



Sylvia Plath (1932–1963)

Sylvia Plath's life

Sylvia Plath was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1932. Her father was a German professor of entomology; he died when she was eight years old but the memory of his strict and authoritarian temper influenced Sylvia Plath throughout her life and found expression in some of her best poems. She was an attractive, precocious girl who did brilliantly at school, but whose sensitiveness led to her first attempted suicide at the age of 19, and to fits of depression in her adult life. In 1955 she went to England to study at Cambridge. There she met the English poet Ted Hughes, whom she married in 1956. Their marriage broke up in 1962; this separation increased Plath's insecurity and depression, and in 1963 she committed suicide by gassing herself in her London flat.

In her lifetime, she published her first collection of poems, *The Colossus* (1960). The poems of this volume show a concern for experimenting with imagery and different verse forms. They mark an important stage in Plath's development as a poet, since she regarded writing as a craft that could be improved by hard work and discipline. A largely autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*, appeared in 1962. The account of her first suicide attempt and subsequent recovery in hospital forms the basis of the book. Her most famous collection of poems, *Ariel*, was published in 1965, two years after her death. It was characterised by directness and immediacy with a voice that speaks in a confrontational colloquial tone.

Exploration of the individual sense

After her death, Sylvia Plath became a sort of 'cult figure', and her verse was acclaimed as one of the most powerful achievements of American poetry after World War II. Her poems were intense explorations of the individual self, and voiced the conflicts and the restlessness of America's young generation in the Sixties. Her poetry is pervaded by a sense of anguish linked to various states, such as illness, oppression, madness and death. Death is conceived as inevitable loss, as release from suffering or even

regeneration. However, Plath did not believe in the possibility of a new life after death. She stressed the importance of personal experience and responsibility and the demands they make on the individual who is regarded as a free agent in an apparently meaningless universe.

Plath's poems appeal to the contemporary reader also for their concern with the search for a personal identity through the awareness of the weight of taboos, of the importance of past memories, of the existence of a wide gap between individuals, which leads to the failure of human relationships, especially inside the family. She protests against the patriarchies of autocratic fathers, treacherous husbands, and even a God who has condoned the atrocities of genocide.

Plath's interest in the condition of women and her attempt to assert a strong female identity, established her poetry as one of the voices of the Feminist Movement, though she never admitted that she was a feminist.

She was also deeply concerned with the issues of her time. Some of her poems are a warning against consumerism, the power of the advertising industry, the misuse of technology which results in the exploitation of humanity and of the environment.

Confessional poetry

Plath's poems belong to the so-called 'confessional poetry', since they reveal the most subjective feelings, the deepest emotions and torments as if in a confession. Many of them are dramatic monologues voiced by a character who is not necessarily the poet herself; they are rich in symbols, in vivid and often brutal imagery. Usually written in free verse, they develop in an unpredictable way, as if they were fragments of consciousness, whose substance is supported by a masterful use of sound effects and rhythm. Her accomplished use of the language of the senses, of cinematic techniques – flashback, slow motion, leitmotifs, close-ups – shocking metaphors and symbols, make her poetry extremely distinctive.

1 ANSWER the following questions about the work of Sylvia Plath.

- 1 Why did she become a cult figure?
- 2 How did she conceive of death?
- 3 Why do her poems appeal to the contemporary reader?
- 4 What did she protest against?
- 5 Why are her poems regarded as 'confessional'?
- 6 What are the main features of her style?



Daddy

Sylvia Plath

Ariel (1963)

The following poem was written on 12 October 1962, in the year before Sylvia Plath committed suicide, and was published in 1963 in the collection Ariel. The most disturbing and controversial of her confessional poems, it soon became a cult text for the American feminists.

You do not do¹, you do not do
Any more, black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For thirty years, poor and white,
5 Barely daring to breathe or Achoo².

Daddy, I have had to kill you.
You died before I had time –
Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,
Ghastly³ statue with one gray toe
10 Big as a Frisco seal⁴

And a head in the freakish⁵ Atlantic
Where it pours⁶ bean green over blue
In the waters off beautiful Nauset⁷.
I used to pray to recover you.
15 Ach, du⁸.

In the German tongue, in the Polish town
Scraped flat by the roller⁹
Of wars, wars, wars.
But the name of the town is common.
20 My Polack friend

Says there are a dozen or two.
So I never could tell where you
Put your foot, your root,
I never could talk to you.
25 The tongue stuck in my jaw¹⁰.

It stuck in a barb wire snare¹¹.
Ich, ich, ich, ich¹²,
I could hardly speak.
I thought every German was you.
30 And the language obscene

An engine¹³, an engine
Chuffing me off like a Jew.
A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.
I began to talk like a Jew.
35 I think I may well be a Jew;

- 1 **You do not do.** Non servi.
- 2 **Achoo.** Starnutire.
- 3 **Ghastly.** Orribile, disgustoso.
- 4 **Frisco seal.** Foca di San Francisco.
- 5 **freakish.** Irrequieto.
- 6 **it pours.** Si riversa.
- 7 **Nauset.** Antico nome di Cape Cod, Massachusetts.
- 8 **Ach, du.** Oh, tu (in tedesco).
- 9 **Scraped ... roller.** Rasa al suolo dal rullo compressore.
- 10 **The tongue ... jaw.** La lingua mi si bloccava in bocca.
- 11 **a barb wire snare.** Una trappola di filo spinato.
- 12 **Ich.** Io (in tedesco).
- 13 **engine.** Motore, locomotiva.



The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna
Are not very pure or true.
With my gipsy¹⁴ ancestress and my weird¹⁵ luck
And my Taroc pack¹⁶ and my Taroc pack
40 I may be a bit of a Jew.

I have always been scared of *you*,
With your Luftwaffe¹⁷, your gobbledygoo¹⁸.
And your neat moustache
And your Aryan eye, bright blue.
45 Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You –

Not God but a swastika
So black no sky could squeak through¹⁹.
Every woman adores a Fascist,
The boot in the face, the brute
50 Brute heart of a brute like you.

You stand at the blackboard, daddy,
In the picture I have of you,
A cleft²⁰ in your chin²¹ instead of your foot
But no less a devil for that, no not
55 Any less the black man who

Bit my pretty red heart in two.
I was ten when they buried you.
At twenty I tried to die
And get back, back, back to you.
60 I thought even the bones would do.

But they pulled me out of the sack²²,
And they stuck me together with glue.
And then I knew what to do.
I made a model of you,
65 A man in black with a Meinkampf look²³

And a love of the rack and the screw²⁴.
And I said I do, I do.
So daddy, I'm finally through²⁵.
The black telephone's off at the root,
70 The voices just can't worm²⁶ through.

If I've killed one man, I've killed two –
The vampire who said he was you
And drank my blood for a year.
Seven years, if you want to know.
75 Daddy, you can lie back now.

There's a stake²⁷ in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you²⁸.
They always *knew* it was you.
80 Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.

- 14 **gipsy.** Gitana, zingara.
15 **weird.** Magica, strana.
16 **Taroc pack.** Mazzo di tarocchi.
17 **Luftwaffe.** L'aeronautica tedesca durante la guerra.
18 **gobbledygoo.** Linguaggio incomprensibile.
19 **squeak through.** *Let.*: cavarsela per un soffio; *qui col senso di insinuarvisi.*
20 **cleft.** Fessura (si dice che il diavolo abbia un piede fesso).
21 **chin.** Mento.
22 **sack.** *Qui:* depressione.
23 **a Meinkampf look.** Uno sguardo da Meinkampf (*Mein Kampf*: autobiografia di Hitler considerata il manifesto del nazismo).
24 **the rack ... screw.** Due strumenti di tortura.
25 **I'm ... through.** Ho finito.
26 **worm.** Strisciare, insinuarsi.
27 **stake.** Palo (secondo la leggenda, per uccidere un vampiro bisogna conficcargli un palo nel cuore).
28 **stamping on you.** Ti calpestanto.



COMPREHENSION

1 READ the poem and focus on the description of the father.

1 Fill in the blanks below with the details given:

- Appearance
- Origin
- Past experiences
- Clothes
- Character
- Job

2 List the figures the speaking voice compares her father to.

2 WRITE DOWN the autobiographical details contained in the poem:

line 57

line

lines *she spent time in a mental hospital*

3 FIND the lines where the speaking voice explains how she felt towards her father and match them with the corresponding adjectives:

trapped · inferior · inhibited · scared · victimised · broken-hearted

4 LOOK the term 'to be through' up in your dictionary and state what meaning it acquires in the poem.

ANALYSIS

5 UNDERLINE examples of similes. Who are they referred to? How do they connote the personal relationship between daughter and father?

6 GROUP the images of the poem according to the following semantic areas:

Imprisonment

Violence

The supernatural

7 CIRCLE the words referring to colour. What/whom do they refer to? Which is the dominant one? To what effect?

8 DEFINE the tone of the poem choosing from among these adjectives:

jolly · aggressive · exaggerated · childish · resentful · forgiving · hypnotic · anguished · plain

YOUR TURN

9 DISCUSS the view of the daughter/father relationship given in the poem and say in what sense it reflects a widespread attitude of the Sixties.

10 DESCRIBE your reaction to the poem. Does it disturb you or do you identify with the narrator? Discuss the influence your relationship with your father has on your life.