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The Life that formed the Poet Sylvia Plath: A selective account

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Introduction

To study, critically appreciate or elucidate the creative work of a literary artist, it is not necessarily important to delve at any great depth into the biography. If the study is felt to be left lame without the crutches of biographical details, the work is generally confessional in nature. But, with Sylvia Plath, the case is a typical one. Her work pronounces her to be a poetic genius. Yet for a Plath student, a detailed study of her biography contributes a lot towards a lucid understanding of her poems and prose. However, Sylvia, the poet is no replica of Sylvia, the person.

Born on October 27, 1932 in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts to Aurelia and Otto Plath, Sylvia was a child distinguished from her peers at a very early age. Just an infant and she was already the exuberant, curious, daring Sylvia, she headed to explore right into the ocean when her alert mother's firm grip on one foot saved her. For two and a half years she had been "the center of a tender universe" and felt such rage at the invasion of her territory when her brother, Warren was born that, as she wrote later, she "felt the axis wrench and a polar chill immobilize my bones". Scarcely three, she read letters arranged into words and built with blocks replicas of structures such as Taj Mahal. The Schobers, her maternal grandparents, lived at 'Point Shirley' and she in her fantasy believed that the sea would always protect her. And 'Point Shirley' was a truly safe haven. Her essays and poems are rich with the reminiscent fantasies of this period. Warren was sickly, Otto got increasingly debilitated from an undiagnosed illness, so Sylvia at the age of five and a half was living at the Schobers. Despite her love for her grandparents, great was the hurt of this sensitive soul at being sent away from her own house, although '92 Johnson Avenue' in Winthrop, the new Plath house was not far away from 'Point Shirley', maternal grandparents house.

Sylvia's early childhood alternated between her feeling lonely and being the centre of attention. She would show bad temper tantrums when she felt the centre shifting away from her. Even being sick at the Plaths' was a pleasant attention getting experience for her. Otto's deteriorating physical state made him withdraw from the normal life of the family. The children were often unwelcome in his room. He felt strong hardly for half an hour in the evening and during this time Sylvia and Warren would perform and Otto would feel proud and genuinely appreciate their show. This kind of a formal, unnatural session created the image of father as an autocrat, a mentor, a critic and someone to be pleased. This caused confusion in Sylvia's mind about the unusual fact that her father loved the children but he loved them most when they were absent. On October 12, 1940 Otto's leg was amputated at the thigh. On being so told, Sylvia remained silent and finally with a studied calm asked, "when he buys shoes, will he have to buy a pair, mummy"

The black shoe got registered in her psyche and figured very frequently through her mature poetry. On November 5, 1940 Otto Plath died. When she was told, she dully said, "I'll never speak to God again!". She was a child of eight then, but her poetry is a testimony that she never did speak to God, rather, she created in her imagination a stronger, darker counterpart, definitely different from the benign Biblical Christian God. Aurelia decided that the children were not to attend the funeral or the burial, since Otto's appearance in the casket, because of autopsy having been performed on the body, was greatly 'forbidding.' And we see that the appearance sketched and suggested by the horrid imagery used in poem after poem is much more morbid and forbidding than what a glimpse of the corpse could be. Aurelia showed

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unusual stoicism and betrayed no grief over her husband's death, ignorantly making the position on the bereaved young daughter further complicated, as the girl had no model for her mourning. Disoriented enough by her father's death, wrapt in confusing shrouds, Sylvia herself wished to die, as she later told her friend. She consistently discussed Otto's death as 'the child's loss.' Her father's death left her with the natural overwhelming fear of losing the parent that survived and to allay this fear, she asked Aurelia to sign a note promising she would never remarry.

Sylvia's observations as a child, so far had confirmed her belief in male supremacy. She had spent her younger days identifying with her grandfather and father who symbolized domestic power. Financial and domestic circumstances necessitated merger of the Plath and Schober households. With Otto dead and the control of family finances in grandmother's hands after Frank (grandfather) suffered some investment losses, the Plath – Schober household eventually became a matriarchy. After Aurelia secured a Boston University position, the families decided to move inland from Winthrop to '26 Elmwood Road,' Wellesley in 1943. Sylvia had reservations about the change. She lamented leaving their 'Johnson Avenue' house in her poem, *Let the Rain Fall Gently*, written when she was fifteen. World war II further darkened the days. Sylvia had vivid memory of war time black outs, rationing and paper drives. However, exploring Hunnewell fields, Morse pond, lake Waban, biking and her pets, a cat named Mowgli, parakeets and a tame squirrel, made her childhood in Wellesley seem rich in many ways. She would sun bathe devouringly and the sun here was as important as the sea had been in Winthrop.

When Sylvia was in seventh grade, Aurelia took the children to watch 'The Tempest' at the 'Colonial Theatre' in Boston. The father-daughter relationship, the reunion, the ocean and the powers of Ariel (a lively spirit which Prospero had freed from its captivity) made the story specially germane to her. Sylvia's fascination with Ariel, thus dated right from January 1945. In 1945 she saw herself first in print when her poem about crickets and fireflies came in the Boston Sunday Herald. Writings about nature: 'The Spring Parade,' 'March' and 'Rain' appeared in a magazine titled, The Phillipian. Also she won a prize for a drawing of a woman in a hat. Her adolescence was marked by concerns about being good. Saving money, eating a lot and worrying whether she would ever date, for, she was not popular with boys, who were awed by her tall, confident stature and superior intellect. Sylvia had grown a slim leggy girl of 5ft. 8" by her 15th year. Despite signs of maturity she would revert to the feeling and fear caused by her father's death, the fear of losing the one surviving parent and the feeling of inadequate parental protection. When her mother was offered the position of Dean at a university in Boston and she talked to her children whether to accept the offer, Sylvia responded angrily, "For your self-aggrandizement you would make us complete orphans."

Wilbury Crockett, the young English teacher at Bradford High School, with his demanding and encouraging teaching methods held in Sylvia's esteem the position of a 'Guru,' when she was in 10th grade. Sylvia excelled in whatever assignment she was given and Crockett "wondered whether she was able to relax enough to enjoy life. Would she ever give up her aim of always being the best? Would she ever mature enough to realize the impossibility of that?" In fact

her anxiety to excel was unconsciously connected with her natural need to be loved and her conviction that her mother's love would be in proportion to her accomplishments and thought consciously that her mother's threadbare monetary position justified the expectations she had from her. Any results, less than perfect, depressed her seriously. Obviously her straight A record throughout was not earned without strain. After high school, Sylvia went to Northampton to attend Smith on scholarships from the local Smith Club and the Olive Higgins Prouty Fellowship fund at Smith College. Prouty became Sylvia's lifelong benefactress and friend. Sylvia called herself "The girl who wanted to be God". She loved freedom and hated constriction and limitations. She rejected the prevailing mode of femininity__

"Cooking three meals a day... the relentless cage of routine and rote."

She had not been accepted to Frank O'Connor's fiction course. The rejection made her believe herself a total failure and she steadily slid into depression. She would no longer write and she had not slept for many nights. Plath's family doctor referred her to a psychiatrist and Sylvia received outpatient shock treatment which horrified her as she described in a late poem:

By the roots of my hair some god got hold of me.
I sizzled in his blue volts. ('The Hanging Man')

On August 24, 1953 she broke open a cabinet that held sleeping pills, left a note saying, "Have gone for a walk, will be home tomorrow," crawled to the basement with a container of water, emptied the nearly full bottle of pills and lost consciousness for more than two days. Sylvia's disappearance got national news coverage, police investigations continued, a volunteer group of nearly hundred scouts and Wellesley citizens complete with bold hounds searched Morse's Pond and Lake Waban. Two days later Warren heard a moan coming from below the house. He dashed from the lunch table and the 'Beautiful Smith Girl' with bruises and cuts and the injured right eye festering was taken by ambulance to the Newton Wellesley Hospital where the nurse described her "more dead than alive." In mid-October, after Prouty fully patronized Sylvia's medical expenses, she was moved to McLean Hospital. The one person she asked to see was Wilbury Crockett, her revered English teacher. Sylvia could neither read nor write and Crockett's patient work was a crucial part of the therapy that led to her recovery. Her Smith teacher, Evelyn Page wrote to her "I want you to know that I am proud of you with the kind of pride that makes no demands upon you." By late December Sylvia's condition was much improved and by February she was back at Smith for the Spring term__ doing her usual 'A' work.

Part of Sylvia's therapy suggested by her psychiatrist was to learn to trust herself, to see that her relationship with her parents was crucial and to understand that she needed nothing to do to be worthy of love, which was a natural part of a loving family. However Sylvia tried to stay away from Wellesley whenever possible. Visits home were replaced by letters. She termed her attempted suicide and recovery 'a rebirth.'

Poems Plath wrote during 1955 reflect tension and a vacuum in her life. Some of them are about an absent lover. For instance, 'Cinderella,' 'on Looking into the Eyes of a Demon Lover,' 'Denouement,' and 'Two lovers and a Beach Comber by the Real Sea,' She found England less exciting and fulfilling than she had imagined and a pall of gloom overcame her. Despite the inner hollowness that she felt, her height, solemn expression, aura of defiance and poise made her someone to talk about. On a date with a friend from America, Plath dared riding a runaway horse, Sam through the streets of Cambridge, barely escaping injury. Her final flight with 'Ariel' is rooted in this fleeting experience. Sylvia was always in love with some giant of a man or the other but she avoided serious relationship by telling men about someone in France. By mid Feb. 1956, she experienced the same kind of angry depression that had preceded her early breakdown. To add to her discomfort Sylvia got a splinter in her eye and was quite unnerved by her temporary blindness though she is able to laugh at it later in a poem titled 'Eye Mote.'

Her chief problem was that she had not yet found that "blazing love," she had believed would surround her. As if in answer to her journal deliberations, she seriously set to find the man she had been waiting to accidentally meet. She bought a copy of the first issue of the new literary magazine *St. Botolph's Review* wherein Ted Hughes's poems particularly impressed her. She turned up that night to *St. Botolph's* celebratory party at Falcon yard and met Ted to find that he too had liked her poems as she had liked his. They yelled exuberantly_ reciting lines from each other's poems. Later she wrote to her mother: "In the last two months I have fallen terribly in love which can only lead to great hurt. I met the strongest man in the world, ex_ Cambridge, brilliant poet whose work I loved before I met him, a large, hulking, healthy Adam...with a voice like the thunder of God_ lion and world- wanderer, a vagabond who will never stop". The jubilant tone for exactly the sort of man she had long sought for was a truthful expression for a genuine feeling. His behavior, however, which was sometimes unruly worried her and she wrote to Prouty about his ruthless force, "He is a breaker of things and people." Sylvia was definitely more dynamic, more talented and possessed a more sophisticated upbringing in contrast to Ted's countryside background. Sylvia poured all her love and energy into the relationship and on June 16, 1956 they married. Together they moved into an apartment in Grantchester Meadows. Sylvia somehow felt that Ted's writing was more important than hers. She would shop, cook, keep house, type his manuscripts, receive and answer mail and study for her exams.

Sylvia Plath felt she needed a job for secure earning. Smith, her alma mater, willingly accepted her on the faculty. Hoping for Ted too to take up teaching at some U.S. university, they came to America. At the end of a tedious year of teaching as well as housekeeping, Sylvia realized that her only real and satisfying vocation was to be a successful poet_ writer and she quit her job at Smith. Ted during this period grew into a published and sought after poet, as he had certainly enjoyed more writing time. It was during this stay in America that she, for the first time in 20 years visited her father's grave on Azalea Path in the Winthrop cemetery. The genesis of her poem *Electra* on Azalea Path and several other poems lies in this experience. She also started attending Robert Lowell's Boston

University Poetry workshop where she made friends with Anne Sexton, both admiring each other's poetry. Lowell's and Sexton's assessment of Sylvia Plath, the poet as well as the woman is influenced by their personal acquaintance.

Before returning to England, her 11 weeks stay at Yaddo, a writer's colony in Saratoga Springs, re-affirmed her faith in her poetic talent and saw the birth of most of the *Colossus* poems. Agreeing to settling in England was a crucial decision and a sort of sacrifice on her part. It meant choosing to be thrown off one's roots. As either of the two had to forego the smugness of being at home, Sylvia opted for the harsh buffet. "I wouldn't have Ted change his citizenship for the world. It is part of his identity, I feel, and will always be so". Plath continued feeling homesick intermittently and to keep her bond with her roots alive and up-dated she would maintain some touch with the American cadence. She would write to her mother such appeals as, "could you pack me off *ladies Home Journal* or two? I get homesick for it: it has an Americanness which I feel a need to dip into, now I'm in exile".

Sylvia pregnant with her first child, they sailed back to England. A relentless worker as she had always been, her energies went not so much in writing and publishing as in homemaking and preparing for motherhood. Frieda's birth made her euphoric. A housewife and mother became her identity in public and maintaining her identity as a poet at home was difficult. Ted became busier and busier with poetry readings at universities and for the BBC and Sylvia got furious at one of the occasions when he got back late than expected. Soon after this episode she miscarried and three weeks later had an appendectomy. Birth of one child, loss of another, hospitalization, burdensome housekeeping and infidelity on part of the spouse gave her a language that would express herself as a woman and explore the emotions associated with women experiences.

Subletting their London apartment to David Wevill, a young Canadian poet and his wife Assia the Hugheses moved to Courtgreen, a sprawling but dilapidated cottage in Devon. Here in Jan. 62, her son Nicholas was born, making the family pattern similar to that she had herself known and disliked as a child. Vocationally, Sylvia was at her lowest as diapers figured more prominently than writing schedules. Part of her uneasiness, that winter sprang out of the fact that Ted was not writing the kind of poetry she knew him for. Because she usually typed his manuscripts, she was bewildered to note that distrust of and anger towards the feminine in his work. She sensed something was causing distance between herself and Ted and she was losing him.

Her poem 'Little Fugue' speaks of a woman's anxiety and fear of loss and the figures of Otto and Ted are merged. In May 1962 David and Assia Wevill spent a weekend in Devon. Assia kept no secret of her admiration for Ted. The day the visiting couple left, she wrote two angry revealing poems 'The Rabbit Catcher' and 'Event' followed a week later by 'Apprehension.' Trying to repress her anger and divert her thoughts, she bought a hive at a meeting of beekeepers and was soon keeping bees_a regression into girlhood by strengthening her bond with her dead father who had authored *Bumblebees* and their *Ways*. In July Sylvia intercepted a phone call from Assia to Ted which confirmed her doubts regarding her husband's fidelity and put an end to troubled speculations. When the conversation was over she tore the telephone wires from the wall and drove with Nick to a friend's house leaving Frieda in her

mother's care who was in England with her on a summer visit. Next day she gathered Ted's letters, drafts of work and the manuscript of what was to be her second novel, celebrating her great love for Ted and burnt them all in the presence of a troubled Aurelia and inquisitive Frieda. Poems like 'Words Heard by Accident over the Phone' and 'Burning the letters' have their origin in these fateful events in her life. But they are not at all narrative in form. They are like many other poems, exquisite examples of artistic transmutation of personal agony.

As soon as Aurelia was gone, Sylvia for the next few months was taking her riding lessons from the runaway 'sam' of Cambridge. The traits of the Cambridge horse have been superimposed on the symbolic 'Ariel' figure of the final poems richly combining the intangible spirit of 'Ariel' of *The Tempest*. The accelerated flight of Ariel into the eternal abyss of the persona's subconscious, gives Plath's Ariel particularized dimension and becomes intricately woven with the Plath myth. Riding and beekeeping helped her fill her days. Reconciliation could not be brought though an attempt was made by planning a trip to Ireland. Women were drawn to Hughes, mainly because of his literary reputation, for which partly credit could be given to Sylvia, who had helped him considerably giving a back seat to the creative needs to her own poetic talent. Her situation is comparable to the Greek legendary heroine, Euripides or Medea, who loses her husband Jason to a rival after helping him find the Golden Fleece. 'Burning the Letters' was the first in her cycle of Medea poems which went on and on till her death.

Sylvia was angry and rebellious, defiant and strong without but within she was immensely grieved and broken at the collapse of her domestic milieu in which she had invested with all her heart and strength. Amidst this mess of her life, severe chills, fever and sinus problems and the coldest winter in 150 years ahead, Sylvia found her genuine poetic voice. In the early hours of morning, before the cry of the child, she would finish poems at a breathtaking speed sometimes two or three and each with exquisite artistry, rambling yet poised, autobiographical yet mythical and mystic, a woman's voice stronger than a man's "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."

Her poems though interior and private and drawn from her own life, opened to universal interpretations. She had come to London and was staying in the flat where once Yeats had lived. Despite the cold and darkness of power failures, she continued writing poems every morning, working simultaneously on her new novel titled *Double Exposure* about the gradual corruption of a naive American girl, who revered honesty, by a powerful but innately dishonest man. Some of her poems reflect the pleasure she took in her role as a mother and in the beauty of her children and their innocence. That her children had no promises of stability in their lives, that they would live without a father and that she would live a life her own mother had led, a life that she had often criticized, greatly depressed her. She would not run away or go to America in the midst of her emotional, financial and professional instability. She simply had to fight it out on her own and in England. On Feb 10, 1963 at 11:45 p.m. she went down to neighbour, Professor Thomas, to get postage stamps from him, which he was happy to provide. Sylvia looked very ill. The professor suggested, to call the doctor but she refused, the minutes later when he

again opened the door she was still standing as if in a trance. The professor offered to call the doctor, she said 'no' again, adding, she was having a wonderful dream, a marvelous vision.

Early on the morning of Feb. 11, 1963 she knelt beside the open oven and gassed herself to death. She had left two cups of milk beside the children's beds and had shoved towels under the door to seal them against escaping gas_ her "last act of love."

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