

Reading *Wintering: A Novel of Sylvia Plath*

Nobuko Katsui

*Nara Medical University School of Nursing*

『冬越し:小説シルヴィア・プラス』を読む

奈良県立医科大学医学部看護学科

勝井伸子

Sylvia Plath に関わる多くの伝記類が次々に生み出され、Plath Canon とも言うべきジャンルが形成され、Plath その人が巨大な像としてそびえている。2003 年に出版された Kate Moses による *Wintering: A Novel of Sylvia Plath* は、あえて小説という形をとって、Plath の最後の数ヶ月を描いている。読者は、Plath 自身が生前出版を予定していた詩集 *Ariel* のために計画していた選択・順番に配置された詩でタイトルがつけられた 41 の章をたどることで、詩人 Plath の生の最後の生活と詩作の時間をともに体験する旅にいざなわれる。そこで読者は、これまであまり光をあてられることがなかった彼女の母親としての、生活者としての時間を、詩人としての時間とともに体験し、繰り返し訪れる死への誘惑に怯えながら彼女が求めた生への必死で危うい闘いにふれ、Plath の生についての新しい視座を与えられ、巨像としての Plath Canon に加わった新しい Plath 像を知ることになる。

キーワード

詩人(poet) 生(life) 伝記小説(biographical novel)

**Introduction**

Had she lived, Mrs. Edward James Hughes would have been seventy-three years old on October 27th, 2005. But the clock stopped for her and the calendar froze on February 11th, 1963. That was the Monday morning that Sylvia Plath killed herself. She became “a fly fixed in the amber of time; forever gift-wrapped in the beauty and brimful promise of a still artistically evolving young woman of thirty years of age”(Whittinton-Egan).

**Plath canon**

Since her death, Sylvia Plath has attracted not only literary attention but popular interests for such a long time, and eventually we now have “Plath canon” consisted of piled Sylvia Plath-related works: biographies, essays, poems, novels, even a play and a movie. There are many layers of selves of Sylvia Plath which include both false aspects and true aspects as I mentioned in my previous article on Plath (Katsui “Notes” 3-10). It is the nature of her

works and her life that attracts our interests and attention in many ways. After forty years of her death, Sylvia Plath has become a kind of colossus statue herself as if her early poem, "The Colossus," already had prophesied the colossal figure of Plath. She wrote about her father in that poem, "I shall never get you put together entirely, / Pieced, glued, and properly jointed"(Plath *Collected Poems* 120). This is exactly what we experience when we try to put together the disruptive or conflicting images of Sylvia Plath.

As so many traits of her life such as her suicide attempt, her obsession with death and father, her romance and marriage to Poet Laureate, Ted Hughes, his infidelity and their break-up, and her final suicide bear tragic and poetic nature, we now have a variety of Plath-related works called the Plath canon including Anne Stevenson's *Bitter Fame*, Linda Wagner-Martin's *Sylvia Plath: A Biography*, Janet Malcolm's *Silent Woman*, Paul Alexander's *Rough Magic*. It seems that Sylvia Plath's life already bears enough marks of fiction to encourage formal fictionalization. In 2003, even a movie, *Sylvia*, with Gwyneth Paltrow as Plath, a play called *Edge* performed off-Broadway and London and Kate Moses' novel titled *Wintering: A Novel of Sylvia Plath* all joined the Plath canon. In this article, I would like to follow Moses's effort to

vision the last months of a mother with two young children and a female poet promising but yet barely recognized.

### *Wintering and Ariel* poems

There would be an argument if *Wintering* is a pure fiction or a biography. Moses says that she has invented "characters' thoughts and conversations and the fictional particulars attributed to real events otherwise known only in sketchy detail" (286). Considering the view that omissions are sometimes as important as its inclusions, we could see the invented scenes would operate to fill the gaps of the unknown months probably described in Plath's missing/destroyed journals so that *Wintering* can offer a new perspective other biographies hadn't dare. We may assume that Moses tried to "put together" conflicting and contradictory pieces of Plath in her Novel. In her book about Sylvia Plath, Janet Malcolm states, "In a work of nonfiction we almost never know the truth of what happened. The ideal of unmediated reporting is regularly achieved only in fiction, where the writer faithfully reports on what is going on in his imagination" (Malcolm 155). Following Moses's imagination may lead us to a new, deeper and more integrated insight into the nature of life (and art) of Sylvia Plath.

We should pay attention to the order

and selection of *Ariel* poems because it is clear that Kate Moses uses *Ariel* poems as a subtext of *Wintering*. When *Ariel* was published posthumously by Ted Hughes, poems of *Ariel* were arranged in a different order and different poems were chosen. The second to the last poem, "Edge," depicts a woman "perfected" in death, with two dead children curled at her sides. The last poem titled "Words" suggests the last words of someone who believed her death was inevitable: "From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars / Govern a life" (Plath *Collected Poems* 270) which had been interpreted as a suicide note. As Ted Hughes notes of the *Ariel* sequence in his introduction, Plath "pointed out that it began with the word 'love' and ended with the word 'spring' (Plath *Collected Poems* 15). Moses arranged all the chapters with the title of Plath's poems according to Plath's original order and selection. Although Moses does not start with 'love,' or ends with 'spring,' but overall atmosphere and spirit are the same as the original *Ariel* poems: first chapter, 'Morning Song,' starts with one December morning when Plath feels "happiness? Not that, but something close" (Moses 2), and the last 41st chapter ends with the phrase: "It's here. Here, now, her moment of truth. And it falls like grace, only for her" (Moses 283). Judging from this order and selection of chapter names and the spirit of them

suggests that Moses' imagination was not on the suicide note but something different, "positively optimistic" (Moses 2). When we see the close association with each chapter to Plath's poems, it is undeniable that Moses' vision of Sylvia Plath is apparently different from that of Ted Hughes and that Moses tries to view Plath from her point of view, which most of biographers failed.

#### A poet's life as a poem

The life and art of Sylvia Plath are so intertwined that readers cannot read her poems without thinking about her life, and vice versa. Plath herself seems to be fully aware of this close interaction of her life and her poems. It seems that she even try to identify her life as a poem. John Milton once said that a poet's life should itself be "a true poem." He wrote in the introduction of *An Apology for Smectymmus*, "he who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things, ought himself to be a true poem." More than three hundred years later, his idea seems to be realized by this young American poet. She even tried to make her life poetic. She shaped her life with "the aesthetic perfectionism of a sculptor," as Cristina Nehring describes. (123) According to Nehring, "a college boyfriend remembers her penchant for corresponding in "hyperbole"; always "seeking a chance to dramatize her life."

She ordered it with an architect's eye for symmetry”(Nehring 123). Sylvia Plath's life itself can be read as a sort of tragic poem and she was aware of it, even tried to do so..

One example of her enthusiasm to make her life poetic appears in the first Chapter, 'Morning Song,' dated December 12, 1962 7:30 AM London. When Plath wakes in a morning, she feels something different, much better.. She had accustomed to “tense, motionless drug-sleep”(1)and the state of being “paralyzed with fear,” but she feels different because she is now in the house where Yeats had lived as a child. She feels excited: “ she is in London. Yeats' house with its blue enamel plaque by the door. It's hers---her new home in the city ...home now in a poet's flat that seemed fated for her. All hers” (Moses 2), “what a benediction!”(Moses 3) She finds living in a house of Yeats both appealing and symbolic. She thought, “this house is going to be her salvation. God, she's made it”(Moses 4). She even sees the house as a sign of her future. “She'd known this house was her omen as soon as she saw it”(Moses4). Here, Plath seems to identify herself with a great poet of Irish Renaissance and wishes to follow his life and art. This could be counted as one example of Plath's passion to make her own life poetic.

We should note that Plath's living in Yeats House may sound ominous when

we remember that it is Yeats himself who suggested the idea of suicide as an art. W.B.Yeats once wrote, “after my own verse, after all our subtle colour and nervous rhythm, after the faint mixed tints of Conder, what more is possible? After us the Savage God”(Yeats 348-9). According to Alvarez, “the whole of twentieth-century art has been dedicated to the service of this earthbound Savage God who,...,has thrived on blood-sacrifice....an art which is more extreme, more violent and finally, more self-destructive than ever before.”(Alvarez 245) “Her omen” might have followed modern art's self-destructive force.

#### Lady Lazarus: a ritual

The most extreme self-destructive act is doubtlessly suicide. Plath deals with her own suicide attempt in a detached and aesthetic attitude. Her actual suicide attempt is described in her poem “Lady Lazarus” which celebrates a sort of “symmetry” and “aesthetic perfectionism.”: I have done it again. / One year in every ten/ I manage it/.../And I a smiling woman./ I am only thirty. / And like the cat I have nine times to die. / This is Number Three./ What a trash/ To annihilate each decade./.../Dying/ Is an art, like everything else./I do it exceptionally well”(Plath *Collected Poems* 244). In this poem, death is treated as a sort of ritual

as Alvarez describes the meaning of suicide attempt for Plath as “an initiation rite qualifying her for a life of her own.”(Alvarez 34) Her attempt for death is described without self-pity and we sense a sort of detachment, and that the attempt is repeated every ten years makes her suicide attempt look more ritual.

In the chapter titled Lady Lazarus, detachment and repetition are observed. When Plath talks about her suicide attempt 10 years before, what she takes from her mother is only denial of her death wish. Her mother says, “You didn’t really want to die.” and she does not accept that her daughter really wanted to kill herself saying “you were trying to help yourself”(Moses 77). In the memory of her childhood with her father, a bee he catches for her flies away. Denial of her deep struggle is repeated. Her memory of mental hospital also appears repeatedly. Plath accuses her mother of giving permission to electrocute her, and her saying “Let’s just pretend it never happened.”(Moses 78) Plath’s deeper suffering is not accepted by her mother and their relationship is superficial and detached one. Under this repetition and detachment, we sense her sense of anxiety and fear. She fears that her madness may be back. “*Is it back? Is it over?*”(Moses 76).

She also fears of losing Ted. “For six years, she had feared, even fantasized,

...that someone would lure him away.(Moses 3) Sense of detachment is also observed between Plath and Ted, which suggests unhappy course of their marriage. When Plath takes care of Ted’s swollen head because of bee stings, she feels that he is a strange, new man. “It feels oddly different to her, new in a way. New as the stranger who came back to her hotel in London six years ago”(Moses 68). Ted is actually different, he is no longer Plath’s good husband.

Plath’s fear, which is realized just one day before her sixth anniversary. She takes a phone call from a woman claiming, “I’d like to speak to Ted Hughes”(Moses 80). This woman is the embodiment of her fear, that is, a woman who lures Ted from Plath. “She knows this voice: It is the voice of her nightmares. Not the voice itself, but the ceaseless void it comes from”(Moses 80). And Plath realizes that her marriage ends. In the fits of anger, again, there appears the image of electrocution. “Sylvia pulls the phone out of the wall and feels a surge of electric current, a charge, the million filaments of the wires exploding, ...all along her nerves, electrocuting her, ...shocking her again with their lightning stroke, straight to her electrified heart. He had betrayed her”(Moses 81). In this description, we somewhat identify the close connection of the end of marriage and the fear of madness.

This connection is taken for granted when we consider her belief in her life, in other words, her effort to make her life perfect, “a true poem.” When she describes her present state, she admits that she struggles to keep perfect pieces of her life together. She says to her mother, “I never thought I would have all this. My beautiful children,...[m]y husband. I have everything. My house and my writing. I never thought I would have it”(Moses 76). And she adds, “I should be dead”(Moses 78). This perfectionist point of view in trying to live a poetic life and become a poet seems to be scared by the shadow of lost love, madness and death.

#### Plath's life in Yeats' house

*Wintering* depicts Plath's struggles to live as a poet as well as an almost single mother. Interestingly, after she breaks up with Ted Hughes, Plath experiences her time of prolific writing. Her work is done in the hours around the sunrise. There is an atmosphere of serenity,

Sylvia sits in the sunrise quiet, her room, her papers, her flannel nightgown washed in thin blue light. She's risen today as she has everyday since Ted left her in Ireland in September: desk before daybreak, a habit begun as a way to give a form to her suddenly nebulous days .(Moses 5)

Plath seems to accept and even enjoy these hours.

But something happened in those predawn mornings at her desk, some alchemy that distilled, concentrating eau de vie. She had been struggling to write like this for years. Then Ted left and the real muse moved in. Her poems had been flaming up sparking, dangerous, for months. There was no sign of them stopping. (Moses 5)

When children are asleep, morning is the best time for a poet.

Here, Sylvia thinks, is where they really begin to practice a new language, one of efficacy and avoidance, a replacement for their old, shattered familiarity...the morning had expanded so generously around her, spreading itself into the corners of the rooms. It felt clean, as after rain. She hadn't wanted to move. She hadn't wanted to disturb it at all. (Moses 25)

Living in Yeats' house seems to bring her a kind of creative harvest time. On page 135, Plath thinks, “What had she gained by Ted' s leaving but her voice? What did she do now but listen to the beat of her own words, feel them and hear them as they formed...audacious, supple,

ruthless, dazzling---in her mouth? . . . Her poems were lifting off the page. They hung in the air like a risen soul.” This indicates that the breakup of her marriage, with all its grief and anger, was the cause of Plath’s extraordinary breakthrough. This also suggests that the nature of her gift requires her own voice instead of predominant male supervising her works and her life.

As a poet, it is undoubtedly true that Plath becomes greater poet after she breaks up with Ted. However, this could be explained because she is so much perfectionist that she tries to fill the gap produced by the absence of Ted, a poet, husband and a father.

Moses describes that Plath spends a lot of time for household chores. “Sylvia cleans. She paints and weeds and mends. She scrubs, echoing through her house, her yard”(Moses 69). “She washes every window in the house...She hangs garlic in a braid along the mahogany sideboard in the kitchen...She throws netting over the ripening cherries...she whitewashes her children’s furniture, trims it with small painted hearts”(Moses 69). This tremendous effort would be considered as a sign of her perfectionist attitude to her life. Moses juxtaposes “her omen” with her everyday life. In Yeats’ house, Plath has plenty of apples from the orchard at Court Green, Devon where she and Ted spent years as well as potatoes and onions. Even honey from

her new bees. Bee is always very significant to Plath. Keeping bees is not only her practical chore but quite symbolic one. Plath’s beloved dead father was an authority on bees, so her bee-keeping could be “ a way of symbolically allying herself to him, and reclaiming him from the dead” as Alvarez indicates.(Alvarez 35)

Moses also allocates many pages on Plath’s motherhood. She does so many ordinary childbearing chores such as changing diaper of one baby boy while talking to another sobbing baby girl. This explains that Plath spends most of her hours taking care of her children alone. This may suggest that everyday happenings such as child-care and food to live on bears significance and symbolic meaning to Plath. In other words, once a woman becomes a wife and a mother, “a queen bee”, “then she’ll never leave the hive again”(Moses 65). To be a perfect mother seems to be very important to Plath, the perfectionist. And being a mother means that she would take care of the whole household just like a queen bee.

### Bee

Bee is always very significant in Plath’s poems. In Lady Lazarus Chapter, in June, new queen bee is repeatedly mentioned. The Bee Meeting chapter briefly describes the moment when Sylvia finally breaks up with Ted. Plath

is very decisive and she is the one who speaks. “The answer comes. She will risk nothing. She is ready to speak, the words clustering in the black hive of her mind; her ear, that flower, awaiting her own voice. It is hers now. She is the owner. She stands defensive, her winter stores gathered behind her. She will get through another year. She will live on, resourceful.” and she said, “I want a divorce.”(Moses 264) But at the same time, she feels “so cold.” Here, the poem, “The Bee Meeting” apparently operates as a subtext. “They are hunting the queen./ Is she hiding, is she eating honey? She is very clever./ She is old, old, old, she must live another year, and she knows it./While in their fingerjoint cells the new virgins/ Dream of a duel they will win inevitably” (Plath *Collected Poems* 211). Moses seems to interpret “Bee Meeting” poem that Plath is identified as queen rather than one of new virgins. And “her winter stores” are means of survival for her as a queen and her children. As a bee queen has to live another year, Plath has to survive. Alvarez’s interpretation of “Bee Meeting” fits this view; Alvarez wrote, “the death of her father had inflicted on her in her childhood...had been transformed into the conviction that to be an adult meant to be a survivor”(Alvarez 34).

### Wintering

The last Chapter Wintering begins

with the scene of Plath’s bathing and preparation “almost bridal in her anxious excitement” (Moses 280). She prepares for Ted knowing that even after breaking up, “it was something between them, she and Ted, something inextinguishable---it was blood and more, not so simple as love”(Moses 281) She sees her life almost perfect. “She got her honey to get her through”(Moses 281). Here, Moses clearly identifies Plath with a queen bee. Career-wise, Plath is in good shape with her manuscript finished, “*The Bell Jar* coming out in two weeks”(Moses 281). The poem “Wintering” mentions honey. and jar: “This is the easy time, there is nothing doing/ I have whirled the midwife’s extractor/ I have my honey/ Six jars of it”(Plath *Collected Poems* 217). At the end of the novel, Plath sees snowflakes and thinks: “It’s here. Here, now, her moment of truth. And it falls like grace, only for her”(Moses 283). This Plath’s graceful figure reflects the lines of “Wintering”: The bees are all women / Maids and the long royal lady./ They have got rid of the men,/ The blund, clumsy stumblers, the boors,/Winter is for women---/.../Will the hive survive, will the gladiolas / Succeed in banking their fires / To enter another year? / What will they taste of, the Christmas roses? / The bees are flying. They taste the spring” (Plath *Collected Poems* 217).



With Plath dressed like a bride whose figure implies a queen bee, the novel ends with grace. The ending suggests some hope, at least the achievement she struggled, her children, and her work. Moses presents us Plath as a struggling and successful mother poet. However, Moses also mentions her being thin, shaky and vulnerable. This Plath's figure suggests that she achieved a temporary peace and success. This ending seems to be quite appropriate as it fits well into the arrangement of original *Ariel* poems, and also reminds us of the ending of her only novel, *The Bell Jar* which offers the temporary relief from despair. *Wintering* suggests that Plath struggled well and worked well with fatal suffering. That Moses did not go into the very last days of Plath could be justified as her tragic death may make her whole life a series of tragedy and failures. With its narrative on how Plath struggled to survive instead of how she was victimized and failed, Moses offers us in *Wintering* a new, deeper and more integrated insight into the nature of life (and art) of a mother-poet who lived with her perfectionist obsession and fear, yet achieved something temporarily but great.

#### Works Cited

- Alexander, Paul. *Rough Magic: A Biography of Sylvia Plath*. New York, Viking, 1991.
- Alvarez, A *The Savage God*. London. Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971.
- Butscher, Edward. *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness* (1976), New York: Seabury Press, 1976.
- Elie, Paul. "A Poet's Unmistakable Voice: Remembering Ted Hughes" *Commonweal*, Vol. 126, July 16, 1999.
- Hayman, Ronald. *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath*. London, Heinemann, 1991.
- Hughes, Ted. *Birthday Letters*. London, Faber and Faber, 1998.
- Katsui, Nobuko. "Daughter / Sister / Unborn Baby: Split and Doubles in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*." *Bulletin of Nara Medical University College of Nursing*, vol.2. 1998. 31-38.
- Notes on a Fictional (Colossal) Figure of Sylvia Plath" *Bulletin of Nara Medical University School of Nursing*, vol.1. 2004. 3-10.
- Kukil, Karen V. ed. *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*. New York, Anchor Books, 2000.
- Lerner, L.D. *The Listener*, 31.1.63.
- Malcolm, Janet. *The Silent Woman*:

*Sylvia Plath & Ted Hughes.* New York, A.A. Knopf, 1994.

Milton, John. *An Apology for Smectymmus*, 1642. Introduction

Moses, Kate. *Wintering: A Novel of Sylvia Plath.* New York, Anchor Books, 2003.

Murray, Matthew. Theatre Review of Edge [http://www.talkinbroadway.com/ob/07\\_23\\_03.html](http://www.talkinbroadway.com/ob/07_23_03.html)

Nehring, Cristina “Domesticated Goddess: “Dying Is an Art,” Said Sylvia Plath, but So Is Living, and She Excelled at Both—Not That Her Biographers, with One Wise and Big-Hearted Exception, Have Noticed.” *The Atlantic Monthly*. Vol.:293, Iss.:3, April 2004.

Oates, Joyce Carol. “Raising Lady Lazarus” *New York Times Book Review*, November 5, 2000.

Plath, Sylvia. *Sylvia Plath Collected Poems.* Faber and Faber 1981.

Quart, Alissa. “Dying for Melodrama: Why Does Sylvia Plath Still Seduce the Adolescent Psyche?” *Psychology Today*, Vol. 36, November-December 2003.

Stevenson, Anne. *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath.* Penguin, 1989, 1998.

Taylor, Henry. “The Life Story of Ted Hughes, Told with Gossip and Favoritism.” *The Washington Times*. February 17, 2002.

Wagner - Martin, Linda *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* New York, Simon and Schuster, 1987.

Walter, Colin. “Sylvia Plath’s last winter days in London.” *The Washington Times*. Feb.9, 2003.

Whittington-Egan, Richard. “The Life after Death of Sylvia Plath”. *Contemporary Review*. Volume: 272. Issue: 1588. May 1998.: 238+

Yeats, William Butler. *Autobiographies*, New York, 1953.

The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath (Book Review): *Publishers Weekly* - September 25, 2000.

<http://www.plathonline.com/articles/PW092500.html>