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Books

Caught between sun and ice

A terrific, even-handed biography of Sylvia Plath frees the poet from the narrow view of her as 'a mind on course for suicide'

By Lyndall GORDON

RED COMET
by Heather Clark

1152pp, Jonathan Cape,
£25 (0844 871 1514)
RRP £30, ebook £12.99

★★★★★



"Perfection of the life or of the work": Yeats posed this dilemma. It's a question central to Sylvia Plath, a poet who meant to resolve this choice, at

its toughest for a gifted woman growing up in Eisenhower's ultra-conformist America of the 1950s. Plath tried to invent a way of life that would make it feasible for a woman, as well as a man, to have everything. One achievement of *Red Comet*, Heather Clark's terrific biography of Plath, is to document, without taking sides, her choice of Ted Hughes as a revolutionary who was true to his instincts.

She asked Hughes to marry her soon after their explosive meeting: a famously violent kiss, leaving tooth-marks on Ted's cheek, at a Cambridge party in 1956. This was a unique marriage to a fellow-poet who could tap into the lasting force of nature, and free her to gallop into "the red/ Eye, the cauldron of morning" – the fierce sun of all our days. Clark detects the model for Plath's vision in DH Lawrence, who imagined a sexual union as a semi-sacred transformation, unlike the casual affairs of Bloomsbury, who made friendship instead the be-all of human existence. In the era before second-wave feminism, Lawrence's *Women in Love*, with its balanced marital union, was an ideal for the Cambridge students

whom Plath joined at Newnham.

Red Comet also puts forward a new norm: to read Plath as surreal rather than confessional, for the latter approach limits her to a mind on course for suicide. Yet feminism does inhere in her "song" of empowerment as a woman. She told her mother, "my poems and stories I want to be the strongest female paean yet for the creative forces of nature, the joy of being a loved and loving woman; that is my song."

Ted Hughes saw Plath's potential, and *Red Comet* fills out the 2004 revelations of Diane Middlebrook's *Her Husband*, with the evidence of their mutual and wonderfully creative mentoring. Sadly, after six years of marriage, Hughes had writer's block in the spring of 1962. Clark is persuasive in marking this as a turning point in the tragic breakdown of the poets' union. She suggests jealousy.

Careful to set down the facts without the rancour of earlier feminists and to preserve as fully as possible the complexity of the situation, Clark quotes Hughes's cruel words that cut through the assurance of Plath's public carapace: her looks and ways in bed were inferior, he told his wife, to those of his mistress, Assia Wevill. Plath reports that when he left her and their two children, it occurred to him that she might conveniently kill herself. She alleged earlier domestic violence resulting in a miscarriage. In the latter half of 1962, she lifted her head in loud bursts of crying in their dream home, Court Green, in Devon.

Mitigating allegations against Hughes is Clark's evidence that he

continued to uphold Plath's writing. She showed him her outpouring of poems, at its peak in October 1962, including "Ariel", that head-

long rhythmic ride that "I" takes into the "Eye" of sunrise. Hughes backed the blazing originality of the collection she called *Ariel*, which he published posthumously, to her huge acclaim.

Hughes tried to deflect blame elsewhere (most successfully in his late-life collection *Birthday Letters*), but there remains a crucial fact: Plath said repeatedly that what shocked her more than infidelity was lying. The lies broke her faith in her husband, in the sacredness of their Cathy-Heathcliff union, so that it was impossible for her ever to live in the same way again.



In the last months of Plath's life, Al Alvarez – the influential poetry editor for *The Observer* – replaced Hughes as a figure of heartening trust, a mentor and possibly (it's revealed) lover for one night. Clark suggests convincingly that a tie developing in October-November 1962, reaching beyond mentorship into a borderland of attraction, helped to fuel the *Ariel* poems.

It seems that when Alvarez backed off at the start of 1963, Plath's fuel diminished. Her last letter, to her American psychiatrist, Ruth Beuscher, confides her frozen will – the same mental state as in 1953, when she attempted suicide as a student at Smith College.

In the run-up to that, Plath had turned her freeze into a marvelously imagined allegory, *Mary Ventura and the Ninth Kingdom*. On a train hurtling towards the frozen

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kingdom of death, a young woman exerts the will to get off at the last stop. Clark might have made more of this great story, rejected by *Mademoiselle* and brought to light by *The Hudson Review* with a perceptive introduction by Karen Kukil.

Alvarez said that the two American poets who thrilled him most were Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath. He thus had the prescience to liken Plath to a poet who had written at “white heat” and for whom immortality had been the “flood subject”. The Plath cult stress her poems about the doomed Medea and Electra, but Clark sidelines these in favour of those about Ariadne, who makes the thread to lead a way out from the lair of the monster, the Minotaur. *Red Comet* is a portrait of a maker who is resilient and seething with creativity in her maternal and domestic as well as writing life, together with a record of this maker’s setbacks and struggles from day to day. The inward force of the poet does surge through the nets that held her back, nowhere more keenly than when Plath left Devon for London in December 1962 and rented the place where Yeats had lived in Primrose Hill. His lines were alive in her. His blue plaque outside seemed to augur her own recognition.

After more than half a century of occlusion, the time has come to see Plath emerge now into the full daylight of her immortality. This is not helped by excessive detail in the early chapters of *Red Comet*. I would also have liked to have seen due recognition of the discoveries of pioneering biographers, especially Diane Middlebrook, Janet Malcolm and Jacqueline Rose. I would add to this list the wise insights of Pamela Norris in *Words of Love* – too often overlooked in this age of “definitive” biography is the art of an alternative form, the distilled biography. Apart from these omissions, Heather Clark’s meticulous research, sweeping up every scrap, deftly integrates drafts, unpublished pieces, stories and critiques of poems. To demythologise

Sylvia Plath is to make this extraordinary story more moving than ever. It will bring home to readers the enduring force of her “song”.

Lyndall Gordon's Outsiders: Five Women Writers Who Changed the World is published by Virago

Hughes had writer's block in 1962 – was his jealousy the turning point?



▲ Ted Hughes in 1970. Plath was more shocked by his lies than his infidelity

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► Sylvia Plath
with her children
Frieda and
Nicholas in 1962