



Sylvia Plath As A Confessional Poet

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The term "confessional poetry" was coined by M. L. Rosenthal, who was thinking specifically of a period in Robert Lowell's career when Lowell explored themes of sexual guilt, alcoholism, and psychiatric hospitalisation, developing them in the first person in a way that Rosenthal believed was meant to point to the poet. Though he was careful to define the genre narrowly, Rosenthal included Sylvia Plath in his list of confessional poets because, he claimed, she made the speaker's own frailty and humiliation an expression of her culture by placing herself at the poems' centre. Since then, Marjorie Perloff has argued that Plath's poetry lacks the realistic specificity of Lowell's work, and Ted Hughes has said that Plath employs autobiographical information in her poetry in a more iconic way than Lowell. If Hughes and Perloff are correct, as I believe they are, then we need to reevaluate the identity of the speaker, her relationship to the poet, and the degree to which the poems are confessional.

Sylvia Plath was born to Otto Plath and his second wife, Aurelia Schober Plath, in Boston, Massachusetts on October 27, 1932. When his daughter was born, Otto Plath was 47 years old, which made him the dominant patriarch in the home. His wife was only 21. In 1901, he left Grabow, a town in the Polish Corridor, for the United States. Grabow was later described by Sylvia Plath as a "manic-depressive hamlet in the black heart of Prussia." Otto Plath, who was disowned by his Lutheran family after he converted to Darwinism, went on to earn a Ph.D. in entomology from Harvard in 1928 for his study of bumblebee life cycles despite being cut off from them. Aurelia Schober, whose parents were Austrian immigrants, was a high school language teacher before being married at the age of twenty-two. Possibly an immigrant's awareness of the tenuousness of worldly accomplishment and the need to constantly refresh and fortify it may have been passed down to Plath from both of her parents, together with her strong idealism and desire towards self-improvement. In 1940, when

Sylvia and her brother Warren were ages 8 and 5, their father, Otto Plath, passed away after an operation to amputate a gangrenous leg. He refused to get medical help despite his worsening condition, and was severely debilitated before his diabetes was diagnosed. There is some evidence to show that in Plath's mind, her father's disregard for his health was the morally equivalent of suicide. "Daddy," written in 1962, is a passionate tirade against the father who has forsaken her, a Freudian play of repetition-compulsion in which the speaker resurrects her vampiric father only to kill him again in a contradictory attempt to efface the original source of her psychological suffering. Plath's father's death was such a devastating blow that she never fully recovered. The Plath family relocated from Winthrop to Wellesley, Massachusetts after Otto's passing. Sylvia Plath, even at such a young age, had already begun a stellar academic career, one in which she aimed, with enormous discipline and hard effort, to become the ideal all-around student. She attended Smith College on a scholarship and managed to keep an A average while still being an active member of campus life, editing the college newspaper, and having her work published in prestigious magazines like *Seventeen*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and *Mademoiselle*. After finding early success as a bright student author in the "slicks," as Plath called them, she found it challenging to make the leap to more mature and serious writing. She had learned as a young person how to shape her writing to fit the expectations of the magazines in which she hoped to be published, and it would take her time and effort to develop her own unique voice.

At the end of her second year at Smith, in June 1953, Plath joined nineteen other young achievers from universities across the country for a guest editorship at *Mademoiselle* in New York City. The overwhelming summer heat of the city, the exhausting routine of hard work and socialising, and the competitive cattiness of the young women with whom she was thrown are all described by Plath in *The Bell Jar*, which she later satirised in her strongly autobiographical novel. It is clear that Plath did not enjoy her stint on *Mademoiselle* as much as she felt she ought to have, but was left drained by the experience. When she got back to Wellesley, she was disappointed to learn that Frank O'Connor's summer writing programme at Harvard had rejected her. Plath's depression began when she found herself at a loss in Wellesley, where she had trouble sleeping and felt helpless to establish a regular schedule for herself. After prescribing sleeping drugs and referring her to a psychiatrist, who advised ECT after a short session, the patient began to show improvement. Poorly performed ECT caused Plath excruciating pain and fear, which may have contributed to her decision to end her life.

Sylvia Plath has established herself as a significant female writer in history. In 1960, her first book of poetry, *The Colossus*, was published. Ted Hughes, Sylvia's husband, submitted *Ariel*, her subsequent collection of poetry after she took her own life in 1963 at the age of thirty. *Crossing the Water and Winter Trees*, two other collections of her poems, were published in 1971. In 1982, Plath's *The Collected Poems* was also released posthumously and was edited by Hughes. In 1953, Plath, in addition to penning poems, worked as a temporary editor for the publication *Mademoiselle*. These five collections of poetry, four of which came out after Sylvia Plath passed away, make up her canon and showcase her limited but brilliant years of writing. Several of the accolades Plath received after her untimely death were given in recognition of her literary achievements.

When she was twenty years old, she was granted an honorary invitation to work as a guest editor for the illustrious *Mademoiselle* magazine. A Fulbright scholarship to Newnham College in Cambridge, England, was awarded to her two years later (Plath 1). A number of Plath's poems were published before her death in 1963 in the *New York Times Book Review*, *The Review*, and *The Encounter*, among other well-known publications. *The Collected Poems* by Ted Hughes, which was released after his death, ultimately brought Sylvia Plath the Pulitzer Prize in 1982. Plath's poetry has endured and is still appreciated by her readers, despite the fact that she was too ill to personally accept many of her honours.

It wasn't long after Sylvia Plath passed away that critics started to study her poetry more closely. *Ariel* by Plath was praised as "one of the most marvellous volumes of poetry published for a very long time" by an anonymous *Times Literary Supplement* critic. Similar to how A. Alvarez, editor of the *Observer Poetry*, described Plath as "the most gifted woman poet of her time," As Irving Howe put it, "it's as if we are overhearing the rasps of a mind that has found its own habitation and need not measure its distance from...or relation to, other minds," and as Barbara Hardy put it, "unfailing grim humour" and a "rationally alert intelligence" were two qualities the poet possessed. However, there were some negative evaluations of this poet as well. Harold Bloom claims that while reading Plath's poetry, he "became lost, and doubted [his] competence to read" her work.

However, all writers receive criticism from a variety of critics, both favourable and unfavourable. Looking into Sylvia Plath's poems is the goal of this. We will examine some extremely crucial elements, including her use of imagery, figurative language, and recurring themes. In the majority of her poems, Plath uses imagery. Her works frequently feature symbols, colours, and pictures of the natural world. Plath can help her readers visualise the story she is telling by including the exact elements she selects to include in her poetry. Many of Sylvia Plath's most well-known works contain pictures of nature. Her 1956 piece "Black Rook in Rainy Weather" is one of her compositions that a number of images taken from nature are present. An image of a "wet black rook" resting on a "stiff twig" with a "mute sky" above is provided by Plath. She also wrote a poem in 1956 called "Winter Landscape, with Rooks" that includes imagery of the natural world. The "dry frost" that hides her grief and the "single swan" that circles the pond are two of the things she describes.

Plath often uses colour imagery in her poetry, which is another sort of imagery. Her 1956 poem "Ode for Ted" features a lot of colourful imagery. Examples of this include the "green oat-sprouts" that poke through the ground, the "red fox" that pursues the rabbit, and the "blue fur" that the moles wear. Numerous allusions to colour can be found in Plath's 1959 poem "The Sleepers." She talks about the "blue light" emanating from the window that is encircled by "yellow lace" and the "silver track" left by a little snail. Numerous poems by Sylvia Plath also contain antagonistic, violent imagery. The "red plush" that was left on the "thumb stump" after the "dead white" skin of the thumb was removed is described by Plath in her poem "The Cut" from 1962 (Plath 235). The poem "Daddy," written by her in 1962, likewise uses harsh imagery. She talks of her late father, who passed away when she was a small girl, and his "brute heart" as well as the "obscene language" of his German

relations (Connell). These poems, along with a large number of her other works, show Sylvia Plath's consistent use of imagery in her poetry.

Figurative language also appears frequently in Plath's writing. Allusions, metaphors, and personification are some of the most typical literary devices she employs. In Sylvia Plath's writings, there are several allusions. An allusion to Christ's death can be found in her poem *Moonrise from Colossus*. According to Dobbs, "A body of whiteness/ Rots, and smells of rot under its headstone/ though the body walk out in clean linen." Her poem *Daddy* makes use of allusions as well. Using the well-known *When she states*, "...black shoe in which I have lived like a foot for thirty years," she is referencing the children's book *"The Old Woman in a Shoe."* When Plath refers to her father as "Panzer-man (Connell)" and uses the terms "Luftwaffe" and "Aryan eye," she is also alluding to actual events.

Plath uses similes in her poems as well. Plath used similes in her 1956 poem *"The Queen's Complaint"* to describe the queen's assailant. He appears "fierce and black as rooks," she adds, and has "hands like derricks" (Plath 28). Her 1962 poetry *"The Other,"* which uses similes extensively, is another example. Like a meathook, breathe like mileage, and scratch like a cat are all expressions that help the reader grasp the poetry (Plath 201). Personification is a literary device that Plath uses often in her poetry. She personifies this quality as "so nice," having the capacity to "glide around," converse, and carry "a cup of tea" (Plath 269) in her 1963 poem *"Kindness."* The 1961 poem *"Mirror"* is another example of personification in poetry. A mirror is portrayed in the poem as an item that may "reward[e]" its observers and be both "truthful" and "reward[ed]."

Sylvia Plath uses figurative language in her poems to assist her audience better comprehend the message she is attempting to express by connecting it to more relatable themes. Thematic content is another recurring theme in Sylvia Plath's poems. Suicide as a coping mechanism, abandonment, and apathy are among the recurring themes in her writings. One of Sylvia Plath's most often recurring motifs in her poems is finding relief via suicide. Plath discusses her attempts at suicide in *"Lady Lazarus,"* one of her most well-known works. "And like the cat, I have nine chances to pass away. Number three. "The first time it happened I was ten..." she recalls, referring to her two prior attempts at suicide. When I said it a second time, I really meant to "last it out and never return. According to Plath (244) she performs "exceptionally well" the "art" of dying. Plath's poem *"Daddy"* is another example of her recurring topic of suicide death. In her poem, *"At Twenty,"* Plath says, "I tried to die/and get back...to you/I thought even the bones would do." Suicide is a recurring issue in Plath's works, which helps the reader get a personal impression of the author.

Another recurring theme in Plath's poems is desertion. They are all gloved and covered, why did nobody inform me?, Plath asks in her poem *"The Bee Meeting"* from 1962. she cried out in terror of being left alone, "I am nude as a chicken neck, does nobody love me?" (Plath 211). Her poem *"Daddy"* similarly addresses desertion. According to Connell, Plath writes that she "used to pray to recover" her father and that he passed away "before [she] had time" to express her feelings. The issue of desertion, which appears often in Plath's poetry, is evident

in these pieces. Sylvia Plath's poetry often explores the idea of passivity.

The lady in Plath's poem "Mirror" is powerless and unable to stop looking into the mirror because it has become "important to" her, as shown by Plath's description of the woman's inability to resist. She comes and departs, and every dawn, her face takes the place of the darkness (Plath 174). The passiveness concept is also present in her 1961 poem "Tulips." According to her, she is "learning tranquilly, lying by [herself] quietly." She also demonstrates her powerlessness in the lyric "I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses/ and my history to the anaesthetist and my body to the surgeons." works by her. Sylvia Plath's usage of various aspects has a significant effect on how her poems are read by her audience. Her use of a variety of pictures aids the reader in visualising the settings and themes of her writings. She uses metaphorical language in her poetry to help the reader comprehend the poems, for instance by contrasting unusual items with more commonplace ones. Additionally, her recurring topic material helps readers comprehend the significance of her writing.

The particular feature Plath choose to include throughout her poems has a significant effect on how her readers respond to them. Sylvia Plath, who passed away at the young age of 30, became well-known for her prodigious output of poetry, most of which was released after her passing. Many of her readers have been affected by her writing, which has given them a fresh perspective on those who are on the verge of suicide and given them an awareness of a modern style of writing. Despite Plath's death, her poetry lives on and reveals the legacy of a troubled artist. Students and academics of the twenty-first century will examine the twentieth century as it comes to a close to assess the contributions this century made to disciplines like history, art, and literature. The "canonised" poets and authors of the 1900s have still to be determined, although Sylvia Plath is unquestionably a contender for the title of significant American poet of the period.

In the 1950s and early 1960s, just after World War II, Plath penned her works. Since her suicide in 1963 at the age of 30, Sylvia Plath's reputation has been hampered by her role as a cult figure, which continues to pose a danger to her standing as a serious poet in the early years of the new century. While the cult figure continues to captivate those fascinated by mystery and tragedy, the serious poet has failed to fully cement her position as a great writer in critics' eyes—partly, some would say, through no fault of her own. Ted Hughes, the late wife's husband, oversaw the administration of her estate and her writings after her passing. He later rose to the position of poet laureate of Britain.

Posthumously, Hughes edited and released a number of his late wife's writings, including her extensive notebooks. Similar to how Emily Dickinson's work was edited after her death, Hughes' editing decisions were scrutinised closely in the years that followed his wife's passing and were seen as problematic by many readers, academics, and critics. The feminist movement of the 1970s and 1980s, which reverberated across American society and literary criticism of works by women, took place during these years. For instance, feminists and others accused Hughes of manhandling and manipulating Plath's work and legacy in the early 1980s when he

refused to publish all of his wife's journals, claiming that he destroyed one of them to protect his children and another was "lost" and, worse still, of silencing her voice. Feminist biographers and others started to attribute Plath's despair and even her fatal act on Hughes's adultery and ambition, mostly in response to Hughes's actions after Plath's death and in the decades that followed.

The legend surrounding Plath's last weeks and days rose to such dimensions that it imperilled the poems. Since the passing of Ted Hughes in 1998 and the opening of his archives at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, in 2000, interest in the Plath Hughes saga has grown. As a result, editors, academics, and biographers have turned to the study of the newly made available papers of both poets in an effort to gain a better understanding of what transpired in their lives and how it affected their work. Their lives and works are often seen in parallel to one another as if they are inextricably linked as time goes on. Some claim that in order to completely understand the work of one poet, one must at the very least consider the work of the other poet. New versions of Math's literature are also paving the door for novel ways to analyse her poetry and prose on their own terms. For instance, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* makes an effort to restore Plath's writing to its original setting by adding passages Ted Hughes left out of the published journals from 1982. The "Restored Edition," which substitutes the poet's original poems and arrangement as she had them in manuscript form before the collection was substantially edited by her husband, was slated to be released in late 2004. *Ariel* is Plath's posthumous and most highly praised collection of poetry. These and other initiatives will bring Plath's work closer to its original state. Then it will probably be reevaluated for its worth and applicability in the twenty-first century. Sylvia Plath's poetry were still being anthologized in literature courses and other readers as of the beginning of 2004. Plath was still generally regarded as an important poet with an intense voice that speaks to the conditions of women in the mid-twentieth century as well as other significant themes like family, nature, the Holocaust, and death. However, extensive, serious study of her work was not consistently practised in universities across the country. A search of the Modern Library Association Bibliography at the beginning of 2004 turned up more than 200 books and articles on the poet and her work in addition to 127,000 Web sites dedicated to her. One may get a historical perspective on the expanding but still relatively modest academic and general reader interest in the more contemporary author by comparing these figures to the more than 500,000 Internet hits and almost 800 books and articles for the well-established canonical poet Emily Dickinson. These figures are likely to rise with the new releases as Plath's standing in the academic literary canon is reassessed in light of more reliable editions of her writing.

Despite the poet's cult status as an icon, Sylvia Plath's work would not have attracted as much attention as it has thus far without her ardent supporters in the literary world. The first person in the group to compliment her was Ted Hughes, who went on to have a lengthy writing career that lasted well over 30 years after the passing of his first wife, with multiple published novels and many honours and prizes. Soon after Plath's death, he asserted in a private letter to the poet's mother that "no other woman poet except Emily Dickinson can begin to be compared with her."¹ Indeed, Plath highlighted the whole of Dickinson's poem "After great pain a formal feeling comes" in her copy of *Understanding Poetry*, an anthology produced by Cleanth Brooks and Robert

Penn Warren:

After great pain, a formal feeling comes—
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs—
The stiff Heart questions 'was it He, that bore,'
And 'Yesterday, or Centuries before'?

She also highlighted a phrase made by Brooks in the chapter that said, "...pain is a constant part of the human lot." Given that the majority of readers concur that Plath produced her best work in October 1962, shortly after her breakup with Hughes, and in the months that followed while suffering from depression and sharing a cramped flat with two young children, perhaps it really did take the agony of real suffering for her to experience the "bloodjet" she referred to as poetry. Hughes also praised his first wife's poems in public. He said, "Behind these poems there is a fierce and uncompromising nature," in one of the earliest documented remarks about the Arid poems that established the tone of criticism of the collection for long time.

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