

Sylvia Plath

1932 – 1963

### **Early Life**

Born in Boston, MA

Father – Otto Emil Plath – German immigrant, college professor

Mother – Aurelia Schober – Austrian, had been one of Otto's students, gave up teaching when they married

Younger brother Warren

Sylvia's father died of diabetes in 1940, when Sylvia was eight. He had refused to go to the doctor, because he had convinced himself he had lung cancer and nothing could be done. By the time he went and was diagnosed with diabetes, it was advanced, and he ended up losing a leg. Sylvia never got over his death. She equated his death with suicide because he had brought it on himself. From *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* by Anne Stevenson: "Sylvia's reaction was at first silence. Then, characteristically, she made an extreme declaration, 'I'll never speak to God again,' and dived furiously under the bedcovers. All her life Sylvia was given to using the phrase 'never again' in circumstances she considered intolerable" (10).

When Sylvia was ten, she moved with her mother and brother to Wellesley, MA. She won numerous academic awards, including honorable mention in National Scholastics Literary Contest. She graduated in 1950 with a full scholarship to Smith College. In August before her freshman year, *Seventeen Magazine* published her short story "And Summer will Not Come Again" and the *Christian Science Monitor* published "Bitter Strawberries," a poem.

She struggled to fit in at Smith: "Sylvia idealized Smith, for instance, but she often found it hard to like. Uncomfortable among intelligent or rich girls of her age, she found it painful to have to attach herself to any group; hence, perhaps, her instinctive attraction to men like Eddie Cohen, Richard Sassoon, and Ted Hughes, all individualists with none of Sylvia's need constantly to conform. Sylvia longed to defy convention herself, but at the same time she needed a mother to help her believe she was perfectly adjusted, worthy of the attention she attracted, and capable of 'paying back' her kindly sponsors, most of whom were older women, by achieving spectacular success" (22).

In 1953 she won a chance to be a guest editor at *Mademoiselle Magazine* in NY. She didn't enjoy it, and would later write about it in *The Bell Jar*.

When she returned home she found out she had been rejected from a summer writing class at Harvard, which led her into a depression. She cut herself, and her mother noticed. When asked about it, she said, "I just wanted to see if I had the guts" (44). Her mother got her treatment, but

the psychiatrist subjected her to painful shock treatments. She then made her first suicide attempt. Unlike Wollstonecraft's half hearted attempts, she was serious from the outset: "On August 24, a stiflingly hot day, she broke into her mother's household safe, where Mrs. Plath, tacitly admitting the gravity of the situation, kept Sylvia's sleeping pills. Aurelia was watching a film of Queen Elizabeth's coronation at a friend's house....With the pills and a glass of water, Sylvia crept down to the basement; she knew there was a narrow crawlspace under the porch. Stealthily she removed the firewood stacked at the mouth of the hole, hoisted herself into the womblike cave with the bottle and the water, carefully replaced the firewood, and proceeded to swallow as many pills as she could" (45). The family searched and searched, but it was two days before they found her—she had vomited up the pills, and it was her groaning that led them to her.

She spent five months in a private hospital, paid for by a benefactor. Mrs. Olive Higgins Prouty. Plath later recorded all of these experiences in her best known work, her autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*, published under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas in 1963, just before her death.

Sylvia and her mother always had a conflicted relationship, but this seems to be mostly due to Sylvia and not her mother, who seems to have always been supportive.

## **Adulthood**

During the summer of 1954 she started dating a much older man (searching for a father figure perhaps), and it was her first sexual experience. The sex was so rough he caused her to hemorrhage, yet she kept seeing him. Numerous affairs followed, and she became very promiscuous. From *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, "Hamish helped me up on the wall, and in my tight skirt, I tried to step over the spikes; they pierced my skirt, my hands and I felt nothing, thinking from the great distance that I might at last lie on a bed of spikes and not feel it, like the yoga, like celia coplestone, crucified, near an anthill, at least, peace, and the nails went through my hands, and my legs were bare to the thigh, and I was over. The stigmata, I said, frozen, looking at those raw frigid hands that should have been bleeding. But they were not bleeding. I had gotten over in an act of sublime drunkenness and faith. And then we went to Hamish's room and lay on the floor by the fire and I was just so damn grateful for his weight on me and his mouth which was nice, and begged that he scold me, and he just said I wasn't a whore or a slut like I said but only a very silly girl and he kind of liked me and when would I learn my lesson" (213-214).

She recovered enough to graduate at the top of her class in 1955, and she won a Fullbright scholarship to Cambridge University in England. While at Cambridge, she met poet Ted Hughes. From her journal: "Then the worst thing happened, that big, dark hunky boy, the only one there huge enough for me, who had been hunching around over women, and whose name I had asked the minute I had come into the room, but no one told me, came over and was looking hard in my eyes and it was Ted Hughes. I started yelling again about his poems and quoting: 'most dear

unscratchable diamond' and he yelled back, colossal, in a voice that should have come from a Pole, 'You like?' and asking me if I wanted brandy, and me yelling yes and backing into the next room past the smug shining...face of dear Bert, looking as if he had delivered at least nine or ten babies, and bang the door was shut and he was sloshing brandy into a glass and I was sloshing it at the place where my mouth was when I last knew about it. We shouted as if in a high wind, about the review, and he saying Dan knew I was beautiful, he wouldn't have written it about a cripple, and my yelling protest in which the words 'sleep with the editor' occurred with startling frequency. And then it came to the fact that I was all there, wasn't I, and I stamped and screamed yes, and he had obligations in the next room, and he was working in London, earning ten pounds a week so he could later earn twelve pounds a week, and I was stamping and he was stamping on the floor, and then he kissed me bang smash on the mouth and ripped my hair band off, my lovely red hairband scarf which had weathered the sun and much love, and whose like I shall never again find, and my favorite silver earrings: hah, I shall keep, he barked. And when he kissed my neck I bit him long and hard on the cheek, and when we came out of the room, blood was running down his face" (75-76).

They were married four months later, in June of 1956. They returned to MA and she taught at Smith, then they moved to Boston, where she attended poetry classes taught by Robert Lowell (this is where she met Anne Sexton). They returned to England in 1959, and her first child was born in 1960 – Frieda Rebecca Hughes. She published her first book of poetry the same year, *The Colossus and Other Poems*. She wasn't satisfied with the reviews. She suffered a miscarriage, and then had her second child in 1962, Nicholas Farrar Hughes. (Sadly, he hanged himself in 2009, when he was working as a biologist in Alaska). Sylvia and Ted's marriage was tumultuous, and they often fought physically. Once, after she caught him cheating, she reportedly burned a manuscript of his.

### **Later Life**

David and Assia Wevill befriended Ted and Sylvia in England, and Sylvia sensed an attraction between Ted and Assia. She reacted dramatically, perhaps pushing them together. Ted and Assia began an affair: "Returning from a morning outing with her mother one day, Sylvia heard the phone ring as they walked into the house and rushed to answer it. Obviously surprised by their early return, Ted fell down the stairs in his haste to try to reach the phone first. When Sylvia answered, she heard a woman disguising her voice, but she realized it was Assia. After Ted finished speaking a few words and hung up, Plath jerked the phone wire from its socket. She realized what the call meant, and that it helped explain Ted's increasingly odd behavior over the past two months. Since David and Assia's visit, the quarrels were growing in frequency, and Sylvia did not always know where Ted was on his frequent trips away from home" (neuroticpoets.com). During the summer of 1962 Ted and Sylvia separated. Ted was cruel in the months following, particularly when he returned to the house in Devon to pick up some of his things: "Ted arrived one day to pack his things and stayed for a week, during which he told Sylvia that he and Assia had speculated that she might have already killed herself. At least if she

were dead, he said, he could sell the house and take Frieda [he never wanted Nicholas]. After all, David Wevill had tried to kill himself when Assia left him for Ted. Just before leaving, he told Plath he had hated living with her and had wanted to leave her for years” (neuroticpoets.com). During the separation Sylvia began to write fast and furiously. In the five months preceding her suicide, she wrote almost the entire body of poems that were to be collected two years later and published as *Ariel*. These poems show a concern for death, her own death in particular, her sense of alienation, and a fixation with self-annihilation. In *Ariel*, the everyday incidents of living are transformed into the horrifying psychological experiences of the poet. In her work is an ego so indulgent and pervasive that the ego’s own destruction is warranted. Death and poetry are inseparable.

She moved with the children to a flat in London during a bitter cold winter. She was often without heat. Friends were worried about her, and often had her stay with them. But the day before her death, she convinced them that she was fine and returned with the children to her flat: “Sylvia left the Beckers’ at about six in the evening. Two hours later Gerry returned, extremely distressed. Sylvia had wept all the way home, but though Gerry had repeatedly urged her to return with him, on arrival she had taken the keys from her bag and opened the front door, and they all went in. Dr. Horder is sure he saw her that evening at her flat, rather late. Professor Thomas in the downstairs flat was the last person to see her alive. Sylvia went downstairs about midnight and asked to buy stamps from him, which she insisted on paying for there and then, ‘or I won’t be right with my conscience before God.’ Her real purpose seems to have been to ensure that he would be up before nine the next morning, in time to let in the nurse she expected. She left, but he did not hear her go back upstairs, and after a few minutes he opened the door and found her standing motionless in the freezing hall. He realized she was in a strange state and offered to call a doctor, but Sylvia claimed she was having a wonderful vision. Later Thomas’s sleep was disturbed by her walking about on the wooden floors above” (296). The next morning, the nurse and a builder who was working on the property, broke into Sylvia’s flat and found her dead. She had committed suicide by inhaling gas from her oven in the kitchen. She had placed towels under the doors and taped up the cracks to ensure that the gas didn’t reach her children in their bedroom. Their bedroom window was wide open, and bread and milk had been left by their beds. They were cold, but safe.

Because Sylvia hadn’t been divorced from Ted, he became the executor of her works. He went through all her journals and destroyed what he didn’t want the public to see before publishing them.

By all accounts, Sylvia was a good mother up until the end. She did not become a famous writer until after her death, and it is unlikely that she would have been famous if she hadn’t committed suicide. Ted was the famous one. She was his wife, also a writer.

After Sylvia’s death, Ted moved back to the Devon house with the children. Sylvia’s mother came to visit every summer, and the children also visited her. While Ted didn’t want Sylvia in

life, he became almost obsessed with her in death. Assia moved in with them, but not until 1966. She and Ted had a daughter, Alexandra in 1967. In 1969, realizing she would never escape from living in Plath's shadow, Assia killed herself and their daughter in the same way Sylvia had. Ted later remarried and became Poet Laureate of Britain from 1984 until his death in 1998.