

Chapter 1

Who Was Sylvia Plath?

PLATH'S CHILDHOOD

Plath was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on October 27, 1932, to Aurelia Schober Plath and Otto Plath. Aurelia was a second-generation American of Austrian descent, and Otto was an immigrant from Germany. Otto's German heritage would play a huge role in Plath's self-conception as a middle-class New Englander.

Aurelia was a teacher, and Otto was a professor who specialized in bees. He even wrote an influential book, *Bumblebees and Their Ways* (1934). Sylvia had a brother, Warren, who was two years younger. This would be their family unit until Otto Plath's untimely—and ultimately preventable—death when Sylvia was eight.

Otto Plath suffered from diabetes but ignored his condition until his leg had to be medically amputated. Afterward, his health plummeted, his amputation became infected, and he died of complications due to diabetes. Otto's death would haunt Sylvia for the rest of her life.

Sylvia would later write about how idyllic her childhood had been until her father's death in the essay "Ocean 1212-W": "And this is how it stiffens, my vision of that seaside childhood. My father died, we moved inland. Whereon those nine first years of my life sealed themselves off like a ship in a

bottle—beautiful, inaccessible, obsolete, a fine, white flying myth.” Ultimately, her father’s death would shape Sylvia’s relationships with men, religion, politics, and herself, and would be the basis for some of her most powerful poetry.

After Otto’s death, Aurelia moved the family away from its home in the seaside town of Winthrop, Massachusetts, inland to the suburbs of Wellesley. There, Sylvia lived in a multigenerational home with her maternal grandparents. Aurelia always managed to make ends meet, but the family had to be frugal. Aware that she wasn’t as financially privileged as other children in the neighborhood, Sylvia—already showing signs of precocious intelligence—became an overachiever and a perfectionist. She spent most of her middle and high school years winning academic awards and accumulating scholarships.

A SCHOLARSHIP GIRL

Plath started at prestigious Smith College in 1950 on a scholarship sponsored by writer Olive Higgins Prouty. Plath was keenly aware of class stratifications at the elite, all-women’s college. She put intense pressure on herself to be perfect. Writing in her journal on October 1, 1957, Plath addresses a “demon” who is in reality her “murderous self” who demands perfection: “Not being perfect hurts,” she writes. “This is the month which ends a quarter of a century for me, lived under the shadow of fear: fear that I would fall short of some abstract perfection: I have often fought, fought & won, not perfection, but an acceptance of myself as having a right to live on my own human, fallible terms” (*Unabridged Journals*, 2000, p. 618).

This need to be perfect is a personality characteristic, but it’s also a value very much encouraged during Plath’s life. Throughout the 1950s, as we will learn further in the next chapter, in Plath’s social circles there was a lot of stress on appearances and conformity—especially for women. Sylvia, always a savvy observer of double standards, participated in many of the rituals of college life at this time while criticizing them in her writing. She went to formal dances, had many dates and friends, and immersed herself in studies and activities. Well-liked, incredibly bright, and fiercely ambitious, Sylvia Plath looked like she had everything going for her.

But mental illness is insidious. For someone with a predisposition to depression, as Plath had, it can feel like everything is wrong and will never get better. Mental healthcare was much less sophisticated in the 1950s than it is today,

and conversations about mental health in general were often conducted in hushed tones, as if struggling with one's emotions was something about which to be ashamed. The stigma of mental illness prevented many people from getting the proper treatment. Women especially, who often were dismissed by male doctors, felt disempowered when it came to medical care, especially gynecological and psychiatric care.

Plath grappled with suicidal ideation and feelings of depression and worthlessness for most of her adult life. Her mental health struggles formed some of her most powerful poems. An understanding of Plath's mental health—and how she conceived of it—is valuable to any study of her work, but we need to be careful not to pathologize her or her poetry.

THE RISKS OF READING AUTOBIOGRAPHICALLY

It is tempting to read Plath's work as purely autobiographical, as several scholars have done in the past. However, as Plath studies evolve, we now understand that reading Plath's work from a solely autobiographical perspective poses problems and closes off the work from its larger contexts. We must always think of Plath as a writer who used autobiographical elements in her work and transformed them into art. In short, her real-life experiences informed her art—but are not necessarily the only aspects of the writing itself.

While Plath mined her life for inspiration, her work stands on its own. Plath never intended to write an autobiography; she carefully chose poetry and fiction as her medium with a few short essays written toward the end of her life. "Rather than assume that Plath is an unusually autobiographical writer," Plath critic Susan R. Van Dyne notes, "we need to understand that she experienced her life in unusually textual ways. In her letters and journals as much as in her fiction and poetry, Plath's habits of self-representation suggest that she regarded her life as if it were a text she could invent and rewrite" (Van Dyne, 1993, p. 5). Plath kept journals. She composed letters. She wrote fiction. She crafted poetry. She was familiar with all mediums and made artistic choices fitting to each one. To only read Plath as an autobiographical writer would be to miss out on the myriad layers in her work. Therefore, readers should bear in mind the distinction between the speaker/narrator and the author when reading, and refrain from pathological narratives and unfounded mental health diagnoses.

A TURNING POINT

In 1953, Plath's life took a series of twists that would ultimately lead to a suicide attempt. Aside from academic success (Plath was elected to Phi Beta Kappa and also learned she would be the editor of the *Smith Review* for her senior year), Plath won a guest editorship position at *Mademoiselle* magazine, which she held during the summer at its New York City offices. She and other winners were put up at a women's-only hotel, The Barbizon, and were expected to fulfill their duties as well as put forward a positive face representing the magazine while touring the city.

Plath drew inspiration from this experience in her only published novel, *The Bell Jar* (1963). Aside from the novel, some letters, and scant journal entries, we don't know a lot about this time during Plath's life from Plath's own perspective. However, once she finished her editorship, returned home, and received a rejection from a Harvard University writing program she desperately wanted to take, her mental health seemed to take a dive.

Facing a long stretch of summer vacation at home with her mother and nothing to look forward to, Plath fell into a deep depression that was so severe it had physical effects. Unable to sleep, read, or write, Plath reached out for help. Her mother took her to a male psychiatrist, and that psychiatrist gave her improperly administered electroconvulsive therapy (ECT). In *The Bell Jar*, Plath would compare the experience to how one must feel being electrocuted and tortured. This event would haunt Plath and her writing for the rest of her life, coming up again and again as an image and metaphor in her poetry.

Plath's condition continued to deteriorate. On August 24, 1953, Plath consumed a bottle of pills and hid in a crawlspace in the basement. She was unconscious for two days, during which an exhaustive search took place throughout the greater Boston area. Her disappearance made the newspapers: "Beautiful Smith Girl Missing at Wellesley," read the headline of *The Boston Daily Globe*. "Mrs. Aurelia S. Plath, of 26 Elmwood Street, said her daughter apparently left the house at 2 p.m., leaving a note saying she was 'taking a long walk' and would 'be back tomorrow.'"

Plath was found in the crawlspace with injuries to her face from hitting her head. She was treated and hospitalized at McLean Hospital, a private hospital in Boston renowned for its psychiatry program. Plath's Smith College benefactor Olive Higgins Prouty helped pay for most of Plath's care. Prouty herself had suffered a nervous breakdown and could relate to Plath's struggles. As part of her



Figure 1.1 Plath at the beach, 1954.

Source: Bridgeman Images

treatment, Plath received regular therapy sessions, which she found beneficial, with Dr. Ruth Barnhouse Beuscher. She received ECT again, but this time it was administered correctly and actually helped Plath's depression. Plath's work with Dr. Beuscher gave her the tools she needed to manage her mental health and eventually return to school. The two of them would remain in contact for the rest of Plath's life.

After her recovery, Plath threw herself back into college life with fervor—and started to hone her skills and develop the poetic voice that would earn her a respected place in American literature. She finished her college education with high honors and received a Fulbright Scholarship, which would allow her to study English at Newnham College, Cambridge University. She would seek further education abroad, which was not the norm for women during this time.

As an American in England during the 1950s, Plath experienced culture shock—her brash Americanness sometimes uncomfortably set her apart. Acquaintance Jane Baltzell remembered Plath seemed “totally unaware of how her American behavior and talk seemed rather comic to the British” (Wilson, 2013, p. 292). However, she was also exposed to new poets who greatly influenced her—including her future husband Ted Hughes. She had to adjust to a new way of life, a new educational system, and a new set of expected behaviors.

MEETING TED HUGHES

When Sylvia met Ted Hughes in 1956, he had published a few poems in university publications and already was garnering a reputation for powerful and violent poetry about the natural world and human relationships. When the two first met in 1956 at a wild party famously recounted in Plath's journals, she recited bits of his poetry to him. Then, they passionately kissed and Hughes snatched Plath's headband and earrings: "I was stamping and he was stamping on the floor, and then he kissed me bang smash on the mouth and ripped my hairband off. . . and when he kissed my neck I bit him long and hard on the cheek" (*Unabridged Journals*, 2000, p. 212).

Plath believed she had finally met her equal—someone who was smart, strong, creative, and passionate about writing—but the relationship was often volatile. They married after four months in a quiet ceremony and kept the marriage secret (Plath was worried she might lose her Fulbright if the marriage was discovered). The marriage was exceptionally literary from the get-go. Plath and Hughes settled into a routine of writing and reading each other's work. Much of the time, however, Hughes would write and Plath would act as his secretary, sending out his poetry. He even won an important poetry contest that he didn't know Plath entered on his behalf. However, Hughes did support Plath's writing goals and encouraged her to write. In this way, the two had a more equitable artistic partnership than most.

In the 1950s—even in progressive artistic circles—there was still a sense that men dominated the world of work. Mostly, women were relegated to a more domestic experience: providing support for their husband, taking care of the home, and raising the children. It might be seen as a bonus to have a clever wife who would write sometimes. But Plath bristled against losing her identity as a writer to household drudgery.

In 1957, Plath and Hughes moved to back to the United States to pursue jobs in education. They settled in Massachusetts, and Plath began teaching English at her alma mater, Smith College. Although she was regarded as a good professor, Plath felt that teaching took her away from achieving success as a writer. Both she and Hughes decided to dedicate themselves to writing from then on and only take jobs that could allow them to focus on that goal. At this time, Hughes' poetry collection *The Hawk in the Rain* had been well received by American poets, and Plath and Hughes were invited to mingle with Boston's literati.

Plath took two part-time jobs and began auditing classes in Boston taught by well-regarded and eccentric poet Robert Lowell. This class exposed Plath to yet another kind of writing: “confessional” poetry. Confessional poets like Lowell, John Berryman, and Allen Ginsberg wrote about their personal experiences in explicit terms, often breaking social taboos by writing about sexuality, trauma, or addiction in the first person. Lowell’s poetic use of “I” blurred the lines between the writer and the speaker of the poem, inspiring Plath to continue playing with the relationship between art and personal experience. While taking Lowell’s class, Plath met fellow poet Anne Sexton. Sexton, who had begun writing poetry after having a nervous breakdown, was flamboyant and open—and she was an important up-and-coming poet. Plath and Sexton became friendly and would go out for drinks at the Ritz to talk about poetry and about their struggles with mental illness. As we will explore further in Chapter 3, Sexton became an influence on Plath’s poetry.

During this time, Plath was trying to figure out how to move forward in her life as a poet and also become a mother. In 1960, Plath discovered she was pregnant, and she and Hughes decided to move back to England and rent a London apartment. A big year of both successes and setbacks lay ahead. On February 10, 1960, Plath signed a contract for her first book of poetry: *The Colossus and Other Poems*. A few months later, Plath’s daughter Frieda was born. Plath became pregnant again later in the year but had a miscarriage followed by appendicitis. In a letter to Dr. Beuscher, Plath explained that prior to the miscarriage, Hughes had hit her: “Ted beat me up physically a couple of days before my miscarriage: the baby I lost was due to be born on his birthday. I felt this an aberration, & felt I had given him some cause, I had torn some of his papers in half.” Later, Plath would indicate that Hughes also verbally and emotionally abused her as their marriage became strained.

GROWING AS A WRITER

The Colossus and Other Poems received good reviews, but Plath wanted more success and a room of her own. While in recovery from appendicitis, Plath began to plan her first novel as well as write more poetry. By 1961, she was deep at work on *The Bell Jar*, mostly keeping this project a secret. She and Hughes moved out of London and into the country to a house called Court Green where they would have more space to write. This was a turbulent time in Plath’s life but also one of unbridled creativity. Plath was very prolific while at

Court Green and somehow in between caring for her daughter, giving birth to her son, Nicholas, and finding out her husband was having an affair, she wrote with great urgency what would eventually become most of *Ariel* (1965), an extraordinary and genre-changing collection of poems that would make Plath famous after its posthumous publication.

With the end of her marriage looming, Plath returned to London with her children to start life as a single parent. In January 1963, *The Bell Jar* was published under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas to mostly positive reviews—but unfortunately Plath did not live to see most of them. Plath had ambitions for her novel but deferentially referred to it as a “potboiler”—meaning a sensationalistic or shocking book. That she chose to publish under a pen name has been interpreted by scholars as evidence that Plath was concerned readers who were familiar with her story (such as friends or family) would see the text as purely autobiographical, since it is the story of a young woman who attempts suicide after an internship at a prestigious women’s magazine. Plath wrote to her brother that it was a “secret” and “no one must read it!” To be fair, most of the people written about in *The Bell Jar* do not appear in a positive light—although this adds to the book’s unexpected comedic power.

The winter of 1963 in London was one of the coldest to date. Plath had been thrown by the dissolution of her marriage and the prospect of life without Ted. She was alone in a country where she did not have a strong support system. And she was parenting two small children in a freezing apartment where things kept breaking. Though her depression had returned with a vengeance, Plath fought to stay optimistic and productive, but it was too hard. Her letters during this time show a woman continually reaching out to all her support systems but feeling entirely overwhelmed and heartbroken: “What appals [sic] me is the return of my madness, my paralysis, my fear & vision of the worst—cowardly withdrawal, a mental hospital, lobotomies,” she wrote to Dr. Beuscher (*Letters Vol. 2*, 2018, p. 967).

THE CREATION OF PLATH THE MYTH

Here’s where Plath’s life transforms into mythology, where a woman trying to survive the winter becomes a mad poet scribbling in the early morning poems of violence and otherworldliness. In this myth, Plath paces the small apartment twisting her hair. Her eyes are wild. She writes and writes and writes as if possessed. Her friend, writer and critic Al Alvarez, penned an iconic description that furthered this image:

I hardly recognised Sylvia when she opened the door. The bright young American house wife with her determined smile and crisp clothes had vanished along with the pancake make-up, the school-mistressy bun and fake cheerfulness. Her face was wax-pale and drained; her hair hung loose down to her waist and left a faint, sharp animal scent on the air when she walked ahead of me up the stairs. She looked like a priestess emptied out by the rites of her cult. And perhaps that is what she had become. She had broken through to whatever it was that made her want to write, the poems were coming every day, sometimes as many as three a day, unbidden, unstoppable, and she was off in a closed, private world where no one was going to follow her. (Alvarez, 1970)

In reality, we can never know what went through Sylvia Plath's mind during this time. Through letters she wrote and interviews with friends and neighbors during her last few weeks, we know Plath reached out to friends, her primary care physician, Dr. Horder, and her former therapist, Dr. Beuscher. Plath was severely depressed and without adequate support: "I am suddenly in agony, desperate, thinking Yes let him [Hughes] take over the house, the children, let me just die & be done with it. How can I get out of this ghastly defeatist cycle & grow up. I am only too aware that love and a husband are impossibles to me at this time, I am incapable of being myself and loving myself," she wrote to Beuscher on February 4.

On Monday, February 11, 1963, Plath died by suicide. She sealed herself off in the kitchen, away from her children, and turned the gas on. She left the manuscript for *Ariel and Other Poems* neatly on her desk. Later, Dr. Horder explained that he had found a bed for Plath at a mental hospital and she was set to be admitted on February 11 (Clark, 2020, p. 891). Biographer Heather Clark thinks that, in addition to suffering from depression and using medications carelessly, "the prospect of a potentially horrific stay in an unknown mental hospital was one that filled Plath with fear. . . she was on the verge of surrendering herself to unknown psychiatrists—likely all men—in a notorious asylum" (Clark, 2020, p. 887).

Plath did not leave a suicide letter; a note was found by the baby stroller that simply read: "PLEASE CALL DR. HORDER AT PRI 3804." Plath's body was discovered that morning by the visiting nurse she had enlisted to help care for the children.

Ariel and Other Poems was later edited by Ted Hughes and published as *Ariel* in 1965. In a controversial move, Hughes reorganized the structure of the

manuscript and removed poems that he considered cast him in a bad light. Hughes chose to end *Ariel* on “Words,” a poem that references fate in its last lines: “fixed stars govern a life.” What Hughes seemed to be saying with his reorganization was that Plath’s suicide was unpreventable and destined to happen—thus distancing himself from his wife’s desperate act.

In 2004, Frieda Hughes released her mother’s original poetic manuscript, which showed the public that her mother had a very different vision of the collection that made her famous. In particular, Plath concluded her version with the cycle of bee poems, with the last line of the last poem giving a sense of optimism: “The bees are flying. They taste the spring.”

THE TROUBLE WITH BIOGRAPHY

One of the biggest issues in Plath studies has revolved around Plath’s biography: Who gets to tell her story and what written version of this life do we trust? What are the biases? What is at stake? Especially when the person being written about is not alive, and therefore cannot defend herself, the issue of biography remains complicated to this day.

Biographies are intended to be factual accounts of a person’s life. Using eyewitness accounts, interviews, and artifacts such as letters and journal entries, biographers do the best they can to craft a truthful portrait. But as we have learned over time, eyewitness accounts can be faulty. Memories can change or evolve. And as we see from the editorial controversy around *Ariel*, narratives can be molded to satisfy certain agendas depending on who is determining them.

When biographers initially started to tackle Plath’s life, they came up against various roadblocks. The most difficult to get around was Ted Hughes and his sister Olwyn. Olwyn had been placed in charge of Plath’s estate and controlled who was able to use and quote from Plath’s work and access her private materials. Specifically, biographers who were inclined to treat her brother with a gentle touch tended to get permission. One biographer, Linda Wagner-Martin, explained as much in the Preface to *Sylvia Plath: A Life* (1987): “When I began researching this biography in 1982, I contacted Olwyn Hughes, who is literary executor of the Sylvia Plath estate. Olwyn was initially cooperative and helped me in my research . . . As Olwyn read the later chapters of the book, however . . . her cooperation diminished” (Wagner-Martin, 1987, pp. 13–14). Wagner-Martin also added that both Olwyn and Ted’s refusal to cooperate led

to her inability to use more of Plath's writing in the book: "Consequently, this biography contains less of Plath's writing than I had intended. The alternative would have been to agree to suggestions that would have changed the point of view of this book appreciably" (Wagner-Martin, 1987, p. 14).

In 1996, Olwyn gave up control of the estate to Frieda and Nicholas. After Nicholas's suicide in 2009, the estate fell solely to Frieda. Currently, Faber & Faber assists Frieda with administrative duties. Having the estate under Frieda's control has made it much easier for biographers to use material, and for readers to learn more about Plath's life and work.

Because *Ariel* eventually became a foundational text in American literature, and because Sylvia's death became so tied to those poems, her work took on new meaning. But to look at all of Plath's literary products through the veil of her suicide would be to do the poems a disservice.

Plath is not defined by her death. She was a human being who experienced the highs and lows of life and created art inspired by everything from nature to love to childbirth to traveling and so much more. Too often, the poems that deal most directly with mental illness and suicide have been made to stand in for Plath's entire oeuvre, obscuring the range of her poetic interests. As Frieda writes, "I saw poems such as 'Lady Lazarus' and 'Daddy' dissected over and over, the moment that my mother wrote them being applied to her whole life, to her whole person, as if they were the total sum of her experience." Plath's death does not represent her entire life and work, but it is an example of how society can let down people who struggle with mental illness. Her art remains a testament to how someone with mental illness can still live a full and productive life.

Plath's life as well as her poetry and prose continue to influence readers in all kinds of ways. Plath is now a pop culture icon and a central figure in American literature. Whereas, when I was growing up and we studied one Plath poem, there are now entire college courses dedicated to Plath studies, indicating that her work is being taken more seriously. Conferences are held, books are written, and paintings and sculpture are created. Her London apartment at 3 Chalcot Square is a national landmark. People make journeys to her grave in Heptonstall, England, to leave pens. Her legacy is one of empowerment, especially for young women who feel stifled by societal expectations. When we study Sylvia Plath's life, we study all the ways that a woman was able to thrive, for a time, in a world that didn't expect her to achieve much.

