Elizabeth Wenger
Undergraduate Division
Book Collection
Notes on Sontag

Summary:
This collection focuses on Susan Sontag and the line between Sontag as a private person and a public intellectual. The books were gathered in an attempt to understand Sontag both as a writer/critic who made incredible cultural contributions and as a person — a mother, wife, friend, and queer, Jewish woman — who strived for moral and intellectual perfection. Contained in the collection are Sontag's essays, novels, and plays, as well as some writings of those close to her (Roland Barthes, Phillip Rieff, Maria Irene Fornes). I've paired these works with biographical and critical works about Sontag. Through these various mediums, the collection works to triangulate the 'real' Sontag through the texts she left behind and the ink spilled about her.

Notes on Sontag

"Many things in the world have not been named; and many things, even if they have been named, have never been described," so begins Susan Sontag's 1964 essay "Notes on 'Camp.'" So too began my long obsession with Susan Sontag -- her works and her life. The essay, my first introduction to Sontag, attracted me with its witticism, its style, and its subject matter: 'Camp' an aesthetic sensibility which Sontag noted was especially common among queer subcultures. But I was caught on one phrase in particular:

> "Jews and homosexuals are the outstanding creative minorities in contemporary urban culture. Creative, that is, in the truest sense: they are creators of sensibilities. The two pioneering forces of modern sensibility are Jewish moral seriousness and homosexual aestheticism and irony."

I was interested not by the meaning of the words themselves, but by the particular irony of Sontag's authoritative distance from two identities she was more than just describing. Sontag *was* Jewish (though she took the last name of her goyish stepfather). And she was, if not openly queer, then a woman with many female partners. Sontag's struggle with her own marginal identities, both her silence and shame in them, intrigued me, particularly because she ran in artistic circles where these sort of differences were beginning to be celebrated in the 60s and 70s. Being gay and Jewish, a journal-keeper, and an avid reader myself, I found in Sontag something of a kinship, an admiration, and a frustration when her shame mirrored my own.

Where we differ of course, is not only a matter of era, but one of fame. Sontag's fame, like all fame, created a sort of dichotomy in her life. There was the private Sontag, a mother at seventeen, a brilliant woman with a thirst for knowledge and an insatiable hunger for travel. Then there was the public Sontag who spoke with a much affected mid-Atlantic accent. The woman who wrote *Against Interpretation* and diminished the distinction between low and high art. The woman who Warhol photographed. The woman whose semi-modernist, experimental novels never

matched the success of her non-fiction, but who declared herself a novelist anyway. The president of PEN America who spoke up when Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* endangered him and his publishers. The writer who condemned America during the Vietnam War and after 9/11. A woman whose self-assuredness earned her both admiration and resentment from her contemporaries, predecessors, and successors like Camille Paglia who's essay "Sontag, Bloody Sontag" criticized Sontag's arrogance and feminism.

Her works too can be divided between the public and private spheres. She found space on the page to explore many things, but very rarely published work on her private life and her own experiences. The life of the private Sontag remained locked in her journals until her son, David Rieff began to edit and collect them posthumously. These journals were of use to me when, in my Junior year I became interested in the ways in which Sontag navigated her position as literary icon while maintaining some semblance of privacy in her relationships. I began work on a short biography of Sontag that explored how her identity surfaced in her works, even as she tried to veil them behind the page. Though it was not a subject she dwelt on publicly, her identity as a queer, Jewish woman seem central to pieces like her monograph *AIDS and its Metaphors*, her documentary *Promised Lands* (about Israel), and her (perhaps most successful) short story "The Way We Live Now" which centers on characters who have been diagnosed with AIDS.

In my research, I happened upon a discounted copy of *Reborn,* the collected notebooks she kept between 1947 and 1964. Her journals dazzled me, and soon after I finished the first volume, I purchased the second. At times incredibly vulnerable, at others academic or aphoristic, they gave a revealing account of the life of an autodidact, a young girl discovering her sexuality, and a woman attempting to find a place for herself. The more I read, the more I wanted to know. Her constant aspirations to self-betterment; her commitment to reading more and wider; and her

constant eye to human interactions, culture, and art — simply put, her mind — made Sontag a mystery to me. I wanted to unravel the pages and find the writer underneath. Lucky for me, Sontag left a lasting impression in the world, both in print and in film.

Her notebooks, essays, novels, plays, stories, and interviews provided endless material to comb through as I attempted to triangulate a private identity of this famed public figure. My collection grew from this point. I gathered her classics (*Regarding the Pain of Others, On Photography, Against Interpretation*) and works by her contemporaries and artistic examples (Andy Warhol, Roland Barthes, Thomas Mann, Diane Arbus). Then, my friend, knowing my interest was turning into an obsession, gifted me Annie Leibovitz's *A Photographer's Life* which contains pictures of Sontag in her bed, by her books, at her desk, and in her final days, before she died of cancer in December of 2004. The photographs provide an more unguarded, intimate image of Sontag which, before the book's release, was difficult to discover. They showed a Sontag less celebrity, and more human.

***

Stretching from 1933 to 2004, Sontag's life intersected with crucial moments of American history. She bore witness — always with a critical, writer's eye. She was hungry to see and to record. She took the podium at protests, was there in Sarajevo during the siege, watched as the AIDS epidemic took friends and artists she loved, visited Warhol's Factory, documented the Yom Kippur War, and went with Leibovitz to ground zero after 9/11 to record the aftermath of a tragedy.

Sontag is in line with Jean-Paul Sartre's idea of the 'committed writer' as articulated in his essays "What is Literature?" and "Why write?" This is clear in her continued commitment to political and social engagement, and her concern for and inquiry into justice, ethics, and culture.

This commitment and engagement continued even during her first cancer diagnosis when she worked to demystify the disease by writing what would become *Illness as Metaphor.* The book presents a detailed study of the various representations of cancer, tuberculosis, and syphilis in literature and the ways in which these diseases have become symbols in everyday discourse. Even after being declared cancer-free, Sontag continued to answer inquiries from her readers and to help cancer patients receive the best care possible.

Though I consider Sontag an admirable and committed writer, it is hard to say Sontag *did* reach that moral and intellectual perfection she so strived for. Her biographies and journals reveal a deeply insecure woman who could be cruel to her friends, egotistical about her intellect, and overly-concerned with her image. But all these things, which have made her the subject of much criticism, seem only to make her more human. Sontag was *not* perfect, but the attention and criticism she drew are of relevance even today. Her life is a case study in the over-scrutiny of women who choose a life in the public eye as compared to men who live similarly.

In one illustrative clip from 1971, Sontag stands up in New York City Town Hall at a meeting of writers and cultural critics to confront Norman Mailer. The room is full when Sontag says to the much-respected writer:

> "Norman, it is true that women find, with the best of will, the way you talk to them patronizing and one of the things is your use of the word lady….I don't like being called a lady writer, Norman. I know it seems like gallantry to you, but it doesn't feel right to us."

In the video, Norman Mailer simply shakes his head and interrupts her, not to apologize, but to explain that when he called another writer the best "lady critic" he meant only "the best in kind."

It was Mailer who, years before, in 1960, stabbed his second wife, almost killing her, and subsequently claimed it was to relieve her of her cancer. His literary career continued. It was Mailer who was often excused for his many misogynistic, racist, and homophobic remarks on the basis of

his talent for writing. It was Mailer, an egoist as well, who sat on stage while Sontag stood in the audience to ask of him an equal amount of respect as that given to male writers.

When placed next to male contemporaries like Mailer, Sontag, though perhaps not as perfect a feminist as Paglia and others desired, provides an interesting case study of what it means to be a writer and critic and the special scrutiny that came with, and still comes with, being a woman in the public eye. There is something familiar in the criticisms of Sontag that ring true today in elections, in interviews, and in general media coverage of female figures.

Sontag was unapologetic in many ways, forthright, and prideful perhaps to a fault. But Sontag's public image, imposing as it was at times, and the authority with which she spoke paved the way and made a place for many who came after her. She pressed forward as a woman in a male-dominated field. She left her husband despite her knowledge that the action was indecorous at the time. She fought for custody of her child; she became a single mother, a professor, and a writer. She sought always to improve herself through reading and to safeguard literature as a stronghold for intellectual curiosity and debate. In collecting books about or by Sontag, I have grown in an understanding not only of her, but of morality, society, art, and myself. Even now, fifteen years after her death, Sontag remains often cited, and widely read. I smile anytime I happen upon her name in a new book or essay, feeling a connection to others who have discovered in Sontag some bit of well-articulated wisdom. The private Sontag rests peacefully in Montparnasse Cometary in Paris, but her words still shimmer and intrigue from between the covers of her books, continuing to echo in literature today.

Annotated Bibliography

Arbus, Diane, Doon Arbus, and Marvin Israel. *Diane Arbus*. Millerton, New York: Aperture, 1972. Print.

Sontag discusses Diane Arbus' photographs in her monograph *On Photography,* writing: "Arbus's work expressed her turn against what was public (as she experienced it), conventional, safe, reassuring — and boring — in favor of what was private, hidden, ugly, dangerous, and fascinating." In Arbus' photographs we see Sontag's interest in the blurred lines between the private and the public — the grotesque and the beautiful.

Barthes, Roland. *Camera lucida : reflections on photography*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981. Print.

Originally published in 1980, Barthes' book followed Sontag's 1977 collection *On Photography* discussing similar themes. The two writers were friends and colleagues, though at times, like many of her friendships, their relationship was turbulent and fraught. The two books are interesting reflections of their two separate styles. While both meditate on photography, Barthes' book takes himself as subject and Sontag's discusses the role of photography in society. See "Writing Itself" and "Remembering Barthes" in the digital section.

Beckett, Samuel. *Waiting for Godot*. New York, NY: Grove Press, 2011. Print.

Sontag staged *Waiting for Godot* in Sarajevo during the Siege of Sarajevo in the 1990s. She wrote of the experience: "People in Sarajevo know themselves to be terminally weak: waiting, hoping, not wanting to hope, knowing that they aren't going to be saved." The staging was a public statement on the hopelessness of war. But it was more than that. Sontag emphasized the importance of culture even in the worst and most violent of times. She viewed the production as a moment of relief for the besieged citizens. See Sontag's "Godot Comes to Sarajevo" in the digital collection.

Fornes, Maria I. *Fefu and her friends : a play*. New York Baltimore, Md: PAJ Publications Distributed by the Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990. Print.

Maria Irene Fornes was briefly romantically involved with Sontag in a complicated love-triangle involving writer, Harriet Sohmers, Sontag's ex-lover. Sontag and Fornes lived together in New York, spending much of their time writing together. Fornes wrote avant-garde and experimental plays. Like Sontag, Fornes sites *Waiting for Godot* as an influence.

Gombrowicz, Witold, and Danuta Borchardt. *Ferdydurke*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000. Print.

This book contains a foreword by Sontag. While a forward may seem inconsequential, Sontag's forwards, introductions, and book reviews mark her commitment to literature. Her book reviews

served to endorse and publicize many international writers. She was interested in translation generally, but found literary translation of special importance as a way to bridge cultural gaps and explore other cultural possibilities See “The World as India” in the digital collection.

Kennedy, Liam. *Susan Sontag : mind as passion*. Manchester, UK New York: Manchester University Press Distributed exclusively in the USA and Canada by St. Martin's Press, 1995. Print.

Leibovitz, Annie. *A photographer's life, 1990-2005*. New York: Random House, 2006. Print.

Leibovitz, Annie, and Susan Sontag. *Women*. New York: Random House, 1999. Print.

Though I did not realize it until I became interested in Sontag for her essays, it was through Annie Leibovitz’s collection of photographs *Women* that I was first exposed to Sontag. My mother kept a copy on a coffee table and I would flip through it from time to time. It contains an accompanying essay by Susan Sontag at its beginning. The two were partners for many years before Sontag’s death in 2004. I didn’t notice Susan Sontag’s name on the cover until I came home from college after having read Sontag’s journals.

Mann, Thomas, and H. T. Porter. *The magic mountain = Der Zauberberg*. New York: Modern Library, 1955. Print.

Sontag’s meeting with Thomas Mann at the age of fourteen had a profound influence on her. She later gave an account of the meeting in her 1987 New Yorker piece “Pilgrimage” (contained in *Debriefing: collected stories*). In the story, she describes the novel as a “transforming book,” saying “For a month the book was where I lived.” Mann’s novel and Sontag’s reading of it exemplify the importance of literature in Sontag’s life. *The Magic Mountain* also figures in to Sontag’s *Illness as Metaphor* in her discussion of tuberculosis and its representation in literature.

Rieff, David. *Swimming in a sea of death : a son's memoir*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008. Print.

Rieff, Philip. *Freud, the mind of the moralist*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979. Print.

At the age of seventeen, Sontag married Phillip Rieff after knowing him only ten days. Their marriage was brief (eight years in all), but out of it came David, Sontag’s son and companion. The book was written in the time Rieff and Sontag were still married. Though it is not certain to what extent she contributed, Sontag’s intellectual influence on Rieff has led some biographers to consider her an unofficial co-author of the book.

Rollyson, Carl E., and Lisa O. Paddock. *Susan Sontag : the making of an icon*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2000. Print.

Shilts, Randy. *And the Band Played on : Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* (1987). Print.

Shilt's massive expose on the AIDS epidemic was released in 1986, the same year as Sontag's short story "The Way We Live Now" was published in *The New Yorker.* Then, in, 1989 Sontag published *Aids and Its Metaphors,* contributing to the conversation surrounding AIDS and its connection to the gay community. Sontag herself, though never public about her personal same-sex relations, was a regular figure in queer, artistic circles in New York. She dedicated *AIDS and its Metaphors* to Paul Thek, a friend and artist who later died of AIDS. It was Thek, too, who inspired her famous essay *Against Interpretation* as he always said he was "against interpretation." Shilt's book gives context and provides a background on the AIDS epidemic that helped me to better understand what public ideas of the disease Sontag argued against in *AIDS and its Metaphors.*

Sontag, Susan, and David Rieff. *Reborn : journals and notebooks, 1947-1963*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008. Print.

———. *As consciousness is harnessed to flesh : journals and notebooks, 1964-1980*. New York: Picador, 2013. Print.

David Rieff, Sontag's son, is currently editing Sontag's journals, the whole of which are currently at UC Berkeley (where Sontag began her undergraduate studies). The two edited editions, *Reborn* and *As consciousness is harnessed to flesh* map Sontag's beginnings, her undergraduate years, into her marriage to Philip Rieff, her travels in Europe, and her early successes as a writer and public intellectual. Rieff plans to release a third volume which will contain the years between 1965 and Sontag's death in 2004. The journals are the only direct account we have of Sontag's life since she never published a memoir, though she at times spoke of plans to do so. They are a remarkably detailed record of Sontag's rise to fame. Contained within them are lists of books, films, artists, and philosophers; notes for what would become her essays; and diary-like entries about her relationships.

Sontag, Susan, and Benjamin Taylor. *Debriefing : collected stories*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017. Print.

Debriefing contains Sontag's stories. From the perspective of one looking for an engrossing collection of short stories, this volume might not be the place to look. They are wordy stories, revealing Sontag's true talent lay more in non-fiction (aside from her successful story "The Way We Live Now"). However, from the standpoint of a biographer, the stories offer great insight into Sontag's life. They are, many of them, reflections on Sontag's personal experiences and early life.

Sontag, Susan, and Jonathan Cott. *Susan Sontag : the complete Rolling Stone interview*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013. Print.

Sontag, Susan. *Against interpretation : and other essays*. New York: Anchor Books, 1990. Print.

———. *Alice in bed : a play in eight scenes*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1993. Print.

———.*The volcano lover : a romance*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1992. Print.

———.*Regarding the pain of others*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017. Print.

———.*On photography*. New York: Picador USA Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001. Print.

———.*Illness as metaphor ; and, AIDS and its metaphors*. New York: Doubleday, 1990. Print.

Warhol, Andy. *The philosophy of Andy Warhol : from A to B and back again*. New York: A Harvest Book, Harcourt Inc, 1975. Print.

I have contained Warhol here not only because he once photographed Sontag, but because Sontag was very interested in his work and because the two ran in similar circles. Both are famous figures and were key to deconstructing the line between high and low culture — Sontag, through her essays, and Warhol through his art.

Digital

Sontag, Susan. "Godot Comes to Sarajevo." *The New York Review of Books*, 21 Oct. 1993, www-nybooks-com.www2.lib.ku.edu/articles/1993/10/21/godot-comes-to-sarajevo/.

———. "The World as India: The St. Jerome Lecture on Literary Translation." *Susan Sontag Foundation*, 2007, www.susansontag.com/prize/onTranslation.shtml.

———."Writing Itself: On Roland Barthes." *The New Yorker*, The New Yorker, 26 Apr. 1982, www.newyorker.com/magazine/1982/04/26/writing-itself-on-roland-barthes.

———."Remembering Barthes." *The New York Review of Books*, 15 May 1980, www.nybooks.com/articles/1980/05/15/remembering-barthes/.

Promised Lands. Directed by Susan Sontag. DVD. 19 December 1974.

Sontag's 1974 documentary *Promised Lands* is strictly observational. Filmed during the Yom Kippur War, the footage of Israel at war is overlaid with voiceovers from narrators the viewer is never shown. It was released to mixed, though largely negative reviews.