

*Dying*  
Is an art, like everything else.  
I do it exceptionally well.  
— Sylvia Plath, “Lady Lazarus” from *The Collected Poems*

Sylvia Plath indeed died memorably as foreshadowed in a poem written in the final months of her life. A renowned American poet, she was married to the celebrated British poet, Ted Hughes, and committed suicide by putting her head in a gas oven.

On the night of February 11, 1963, Plath's children were sleeping in another room where she had set out bread and milk for them. Plath then taped the door frame and stuffed the gap underneath the door with towels. Finally, she turned on the gas and rested her head on a folded cloth on the open oven door.

The final acts of Sylvia Plath's life were to make sure her children, two-year-old Frieda and one-year-old Nick, would be safe and fed. While she was going about ending her life, her husband was in another flat in London with another woman.

Recently discovered unpublished letters from Plath to her psychiatrist Dr Ruth Barnhouse alleged that she suffered physical and psychological abuse from Hughes. One letter, about events on September 22, 1962, revealed that he beat her while Plath was pregnant and two days later, she miscarried their second child. They separated that very month. Another letter sent the next month alleged that Hughes told her that he wished she was dead.

These letters are part of a collection by a feminist scholar, Harriet Rosenstein, of correspondence between Plath and Barnhouse, particularly in the year leading up to her death, during which Plath discovered that her husband was having an affair with a friend of theirs, Assia Wevill. In addition to his well-known infidelity, these allegations of abuse bring a new dimension to understanding Plath and Hughes's failed marriage and the final months of Plath's life.

### A Literary Union

Plath's only novel *The Bell Jar*, semi-autobiographical, was published in January 1963, less than a month before her death. Posthumously, her poetry collection *Ariel* (published in 1965) gained her mainstream recognition which Plath had predicted, writing to her mother, “I am writing the best poems of my life. They will make my name.”

Carol Ann Duffy, another prolific woman poet, wrote that Plath's poems were uniquely feminist. Plath wrote in the confessional style of poetry primarily about “the experience of being a woman”. Plath believed that it was important to “control and manipulate her experiences...with an informed and an intelligent mind” in her poetry. By doing so, she shed the influence of confessional poets preceding her such as

Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton, and found her distinct voice.

Plath and Hughes's relationship is legendary in the literary world. They married in 1956, four months after their first meeting at Cambridge University where she was a Fulbright scholar. They had a fruitful literary union – writing poetry together every day in the first years of their married life.

They heavily influenced each other's work though they drew from entirely different subjects. Hughes's poems were

struggling with depression since adolescence.

Feminists and fans alike have taken up Plath's cause since the 1970s – her gravestone has had repeated attempts to have Hughes's name obliterated from it and Hughes was publicly denounced as a murderer during his lifetime. Hughes had multiple affairs, often around the same time, and many believed that her husband's callous cruelty and infidelity drove a depressed Plath to take her own life.

Hughes's actions had tragic consequences for Sylvia Plath, Assia Wevill and Shura, and his children with Plath who lost their mother at a very young age. His personal reputation was all that suffered; in death, Plath's legend surpassed him in fame. According to Hughes's friends, he lived the rest of his life in the shadow of Plath's fame, shouldering the burden of public-directed guilt. Hughes continued to be a distinguished career regardless, being made Poet Laureate in Britain in 1984.

His actions in the years since Plath's death have also been criticised. Hughes destroyed Plath's final journal – saying it was in the best interests of their children. As executor of her estate, Hughes was also accused of editing and reordering her collections of poetry and journals to his wishes in addition to restricting access to her papers.

For years, Hughes kept silent. He finally spoke about this troubled

“INTOXICATED WITH MADNESS,  
I'M IN LOVE WITH MY SADNESS”

*Domestic abuse by Hughes adds a new dimension to Plath's suicide*

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deeply rooted in nature and relied particularly on symbolism. Plath's writing, on the other hand, was about her life experiences. She also morbidly obsessed over death in many of her poems. An excerpt from one of her most famous poems, “Daddy”, revealed her anguish at her father's death, her first suicide attempt, and her meeting Ted Hughes.

*I was ten when they buried you.  
At twenty I tried to die  
And get back, back, back to you.  
I thought even the bones would do.*

*But they pulled me out of the sack,  
And they stuck me together with glue.  
And then I knew what to do.  
I made a model of you,  
A man in black with a Meinkampf look*

Hughes soon went on to publish his first collection of poems, *Hawk in the Rain*, which won him widespread acclaim. Plath was still relatively unknown in the literary world outside poetry circles. Depression and suicidal tendencies resurfaced, exacerbated by her marriage falling apart, with Hughes leaving her for his then-lover, Wevill.

It was at this time, during the last months of her life, that she produced prodigious work. *The Collected Poems* went on to win her a posthumous Pulitzer Prize in 1982. Plath was 30-years-old when she killed herself.

This was not her first suicide attempt. As referenced in “Daddy”, Plath had taken a large number of sleeping pills at the age of 20 in her family home. She had been subsequently treated with electroconvulsive therapy and had been



When Wevill killed herself in a similar manner as Plath; it was déjà vu for Ted Hughes and the public six years later. This time, however, there was another casualty – her four-year-old daughter with Hughes, Shura. At the time, Hughes was involved with other women, including Carol Orchard (who he later married), and Wevill had been facing public backlash for her alleged role in Plath's suicide.

### Hughes's Defense

On behalf of his estate, Hughes's widow, Carol, denied the claims of physical abuse by her late husband towards his first wife, saying they are “as absurd as they are shocking”. It is however difficult to treat Ted Hughes as an innocent party in Plath's suicide. Thanks to the recent discovery of these letters, Hughes's abusive behaviour to Plath is documented but other such behaviour may have escaped the public eye. Wevill's subsequent suicide suggests repeated abusive behaviour on the part of Hughes.

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### LITERATURE



# Wending My Way Toward Ray

My father taught us to wear our Bengaliness with pride. It was impressed upon us that we, by being born Bengali, had inherited a rich intellectual and artistic tradition. Our very own Tagore, after all, had been the first South Asian Nobel Prize winner for literature. Even more significantly to my father, his creative voice had rung clarion-clear and urgent amid the cries for independence from the Raj. My sister learnt Rabindra Sangeet and Nazrul Geeti while I memorised their poetry. My father read us Sukumar Ray's stories and fairy tales from *Thakurma'r Jhuli* at bedtime.

Sukumar's famous son, whose patrician profile was outlined on hardbound Feludas occupying pride of place in the “showcase” where my father kept his books, was chief amongst the examples that my father cited to prove the cultural greatness of Bengal. Satyajit Ray, he explained to me, was known all over the world. Film schools studied him! He'd won an honorary Oscar! He had made *Pother Panchali*, the finest film of all time!

My father had me watch *Hirok Rajar Deshe* one sleepy Friday afternoon. In all honesty, I would rather have been watching cartoons, but I remember being charmed by the rhyming verse dialogue and the genteel whimsicality of the film, so different from the noisier shenanigans of the English- and Hindi-language children's movies I was used to watching. But eventually I was overcome by the film's deliberate pacing and fell asleep to Utpal Dutt glowering while my father roared in laughter next to me.

I recall snippets of various Ray films playing in the background of my growing-up years: *Shatranj Ke Khiladi* (*The Chess Players*) on television, with a radiant and unhappy Shabana Azmi in its margins; *Aranyer Din Raatri* (*Days and Nights in the Forest*), perhaps, or *Nayak* (*Hero*) — one of those urbane vehicles where Ray employed Sharmila Tagore's arch, questioning gaze to such splendid effect.

But I finally sat down to watch one of Ray's movies from start to finish only in my early twenties. I was living in Chicago by then, films from the world over came to my door in little red Netflix envelopes, and I felt like I needed to get to know the cinema of my people better. *Charulata* felt like the right sort of reintroduction to Ray because I already had a bit of an acquaintance with it, courtesy its source material. At about ten or so, I'd gone to a performance of “Shyama,” at the Abu Dhabi Cultural Center and bought a translation of *Noshonir* (*The Broken Nest*) in the lobby after. I was a rapaciously indiscriminate reader as a child, and consumed acres of



stuff I probably had no business reading. Of course, I had bumbled through Tagore's novella with little understanding of the proceedings, except that it seemed to end sadly. *Charulata* would bring me back to Tagore as well as Ray, and I could bring my adult understanding to bear on this heralded work.

If you've watched the film, which is perhaps my favourite of all time, you remember the opening credits, which are accompanied by a close-up of a pair of hands working on a bit of embroidery. A stately, almost sorrowful instrumental arrangement of Tagore's “*Momo Chitte*” scores this long, steady shot. As the credits end, Madhabi Mukherjee leans into the frame and cuts the thread with her teeth, and the camera pulls back.

This is as indelible an opening to me as “Mrs Dalloway bought the flowers herself.” There is something perfectly quotidian about both beginnings, yet by looking straightaway at the prettily ordinary doings permitted within their protagonists' circumscribed femininity, both Ray and Virginia Woolf establish their concerns with an intentful economy.

Woolf, of course, was chatelaine of the

Modernist movement in English literature, while film critics often situate Ray's films, particularly the Apu trilogy, in the cinematic tradition of social realism that feels more analogous to the Victorian novel of Dickens and George Eliot. But *Charulata* is thoroughly, wondrously Modern in its interiority, its attention to the chiaroscuro play of anomie and restlessness, desire and pain across its protagonist's mind. I still marvel at how Ray compellingly dramatises the inner life of his heroine with no voiceover, little expository dialogue; one feels as if one has an ear to her heart. He achieves this miraculous filmmaking feat by showing us what she looks at with her curious, half-hostile gaze—through the slats of windows, through binoculars, or as she cuts arcs in the air with her feet on a swing.

From time to time, I think of that scene of Charu swinging in that ruined garden, singing “*Fuley Fuley Dhole Dhole*.” (She sits on that swing again later in the film, as images from the village she grew up in play across her face.) I think of the joyous contentment on her face as she sings about the flowers and the cuckoos, and it is precisely the

expression I've felt on my own face as I've walked through streets singing and exulting over some particularly blue sky or particularly gemmed sunset on the lake. I think of that joy shading into pensiveness as she sings about not knowing what her heart hankers after. Ray watches Charu as she is looking at her own quicksilver self, considering her joys and longings. Ray makes his protagonist's stream of consciousness visual and legible to the audience. It is the most sublime moment I've ever encountered in a film.

I have gone on to watch several of Ray's films since that first viewing of *Charulata*, as you may have guessed, and I have admired them and excitedly noted their influence on the work of filmmakers who came after him. But of his work, I return only to *Charulata* again and again. Its intimacy still feels potent, its ability to make the ineffable and inchoate visible still astonishing. I am still struck by the film's mastery over light and space. The film is shot in black and white within one large house and its grounds, but it is suffused with light and air in a way that the more expansive and similarly themed *Ghare Baire* (*The Home and the World*), which came out decades later and was shot in color, isn't.

Ray was making films during the same period as Jean-Luc Godard and the other *Nouvelle Vague* filmmakers were putting out work that is now recognised as some of the most important and exciting in film history. *Charulata* came out in 1965, the same year as *Pierrot Le Fou*. *Charulata* is certainly less conspicuous than the cunningly edited, eccentrically performed *Pierrot Le Fou*, and Ray is likely less well-known by your garden-variety cinephile than his European counterparts. But I find his often quiet, unflashy films radical and incredibly important in their own way. It seems to me that *Charulata's* heroine, and the heroine of *Mahanagar* (*The Big City*) and of *Ghare Baire*, is a fully realised person in a way that the languid, fascinating women who entice and frustrate the men in the celebrated works of Godard or say, Rohmer often aren't. Ray was interested in his female characters as complex, interesting, irreducible people whose problems the men around them couldn't swoop in and solve.

My father and I don't talk very often, but recently I told him about watching Ray's films here in the United States, how much I loved *Charulata*, and how they were playing the *Apu* trilogy in the theaters. He responded positively enough but quickly moved on to subjects he was much more interested in discussing – my finances and his various ailments, gossip related to extended family, that sort of thing. He's changed a great deal, his passion for the arts entirely replaced by religious zeal, and we, having long had our differences, have reached a détente that precludes closeness. But even with thousands of miles and acres of silence between us, I'm rather glad he was the one who started me off, nice and early, toward Ray's cinema, films that have been such a windfall of meaning and beauty in my life.

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