with my drawings hanging on the walls ... and pictures pinned up over my bureau. It is a room suited to me—tailored, uncluttered and peaceful.... I love the quiet lines of the furniture, the two bookcases filled with poetry books and fairy tales saved from childhood.

At the present moment I am very happy, sitting at my desk, looking out at the bare trees around the house across the street.... Always I want to be an observer. I want to be affected by life deeply, but never so blinded that I cannot see my share of existence in a wry, humorous light and mock myself as I mock others.

I am afraid of getting older. I am afraid of getting married. Spare me from cooking three meals a day—spare me from the relentless cage of routine and rote. I want to be free—free to know people and their backgrounds—free to move to different parts of the world so I may learn that there are other morals and standards besides my own. I want, I think, to be omniscient ... I think I would like to call myself “The girl who wanted to be God.” Yet if I were not in this body, where *would* I be—perhaps I am destined to be classified and qualified. But, oh, I cry out against it. I am I—I am powerful—but to what extent? I am I.

Sometimes I try to put myself in another’s place, and I am frightened when I find I am almost succeeding. How awful to be anyone but I. I have a terrible egotism. I love my flesh, my face, my limbs with overwhelming devotion. I know that I am “too tall” and have a fat nose, and yet I pose and prink before the mirror, seeing more and more how lovely I am ... I have erected in my mind an image of myself—idealistic and beautiful. Is not that image, free from blemish, the true self—the true perfection? Am I wrong when this image insinuates itself between me and the merciless mirror? (Oh, even now I glance back on what I have just written—how foolish it sounds, how overdramatic.)

Never, never, never will I reach the perfection I long for with all my soul—my paintings, my poems, my stories—all poor, poor reflections ... for I have been too thoroughly conditioned to the conventional surroundings of this community ... my vanity desires luxuries which I can never have....

I am continually more aware of the power which chance plays in my life.... There will come a time when I must face myself at last. Even now I dread the big choices which loom up in my life—what college? What career? I am afraid. I feel uncertain. What is best for me? What do I want? I do not know. I love freedom. I deplore constrictions and limitations.... I am not as wise as I have thought. I can now see, as from a valley, the roads lying open for me, but I cannot see the end—the consequences....

Oh, I love *now*, with all my fears and forebodings, for *now* I still am not completely molded. My life is still just beginning. I am strong. I long for a cause to devote my energies to....

*Diary entry transcribed by Sylvia Plath’s mother, Aurelia Schober Plath. Source: Letters Home (1975).*

ANNEX B – *Be chaste: a journal fragment*

April 1

Program: to win friends & influence people

- Don't drink much – (remember misfortunes w. Iko after St. John's party, Hamish – 2 dates, St. Botolph's party & London night); stay sober.
- Be chaste and don't throw self at people (cf. David Buck, Mallory, Iko, Hamish, ted, Tony Gray) – in spite of rumor & M. Boddy, let no one verify this term the flaws of last!
- Be friendly & more subdued – if necessary, smog of “mystery woman” – quiet, nice, slightly bewildered at colored scandals. Refuse ease of Sally Bowles act.
- Work on inner life – to enrich – concentrate on work for Krook – writing (stories; poems, articles for Monitor – Sketches) – French daily.
- Don't blab too much – listen more; sympathize & “understand” people –
- Keep troubles to self.
- Bear mean gossip & snubbing & pass beyond it – be nice & positive to all –
- don't criticize anybody to anyone else – misquoting is like a telephone game.
- Don't date either Gary or Hamish – be nice but not too enthusiastic to Keith et al.

Be stoic when necessary & write – you have seen a lot, felt deeply & your problems are universal enough to be made meaningful – WRITE –

*Appendix 8 – Journal Fragment (1 April 1956)*

*Source: The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath (2000), page 569*

## ANNEX C – The writing table

### Mr. and Mrs. Ted Hughes' Writing Table:

In the center of the stone-tiled dining room, directly under the low-hanging chandelier with its large frosted glass bowl of light and four smaller replica bowls, stood the heavy writing table of glossy dark polished wood. The table top, about five feet square, was divided lengthwise down the center by a crack which never stayed closed, into which a drop-leaf might be inserted. At the head of the table, Ted sat in a squarely built grandfather chair with wicker back and seat; his realm was a welter of sheets of typing paper and ragged cardboard-covered notebooks; the sheets of scrap paper, scrawled across with his assertive blue-inked script, rounded, upright, flaired, were backs of reports on books, plays and movies written while at Pinewood studios; typed and re-written versions of poems, bordered with drawings of mice, ferrets and polar bears, spread out across his half of the table. A bottle of blue ink, perpetually open, rested on a stack of paper. Crumpled balls of used paper lay here and there, to be thrown into the large wooden crate placed for that purpose in the doorway. All papers and notebooks on this half of the table were tossed at angles, kitty-corner and impromptu. An open cookbook lay at Ted's right elbow, where I'd left it after finishing reading out recipes of stewed rabbit. The other half of the table, coming into my premises, was piled with tediously neat stacks of books and papers, all laid prim and four-squared to the table corners: A large blue-paper-covered notebook, much thinned, from which typing paper was cut, topped by a ragged brown covered Thesaurus, formed the inner row of books, close to Ted's red covered Shakespeare, on which lay the bright yellow wrapping paper with a black-inked rhyme which served as birthday wrapping for a chocolate bar. Along the edge of the table, from left to right, were a plaid round metal box of scotch tape, a shining metal pair of sleek scissors, an open Cassell's French dictionary on which also opened, an underlined copy of *Le Rouge et Le Noire* in a yellow-bound ragged-edged paper-back edition, a bottle of jet black ink, scrupulously screwed shut, a small sketch book of rag paper atop Ted's anthology of Spanish poems, and a white plastic sunglasses case sewn over with a decorative strewing of tiny white and figured shells, a few green and pink sequins, a plastic green starfish and rounded, gleaming oval shell. The table top jutted over a border carved with starry flower motifs and the whole stood on four sturdy carved legs, alternating squared pieces carved with the diagonally-petaled flower motif and cylindrical rings, two of each; On two sides, the legs were joined by a fence of wooden pillars, four in all, and a carved medallion in the center depicting a frowning bearded face with handlebar moustache.

*Source: The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath (2000), pages 259-260*