

## 'I flake up papers that breathe like people': Blurred boundaries in the poetry and letter writing of Sylvia Plath

### **Abstract**

The study of Sylvia Plath comes with the realisation that there are a plethora of interpretations of both her work and the life that she lived. She is famed for her poetry but is often forgotten in her role as a prolific and frequent letter writer and diarist. The recent publication of *The Letters of Sylvia Plath* in two volumes in 2017 and 2018 has allowed Plath scholars and letter writers alike to consider the wider significance of letter writing both from an academic and a communicative perspective. The letter as an object occupies an interesting position within literature. It is neither entirely factual, nor does it venture into fiction; rather, it sits on the boundary between the two. Letter writing is therefore an activity that is innately liminal because letters struggle to occupy one singular genre. In this essay I aim to discuss the evolution of the letter poem within the realm of confessional literature focussing specifically on Sylvia Plath. The influence of the epistolary throughout Plath's writing is clear and is demonstrated by the way that Plath's letter writing permeates her poetry in the form of her 'letter' poems. Notably, 'Love Letter' (1960), 'Letter in November' (1962), and 'Burning the Letters' (1962). This essay focusses specifically on the idea of a 'note to self', or, in other words, a 'self-letter'. Even when there is a direct address present, Plath's lyric poetry mirrors the self-letter form influenced by her correspondence and seen explicitly in her journal entries, thus creating blurred boundaries between writing and life itself.

**Keywords:** Letter Writing, Poetry, Autobiography, Epistolary, Sylvia Plath

In 1962, Sylvia Plath writes: 'I flake up papers that breathe like people' (1981, p. 204-5). While she is talking about physically burning letters here, I think that this line serves as an interesting metaphor for the ways in which Plath's poetry plays with language. Her writing is simultaneously attached and detached from its roots in reality, and Plath ties the physicality of letters to the humanity of writing. Having 'papers breathe like people' in her poem immediately closes the gap between subject and object, and consequently blurs the boundaries between writing and reality.

Plath's poetry and prose come under the wider umbrella of confessional writing: a literary movement pivotal in bringing typically 'taboo' personal or emotional subjects such as sexuality, suicide, and trauma to the forefront of American literature in the late 1950s. Discussing the rise of confessional writing, Christopher Beach (2003, p. 155) notes that: 'The mode of confessionalism – whether one approved of the term or not – served as a model for poets who chose to reject modernist difficulty [...] in favor of a more relaxed or personal voice.' This introduction of a 'personal voice' to poetry and prose alludes to a new style of writing that is interested in the personal lives of those who are writing. As a younger member of the movement, Plath exploits the confessional mode to her benefit, taking inspiration from her own surroundings and writing with a 'personal voice', an approach to writing that made her name in literature posthumously. Plath explains in an interview with Peter Orr (2018) that: 'I think my poems immediately come out of the sensuous and emotional experiences I have [...] I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrific, like madness'. Here, Plath explicitly identifies the boundary between life and writing for her, alluding to the confessional writing genre and highlighting that she is not afraid to discuss 'terrible' experiences. However, she simultaneously notes the importance of being able to 'control and manipulate' these life experiences into writing, which suggests that Plath was acutely aware of how to manipulate and blur the lines between writing and reality.

What the confessional writers have in common is the importance of letters in their writing lives; sometimes between each other in a personal/professional capacity, and other times to loved ones, just like Plath. It is no surprise, then, that the frequent correspondence of these poets is eventually translated into their writing – if letter writing is an art, then the influence of correspondence on poetry is inevitable. However, Plath was not the only poet to have blurred the boundaries between correspondence and writing and bring two different forms of writing together. Plath's letter poems were published in 1960 and 1962, however, also acknowledged for his prolific letter writing and letter poems is Robert Lowell. Lowell wrote the poem 'The Dolphin' (1973), which controversially makes reference to his ex-wife, Elizabeth Hardwick's letters within it.<sup>1</sup> Lowell (2003, p. 594) also penned a sequence of four letter poems to Elizabeth Bishop, (along with other poems inspired by her writing, or dedicated to her). Lowell's poem 'For Elizabeth Bishop 3. Letter with Poems for Letter with Poems' is self-consciously a letter both in its title and in its content - blurring the lines not only between poetry and letter writing, but also public and private. By contrast, Plath's letter poems do not always have a clear addressee, therefore making the lines between writing and reality harder to discern than Lowell's letter poems. The absence of a clear addressee in Plath's letter poems gestures towards different epistolary styles within her writing. Plath writes letters to herself as a 'Spoiled Baby', open letters with a more universal address, and letters with a direct address, all of which are in conversation with one another and illustrate the influence of the epistolary in Plath's work. Essentially, much of Plath's writing follows this self-letter form and the self-letter

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1. Thomas Mallon in an article for *The New Yorker* explains how the 'The Dolphin' 'Paraphrased and versified, some of Hardwick's letters, along with her spoken words from that supposedly merry phone call of June 25, 1970, would find their way into the book, without her permission.' (Mallon, 2019)

becomes a reflective act for Plath, which in turn mirrors the boundary breaking confessional writing genre. From 'Burning the Letters' to 'Love Letter' (1960), to 'Letter in November' (1962), Plath's letter poems demonstrate a blurring of boundaries between confessional writing and letter writing, creating a fusion of genres.

Plath's epistolary practice infiltrates most of her writing and its influence spans different genres illustrating that her writing, in any capacity frequently crosses literary boundaries. In connection to this, Tracy Brain warns that:

[t]here is a danger here of erecting false and overly rigid boundaries between Plath's different types of writings, of believing that the poems could not possibly share qualities with, or even arise from, her epistolary practices. <sup>(2006, p. 142)</sup>

Brain makes an important point: creating boundaries between Plath's letters, journals, poetry, and prose, obstructs the fluidity that is innate to Plath's writing. Her epistolary writing also spills over into her journal entries and poetry, and I would argue that everything Plath writes is a form of self-letter, emphasising the influence of the epistolary on most of her writing. However, this is not to say that Plath never has a specific address in mind, but what it does mean is that Plath's writing is inherently reflective. This is most obvious in her writing of lyric poetry because it is concerned with thought and feeling in the same way that Plath's self-letters and letter poems are. Discussing lyric poetry more generally, William Waters <sup>(2003, p.1)</sup> argues that '[t]he poem persistently revolves around, or thinks about, the contact that it is (or is not) making with the person to whom it is speaking.' This is true of Plath's writing. Whether consciously or unconsciously, there is a central gravity which the poems move around; this sense of gravity tends to be Plath's own internal monologue – the 'you' of Plath's poetry might not be someone else, but a note to self, highlighting that for Plath, the idea of the self-letter is a poetic model.

During June 1953, Plath penned a letter looking forward to July and addresses it to 'an Over-grown, Over-protected, Scared, Spoiled Baby' <sup>(2014, p. 543)</sup>. The prolonged time span for which this self-letter was penned suggests that Plath was working through something, demonstrating her innate inclination to write in order to process the events in her life. In this entry, her words are self-critical, harsh, and seem to be an attempt to rationalise. The letter form functions as a 'note to self' – an entry that is there to remind and hold herself accountable, but this journal-letter also demonstrates how Plath's epistolary practice naturally spills over into her journal entries. However, 'Scared' in the middle of the self-critical language she uses, illustrates a moment of fragility, where she simultaneously seems to want someone else to protect her. She continues: 'It is not the time to lose the appetite, feel empty, jealous of everyone in the world because they have fortunately been born inside themselves and not inside you.' <sup>(2014, p. 543)</sup>. The context of this statement within the form of a self-letter also shows Plath trying to process the character flaws she sees within herself. She continues the entry telling herself that '[i]t is a time to balance finances, weighty problems: objectives and plans for the future' <sup>(2014, p. 543)</sup>. This neatly encompasses the ambition and drive that Plath had, even at twenty-one, and her ability to work through the problems she encountered through writing it down. Plath was no stranger to candour in her journals and letter writing. In a letter to Edward Cohen dated 28<sup>th</sup> of December 1953, just four months after Plath's first documented suicide attempt, she details the loneliness she feels during her time at McLean psychiatric hospital:

I do miss you to talk to [...] (even though she is incarcerated temporarily she still has her lucid ... and very lonely ... moments) --- please do write me

frankly and fully what's been with you the last months or so. I would like somebody to talk to again very much. (Plath, 2018, p. 658)

This letter and the earlier journal entries illustrate that despite the common portrayal of Plath as hysterical, irrational, and suicidal portrayed in connection with her later poetry, it is far from the rational woman she documents herself to be at twenty-one and twenty-two. The frequency with which Plath's writing is taken out of its context to present her this way is unnecessary and further highlights the importance of representing her with her own words.

Furthermore, Plath wrote another self-letter in a journal entry five years later, illustrating her affinity for the epistolary form and its influence on all of her writing. On 1<sup>st</sup> October, 1957 Plath wrote a 'Letter to a demon:' explaining that:

Last night [...] I could not sleep, although tired, and lay feeling my nerves shaved to pain & the groaning inner voice: oh, you can't teach, can't do anything. Can't write, can't think. And I lay under the negative ice flood of denial thinking that voice was all my own, a part of me (2014, p. 618).

This 'Letter to a demon' alludes to a destructive inner monologue that tells Plath she 'can't do anything.' This kind of self-criticism mirrors that of the journal-letter above but most of all demonstrates her perfectionistic inclination to do everything right, while also opening up a wider conversation surrounding a feminine tendency to believe you are not enough. Ironically, she writes about not being able to write, and while this writer's block is likely in connection with creative writing, it illustrates again that writing is a form of processing for Plath. The documentation of her 'ice flood of denial' is poetic in description and such descriptive language shows Plath's talent for allowing the reader to see exactly the image she tries to evoke; while her depiction of her 'nerves shaved' evokes the feeling of anxiety Plath is processing in this journal entry. Both examples further illustrate the ways that the epistolary, the autobiographical, and the poetic permeate one another. The journal entry gradually becomes more light-hearted as she writes 'I can say I am easier, more confident & a better teacher than I was the first day, I have done enough. I must face this image of myself [...] and not freeze myself into a quivering jelly', which further highlights the clarity this process of self-letter writing brings for Plath. (2014, p. 619). These journal entries are an important puzzle piece in understanding the role that the epistolary plays in all of Plath's writing, but they also explicitly identify the ground-breaking work she was doing by bridging the gap between the epistolary and poetry.

The self-letters that Plath penned are most self-conscious in her journals but are also translated into her poetry, as letter poems. Just as Plath's letter writing differs in tone depending on the recipient, her letter poems are also an example of the ways in which Plath utilises the skills she has learned through letter writing and translates them into her other works. Plath's poems differ in tone depending on the subject matter – something that her letter correspondence helped to develop. Plath's letter poems are unique because they all use the letter form to address an unspecified someone in different ways, whereas the rest of Plath's poetry, by comparison does not explicitly and directly address a 'recipient'. Not only does this emphasise the significance of letter writing itself but it further highlights the ways in which art and life overlap. In connection to this, Hermione Lee (2012, p. 461) argues that '[t]he familiar gestures of traditional letter-writing – "all my love", or "thinking of you" – tell us that it is a mistake to think of a letter as a solitary, independent, free-standing document.' While Lee is discussing letter writing more generally here, she emphasises that a letter is one half of a conversation and cannot therefore be read or understood as 'independent' or whole. Letters

require two people, but by contrast, Plath's letter poems do not. They take the form of an open letter, and are self-consciously one half of a larger, unreciprocated, conversation.

Letters as a form permeate Plath's writing; she writes a set of poems illustrating that letter writing does not have to exist between two individuals, but can also take the form of a poem or epistolary narrative – further complicating and blurring the boundaries between epistolary writing and poetry. Plath's letter poems are not only letters because of their titles, but also due to the way they are written. Both 'Love Letter' and 'Letter in November' address an unknown somebody, a recipient unaccounted for – making their letter form closer to a normal letter than initially meets the eye because they have an addressee in mind, even if as readers we do not know who that somebody is. This recipient unaccounted for also echoes Lee's argument that a letter should not be considered a 'free-standing document' because both poems illustrate that Plath's thoughts are not always extended onto the page. The opening line in 'Love Letter' illustrates this: 'Not easy to state the change you made.' (Plath, 1981, p. 147). The direct address to a 'you' immediately highlights that the poem is addressed to someone that is not disclosed. Unlike a regular letter which is addressed, signed, and sent, Plath's letter poetry is closer to an open letter – addressed to an individual, yet consciously intended for more eyes to read upon publication. By comparison, 'Burning the Letters' reads more ambiguously with no direct address, however what becomes clear in all three poems, is that despite their capacity for a universal address, they all fall under Plath's poetic model of the self-letter, which makes these poems simultaneously outward and inward looking. This means that Plath's letter poems occupy a unique position within literature because their epistolary nature means that the boundaries between writing and reality are constantly shifting. In connection to this, Waters discusses lyric address in his book *Poetry's Touch* and makes a case for the significance of addressing a particular 'you' in a poem as opposed to first or third-person address in poetry. He argues that '[s]laying you, and the irreplaceable particularity of that addressee, can be the center of a poem's gravity.' (Waters, 2003, p. 4) This is true of Plath's letter poems, the focus on the 'you' of the poem sets it apart from the other letter poems with its direct yet anonymous address and does become the center of the 'poem's gravity'. However, the 'you' addressed in this poem is not unique to Plath's self-letter form of writing, as she uses a self-address in her journals: 'oh, you [*sic*] can't teach, can't do anything' (2014, p. 618; emphasis added). Particularly in 'Love Letter', this open letter style of poetry illustrates Plath's acute awareness of an audience. Waters goes on to point out the differences between letter writing and poetry, arguing that:

the sentences I say to people, or write in a letter, contain no formal marker of address at all, because context has sufficed to make it clear to all interlocutors who is speaking to whom, in what situation. Short written poems, however, usually lack the cues that would play this role. (Waters, 2003, p. 5)

This distinction between letters and poetry is significant; the envelopes on letters provide a clear individual address, as do physical conversations because there are physical indicators of address in both instances. By contrast, because the 'you' of a poem lacks the context that a letter or conversation has, it immediately makes the address both universal and arbitrary. Plath's letter poems are a letter addressed, marked by the 'you' and 'love' of the poetry, but also a letter out of context, because this 'you' and 'love' is an individual unspecified, which would not be the case with a physical letter. This clever and playful use of letter writing etiquette illustrates the fluidity and often, absence of boundaries within Plath's writing – both of which make her style of letter poem unique to her. Plath's letter poems might 'lack the cues' of 'To' and 'From' but she identifies that letter poems do not need these traditional forms of address,

with 'you' and 'love' intentionally creating epistolary ambiguity which allows a plethora of poetic interpretations including the introspective self-letter.

This ambiguity is signposted throughout the poem through many juxtapositions. The title 'Love Letter' suggests a romantic poetic exchange. However, there is a contrast between this and the content of the poem, which instead details the more tumultuous, negative emotions associated with love. There is a lack of reference to colour in this poem:

black rocks as a black rock  
In the white hiatus of winter –  
Like my neighbors, taking no pleasure  
In the million perfectly-chiselled  
Cheeks alighting each moment to melt  
My cheek of basalt. They turned to tears,  
Angels weeping over dull natures,  
But it didn't convince me. Those tears froze.  
Each dead head had a visor of ice. (Plath, 1981, p. 147)

'black rocks', 'cheek of basalt', 'visor of ice' contrast the typical bright colour associations of love and diverts attention to 'dull natures' (1981, p. 147) suggesting that the love letter is, ironically, devoid of romantic love. The environmental connotations of this poem are also difficult to ignore and portray a narrative that goes beneath the surface of this poem: z'rock', 'basalt', and 'ice' as metaphors allude to a craving of stability of Plath's behalf but illustrate that she is the only person who can grant herself stability. 'Love Letter' constructs a wider commentary on the idea of façade and suggests that romantic relationships are not always what they appear to be. Furthermore, the deliberate exclusion of all the information a letter would usually contain; a specific addressee, a clear message, a signature, serves to remind us that while epistolary in nature, 'Love Letter' is a poem above all else. However, 'Love Letter' self-consciously demonstrates an overlap between Plath's practice of letter writing and poetry by emphasising the catharsis of writing directly to an unspecified someone. This is explored in the final stanza of the poem where Plath writes:

Tree and stone glittered, without shadows.  
My finger-length grew lucent as glass.  
I started to bud like a March twig:  
An arm and a leg, and arm, a leg.  
From stone to cloud, so I ascended. (1981, p. 147)

After the colourless imagery in the previous three stanzas, to 'bud' illustrates renewal, perhaps after a realisation, or after finishing writing this letter poem. The change in tone at the end of this poem mirrors the self-letter form because it indicates a sense of catharsis and closure within the process of writing it. Plath's colourless reflections at the start of the poem and subsequent transition into budding March twigs highlights a process of self-reflection which is innate to the confessional genre but also reinforces the positive influence of letter writing throughout her other writing projects and the benefits of having fluid boundaries within her writing.

In contrast to 'Love Letter', which opens with its colourless descriptions, 'Letter in November' evokes all of the colours of the autumn season. The title of the poem 'Letter in November' suggests she is marking a moment in time, specifically, the thoughts and feelings she has during November. This poem therefore also becomes a self-letter, because it depicts

Plath's letter poems as inherently introspective. Heather Clark speculates in *Red Comet* whether the poem is actually about Al Alvarez, a long-time friend and biographer of Plath's. Clark explains that friends of Plath's remember her as "pink and glowing" after spending time with Alvarez (Clark, 2020, p. 807). Clark speculates that 'Something happened during this London trip which inspired Plath to write "Letter in November," a love poem for Alvarez' (2020, p. 807), which adds another dimension to the poem because it shows Plath constructing a boundary around this new relationship by not alluding to who this lover might be. However, the poem's setting alludes to Plath and Hughes' *Court Green* home in Devon which immediately situates the poem within an autobiographical context, but also within the context of a self-letter, because the poem shows Plath processing her thoughts about the life and the place she lives – a clear moment of gratitude and a reminder to herself to take in the surroundings of the home and life she dreamed of. Clark (2020, p. 807) notes in *Red Comet* that '[u]nlike most of Plath's autumn poems, "Letter in November" describes real feelings in real time, largely unobscured by symbol and myth.' Clark is keen to not detract from the importance of symbolism in this poem, but the idea that Plath describes 'real feelings in real time' illustrates how Plath blurs the boundaries between symbolic writing and metaphor, and the realities of her personal life.

The poem serves as a letter to autumn, addressing the happiness that it, and nature itself brings to Plath. The opening of the poem, 'Love, the world / Suddenly turns, turns color.' highlights a direct and light-hearted address which is also reflected in Plath's rose-tinted and colourful depiction of Autumn. (Plath, 1981, p. 253) This celebration of the autumn season celebrates the death of nature in its cycle, but the depiction of autumn's arrival by Plath also alludes to a rebirth reminiscent of spring, except that the cold autumn weather will inevitably mean that this excitement towards life will be short lived, paralleling the 'sudden' burst of colour enjoyed by Plath. The idea that everything 'suddenly' becomes colourful alludes to both the sudden arrival of autumn, but also a new sense of life Plath has with the change in season. There are frequent references to 'gold' throughout, referencing the golden colours that autumn displays and Plath's admiration for the season:

The apples are golden,  
Imagine it ---

My seventy trees  
Holding their gold-ruddy balls  
In a thick gray death-soup,  
Their million  
Gold leaves metal and breathless. (1981, p. 253)

The 'golden' apples and 'Gold leaves' sandwich the 'thick gray death-soup' weather of November, illustrating a moment of happiness in the midst of the dull British winter. Furthermore, the language used here, 'My seventy trees', mirrors the reflective model of the self-letter, identifying not only the trees as hers, but the poem too by referencing herself within it. The colourful references throughout this poem are difficult to ignore; and Plath observes the 'Pods of the laburnum at nine in the morning. / It is the Arctic, // This little black / circle' (1981, p. 253). The enjambment throughout mirrors the flow of a traditional letter, with the stanzas flowing into one another, presenting a stream of consciousness style of poetry but also a lack of awareness of any kind of audience for this poem. This suggests that the exercise of writing 'Letter in November' was more for herself than anyone else. Plath notes the 'pods of the laburnum' early in the morning, suggesting that their bright yellow colour is the only brightness

on this November morning. However, while laburnum flowers are a bright colour fitting with Plath's descriptions of her autumn surroundings, these trees are poisonous, which once again addresses the death and decay that autumn connotes. Plath describes her natural surroundings in an unconventional way: '[t]he barbarous holly with its viridian / Scallops, pure iron' (1981, p. 253). Here, Plath constructs a brutalised description of the holly, comparing its sharp pointed leaves to the sharpness of 'pure iron'. Plath does this while also depicting the leaves on the trees as 'Gold leaves metal and breathless', again referencing strong metal, and 'breathless' similarly alluding to death and decay (1981, p. 253). While Plath's poetry does exhibit 'a lifelong flirtation with suicide' (Moramarco, 1982, p. 147) or perhaps more accurately, a flirtation with the notion of death, Plath plays with these notions in 'Letter in November' where the presence of death is not overwhelmingly dark, and instead gestures towards death as more natural occurrence. 'Letter in November' also shows Plath's emotional capacity to 'control and manipulate experiences [...] like madness' as she explains in her interview with Orr. Because of this emotionally intelligent approach to writing poetry, 'Letter in November' sits on the boundary between traditional poetry and letter writing, with Plath revealing enough of herself to create intrigue, but not enough to give too much away.

In contrast to 'Love Letter' and 'Letter in November', 'Burning the Letters' personifies the letters rather than addressing a specific person. While in 'Love Letter' Plath addresses a 'you' and in 'Letter in November' she talks to her 'love', in 'Burning the Letters' Plath talks about the letters in the third person: 'What did they know that I didn't?' (1981, p. 204-5). While somewhat speculative, 'Burning the Letters' seems to have parallels to the letters Plath wrote following Ted Hughes' affair in which she explains to Dr. Beuscher in a letter that she found 'sheafs of passionate love poems to this woman, this one woman to whom he has been growing more & more faithful' (Plath, 2018, p. 843). 'Burning the Letters' and this letter written to Dr. Beuscher immediately draws a comparison between real life and poetry, showing that for Plath, the boundary between life (her internal, personal, day-to-day experiences) and writing (for work as a career) was fluid. Furthermore, Plath uses a third person address, asking the letters 'What did they know that I didn't?' going on to explain that they 'Grinned like a getaway car.' (Plath, 1981, p. 204-5). These lines depict Plath processing the idea of Hughes' letters knowing more than she does. However, in a sudden change of tone she writes 'a dream of clear water grinned like a getaway car' suggesting that whatever information the letters contained, Plath knows that she has escaped a relationship in a 'getaway car' and is better off alone. Because 'Burning the Letters' is the most ambiguous of the three poems in terms of poetic address, this realisation mirrors the poetic model of the self-letter more so than 'Love Letter' and 'Letter in November', because Plath self-consciously inserts herself into the narrative using 'I':

I am not subtle  
 Love, love, and well, I was tired  
 Of cardboard cartons the color of cement or a dog pack  
 Holding in its hate / Dully, under a pack of men in red jackets,  
 And the eyes and times of the postmarks. (1981, p. 204-5)

I think here, Plath knowingly illustrates the notion of the self-letter by making herself the central persona in the poem. She simultaneously addresses her 'love' but in a passive tone, suggesting that the sole purpose of this poem is to process her own emotions rather than resolve them. 'Burning the Letters' therefore presents the epistolary influence of not just letter writing as a genre, but of the self-letter, and letter correspondence in general – demonstrating its integral role in Plath's epistolary writing.



In conclusion, Hugh Haughton (2015, p. 57) observes that '[t]he inherently 'literary' nature of letters is recognised when they figure as epistolary poems.' This understanding of letter writing frames letter writing as inherently poetic, and, in reverse, poems always as a letter – whether consciously or unconsciously. To take this approach suggests that all poetry must be addressed *to* someone, which of course, isn't necessarily the case but as Plath herself explains: 'personal experience is very important, but certainly it shouldn't be a kind of shut-box and mirror looking' (Plath & Orr, 2018). This highlights the importance of personal experience, but also of taking inspiration from other things around her. Plath's letter poems are significant because they identify the blurring of boundaries between letters and poetry, two genres that are generally accepted as separate despite their natural ability to overlap when you consider the self-letter as an additional poetic model. However, Plath brings the two together, merging life with writing in a way that presents letter writing as more than its communicative form. Plath's letter poems illustrate her affinity for writing letters but also for breaking the rigid literary boundaries created between genres, which ultimately allows her writing to flourish.

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