Linda Wagner-Martin: On "Sylvia Plath's Life and Career"

Sylvia Plath was born in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, the older child of Otto and Aurelia Schoeber Plath. Her father was professor of German and entomology (a specialist on bees) at Boston University; her mother, a high school teacher, was his student. Both parents valued learning. In 1940 Otto died of complications from surgery after a leg amputation, and Aurelia's parents became part of the household to care for the children when she returned to teaching.

Sylvia's interests in writing and art continued through her public school years in Wellesley, Massachusetts, and at Smith College, where she attended on scholarships. Her extensive publications of poems and fiction led to her selection for the College Board of Mademoiselle magazine in 1953. The depression that was endemic in her father's family troubled her during her junior year; when her mother sought treatment for her, she was given bi-polar electroconvulsive shock treatments as an out-patient. In August 1953, she attempted suicide by overdosing on sleeping pills.

Recovered after six months of intensive therapy, Sylvia returned to Smith and her usual academic success. A senior, she wrote an honors thesis on Dostoyevski's use of the double and graduated summa cum laude in English; she also won a Fulbright fellowship to study at Newnham College, Cambridge. In the fall of 1955, she sailed for England.

Plath studied hard but her life in England was also sexual. As her writing showed, she was angry about double-standard behavior, and claimed for herself the right to as much sexual experience as men had. She believed combining the erotic and the intellectual possible, and when she met Ted Hughes, a Cambridge poet, she felt that life with him would be ideal. The two were married in London on 16 June 1956, accompanied by Sylvia's mother.

After a honeymoon in Spain, the Hugheses set up housekeeping. Sylvia passed her examinations while Ted taught in a boys' school; in June they sailed for America. The next year Sylvia taught freshman English at Smith; in 1958 and 1959 they lived in Boston and wrote professionally. Ted's first poem collection, The Hawk in the Rain, won a major poetry prize; Sylvia's promise that she would make him a success seemed fulfilled. Unfortunately, giving such single-minded attention to Ted's work meant that developing her own voice as a writer was difficult. She visited Robert Lowell's class in poetry writing, where she met George Starbuck and Anne Sexton; Sexton's work became an inspiration to her. Plath worked part-time as a secretary in the psychiatric division of Massachusetts General Hospital, transcribing patients' histories, which often included dreams. She also resumed therapy with the woman psychiatrist who had helped her after her breakdown.

The years in the States convinced Ted that he needed to live in England. After an autumn at Yaddo, the writers' colony, Ted and Sylvia sailed for London in December 1959. Sylvia was happy: she was writing good poems (she had written 'The Colossus' at Yaddo, where she had discovered Theodore Roethke's poetry), and she was five months pregnant. Soon after Frieda's birth on 1 April 1960, they began looking for a country house to escape cramped, expensive London. In late summer of 1961, they moved to Devon, where Sylvia was ecstatic about their centuries-old manor house. Before that time, however, they wrote efficiently
(sometimes in the borrowed study of poet W. S. Merwin), and Plath was able to finish most of The Bell Jar. Influenced by J. D. Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye, Sylvia’s novel narrated a woman’s life from adolescence, ending with a positive resolution of rebirth.

Ted wrote programs for the BBC and became a Faber author, in contact with T. S. Eliot and other important British poets; Sylvia was publishing new kinds of poems, content that William Heinemann had contracted to publish her book, The Colossus and Other Poems. Its publication in October 1960 was well received, and Alfred Knopf published the collection in the States.

Personal jealousies, differences in American and British views of gender roles, and a return of Sylvia’s depression complicated the Plath-Hughes marriage. Despite their happiness when Sylvia became pregnant once more, after an earlier miscarriage, the marriage of two aspiring writers living in an isolated village with an infant and little money was difficult. After Nicholas’s birth in January 1962, Sylvia faced the fact of Hughes’s infidelity, expressing herself through increasingly angry—and powerful—poems. In contrast to such work as “The Rabbit Catcher” and “The Detective,” her radio play for the BBC, “Three Women,” is a beautifully wrought, somber poem about maternal choice. Plath had learned to find joy in her women-centered world, and the care of her children and friendships with other women were increasingly important. But she could not tolerate male irresponsibility. Living with the children in lonely Devon, Plath wrote many of the poems that later appeared in Ariel. Her so-called October poems, written during the month after Hughes had left her, are among her most famous: "Lady Lazarus," "Daddy," "Fever 103," "Purdah," "Poppies in July," "Ariel," and others. The magazines to which she sent these poems did not accept them; although the New Yorker magazine had a First Reading contract, its poetry editor refused all her late work except for a few lines.

Moving with the children to a London flat in December 1962, Plath tried to make a new life for herself, but the worst winter in a century added to her depression. Without a telephone, ill, and troubled with the care of the two infants, she committed suicide by sleeping pills and gas inhalation on 11 February 1963, just two weeks after the publication of The Bell Jar (written by "Victoria Lucas").

That novel, and the various collections of her poems that appeared during the next twenty years, secured for Plath the position of one of the most important women writers in the States. The mixture of comedic self-deprecation and forceful anger made her work a foreshadowing of the feminist writing that appeared in the later 1960s and the 1970s. Like Friedan’s 1963 The Feminine Mystique, Plath’s Bell Jar followed in 1965 with the posthumously published collection Ariel, was both a harbinger and an early voice of the women’s movement. As the posthumous awarding of the 1982 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry to Plath’s Collected Poems showed, her audience was not limited to women readers, nor did her writing express only feminist sentiments.

Plath's work is valuable for its stylistic accomplishments—its melding of comic and serious elements, its ribald fashioning of near and slant rhymes in a free-form structure, its terse voicing of themes that have too often been treated only with piety. It is also valuable for its ability to reach today's reader, because of its concern with the real problems of our culture. In this age of gender conflicts, broken families, and economic inequities, Plath’s forthright language speaks loudly about the anger of being both betrayed and powerless.

The Sylvia Plath papers are housed at the Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, and

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