

Anne Stevenson: On "Sylvia Plath's Life and Career"

Plath was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on 27 October (she shared a birthday with Dylan Thomas), and spent her childhood in Winthrop. When she was 8 her German father, a professor at Boston University, died of diabetes. Two years later her mother moved the family inland to Wellesley, where she struggled to give Sylvia and her younger brother every advantage of a superior education. Self-consciousness and anxiety about status and money during adolescence contributed to the profound insecurity Plath concealed all her life beneath a façade of brassy energy and brilliant achievement.

Plath discovered that writing was her vocation very early. By the time she was at Smith College in the early 1950s she had published precocious poems in newspapers and written over fifty short stories, some of which won prizes from ladies' magazines. At Smith she went on winning prizes, but after a third year of feverish overwork, she broke down and attempted suicide. Six months in a private hospital set her on her feet again, but in reality she never recovered.

After she had graduated, *summa cum laude*, from Smith in 1955, she went to Cambridge University on a Fulbright scholarship, and there she met the poet Ted Hughes. They were married in London in June 1956. The marriage was for six years a strong union of supremely dedicated writers. Sylvia's wholehearted enthusiasm for Hughes's work, which she sent off to the competition that won him fame, was balanced by his steadfast belief in her exceptional gift. They lived in Massachusetts (Cambridge, Northampton--where Sylvia taught for a year at Smith--and Boston), then in London and Devon. A daughter, Frieda, was born in April 1960, and a son, Nicholas, in January 1962.

Sylvia Plath's early poems--already drenched in typical imagery of glass, moon, blood, hospitals, fetuses, and skulls--were mainly 'exercises' or pastiches of work by poets she admired: Dylan Thomas, W. B. Yeats, Marianne Moore. Late in 1959, when she and her husband were at Yaddo, the writers' colony in New York State, she produced the seven-part 'Poem for a Birthday', which owes its form to Theodore Roethke's 'Lost Son' sequence, though its theme is her own traumatic breakdown and suicide attempt at 21. After 1960 her poems increasingly explored the surreal landscape of her imprisoned psyche under the looming shadow of a dead father and a mother on whom she was resentfully dependent.

A fanatical preoccupation with death and rebirth informs her sad, cynical novel, *The Bell Jar*, as it does her first book of poems, *The Colossus*, published in London by Heinemann in October 1960, and by Knopf in New York, in 1962. Plath's mature poetry, too exalted to be merely 'confessional', frequently treats of this resurrection theme, together with a related one which attempts to redeem meaningless life through art. Lines like 'I am lost, I am lost, in the robes of all this light' ('Witch Burning?'), and 'On Fridays the little children come / To trade their hooks for hands' ('The Stones') foreshadow the powerful, wholly convincing voice of poems like 'The Hanging Man', published posthumously in *Ariel*: 'By the roots of my hair some god got hold of me. / I sizzled in his blue volts like a desert prophet.'

Ted Hughes has described how Sylvia Plath underwent a searing, 'curiously independent

process of gestation' during the spring of 1962, when, two months after giving birth to a son, she produced a powerful radio drama, 'Three Women'. The first deathly Ariel Poems appeared soon afterwards with 'The Moon and Yew Tree', 'Little Fugue', 'Elm', 'Event', 'Berck-Plage', and others. During the summer of 1962 her marriage to Hughes began to buckle; she was devastated when she learned that he had been unfaithful to her. Although she, and Hughes travelled to Ireland together in September, the marriage was by then in ruins, and in October she asked her husband to leave for good.

It was after Hughes's departure that Plath produced, in less than two months, the forty poems of rage, despair, love, and vengeance that have chiefly been responsible for her immense posthumous fame. Throughout October and November of 1962 she rose every day at dawn to take down, as from dictation, line after miraculous line of poems like 'The Bee Meeting', 'Stings', 'Daddy', 'Lady Lazarus', 'Ariel', and 'Death & Company', as well as those heartbreaking poems to her baby son: 'Nick and the Candlestick' and 'The Night Dances'.

In December 1962 she moved with her children from Devon to London. What she recognized as the 'genius' of her poetry temporarily restored her self-confidence, but in January 1963, after the publication of *The Bell Jar*, and during the coldest winter of the century, she descended into a deep, clinical depression, and in the early morning of 11 February, she gassed herself.

In the quarter-century following her suicide Sylvia Plath has become a heroine and martyr of the feminist movement. In fact, she was a martyr mainly to the recurrent psychodrama that staged itself within the bell jar of her tragically wounded personality. Twelve final poems, written shortly before her death, define a nihilistic metaphysic from which death provided the only dignified escape.

From *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry in English*. Copyright © 1994 by Oxford University Press.

Publication Status:

Excerpted Criticism [1]

Author:

Anne Stevenson [2]

Review Process:

Single Review

Target:

Sylvia Plath

Source URL: <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/content/anne-stevenson-sylvia-plaths-life-and-career>

Links

[1] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/publication-status/excerpted-criticism>

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