

# Outside the bell jar: a biography on sylvia plath

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Sylvia Plath, a ground-breaker in women's literature, showed the world that she was not afraid to pursue topics otherwise deemed " unacceptable" in the early twentieth century. Plagued by depression and anxiety, her writing proves that mental unbalance plays no part in developing groundbreaking work. While Plath was surrounded by walls and boundaries her whole life, she managed to rip them down through her writing.

Born to highly intellectual parents in 1932, Plath's intelligence was a byproduct of her own parent's intellect. Her father, Otto Plath was a Polish immigrant who became a Professor in Entomology at Boston University. While he was teaching there he met Aurelia Schobe who was there to obtain her Masters in teaching. Two years after she graduated, they married, and gave birth to their first child, Sylvia. As the daughter of two teachers, it was made sure that she was given the best education, so she attended some of the most prestigious private and grammar schools in Massachusetts. When she was eight Sylvia's father, Otto, died from complications of lung cancer that he had refused treatment for.

Widowed, her mother took her brother Warren and her to Wellesley, Massachusetts where she accepted a position at Boston University. Sylvia's reaction to her father's death was nothing to be expected. Her mother, in efforts to help Sylvia get over the grieving of her father's death, reenrolled her in fifth grade at a local school. Even as a young girl, Plath showed a love for writing, composing poems and short stories as soon as she learned to write. By the time she had graduated from high school she already had had poems published in national magazines. Entering Smith College in 1952, her literary success continued (" Sylvia Plath").

In addition to winning the Mademoiselle Fiction contest, she was also recognized by her school for her artistic and academic success. Before her graduation in 1955, however, she had already been hospitalized for depression and a failed suicide attempt (“ Sylvia Plath”). This first attempt was a foreshadowing for Plath’s highly depressed adult life. Her marriage to Ted Hughes in 1956 marked the beginning of her adult career. A famous English poet, he and Sylvia met during a party at Oxford and instantly hit it off.

After a courtship of a mere six months, Plath and Hughes moved to Massachusetts where Plath taught English at her alma mater, Smith College and Hughes worked on his writing. It was there that Sylvia met Anne Sexton and Robert Lowell. Considered to be two of her biggest influencers, Plath penned most of her first collection of poems while around them. After befriending Sexton, the two had lengthy discussions about death and their own suicide attempts. “ Drawn like moths to an electric light bulb” on the subjects, the pair regularly conversed about the morbid topics until Hughes and Plath’s return to England in 1960. But the newlyweds return wasn’t necessarily a joyful one; rumors of Hughes’s infidelity left Sylvia depressed and paranoid about her marriage.

When her first book of poems, *Colossus*, was published, she became pregnant with the couple’s first child, Frieda, and later, in 1962, with their second child, Nicholas (Academy of American Poets). But the family’s happy times were short lived. After moving the family to a rural farm in Devon, England, Sylvia and Ted’s marriage began to take a turn for the worst. Worried that Hughes would once again find love outside of the marriage,

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Sylvia became possessive of her husband. They became distant with each other, often not speaking for days at a time (Academy of American Poets). Upon her discovery of Hughes's affair with Assia Gutmann Wevill, Plath divorced her husband of less than three years and began to work with fervor on her most acclaimed book, *Ariel*.

Poems such as "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" completed the book and showed readers a side of Plath they had never seen before. Published posthumously, her work broke down social barriers that had been placed on writers of that day, as she brought up subjects that had normally been labeled "taboo" ("Sylvia Plath"). "These are my hands My knees. I may be skin and bone, Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman. The first time it happened I was ten.

It was an accident." (ll. 33-36, "Lady Lazarus") One of her most well-known poems, "Lady Lazarus," Plath uses Nazi metaphors to express her own internal struggle and helplessness. She channeled her fascination with death and pain into dozens of poems. "Dying/Is an art, like everything else. / I do it exceptionally well.

"These lines, also taken from "Lady Lazarus," foreshadow Plath's own dramatic suicide. Her writing showed that even though a poem's mood could be dark and ominous, it didn't have to be lacking in beauty or depth. Using alliteration and rhythm, Plath chooses disturbed, sometimes violent subjects and situations, and pens them into a "rhythmic" chant. Through the use of symbols and imagery, Plath allows readers to grasp the faintest glimpse

inside her crazy mind (Academy of American Poets). Plath's most recognized work, *The Bell Jar*, was published under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas.

Greeted with mild success after its publication date in 1963, it wasn't until after her death when the novel was published again in 1971 under her actual name that its popularity took off. Selling millions of copies, it has been turned into a 1979 movie, and a staple in high school classrooms (Gould). Highly regarded as an autobiography, Plath gives the protagonist, Ester, a similar mental health as herself. Esther's breakdown parallels her own mental collapse in 1953 (Steinberg). Two months after her novel was first published, Plath committed suicide in her London apartment. Lining the door frames with towels to protect her children, Plath stuck her head inside her kitchen oven and died of carbon monoxide poisoning.

On February 11, 1963 a daily nurse, scheduled to arrive at 9: 00a. m., found Plath on her kitchen floor and immediately called the authorities (Academy of American Poets). Throughout her life time Plath had relatively few works published. After her death, poetry including *Ariel*, *Crossing the Water*, *Winter Trees*, and *The Collected Poems*, were assembled by her former husband and published.

*Letters Home*, a book compiled of letters to her mother throughout her lifetime, was edited by her mother and then published in 1975. Her senior thesis, *The Magic Mirror*, and her journals were also printed in 1989 and 1982 respectfully. The latest remake of *The Bell Jar* is set to premiere in late 2013. Including a renowned cast such as Julia Styles and Virginia Madsen, many critics are expecting this movie to be a success at the box office. After

almost fifty years, Sylvia Plath's phenomenon is reaching a new generation. Through her flawless writing and unconventional ideas, Sylvia Plath has opened a new door in the literature world.

Her non-mainstream ideas and unconventional topics tore down literary boundaries that so many writers before her had been trapped under. Plath proved that writing doesn't have to be happy – it just has to be good. WORK CITED Academy of American Poets. " Sylvia Plath."

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