

Sylvia plath

[Literature](#), [Poetry](#)



In many ways, it is surprising that Sylvia Plath's poetry has attained the popular and critical acclaim it well-deserves. Uncompromisingly self-revealing, violent, mystical, and decidedly feminine, if not radically feminist, in conception and articulation, Plath's poems continue to startle readers with their direct, explosive candor as well as their brilliant finesse with meter and diction and superlative use of figurative language.

From the very beginning of Sylvia Plath's career as a teenage poet dreaming of publication in *Seventeen Magazine* while publishing and winning poetry prizes in small literary journals, the combination of mathematical precision in diction and prosody combined with passionate, of emotionally volatile, themes and images characterize the best and most renowned of her poems. The literary tradition Plath is most closely associated with: Confessionalism, engenders robust biographical interpretation due to the innately self-revelatory idiom.

Plath, even more so than other Confessional poets like Anne Sexton or Robert Lowell, explored the poetic possibilities of contemporaneous self-expression which involved intimate, sometimes deeply personal psychological and biographical revelation. This aspect, along with deftly executed figurative language, expressive and interesting prosody, and stark, often violent imagery distinguishes the poems of Plath's most well-known book of verse, *Ariel*. Plath's personal life plays a crucial role in her poetry.

The brevity of her life, coupled with its psychological intensity underscores everything in her poetry and colors her work deeply. Plath was born in 1932 in Massachusetts. Her father, Otto Plath, a man considerably older than her

mother, Aurelia, died when Plath was eight years old. Plath later attended Smith College and then Cambridge College on scholarships. In England she met and eventually married the poet Ted Hughes. The poets were married for three years before they separated in 1963.

Having previously suffered mental breakdowns during her childhood and college years, Plath committed suicide in February of 1963 in London in a flat which had previously been occupied by the poet William Butler Yeats, (Plath, CP). Though Plath's fame as a poet came largely posthumously, her journals and letters reveal that, in the last stages of her career, she was aware that a breakthrough of some significance had been made in her poetry. She remarked to her mother, in a letter of October 1962 " I am a genius of a writer; I have it in me.

I am writing the best poems of my life; they will make my name" (LH, p 468). This famous statement is an important moment in Plath's quite brief literary career because self-doubt and feelings of inferiority, especially as a poet, plagued her incessantly and she was frequently consumed by jealousy and envy toward other poets and writers. Due to the fact that Plath suicided at the age of thirty, many critics and even devotees of her poetry have maintained that her work suffers from a " sophomore" quality.

Even Hughes, her husband and posthumous editor of her *Collected Poems* remarks that when she broke through to the voice of the Ariel poems, her last poems, " her real self, being the real poet, would now speak for itself, and would throw off all those lesser and artificial selves that had monopolized the words up to that point, it was as if a dumb person suddenly

spoke" (Plath, Journal). Despite the lack of immediate or notable prestigious academic acceptance of her work, Plath was published first at the age of eight and continued to publish dozens of poems as well as short stories and articles throughout her teenage and college years.

Plath's early prowess with poetry retains a close affinity with what might be considered the "golden years" of her childhood -- the years before her father died of gangrene. The death of Plath's father has been considered one of the most significant events of her early life and it casts an influence over her poetry as well her life-choices and recurrent psychological "breakdowns" or as she described them "panic attacks" (Plath, Journal).

Plath's father, who in life, was a professor of zoology and a renowned expert on bees, rose to occupy a god-like status in Plath's early work -- and a demonic status in her late work. The same is true for her poetic portrayal of her husband, the poet Ted Hughes, whose initial god-like status in Plath's poetic imagination, reflected in such poems and "Ode to Ted" and "Man in Black" is eclipsed by the villain of the Ariel poems, featured in "The Jailer" "Fever 103 Degrees" "Gigolo" and "Words Heard by Accident Over The Phone," among others, (Plath, CP).

Plath's earliest surviving poems, classified as juvenilia, along with the poems of her first published collection, *The Colossus*, demonstrate a pattern in Plath's poetry of precise and controlled meter coupled with mythic images and themes, combined to articulate a personal vision, which -- when the poems are successful -- can be apprehended universally.

Two poems from the early period, "Sonnet to Satan" and "Black Rook in Rainy Weather" are characteristic of the most powerful examples in Plath's early idiom, which is also notable for a reliance on dense rhetoric and complex syntax. In "Sonnet to Satan," Plath employs startling imagery "In darkroom of your eye the moonly mind/ someraults to couterfeit eclipse;/ bright angels black out over logic's land/ under shutter of their handicaps" where the scope of the poem is epic, although its form -- as a sonnet -- is concise and mathematical.

Some of the phrasing in the poem is daring: "Steepling snake in that contrary light/ invades the dilate lens of genesis" where the alliteration of "steepling snake" provides a sinister contrast to the melodious assonance of "light invades dilate lens" and the image of a snake entering a camera's eye to stamp its "flaming image in birthspot/ with characters no cockcrow can deface" carries a powerful sexual connotation, (Plath, CP). Other lines in the poem suffer from a rhetorical density or a forced sense of diction.

The closing couplet "O maker of proud planet's negative,/obscure the scalding sun till no clocks move" rings strangely archaic and forced in a poem where other more startlingly original lines and images flourish in abundance. The image of the "steepling snake" is also notable for its ironic "pun" on the image of a church-steeple: a foreshadowing of a fully-fledged anti-church sentiment which Plath later used in poems like Medusa, Lady Lazarus, and Medallion. "Sonnet to Satan" is representative of Plath's early tendencies to "corrupt" an otherwise startling poem with forced diction and odd-sounding rhetoric which is not at all in harmony with the otherwise

precise and meter and figurative language, (Plath, CP). A more successful poem from the early period, one which was included in Plath's collection *The Colossus*, is "Black Rook in Rainy Weather." This poem like "Sonnet to Satan" utilizes an emblematic power -- in this case, the image of a black rook on a stormy day -- to convey sense of personal emotion and subjective response to nature.

As is the case in many of Plath's successful poems, these subjective feelings are elevated through the poem's imagery, meter and diction to a universal sense of expression rather than a merely personal confession. The same pattern: mathematical precision, daring figurative language, and dense, often "artificial" rhetoric, which results in a unique, mythically charged idiom. "Black Rook in Rainy Weather" demonstrates the same inconsistencies with diction that characterize most of Plath's early-period works.

Beautifully phrased passages such as: "although, I admit, I desire,/ Occasionally, some backtalk/ From the mute sky, I can't honestly complain: A certain minor light may still/ Lean incandescent/Out of kitchen table or chair" give way immediately to less natural sounding phrases: "Thus hallowing an interval/Otherwise inconsequent/By bestowing largesse, honor," and this obscurity in phrasing does diminish, if slightly, the overall impact of the poem (Plath, CP). As Plath matured, her work became less rhetorical and more deeply personal.

The mythic images of Satan and of Black Rooks were coupled with memories of her dead father, and with Plath's own explorations of Freudian psychology,

both as an in-house mental patient (during her collegiate post-suicide months) who received shock-therapy, and as an out patient who sought therapy sessions periodically throughout her adult life. One of Plath's earliest explorations of her "father-sea-god-muse" subject is a poem entitled "Full Fathom Five." This poem, composed in 1958, bridges the poetic "gap" between Plath's early work like "Sonnet to Satan" and her late, most highly distinguished work in *Ariel*.

Starting with a direct address to her dead father, a pattern that Plath would later repeat successfully in her most famous poem "Daddy." The poem "Full Fathom Five" represents the image of the dead father as rising from the sea: "you come in with the tide's coming/When seas wash cold, foam-/Capped: white hair, white beard, far-flung,/A dragnet, rising, falling, as waves/Crest and trough." to issue a sort of reverse-siren song to his still living daughter, the poetic speaker.

When at last the speaker of the poem sees the father's god-like image rise, then dissipate on the open sea, she concludes: "You defy godhood. /I walk dry on your kingdom's border/ Exiled to no good. /Your shelled bed I remember. /Father, this thick air is murderous. /I would breathe water." (Plath, CP). A companion poem written on the same day, "Lorelei" expresses a similar death-sea wish. This poem, unlike "Full Fathom Five" carries a political punch, if a rather oblique one. In "Lorelei" Plath imagines that the mythic singers of the deep are calling to her from the world of the nadir" where they rise "their limbs ponderous/With richness, hair heavier/Than sculptured marble" to sing "Of a world more full and clear/Than can be."

The political connotation of them is achieved as the speaker of the poem identifies with the Lorelei as " sisters. " This imagined sisterhood calls the poet from the everyday world of " a well-steered country,/Under a balanced ruler. " to a world " deranged by harmony" the world of poetic insight and illumination, which culminates, as does " Full Fathom Five" in a death-wish " Stone, stone ferry me down there" (Plath, CP).

During the middle period of Plath's work, her reliance on oblique rhetoric and direct mythical allusion lessened and became replaced by a more lyrically dynamic, almost colloquial voice which rendered the deepest personal aspects of her experience to an articulation meant at achieving universality. The middle period poems are more successful than the early poems and juvenilia at gaining this universality, but the peak of Plath's technique was not yet attained and would not be attained until she wrote the poems of her final collection, Ariel. The emotional turbulence of Plath's life forms a thematic undercurrent to all of her poetry.

By welding intimate biographical details of her life to mythic symbols, themes, and settings in poetry, Plath at once elevated the personal aspect of lyric poetry and familiarized or concretized abstract and mythical components of the human imagination . At the peak of her poetic power, during the composition of the Ariel poems, Plath's simultaneously personal and universal idiom soared to unprecedented heights, capturing the awed respect of both her former mentor, the poet Robert Lowell and poetic rival, Anne Sexton, along with legions of other poets, scholars, and lovers of poetry.