

Sylvia Plath

(1932-63)

Born to middle class parents in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, Sylvia Plath published her first poem when she was eight. Sensitive, intelligent, compelled toward perfection in everything she attempted, she was, on the surface, a model daughter, popular in school, earning straight A's, winning the best prizes. By the time she entered Smith College on a scholarship in 1950 she already had an impressive list of publications, and while at Smith she wrote over four hundred poems.



Sylvia's surface perfection was however underlain by grave personal discontinuities, some of which doubtless had their origin in the death of her father (he was a college professor and an expert on bees) when she was eight. During the summer following her junior year at Smith, having returned from a stay in New York City where she had been a student "guest editor" at *Mademoiselle Magazine*, Sylvia nearly succeeded in killing herself by swallowing sleeping pills. She later described this experience in an autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*, published in 1963. After a period of recovery involving electroshock and psychotherapy Sylvia resumed her pursuit of academic and literary success, graduating from Smith summa cum laude in 1955 and winning a Fulbright scholarship to study at Cambridge, England.

In 1956 she married the English poet Ted Hughes, and in 1960, when she was 28, her first book, *The Colossus*, was published in England. The poems in this book – formally precise, well wrought – show clearly the dedication with which Sylvia had served her apprenticeship; yet they give only glimpses of what was to come in the poems she would begin writing early in 1961. She and Ted Hughes settled for a while in an English country village in Devon, but less than two years after the birth of their first child the marriage broke apart.

The winter of 1962-63, one of the coldest in centuries, found Sylvia living in a small London flat, now with two children, ill with flu and low on money. The hardness of her life seemed to increase her need to write, and she often worked between four and eight in the morning, before the children woke, sometimes finishing a poem a day. In these last poems it is as if some deeper, powerful self has grabbed control; death is given a cruel physical allure and psychic pain becomes almost tactile.

On February 11, 1963, Sylvia Plath killed herself with cooking gas at the age of 30. Two years later *Ariel*, a collection of some of her last poems, was published; this was followed by *Crossing the Water* and *Winter Trees* in 1971, and, in 1981, *The Collected Poems* appeared, edited by Ted Hughes.

"These poems are playing Russian roulette with six cartridges in the cylinder."
Robert Lowell on Sylvia Plath's poetry