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Who is Sylvia Plath?—An Inquiry-Based Biography Primer

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Introduction

"From these fragments we construct what we believe to be the biographical truth." ¹

I remember the moment I became a historian. I was in Inwood, Iowa, at my grandparent's farm. I was there with my mother helping my grandmother "simplify" her life through an inventory of the past. We had one pile marked "keep" and another "throw." As we went through two generations of photos, letters, receipts (my grandfather kept every receipt he was given), and clothing, a world began to open up to me. I saw letters between my grandparents written during their three-year separation in World War II. They reference photos that my grandmother had sent along with the letters of my mother, newly born and growing in my grandfather's absence. As I read the letters, full of optimism and gratitude, I also understood the limitation of primary sources. That which is purposefully left unsaid: the loneliness of a being a farmer's wife left to manage the farm with a newborn baby in tow, and the terror of marching across Africa and Italy hoping to make it back and fearing the return. History comes to life in archives, not in textbooks. Students need to negotiate with the "real stuff" of history and grapple with the challenge of interpretation before they can understand that all text is incomplete and a matter of perspective requiring them to be an active reader who challenges both their own assumptions and those made in the text.

In order to get at the "real stuff" of archives, I have created a unit that explores the genre of biography through an examination of Sylvia Plath. This "biography primer" will serve as an introduction to biography as a genre, a way to examine the multiple tools used by biographers to bring their subjects to life, and a jumping off point to practice critical reading. Plath lends herself well to this type of study because of the wealth of primary source material (letters, journals, poems, etc), from Plath herself as well as others who knew her, and biographies with multiple interpretations. Even with the depth of study many feel that Plath herself has been lost in the story. This prompts the final question to be posed to students: Can we ever really tell the complete story of someone's life? Students will then use the tools learned in the primer to write a biography during a year-long project. The project asks students to spend the year writing the biography of a woman over 40. They will have multiple interviews with the subject and others familiar with her. They will research her life in the context of both her time and place through primary and secondary sources, and they will craft a narrative that tells a story rather than a list of events. My hope is that students, from their position as biographers, will begin to see how lives are constantly being defined and redefined.

Context

I teach at Lindblom Math and Science Academy, a selective enrollment high school in Englewood, a neighborhood on Chicago's south side. Students take an exam to gain acceptance and, while facing many issues of other urban school students, have an academic confidence that is either shaken or strengthened during their first years at Lindblom. Nearly all the students who enter Lindblom were at the top of their grammar school classes and feel confident in their ability to rise to the rigor of a selective enrollment curriculum. While much has been done to smooth the transition from 8th to 9th grade, many students' academic sense of selves is shaken upon arrival. The resilient respond well and make the necessary adjustments but other students remain on wobbly legs for the remaining three years of high school.

Women's Studies is an elective course for students who either have multiple AP courses in non-History subjects or who have been broken by or never tried the grueling death march of an AP class. That said, they are bright young men and women but, for many, they have yet to fully believe in their place in the academic world. I love teaching this class for that reason. Most of us became teachers for the purpose of reaching the reluctant students whose fear of failure keeps them from the intellectual risks required for joyous learning. The students in my Women's Studies course are mostly seniors who have waited two years to take this course and, for that reason, I generally do not have an issue with overall student investment. However, getting them to go beyond the basic requirements of the assignment remains a challenge.

Even though Women's History is an elective and draws the attention of many interested students, it is hard to ignite a sustained intellectual fire with the story of the Seneca Falls Convention. I might spark their interest with the story of Frederick Douglass rising, when others were repelled, to second the motion for woman suffrage. But in the end, the question, "How does this relate to me?" is difficult to answer to their satisfaction. On some level I agree with their resistance. The Declaration of Sentiments, while beautiful to me, has little resonance with the issues facing my students today. The style of writing and the issues presented feel unapproachable and not applicable to the struggles of adolescence today. That is why I joined with an English teacher to team teach a class that included Women's Literature and Women's History, hoping to find multiple access points where the young men and women in our class could enter the material and find themselves. To further this effort, we have organized the class around female archetype/stereotype units that focus on topics such as the slut, wife, mother, bitch, and tomboy. These archetypes allow us to weave history and literature together in an exploration of the changes (and continuities) in those roles over time in American history. At this point, I applied and was accepted to the Yale Teacher's Institute biography seminar. The seminar provided the unifying strand, the biography project, that will inform and be informed by these individual archetypal units.

Rationale

Problems

The problem I am addressing with this unit is twofold. One, my students struggle to make the personal connections to the material that make learning a dynamic experience. I blame the passivity of the content far more than the passivity of adolescence. So much content, especially in history, comes from the sterile

textbook narrative of people and events that are removed from the experiences of modern, urban adolescence. For me, *My Antonia*, had resonance because I could look out my window and see the barren prairie that Cather described so well. My students prefer the stories of the city. They prefer the stories of youth. Yet we all want the same thing—to find ourselves in the narrative and in the world. To read about someone struggling with identity in the same ways we are struggling.

Two, students in my classes lack the ability to read critically. They too often willingly accept the author's argument and shrug their shoulders at the questions requiring them actively to negotiate with the text. As Cris Tovani explains so well in *I Read It, But I Just Don't Get It*, the struggling students are often either "resistive readers" and "word callers." ² At my school, the first group has developed an aversion to reading and avoids it consistently except when it directly informs some aspect of their non-academic life. The others have learned to go through the motions of reading and sound quite good but cannot explain or analyze that which they just read. A student must be interested enough to invest the time to learn the strategies necessary for reading critically.

Solutions

Why a biography project?

The biography project is designed specifically for my Women's Studies students. Whether they are struggling readers or painfully shy, they can find academic comfort through a familiarity with their chosen subjects. From the start, their main task is to simply to follow their curiosity. I have participated for many years in the National History Day competition and have found that my struggling students often excel at projects that allow for choice on multiple levels. Additionally, it is these students who are much more comfortable with classroom discussion than essay tests and are grateful that the parameters of the assignment allow for their lived experiences and insights to be valued. Every student is an expert on her own life.

The biography project offers students an independent study of sorts and requires of them the skills necessary for college-level reading, research, and writing. In discussing the conventions of biography, Hermione Lee writes, "Whatever the story is about, whatever race, nationality, sex, class, language, or history is involved, there will have to be time, place, character, and events. Most biography moves forward and onward, sets the main figure in its context, mixes the plot with accounts of the subject's work, of historical complexities or of subsidiary characters and uses description, observation, documentary sources, witness testimony, peripheral materials, and first-hand knowledge to construct the story." ³ The biography project allows students to think and create in unique and advanced ways.

Why a biography primer?

The readability of timelines, films, and a variety of artifacts allows for students to access information about Sylvia Plath and contribute to the conversation at various levels. My philosophy of teaching history is to use the content to teach critical skills. This primer unit introduces the skills that students will be learning and practicing throughout the year in the biography project as well as in the individual units that follow. Through these skills students will understand the creation of a common definition of biography, understand the use of sources in writing a biography as well as the point of view of the individual source or the interpretive choices made by the biographer. In short, I want students to know that every biographer enters into a relationship with themselves and the subject of their study.

Why Sylvia Plath as the focus?

Initially the story of Sylvia Plath might seem far removed from the lives of my students. Sylvia Plath, born to a German immigrant father who was intellectual and distant and a mother, born of Austrian parents, who recognized the box her marriage had put her in and chose to live vicariously through her daughter. ⁴ Plath's life was one of privilege and struggle. Her father died when she was eight and Aurelia, her mother, moved the family to Wellesley, Massachusetts, for work and better schools. Plath's identification as a writer came at an early age, as evidenced by her consistent submission of poetry and short story to the editors of *Seventeen* magazine, followed for a time by a consistent set of rejection letters. Eventually, she was published and her thoughts on this are wonderfully recorded in the journal entries and letters published posthumously.

Plath attended Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, where she thrived on the intellectual atmosphere. In the summer following her junior year, she won an award from *Mademoiselle* and was offered a month long internship in New York City. Drained from the experience, she returned home to find a rejection letter from the summer writing program at Harvard. In response, she attempted suicide by taking sleeping pills and hiding in a crawl space under the guest bedroom. Her mother, assuming her missing, called the police and the search continued for three days before she was found. She entered, what would later become a stopping place for other New England authors, McLean Hospital, for treatment which included electroshock therapy. She returned to Smith to finish her senior year late and graduated *summa cum laude*.

After college she went to England on a Fulbright scholarship. At Cambridge she met Ted Hughes, a rising British poet. Hughes and Plath married and moved back to America to teach and write. The stresses of teaching were frustrating for both poets and they tried to live off their work for a time before moving back to England. Plath had her first child, Frieda, in England and published her first book of poetry, *The Colossus*. Being a wife and mother AND poet meant that Plath struggled to find time to write during this period. Additionally, some biographers link the stresses of her husband's affair to the furthering of Plath's downward slide into depression. Living in a remote town in England, far from the energy and entertainment of London, Plath's loneliness increased at the same time as her husband's affair grew increasingly serious. They separated and Plath returned to London to live in an apartment formally inhabited by William Butler Yeats. She began to write consistently but the depression persisted. At age 31, with the manuscript of her next book of poetry ready on her desk, Sylvia Plath committed suicide.

While not generally wealthy and privileged, my students will find Plath's story engaging largely because of the honesty of her struggles and the intimacy in which she presents them. Delving into the letters home to her mother or into the journal entries she kept in high school and beyond will show my students that primary sources don't have to be dry formal documents. They can be alive and intimate so that the voyeur in all of us feels both uncomfortable and driven to read more. Students are more comfortable making inferences about such approachable documents. From those inferences come interpretations which are at the heart of good biography. Plath's "story" is, as Jo Gill stated, "overdetermined" and full of competing interpretations and is constantly changing with each successive biography. ⁵ The biographers closest to her had their motivations while feminist writers and literary critics have other agendas that frame Plath's story for themselves. All claim to be telling the definitive truth of her life. Plath's daughter, Frieda, has struggled to find her mother somewhere in the interpretive muddle. She said, "The point of anguish at which my mother killed herself was taken over by strangers, possessed and reshaped by them." ⁶ Plath, some biographers claim, has faded under the microscope rather than created sharpness. It is for this reason that Plath is the perfect subject for a unit on the complexities of writing biography.

Objective

My philosophy of teaching is to use content to teach students the critical skills that are necessary for success in college and beyond. The content of this unit is meant to gain student interest in the compelling story of a woman who was both a product of her time and rebel against it, a woman whose portrait has been painted and repainted beyond recognition. I want students to be able to define biography, describe the components of biography (timeline, both contextual and personal primary and secondary sources, and the organization and argument of the biography itself), and explain the challenges facing biographers. I also want them to know the story of Plath's life insofar as it helps them to practice the craft of the biographer. This knowledge of Plath will further help them as we delve into the archetypal units throughout the year.

I want the students to be able to do many things at the end of this unit. I want them to improve their literacy in multiple forms including timelines, text, images, film, and more. I want them to always see the source as a human creation with reasons for the choices made and to analyze those choices. I want students to practice making inferences and challenge themselves to defend their inferences with evidence from the source. I want their inferences to drive their curiosity, generate high-level questions, and motivate them to seek the answers on their own. I see great value in the biographical challenge of defining self and subject simultaneously.

Additionally, this project aims to make students more critical readers of both their own work and the work of professional biographers. Students who work to gain an understanding of Sylvia Plath's childhood by analyzing the events of her life, her journals, letters, and poetry, are better able to take on a biographer attempting the same task. By analyzing sources, students are also preparing to gather the archival and oral sources and analyze it for their the year long biography assignment.

The act of writing and revising is the final aspect of this year long biography project. The students will become biographers themselves. They will use steps similar to those presented in the primer unit to write the biography of their subject. They will analyze and make conjectures about a basic timeline of major events and interview their subjects for insights into the pivotal moments as well as the personal and public context surrounding those moments. They will research to gain context and grapple with the sources that require them to solve the puzzle of how best to represent a life honestly and engagingly.

Strategies and Activities

My biography primer unit is a ten day unit and the strategies are guided by the knowledge and skills needed to be successful on the biography project. The unit will begin with an examination of biography itself and the components that are included in a life story. To introduce the genre of biography to students, we will begin by assessing prior knowledge and identifying areas of misunderstanding. With an initial discussion of the Greek roots of the word ("bios" meaning life and "graphia" meaning writing) as the starting point followed by the question, "What is biography?" and "Why tell the story of someone else?" Students will explore the fundamental questions of biography. Is biography more like an autopsy or a portrait? What are the authorial responsibilities of writing another person's life? How does a biographer turn a series of facts into a narrative? How much interpretation is allowed on the part of the biographer? In the end, I hope to guide students to the

answer that Nigel Hamilton provides in *How to do Biography*: "Biography, remains, as it has always been, the record and interpretation of real lives—the lives of others and ourselves." ⁷ The following days will be spent deconstructing the craft of writing a biography through an analysis of the life of Sylvia Plath. The essential questions for the unit are "Who is Sylvia Plath?" and "How do we know this?"

Most of the lessons in this unit are connected to literacy. The first of these will be timeline literacy. Students will make timelines of their own lives as an entry point to analyzing what kind of information can be gleaned from timelines, their informational limitations, and their use in helping to generate questions for further study. Students will then examine Sylvia Plath's timeline and create an "emotional timeline" from the information included. An emotional timeline requires the student to not only to place the events along a linear continuum of time (x-axis) but also to assign an emotion to that event with a parallel line above the timeline representing very positive emotions (joy, excitement) and a line underneath the timeline representing very negative emotions (fear, anger, sadness, etc). Students will place the event in Plath's life where it occurred in time as well as the in the place that represents the emotion they believe Plath would have felt at the occurrence of the event. This will force students to make inferences. Students must defend where they put events along the emotional scale and engage in a class debate over the positioning on the timeline of a few of the most important events. For example, students might say that the publishing of Plath's first book of poetry, *The Colossus*, brought her more joy than having her first baby, and other students would say the opposite. The dialogue is one of interpretation which gets to the heart of the essential problem of biography. This debate, while seemingly pedestrian, is getting students into the habit of interpretation so necessary in writing a biography. It is also a preparation for using argument and evidence to defend one's interpretation. The discussion that the activity elicits is most important. This also allows for a discussion of "fact" versus inference and the role of each in writing a biography.

The culminating strategy will be a discussion of what makes a good question and what questions arise from reading and analyzing Plath's timeline. Questioning is a strategy in itself and one that I often model using Bloom's taxonomy. I challenge students to try to come up with questions that could have multiple answers all using the same source. For example, questions that rely on interpretation for answers. Why did Sylvia Plath commit suicide? Here students can say it was due to the demise of her marriage with Ted Hughes while others might contend she suffered from depression prior to meeting Hughes. Both are assertions made by various Plath biographers. Students are forced to make educated guesses that connect the pivotal moments in Plath's life.

In order to gain more insights into Plath's life and to have an initially approachable biography, students will watch the film *Sylvia*. ⁸ Students will use a tool for evaluating film introduced by James Percoco in *A Passion for the Past* called the "historical head." The historical head is the outline of a head where students write the actions, thoughts, questions, and emotions of the character in the film. It is both a factual note-taking activity as well as source of interpretation and curiosity about the characters choices and actions. Students will have a historical head for Sylvia Plath on one side of a sheet of paper and on the other students will either have the historical head of Ted Hughes or Sylvia's mother. Historical heads allow for students to take notes but without being entirely distracted by a set of questions on a worksheet. In the head of Sylvia Plath students might write: "studied in England," "met Ted at a party," "tried to kill herself earlier," "jealous," "flirtatious," "Why does she still want to be with Ted?" or "What happened to her children after she killed herself?" These comments and questions are both broad and narrow. They make room for inferences and interpretations—essential components of biography. The film will add more layers to the story presented in the timeline and perhaps answer some of the questions that students had the previous day. Yet this is also an important opportunity to discuss point of view. The mingling of history and literature that go into making a

film "based on a true story" provide students with a clear example of how biography bridges the two genres addressed in the class: history and literature. Just how far a filmmaker should stretch the truth to make a story interesting will make for an interesting discussion about choices and, perhaps, what is "truth" itself.

Using a Socratic seminar method, students will examine the human choices that go into writing and making a biographical movie. I prepare students for Socratic seminars by providing a few guiding questions to help students think about the topic. I also provide conflicting readings to allow students to take sides and debate using evidence from the multiple sources we have used thus far. For homework students will read an article written by Plath's daughter, Frieda Hughes, condemning the film as well as a positive review of the way the film contributes to Plath's legacy. ⁹ Students are expected to read, think, and prepare questions for the seminar and are graded on their ability to contribute to the discussion either by asking a high-level question or responding to a question using evidence from sources. Questions posed for preparation are: Was Frieda right in not giving the filmmakers permission to use her mother's poems? Would Ted Hughes have approved of this interpretation? What challenges do filmmakers confront when trying to make a relatively short, engaging film that tells the story honestly? Is it possible to tell multiple perspectives in a story? If so, how does one do this?

Students struggle to understand that historical figures lived within a larger society and culture that, in large part, shaped who they were. Since students pay little attention to the context in which they live, my strategy for helping students understand context begins with today. Socratic questioning will help students understand the multiple cultures that define them. How has your race or ethnicity influenced who you are? How has your gender shaped you? How has Lindblom shaped who you are as a person? How has living in Chicago framed your view of life and the world? How does being an American influence your thinking? The critical thinking then narrows and students are asked to analyze actual artifacts that define their age (song lyrics, television ads and clips from television shows, and newspaper articles). Each student in a group of five will examine one artifact using the guided question sheet that includes the questions: What is the main message or argument being presented? What does this artifact say about the time period in which it was created? Students will discuss the artifacts as a group and organize them into categories. Using these categories, students will answer the question: Fifty years from now, what will people say about the context of your childhood based on the artifacts presented here?

Using similar artifacts from the 1950s, students will analyze two documents each using the same guided questions along with the question—Where does this document fit along the timeline of Plath's life? Students examining the *Coronet Magazine* article from 1953 entitled, "How To Help Your Husband Get Ahead" by Mrs. Dale Carnegie would understand that the message from media sources was for women to play the role of submissive stay-at-home wife who must sublimate her desire for an independent life outside of the home in favor of helping her husband's career. Other students will understand the cultural assumptions inherent in the episode of *I Love Lucy* when she changes places and attempts to find a job. One particular clip, where Lucy and Ethel clearly have no marketable skills that would help them gain employment, shows the financial dependence of women on their husbands. While humorously presented, this scene shows the financial dependence many women of the time had on their husbands. Another contextual source is the 1955 Smith College commencement address by Adlai Stevenson entitled "A Purpose for Modern Women." Stevenson stated, "Women, especially educated women, have a unique opportunity to influence us, man and boy, and to play a direct part in the unfolding drama of our free society. But I am told that nowadays the young wife or mother is short of time for such subtle arts, that things are not what they used to be; that once immersed in the very pressing and particular problems of domesticity, many women feel frustrated and far apart from the great issues and stirring debates for which their education has given them understanding and relish. Once they read Baudelaire. Now it is the Consumers' Guide. *Once they wrote poetry. Now it's the laundry list.*" ¹⁰

Plath, mortarboard on her head, sat listening to these words. While no comment is made of the address in her journal or letters, students can begin to understand the pressures on women like Plath to prioritize marriage and family above all else. After students have analyzed the documents and discussed them in relation to the question, the entire class will read a secondary source on women in the 1950s to assess the accuracy of their assertions.

Source analysis is the focus of the next day and will further help students gain a picture of the various layers that make up the understanding of a life. The strategy for this lesson is the "document shuffle." This strategy is common in Advanced Placement (AP) history courses when examining the documents in a document based question (DBQ). This method was first introduced by Robert DiLorenzo and essentially asks students to interpret a set of documents that relate to one another, organize the documents into categories, and make an argument using the documents and categories to structure the essay.¹¹ Students will be in groups of five at their table and asked to examine conflicting sources ranging from journal entries, letters (from Sylvia, to Sylvia, and about Sylvia), poetry, *The Bell Jar*, artwork, and reviews. These sources will be connected to one specific chronological time period of Plath's life (i.e. childhood, college, or early/late marriage). Students will have an essential question that relates the documents (i.e. What do the documents tell us about the childhood of Sylvia Plath?), as well as keeping the main essential questions in mind. The documents tell a conflicting story and require that students look at the author, main message, inferences, and bias. For example, the reflection of Sylvia's mother about her choice not to have her children attend their father's funeral differs markedly from the reflections found in Sylvia's journal. Such inconsistencies will force the students to make judgements about how to present the entire story. Additionally, this strategy requires that students to organize the information and rank the sources from most credible to least credible in order to decide on the argument that is most defensible with evidence.

After analyzing documents, students will attempt to write the story of that time period in Plath's life using their knowledge of Plath, the context of her life, and the primary sources examined. For this exercise and to push students more toward narration than explanation, I will ask them to write the story in first person from one person's perspective. I have chosen to have students write biography before they see actual excerpts from published biographies so that they are not intimidated by the authority or limited by the structure of traditional biographies. I would like them to play with the line between non-fiction and fiction in order to examine the challenges inherent in writing a compelling but honest biography. The final analysis strategy requires students to highlight facts in one color and inference or interpretation in another so that they may overtly see how much of each they have included. Ideally, students should have a balance of colors where the facts presented are interpreted and narrated by the author. A biography too heavy on fact loses its appeal and sounds like a timeline in prose. However, a timeline with little fact lacks the substance required of a professional. I want students to ask Sylvia (as well as Ted and others) a question and have them answer it in a narrative.

The final strategy of the unit is a comparison of the group-made biography from the previous class to similar excerpts from various Plath biographies. Here students can see how biographers used similar sources to craft a narrative that aims to answer the essential questions of the unit. The strategy for this lesson is the "literature circle" where students in the groups from the previous days will examine the interplay between fact and interpretation and the role of author's purpose in interpreting a life. For this I will use excerpts from multiple biographies.¹² By using the same documents as the biographers, students gain a greater understanding of the interpretive power of biography. Students will once again highlight facts presented by the author in one color and interpretations of the author about those facts in another color to see how the author uses facts to support his or her ideas.

It is at this point that students should be able to see the power of interpretation. Excerpts from multiple biographies will help illuminate the problems inherent in finding a "truth." Edward Butscher, an early biographer and author of *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness* invents the term "bitch-goddess" to describe the ambivalent nature of Plath. Linda Wagner-Martin adopted a feminist lens in her book, *Sylvia Plath: A Biography*, and Anne Stevenson, a poet at living at the same time as Plath, wrote what some have deemed an "unsympathetic" assessment of Plath, called *Bitter Fame*, with permission of the Plath estate. Stevenson's biography was followed by Paul Alexander's more compassionate, *Rough Magic*, which one critic deemed as "imagining himself her life in a way which pretends to an insight he cannot possibly possess."¹³ These biographies present conflicting interpretations about Plath's childhood, her relationship with her mother, her marriage and her suicide. All of these biographies had to contend with the anxious living who had a stake in the interpretations presented—her mother, her husband, and her surviving children. Writing a biting commentary on biographical license, Janet Malcolm wrote that despite Hughes's attempts to redefine his place in the story that "the harm was done....The narrative of the faithless, heartless Hughes and his Jezebel could not be dislodged."¹⁴ Aurelia, Plath's mother, faced the same dilemma after the American publication of the *The Bell Jar* which most believed was closely autobiographical and presented the mother as a horrible woman. This damage to her reputation caused Aurelia to publish Sylvia's letters to her in *Letters Home*. Ted Hughes's long silence about Sylvia's death also came to an end when he published, *Birthday Letters*, a collection of poetry written in response to the criticism he faced. These examples show how biography is contested ground where the subject, the writer, and the reader meet.

As a culminating review of the unit, we will return to a general discussion of biography. We will examine the larger questions: What is biography? Is biography more like an autopsy or more like a portrait? Is biography a two-way conversation or a monologue? What are the components of biography? What inherent dangers are there in writing a biography of someone else's life? Can we ever know who Sylvia Plath really was?

The Biography Project Strategies in Brief

The biography unit established a framework for how to approach writing another person's life story. In Nigel Hamilton's *How to do Biography* he identifies the stages that one should follow when writing a taking on the task of writing biography. The first phase is "agenda." Although this project has defined the agenda on some levels, I still believe it would be a helpful place to start. What do you want to know about the person you are interviewing and why do you want to know it?

It established the helpfulness and limitations of a timeline and allowed for practice in creating questions from inferences that could be used by my students to interview their subject. Every week during the remaining units time will be spent learning how to interview and how to take notes during the interview. We will have student-to-student mock interviews as well as models of me interviewing another staff member. Students will critique the interview using a rubric and much time will be given to reflection and practice.

Research and reading skills will be used to find the context of the life of the subject. Students will use the library to find books and database sources as well as combing the archives of the home of the subject (with permission of course) for materials that would help add layers to the story. Students will be encouraged to use primary and secondary sources (journal articles or monographs) to understand the societal forces that influenced the subject.

Once the data has been collected it must be organized into categories for the sake of argument. One example might be the categories of "ahead of her time" and "a product of her time." The bulk of sources in the categories help push the student to an argument and perhaps section titles. Other organizational choices then arise. Do you tell the entire story chronologically or do you start with a defining moment? Do you tell the whole story? Will it be in first person or third person?

Once a working argument is formed, the writing can begin. Here Hermione Lee again informs the challenge. "Biography's narrative tactics—often barely noticed as the facts unroll and the story moves on—set the tone and create a point of view." ¹⁵ Students will work to consider both tone and point of view when writing their biography. Multiple revisions will provide opportunities for individual meetings with students to read their work aloud for a better understanding of problems of clarity and tone.

The final project will provide the students with greater options beyond a narrative paper. Students can create the biography through a video documentary, a Storycorps-style podcast, a spoken word performance, or turning the biographical narrative into a more fictionalized form.

Assessment

How will I know if I have completed my objectives? Like all teachers, I will use a combination of formative and summative assessments in this unit and in the larger biography project. Much of the assessment during the primer will be in the form of "exit slips" from the day's work that allow me to gauge student understanding and make the necessary adjustments each day. The exit slip assessments will be the timeline analysis, the historical head, the facts and inferences from both the cultural and the personal artifacts, and finally the period biographical excerpt. The final assessment for this unit will be to have students answer the question, "What is biography?" and use information from the unit in their answer.

Annotated Bibliography

Alexander, Paul. *Rough Magic: A Biography of Sylvia Plath*. Cambridge, MA: De Capo Press, 1999.

Written as a very intimate narrative that makes it seem like the reader is watching Plath's life unfold before them. Alexander does this by not directly citing sources in the text.

Butscher, Edward. *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness*. Tucson, Ariz: Schaffner Press, 2003.

Butscher's most long lasting contribution is his use of the phrase "bitch goddess" to reconcile the disparate aspects of Plath's personality.

Connors, Kathleen, and Sally Bayley. *Eye Rhymes: Sylvia Plath's Art of the Visual*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007.

Sylvia Plath also created visual images such as collages and drawings. This book would be a great addition to the journals and letters since they provide a visual option for students who struggle with text.

DiLorenzo, Robert. "Teaching Advanced Placement United States History in the Urban, Minority High School: Successful Strategies." *The History Teacher*. Vol. 32, No. 2 (February 1999), pp. 207-211.

DiLorenzo is an Advanced Placement United States History teacher in New York who came up with the teaching strategy of the "document shuffle" used to teach the Document Based Question essay on the exam.

Gill, Jo. *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007.

This book is immensely useful for both an instructor's overview of Plath's life, work, and biographical study.

Hamilton, Nigel. *How to do Biography: A Primer*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2008.

Hamilton's book, written more for a professional biographer, provides useful organizational advice for writing biography.

Helle, Anita, ed. *the Unraveling Archive: essays on Sylvia Plath*. Ann Arbor, Mich: University of Michigan Press, 2007.

This book deconstructs both Plath's work and the work about Plath. For this unit, Janet Badia's "The 'Priestess' and Her 'Cult': Plath's Confessional Poetics and the Mythology of Women Readers" examines how "Plath readers" have become a symbol for a certain kind of woman.

Hughes, Ted. *Birthday Letters*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1998.

This book of poetry, written by Plath's husband Ted Hughes, serves as a primary source to represent Hughes's perspective on the death and defining of Sylvia Plath.

Kirk, Connie Anne. *Sylvia Plath: A Biography*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004.

This book is a very readable, concise biography that can be used in comparison to the more dramatic and controversial examples by Alexander, Butscher, and Stevenson.

Malcolm, Janet. *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993.

Malcolm's critical review of Plath biographies illustrates the complicated nature of the genre and challenges the readers and writers of biography to a higher level of awareness.

Orr, Peter. *The Poet Speaks: Interviews with Contemporary Poets Conducted by Hilary Morrish [and Others]* Pref. By Frank Kermode. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1966.

The interview of Plath in this collection focuses on her work but provides insight into how she describes her poetry and its influences.

Plath, Sylvia. *Ariel: the Restored Edition*. New York: Harper Collins, 2004.

These poems, originally published in 1965 and edited by Ted Hughes, are dark and confessional and are excellent primary sources used to understanding Plath just before her suicide.

Plath, Sylvia. *The Colossus Poems*. London: Heinemann, 1960.

This was Plath's first published book of poetry and provide a comparison to her later poems in Ariel.

Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2006.

Just how autobiographical this novel is remains up for debate but it serves as a useful primary source for both Plath's writing and her possible strained relationship with her mother. The American publishing of this book led Aurelia Plath to publish *Letters Home*.

Plath, Sylvia and Aurelia Schober Plath. *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950-1963*. New York: Harper and Row, 1975.

This collection offers a wealth of options for the teacher to use in the classroom. The letters stretch from Plath's high school years to just before her death. Her mother's perspective is presented in the introductions to the sections.

Plath, Sylvia and Karen V. Kukil. *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath, 1950-1962*. London: faber and faber, 2000.

With more time it would be interesting to compare both published versions of Plath's journals. Like *Ariel*, the first version was edited by Hughes. This version was published much later and offers a more objective presentation.

Percoco, James A. *A Passion for the Past: Creative Teaching of U.S. History*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998.

This book, though somewhat dated, offers many ideas for making a history classroom more relevant and engaging. The idea of the historical head comes from this text.

Stevenson, Anne. *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath*. New York: Penguin Books, 1998.

Stevenson, more than the preceding biographers, takes all of Sylvia Plath into account. This book is seen by some as unnecessarily critical of Plath and by others as a refreshingly honest account.

Sylvia. Dir. Christine Jeffs. Perf. Gwineth Paltrow and Daniel Craig. Focus Features, 2004. DVD.

This film begins with Plath in Cambridge, England on a Fulbright Scholarship and ends with her suicide. It is biographical and takes a clear position on the influence of Hughes and Plath's mother on her life.

Appendices

Sylvia Plath's Timeline

<http://www.cliffsnotes.com/WileyCDA/LitNote/The-Bell-Jar-Sylvia-Plath-Biography-Chronology-of-Plath-s-Life.id-185,pageNum-12.html>

Adlai Stevenson 1955 Commencement Address at Smith College

<http://www.h-net.org/~hst203/documents/stevenson.html>

Other 1950s Primary Sources

A simple google image search for 1950s advertisements yield many that could work well with this unit. Also, the 1957 hit song "Wake Up Little Susie" is a great choice. This song was banned by some radio station and definitely would show students the prudishness of the 1950s.

Emotional Timeline

Positive Emotions (joy, excitement, etc)

Time

Negative Emotions (Sadness, anger, fear, etc)

Endnotes

1. Jo Gill. *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 1.
2. Cris Tovani. *I Read It, But I Don't Get It: Comprehension Strategies for Adolescent Readers*. (Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers, 2000), pp. 14-16.
3. Hermione Lee. *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 124.
4. Aurelia Plath, ed. *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950-1963*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 13.
5. Jo Gill, *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 1.
6. Susan R. Van Dyne. "The Problem of Biography." *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 17.
7. Nigel Hamilton. *How to do Biography*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 21.
8. This is film is rated "R" and therefore I encourage teachers to use appropriate clips or to send a letter home to parents as a precaution.
9. Jamie Wilson. "Frieda Hughes attacks BBC for film on Plath." *The Guardian*. Feb. 3, 2003. Retrieved on July 15, 2010 from www.guardian.co.uk.
10. Adlai Stevenson. "A Purpose for Modern Woman," Commencement Address, Smith College, 1955 in *Women's Home Companion* (September 1955). Retrieved on Jul 15, 2010 from <http://www.h-net.org/~hst203/documents/stevenson.html>.
11. Robert DiLorenzo. "Teaching Advanced Placement United States History in the Urban, Minority High School: Successful Strategies." *The History Teacher*, Vol. 2, No. 2, (Feb., 1999), pp. 207-221.
12. Biographies of Sylvia Plath are numerous. For an overview of all the biographies, I recommend reading Susan R. Van Dyne's "The Problem of Biography" found in *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 3-20. Also, *Silent Woman* by Janet Malcom provides a stinging review of the effort to write Plath's life.
13. Gill. P. 113-115.

14. Janet Malcom. *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*, (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1994), p. 28.
15. Lee, p. 132.

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