

## Key to the Transcription Table for Aurelia S. Plath's Shorthand Annotations in Sylvia Plath's Personal Library at the Lilly Library, Indiana University

By Catherine Rankovic

Sylvia Plath's personal library of approximately 150 books is housed at the Lilly Library, Indiana University at Bloomington, U.S.A., under the library catalog listing "Sylvia Plath Papers, Material in the Printed Collection." For a full list of the titles in this personal library, search Indiana University's main library catalog for books tagged "Plath, Sylvia, former owner."

Among these books once owned by poet Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) are six books annotated in Gregg shorthand by her mother, Mrs. Aurelia Schober Plath (1906-1994). Scattered throughout these six books are a total of 30 Gregg shorthand annotations. These annotations are cataloged and transcribed in the accompanying Transcription Table.

### Where the Books Came From

In 1959, Sylvia Plath, age 27, and her husband Ted Hughes left the United States to settle in Hughes's native England. Plath died in 1963 without returning to her mother's house in Wellesley, Massachusetts, where she had left the books not packed for their trip. Many of these books, fiction and nonfiction, were paperbacks Sylvia had used as textbooks for college and college teaching. Sylvia Plath had underlined and made notes in several of the books.

This set of books stayed with Mrs. Plath in Wellesley from 1959 until 1977 when Mrs. Plath sold to the Lilly Library her accumulation of Sylvia Plath's books, papers and memorabilia.

### Who Wrote the Shorthand?

Mrs. Plath read several of the books in her daughter's personal library and wrote her own notes and comments in them. As her daughter had, she underlined, made checkmarks, and wrote short notes in the margins. In six of the books Mrs. Plath made annotations in Gregg shorthand, a language of symbols used for professional note-taking and secretarial work. Mrs. Plath had learned to write Gregg shorthand in college in the 1920s and worked for many years as a professional instructor of Gregg shorthand and other secretarial skills.

Mrs. Plath tried to teach Sylvia how to write Gregg shorthand, but failed. Sylvia Plath fictionalized this episode of her life in her autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*, stating why she chose not to learn shorthand. She never learned it. The numerous Gregg shorthand annotations appearing in the vast entirety of Sylvia Plath's papers, books and letters were therefore not written by Sylvia Plath but by her mother.

One book from this personal library, *Dark of the Moon* (1926), a volume of poems by Sara Teasdale, belonged to Mrs. Plath before Sylvia claimed it. Of the 30 shorthand annotations in Sylvia Plath's personal library books, 14 are in *Dark of the Moon*, purchased in December 1926 by Mrs. Plath, then a college sophomore using her maiden name Aurelia Schober. She wrote her name and the date "December 29, 1926," in longhand on the book's flyleaf. She annotated *Dark*

*of the Moon* while dating a man named Karl von Terzaghi. This was several years before Aurelia Schober dated Otto Plath and married him in 1932.

Two shorthand annotations were dated by Mrs. Plath “3/68” and “3/24/68,” five full years after her daughter’s death. Yet another annotation says, “Sylvia’s stone took 6 years to be erected!” If that statement is correct, Mrs. Plath wrote the comment during or after 1969.

### **About the Table**

The Transcription Table is arranged according to the authors’ last names. Column “A,” labeled “Annotation I.D.,” numbers each of the 30 shorthand annotations. Each annotation has its own row.

Each of the six books with shorthand annotations is assigned a number, 1 through 6, appearing in column “B,” labeled “Artifact I.D.”.

The Table then identifies the book’s author, publisher, publication date and the page with shorthand, and the shorthand’s position on the page. Additional columns describe or explain further features of each annotation or transcription. In the novel *The Charterhouse of Parma* a scribble resembles Gregg shorthand, but is not. The Table acknowledges this in case there might be in the future confusion or doubt.

Gregg shorthand, a language based on phonics, cannot be spoken but only written. For this reason, “translating” shorthand into common language is correctly called “transcribing” it, and the result is called a “transcription.” A “transcription” is verbatim, not an approximation. An individual shorthand symbol is called a “character.” A shorthand “character” usually represents a single word or phrase.

The shorthand in Sylvia Plath’s book collection is the property of the Estate of Aurelia S. Plath. The Estate granted Plath scholar Catherine Rankovic written permission to publish the shorthand transcriptions for scholarly purposes. The English transcriptions are copyrighted by Catherine Rankovic.

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