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Desperately Seeking Susan: HBO's *Regarding Susan Sontag* Traces the Life Behind the Critic

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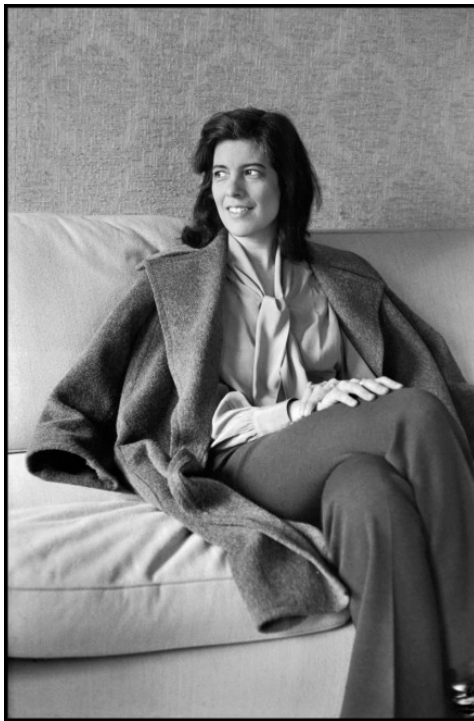


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The first time Susan Sontag picked up a copy of *Partisan Review*, the story goes, she was in high school, in North Hollywood, and she hardly understood what she was reading. The journal, a small but vaunted quarterly, had become the figurehead for a renaissance in American intellectual life. Despite not comprehending it—or perhaps exactly for that reason—the teenaged Sontag wanted membership in the club that it seemed to represent. Over the half-century that followed, in more than a dozen books, several plays, and a few films, she worked not only to earn her stripes as a postwar intellectual, but to test the changing boundaries of that post. Imbued with bohemian style and a self-begotten mandate earnest even by the era's standards, Sontag led a generation of young critics and glamorized public intellectualism along the way. She saw writing as a personal act that bore global responsibility. “I didn't feel that I was expressing myself,” she's quoted as saying in *Regarding Susan Sontag*, a new biographical

documentary by **Nancy Kates** airing tonight on HBO. “I felt that I was taking part in a noble activity.”

Sontag's belief in the nobility of her work, and in the particular style of life sustaining it, never wavered, even as her output varied in form, quality, and intent. Where many of her critical contemporaries made their names with one book—**Germaine Greer** with *The Female Eunuch*, Alfred Kazin with *On Native Grounds*—Sontag refreshed her reputation several times, in many subject matters: *Against Interpretation* in the mid-sixties, *On Photography* in the late-seventies, *AIDS and Its Metaphors* a decade later. Her pursuits were frequently self-contradictory. Even held constant, they could tend toward fatuousness. (Invited to help stage a play with joy-starved residents of Sarajevo, she famously subjected them to *Waiting for Godot*). Still, Sontag's influence in postwar criticism is nearly unmatched. As Kates's documentary makes clear, few authors seized as fully the range of experience, intellectual and physical, that the writing life allowed, and used it to help with the crucial naming of their world.

Sontag was known as the ultimate postwar New York intellectual, but she climbed to that perch from outside. Her father traded furs in China and died there when Sontag was five; she spent the rest of her childhood under the wandering eye of her mother, who settled down first in Tucson,

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Arizona, and then in the valley suburbs of Los Angeles. “Sue” Sontag’s high school friend, **Peter Haidu**, tells us in the film that she had an early penchant for discoursing (or presuming to discourse) on Kant. Eager to join the adult world, she set off for UC Berkeley at fifteen. Collegiate life proved revelatory both intellectually (she learned for the first time that the French novelist was pronounced “Proost,” not “Prowst”) and sexually (she had her first love affair with another woman, and was shown the wild world of San Francisco gay bars). It was the start of her long self-transformation from a suburban West Coast girl into an urbane East Coast writer.

With her Berkeley degree unfinished, Sontag transferred to the University of Chicago (she liked its old-school Great Books program), where she encountered Philip Rieff, a sociology instructor. “At seventeen, I met a thin, heavy-thighed, balding man who talked and talked, snobbishly, bookishly, and called me ‘Sweet,’” she wrote. They were married after a courtship of ten days. In the course of their eight-year union, Sontag had a son and enrolled in graduate school at Harvard. She soon became impatient with the university’s doctoral program, though, and also with domestic life. She scored a fellowship to Oxford, leaving her husband and son behind, but after less than a year, she became impatient with Oxford, too, so she enrolled at the University of Paris, living with her erstwhile Berkeley lover, **Harriet Sohmers Zwerling**. (Zwerling, an outsize personality who has a way with description, is a welcome dash of spice among the documentary’s staid interviewees.) This was the effective end of Sontag’s marriage: She simply left and never looked back. “Susan was not sensitive. Was not a sensitive person,” reports **Eva Kollisch**, one of her lovers. When her only sister married, Sontag didn’t show up at the wedding.

Though Sontag is today remembered as a New Yorker, Paris was crucial to her, and her conception of literary life was basically French—dark glasses, dark studies, dark chic. “Her style as a writer was inseparable from her style as a person,” journalist **Mark Danner** says. In Paris, needing money, she’d gotten a walk-on part in an early New Wave film. Her sense of Continental cinematic cool helped shape the persona she cultivated in Manhattan. Sontag began publishing exactly at the moment she found herself in a burgeoning avant-garde scene centering on the Factory, the happenings, and a range of ambitious low art. That milieu gave rise to the essay that made Sontag famous, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” which first appeared in *Partisan Review* in 1964. It helped to bring about one of the greatest revolutions in the criticism of the sixties.

“Notes on ‘Camp’” was written in the arch, declarative tone of a philosophical text. But it applied this high-intellectual analysis to the hip cultural ether through which a young, city-based generation had begun to travel. “Camp involves a new, more complex relation to ‘the serious.’ One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious,” she wrote in one of 58 “notes”—an attempt to define the indefinable that might have stood for Sontag’s own goals of the time. *Against Interpretation*, the 1966 collection containing “Notes on ‘Camp,’” traced out a brand-new style of sensual intellectualism, one that could commute between the great books and the Supremes, Brechtian theater and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Sontag became a cultural interpreter in a nation that, across the ferment of the sixties, desperately needed one. But she also helped to situate a messy efflorescence of new lifestyles and fashions in the long canon of Western thought.

Kates’s documentary makes clear that this project grew largely from an alchemy of Sontag’s own ambitions and insecurities. On one hand, she was an adventurer, restless and inquisitive and always seeking out the new. (Sontag was very proud that she spent her 40th, 50th, and 60th birthdays in, respectively, China, France, and wartime Sarajevo.) On the other, she seemed to harbor fixed and somewhat antique ideas about what proper intellectualism ought to look like. During one protracted stay in Paris, Sontag lived in an apartment that, years earlier, had been Sartre’s—a gesture of fan-girl tourism that would embarrass many mature writers. Her prose, even at its best, was never virtuosic, largely because it was clouded by formal imitation and a grandiosity of mission—the work of a stylist who had ideas of what “serious” writing sounded like. She flashed her Western-canon credentials in a way that seemed a kind of tic, and held herself to

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almost comical standards. When Sontag published *On Photography* in 1977, she was dissatisfied. “It’s not as good as Walter Benjamin, is it?” she asked Don Levine. (Benjamin, a Frankfurt School thinker, wrote presciently about the photographic medium.) In public, Sontag affected a disregard for everything except the life of the mind, yet her journals and notebooks reveal her to have had an intense preoccupation with how she came off and a lifelong devotion to banal-seeming projects of self-improvement. From a 1961 list of self-directives:

- 1. Not to repeat myself**
- 2. Not to try to be amusing**
- 3. To smile less, talk less. Conversely, and most important, to mean it when I smile, and to believe what I say + say only what I believe**
- 4. To sew on my buttons (+ button my lip)**
- 5. To try to repair things which don’t work**
- 6. To take a bath every day, and wash my hair every ten days. Same for D.**
- 7. To think about why I bite my nails in the movies**
- 8. Not to make fun of people, be catty, criticize other people’s looks, etc. (all this is vulgar and vain)**
- 9. To be more economical (because the carefree way I spend money makes me more dependent on earning this much money)**

This private Sontag—self-conscious, self-constructed, and self-critical on the small matters of daily life—was one that remained hidden in the public eye. Kates, to her credit, lets it come through slightly. “Do I resent not being a genius?” Sontag once asked herself, as quoted in the film. She seems to have believed in great men and great women as great thinkers—and great thinkers as large, marble busts whose company she aspired to join. She was certain she never got there. At the end of her life, according to scholar **Terry Castle**, “she was haunted by a sense that her younger self would not have been satisfied; that she hadn’t been good enough. I think she was terrorized by the fact of her own transience—that she, too, would become a part of the past, fade to black.”

In the end, of course, she did. The last chapter of Kates’s documentary is the most moving; it centers on Sontag’s struggles with her third, most lethal, bout of cancer. Sontag’s zest for life, her joy at being in the world and being able to decipher it through writing, was genuine. (“Death,” she once wrote, “is the opposite of everything.”) Her son, **David Rieff**, tells a haunting story about her final experience receiving a transplant at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle. “When the doctors came to tell her it hadn’t worked, she started to scream,” he says. This last moment of drama, of clinging to life and her own intentions, may be as fine a distillation of Sontag’s approach as anything. “She represents grandiosity, I think, and it is a little comic,” **Wayne Koestenbaum**, the poet and critic, explains at one point. “Her seriousness is kind of camp because it seems a bit of a pose, and it’s mannered and stylized. But that’s part of the fun of the package of Susan Sontag.” It is part of the fun of her life on the screen, too.

<http://www.vogue.com/6052607/regarding-susan-sontag-hbo-documentary/>