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Summary Article: **Sylvia Plath 1932-1963**

From *Encyclopedia of Creativity*

Novelist and poet

Author of *The Colossus and Other Poems, Ariel, The Bell Jar, Crossing the Water, Winter Trees, and The Collected Poems*

SYLVIA PLATH (Victoria Lucas) was a creative American poet who died at the age of 30 in 1963 in England by putting her head in a gas oven. She wrote several volumes of poetry and a novel. Her work was based on her life experiences and had a confessional quality common also to the poets Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton. Plath had a severe depression when she was an undergraduate student, during which she attempted suicide. She was treated with electroconvulsive therapy and psychotherapy. Her life provides an opportunity to explore how creativity and psychiatric disorder interact throughout the course of a life history.



Sylvia Plath seated in front of a bookshelf. (Copyright CORBIS/Bettmann.)

Background

Plath's father, Otto Plath, was born in 1885 in the German town of Grabow. He emigrated to the United States when he was 15 years old and earned a doctorate in 1928, specializing in the study of bees. He began teaching at Boston University where he met a student named Aurelia Schober who was 21 years his junior. After divorcing his first wife, he married Aurelia in 1932. Sylvia Plath was born on October 27, 1932, three weeks ahead of schedule. She was somewhat frail because of a sinus condition that plagued her for the rest of her life. Two and a half years later, her brother Warren was born.

Plath's early years were uneventful. She apparently was quite bright and used her intelligence to please her father, as many firstborns do. She learned the Latin names for insects, and Otto would show off her skill to visitors. From the beginning, she earned straight As in school, impressing teachers with her intelligence and dedication. Aurelia read a lot to the children as they grew, and Plath's verbal skills were so advanced that she went to school at age 4 and excelled right away. By age 5, she was writing short poems.

Otto fell ill in 1935, and he deteriorated over the next 4 years. He decided that he had lung cancer and chose not to seek treatment so that he would die quickly. He, therefore, initially refused to consult with doctors. In 1940, he noticed weird symptoms and finally sought medical advice. He found out that he had diabetes, which was treatable at that time, but he had waited too long before seeking treatment. In October 1940 his leg was amputated, and he died of an embolism on November 5, 1940, 8 days after

Sylvia's birthday. Early loss is common among those who later commit suicide, and it may make them less able to cope with loss later in life.

Aurelia moved to Wellesley where she could raise her children in an educated and middle-class community and give them high-achievement experiences. Plath's first poem appeared in the *Boston Sunday Herald* in August 1941, when she was 8½ years old, and she won a prize for a drawing in another contest. As she progressed through school, her work continued to be outstanding, and she received many awards. She quickly developed an interest in literature and in writing. In junior high school she received straight As and a perfect record of punctuality. Her poems and drawings continued to win prizes. Her IQ was about 160. High school continued in the same vein. Plath took the advanced literature courses and edited the school magazine in her senior year. Her stories and poems appeared in magazines such as *Seventeen* and the *Christian Science Monitor*. She was also active in the local Unitarian church and in the community. She ranked first among the 158 graduates and was admitted to Smith College on a scholarship. Her biographers do not mention psychological problems at this time in Plath's life, though she tended to suffer from depression whenever her sinuses or menstrual cramps bothered her. However, the frequency and severity of the depressions is unclear. Plath's career at Smith was outstanding. From the first, she obtained mainly As, and her literary achievements steadily grew. Throughout her stay at Smith, she worked hard, often ending up fatigued and depressed. She continued to write and submit her work for publication. Despite frequent rejections, she built up an incredible body of published works. Indeed, a \$500 prize from *Mademoiselle* in the summer of 1952 led to an offer by Knopf and Dodd Mead asking her to consider writing a novel. However, not surprisingly, a run of rejection slips led Plath to question her ability and to fall into a depression.

Her junior year led to her most severe depression. She confided to her mother thoughts of suicide, and she saw a psychiatrist in December of that year. But she continued to study hard and work toward winning a guest editorship at *Mademoiselle* in the summer of 1953, which she indeed won.

The summer of 1953 is the focus of Plath's novel *The Bell Jar*, written mostly during 1961 and 1962. At *Mademoiselle* Plath worked for Cyrilly Abels, reading and judging manuscripts and participating in all of the social activities planned for the group of guest editors. Abels noticed Plath's distancing manner and tried to break through and relate to the real Sylvia, but she failed to penetrate Plath's social mask. Although the guest editorship was exciting, Plath came home depressed by the experience.

Back in Wellesley, Plath was rejected for a course on creative writing at Harvard summer school, which left her with two months to fill. She could not write, and her depression worsened. After she cut her legs in a suicidal gesture, her mother began locking up the sleeping pills in the bedroom that they shared and took Plath to a local psychiatrist who diagnosed a depressive disorder and recommended electroconvulsive therapy. (In the 1950s, effective antidepressant medications had not yet been developed.) The electroconvulsive shock therapy seemed to make Plath's condition worse, and she developed chronic insomnia.

Plath contemplated using a razor blade to kill herself and she tried to drown herself in the sea. Eventually, on a Monday morning in August 1953, she took 40 sleeping pills from where her mother had locked them up, went into the basement of the house (after leaving a note saying that she was going for a hike and would be back the next day), and crawled behind some wood that was stacked there. (It appears that she threw up some of the pills, which possibly saved her life.) Her mother called the police that evening, and search parties were organized. Plath was not found until Wednesday afternoon when

her grandmother went into the basement to do the laundry and heard Plath moaning. After a week in the hospital, Plath was transferred to the locked psychiatric ward at Massachusetts general Hospital where Erich Lindemann examined her. He diagnosed an adolescent nervous illness, whereas another psychiatrist diagnosed an acute schizophrenic episode. Her depression did not lift, and so she was transferred to McLean Hospital where she received insulin shock therapy, then chlorpromazine, and finally electroshock therapy again. This treatment was supplemented by psychotherapy from a female psychiatrist, Ruth Barnhouse. Barnhouse observed that Plath first refused to talk much and was angry at her mother. Barnhouse saw Plath as an intuitive-feeling type in Jung's schema, and Plath said that she felt she had been forced into using thinking to the neglect of feeling. Surprisingly, this time the electroconvulsive therapy helped and during the Christmas holidays Plath's depression disappeared. Plath was released in January 1953. She told a friend that she had tried to kill herself because she feared she had lost her talent to write. She also told him that she had tried to slit her throat when she was 10 years old, and she did have a scar on her throat. Barnhouse had encouraged Plath to no longer suppress her sexual impulses, so Plath had sex for the first time. When she returned to college, Plath confided to another friend that she had both loved and despised her father and probably wished many times that he was dead. When he died, she imagined that she had killed him (a theme that later appeared in one of her poems).

Aurelia heard from one of Otto's sisters that Otto's mother, a sister, and a niece had all suffered from depression, raising the possibility that an inherited predisposition to depression ran in the family. Plath spent another 1½ years at Smith and graduated in June 1955. Although Smith took away the scholarship for her first semester back, the college restored it for her final year. Graduation resulted in many prizes and awards, including Phi Beta Kappa and summa cum laude (one of only four students in her class so honored), and she was awarded a Fulbright scholarship to Cambridge University in England.

Plath had written at least 200 poems, short stories, newspaper articles, and magazine pieces, some of which had been published in national periodicals. Of course, she also received numerous rejection slips, but although the rejections often damaged her self-confidence they did not deter her from writing and submitting her work for publication.

Cambridge University and Ted Hughes

Plath spent 2 years at Newnham College of Cambridge University, where she eventually obtained her second BA. She hated the cold and rainy weather and the poor heating of the rooms. She fell ill frequently with sinusitis, colds, and the flu. She realized how much better prepared the British students were, and she abandoned plans to obtain a doctorate. She kept busy with course work, writing, and dating. Plath determined that she would be, at best, a minor writer and decided to settle down as a wife and mother who would write only in her spare time. Her depression worsened, and she saw a psychiatrist at the university. Then in February 1956, she met Ted Hughes. Hughes, an aspiring poet and writer like Plath, had graduated from Cambridge in 1954 and had worked in various odd jobs. Plath met him at a party in Cambridge and was attracted "at first sight." They married in June 1956.

Plath began to work with dedication on their literary careers, typing up and sending off submissions of both Hughes's work and her own. Their publications grew more and more numerous, and Hughes's first collection of poems was accepted for publication in 1957. They came to the United States, and Plath taught at Smith College for a year.

At this time, Hughes was the more successful poet. He had soon completed a second book of poems

and a book of children's stories. His poems appeared in *The New Yorker*. The couple decided to return to England, especially as Hughes was not happy in the United States. But first they spent a year in Boston, and they supported themselves with the money Plath earned working at odd jobs along with their income from writing. Plath audited a course at Boston University from Robert Lowell, during which she met Anne Sexton, and her poems were eventually accepted by *The New Yorker*. Plath went back into therapy with Ruth Barnhouse and dealt with some of the feelings she had toward her mother and, with Barnhouse's encouragement, visited her father's grave.

Hughes was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship, which eased the couple's financial worries, and they were invited for three months to Yaddo, an artists' colony near Saratoga Springs in New York. They spent 3 months touring the United States during the summer of 1959, and during this trip Plath found out that she was pregnant. They left for England in December 1959. Plath was twenty-seven, pregnant, and headed for permanent residence in a foreign country.

England and Suicide

The couple first rented an apartment in London. Plath gave birth to Frieda in April 1960. Visits to Hughes's family did not go well, as Plath and Hughes's sister Olwyn had severe conflicts. Later that year, Plath and Hughes looked for and found a house in Croton, Devon, with the help of loans from both of their families. Before moving, Plath found out that she was pregnant again. They rented their apartment in London to a Canadian poet, David Wevill, and his German-Russian wife, Assia Gutmann, and moved to Devon. Their literary careers continued to progress, and Plath's first book of poems was published in 1960. They each won prize after prize and by 1961 were successful enough as writers that their finances were thereafter in good shape. In 1961, Plath was awarded a Saxton Foundation grant to work on *The Bell Jar*. Plath gave birth to a son, Nicholas, in January 1962, but Hughes seemed unhappy to have a son and kept distant from the baby. He later admitted that he had not wanted any children. The cold winter made Plath ill and depressed, but life was full and busy with writing, the children, and a new house to fix up. By the summer of 1962, another woman had entered Hughes's life. Hughes and Plath had invited poet David Wevill and his wife Assia Gutman to visit, and soon Hughes and Gutman were in love and having an affair. Hughes left Plath in July, but Plath maintained hope that he would return to her.

Her work did not go well at this time. Plath's *Colossus and Other Poems* had received poor reviews, and the poems written in her new style were being rejected. She was also finding it hard to write. On her 30th birthday in October 1962, she was in Devon with two children, deserted by her husband, and now writing poems furiously every morning. By December Plath had moved to an apartment in London and had rented the house in Devon to others. The last few weeks of Plath's life were difficult. She corrected the galley proofs for *The Bell Jar* and was awaiting publication and comment. She was working feverishly, smoking heavily, hardly sleeping, and eating little. She had lost 20 lb. since the summer and developed influenza, after which the children came down with it. The winter was one of the worst ever, with frozen plumbing, strikes by the electrical workers, and snow and ice everywhere. The weather did not break until the end of January.

The reviews of Plath's book appeared at the end of January, and they were lukewarm. (She had published it under a pseudonym, which meant that reviewers would be less likely to give the work close attention that a work by Sylvia Plath would merit.) Her recent poems were being rejected, and her publishers could not sell *The Bell Jar* to an American publisher. In the last week of her life, from

February 4, 1963 to February 11, Plath had a fever and wildly fluctuating moods. She lost her au pair on February 7 after arguing with her, and the weather was still bad. Plath kept in close contact with her physician, John Horder, and after February 4 she saw him daily. He treated her depression on his own, but also tried to refer her to a regular psychiatrist. Horder put Plath on antidepressants (a monoamineoxidase inhibitor), and then, on February 7, searched for a bed in a suitable hospital so that Plath could be admitted. Two he approached were full, and one he deemed unsuitable. Friends invited Plath and the children to come and stay that day. On the evening of Friday, February 8, she met Hughes briefly and then came back to her friends' home. However, on Sunday she decided to take the children home, despite the protestations of her friends. Horder called her that night. That night she put the kids to sleep, opened their windows, placed milk and bread and butter by their beds, left a note on her downstairs neighbor's door to call Horder, sealed herself in the kitchen, and put her head in the oven and turned the gas on. Horder had arranged for a nurse to come on Monday morning, February 11. The nurse arrived at 9 a.m., but could not get in. She went to a public telephone to check on the address she was supposed to visit, and came back to see two children crying at the bedroom window. She found a workman who helped her break in, and they found Plath. The workman began artificial respiration, and the nurse took over. A police officer rescued the children, but when Horder arrived he pronounced Plath dead at 10:30 a.m. The gas had asphyxiated the downstairs neighbor too, and he did not regain consciousness until the late afternoon.

Discussion

The loss of her father when she was 8 years old looms large in Plath's life, especially because of the way she wrote about him. Plath seemed to be filled with anger over his rejection of her, both while he was alive (neglecting her for his research) and upon his death. Her poem written in the months prior to her suicide casts him as a devil, a concentration camp guard with her as a victim. She viewed Hughes as a father substitute. Yet she loved her father too and casts her suicide attempt years earlier as an effort to be reunited with him. (Interestingly, Plath eventually kept bees, as did her father, and she studied German, the language of her father. Her identification with him was strong.) Plath was depressed throughout her life, and it is likely that she had an affective disorder. Her first major breakdown occurred when she was an undergraduate, and her suicide has partly been attributed to her fear of becoming psychotic again. On top of this, she lost her husband, whom she loved, and who provided her with the environment to flourish as a mother and author. He not only left her, but he rejected her for another. In her novel about her psychiatric breakdown in 1953, Plath shows a distrust of her ability. She had worked hard to get good grades and to publish, but she feared that the success was temporary. However, Plath seemed to be quite persistent in her writing career and sent off poems and stories despite rejections.

Was Plath's Writing Helpful or Harmful?

Is writing therapeutic for creative writers or is it a stressor that can contribute to their psychological disturbance? Martin Silverman and Norman Will have argued that, although Plath tried to control her suicidal impulses by means of her poetry, she failed in this endeavor. Successful poetry, they suggested, must communicate between the inner worlds of the creative person and the audience. (Presumably they mean *critically* successful, for even poor poetry can serve a useful psychological function for the writer, even if it is merely cathartic.) To be successful, poetry must first achieve a balance between the writer's use of the audience to serve his or her own narcissistic needs (a type of exhibitionism) and the desire to give others a way of structuring the terrors and anxieties that afflict us

all. The writer must also achieve a balance between the potentially destructive conscious and unconscious forces motivating the writing and the constructive desires to harness these forces for the purpose of writing creatively. In terms of psychoanalysis, the writer must balance primary and secondary process mechanisms. The writer must also compromise between the fantasy permissible in writing and the acceptance of reality necessary for successful living.

When they applied their ideas to Sylvia Plath, Silverman and Will asserted that the successful creative process is successful only when the unconscious forces in the writer operate silently and remain hidden from view. This assertion represents a rather traditional view of creative writing. It would seem to express a preference on the part of Silverman and Will for a particular type of literature rather than expressing a universal truth. For example, the unconscious forces motivating Ernest Hemingway may be under control in his writing, but they are certainly not hidden, and the confessional style of poetry developed by W. D. Snodgrass and Robert Lowell and pursued by Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath is in direct opposition to Silverman and Will's view. In Plath's later poems she revealed her deepest feelings, using her experiences to create the poem rather than to simply transform it. Silverman and Will noted that she described her early poems as "proper in shape and number and every part" but not alive. Her poems moved from being a reordering and reshaping of experience with a poetic purpose to becoming expressions of herself. She identified with her poems, which made their rejection even more painful, and Silverman and Will labeled this change as a "narcissistic regression." The causal sequence that Silverman and Will propose for Plath is simply one reading of Plath's life. Other equally plausible alternative paths can be proposed. For example, it is quite likely that Plath's participation—along with Anne Sexton, with whom she became very close—in a poetry workshop run by Robert Lowell had a major impact on her writing style. Several members of his workshop adopted a more self-revealing content for their poems, and two received Pulitzer prizes for their work (Lowell and Sexton). Furthermore, Plath, as she herself clearly recognized, was prone to recurring depressions. In all probability, Plath had an affective disorder, possibly bipolar, and her depressions were likely to reoccur periodically. It is evident from the severity of her depression in 1953, which led to a very serious suicide attempt, that she would likely become suicidal again with each new depression (much as Virginia Woolf had).

It is interesting to note that although her writing may not have helped her cope with the stressors, external and intrapsychic, with which she was confronted during the early 1950s, in the later 1950s her switch to a more revealing and personalized style of writing may have helped her survive. Silverman and Will claimed that her writing failed to prevent her suicide. Perhaps it may have postponed her suicide? In the months prior to her suicide, Plath wrote feverishly, sometimes producing several poems in one day. (This feverish activity in the months prior to a suicide was apparent also in Anne Sexton's life.) What would Silverman and Will suggest as a more appropriate strategy for a person confronting intrapsychic turmoil who is not under professional care? It is very likely that the writing helped Plath control her inner turmoil, and some commentators think that the poems she produced were among her finest.

David Lester and Rina Terry have argued that writing poetry can be useful with suicidal clients. They saw the construction and revision of poems as serving a similar function for clients as the journal assignments devised by cognitive therapists by giving the clients intellectual control over their emotions and distance from the traumatic memories. Both Plath and Sexton showed manic trends prior to their suicides, writing poems furiously, poems with more emotional expression and less poetic

crafting. Rather than arguing that writing poetry contributed in part to their suicides, it makes much more sense to say that, in their final breakdowns, poetry was no longer able to help them deal with the intrapsychic forces driving them as it had in the past. As their inner turmoil increased, both wrote feverishly, almost like a safety valve letting out the steam under pressure in a boiler, but to no avail because the pressure was building up faster than they could release it.

This final failure of the craft of poetry to keep Sylvia Plath alive may not signify total failure. She was an outstanding poet and functioned quite well given her psychiatric disorder. Perhaps the craft of poetry kept her alive for many years after her self-destructive impulses first manifested themselves.

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