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# Susan Sontag, Social Critic With Verve, Dies at 71

By MARGALIT FOX

**S**usan Sontag, the novelist, essayist and critic whose impassioned advocacy of the avant-garde and equally impassioned political pronouncements made her one of the most lionized presences - and one of the most polarizing - in 20th-century letters, died yesterday morning in Manhattan. She was 71 and lived in Manhattan.

The cause was complications of acute myelogenous leukemia, her son, David Rieff, said. Ms. Sontag, who died at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, had been ill with cancer intermittently for the last 30 years, a struggle that informed one of her most famous books, the critical study "Illness as Metaphor" (1978).

A highly visible public figure since the mid-1960's, Ms. Sontag wrote four novels, dozens of essays and a volume of short stories and was also an occasional filmmaker, playwright and theater director. For four decades her work was part of the contemporary canon, discussed everywhere from graduate seminars to the pages of popular magazines to the Hollywood movie "Bull Durham."

Ms. Sontag's work made a radical break with traditional postwar criticism in America, gleefully blurring the boundaries between high and popular culture. She advocated an aesthetic approach to the study of culture, championing style over content. She was concerned, in short, with sensation, in both meanings of the term.

"The theme that runs through Susan's writing is this lifelong struggle to arrive at the proper balance between the moral and the aesthetic," Leon Wieseltier, literary editor of The New Republic and an old friend of Ms. Sontag's, said in a telephone interview yesterday. "There was something unusually vivid about her writing. That's why even if one disagrees with it - as I did frequently - it was unusually stimulating. She showed you things you hadn't seen before; she had a way of reopening questions."

Through four decades, public response to Ms. Sontag remained irreconcilably divided. She was described, variously, as explosive, anticlimactic, original, derivative, naïve, sophisticated, approachable, aloof, condescending, populist, puritanical, sybaritic, sincere, posturing, ascetic, voluptuary, right-wing, left-wing, profound, superficial, ardent, bloodless, dogmatic, ambivalent, lucid, inscrutable, visceral, reasoned, chilly, effusive, relevant, passé, ambivalent, tenacious, ecstatic, melancholic, humorous,

humorless, deadpan, rhapsodic, cantankerous and clever. No one ever called her dull.

Ms. Sontag's best-known books, all published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux, include the novels "Death Kit" (1967), "The Volcano Lover" (1992) and "In America" (2000); the essay collections "Against Interpretation" (1966), "Styles of Radical Will" (1969) and "Under the Sign of Saturn" (1980); the critical studies "On Photography" (1977) and "AIDS and Its Metaphors" (1989); and the short-story collection "I, Etcetera" (1978). One of her most famous works, however, was not a book, but an essay, "Notes on Camp," published in 1964 and still widely read.

Her most recent book, published last year, was "Regarding the Pain of Others," a long essay on the imagery of war and disaster. One of her last published essays, "Regarding the Torture of Others," written in response to the abuse of Iraqi prisoners by Americans at Abu Ghraib, appeared in the May 23, 2004, issue of The New York Times Magazine.

### **An Intellectual With Style**

Unlike most serious intellectuals, Ms. Sontag was also a celebrity, partly because of her telegenic appearance, partly because of her outspoken statements. She was undoubtedly the only writer of her generation to win major literary prizes (among them a National Book Critics Circle Award, a National Book Award and a MacArthur Foundation genius grant) and to appear in films by Woody Allen and Andy Warhol; to be the subject of rapturous profiles in Rolling Stone and People magazines; and to be photographed by Annie Leibovitz for an Absolut Vodka ad. Through the decades her image - strong features, wide mouth, intense gaze and dark mane crowned in her middle years by a sweeping streak of white - became an instantly recognizable artifact of 20th-century popular culture.

Ms. Sontag was a master synthesist who tackled broad, difficult and elusive subjects: the nature of art, the nature of consciousness and, above all, the nature of the modern condition. Where many American critics before her had mined the past, Ms. Sontag became an evangelist of the new, training her eye on the culture unfolding around her.

For Ms. Sontag, culture encompassed a vast landscape. She wrote serious studies of popular art forms, like cinema and science fiction, that earlier critics disdained. She produced impassioned essays on the European writers and filmmakers she admired, like Jean-Paul Sartre, Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin and Jean-Luc Godard. She wrote experimental novels on dreams and the nature of consciousness. She published painstaking critical dissections of photography and dance; illness, politics and pornography; and, most famously, camp. Her work, with its emphasis on the outré, the jagged and the here and now, helped make the study of popular culture a respectable academic pursuit.

What united Ms. Sontag's output was a propulsive desire to define the forces that shape the modernist sensibility. And in so doing, she sought to explain what it meant to be human in the waning years of the 20th century.

To many critics, her work was bold and thrilling. Interviewed in *The Times Magazine* in 1992, the Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes compared Ms. Sontag to the Renaissance humanist Erasmus. "Erasmus traveled with 32 volumes, which contained all the knowledge worth knowing," he said. "Susan Sontag carries it in her brain! I know of no other intellectual who is so clear-minded, with a capacity to link, to connect, to relate."

## **A Bevy of Detractors**

Others were less enthralled. Some branded Ms. Sontag an unoriginal thinker, a popularizer with a gift for aphorism who could boil down difficult writers for mass consumption. (Irving Howe called her "a publicist able to make brilliant quilts from grandmother's patches.") Some regarded her tendency to revisit her earlier, often controversial positions as ambivalent. Some saw her scholarly approach to popular art forms as pretentious. (Ms. Sontag once remarked that she could appreciate Patti Smith because she had read Nietzsche.)

In person Ms. Sontag could be astringent, particularly if she felt she had been misunderstood. She grew irritated when reporters asked how many books she had in her apartment in the Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan (15,000; no television set). But she could also be warm and girlish, speaking confidingly in her rich, low voice, her feet propped casually on the nearest coffee table. She laughed readily, and when she discussed something that engaged her passionately (and there were many things), her dark eyes often filled with tears.

Ms. Sontag had a knack - or perhaps a penchant - for getting into trouble. She could be provocative to the point of being inflammatory, as when she championed the Nazi filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl in a 1965 essay; she would revise her position some years later. She celebrated the communist societies of Cuba and North Vietnam; just as provocatively, she later denounced communism as a form of fascism. After the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, she wrote in *The New Yorker*, "Whatever may be said of the perpetrators of Tuesday's slaughter, they were not cowards." And in 2000, the publication of Ms. Sontag's final novel, "In America," raised accusations of plagiarism, charges she vehemently denied.

Ms. Sontag was born Susan Rosenblatt in Manhattan on Jan. 16, 1933, the daughter of Jack and Mildred Rosenblatt. Her father was a fur trader in China, and her mother joined him there for long periods, leaving Susan and her younger sister in the care of relatives. When Susan was 5, her father died in China of tuberculosis. Seeking relief for Susan's asthma, her mother moved the family to Tucson, spending the next several years there. In Arizona, Susan's mother met Capt. Nathan Sontag, a World War II veteran sent there to recuperate. The couple were married - Susan took her stepfather's name - and the family moved to Los Angeles.

For Susan, who graduated from high school before her 16th birthday, the philistinism of American culture was a torment she vowed early to escape. "My greatest dream," she later wrote, "was to grow up and come to New York and write for *Partisan Review* and be read by 5,000 people."

She would get her wish - Ms. Sontag burst onto the scene with "Notes on Camp," which was published in *Partisan Review* - but not before she earned a bachelor's and two master's degrees from prestigious American universities; studied at Oxford on a fellowship; and married, became a mother and divorced eight years later, all by the time she turned 26.

After graduating from high school, Ms. Sontag spent a semester at the University of California, Berkeley, before transferring to the University of Chicago, from which she received a bachelor's degree in 1951. At Chicago she wandered into a class taught by the sociologist Philip Rieff, then a 28-year-old instructor, who would write the celebrated study "Freud: The Mind of the Moralizer" (Viking, 1959). He was, she would say, the first person with whom she could really talk; they were married 10 days later. Ms. Sontag was 17 and looked even younger, clad habitually in blue jeans, her black hair spilling down her back. Word swept around campus that Dr. Rieff had married a 14-year-old American Indian.

Moving with her husband to Boston, Ms. Sontag earned her master's degrees from Harvard, the first in English, in 1954, the second in philosophy the next year. She began work on a Ph.D., but did not complete her dissertation. In 1952 she and Dr. Rieff became the parents of a son. Ms. Sontag is survived by her son, David Rieff, who lives in Manhattan and was for many years her editor at Farrar, Straus & Giroux. (A journalist, he wrote "Slaughterhouse: Bosnia and the Failure of the West," published by Simon & Schuster in 1995.) Also surviving is her younger sister, Judith Cohen of Maui.

After further study at Oxford and in Paris, Ms. Sontag was divorced from Dr. Rieff in 1958. In early 1959 she arrived in New York with, as she later described it, "\$70, two suitcases and a 7 year old." She worked as an editor at *Commentary* and juggled teaching jobs at City College, Sarah Lawrence and Columbia. She published her first essays, critical celebrations of modernists she admired, as well as her first novel, "The Benefactor" (1963), an exploration of consciousness and dreams.

## **Shaking Up the Establishment**

With "Notes on Camp" Ms. Sontag fired a shot across the bow of the New York critical establishment, which included eminences like Lionel and Diana Trilling, Alfred Kazin and Irving Howe. Interlaced with epigrams from Oscar Wilde, that essay illuminated a particular modern sensibility - one that had been largely the province of gay culture - which centered deliciously on artifice, exaggeration and the veneration of style.

"The experiences of Camp are based on the great discovery that the sensibility of high culture has no monopoly on refinement," Ms. Sontag wrote. "The man who insists on high and serious pleasures is depriving himself of pleasure; he continually restricts what he can enjoy; in the constant exercise of his good taste he will eventually price himself out of the market, so to speak. Here Camp taste supervenes upon good taste as a daring and witty hedonism. It makes the man of good taste cheerful, where before he ran the risk of being chronically frustrated. It is good for the digestion."

If that essay has today lost its capacity to shock, it is a reflection of how thoroughly Ms. Sontag did her

job, serving as a guide to an underground aesthetic that was not then widely known.

"She found in camp an aesthetic that was very different from what the straight world had acknowledged up to that point, and she managed to make camp 'straight' in a way," Arthur C. Danto, the Johnsonian professor emeritus of philosophy at Columbia and the art critic for *The Nation*, said yesterday in a telephone interview. "I think she prepared the ground for the pop revolution, which was in many ways essentially a gay revolution, through Warhol and others. She didn't make that art, but she brought it to consciousness. She gave people a vocabulary for talking about it and thinking about it."

The article made Ms. Sontag an international celebrity, showered with lavish, if unintentionally ridiculous, titles ("a literary pinup," "the dark lady of American letters," "the Natalie Wood of the U.S. avant-garde").

### **Championing Style Over Content**

In 1966 Ms. Sontag published her first essay collection, "Against Interpretation." That book's title essay, in which she argued that art should be experienced viscerally rather than cerebrally, helped cement her reputation as a champion of style over content.

It was a position she could take to extremes. In the essay "On Style," published in the same volume, Ms. Sontag offended many readers by upholding the films of Leni Riefenstahl as masterworks of aesthetic form, with little regard for their content. Ms. Sontag would eventually reconsider her position in the 1974 essay "Fascinating Fascism."

Though she thought of herself as a novelist, it was through her essays that Ms. Sontag became known. As a result she was fated to write little else for the next quarter-century. She found the form an agony: a long essay took from nine months to a year to complete, often requiring 20 or more drafts.

"I've had thousands of pages for a 30-page essay," she said in a 1992 interview. " 'On Photography,' which is six essays, took five years. And I mean working every single day."

That book, which won the National Book Critics Circle Award for criticism in 1978, explored the role of the photographic image, and the act of picture-taking in contemporary culture. The crush of photographs, Ms. Sontag argued, has shaped our perceptions of the world, numbing us to depictions of suffering. She would soften that position when she revisited the issue in "Regarding the Pain of Others."

The Washington Post Book World called "On Photography" "a brilliant analysis," adding that it "merely describes a phenomenon we take as much for granted as water from the tap, and how that phenomenon has changed us - a remarkable enough achievement, when you think about it."

In the mid-1970's Ms. Sontag learned she had breast cancer. Doctors gave her a 10 percent chance of surviving for two years. She scoured the literature for a treatment that might save her, underwent a

mastectomy and persuaded her doctors to give her a two-and-a-half-year course of radiation.

Out of her experience came "Illness as Metaphor," which examined the cultural mythologizing of disease (tuberculosis as the illness of 19th-century romantics, cancer a modern-day scourge). Although it did not discuss her illness explicitly, it condemned the often militaristic language around illness ("battling" disease, the "war" on cancer) that Ms. Sontag felt simultaneously marginalized the sick and held them responsible for their condition..

In "AIDS and Its Metaphors" Ms. Sontag discussed the social implications of the disease, which she viewed as a "cultural plague" that had replaced cancer as the modern bearer of stigma. She would return to the subject of AIDS in her acclaimed short story "The Way We Live Now," originally published in *The New Yorker* and included in "The Best American Short Stories of the Century" (Houghton Mifflin, 1999).

Although Ms. Sontag was strongly identified with the American left during the Vietnam era, in later years her politics were harder to classify. In the essay "Trip to Hanoi," which appears in "Styles of Radical Will," she wrote glowingly of a visit to North Vietnam. But in 1982 she delivered a stinging blow to progressives in a speech at Town Hall in Manhattan. There, at a rally in support of the Solidarity movement in Poland, she denounced European communism as "fascism with a human face."

In 1992, weary of essays, Ms. Sontag published "The Volcano Lover," her first novel in 25 years. Though very much a novel of ideas - it explored, among other things, notions of aesthetics and the psychology of obsessive collecting - the book was also a big, old-fashioned historical romance. It told the story of Sir William Hamilton, the 18th-century British envoy to the court of Naples; his wife, Emma ("that Hamilton woman"); and her lover, Lord Nelson, the naval hero. The book spent two months on *The New York Times* best-seller list.

Reviewing the novel in *The Times*, Michiko Kakutani wrote: "One thing that makes 'The Volcano Lover' such a delight to read is the way it throws off ideas and intellectual sparks, like a Roman candle or Catherine wheel blazing in the night. Miniature versions of 'Don Giovanni' and 'Tosca' lie embedded, like jewels, in the main narrative; and we are given as well some charmingly acute cameos of such historical figures as Goethe and the King and Queen of Naples."

Ms. Sontag's final novel, "In America," was loosely based on the life of the 19th-century Polish actress Helena Modjeska, who immigrated to California to start a utopian community. Though "In America" received a National Book Award, critical reception was mixed. Then accusations of plagiarism surfaced. As *The Times* reported in May 2000, a reader identified at least a dozen passages as being similar to those in four other books about the real Modjeska, including Modjeska's memoirs. Except for a brief preface expressing a general debt to "books and articles by and on Modjeska," Ms. Sontag did not specifically acknowledge her sources.

Interviewed for *The Times* article, Ms. Sontag defended her method. "All of us who deal with real

characters in history transcribe and adopt original sources in the original domain," she said. "I've used these sources and I've completely transformed them. I have these books. I've looked at these books. There's a larger argument to be made that all of literature is a series of references and allusions."

Ms. Sontag's other work includes the play "Alice in Bed" (1993); "A Susan Sontag Reader" (1982), with an introduction by Elizabeth Hardwick; and four films, including "Duet for Cannibals" (1969) and "Brother Carl" (1971). She also edited works by Barthes, Antonin Artaud, Danilo Kis and other writers.

Ms. Sontag was the subject of an unauthorized biography by Carl Rollyson and Lisa Paddock, "Susan Sontag: The Making of an Icon" (Norton, 2000), and of several critical studies, including "Sontag & Kael: Opposites Attract Me," by Craig Seligman (Counterpoint/Perseus, 2004). She was the president of the PEN American Center from 1987 to 1989.

In a 1992 interview with The Times Magazine, Ms. Sontag described the creative force that animated "The Volcano Lover," putting her finger on the sensibility that would inform all her work: "I don't want to express alienation. It isn't what I feel. I'm interested in various kinds of passionate engagement. All my work says, be serious, be passionate, wake up."

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