

Biography: Sylvia Plath (1932-1963)

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Sylvia Plath was born in Boston, Massachusetts on October 27, 1932 to highly intelligent parents. Her father, Otto Plath was a German immigrant and a professor of entomology at Boston University. Her mother, Aurelia, was the daughter of Austrian immigrants and taught high school German and English. At the age of eight Sylvia published her first poem. The same year, 1940, her father died of gangrene caused by untreated diabetes. His death had a profound impact on the young poet. After Otto's death, Aurelia returned to teaching to support her children, with the help of her parents. Though she struggled to maintain the family's lifestyle, she always provided Sylvia and her younger brother, Warren, with various lessons and instilled in them a deep love of learning. Throughout her childhood and adolescence, Sylvia continued to publish poetry and fiction in regional newspapers and magazines, and published her first national piece in the *Christian Science Monitor* in 1950.

Plath was an exceptionally bright and tenacious student, excelling in studies at Wellesley High School and afterward at Smith College, where she attended on a scholarship. While at Smith, she continued to publish poetry and short stories, which earned her a guest editorship at *Mademoiselle Magazine* in New York. This would become the basis for the *Bell Jar*. It was also during this time that Plath attempted suicide for the first time and was sent to a private psychiatric hospital for six months. She returned to Smith where she went on to write her honors thesis on Dostoevsky, graduate summa cum laude in 1955, and earn a Fulbright Scholarship to study at Cambridge University.

Plath met Ted Hughes, a future British poet laureate, at a party in the spring of 1956. The pair of aspiring writers married shortly thereafter, on June 16, 1956. The following year, Plath and Hughes moved to the United States where she taught English Composition at Smith College for a year and enrolled in a writing class with Robert Lowell. It was here she met Anne Sexton. In 1960, Plath published her first volume of poetry, *Colossus and Other Poems*. Shortly after Plath and Hughes returned to the U.K., she gave birth to two children, Frieda in April 1960 and Nicholas in January 1962. Between their births she suffered a miscarriage, and by the summer of 1962, Plath had discovered her husband's affair with Assia Gutmann Wevill. The couple separated and Plath moved with her children to an apartment in London's Primrose Hill, where she tried to build a new life for herself and her children.



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*My life, I feel, will not be lived
until there are books and stories which
relive it perpetually in time.*¹

—SYLVIA PLATH

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¹ Plath, Sylvia. *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*. Ed. Karen V. Kukil. London: Faber and Faber, 2000.

TEACHING HUMAN DIGNITY

The period following her separation from Hughes was a time of intense creativity and prolific writing during which she composed the “October poems,” which secured her position as one of the most significant literary voices of the twentieth century. Within just five months, Plath wrote “Daddy,” “Lady Lazarus,” “Poppies in July,” and “Ariel.” Despite her productivity, she continued to sink further into depression. Plath committed suicide two weeks after the publication of her novel, *The Bell Jar*, was published under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas, and just days before her divorce proceedings were set to begin.†

Videos

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6hHjctqSBwM> Audio recording of Sylvia Plath reading, “Daddy”)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=snEkUrme-28> Audio recording of Sylvia Plath reading, “Parliament Hills Field”

Bibliography for Ann Sexton

Primary Texts

Plath, Sylvia. *Ariel*. New York: Harper & Row, 1966.

The Bell Jar. New York: Harper & Row, 1971.

The Collected Poems. Edited by Ted Hughes. New York: Harper & Row, 1981.

The Colossus and Other Poems. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962.

Crossing the Water. New York: Harper & Row, 1971.

Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams. New York: Harper & Row, 1980.

The Journals of Sylvia Plath. Edited by Frances McCullough. New York: Dial Press, 1982.

Letters Home by Sylvia Plath. Edited by Aurelia Schober Plath. New York: Harper & Row, 1975.

Winter Trees. New York: Harper & Row, 1972.

Secondary Studies

Broe, Mary Lynn. *Protean Poetic: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1980. [See pp. 141-42 for a discussion of the different drafts of “Thalidomide”]

Hayman, Ronald. *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath*. New York: Birch Lane Press, 1991. [See pp. 152-53 for a discussion of “Parliament Hill Fields.”]

Saldívar, Toni. *Sylvia Plath: Confessing the Fictive Self*. New York: Peter Lang, 1992. [See p. 190 for a discussion of “Winter Trees.” There Saldívar observes: “Only a belief in a divinity who is a loving father could make the image of the grieving mother holding her dead son a symbol of love. Without that belief, Plath’s trees become signs of unbearable loss; and the poem, a place for endless anguish.”]

Wagner, Linda W. *Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984. [See pp. 53-54 for a discussion of the poems in *Winter Trees*. According to Wagner, “In these poems a woman is on trial before herself, and spared nothing” (54).]

Wagner-Martin, Linda. *Sylvia Plath: A Biography*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987.