Sylvia Plath’s Poem “A Secret” as it corresponds to Lawrence Durrell’s The Alexandria Quartet

Excerpts from:

Fixed Stars Govern a Life—Sylvia Plath’s Qabalah Code

by

Julia Gordon-Bramer

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• BA in Literature and Language from Webster University, St. Louis, Missouri USA
• MFA in Creative Writing (poetry and prose) from University of MO-St. Louis
• Teaches Arts and Humanities, Philosophy and World Literature at Lindenwood University, St. Louis, Missouri USA
• tarot reader for 32+ years
• student of mythology, Qabalah, Jungian alchemy and Hermeticism
There are six facets to each Ariel poem by Plath:

- Qabalah and Tarot
- Alchemy
- Mythology
- History and the World
- Astrology and Astronomy
- Humanities and the Arts

Durrell had similar themes and sub-themes embedded in his work.
“A Secret” pays tribute to Durrell’s *The Alexandria Quartet*, corresponding to Humanities & the Arts facet of the poem.

... with special emphasis on the first book, *Justine*, as it relates to the Justice Tarot card.
The other facets mirror and correspond with one another

Briefly, The Tarot and Qabalah facet: Justice will be done; an impartial weighing of sides or ideas; settling conflict; the law; equilibrium; balance; Karma; cause and effect.
The Alchemical facet: relates to references of the famous alchemist Paracelsus, studied by *The Alexandria Quartet* character, Capodistria.

There are also many correspondences to the chemistry of practical alchemy and Rosicrucianism throughout the poem.
The Mythology facet pays tribute to Athene (Minerva to the Romans), the goddess on the Justice card.

a.k.a. “Athena”

Athene is sometimes called Hippia, meaning “of Horses,” “Hippopotamus” meaning “water horse.”
The History and the World facet addresses London’s Square Mile, where ruins of a Roman temple to Minerva have been discovered.
Collective references to smallpox, illegitimate children, London, and gout point to England’s King Henry VIII—"A Secret" becomes a story of his wives.

Another powerful woman, Marie Antoinette, also surfaces in the poem.
The Astrology and Astronomy facet corresponds with the rare event of Venus in Transit, said to occur at times when women are most powerful in history.

We just had one last week, on the occasion of the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee.
The Justice tarot card falls on the 11th path of the Qabalah Tree of Life:

Justine, 1957
Balthazar, 1958
Mountolive, 1958
Clea, 1960
The legal authority of Justice is expressed in Plath’s first lines:

“How superior”

“You are blue and huge, a traffic policeman”

and

“holding up one palm.”
Plath’s line, “I have one eye” corresponds to the character Nessim’s blinded eye, Pursewarden’s sister Liza’s blindness, and also to Justine, whose stroke leaves her with one drooping eye.
“The secret is stamped on you, / Faint, undulant watermark” refers to Leila’s smallpox.

“Wavery”: smallpox come in waves, both on the body, and as epidemics.
Plath’s third stanza, “Will it show in the black detector?” refers to the character of Mountolive approaching Alexandria by sea during a wartime blackout.
There are associations to Alexandria and Durrell’s real-life lover, Eve, in the lines: “Through the African giraffe and its Edeny greenery, The Moroccan hippopotamus” and “jungle gutterals”
“An illegitimate baby” is Melissa’s baby by Nessim.
It is interesting to note that Plath’s husband, Ted Hughes, left Plath for his Jewish lover, Assia Wevill, similar to Durrell leaving his wife Nancy for (also Jewish) Eve Cohen.
Justice vs. Strength
• Planet Earth vs. Planet Venus (for the Sun/Apollo)
• Athena vs. Aphrodite
• Minerva vs. Venus
• Lawrence Durrell’s character Justine as Aphrodite
• Lawrence Durrell’s real-life wife Nancy vs. Eve Cohen
• Sylvia Plath vs. Assia Wevill
In Mountolive, narrator Darley mocks both himself and the character of Pursewarden, brought in for comic relief, suiting the fools in the fourth stanza of “A Secret”.

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The line “Behind two eyes in which nothing is reflected but monkeys” touches on Nessim’s and Liza’s blindnesses again.

The monkeys also fit the Quartet’s characters, being slaves to their primitive natures---most especially the character of Justine.
A well-known moment: Justine spills perfume all over herself ("My god, there goes the stopper!").

In a parallel scene, Leila, now an old woman who’s had smallpox, runs into her former lover. She is drenched in a sickening perfume.
“An illegitimate baby---
That big blue head!
How it breathes in the bureau drawer”
---Sylvia Plath “A Secret”

In *The Alexandria Quartet*, the character Melissa has an illegitimate baby that dies. The baby is featured in this unforgettable scene:

“Clea’s account of the horrible party; driving with Justine they had seen a brown cardboard box by the road. They were late so they put it in the back and did not open it until they reached the garage. Inside was dead baby wrapped in newspaper. What to do with this wizened homunculus? Perfectly formed organs. Guests were due to arrive, they had to rush. Justine slipped it into drawer of the hall desk. Party a great success.”

(Durrell, 211)

Two babies, both in a drawer, cannot be coincidence!
“An exploded bottle of stout, / Slack foam in the lap,” and “Dwarf baby” refer to the alchemist Capodistria, who studies Paracelsus’ *De natura* and claims that he has seen homunculi himself:

“This Baron had...*actually produced* ten homunculi which he called his ‘prophesying spirits’. They were preserved in huge glass canisters. [...] They dangled lazily in those stout glass jars.” (Durrell, 809)
As lovers reconnect and re-injure each other throughout the Quartet books, “The knife in your back” line fits well too.
The precept on the Hermetic Emerald Tablet that correlates with the Justice card explains that there is life in everything, and all life should be honored and treated with equal respect and justice.
Sylvia Plath used “A Secret” to reveal the wonder of *The Alexandria Quartet*, and also the secret of women’s power, good and evil, to be used for justice and revenge—the meaning of the tarot card Justice.
Please see me, or write me at wordgirl@nighttimes.com for the complete paper on “A Secret.”

For more of my interpretations of Plath’s work, please see Indiana University’s online publication, Plath Profiles, volumes 3, 4 & 5.

Thank you.


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