

## Poetry and Life of Sylvia Plath

**Abstract:** Sylvia Plath was one of the most influential and charismatic poet of the 20<sup>th</sup> century America. Her poetry belongs to Confessional poetry movement which is characterized by describing poet's personal life stories and creating poetry from that. In her two main poetry collections *The Colossus* and *Ariel* she wrote about her relationships with her father, mother and her husband famous British poet Ted Hughes. The first collection *The Colossus* describes her hopeful stage of life and the other *Ariel* which she finished before her tragic suicide act, tells about her fears, depression, disappointment and feeling betrayed. This article is trying to show the connection and art of Sylvia Plath life and her works.

**Keywords:** Sylvia Plath, American Poetry, Ariel, The Colossus, Confessional poetry

### Introduction

Sylvia, born in Boston in 1932, was the daughter of a German immigrant college professor Otto Plath and his former student Aurelia Schober. The life of the poet drastically changed after her father's death. Some of her poems, including the famous poem "Daddy", is about the poet's complicated relationship with her strict dad. Sylvia had strange reaction on her dad's death, she took it as a betrayal, an escape. Which finally ended their difficult contradictory relationship and it became Plath's property. Financial problems made the Plath family to move to another state. Sylvia was a gifted student, she had received many awards and scholarships. She studied in Smith College with a scholarship. A successful period lasted with the winning scholarship in literature competition of magazine *Mademoiselle*, where she got prestigious guest title of the magazine board. During her final years of studying at University the symptoms of heavy depression started, which finally led to her death. At the age of 19 she tried to commit suicide with sleeping pills. Luckily, she survived. The experience of depressive attacks and recovery was a base of her novel *The Bell Jar*. Her famous two poetry collections "The Colossus" and "Ariel" describe her personal and writing development.

### Main Text

Poetry collection *The Colossus* by American poet Sylvia Plath was first published in 1960 by the publishing house Heinemann. *Ariel* was published by the company Knopf and ten new poems were added. Plath's poems caught attention briefly and were applauded by the literary critics. In 1963 when the shocking news about her suicide spread people started reading more intensively, her recent extraordinary poems that were published in her poetry book *Ariel* in 1965.

Many of Plath's poems are haunted with feelings of fear, her empathy toward the animals is growing. Suicide is evaluated as a pervasive act. The poetry collection *Ariel* was a new direction for the poet herself. It was a realization of her ceaseless search for of the poet, who was looking for her way in the beginning.

Perhaps, the poetry collection *The Colossus*, from the fictional point of view, is on the same level as *Ariel* but *Ariel* has the glimpse of Sylvia Plath's end of life, some foreshadowing. This is clear in her poem "Two views of a Cadaver Room, in her terrible echo of T.S.Eliot's The love song of J. Alferd

*Prufrock*: “On their jars the snails-nosed babies moon and glow”. (Plath, 1998, p. 5) The same idea is seen in that whole poem. The first two parts are dedicated to a girl’s visit to a morgue where she sees how the boys are working on the corpse. In the second part there is a description of a war scene. The poet is showing us a conflict between love and death. She is trying to connect her personal life experience to the picture seen in the morgue or generally to the war topic. In the poem “Suicide off Egg Rock” Sylvia Plath is doing a reconstruction of protagonist’s feeling in the moment of drowning and when her body was becoming like a lifeless object.

A much more characteristic poem is “Hardcastle Crag”. It shows an absolute distance from the city and urban landscape, without any self-pity and sentiments. But the same concrete and motionless as a rock, as in the poem “The stones”. The word “vision” when used in connection with Sylvia Plath’s poems should not be understood literally but in its philosophical sense. Her works’ positive side is discovered in her fascination with the nature. It is well described in the light passages of her poems. A brilliant moment of such fascination is seen in the beginning of the poem “The Eye-Mote”:

Blameless as daylight I stood looking  
At a field of horses, necks bent, manes blown,  
Tails streaming against the green  
Backdrop of sycamores... (Plath, 1998, p. 12)

The first poem of *The Colossus* is dedicated to her late father. It is about a contempt toward her father and the feeling of a death. *The Colossus* expresses the author’s daily routine work: editing texts and fragments, collecting pieces, creating something as a whole. The poems from *The Colossus* are read as one, whole and are inseparable. As for the second poetry collection *Ariel*, it tells us about how Plath is trying to reconcile with crime, mortality history (of personal and humanity). Earth destruction by human’s ignorance when they depend on it, manslaughter in Auschwitz, Birkenau, Dachau, threatening with nuclear bombs and radioactive fossils, cruel destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki---Sylvia was worried about all these issues. This was a reflection in her own mirror. With age she became worried about the discovery of her irrational hatred toward her father Otto Emil Plath. Otto was an etymologist of German origins. Plath felt resentment toward her husband, British poet Ted Hughes. She was angry at her forced role of a housewife:

A living doll, everywhere you look.  
It can sew, it can cook,  
It can talk, talk, talk (Plath, 2004. p.11 )

The US poets of the 1950s have some common characteristics. The best ones write with a perfect technique, intellectually and sensibly. But after reading their books, some readers are left dissatisfied, especially the ones whose minds are still in the process of formation. For the young poets, who shared the conceptual framework of the 1920-30s, rational approaches were not useful. Quite often in their poetry the universe is substantial unity without thinking and poetry. Where there is not a stream of thoughts that would take objects in one direction. In the world of poetry there are many good poems that describe everyday life. Those poems are written by means of metaphysical and psychological observations. There are some poems seen by immigrants or tourists perspective (especially by American poets on Rome, Florence etc.) Those poems are personal characteristic poems and do not represent any importance for poetry. Many poets feel that protest against our sensitive condition is nonsense and it is better to write about what you feel.

In *The Colossus* almost all poems are perfect. A poet is mastering, controlling of a poem's form and intonation, keeping rhythmical variation relevance, using vocabulary correctly and observing on events that often causes astonishment but is always exact:

the waves

spewed relics clicker masses in the wind, or ( the place in laboratory),

In their jars the snail-nosed babies moon and glow. (Plath, 1998. P.5)

"Poem for a Birthday" describes a pregnant women's feeling. The author had learned about pregnant women's colorful dreams and was writing bravely about it. In "Metaphor" a focus is on pregnant women's experienced emotions, visual accent is expressed and noticeable. A poet describes perspective, paints her future life where we see her as a spinster, a whore or being a suicidal. The early poetry of Sylvia Plath is full of such phobias.

Sylvia Plath was obviously influenced by Theodor Roethke and Ted Hughes. It is important to compare her poetry to these great poet's works. *The Colossus* is an important book for people who are interested in literature topics. As if a reader repeatedly wants to reread again. This book made Sylvia Plath one of the best poets whose strong feminine voice is heard for many years.

A labour of love, and that labour lost.

Steadily the sea

Eats at Point Shirley. ( Plath, 1998, p. 56)

The book title says a lot, a poet meets the expectation of the reader even with the title. Sylvia Plath's mind is dominated by grandiosity and continuity. She adores the nature and is afraid of it at the same time. The hidden danger of her poetry, makes humans stronger rather than causes joy. In the endless, fierce fight against the rock cliffs, wind and sea, you can gain "temporary banal heroism" as one can see in her poems "Point Shirley" and "The Hermit at Outermost House" but eventually nature defeats humanity and wins.

A labour of love, and that labour lost.

Steadily the sea

Eats at Point Shirley? ( Plath, 1998, p. 56)

Landscapes altered by humans become unimportant and uninteresting for Sylvia Plath. She is attracted by wild, uninhabited, intact nature. When feeling nostalgia for Cambridge, while walking in Grantchester Meadow, she noticed that "Birds are like thumb fingers, swans are tamed, water rat feels funny when it feels inhospitality of nature towards the humans." For a poet the wind and the sea are those natural forces that can conquer humanity or wait for them patiently before they become extinct and then take their place.

In the poem "Thin People" the danger comes from Sylvia herself, the poet perceives weak people as a danger. She is afraid that "*Their talent to persevere/ in thinness, to come, later,/ into our bad dreams.*". The poem "Mushroom" is an omen as a cancer spreading virus. In the poem "Sculptor" are shown the forms that the sculptor should create soon, bodyless realities are felt, which are becoming not pieces of work but dwarfs.

His chisel bequeaths

Them life livelier than ours.

All The Dead Dears. (Plath, 1998. P.78)

In the epigraph of the poem we read as a note: "In the Cambridge Archeology Museum, in a fourth century stone coffin is put skull and bones of a mouse. A woman's ankle bones are a bit gnarled". This fact was the source of inspiration for her poem:

These three, unmasked now, bear  
Dry witness  
To the gross eating game  
How they grip us through thick and thin,  
There barnacle dead!  
This lady here's no kin  
Of mine, yet kin she is: she'll suck  
Blood and whistle my marrow clean  
To prove it... (Plath,1998. p.29 )

Closeness that Sylvia feels towards any victim is not an expression of sympathy towards the stranger; but relative (close) feeling toward anything that exists and does not exist. However, omen dangerous mood is constantly felt. For example, in the poem "Blue Moles" she expressed sympathy to the outsiders, outcasts. She pays attention on that poem "Beggars". One of the concepts that is felt in Sylvia Plath poems is annoyance caused by the existence of the better world. In her early poems "Black Rook In "Rainy Weather" Plath describes her talent half philosophically or half ironically. She is waiting not for a miracle but a little truth so that to make everyday life more interesting.

To seize my sense, haul  
My eyelids up, and grant  
A brief respite from fear  
Of total neutralit.

### Conclusion

Sylvia Plath was one of the distinguished poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Even before her suicide, she already had many admirers in literature circles. In the following years her works attracted a lot of readers, who in her verses saw a poet's trying to talk about despair, strong emotions and obsession with death. In a *The New York Times Book Review*, Joyce Carol Oats described Plath as "one of the most famous and controversy, postwar poet, who wrote in English". Plath's extremely autobiographical poems describe her rational sadness, complicated marriage with Ted Hughes, and the author's unresolved conflict with parents, herself and her views.

Socialist Margaret Ritz points out that it does not matter whether Plath writes about nature or a person's social inequality, she removes "a frame of politeness" from any topic, she is swimming against the tide. The poet in her writing described primitive forces and primary fears. With this she clearly and openly addressed the tense situation that was floating on the surface of American life after the war.

Some feminists, described Plath as a woman who was sacrificed to her strict father, treacherous husband and unplanned motherhood. Some poets consider her as a confessional poet that speaks about chaotic, noncontrollable subjects that were needed by our conscience. With the book *Ariel* Sylvia became a popular American poet whose categorization in a narrow literature frame was not so simple.

English poet and critic, Alfred Alvarez in his book *The Savage God* wrote that with the poems of *Ariel*, collected and published by Ted Hughes, Plath made poetry and death inseparable notions. One could not exist without the other. It is interesting that the majority of the poems are read as if they were written after the poet's death. Robert Warren called *Ariel* a unique book: "It is more than that book, it is like a wind's cruel blowing, like someone broke windowsills in the wonderful evening". *Ariel* would not have been written without *The Colossus*. The latter paved the way for the next poetry collection of the American poet.

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