

Susan Sontag documentary

Grande dame

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PROVOCATIVE, poetic, imperious, grand—Susan Sontag continues to inspire outsized adjectives ten years after her death. In a new documentary, “Regarding Susan Sontag”, due out on HBO this week, Nancy Kates weaves together the various strands of Sontag’s life and work to provide a dynamic, if somewhat star-struck, new portrait of her subject.

Writers do not often loom larger than their words, but Sontag’s persona appears inseparable from her highly prescient and quotable prose. She was both cultural critic and icon. The words, images and cast of characters she accrued in a life vigorously lived form an immense trove through which to sort. Using interviews, archive footage and, most importantly, Sontag’s own writing, the film celebrates the imposing persona, but also critiques various aspects of her life, such as her public reticence on her homosexuality and gay rights, her infidelities and frequent maltreatment of those closest to her, and the quality of some of her work, not least her novels and films.

Entering college at 15, marrying a professor at 17 after a 10-day courtship, and giving birth at 19, Sontag’s seeming impatience to devour life frames the film as much as her criticism and celebrity status. As her words on the screen testify, “My idea of a writer: someone interested in everything. Like a hyperactive queen I cruise culture daily, have a thrill or flash of ecstasy several times a week, my appetite is compulsive, promiscuous.” As Alice Kaplan, a critic, observes, “She was someone who was constantly being reborn—constantly discovering things and becoming a new person. That’s kind of her essential avant gardism.”

While on a fellowship at Oxford in her early 20s, Sontag made her first trip to Paris, where in the 1950s so much of America’s avant garde seemed to find a natural home. Harriet Sohmers Zwerling, the

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writer's first lover, accompanied her to France and recounts that the day before they were due to host an expat party she punched Sontag in a jealous rage. At the party, noticing Sontag's bruise, Allen Ginsberg asked Zwerling, "Why'd you hit her, she's younger and prettier than you." Zwerling replied, "That's why." Sontag possessed a magnetism that even in their moments of greatest candour the film and the people in it—some of them deeply hurt by her—seem unable to withstand.

While much has been made of Sontag's desire to remain private about her sexuality, she also wrote about it often and gave it an enshrined place in her life and intellectual development. Wayne Koestenbaum, a writer, wryly sums the situation in the film: "Does the author of 'Notes on Camp' have to come out?" The film takes us through her experiences as a very young undergraduate in Berkeley and San Francisco in the late 1940s, discovering the area's underground queer culture and her own place within it. "Everything begins from now...I am reborn," she writes, "I have been given permission to live..." Of its connection to her writing she observed, "My desire to write is connected to my homosexuality. I need the identity as a weapon to match the weapon that society has against me. I am just becoming aware of how guilty I feel being queer."

Along with "Notes on Camp", Sontag's essays in "Against Interpretation" and "On Photography" will perhaps form the core of her literary legacy. It was this legacy that particularly concerned her. After "On Photography" was published to much critical acclaim, a friend found her nearly distraught. She asked him: "It's not as good as Benjamin, is it?" As her son observes, "My mother was afraid of extinction."

The film's emphasis on Sontag's glamorous vitality helps define a writer who engaged with life in a way that her words only partially describe. It is itself highly engaging, with a cast of characters that includes Andy Warhol, Norman Mailer, Nadine Gordimer, William F. Buckley and Annie Leibovitz. It fills out more of her story for those who are already fans and for others delivers a fitting tribute to one of the last century's unapologetically grand intellectuals.

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