

# SYLVIA PLATH

by Caitriona O'Reilly



On the morning of 11 February 1963, Sylvia Plath committed suicide in London. At the time of her death, she was known as the author of a first, moderately well received book of poems, *The Colossus* (1960). In addition, she had recently published a novel, *The Bell Jar* (1963), under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas. She had published a number of prose stories and sketches in various magazines and journals. Plath also left behind a manuscript of newer work, titled *Ariel*, which consisted of poems written for the most part in the last five months of her life. The eventual publication of this book, somewhat altered in form from Plath's original intention, occurred in 1965. Plath's considerable notoriety as a writer dates from the publication of *Ariel*, which was quickly recognized as a poetic work of the highest order. As the facts about her life, and particularly the manner of her death, became widely known, she developed a cult status. Many critical commentators found themselves taking sides in a startlingly polarized debate about the merit of Plath's late work. Much of the critical controversy centered around poems such as "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus," in which Plath conflates details from the recent past of Europe (in particular references to the concentration camps and the Nazi persecution of the Jews) with images depicting the trauma of her personal history.

Rather than clarifying the "identity" of Sylvia Plath and the root cause of her madness or genius, the publication of *Letters Home: Correspondence, 1950–1963* in 1975, and of her *Journals* in America in 1982, seemed only to fuel the fires of controversy. Unfortunately, in a highly public and grotesque exaggeration of the blame-apportioning that can follow a death of such tragic nature, Sylvia Plath's family and friends were caught in the crossfire of a critical debate often dominated and made rancorous by



Sylvia Plath.  
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the gender politics of the 1970s. The personal fallout from this almost unprecedented collision between a writer's work and her biography is incalculable. What can be asserted, however, is that Plath's notoriety has obscured to a great extent the true value of her best work, tending to foreground the more sensational of her poems at the expense of other, quieter, and perhaps more important aspects of her writing. Forty years after her death, and with several of the main protagonists of Plath's biographical drama no longer living, it has become somewhat easier to view her work in the balanced critical light it deserves.

## BACKGROUND AND EARLY LIFE

Sylvia Plath was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on 27 October 1932, the first child of Otto Plath and his second wife, Aurelia Schober Plath. Otto Plath was forty-seven at the time of his daughter's birth, twenty-one years older than his wife, and a dominant patriarchal presence in the household. He had emigrated to the United States from Grabow, a town in the then "Polish Corridor" (later called by Plath a "manic-depressive hamlet in the black heart of Prussia") in 1901. Estranged from his devoutly Lutheran family because of his conversion to Darwinism, Otto Plath independently pursued advanced studies in languages, biology, zoology, and entomology, eventually receiving a doctorate from Harvard in 1928 for research into the life cycle of the bumblebee. Aurelia Schober had been born in the United States to Austrian parents, and had worked as a high-school teacher of languages before her marriage at the age of twenty-two. From both parents, Plath seems to have inherited her strong idealism and drive toward self-improvement, and perhaps also an immigrant's sense of the precariousness of worldly success, a sense of its having to be continually renewed and bolstered. Otto Plath died following an operation

to amputate a gangrenous leg in 1940, when Sylvia was eight and her brother, Warren, five. He had stubbornly refused to seek medical advice for his declining health, and was much weakened by the time a diagnosis of diabetes was made. There is some evidence to suggest that Plath considered her father's carelessness about his health as tantamount to suicide, and therefore as blameworthy. Written in 1962, "Daddy" is an angry tirade against the father who has deserted her, a Freudian drama 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 pain. In Plath's poetry and prose, Otto Plath was to become a potent symbol of absence, signifying the impossibility of lasting love, of God, or of any real meaning in life. The death of her father was a shock from which Plath never properly recovered.

#### COLLEGE LIFE AND ATTEMPTED SUICIDE

Following Otto Plath's death, the family moved inland from Winthrop to Wellesley, Massachusetts. At this early stage in her life, Sylvia Plath was already embarked on a brilliant academic career, aspiring with immense discipline and hard work to become the ideal all-round student. She won a scholarship to study at Smith College, where she maintained her high grade average while enjoying an active social life, serving as an editor of the *Smith Review*, and publishing stories in *Seventeen*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and *Mademoiselle*. Plath was later to find the transition from her initial success as a precocious student, publishing in the "slicks," as she called them, to becoming a more mature and considered writer a difficult one. As a teenager she had mastered the art of tailoring her writing to meet the perceived requirements of the magazines in which she wanted to publish, and finding her own independent voice was to be a gradual and often painful process.

In June 1953, at the end of her second year at Smith, Plath embarked on a guest editorship for *Mademoiselle* in New York City, together with nineteen other young high achievers from colleges all over the country. She later satirized this period in her strongly autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*, and from her descriptions of the overwhelming summer heat of the city, the exhausting routine of hard work and socializing, and the competitive cattiness of the young women with whom she was thrown, 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. On returning home to Wellesley, she was dismayed to discover that she had not been accepted for Frank O'Connor's summer writing class at Harvard. At loose ends in Wellesley, suffering badly from insomnia, and panicking at her inability to impose a disciplined routine on herself, Plath began to slip into depression. The family doctor prescribed sleeping pills and referred her to a psychiatrist, who recommended electroconvulsive therapy after a brief consultation. The ECT was ineptly administered, and the resulting pain and terror that Plath suffered apparently propelled her toward suicide.

On 24 August she hid herself in the family basement and took a massive overdose of sleeping pills. Having vomited up a large quantity of the pills, she lay undiscovered in a comatose state for two days, while police searched the surrounding area for her. She was eventually discovered and brought to the psychiatric wing of Massachusetts General Hospital. Her physical health was recovered, but the severity of her mental condition became clear, and she was transferred to McLean Hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts, at the expense of her Smith benefactress, Olive Higgins Prouty. Plath remained at McLean (whose other illustrious literary patients had included Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton) until February 1954, when she was judged fit to return to Smith. The Freudian analysis she underwent as part of her treatment at McLean was to have a profound influence on her writing. In 1958, while living in Boston with her husband, Ted Hughes, Plath voluntarily reentered analysis with her McLean psychiatrist, Dr. Ruth Beuscher, and further refined her own interpretation of the Freudian "family romance." Plath's artistic debt to her analysis, and the rather programmatic narrative version of the traumatic events of her life with which it seemed to furnish her, remains one of the more controversial aspects of her biography.

#### GRADUATION AND MARRIAGE

Plath returned to Smith in February 1954, and resumed her challenging work and social schedule, graduating summa cum laude in 1955. In the autumn of that year, she embarked on a master's degree course at Newnham College, Cambridge. At a party in Cambridge in February 1956, she met the young English poet Ted Hughes. The couple married within four months of their first meeting, in a ceremony that took place in London on 16 June 1956. They spent their honeymoon in Benidorm, Spain, and then returned to Cambridge, where Plath completed her studies, graduating with a master's degree in 1957.

The couple moved back to the United States in the summer of that year, Plath to take up a teaching job at Smith College, and Hughes to teach and write. Her journals testify to Plath's difficulties with teaching and her frustration with the lack of time it afforded her to concentrate on her poetry and prose. During the difficult year of 1957–1958 Plath and Hughes resolved to try and live by their writing. They spent the following year in Boston, where they met many writers, including Robert Frost, Robert Lowell, Marianne Moore, and Adrienne Rich. Plath participated (with Anne Sexton) in Robert Lowell's writing workshop at Boston University for a time, and in December 1958 reentered psychotherapy with Dr. Ruth Beuscher.

Plath and her husband spent the summer of 1959 traveling across the United States by car, returning home in late August. The autumn of 1959 saw them at Yaddo, the artists' colony in Saratoga Springs, New York. Her stay there was to be a productive time for Plath. She was by this time pregnant with her first child, and many of the poems she wrote at Yaddo, including the breakthrough sequence "Poem for a Birthday," show her musing on her condition. "Poem for a Birthday" posits a connection between pregnancy and her personal reemergence after the nightmare of psychological disintegration and "electrocution" by ECT. As well as this important poem, Plath also wrote several successful lyrics at Yaddo, including "Mushrooms" and "The Colossus," which was to become the title poem of her first collection.

RETURN TO ENGLAND, MOTHERHOOD,  
AND THE GENESIS OF *ARIEL*

Late in 1959, Plath and Hughes left the United States for England, where they intended to settle and raise a family. Until August 1961 they lived in London (their daughter Frieda Rebecca was born in April 1961); thereafter they moved to Court Green, a former rectory in the village of North Tawton in Devon. A second child, Nicholas Farrar, was born there in January 1962. Heinemann had published *The Colossus* in London in 1960, and in 1962 Knopf published it in New York. While in Devon, Plath began work on the poems that would eventually be gathered into the *Ariel* volume. In the early autumn of 1962, Plath and Hughes separated acrimoniously after Plath's discovery that Hughes had begun an affair with Assia Wevill, wife of the young Canadian poet David Wevill. Alone with her children in Devon, Plath entered upon the most productive phase of her creative life. Between September and December 1962,

she produced as many as forty lyric poems of immense power, often writing two in a day. For a writer as self-conscious and painstaking as Plath had been, it was a true watershed.

In December, tired of her enforced isolation in Devon, but exultant at her creative breakthrough, Plath moved back to London with her children. She continued to write poems, but with less ferocity than the initial outburst of the autumn. It seems she was also working on a second novel, which dealt with the subject of her marriage. The manuscript of this work, if it still exists, has never been released by Plath's estate. *The Bell Jar* (a work Plath dismissed to friends as "a potboiler," probably because of the extremely unfavorable biographical portraits it contained) was published pseudonymously by Heinemann in January 1963. However, difficulties with her new flat and with finding a nanny for her children, as well as ill health and the harshest winter England had seen for many years, combined to make her seriously depressed. Despite the ministrations of concerned friends and of her doctor, Plath was clearly unable to cope, and she gassed herself in the kitchen of her flat in the early hours of 11 February, having first taken steps to ensure the safety of her two children, who were asleep in an upstairs bedroom. She was thirty years of age.

THE LEGACY

Sylvia Plath died intestate, and her husband, Ted Hughes, together with his sister Olwyn, took over the administration of Plath's literary estate after 1963. The publication of *Ariel* in 1965 was followed by two further volumes of poetry in 1971, *Crossing the Water* (which contains poems written between *The Colossus* and *Ariel*) and *Winter Trees* (containing eighteen previously uncollected poems and a verse play for radio titled *Three Women*). Aurelia Schober Plath published a volume of Plath's correspondence in 1975, and a children's book titled *The Bed Book*, written by Plath in the late 1950s, appeared the following year. In 1977 Hughes published *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, a collection of Plath's short stories and miscellaneous prose pieces, and in 1981 Plath's *Collected Poems* was published, a volume that also included a substantial amount of juvenilia. It was awarded the Pulitzer Prize.

A heavily edited edition of *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* appeared in the United States only in 1982, and it was not until after Hughes's death that a more comprehensive edition of the journals appeared in Britain and the United States in 2000, edited by Karen V. Kukil. In addition,

it is thought that a substantial amount of Sylvia Plath's writing either did not survive or has been withheld by her estate. This includes two volumes of her journals covering the years 1960–1963 and a novel that she is believed to have finished, or at least brought close to completion, by the time of her death. Of the journals, Ted Hughes wrote: "Two more notebooks survived for a while, maroon-backed ledgers like the 1957–1959 volume, and continued the record from late 1959 to within three days of her death. The last of these contained entries for several months, and I destroyed it because I did not want her children to have to read it . . . The other disappeared."

#### SHORTER PROSE WORKS AND *THE BELL JAR*

Even despite such absences, however, the totality of Plath's published work indicates what a remarkably precocious and multifaceted talent she possessed. Many of the early stories contained in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* are somewhat stilted, and amply illustrate what Plath wrote about so eloquently in the journals, her struggle to imbue her material with convincing life and psychological insight. An early success was "Superman and Paula Brown's New Snowsuit," written when Plath was twenty-three. This semiautobiographical story is set in Plath's childhood during World War II, and deals subtly with the theme of discrimination against German-Americans in this period. However, such success in prose before 1960 was the exception for Plath. It is in the later, more directly autobiographical pieces, such as "America! America!" (an amusing satire on American patriotism written for *Punch*) or "Ocean 1212-W," that a freer, more confident prose voice can be seen emerging. The latter piece, written for the BBC series "Writers on Themselves," is a tremendously skillful evocation of Plath's early childhood in Winthrop, Massachusetts. Ostensibly it is about a young child's jealousy at the birth of her baby brother, an event that brings her own isolation home to her: "Hugging my grudge, ugly and prickly, a sad sea urchin, I trudged off on my own, in the opposite direction toward the forbidding prison. As from a star I saw, coldly and soberly, the separateness of everything. I felt the wall of my skin: I am I. That stone is a stone. My beautiful fusion with the things of this world was over." On a deeper level, however, the piece can be said to revisit the site of Plath's obsession with the death of her father, since it deals with a period of happiness she now regards as forever out of reach. The abruptness of the story's ending underlines the shock of

loss: "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."

*The Bell Jar* deals with the theme of isolation and unhappiness in greater detail. The book is really a roman à clef detailing the traumatic summer of Plath's breakdown in 1953, and contains thinly disguised portraits of her family and friends. It is generally supposed that Plath published the novel under an assumed name and discouraged her mother from reading it because of the acidity with which some of these portraits are drawn. Mrs. Greenwood, the mother of the book's protagonist, comes off particularly badly. In another recasting of her versatile Freudian-inflected myth of self, Plath makes clear that it is her heroine's enforced proximity to her well-meaning but hopelessly naïve mother that leads to suicidal depression. During one climactic scene an insomniac and desperate Esther Greenwood fantasizes about killing her sleeping mother: "My mother turned from a foggy log into a slumbering, middle-aged woman, her mouth slightly open and a snore raveling from her throat. The piggish noise irritated me, and for a while it seemed to me that the only way to stop it would be to take the column of skin and sinew from which it rose and twist it to silence between my hands." The extreme detachment of this description borders on the pathological, and is symptomatic of Esther's feeling of general disconnectedness from reality. This is the "bell jar" state that Plath describes being trapped in, as though a glass wall were separating her from her life. Its similarity to the sealed-off ship-in-a-bottle quality of her childhood described above serves to underline the profound continuity of imagery throughout Plath's work. A version of the bell jar would return in her late poem "Medusa," a counterpart to "Daddy" in which the speaker violently rejects her smothering, controlling mother, whom she also envisages as an airless receptacle: "Bottle in which I live, / Ghastly Vatican."

*The Bell Jar* is written with considerable verve, and displays Plath's gifts for gallows humor, forceful imagery, and skillful inflection of voice, characteristics that she later raised to virtuosic level in the poems of *Ariel*. However, the novel is less convincing as a bildungsroman or psychological self-portrait. The critic Stan Smith has written of Plath's "irony of artifice," suggesting that Plath uses her heroine's paranoia to "penetrate[s] the bland benevolent surfaces of other people's motives to discover their inner and unconscious significance." However,

other critics of the novel, such as Pat MacPherson and Elisabeth Bronfen, have noted that the novel's almost nonchalant resolution, given the apparent severity of Esther's psychological collapse, is unconvincing. The growth in self-knowledge and insight one expects from a novel of crisis has failed to materialize, but this aesthetic weakness is perhaps indicative of another, more disturbing meaning. In *The Bell Jar*, "cure" is viewed not as a form of internal healing, but instead as a test one must pass in order to rejoin the competitive society beyond the asylum walls. The novel depicts an encompassing dystopia to which there seems no viable alternative, and at its core is a nihilism that is avoided only by denial, a willed redirection of the gaze. Esther's suicide can in fact be seen as a last-ditch attempt of the will to avoid coming face-to-face with this more profound, unspoken reality, not an outcome of having already confronted it. *The Bell Jar*, despite its jaunty, slangy narrative style, is a work that studiously avoids admitting its own deepest implications.

#### THE ARIEL POEMS

If *The Bell Jar* provides unsatisfying glimpses of a darker truth, then it is in her poetry, with the resources of myth at her disposal, that Plath gives full voice to her particular tragic vision, and it is upon these late poems that her reputation as a writer ultimately rests. "The Fearful" provides an arresting image of selves being devoured by their attributes:

This man makes a pseudonym  
And crawls behind it like a worm.

This woman on the telephone  
Says she is a man, not a woman.  
The mask increases, eats the worm,  
Stripes for mouth and eyes and nose,

The voice of the woman hollows—  
More and more like a dead one . . .

The image is that of a fiction taking on an autonomous life, hollowing out or abstracting the living matter of which it was initially composed, in cannibalistic fashion. Throughout Plath's work, the figure of a self subsumed or reduced to its various, separable appurtenances has a counterpart in images of wholeness and intuitions of an essential core of self. The latter trope has been emphasized by those who regard *Ariel* as a triumphant culmination; indeed, it may be regarded as the most commonly accepted interpretation of Plath's achievement, although it involves a strong teleological bias, with either *Ariel*

or the poet's suicide as the inevitable end point of the process. According to this interpretation of Plath's life and works, the *Ariel* poems represent a triumphant, and permanent, release from years of seemingly fruitless toil, psychological difficulties, and paralyzing writer's block. Plath's husband and executor, Ted Hughes, possibly the most important critic of her work, has argued that Plath's poems represent stages in her healing and rediscovery of self. In a number of influential essays about Plath's writing, Hughes portrays her as a uniquely self-referential writer: "Sylvia Plath's poetry, like a species on its own, exists in little else but the revelation of that birth and purpose. Although her whole considerable ambition was fixed on becoming the normal flowering and fruiting kind of writer, her work was roots only." But perhaps to regard Plath as quite such a unique writer is to begin to pathologize her. Hughes, far from demystifying Plath, has added greatly to her posthumous mythology by emphasizing her helpless passivity before a ferocious muse: "It [i.e., her development] gave the impression of being a secret crucible, or rather a womb, an almost biological process—and just as much beyond her manipulative interference."

The image of the woman artist which emerges from this portrait is that of a sibyl in the grip of a powerful, biologically determined process which it is beyond her power to actively control. Hughes diagnoses Plath as a unique case in the history of poetry: "The difficulty is the extreme peculiarity in kind of her poetic gift. And the difficulty is not lessened by the fact that she left behind two completely different kinds of poetry." The first kind of poetry, in Hughes's analysis, was everything before the true "*Ariel* voice" emerged in "Elm," which was written on 19 April 1962. Hughes's assertion that the end point of this process was a new, triumphant self and that "all her poems are in a sense by-products" indicates that his interpretation of Plath has, ironically, much in common with feminist readings of her work, as the critic Jacqueline Rose has observed: "Let's . . . note how close, aesthetically, that notion of the emergent real self is to the feminist reading of Plath in terms of an isolate selfhood that Hughes has also been seen as suppressing." Rose argues convincingly that Plath's work is indicative of a less triumphant vision of self and reality: "I think we should be very cautious about attempting to read Plath's writing in terms of a positive emergence of selfhood, of turning what may be better thought of in terms of the unbearable coexistence of opposites into a

narrative progression from suffering into self-discovery or flight.”

A careful chronological reading of the poems indicates that Plath’s themes are in fact remarkably consistent. While the *Ariel* poems may seem to represent a self that has emerged from the inimical reality in which it has been forced to exist, Plath’s best poems illustrate, conversely, a troubling philosophical *acquiescence* to such realities. Thus, in an early poem such as “The Thin People,” Plath establishes the vampire metaphor she would later use to greater dramatic effect in “Daddy.” The “thin people” of the poem are never named, although it is clear that she is thinking of the starved inmates of the Nazi concentration camps as they appeared in 1940s newsreels during the speaker’s childhood. Although she argues that the passage of time should logically make them disappear, they seem paradoxically to grow in power by virtue of their tenacity in memory. Vampirelike, they return from the scene of their repression in “the contracted country of the head” and begin to drain reality of its richness, as if in revenge: “They persist in the sunlit room: the wallpaper / Frieze of cabbage-roses and cornflowers pales / Under their thin-lipped smiles, / Their withering kingship.”

Similarly, in the 1957 poems “All the Dead Dears” and “The Disquieting Muses,” Plath introduces the theme of maternal blame she would later fine-tune in “Medusa.” Although Plath’s early lyrics are rather stilted and self-conscious, demonstrating how heavily, at first, she relied on the formal poetic resources of rhyme and meter, her development as a poet was rapid. By the time of her return to England in 1959, following the decisive breakthrough of “Poem for a Birthday,” she was writing lyrics full of disturbingly powerful and suggestive imagery. In “Crossing the Water,” for example, she imagines herself and her husband as “two black, cut-paper people” whose fragile identities are threatened by the immensity of the ocean. Such themes—the terrible insecurity of the self, the reality of indifference and lovelessness, and the inevitability of death and loss—preoccupied Plath from the beginning of her writing life to the end. It is in the poems of *Ariel* that they are most powerfully reiterated, however. Apart from the controversial poems such as “Daddy” and “Lady Lazarus,” in which Plath dubiously inflates her personal trauma to rival that of the Jewish victims of the Nazis (an aesthetic lapse for which she has attracted a great deal of critical opprobrium), it is in other, better poems that the poignancy of her tragic vision comes through most clearly.

Plath’s most beautiful poems present images of absolute self-loss. One of these, “The Night Dances,” describes, according to Ted Hughes, “a revolving dance which her baby son performed at night in his crib.” The smile that falls surrealistically into the grass at the beginning of this poem is “irretrievable,” and the speaker compares this to the dancing gestures of her baby, which seem so significant to her that she finds it hard to believe they are merely ephemeral: “Surely they travel / The world forever, I shall not entirely / Sit emptied of beauties, the gift / Of your small breath, the drenched grass / Smell of your sleeps, lilies, lilies.” The image of the lilies is then considered in *its* uniqueness—it is as if Plath is deconstructing the poem as she writes it—“their flesh bears no relation. Cold folds of the ego, the calla, / And the tiger, embellishing itself— / Spots, and a spread of hot petals.” This is the alienation of extreme self-involvement: a lily is not just a lily but is classified according to species; the calla lily (from the Greek *kallos*) is wrapped up in its own cold beauty (there is a submerged pun here on “callous”) while the tiger lily embellishes *itself* alone. This introduces the theme of indifference, or, as this poem expresses it, amnesia: “The comets / Have such a space to cross, / Such coldness, forgetfulness.” She considers the movement of the comets to be a more appropriate metaphor for her son’s gestures: “so your gestures flake off— / Warm and human, then their pink light / Bleeding and peeling / Through the black amnesias of heaven.” By this time the speaker seems to have given up her belief that the self and its gestures can retain their identity, and the image is a disturbing one, a vision of dismemberment.

In “The Night Dances” the self is a disintegrating structure, its gestures inevitably swallowed up in inhospitable and unconscious space. The fatalistic tone of the poem is reflected in Plath’s avoidance of the question mark, a technique she uses here twice: “And how will your night dances lose themselves.” And again at the end, when she compares her son’s dances to falling snow: “Why am I given / these lamps, these planets / Falling like blessings, like flakes / Six-sided, white / On my eyes, my lips, my hair / Touching and melting. / Nowhere.” The speaker of “The Night Dances” entertains no hope of an answer to her questions. This poem provides an image of self not as emergent but as fragmented, dissipated, obsolescent.

The consciousness of *Ariel* has many different masks and positions; part of the excitement of the volume comes from the restless dynamism of a voice that repeatedly insists on escaping from deadening enclosures. Such a movement always entails loss, however; the speaker

of "Ariel" imagines sloughing off "dead hands, dead stringencies"; the ascending consciousness of "Fever 103" experiences orgiastic self-loss, "my selves dissolving, old whore petticoats"; and the symbolically liberated queen bee of "Stings" is horribly injured, a metonymic "red scar" already murdered by the "wax house" that has engulfed her. In other, remarkable poems such as "Totem," Plath restates her disabused and fatalistic recognition that "there is no terminus, only suitcases / Out of which the same self unfolds like a suit / Bald and shiny, with pockets of wishes, / Notions and tickets, short circuits and folding mirrors." "Words," written the week before her death, posits an absolute division between the autonomy of "words dry and riderless" and the "fixed stars" that "govern a life." This poem stands as a salutary reminder to those who would simplistically conflate Plath's biography with the personae of her writings. At its most extreme, this critical approach has tended to view Plath's entire oeuvre as an extended suicide note, or (in Hughes's analysis) as the "by-product[s]" of her quest for self-realization. But the connections between a writer's life and her work are numerous, indirect, and mysterious. Plath's poems stand as a poignant testament to the tragic loss of a remarkable talent, but they are also undeniably powerful and achieved works of art in their own right.

[See also Writing as a Woman in the Twentieth Century.]

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*Letters Home: Correspondence, 1950–1963* (1975)  
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See also the article on *The Bell Jar*, immediately following