



# Journal of Religion & Film

---

Volume 7  
Issue 2 October 2003

Article 13

---

12-14-2016

## Sylvia

J. Sage Elwell  
*University of Iowa*, [jselwll@uiowa.edu](mailto:jselwll@uiowa.edu)

---

### Recommended Citation

Elwell, J. Sage (2016) "Sylvia," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 2 , Article 13.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol7/iss2/13>

This Film Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact [unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu](mailto:unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu).

UNIVERSITY OF  
**Nebraska**  
Omaha

---

# Sylvia

## **Abstract**

This is a review of *Sylvia* (2003).

When *Titanic* was released in 1997 everyone knew how it was going to end: The ship was going to sink. The trick was how to tell the familiar story of a sinking ship in a compelling way. The film *Sylvia* faces a similar challenge as it attempts to tell the well-known story of Sylvia Plath's (Gwyneth Paltrow) spiral into depression and eventual suicide. If *Titanic* succeeded in the box office it was because it did not in fact tell the story of a sinking ship; the ship served merely a backdrop for another, more viewer friendly, story. Conversely, if *Sylvia* does not succeed in the box office, it will be precisely because it does in fact tell the story of the sinking ship.

In light of some of the controversy that surrounded the making of the movie (Plath's daughter did not support the making of the film), it is perhaps worthwhile to begin by briefly asking if the movie accurately portrays the life of Sylvia Plath. However, any descriptive response to such a question would amount to a fruitless exercise in correspondence--correlating Plath's life with the movie's adaptation of it. Perhaps therefore the best answer to that question is to say that the film strives to depict Plath as she is revealed in her work. In keeping with the character of its subject, the movie is more a filmic literary representation of a literary artist than a biography or a documentary about the last decade of Plath's life. As such, the explicit and implicit references to Plath's works that are sprinkled throughout the movie give it the flavor of one of her own haunted and defiant poems, making the

movie a challenging and complex portrayal of a challenging and complex personality.

In this portrayal, the dialectical relationship between depression and creativity is dramatized as we see Plath's psychology crumble while her writing deepens. At the zenith of Plath's depression we are shown a montage of fervent and passion filled writing sessions with Plath huddled over her writing desk sweating out poetry. Barricaded inside her flat during one of the worst winters in Britain, Plath spills out her anger and pain, telling of her attempted suicide, her experiences with shock therapy and of her love-hate relationship with her estranged husband and her dead father. In the film, it is only once Plath has begun to sink to the bottom that she is able to create with ferocity. The question is thus raised: must creativity draw from the well of personal pain and suffering? Or more generally, does all creativity emerge from madness?

Looking into the mythic past, perhaps ancient Mesopotamian cosmogony provides the earliest template for understanding the nature of creativity. It was from Tiamat's primordial waters of chaos that Marduk fashioned original order, and it was Yahweh who spoke into the chaos of *tohu wabohu* and fashioned the ordered universe. Perhaps it could thus be said that it is the nature of creativity to wrest order out of chaos. This ordering of chaos by creativity is imbued with deeply religious significance. Creativity is the primal act of the gods, it is the means by

which significances and purposes are drawn out of the waters of senselessness and how islands of meaning are made.

There is then indeed a certain madness, a certain chaos, underpinning the very nature of creativity. Creativity requires some form of chaos from which to fashion order; for there to be order, there must first be non-order. Within the artist this primordial chaos might be equated to emotional or psychological imbroglio. The order that the artist draws out of this chaos is her artistic creation - a world of meaning fabricated in words and images. Such creative activity has deeply religious connotations as the anchoring of existential significances by the artist. In her work she implicitly mimics the creation of the universe as she gives order to the swirling waters of her psyche fashioning poetry from the eddies of emotions.

Pursuing this paradigm of religious creativity as a way to interpret the film and understand its portrayal of the life of Plath, the question becomes why must Plath create? Does she create simply to give voice to her emotions, to order them on paper, to externalize them so that she might have control over them? In the film it is as though Plath is driven to make sense of the chaos of life as nothing less than a way to survive. The film depicts a woman who writes not so that she might come to terms with her inner turmoil and thereby gain control over her tempestuous interiority, but rather it as though Plath creates simply to keep the chaos at bay. It

is a subtle difference, but Plath appears to create, not to bring about definitive order, but rather to avoid the swells chaos.

There is a scene in the film where Hughes (Daniel Craig) and Plath are in a small row boat paddling just off the coast of New England. As the scene progresses they begin to drift away from the shoreline and risk being pushed into the open sea. Analogously, it is as though without the defined horizons of secured meanings and manageable emotions, Plath would be lost at sea. Writing becomes a religion of need whereby creativity is how she keeps her head above the water. When Plath feels that she is no longer able to extract meaning and order out of the chaos of her inner life, the primordial waters begin to drag her under.

In the end, the ship sinks. *Sylvia* doesn't glamorize the life and sufferings of Plath, it doesn't depict the phoenix flames of poetic brilliance as they burn out from their own heat, nor does it depict a fragile woman crushed under the weight of an unfaithful husband. *Sylvia* tells the dark story of one woman's pain and mental anguish and the relationship between that pain and her creative work as she struggled to wrench order from chaos.