

# Sylvia plath's work



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Sylvia Plath was born in a middle class family in Boston, Massachusetts in 1932 on October 27th to Aurelia and Otto Plath. As a child she attended Smith College. Though her student life painted her as a carefree student, who, many of the young women envied; Sylvia silently struggled with the difficulties of mental illness. She won the Mademoiselle magazine's fiction contest in her senior year and was awarded two Smith poetry prizes. In addition to these, Sylvia was appointed to be a guest editor of the Mademoiselle's College Board contest. Just when she was approaching the mid of her earlier successes, she experienced her earlier breakdown and the famous disappearance. What followed was hospitalization and treatment with shock therapy, something she described as being a time of despair, disillusion, and darkness- so black as the inferno of the human mind, something symbolic to death and numb shock followed by the painful agony of slow rebirth and a psychic regeneration. This breakdown was followed by an attempted suicide in 1953 and intensive therapy for six months. Fortunately enough she was able to go back to college and managed to graduate just a couple of months behind her class. She joined Cambridge University after getting a Fulbright scholarship where she met and married Ted Hughes, also a poet in 1956. They returned to England in 1959 where they had their first daughter. She had a miscarriage in 1961 and managed to get a son in 1962. She killed herself in 1963 after undergoing depression for sometime having been abandoned by her husband (Kirk p. 103).

It is believed that almost every writer or poet, who's prominent in modern literature history, has had an influence from the changing events in his or her life. This is exactly what happened to Sylvia Plath, a highly praised poet

of the twentieth century. Sylvia suffered huge difficulties in her life, regardless of what bottle necks were in her way. Just like many authors, Sylvia's works were mainly influenced by the depression that affected her. In effect, her stories and poems have and still continue to inspire many different kinds of people and have broken new grounds in literature. The semi-autobiographical writing style she used in her writing pioneered the writing form that is today known as the "confessional poetry". Her personal life was wrecked by the endless depression that she went through, especially her marriage. This depression also was an instrument that helped her in the creation of her gothic-styled writing, which comes out clearly in her famous poems "Daddy, Tulips, and Lady Lazarus". When Hughes's first volume of poetry was published, the family decided to relocate to America where Plath was given a job as a freshman English teacher at Smith, but she left at the end of the school year after finding out that she was not getting enough time for writing. Throughout the period she tried to carry herself as a happily married woman, but it was evident that her first work, *The Bell Jar* was looming over her constantly. The only place that Plath felt comfortable to express her feelings of dread was in her writing. She wrote many of poems that later become part of her poetry collection, *The Colossus* and others during their trip across the US. She published *The Colossus* in 1959 on returning to London (Kirk p. 88).

The poem collections in *The Colossus* are regarded as the early poetry works of Plath. In these poems, she reflects the sense of doom and fascination with death, although the poems in *The Colossus* look more experimental than the later ones. They appear confined in a traditional form that does not confront

the issues she addresses directly. Her father is the major theme that Plath has the most conflict with in many of her poems. For instance, the *Colossus* is all about putting together the broken pieces of the father figure in her life. This can be seen in the line, "I shall never get you put together entirely, pieced, glued, and properly jointed" (*Colossus* 1). In this poem she deals with the hate that she felt towards her father. She takes herself as the Jew and her father as the Nazi, who she wants to punish for leaving her in this world. The poem moves from love to hate then regret to revenge. She uses symbolism by substituting events that happened during the Holocaust with events happening in her own life, bringing out the emotional impact of the poem. She employs harsh imagery of a recently separated husband in her poem; she writes, "man in black with a Meinkampf look" (*Daddy* line 65) to bring out her pain so that the reader can feel it. This poem tries to kill her obsession with her father and end her suffering once and for all. She ends the poem by a false illusion of finality by saying, "daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through." This poem, in a way, covers the entire life's worth of depression that Plath went through, which was basically filled with pain and suffering. Furthermore, her suicidal feelings become heightened when the reader discovers that she literally ended her life just months following the writing of the poem, making obvious that the poem was greatly affected by her chronic depression as it shows most of her feelings of depression. Another poem, "*The Manor Garden*," from the *Colossus* presents a pessimistic view of the birth of a child. The poem shows a mother's dread of birth and the fear of bringing forth a child in this world of death. It is sort of a warning to the unborn child about the type of world it is about to join, and how life ends up in death (Kirk p. 82).

Her poem *Tulips* is also very much influenced by her depression, as it reflects on an extremely influential aspect of her personality, the postpartum depression that engulfed her immediately after giving birth to her daughter, Frieda. The baby came when Plath was not emotionally prepared for a new baby in her life. Even the pleasant things she used to cherish like flowers become emotionally disturbing to her just after the arrival of the baby. They represented the unpleasant outside world to her. She personifies the *Tulips* because she is intimidated by them. They symbolically explain why Sylvia does not see something that is meant to be beautiful, like her child, is instead demonized. The tulips, although cute flowers, are taken as the enemy. This just serves to show how Sylvia's deep seated depression swayed the poem to a darker, gothic theme (Kirk p. 85).

She uses the metaphor of the unquiet grave that came out clearly in the volume "*Ariel*" that later came to be known as the death's poems. Sylvia's writings can be said to be an expression, a disclosure, or a fulfillment of subjectivity, everything in them is majorly personal, confessional and felt. This in itself is self-destructive, diseased in nature. The apparent continuity between the texts of *Ariel* and the tormented psyche of their writer is raised to a point of doom or necessity. The poems seem to be writing Sylvia's suicidal destiny for her. She does not just express herself in the poems, but she becomes herself in the poems. In the poem "*Daddy*", Plath goes deep into her sickness and describes it purely. This positions the writer as the hysteric who reveals or confesses her symptoms to a clinically, magisterial probing interpreter (Kirk p. 96).

No one can deny the fact that Plath's style of writing changed dramatically over the course of her writing career. She began her work by researching on the possibilities and limits of the academic that was heavily relied upon by the 1950's critics. Her later works were done through a controlled surrealism, where she replaced narrative sequence with a number of unreal images, and also combining a new rhythmical and conversational freedom with dramatic intensity and concentration. Hate and death themes are very strong in her later works. For example in "Lady Lazarus", Sylvia talks of dying. She refers in a way to her own suicide and in fact, she is proud of the fact that she knows about her death. This comes in the following lines; "the first time it happened I was ten, to last it out and not come back at all, and pick the worms of me like sticky pearls, I do it exceptionally well" (Lady Lazarus line 35). In the poem, she talks of her talent with death: I do it so it feels like hell; I do it so it feels real, and I guess you could say I have a call (Lady Lazarus line 46). This tone seems to be carrying some certain power a feeling of control. The lines fully embody Sylvia's emotions of distress in an autobiographical nature (Kirk p. 96).

What we make of Sylvia Plath so far is a talented, intelligent young woman, who does not know how to control her talent, a woman who is not sure of herself as a person. This was evident when this feeling of despair overcame her while in college. It was only through her suicide's rebirth and the mental growth she got afterwards that she was able to move on and live her life. But she remained with dark feelings that she could only express well in poetry first as we have seen, in a controlled and well structured form as in the Colossus and then in an urgent and free flowing form as seen in Ariel. Her life

was filled with tragic stories of anguish and hurt. Her writing was influenced in every way possible by the inspiration she got from events in her life. Her characteristic use of semi-autobiographical poems gave insight into what she felt, giving the world a view of how Plath faced the different issues in her life. Because of her unique writings, she was without prejudice christened with the title of starting the writing style known as Confessional poetry (Kirk p. 3).

### Conclusion

Sylvia Plath ended her life by committing suicide on February 11th 1963. She had lived a life conveying her obsession and understanding of death via her poetry works. Apparently poetry was her only release, a way of having control over her own life. Whether she felt its presence, its strength or not, the truth remains that she was overcome by it in the end, some say that the bell jar overcame her once again. As it has been shown, Sylvia Plath's obsession with pain and death can be clearly seen in writings, which consequently led her to write exemplary poems having a gothic theme. It is also clear that she endured suffering all through her life. Her endless depression and pain brought chaos in marriage, eventually destroying her family, affecting her mental capacity, and completely ruining her entire life: but still it was instrumental in the forming of her extraordinarily exemplary gothic poems.