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Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and  
American Literature

Guide to the

**May Sarton letters and poems**

1932-1985

Berg Coll MSS 186028

Processed by Emily P. Dunne in 2022.

## Summary

**Creator:** Sarton, May, 1912-1995

**Title:** May Sarton letters and poems

**Date:** 1932-1985

**Size:** 0.21 linear feet (1 box)

**Source:** Gift of Stanhope Cunningham in 2021.

**Abstract:** May Sarton (1912-1995) was a writer, novelist, and poet born in Wondelgem, Belgium, and raised in Cambridge, Massachusetts. This collection dates from 1932 through 1985 and contains newspaper clippings, poems, correspondence, and photographs. The majority of the correspondence is with Sarton's friends, sisters Roswell and Margaret Hawley.

## Conditions Governing Access:

Materials in folder 7 are restricted due to preservation concerns.

**Preferred citation:** May Sarton letters and poems, Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, The New York Public Library

**Language of the Material:** English

**Processing note:** Processed by Emily P. Dunne in 2022.

## Creator History

May Sarton (1912-1995) was a writer, poet, and novelist. Sarton was born Eleanore Marie Sarton in Belgium, but her family fled the country in 1914, first to England, then to Massachusetts. Sarton became interested in theatre and writing poetry and traveled throughout Europe in the late 1930s. During this time Sarton met several literary figures, including Virginia Woolf, and published her first novel. Upon returning to the states in 1939, Sarton continued writing novels, poems and screenplays. During this time, Sarton supported herself with her writing and also gave lectures and taught poetry

classes for colleges around the country. However, she expressed interest in learning to work at a factory because, at times, she struggled to find teaching jobs or paid speaking opportunities.

Through the 1940s and early 1950s Sarton published several novels and books of poetry, while continuing to give lectures and teach poetry. While in Santa Fe, New Mexico, Sarton met her partner, Judith "Judy" Matlack. Later, the couple established a home together in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where Matlack was a professor at Simmons College in Boston. In 1956 Sarton's father, George Sarton passed away and left an inheritance to Sarton, including the family home. No longer required to supplement her writing income with teaching and speaking engagements, Sarton sold her parents' home and moved to Nelson, New Hampshire in 1958. During this time Sarton and her partner of nearly fifteen years, Judith Matlack separated.

Sarton died of breast cancer in 1995. Her last book, *Coming into Eighty*, was published posthumously and described her gratitude for life.

## **Custodial History**

Gift of Roswell Hawley to Phyllis Fenn Cunningham (1903-2003); by descent to Stanhope Cunningham.

## **Scope and Content Note**

The May Sarton letters and poems date from 1932 through 1985, with most materials from 1939 through 1960. The collection contains newspaper clippings about Sarton, typewritten copies of her poems, correspondence with sisters Roswell ("Roz") and Margaret Hawley, and photographs of Sarton and her parents. The collection is loosely arranged by type: newspaper clippings, correspondence, Christmas poems, and typewritten poems. These groupings have been arranged chronologically.

From the 1930s until the mid-1960s, Sarton would write to her friend Roswell Hawley and later her sister Margaret Hawley. Sarton would describe her personal and professional life and often included a typewritten copy of one her poems in addition to her letter. Roswell Hawley was interested in writing, with Sarton often asking Hawley's opinion about current theatre and plays. Margaret Hawley was interested in the visual arts, and Sarton mentions her admiration for Margaret Hawley's paintings despite her distaste for modern visual art.

During her correspondence with the Hawley sisters, Sarton mentions several projects including publishing books and poems while also teaching or giving lectures throughout the United States. Their correspondence also covers different milestones in Sarton's life, including the death of both of Sarton's parents, meeting her partner Judy Matlack and their eventual breakup, and moving to a house in Nelson, New Hampshire in 1956.

The collection includes two photographs. One is inscribed to Roswell Hawley showing May Sarton in a field in Austria, holding a flower. The second is an undated photograph of her parents and cat sent to Roswell Hawley after the death of Sarton's father.

Sarton's letters also include several ideas for stories and plays, and give an incomplete chronology of some of the poems and pieces published during this time, including novels, plays, and stories submitted to magazines including *Cosmopolitan*, *Today's Woman*, *The New Yorker*, and *Town and Country*.

The collection also holds several poems that are undated, but likely from the 1940s. The poems include

an untitled submission to *Atlantic Monthly* in March of 1940 and "The Scholar Mourns," published in *Nature* in June 1940. Several other poems are in the collection, including "Airman's Mother," "Villanelle," "This Gift of Passion," "Out of a Desolate Source," and "These Images Remain."

In addition to her personal correspondence with the Hawley sisters, Sarton would send an annual card with a New Year's or Christmas poem. The Christmas poems in this collection date from 1941 through 1963. Sarton explored themes of the global impact of World War II, her experiences living in New Mexico with her partner, friendship, and later living alone in a home in Nelson, New Hampshire. In 1963 the annual poem included a note stating that the Christmas poems' mailing list had grown to be almost eight hundred recipients, and she would be scaling back the mailings.

The clippings in this collection include two articles detailing some of her professional accomplishments of Sarton in the 1940s and 1985. The other clippings include poems originally published in *Atlantic Monthly*, *Lyric*, and *Voices*, then reprinted in local newspapers.

## **Key Terms**

### **Genre/Physical Characteristic**

Poetry

### **Subjects**

Poetry, Modern -- 20th century

Women -- Correspondence

World War, 1939-1945 -- Poetry

### **Names**

Hawley, Margaret

Hawley, Roswell

Sarton, May, 1912-1995

## Container List

### Correspondence, Hawley Sisters 1932-1964

Some correspondence also contains a copy of a poem Sarton was sharing with the Hawley sisters. Typewritten poems are filed with the original letter.

#### Rosewell Hawley 1932-1964

- b. 1 f. 1 1932 April 23  
Includes a copy of the poem "Portrait of the Artist (Into a Carnation)."
- b. 1 f. 1 Photograph of May Sarton, Austria 1936
- b. 1 f. 1 1938 October 30
- b. 1 f. 1 1938 December 15
- b. 1 f. 1 1939 February 12
- b. 1 f. 1 1939 March 16
- b. 1 f. 1 1939 September 23  
Includes a copy of the poem "Jardins du Luxembourg."
- b. 1 f. 1 1939 December 21
- b. 1 f. 1 1940 February 4
- b. 1 f. 1 1940 March 24
- b. 1 f. 1 1940 July  
Includes a copy of the poem "What The Old Man Said, for Lugné-Poe."
- b. 1 f. 1 1940 August 16
- b. 1 f. 1 1940 August 31
- b. 1 f. 1 1940 December 28  
Includes a copy of the poem "Of the Seasons, Sangre de Christo Mountains."
- b. 1 f. 2 1942 February 15
- b. 1 f. 2 1949 December 22-24
- b. 1 f. 2 1950 October 3
- b. 1 f. 2 1951 August 9
- b. 1 f. 2 1951 September 23
- b. 1 f. 2 1954 February 28
- b. 1 f. 2 1964 September 29
- b. 1 f. 2 Postcard 1958 February 4
- b. 1 f. 2 1964 September 29

#### Margaret Hawley 1947-1960

- b. 1 f. 3 1947 August 24
- b. 1 f. 3 1947 December 13
- b. 1 f. 3 1948 February 16
- b. 1 f. 3 1940 March 25
- b. 1 f. 3 1940 March 24
- b. 1 f. 3 1954 January 27
- b. 1 f. 3 1956 April 24  
Contains a photograph of May Sarton's parents and cat in a garden.
- b. 1 f. 3 1959 January 1

Correspondence, Hawley Sisters (cont.)

Margaret Hawley (cont.)

b. 1 f. 3 1960 May 3

b. 1 f. 3 1960 June 12

Includes a copy of the poem "Where Warriors Stood," originally written in Thanksgiving of 1938.

Typewritten Poems 1940s-1950s

b. 1 f. 4 "Airman's Mother" 1940s-1950s

b. 1 f. 4 "Villanelle" 1940

b. 1 f. 4 "These Images Remain" 1940s-1950s

Submitted to *Atlantic Monthly*.

b. 1 f. 4 "Out of a Desolate Source" 1940s-1950s

b. 1 f. 4 "From Cornwall," "The Trees," "Week-End," "On Hampshire Downs," and "Evening Landscape" 1940s-1950s

Five poems.

b. 1 f. 4 "Allegory," "A Rose for Rilke," "Revelation," "Grace," and "Hyacinth" 1940s-1950s

Five poems dated through January and February.

b. 1 f. 4 "Even That Dark Land" 1940s-1950s

b. 1 f. 4 "This Gift of Passion" 1940s-1950s

b. 1 f. 4 "The Scholar Mourns" 1940

Based on a 1940 June 22 article published in *Nature* about Professor Michael Siedlecki, who was imprisoned in a concentration camp near Berlin, and died there in January 1940.

Christmas Poems 1941-1961

b. 1 f. 5 "A New Year Poem 1942" 1941 December

b. 1 f. 5 "Celebrations 1943" 1942 December

b. 1 f. 5 "New Year Letter 1944" 1943 December

b. 1 f. 5 "The Joys" 1944 December

b. 1 f. 5 "Beautiful Upon The Mountains" 1945 December

b. 1 f. 5 "The Birthday" 1946 December

b. 1 f. 5 "New Year Poem 1948" 1947 December

b. 1 f. 5 "The Invisible Bridges" 1948 December

b. 1 f. 5 "Letter to an Indian Friend" 1949 December

There are two copies of this poem. Sent from Santa Fe, New Mexico.

b. 1 f. 5 "New Year Poem 1951" 1950 December

There are two copies of this poem. Originally typewritten as "New Years Poem 1950," one copy has a penciled note makes a correction to the title as "New Year Poem 1951."

b. 1 f. 6 "The Tree" 1951 December

b. 1 f. 6 "Of Friendship at Christmas" 1952 December

b. 1 f. 6 "On Being Given Time" 1953 December

b. 1 f. 6 "Nativity" 1954 December

b. 1 f. 6 "Lifting Stone, A Painting by Katharine Sturges" 1955 December

b. 1 f. 6 "A Celebration" 1956 December

b. 1 f. 6 "Minting Time" 1957 December

b. 1 f. 6 "Reflections by a Fire" 1958 December

There are two copies of this poem.

b. 1 f. 6 "A Flower Arranging Summer" 1960 December

Christmas Poems (cont.)

- b. 1 f. 6 "The Beautiful Pauses" 1961 December
- b. 1 f. 6 "A Recognition, For Perley Cole" 1962 December
- b. 1 f. 6 "The House in Winter" 1963 December  
There are two copies of this poem.

Newspaper Clippings 1940s-1985

Contains reprints of the poems "Santos: New Mexico," "Return to Chartres," "Bird of Glass," "The Action of the Beautiful," "The Lady and the Unicorn," "Evening Journey," "After Four Years," and "Query." Contains three articles about May Sarton, "A More or Less Open Letter to May Sarton Who Left the Stage to Take Up the Pen," 1940; a profile in a recurring article "Books and Things," 1950s; "The Heart of the Poet, In Youth and in Age," 1950s; and "Author Thrills Her Fans," 1985 October 15. The title of the newspapers where these articles were published are not included in the clippings.

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