

Univerzita Hradec Králové

Pedagogická fakulta

Diplomová práce

2020

Pavla Rudolfová

Univerzita Hradec Králové
Pedagogická fakulta
Katedra anglického jazyka a literatury

**Dílo Sylvie Plathové ve vztahu k nejdůležitějším událostem
jejího života**

Diplomová práce

Autor: Pavla Rudolfová
Studijní program: M7503
Studijní obor: Učitelství pro 2. stupeň základních škol - výchova k občanství,
Učitelství pro 2. stupeň základních škol - anglický jazyk a literatura
Vedoucí práce: prof. PhDr. Bohuslav Mánek, CSc.
Oponent práce: Mgr. Jan Suk, Ph.D.



Zadání diplomové práce

Autor:	Pavla Rudolfová
Studium:	P15P0456
Studijní program:	M7503 Učitelství pro základní školy
Studijní obor:	Učitelství pro 2. stupeň ZŠ - anglický jazyk, Učitelství pro 2. stupeň ZŠ - občanská nauka
Název diplomové práce:	Dílo Sylvie Plathové ve vztahu k nejdůležitějším událostem jejího života
Název diplomové práce AJ:	Sylvia Plath's Writings in Relation to the Most Important Events in Her Life

Cíl, metody, literatura, předpoklady:

Práce se soustředí na rozbor básnického a prozaického díla Sylvie Plathové k událostem jejího života ve vztahu k jejímu dílu. Vedle primární literatury a dobových dokumentů (korespondence) využije nejdůležitější sekundární literaturu z oblasti literární vědy a psychologie.

Plath, Sylvia: Ariel. Harper and Row, 1966

Plath, Sylvia: The Bell Jar. Harper, 2013

Plath, Sylvia: Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams. Faber and Faber, London, 1977

Plath, Sylvia: Letters of Sylvia Plath 1940-1956 (ed. K. V. Kukil). Faber and Faber, London, 2017

Bassnett, Susan: Sylvia Plath: An Introduction to the Poetry. Palgrave, 2004

Cooper, Brian: Sylvia Plath and the depression continuum. PMID:12782699, 2017

Garantující pracoviště: Katedra anglického jazyka a literatury, Pedagogická fakulta

Vedoucí práce: prof. PhDr. Bohuslav Mánek, CSc.

Oponent: Mgr. Jan Suk, Ph.D.

Datum zadání závěrečné práce: 12.10.2018

Prohlášení

Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto diplomovou vypracovala pod vedením prof. PhDr. Bohuslav Mánek, CSc. samostatně a uvedla jsem všechny použité prameny a literaturu.

V Hradci Králové dne 23. 6. 2020

Podpis

Anotace

RUDOLFOVÁ, PAVLA. *Dílo Sylvie Plathové ve vztahu k nejdůležitějším událostem jejího života*. Hradec Králové: Pedagogická fakulta, Univerzita Hradec Králové, 2020, 57 s. Diplomová práce.

Diplomová práce se zabývá podrobným rozbohem života a díla angloamerické spisovatelky Sylvie Plathové. V její první části se nachází popis jejího života, který je kritický pro pochopení vztahu mezi jeho jednotlivými událostmi a samotnou spisovatelčinou tvorbou, zároveň s rozbohem emočních vztahů v jejím nejbližším příbuzenském kruhu a také ve vztahu k nízké toleranci Plathové pro odmítnutí v profesionální sféře. V druhé části je popsána autorčina psychiatrická diagnóza, která ovlivnila její vnímání světa. Poslední část pak rozebírá poezii, prózu a osobní deníky Sylvie Plathové s jejich datací a vztahem k dění v jejím životě. Stěžejní součástí je obsažení postupného rozvoje autorčiny depresivní poruchy, jež nejen přetvořila její literární kariéru, ale také v konečném důsledku ovládla život Plathové v tom nejhlubším smyslu slova. Závěr shrnuje poznatky práce a osvětluje motivace Plathové v její literární tvorbě.

Klíčová slova: Sylvia Plathová, depresivní porucha, poezie, literatura, biografie

Annotation

RUDOLFOVÁ, PAVLA. *Sylvia Plath's Writings in Relation to the Most Important Events in Her Life*. Hradec Králové: Pedagogical faculty, University of Hradec Králové, 2020, 57 pp. Diploma Thesis.

The diploma thesis deals with a detailed analysis of the life and work of the Anglo-American writer Sylvia Plath. In the first part, there is a description of her life, which is critical for understanding the relationship between her life's most significant events and the writer's work itself, along with an analysis of emotional relationships in her immediate family and also concerning Plath's low tolerance for rejection in the professional sphere. The second part describes the author's psychiatric diagnosis, which affected her perception of the world. The last section then discusses the poetry, prose and personal diaries of Sylvia Plath with their dating and relationship to what is happening in her life. An essential part is the inclusion of the gradual development of the author's depressive disorder, which not only reshaped her literary career but also ultimately dominated Plath's life in the most profound sense of the word. The conclusion summarizes the findings of the work and sheds light on Plath's motivations in her literary work.

Keywords: Sylvia Plath, major depression, poetry, literature, biography

Prohlášení

Prohlašuji, že diplomová práce je uložena v souladu s rektorským výnosem č. 1/2013
(Řád pro nakládání se školními a některými jinými autorskými díly na UHK).

Datum:

Podpis studenta:

Contents

Introduction.....	9
Introduction to Sylvia Plath	10
1 Introductory biography	12
1.1 Birth and early life	12
1.2 Childhood and first poems.....	13
1.3 University and scholarships.....	13
1.4 Life in England.....	14
1.5 Meeting Ted Hughes	15
1.6 Work in the United States.....	17
1.7 London, motherhood and poetry.....	18
1.8 Separation	18
1.9 Last works and death	19
2 Mental issue history	20
2.1 Suicide.....	25
2.2 Depression.....	27
2.3 Diagnosis.....	28
3 Themes of the poetry	30
3.1 Childhood.....	30
4 Parents.....	33
4.1 Mother	34
4.2 Father	36
5 Motherhood.....	40
6 Husband	43
7 Suicide attempts.....	49
7.1 The first attempt	49
7.2 The second attempt	51
Conclusion	54
List of used literature	Chyba! Záložka není definována.

Introduction

The thesis follows the most important events in the life of American writer Sylvia Plath in order to show their significance to her work. It is focusing on both poetry and prose created in the creative years of the before mentioned author.

The first part offers an introductory biography of the author to create a basic timeline of her personal and professional life. That is because both are influencing each other with significant impact on each side. From the starting point of her birth, through personal development until her premature death, Plath's work was always very personal and interconnected with many instances of her daily routine. It is also necessary to depict the way how her work affected her personal life, from inspiration to the deep fear of rejection and dismissive attitude toward her work.

The second part is focused on the mental illness she was diagnosed and fought with for the better part of her life. The importance is put on her stay in the mental health institution, where she was treated, and the way it influenced and also inspired an infamous part of her prosaic work. It contains another a look on her diagnoses and treatments she underwent in and out of the sanatorium.

The thesis continues to closely describe phases of Sylvia Plath's life, with the focus on the formative events that were recorded and described, mostly by her personally, in her extensive journals and personal correspondence. Connected with the timeline of her work, both published during her life and after her demise.

1 Introduction to Sylvia Plath

As one of the greatest female poets of the 20th century, Sylvia Plath created a unique set of poetry works between 1940 and 1962. One of the few representatives of poets that were part of both American and British literary worlds, she was an acclaimed author alive and also after her death, when the more significant part of her work was released. Her work consists mainly of poetry but also short prose stories that are vividly describing her struggle with life.

The most prominent themes in her literature are family relationships, life, nature, death, victimisation, patriarchy, being a mother and introspection. She was repeatedly interested in her immediate and also greater surroundings, which she described in her poems and her diaries. The themes of nature can be found throughout her work, from her first to her very last poems. The concept of nature is also very broad, as it includes the places where she lived, Boston or Cambridge, but also the micro nature, just as individual close-ups of plants and animals. Often she is falsely classified as an author of introspective literature, expressing deep depressive and suicidal thoughts and acts. However, her endeavour to describe body and mind, or the self, is much more complicated than that. Her unfortunate mental disease and death are often wrongly putting her in the category of self-destructive creators.

Nevertheless, she goes much deeper into the study of one's mind and body, than only throughout the lens of despair, which is supported by the originality of the themes she is using. She was fascinated by human relationships and their effects on one's mind. Sylvia's interest was manifested by her focus on her own inner thoughts and experiences.

The greater part of her work is introspective, but it does not mean it cannot be applied to the majority of society. Her struggles with family life, in particular, are often the unifying factor, that brings new generations to her poetry and journals. Everyone can relate to her battle with the early loss of her father, whom she never had a chance to get to know as a grown woman, or her troubles within her marriage with Ted Hughes.

The work she has published while alive was critically acclaimed and accepted, yet not every time favourably. Her constant thrive for being better and wanting to work more is recorded in her diaries. There her outlook is incessantly changing, depending greatly on the outer world. Since her teenage years, she was publishing her work in numerous magazines which documents her need for acceptance and evaluation. Her need for perfect curation of her published work was later represented by her husband's endeavour to edit it. After her death, he tried to keep her gift alive by publishing the poems she left behind in her drawers,

bringing her complexity nearer to the public eye. Her mother, Aurelia also published some of her journals and literary work later on.

Especially thanks to her family, readers from all around the world, can see new and revised editions of Plath's poems in bookstores. Since her death, more than half a century ago, Plath still inspires poetry lovers to come up with fresh ways of interpretation of her writings.

Current interest in her work shows how the evolution of her thoughts and that they will be generally popular for future generations.

2 Introductory biography

2.1 Birth and early life

Sylvia Plath was born on 27 October 1932 in Boston, Massachusetts U.S., where she lived with her parents for almost whole four years. After her younger brother Warren Plath was born in 1936, the family decided to relocate to Winthrop. There Sylvia attended the public school and published one of her earliest poems in 1940. There her passion for creating and editing literature was recorded for the first time, as early as at eight years old:

“Poem” (1940)

Hear the crickets chirping

In the dewy grass.

Bright little fireflies

Twinkle as they pass.¹

Her parents, Aurelia Frances Schober Plath and Otto Emil Plath were both descendants from German-speaking families, her immigrating from Austria and his from Germany. They bonded over their conjoint ancestry, besides other common interests, after meeting at the Boston University. Otto Plath was a professor of biology with a specialisation in ornithology, entomology and ichthyology. His speciality were bees, bumblebees and their behaviour in a number of his works.

Aurelia Schober at that time started to persist in pursuing her Master's degree in English and German, at the same university where she met Otto as a teacher. They had a great twenty-one years of the age difference between each other, which later caused some feelings of alienation and misunderstanding in the relationship. Nonetheless, they decided to marry and start a family together, while Otto continued to work at Boston University.

Later, the whole family moved to the mother of Aurelia's house and lived further from the city life of Boston. There Otto became terminally ill with diabetes and relationships within the whole family, just as his health, slowly deteriorated. Eventually, he died in 1940, leaving his wife and both kids alone. Aurelia decided to start a new job so that she could support her family. They moved to Wellesley in 1942, which is a suburb part of Boston.

¹ PLATH, Sylvia. Poem. Boston Herald. Boston, 1940, 1940.

2.2 Childhood and first poems

At that time Sylvia was still contributing to the regional newspaper, mostly with short poems and occasionally with partly biographical stories. The death of her father left Sylvia with an incomplete family and a lifelong void that she later came back to describe in her work. Around this time, Sylvia began to write her diary, a custom she kept for most of her life. Being eleven years old, together with her vivid imagination, gave Sylvia enough of inspiration to write every few days about the world she lived in. This habit became therapeutic in her later years. Her notes were published and released as a testimony of her life, described through her own eyes. Her extensive journals, depicting her life between 1950 and 1962, were published as a collection edited by her immediate family and recently also by unrelated authors.

Much about Sylvia's younger years was not recorded for the public in any other way but through her mother's nostalgic memories. Sylvia's early diaries have not been published yet, and are not expected to be ever published in full. This decision was made by the owners of the rights to issue them in order to protect her personal memories.

During her high school and college years, Sylvia was repeatedly sending her poems and stories to numerous newspapers, namely Boston Herald or Christian Science Monitor, where she was published from time to time. The success and feedback to it were highly influential on her mental state, which began to change very quickly from ecstatic to the depths of despair. Whenever her literary work was not accepted with praise, she began to question the meaning not only of the work but also of her life choices. On the other hand, when her work was printed, she felt happy and supported to create more and more of it.

These highs and lows described in her correspondence and journals can be marked as the start of her struggle with mental illness.

2.3 University and scholarships

After graduating at Bradford Senior High School in Wellesley, Sylvia was admitted to Smith College in Massachusetts in 1950. At that time, she had already won several poetry competitions and reflected her interest in literature in her academic work. During this part of her life, she aimed poems mainly at the struggle of acceptance and trickery of her depressive episodes. This time of her life was filled with curiosity about work.

Plath was continually creating new poems and stories, which she sent to publishers. In a contest, she won with her short story which secured her a work position at the *Mademoiselle* magazine in New York, where she worked as a hosting guest editor. Plath felt encouraged by the work position and change of her surroundings so much that she described the experience in her journals as being "fantastic" and "fabulous". After the end of her job, she fell into heavy depression, caused not only by the end of pleasant experience but also by not being accepted into her dream writing class at Harvard. Unfortunately, she put immense hopes into the meaning of how impactful this class could be for future career development. When she failed, the event triggered mental breakdowns and one of her two documented suicide attempts. After that, she was admitted to a hospital, where she underwent treatment. Part of the psychiatric help at the time was electroconvulsive therapy, which Plath experienced in approximately ten sessions.

The treatment inspired many of her journal records, some of her poems and partly her autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*. In the hospital, she was visited by her family members, mainly by her mother. Aurelia Plath, instead of being supportive, showed feelings of shame over her daughter's condition, which did not encourage Sylvia's healing. When she was eventually released, Sylvia continued her academic studies at Smiths College, from which she graduated in 1955. The subject of her undergraduate thesis was focused on the analysis of Dostoyevsky's novels, which underlined her interest in the literary world.

2.4 Life in England

After her successful graduation, she went on to study in Cambridge, for which she won a full Fulbright scholarship. From England, she regularly wrote letters to her family to keep in touch with them. In the letters she describes fascination with everything new around her, pushing her until now only American view on things. This fascination repeats itself in her journals and poems, where typical English nature and weather are being looked at and compared to their Boston equivalents. Especially the English weather is often vividly depicted in her journals, as she is trying to get used to mild temperatures and fog. She struggled with the cold Winters, that made her immunity system weaker, and Sylvia started to become ill more often. Plath's fascination in the difference between her two homes did not end with nature. It continued with curiosity in discovering the differences in culture and behaviour that English and American people were showing.

At this time, Plath started once again having difficulties with professional and academic acceptance of her works. She was continuously and tirelessly admitting her work for competitions and to publishers, but she was repeatedly rejected. Slowly losing her excitement with new surroundings, Plath put all of her energy into writing. She replaced her astonishment with continuous work, that helped her feel significant advancements in it. After a few months, her surprise diminished as she slowly acclimatised in England but learnt that she missed the ways of culture in the United States.

Accommodating to the new life in the new country was a challenge for Sylvia, who felt hard the absence of American life and family. She often described English academics as 'caricatures of famous Dickensian figures that are too cold and small-minded'², compared to previous Sylvia's experiences in Boston college. Differences in the cultures started to weigh in, and Plath slowly introduced to her life the darker themes of loneliness and misunderstanding once again.³

The theme of cultural clash between England and America became stated not only in the subjects of her writings but also in constant tries to be published in both countries. Later she straightforwardly confirmed it by upright naming her works in English or American way. For example, her essay *America! America!* was published in a British magazine in 1963. It follows the story of how eight years after Plath originally came to England, she still found the differences in the culture, not mundane but peculiar and inspection worthy. In her work, she described her fear of not belonging to any English literary movement, nor an American one. Plath felt uprooted from American culture but still not as a part of the European one. She was unable to find herself to push through the American school system again, which was nowhere near the idyllic American dream as it is often described. Her reason was that the American education system lacked time for in-depth research, which she wanted to devote herself.

2.5 Meeting Ted Hughes

However, Plath's stay in England did not only start a change in the professional and academic part of her life but also in the private part as well. The first years that Sylvia spent in England

² Plath, Sylvia. (2000). *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*. Edited by Karen V. Kukil. New York: Anchor. ISBN 0-385-72025-4

³ BASSNETT, Susan, *An introduction to the poetry, Sylvia Plath*, Susan Bassnett, Ch 1, Macmillan Basingstoke, 1987

were also marked by meeting Ted Hughes. Even before their meeting, Sylvia read some of Hughes' poems and was highly impressed by them.⁴

The pair finally crossed paths on a party in 1956, and they quickly became partners. Plath described their meeting both in her journals and in personal correspondence. She is mentioning the feverish and noisy impression she had of Hughes. From their first meeting on, they continued to see each other throughout the next few months. They spent as much time as they were able to with each other and started inspiring and influencing themselves hugely at that time. Plath was swept off her feet by the much older Cambridge teacher and writer, whom she felt was the only man in England that was equal to her.⁵ After only four months of dating, they got married in London and travelled the continent of Europe, mainly France and Spain. Both new relationship and travel brought a fresh wind of inspiration into Plath's writings.

Nonetheless, getting used to married life quickly dawned on Sylvia. The reasons for that were many, for example, the reoccurring feeling of rootlessness while travelling and especially Sylvia's tries to deal with her husband's fame. In 1954 he was already an established and renowned English author of poetry. He belonged among the cream of British literature society, who were highly acclaimed all around the world.⁶ Hughes lived the life of the future that Plath yearned to create also for herself. Moreover, she was trying to do such in the same field, as her husband did. Her uniqueness laid in her literary view because it became substantially American. That originated at the time when she was attempting to make her American dream come true in New York. With the image that more work equals more success and valuation, she pushed hard to create the most and best she could.⁷

Thanks to that the relationship became mutually profitable. Both Hughes and Plath tried to make the most out of the time they had together. The ultimate goal was to inspire each other, to cooperate to understand their different cultures and experiences. Sylvia helped her husband with editing and publishing for the audience over the Atlantic, where they eventually moved in 1957.

⁴ POPOVA, Maria. Poets in Partnership: Rare 1961 BBC Interview with Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes on Literature and Love. Brainpickings: Two of a Kind: Poets in Partnership [online]. 2013 [cit. 2020-06-20]. Dostupné z: <https://www.brainpickings.org/2013/07/16/sylvia-plath-ted-hughes-bbc-interview-1961/>

⁵ PLATH, Sylvia. Letters Home. Correspondence 1950-1963, June 3, 1956, ed. Aurelia Schober Plath, New York, Harper Perennial, 1992

⁶ PLATH, Sylvia. Letters Home. Correspondence 1950-1963, June 18, 1956, ed. Aurelia Schober Plath, New York, Harper Perennial, 1992

⁷ BASSNETT, Susan, An introduction to the poetry, Sylvia Plath, Susan Bassnett, Ch 1, Macmillan Basingstoke, 1987

2.6 Work in the United States

After spending time in England, Plath decided to show her native country to her husband. The newlyweds moved back to Boston, and Sylvia took up teaching at her alma mater, Smiths College. There she found the security of a day-to-day job and regular daily schedule and income. However, with that came the lack of time and energy to create new pieces of her writings for submitting. She became constantly tired and found it very difficult to continue her pursuit for a career in literature in America, since life there was much more financially demanding, than life back in England.⁸ One possible reason for her dream of moving back to England was also the somewhat favourable acceptance of her work there. Plath created a small but eager audience in London and did not want to lose influence and feedback from them.

Around the time of her move to Boston, she started to work as a receptionist at a hospital, to make ends meet and have enough time to create. She also began taking classes and met writers Robert Lowell Jr. and Anne Sexton, with whom both she became friends. Robert Lowell Jr. was already a very well established and awarded writer of poetry, and Anne Sexton was on her way of becoming the most acclaimed female American confessional poetry writer of her time. Plath's correspondence and diary entries show, how she created close work relationship and friendship with both of them, and how they helped her to continue in the pursuit of publishing her work.

The effort she put into publishing marked a new period in her life. It was a period of high creativity for Plath, as she found inspiration in psychology and psychoanalysis which she learnt about and eventually underwent in 1958.

For the length of the following year, the pair decided to travel the United States and make a living by writing only, Plath giving up her teaching job. While visiting the east coast of the United States Plath became pregnant. That was the reason why the upcoming parents decided to move back to Britain at the end of 1959. Although she was not keen on raising her child in England, it was a decision with which Plath grew gradually satisfied. However, she still felt homesick after her home country, sunny weather and the fast progressing culture, she admired so much.⁹

⁸ PLATH, Sylvia. *Letters Home. Correspondence 1950-1963*, October 28, 1958, ed. Aurelia Schober Plath, New York, Harper Perennial, 1992

⁹ PLATH, Sylvia. *Letters Home. Correspondence 1950-1963*, October 28, 1959, ed. Aurelia Schober Plath, New York, Harper Perennial, 1992

2.7 London, motherhood and poetry

At the beginning of 1960, Plath moved to London with her husband. There she started a new kind of family life when she gave birth to her daughter Frieda Rebecca, on 1 April 1960. After giving birth, Plath and her Husband shared the care of the baby. Thanks to this arrangement, Plath was able to return to writing almost immediately after becoming a mother. Hughes found it too time demanding, so they hired a nanny. Plath subsequently published her first collection of poetry *The Colossus*. It came out in October 1960 and was well received. Motherhood changed Plath's view of the world and became one of the main themes of her poetry. She tremendously enjoyed being a mother and a year after having her daughter Plath was pregnant again. Sadly, she miscarried and soon after and then had her appendix removed. These two events made her spent some time in a hospital.

While she was recovering, she finished her partly autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*, which she started to write in 1960. She had her natural talent for observation even heightened by the experienced trauma and the unchanging hospital environment. Plath repeatedly mentioned in her journals that she could only create when she had time to spare.

In January 1962 Plath gave birth to her son Nicholas, after moving with her whole family from London to Devon. Plath very much enjoyed her stay in the country, as she was trying to engage in the small-town life as much as she could, even though she still was not used to the cold English weather.¹⁰

2.8 Separation

The year was emotionally challenging for Plath, as she discovered her husband having an affair with another woman. She was determined to try and to come to terms with the insecurity in her life. We can witness that in her correspondence, in her writings, and especially in her poetry. After a few months of the efforts to reconcile with Hughes, Plath decided to separate from him legally and become financially independent. Purpose of her action was to take care of herself and her children with whom she moved to a flat in London in December 1962. At that time Plath worked tirelessly, which led to the publication of *The Bell Jar*. It was, for the most part, an autobiographical and significantly personal novel. Therefore Plath decided to publish it under the name of Victoria Lucas.

¹⁰ PLATH, Sylvia. *Letters Home. Correspondence 1950-1963*, November 5, 1959, ed. Aurelia Schober Plath, New York, Harper Perennial, 1992

2.9 Last works and death

Plath was actively creating poems at this time on a daily basis. She was tireless in her conduct. Nonetheless, in those poems is reflected her quickly worsening mental state. At this point, Plath has been clinically diagnosed with depression for about ten years and had experienced its worst symptoms. Lonely life on her own, aggravated by common diseases of her kids, did not work best for Plath's mental health. She became severely depressed. According to her physician John Horder, she struggled to deal with daily tasks and lost around 20 pounds of her weight.¹¹ She began to take antidepressants. However, she died on 11 February 1963, after committing suicide by carbon monoxide poisoning.

After her death, her estranged husband, Ted Hughes, took possession of her journals and poems and destroyed some of them. He reasoned this action as trying to protect their children from being able to read it and have their memory of their mother tainted. Hughes also took upon himself the task of publishing last of Plath's works, journals and letters in various selections, the first of them being the unfinished novel *Double Exposure*.

¹¹ COOPER, Brian (June 2003). "Sylvia Plath and the depression continuum". *J R Soc Med.* 96 (6): 296–301. doi:10.1258/jrsm.96.6.296. PMC 539515. PMID 12782699

3 Mental issue history

In childhood, Sylvia Plath was a happy, carefree child, according to her mother's and brother's recollection.¹² Her memories of early childhood were also mostly positive. Up until her father's death, as she recalled in an interview for BBC in 1961, she felt secure, curious and playful.

*'I think I was very happy up to the age of about nine – very carefree – and I believed in magic, which influenced me a great bit. And then, at nine, I was rather disillusioned – I stopped believing in elves and Santa Claus ... became more realistic and depressed, I think, and then, gradually, became a bit more adjusted about the age of sixteen or seventeen. But I certainly didn't have a happy adolescence...'*¹³

Throughout her life, she did not undergo many medical procedures, such as surgery. As far as the documents go, no diagnose of with any kind of severe physical illness or disease can be found. The only exception was when she had her appendix removed, and when she gave birth two times. Both of her children came of pregnancies with no complications.¹⁴

On the other hand, Plath's experience with psychological illnesses was extensive and continuous throughout her whole life. Probably the most prominent mental illness in her life was depression, with which she was dealing since her 20th year.

After being refused from the Harvard writing course, she felt rejected, which reflected on her mental state very much. She started harming herself while she was staying in New York. Namely, she was cutting her thighs and ripping her hair. She was also talking about suicide excessively with the people close to her. Her mother, Aurelia, recognised the symptoms of depression and began to worry about her daughter. Aurelia brought Sylvia into a doctor's office, where she was examined by her physician and then admitted to a psychiatrist, Dr Thornton. She underwent psychotherapy combined with electroconvulsive therapy.¹⁵ Plath talked about this experience in her correspondence and in her journals, where she expressed how traumatic and to her opinion poorly administered the treatment was.

¹² BASSNETT, Susan, An introduction to the poetry, Sylvia Plath, Susan Bassnett, Ch 2, Macmillan Basingstoke, 1987

¹³ POPOVA, Maria. "Poets in Partnership: Rare 1961 BBC Interview with Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes on Literature and Love." Brain Pickings, 16 Jul. 2013. Web. 3 May, 2014

¹⁴ COOPER, Brian (June 2003). "Sylvia Plath and the depression continuum". J R Soc Med. 96 (6): 296–301. doi:10.1258/jrsm.96.6.296. PMC 539515. PMID 12782699

¹⁵ COOPER, Brian (June 2003). "Sylvia Plath and the depression continuum". J R Soc Med. 96 (6): 296–301. doi:10.1258/jrsm.96.6.296. PMC 539515. PMID 12782699

After this first introduction to psychiatry, Plath came to the conclusion that she was doomed to die by her own hand because she was psychologically ill and therefore destined to it.¹⁶

Shortly after her therapy ended, Plath tried to commit suicide. She hid under their family porch and swallowed sleeping pills. Her brother found her under the porch after she was laying for two days in a coma. When her family finally found her, it was thanks to Sylvia waking up and starting to call for help. The ambulance was called, and the paramedics resuscitated Plath. After that, she was admitted to the McLean psychiatric hospital. There she went through additional psychotherapy, again the electroconvulsive therapy and insulin therapy. This time she seemed to be recovering well. The psychotherapy in the hospital helped her to recognise some of the causes of her depression. Some of them she already knew about, but some were not obvious to her before. Most important of them were the early loss of her father and then the complicated relationship with her mother, the two problems that accompanied her everywhere she went.¹⁷

After her treatment, Plath went back to her student life and poetry. During her adult life, she faced daily problems with exaggerated reactions. Every time she felt disappointed or not achieving enough, she started slowly spiralling into the depressive state. On the other hand, when she felt like she was succeeding, she began to believe in her own kind of invincibility and professional ability to be a great authoress.

When Plath met Ted Hughes, she was in a phase of discovering her personality both in real life and in her writings. She was encouraged by her friends to stay true to her own experiences and to give an account of her life's most important events in her work as naturally, as she could. Thanks to this encouragement, Plath started to feel more secure in her pursuit of becoming a full-time writer.¹⁸

After she got married, Plath found her interests matching with those of her husband's. They were pushing the boundaries of their works and looking for inspiration in their personal life and the supernatural. Plath's life was secured by having her husband by her side. They

¹⁶ PLATH, Sylvia. "Letter from Sylvia Plath to Eddie Cohen." Plath manuscripts II, 1932-77. Plath Manuscript Collection, Lilly Library, December 28, 1953

¹⁷ COOPER, Brian (June 2003). "Sylvia Plath and the depression continuum". *J R Soc Med.* 96 (6): 296–301. doi:10.1258/jrsm.96.6.296. PMC 539515. PMID 12782699

¹⁸ BROWN, Sally and TAYLOR, Clare L. (2004), ODNB. "Plath, Sylvia (1932–1963)". *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford University Press. ISBN 0-19-861411-X

travelled together, shared their passions and cared for each other. Their marital bliss ended after Plath's unfortunate miscarriage.

According to the source of Harriet Rosenstein, who reportedly owned some of Plath's letters, Plath blamed Hughes' abusive behaviour for her miscarriage in her correspondence. However, the fact is still unclear, since the letters have not been published yet and therefore cannot be verified.¹⁹

Soon after Plath had to be admitted to the hospital with an inflamed appendix, and it apparently did not help her worsening mental state. She was deeply struck by grief and inability to do anything about it. Her mood has changed with the news of another pregnancy, that came relatively soon after the miscarriage and operation. During the following year of 1962, Plath gave birth to her son with no complications.

She resumed creating her poetry and tried to combine it with taking care of her two children. The celebration of the new life did not have a lasting positive effect on Plath's life, because soon after Plath came to face in with her husband's infidelity. That was a turning point in her marriage. She felt lost, defeated and betrayed. This experience fuelled her growing frustration with the struggles of motherhood and career unfulfillment. It inspired an enormous amount of her latter work. She also set it as a reoccurring theme of the letters with her family members, her mother predominantly.²⁰

In the new marital situation, Plath was deciding whether to stay with her husband or if to leave him.²¹ Staying would mean to become blindsided to his affair, which would be a big blow to her confidence. After approximately six months of knowing about Hughes' continuing unfaithfulness, Plath decided to go her separate way. She moved with her children to the unfortunate flat in London. The rigorous and constant renewals of Hughes' affair with Assia Wevill, made Plath fall into the depressive pattern she already knew from her early adult years. She started to question her life choices and abilities.²² It is debated whether she knew or not about the child, that Hughes conceived with Wevill, who was his mistress. Assia Wevill was a then-wife of the British poet David Wevill. Sylvia Plath's close friend,

¹⁹ The New Yorker: Sylvia Plath's Last Letters [online]. 2018, 5 November 2018 [cit. 2020-06-08]. Accessible from: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/11/05/sylvia-plaths-last-letters>

²⁰ PLATH, Sylvia. (2000). *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*. Edited by Karen V. Kukil. New York: Anchor. ISBN 0-385-72025-4

²¹ PLATH, Sylvia. (2000). *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*. Edited by Karen V. Kukil. New York: Anchor. ISBN 0-385-72025-4

²² PLATH, Sylvia. (2000). *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*. Edited by Karen V. Kukil. New York: Anchor. ISBN 0-385-72025-4

Elizabeth Sigmund recalled, how Hughes tried to take Wevill for an abortion, but Wevill ended up having the baby in the end. This incident happened just days before Plath's death.²³

Whatever became the specific catalyst, the end of her marriage had a significant effect on Plath's mental state and its slow spiralling tendencies for worse. Reasonably, since the relationship with her husband was detrimental to her personal life. According to her journals, Hughes became the father she never had.²⁴ She admired him as the only man who was ever able to be the responsible, strong man she could always count on no matter what the problem was. She accepted him as an equal on personal and also on the professional level since they intimately shared their professional successes and failures.

When Plath lost Hughes, it started an immense change in her lifestyle and work. As it has manifested itself before, Plath's mental problems were always highlighted by unfortunate life events she experienced.

In her lifetime, Plath was dealing with various kinds of rejection, both personal and professional, that together impaired her confidence and the reoccurring feelings of not having enough of the self-worth started showing up consecutively. She recognised this pattern herself in her poetry. For example, in one of her last poems called 'Words':

'Axes
After whose stroke the wood rings,
And the echoes!
Echoes travelling
*Off from the centre like horses.'*²⁵

The next part of Sylvia Plath's lifetime started when she decided to move out from her former home Court Green in Devon, to a flat in London together with her children. With this decision, she drew a line behind her relationship with Ted Hughes. However, it may seem that Plath could not wait to end the marriage, but it was not true. She was merely deciding whether to continue with the separation or reconcile with her husband. She wanted to have a personal space to make the right decision. This particular dilemma stayed with Plath until her death. It was the period when her husband kept coming to visit her and the

²³ 'I realised Sylvia knew about Assia's pregnancy - it might have offered a further explanation of her suicide': The Guardian. The Guardian [online]. 1999, 23 April 1999 [cit. 2020-06-09]. Accessible from: <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/1999/apr/23/features11.g21>

²⁴ PLATH, Sylvia. (2000). The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath. Edited by Karen V. Kukil. New York: Anchor. ISBN 0-385-72025-4

²⁵ PLATH, Sylvia. Ariel: The Restored Edition. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2004

children in London but was determined to stay in the relationships outside his marriage. As she stated in her last letter to her friend Elizabeth Sigmund:

*'Ted comes to visit, and I can't help longing for lost Edens.'*²⁶

It clearly shows that Plath was still hoping for reconciliation with her husband, remembering the pleasurable times they shared. However, Plath must have seen the way her husband was paying attention to other women and be hurt by it. After the affair with Assia Wevill, he took on another companion and, in those terms, enjoyed his separated life. Hughes started to create new artwork, a play dedicated to his next mistress, called *The Difficulties of a Bridegroom*. The artwork was broadcasted on the radio, and it straightforwardly depicted Hughes' cravings for his new lady, Susan Alliston. In particular, the play is about a dream Hughes had. In the dream, he ran over a deer while he was delivering roses to his woman.²⁷

The broadcasting also could have acted as a catalyst for the upcoming unfortunate events of February 1963. Plath must have heard this very public proof of the end of her marriage, even though Hughes still acted friendly around her. It might have served as a similar personal catalyst as the death of her father or not being accepted to the Harvard writing course, events that started some of her episodes of mental illness before. As it was exceedingly important to Plath, how her immediate circle perceived her, the fallout in her marriage became one of the last woe circumstances, which helped her last depressive episode to bloom. When looking for an explanation of Plath's behaviour, the stated reasons are those, remembered by her doctors, family, friends, and even by Hughes himself. Nonetheless, it is necessary to stress, that no one but Sylvia Plath knew the full range of her mental situation at the time.

Two days before taking her life, Plath sent a parting letter to Ted Hughes, as a goodbye. In it, she stated that she decided to leave England and never see him again. She did not expect it to be delivered that day but thanks to the special postal service, Speedy second post, it was. After receiving it, Hughes rushed to the London home of Plath in order to calm his wife and get an explanation regarding her situation and mental state. Plath, however, took

²⁶ 'I realised Sylvia knew about Assia's pregnancy - it might have offered a further explanation of her suicide': The Guardian. The Guardian [online]. 1999, 23 April 1999 [cit. 2020-06-09]. Accessible from: <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/1999/apr/23/features11.g21>

²⁷ 'I realised Sylvia knew about Assia's pregnancy - it might have offered a further explanation of her suicide': The Guardian. The Guardian [online]. 1999, 23 April 1999 [cit. 2020-06-09]. Accessible from: <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/1999/apr/23/features11.g21>

the letter back from Hughes and burned it subsequently. She tried to calm him and show him that everything was in order. It was the last time the couple saw each other. This letter is perceived as one of the warning signs of the continuity of her depressive state. It shows how her depression episode was peaking because a need for closure is looked for in it. Often those who resort to suicide as to the last attempt at creating balance in existence, search for closure in similar ways.

The next day was Hughes informed of his wife's suicide and wrote his well-known poem Last Letter. ²⁸

*'...Then a voice like a selected weapon
Or a measured injection,
Coolly delivered its four words
Deep into my ear: "Your wife is dead."'*²⁹

In the last verse, Hughes is describing his surprise and pain over the death of his wife. Over the years, the stance to her death did not change much in Hughes' eyes, as for the last time he met with her, he did not recognise the warning signs of the fatal depressive episode. The aftermath of her ultimate decision was life-changing for Hughes, as now he became an only father to their two children. His emotional involvement for Plath a trust in her genius followed him, so he turned into her literary property. Hughes' goal became to publish Sylvia Plath's work posthumously to share the raw imagination of her mind with the world.

After going through Plath's poetry and journals, Hughes came up with a curated version of her work and personal life, that was highly critically acclaimed and much enjoyed by the public. Among her possessions, there was rumoured to have been her suicide note. It was supposedly left in her apartment and seen by various sources, but no proof of its existence, location, or of who might be in possession of it, is public to the date. ³⁰

3.1 Suicide

The last hours of her life, Sylvia Plath dedicated to preparations of her suicide. In the morning, she met with her neighbour in the hall and then proceeded to take care of her children. After that, Plath wrote a note for the babysitter, who was supposed to come soon.

²⁸ BBC. BBC News: Ted Hughes 'was in bed with lover' when Sylvia Plath died [online]. 2015 [cit. 2020-06-13]. Accessible from: <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-34378064>

²⁹ HUGHES, Ted. Birthday Letters. London: Faber and Faber, 1999. ISBN 0571194737

³⁰ The New Yorker: Sylvia Plath's Last Letters [online]. 2018, 5 November 2018 [cit. 2020-06-08]. Accessible from: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/11/05/sylvia-plaths-last-letters>

It stated she should call her doctor, with the number of his ambulance.³¹ From many different theories, there are two predominant and most frequently mentioned ways of explaining Plath's last moments and the motivation behind her suicide.

The first theory states that Plath was planning to be found unconscious but still alive. That means that she wanted to be saved in time, and suicide was a way of attracting attention. This theory is the more frequently used explanation of the two, since no other note, than the one stating her doctor's number, was found in the apartment and verified to be true. Moreover, Plath was repeatedly trying to ensure herself about the fact that the babysitters' arrival should be precisely at 9 am when she called her the night before. That would be in time for the babysitter to find Plath still alive.³² Unfortunately, that day, the babysitter was late, and after she came to the building, it was too late to save Plath. Plath was dealing with depression for a long time at this point, even taking antidepressants. These circumstances could be pointing at a demonstrative suicide case, which ended very sadly, in Plath's life not being saved.³³

However, there is also the second theory. This explanation of the situation is pointing at the possibility that Plath wanted to commit suicide and end her life. However, she was profoundly caring for her kids' best interests and wanted them to be checked by her doctor. That was sensible because, as the method of suicide, Plath decided to use gas from her oven. She tried to protect her children from ingesting it by sealing their room with towels and duct tape.

Also, as her neighbour described, Plath's determination to commit suicide was evident from the position of her body when found, because she had her head stuck deep down her stove, which indicates her decision was final.³⁴ From these testimonies comes the conclusion, that Plath knew what she was doing and succeeded at it.³⁵

³¹ COOPER, Brian (June 2003). "Sylvia Plath and the depression continuum". *J R Soc Med.* 96 (6): 296–301. doi:10.1258/jrsm.96.6.296. PMC 539515. PMID 12782699

³² 'I realised Sylvia knew about Assia's pregnancy - it might have offered a further explanation of her suicide': *The Guardian*. *The Guardian* [online]. 1999, 23 April 1999 [cit. 2020-06-09]. Accessible from: <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/1999/apr/23/features11.g21>

³³ STEVENSON, Anne. (1990) [originally published 1989]. *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath*. London: Penguin. ISBN 0-14-010373-2

³⁴ COOPER, Brian (June 2003). "Sylvia Plath and the depression continuum". *J R Soc Med.* 96 (6): 296–301. doi:10.1258/jrsm.96.6.296. PMC 539515. PMID 12782699

³⁵ 'I realised Sylvia knew about Assia's pregnancy - it might have offered a further explanation of her suicide': *The Guardian*. *The Guardian* [online]. 1999, 23 April 1999 [cit. 2020-06-09]. Accessible from: <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/1999/apr/23/features11.g21>

There are other explanations of the unfortunate evening, but no matter what the actual intention of Plath was, the result was her losing her life.

3.2 Depression

For understanding the influence that major depression had on Sylvia Plath's work, it is essential to define what the major depression is, how it can change a person's behaviour and view of the world.

There is not one kind of depression, and probably not one person will experience all the symptoms that different types of depression have. However, in the life of Sylvia Plath, the major depression was diagnosed. Its presence can be recognised both in her work and in her journals. However, additionally, to the major depression, there are generally two kinds of depressive episodes, psychotic and neurotic, each of which shows itself with different symptoms. The psychotic depression is relevant to Plath's case, according to Cooper.³⁶

The major depression or unipolar depression is often portrayed as a persistent feeling of sadness and the lack of responsiveness to the outside impulses of the world. A person with major depression feels down all the time. Life's pessimistic situations are felt into much greater depth by those affected by it. On the other hand, any good news is received with passivity.³⁷ The feelings can range from discouragement and sadness to despair and hopelessness of one life's situation.³⁸ Thankfully, with the right diagnosis and treatment, major depression is possible to treat medically.³⁹

The psychotic episodes are the more dangerous kind. However, they are also very effectively treatable with antidepressants. Around 14-50% of people diagnosed with depression have psychotic depression, the number increasing in the elderly.⁴⁰ Psychotic depression is an acute state, in which the individuals are at high risk of harming themselves.

³⁶ COOPER, Brian (June 2003). "Sylvia Plath and the depression continuum". *J R Soc Med.* 96 (6): 296–301. doi:10.1258/jrsm.96.6.296. PMC 539515. PMID 12782699

³⁷ LIEBER, Arnold. PSYCOM: Major Depression (Unipolar Depression). : Major Depressive Disorder Can Often be Treated for Better Quality of Life [online]. 2019, 2019 [cit. 2020-06-13]. Accessible from: <https://www.psycom.net/depression.central.major.html>

³⁸ Miller-Keane Encyclopedia and Dictionary of Medicine, Nursing, and Allied Health, Seventh Edition. © 2003 by Saunders, an imprint of Elsevier, Inc. All rights reserved.

³⁹ LIEBER, Arnold. PSYCOM: Major Depression (Unipolar Depression). : Major Depressive Disorder Can Often be Treated for Better Quality of Life [online]. 2019, 2019 [cit. 2020-06-13]. Accessible from: <https://www.psycom.net/depression.central.major.html>

⁴⁰ BLACK, Rosemary. PSYCOM: Psychotic Depression: What It Is and What You Should Know [online]. 2019, 2019 [cit. 2020-06-13]. Accessible from: <https://www.psycom.net/psychotic-depression-what-you-should-know>

It is caused by the brain receptors being unable to recognise the difference of what is happening internally and externally of the body. Some of the most typical depressive symptoms are delusions of guilt, poverty, illness, or feelings of not being worthy enough. The patients are often in a sad mood or have reduced concentration on daily tasks.⁴¹ The psychotic symptoms are hearing voices or delusions of some catastrophic event happening in their lives, for example, that they are seriously ill or that they gambled their money away.⁴² These all are only delusions, yet they are affecting significantly the life of the person suffering with them.

3.3 Diagnosis

The main two categories, that depressive illness, when being diagnosed, is divided into two categories, psychotic and neurotic. Every patient is examined and fitted in the scheme and has medication and psychotherapy prescribed accordingly. Psychiatrist Brian Cooper decided to diagnose Sylvia Plath by using the following psychiatric table and base his diagnosis on her behaviour, documented in her journals and overall her literary work.

⁴¹ “Psychotic Depression Can Be Effectively Treated but is Often Tragically Missed.” 26 August 2011. Brain and Behavior Research Foundation. Available at: www.bbrfoundation.org/content/psychotic-depression-can-be-effectively-treated-often-tragically-missed, Accessed March 26, 2019

⁴² BLACK, Rosemary. PSYCOM: Psychotic Depression: What It Is and What You Should Know [online]. 2019, 2019 [cit. 2020-06-13]. Accessible from: <https://www.psycom.net/psychotic-depression-what-you-should-know>

Table 1

Case of depressive illness (SP): known clinical features rated as psychotic or neurotic, in accordance with the diagnostic index score of Kendell (Ref. 5)

<i>Clinical features</i>	<i>'Psychosis' weighting (positive score)</i>	<i>'Neurosis' weighting (negative score)</i>
Family history		
No firm evidence	0	0
Personal history		
Previous similar illness	+3	0
Previous serious suicidal attempt	+1	0
Previous subjective tension symptoms	0	-2
Aetiology and history of present illness		
Important precipitating causes (marital and social)	0	-5
Phenomenology of present illness		
Agitated	+5	0
Anxious	+1	0
Rapid mood changes	0	-1
Severe insomnia	+4	0
Subtotals	+14	-8

43

The Kendell score in the table created by Cooper is a score which helps to diagnose patients with depression. In this specific case, it is the score of Sylvia Plath, that shows the evaluation of her symptoms at the time of her suicide. These are the symptoms: previous similar illness, last serious suicidal attempt, agitation, anxiety and severe insomnia on the side of psychotic depression. The table is explaining that the closest diagnosis for Plath would be major depression, proved in previous medical sessions, together with the psychotic depression.⁴⁴

⁴³ COOPER, Brian (June 2003). "Sylvia Plath and the depression continuum". J R Soc Med. 96 (6): 296–301. doi:10.1258/jrsm.96.6.296. PMC 539515. PMID 12782699

⁴⁴ COOPER, Brian (June 2003). "Sylvia Plath and the depression continuum". J R Soc Med. 96 (6): 296–301. doi:10.1258/jrsm.96.6.296. PMC 539515. PMID 12782699

4 Themes of the poetry

Throughout the course of the literary life of Sylvia Plath, she emphasised several often repeating themes. In her poetry, these themes are usually set as the central theme of each poem. With some poems being based around the same topic, she created thematic groups of them. That happened because Plath found a big part of her professional inspiration in her personal life. The most important events of her life were deeply printed into the work. Plath described each of these events not only at the time that they were happening around her but also when she came back to them retrospectively. She kept reinventing them, especially in the last nine months of her life when she started creating much more freely and with even greater introspection than before. That is the reason why the themes of Plath's life are echoing in her work and why it is possible to track her work to her experiences and feelings.

These repeating themes can be introduced by the thematic groups, that are childhood, parents, husband, suicide attempts, motherhood, sanatorium and the struggle to success. Some of them are explained with greater detail in the following chapters.

4.1 Childhood

Remembering childhood became one of the most prominent themes in Sylvia Plath's poetry because she was continually looking back to the happier times in her life. That is to the time when she lived with her parents in Boston. Her memories of childhood were mostly carefree images of playing with her brother and interactions with her parents. For example, the often-repeated theme of bees, which she found attractive in her work, just as her father, who was a beekeeper. Beekeeping was also a hobby of her husband. In her childhood, even before her father passed away, Plath started to show curiosity that was based around literature and creating it. At a very young age, she began to write simple poems and her parents encourage her to submit them for publishing in the newspaper.⁴⁵

The first poems are full of natural themes and happiness, as she is purely excited to be in this world. That was also the world she hoped to create for her children, which was one of the reasons why she used childish like imagery in some of her poems with the theme of motherhood. In her late work, Plath goes back to her childhood, for example, in the poem 'Gigolo' she is celebrating being a child, hoping for the time to freeze.

⁴⁵ PLATH, Sylvia. Poem. Boston Herald. Boston, 1940, 1940.

I shall never grow old. New oysters

Shriek in the sea and I

*Glitter like Fontainebleau*⁴⁶

More on the subject of time passing by, Plath shows her observation on how fast the time changes lives in her early poem Sonnet: To Time. Once again, she shows her longing to have the ability to stop the time and linger at the moment:

'Today we move in jade and cease with garnet

amid the clicking jewelled clocks that mark

our years.

...

Time is a great machine of iron bars

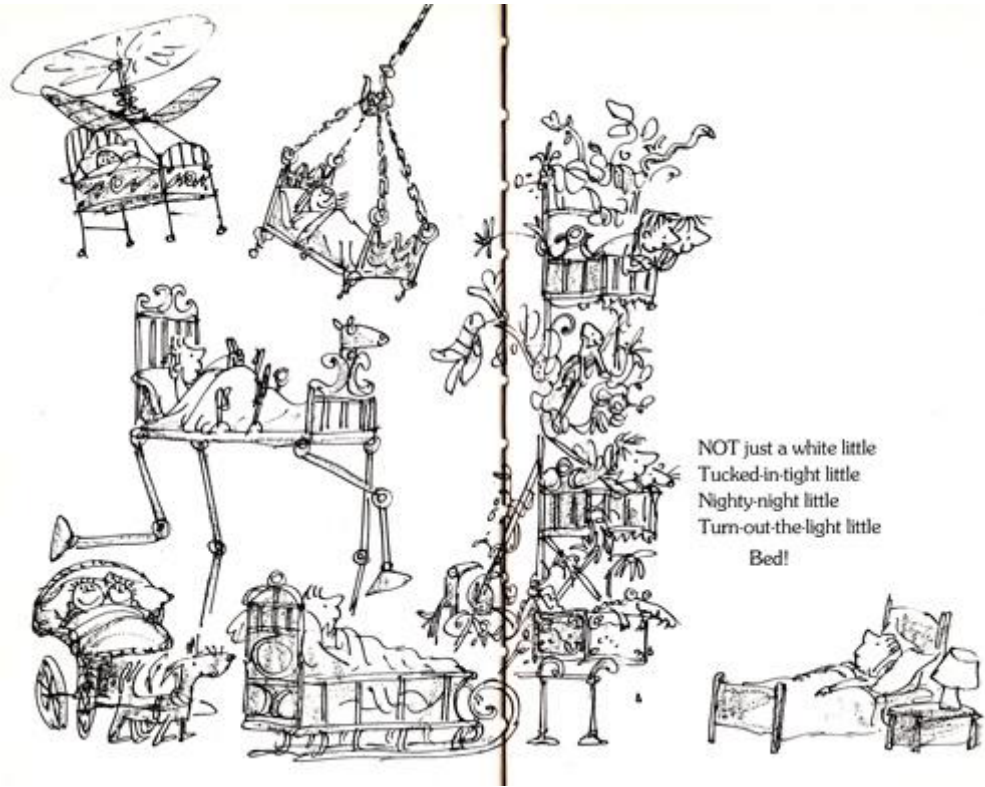
*that drains eternally the milk of stars.*⁴⁷

Plath wishes for eternal youth and returns to innocence. She remembers the time with her parents and the influence the death of her father had on her.

The theme of childhood is repeating itself also in a different dimension, as she wrote a book for kids. It is a less known book of Plath since it is far from her usual themes. The Bed Book was published in 1976 by Faber and Faber. It is a book full of bright thoughts and illustrations, added by acclaimed children's artist Quentin Blake. The work was created from the collection of Plath's inheritance, and it is dedicated to her children, as she created it for them. It is a short bedtime story full of tongue twisters, alliterations and changes of meaning. Thus Plath's usual style that can be found throughout her poetry and diaries. However, this book shows her dedication to making the experience of childhood extraordinary for her children, Frieda and Nicholas. The last page of The Bed Book with, for Plath, straightforward and tender lines.

⁴⁶ PLATH, Sylvia, HUGHES, Ted, ed. The collected poems. New York: Harper Perennial, 2008. ISBN 978-0-06-155889-4

⁴⁷ PLATH, Sylvia, HUGHES, Ted, ed. The collected poems. New York: Harper Perennial, 2008. ISBN 978-0-06-155889-4



5 Parents

Mentions of both of her parents are apparent in different parts of Plath's work. Her mother, Aurelia, can be found in many references of The Journals and their regular letters. On the other hand, her father, Otto, is present predominantly in the poetry of Sylvia. She dedicated a large portion of her poetry to him, trying to free herself from the fact, that she never had the chance to get to know him. That is the reason why she is consciously frequently revisiting his favourite hobbies, the events of his life and his relationship with her mother, as themes appearing in her poems. The death of her father haunted Plath, who suffered a loss of the prematurely terminated bond she had with her father. She is trying to put her present struggles in the context of the choices her late father made in his lifetime and trying to distance herself from them while trying to keep the best of his heritage.

Sylvia Plath dedicated her whole life to figure out her role as a woman, trying to understand the expectations of the then world connected to the previously mentioned heritage. It also covers her legacy of being a woman, a daughter and later, a mother. Plath was very aware of this legacy and the differences in lives caused by gender. As Susan Bassnett puts it in her book *An introduction to the poetry, Sylvia Plath*, the secure connection of her identity to the identity of her parents, is innovative in Plath's writings.

*'... The need to think through the roles of a woman as daughter to a man, as daughter to a woman, as mother in turn to a female and a male child is a central preoccupation of the literature produced by the women's movement of the late sixties and early seventies. Sylvia Plath was exceptional not because she was somehow deranged but because she was trying to confront those problems ahead of their time.'*⁴⁹

It cannot simply be overlooked how strongly Sylvia Plath felt about her ancestry. Notably, in the context of her time, when the then traditional model of the family, meaning mother and father with children, was starting to be disrupted by the increasing number of divorces.⁵⁰ As Plath saw the functions of an uncomplete family first hand, her observations were predictive. They could be transformed into a generalisation for the state of the former society of the United States of America.

⁴⁹ BASSNETT, Susan, *An introduction to the poetry, Sylvia Plath*, Susan Bassnett, p.71, Macmillan Basingstoke, 1987

⁵⁰ EVANS, Michelle L. (2009). "Wrongs Committed During a Marriage: The Child that No Area of the Law Wants to Adopt". *Wash. & Lee L. Rev.* 66

5.1 Mother

Aurelia Plath's life left a very particular impression on her daughter. They had a mutually misunderstood emotionally distant relationship, in which Sylvia Plath blamed her mother for not giving her proper care when she let her hospitalised after her first breakdown. She also blamed Aurelia for the high expectations she put on her, which Sylvia later acquired from her. It made her depressed for not only being able to live up to her mother's expectations nor to her ones.⁵¹ That was one of the initiating sparks of many of Plath's depressive episodes. However, the complicated feelings for her mother did not make Sylvia Plath to drive her mother away completely. Even though bitterness is a feeling she associated with her mother, Sylvia Plath devoted her thoughts to trying to understand her mother's decisions and reasoning, stating clearly, that she never felt a lack of attention or love from her mother. In her *Letters Home*, which is a collection of the mother-daughter correspondence between the years 1950 and 1963, Sylvia Plath shows her affection and devotion to her mother not only by the wording but also by the tone of the letters. Even the way, in which Sylvia addresses her mother '*Dearest, darling mother*'⁵², indicates their fervent relationship.

The most explaining poem, regarding her relationship with her mother, is *Medusa*. It is one of the poems of that Plath created in the last months of her life, when she was, with great energy and stamina, revisiting the most important and influential events and people. In the poem, Plath uses the double meaning of the word *medusa*, firstly as the mortal *Medusa* from Greek mythology, and secondly as the jellyfish, which bears the genus name *Aurelia aulita*. The second was an often repeated joke between both of them.⁵³

*'... Did I escape, I wonder?
My mind winds to you
Old barnacled umbilicus, Atlantic cable,
Keeping itself, it seems, in a state of miraculous
repair.
In any case, you are always there,*

⁵¹ COOPER, Brian (June 2003). "Sylvia Plath and the depression continuum". *J R Soc Med*. 96 (6): 296–301. doi:10.1258/jrsm.96.6.296. PMC 539515. PMID 12782699

⁵² PLATH, Sylvia. *Letters Home. Correspondence 1950-1963*, ed. Aurelia Schober Plath, New York, Harper Perennial, 1992

⁵³ ROLLYNSON, Carl. *American Isis. The Life and Art of Sylvia Plath*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 2013, p. 244

*Tremulous breath at the end of my line,
Curve of water uleaping
To my water rod, dazzling and grateful,
Touching and sucking.
I didn't call you.
I didn't call you at all.
Nevertheless, nevertheless
You steamed to me over the sea,
Fat and red, a placenta*

*Paralyzing the kicking lovers. ...*⁵⁴

Plath is depicting her mother as a monster, as an animal, who is slowly drowning Sylvia in her own predictions and images. Next, Sylvia Plath shows how unending her tries for saving her new family were and how the keeping in the distance from Aurelia was sucking the life energy of her. Plath recognises that the fight is never-ending because she both loves her mother and cannot find a way of keeping her in her day-to-day struggles. The authoress seems elevated from the misery described in the poem thanks to showing Aurelia through the characteristic parts of a mother, a woman, a human. By this generalisation she is creating a space between her as a daughter, the view changes and becomes the unifying element for all the mothers, women, humans. That creates grounds for Plath's overview of her personal struggle, which she uses for less subjective description.

Their correspondence reveals, that in her last days, Sylvia Plath had a much more balanced relationship with her mother, than in the past. In her last letter to her mother, she is inviting her into the plans for her future and for the future of her grandchildren. She is not talking only about shallow daily occurrences but also about her deep desires for her new poems and the novel *Bell Jar*, which was to be published during the Autumn of 1963. With the *Bell Jar*, Plath hoped to '*step out of the shadow*' of her husband's literary genius and create a name for herself with the selection of her new poems. In the letters, she was particular about their exceptionality, saying '*If there is an eternity, I am damned in it*'.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ PLATH, Sylvia, HUGHES, Ted, ed. *The collected poems*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2008. ISBN 978-0-06-155889-4

⁵⁵ PLATH, Sylvia. *Letters Home. Correspondence 1950-1963*, ed. Aurelia Schober Plath, New York, Harper Perennial, 1992

These thoughts were one of the reasons, why Aurelia ultimately decided to publish their private correspondence.

After her death, her mother became one of the heirs of Sylvia's literary work. However, Aurelia Plath took upon herself the publishing of some of Sylvia's earlier poems and letters, only after Ted Hughes, with whom she did not maintain the relationship after. One of her reasons was Hughes' choice of destroying last of Sylvia's journal entries and partial manipulation with her work, of which he was the majority owner. Aurelia questioned his motivation, saying that Hughes carefully censored Sylvia's work in order for him to maintain his reputation, as a husband.

5.2 Father

Otto Plath was a very well-read man with various hobbies, that kept him occupied even in the time he spent at home. As for the relationship with his children, Otto sadly never got to meet them at their adulthood. He died when Sylvia was eight years old, and her brother was six. That was around the time when Sylvia started discovering her passion for writing poetry. As a child, Sylvia saw her father as a distant figure, thanks to his tight schedule as a professor at the Boston University. During the last year, their time together was also strained with Otto Plath's disease because of which he was experiencing seizures. That was the reason why he was mostly staying at home, away from the children, so that he would not scare them.⁵⁶

This approach to the situation uncovers the parenting style of the Plath parents, in which they tried to remain perfect polished faces in front of their children, no matter the circumstances. However, this had two effects on Sylvia, first that she had a problem to establish a deeply trusting relationship with her parents, and second, that she saw her parents as untouchable gods, that were always right. Both of these results of her parent's behaviour became a motive, Sylvia Plath, herself repeats in her journals and poems.

Until his death, it was believed by the family that Otto's condition was only temporary and that he would eventually recover from it. Therefore his demise came as a hard hit for the whole family, especially the children. It changed their lives from the ground, having to move to another home and losing one parent. It also meant, that the relationship that would Sylvia

⁵⁶ BASSNETT, Susan, An introduction to the poetry, Sylvia Plath, Susan Bassnett, Ch 1, Macmillan Basingstoke, 1987

have in her adulthood with her father was ended in her childhood, which influenced the way in which she eventually discovered his real personality.

One of the earliest poems that show Sylvia Plath's grief over his death is called *On the Decline of Oracles* and was written in 1957.

*'My father kept a vaulted conch
By two bronze bookends of ships in sail
...
My father died, and when he died
He willed his books and shell away. ...'*⁵⁷

In this poem, Plath expresses feelings of loss, which is still unbelievable to her, hence the repetition of the fact. However, Plath is showing an understanding of the unchanging nature of the fact. In the end, she remembers her father through his earthly possessions, that he valued while he was still alive.

Two years later, in 1959, Plath visited his grave in Winthrop, trying to prove his existence to herself. This visit inspired notes in her journals, but also her poem *Electra* on Azalea Plath and a part of *The Bell Jar*. In it, Esther, the protagonist, visits the grave of her father and cries over his death, for the first time.⁵⁸ In her journals, she expresses the need for verification of his existence by wanting to dig him up from his grave, to see if he is resting in it.

*'... I found the flat stone, 'Otto E. Plath: 1885-1940', right beside the path, where it would be walked over. Felt cheated. My temptation to dig him up. To prove he existed and really was dead. How far gone would he be? No trees, no peace, his headstone jammed up against the body on the other side. Left shortly. It is good to have the place in mind ...'*⁵⁹

The experiences seem very different, but as the novel is autobiographical, it could be describing Plath's mental state at the moment of her visit to the graveyard. She was still processing the loss of her father, confronting it with her memories of him, that became too cloudy to remember for her.

⁵⁷ PLATH, Sylvia, HUGHES, Ted, ed. *The collected poems*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2008. ISBN 978-0-06-155889-4

⁵⁸ PLATH, Sylvia. *The bell jar: [a novel]*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2005. Modern classics (Harper Perennial). ISBN 0-06-017490-0

⁵⁹ PLATH, Sylvia. (2000). *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*. Edited by Karen V. Kukil. New York: Anchor. ISBN 0-385-72025-4

One of the most acclaimed and equally popular Plath's poems is called Daddy. It introduces her father in the way in which she eventually got to know him, through her memories and memories of others, and his inheritance. Sylvia Plath was feeling as being weighed down by this inheritance, as she was writing the poem. She wanted to free herself from it and use it as a base for her new life of a single mother, as her mother was.

Plath commented on the poem in an interview with Peter Orr, who was the head of the British Council's sound department, where he created the series *The Poet Speaks*.⁶⁰

*'Here is a poem spoken by a girl with an Electra complex. Her father died while she thought he was God. Her case is complicated by the fact that her father was also a Nazi and her mother very possibly Jewish. In the daughter the two strains marry and paralyze each other—she has to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it.'*⁶¹

In the interview Sylvia Plath is using the third person to detach from the situation she is describing, that suggests the memories and discoveries about Otto were still too painful and personal to her, at the time.

In the poem, she describes that freeing herself from the inheritance of her father was not the end of her struggles, to try and identify her current being with it. It shows the reoccurring battle she was trying to end once and for all in her poetry. She hoped that would help her to ease her mind from guilt. Similar feelings could be attributed to the persistent depressive condition, which was untreated at that particular time.

One of the most telling excerpts of the poems Daddy puts Otto Plath in front of an imaginary court of his daughter, who is losing her pink coloured glasses and finally understanding that her father was not the one he seemed to be in her childhood. Plath is expressing disgust with her father's behaviour during the war with horrifying images of suffering.

'... I thought every German was you.

And the language obscene

An engine, an engine

⁶⁰ Peter Orr. Poetry Foundation: Poets [online]. 2020, 2020 [cit. 2020-06-20]. Accessible from: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/peter-orr>

⁶¹ ORR, Peter. A 1962 Sylvia Plath Interview with Peter Orr: Modern American Poetry [online]. 1962, 1962 [cit. 2020-06-20]. Accessible from: <https://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/content/1962-sylvia-plath-interview-peter-orr>

*Chuffing me off like a Jew.
A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.
I began to talk like a Jew.
I think I may well be a Jew.*

...

*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. ...⁶²*

Sylvia Plath is explaining, in the poem, why she despises the German culture for their crimes in the Second World War, in which her father was a member of the Nazi party. She is refusing his German heritage. However, later during her college years, she decided to revisit Germany.

In the last picked stanza, Plath explains how her attempt to take her life at age 20, was inspired by feelings of loss of her father. It bruised her deeply, just as if he would turn her into his enemy 'a Jew' and she went along with it. The industrial imagery emphasises Nazi's, and her father's especially, detachment from humanity. The alienation, being from another person, from a different race as well as from his daughter. Daddy was one of the last poems in which Plath mentioned her father in her life, eventually becoming the ultimate declaration of freeing herself from their broken relationship.

⁶² PLATH, Sylvia, HUGHES, Ted, ed. The collected poems. New York: Harper Perennial, 2008. ISBN 978-0-06-155889-4

6 Motherhood

If something inspired poetry in the life of Sylvia Plath, it was motherhood. The role struck Plath as a daughter, but only as a mother, she began to understand the unconditional love mothers feel for their children. That helped her to see reasons her mother Aurelia had for the behaviour she manifested towards Plath and her brother Warren. Almost immediately after the birth of her first child, Frieda, in 1960, Plath wrote to her mother and brother a letter.

*'I looked on my stomach and saw Frieda Rebecca, white as flour with the cream that covers new babies, funny little dark squiggles of hair plastered over her head, with big, dark-blue eyes. ... I couldn't take my eyes off the baby. ...'*⁶³

With all her tenderness, Plath shows her curiosity and dedication to her new baby Frieda. The poem that describes her feelings as a mother in the most accurate way is the poem Morning song.

*'Love set you going like a fat gold watch.
The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry
Took its place among the elements.*

Our voices echo, magnifying your arrival. New statue.

...

*One cry, and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral
In my Victorian nightgown.'*⁶⁴

In the poem, Plath's usual style does not change. However, what changes, in contrast to her other works, the poem is the tone and circumstances described. Plath expresses, how Frieda is a child of love, who came into the world with the first scream, shared with her mother in labour. She also magnifies the struggles of a new mother, when she learns how to take care of her baby, getting up at night hours to comfort and feed Frieda. The birth brought a sense of reason into Plath's life. She found unfamiliar feelings of motherhood natural. The responsibility of her child's wellbeing taught her to take better care of herself. These obligations made her to look forward to the future and gave a fresh sense to her life.

⁶³ PLATH, Sylvia. Letters Home. Correspondence 1950-1963, February 11, 1960, ed. Aurelia Schober Plath, New York, Harper Perennial, 1992

⁶⁴ PLATH, Sylvia, HUGHES, Ted, ed. The collected poems. New York: Harper Perennial, 2008. ISBN 978-0-06-155889-4

This caused a significant shift in Plath's poetry that became a little less about her personal feelings, and significantly more full of images connected with the colourful world of children's eyes. The perspective inspired not only Plath's book for her children, *The Bed Book* but a number of poems with bubbling metaphors, too. That shows in her poem, conveniently named *Metaphors*.

*'I'm a riddle in nine syllables,
An elephant, a ponderous house,
A melon strolling on two tendrils.
O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers!
This loaf's big with its yeasty rising.
Money's new-minted in this fat purse.
I'm a means, a stage, a cow in calf.
I've eaten a bag of green apples,
Boarded the train there's no getting off.'*⁶⁵

The *Metaphors* show, how full of discoveries and childish images Plath's mind was. Frieda fully occupied her, and that put her psychological struggles on hold. As Plath found the meaning of life in her child, she had her depressive episodes under control, since they were mostly based on feelings of not being enough, not deserving, and fighting with her past.⁶⁶

What made Sylvia Plath realise how complicated the motherly love is, was her unfortunate miscarriage in 1961. Plath's second planned pregnancy ended prematurely, after a few months. Plath felt devastated by the loss, what she believed was to become her son. These feelings influenced her mental health for worse, enforced by succeeding operation Plath had to go through. Poor mental health reflected in her poems that are from that time very dark and hopeless. One of the most outstanding poems about this sad time in Plath's life is *Parliament Hill Fields*, written in February 1961, a week after the miscarriage.

*'On this bald hill the new year hones its edge.
Faceless and pale as china
The round sky goes on minding its business.
Your absence is inconspicuous;*

⁶⁵ PLATH, Sylvia (1967). *The Colossus*. London: Faber and Faber. ISBN 0-571-09864-9

⁶⁶ COOPER, Brian (June 2003). "Sylvia Plath and the depression continuum". *J R Soc Med*. 96 (6): 296–301. doi:10.1258/jrsm.96.6.296. PMC 539515. PMID 12782699

Nobody can tell what I lack.

...

I suppose it's pointless to think of you at all.

Already your doll grip lets go. ...⁶⁷

The poem describes the loneliness with which Plath was dealing, as no one else could see what was 'wrong with her'.

What made the situation even harder, was that an operation kept Plath in a hospital for several days, after she had her appendix out. In the hospital, Plath was not as busy as she would be at home. Thanks to that she had time to reflect on her life. Plath started quickly spiralling into another of her depressive episode. This episode was sadly the last one that Sylvia Plath was meant to live through.

⁶⁷ PLATH, Sylvia (1967). *The Colossus*. London: Faber and Faber. ISBN 0-571-09864-9

7 Husband

Sylvia Plath met her future husband Ted Hughes while studying at the Newnham College in England and he was a professor, in February 1965. He already had an established career not only as an academic but also as a poet. Their relationship started quickly after their meeting, which Plath described in an interview for BBC in 1961, expecting to have future with him

*'... I'd read some of Ted's poems in this magazine and I was very impressed and I wanted to meet him. I went to this little celebration and that's actually where we met... Then we saw a great deal of each other. Ted came back to Cambridge and suddenly we found ourselves getting married a few months later... We kept writing poems to each other. ...'*⁶⁸

Sylvia Plath is describing how fast they started their frequent contact and how a shared passion brought them together.

At the time Plath was craving to become a great writer, something that Hughes already took steps towards in his career. Ted Hughes was not the first man in Plath's life. However, he was the first one with whom she felt on the same level, intellectually. In her journals and letters to her mother, Plath describes him as *'the only man I've met yet here who'd be strong enough to be equal with.'*⁶⁹ They both were equally taken by each other and begun to travel together. After a summer filled by travelling through Europe, they were eventually married in Spain on June 16, 1956. Next, the pair decided to visit Plath's homeland. They were discovering the west coast of the United States together, writing and absorbing new experiences and culture. With Plath finding job at her alma mater, they settled in Boston.

Plath became pregnant, and the pair returned to England, London, where they had their first child, Frieda on June 1, 1960. Sadly, the next year, the bliss of parenthood was disturbed, when Plath miscarried their second baby. This unfortunate event collided with Plath's world and changed not only her relationship but her whole view of the world, as she became mourning. At that time, the tension between Plath and Hughes started to grow. Plath

⁶⁸ POPOVA, Maria. Poets in Partnership: Rare 1961 BBC Interview with Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes on Literature and Love. Brainpickings: Two of a Kind: Poets in Partnership [online]. 2013 [cit. 2020-06-20]. Dostupné z: <https://www.brainpickings.org/2013/07/16/sylvia-plath-ted-hughes-bbc-interview-1961/>

⁶⁹ PLATH, Sylvia. (2000). The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath. Edited by Karen V. Kukil. New York: Anchor. ISBN 0-385-72025-4

was feeling disconnected and alone in the relationship and her grief while taking care of Frieda. She painted the picture of loneliness, for the first time, in her poem *Event*, in May 1961.

*'The child in the white crib revolves and sighs,
Opens its mouth now, demanding.*

...

Love cannot come here.

...

A small white soul is waving, a small white maggot.

My limbs, also, have left me.

Who has dismembered us?

*The dark is melting. We touch like cripples.'*⁷⁰

Nevertheless, the two decided to try and have another child, their son Nicholas, who was born on January 17, 1962. After giving birth, Plath became occupied with caring for two little children, while trying to persist more or less regular writing routine. Around this time in the spring of 1962, Ted Hughes, just as many of the new fathers with a busy life, began an affair with another woman, Assia Wevill.⁷¹

In the summer of that year, Hughes left the holiday in Ireland with his family, to travel to Spain to be with Wevill for ten days. After his return, the damage was done, and their marriage began to deteriorate on its way to an end. This was a turning point for Plath, who felt deeply betrayed and hurt.

She captured this feeling of anguish, in the way she knew best, in poetry. Plath describes the moments of her trust being broken by Hughes in her poem, simply named *The Other*, on July 2, 1962.

'... The police love you, you confess everything.

Sulfurous adulteries grieve in a dream.

Cold glass, how you insert yourself

Between myself and myself.

⁷⁰ PLATH, Sylvia, HUGHES, Ted, ed. *The collected poems*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2008. ISBN 978-0-06-155889-4

⁷¹ 'I realised Sylvia knew about Assia's pregnancy - it might have offered a further explanation of her suicide': *The Guardian*. *The Guardian* [online]. 1999, 23 April 1999 [cit. 2020-06-09]. Accessible from: <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/1999/apr/23/features11.g21>

I scratch like a cat.

...

You smile.

*No, it is not fatal.*⁷²

Plath expresses her feelings of fall out inside of her own mind when she doubts her whole life with Hughes. It is a clear sign of the assumptions of her failure, that is very common in people suffering from the major depression. Plath believes that she is the one in control of the situation. Therefore she is the creator of the marital troubles. It is a fight between herself and herself. As the year progressed, the affair was not fading, more on the contrary, as her Autumn poem *Burning the Letters* shows.

'I made a fire; being tired

Of the white fists of old

Letters and their death rattle.

...

And here is an end to the writing.

...

The dogs are tearing a fox. This is what it is like

*A read burst and a cry ...*⁷³

Plath is describing the grief she is going through. She is dealing with it by metaphorically and literary getting rid of Hughes' possessions, at one point even tearing his collection of first edition books to pieces.⁷⁴ These are not only feelings but also acts of the passionate anger Plath had for Hughes. Her poetry is for the first time full of energy and rage, that is driven by the betrayal. These feelings start a change in Plath, who is contemplating whether or not to leave her husband.

The expressed anger is another very typical sign of an ongoing depressive episode. In patients with psychological problems, anger lays on the top of a ladder of leading symptoms of depression. It is suppressed anger, which cannot be relieved otherwise, that

⁷² PLATH, Sylvia Plath - Poems: Chosen by Carol Ann Duffy. Erscheinungsort nicht ermittelbar: Faber and Faber, 2012. Print

⁷³ PLATH, Sylvia, HUGHES, Ted, ed. The collected poems. New York: Harper Perennial, 2008. ISBN 978-0-06-155889-4

⁷⁴ 'I realised Sylvia knew about Assia's pregnancy - it might have offered a further explanation of her suicide': The Guardian. The Guardian [online]. 1999, 23 April 1999 [cit. 2020-06-09]. Accessible from: <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/1999/apr/23/features11.g21>

creates pressure in the mind of the affected patients.⁷⁵ This pressure often contributes to the feelings of inability to change the uncomfortable situation they are in, and it leads to increased sensitivity. That happens, for example, in the case of deliberate prolonging of the said situation, which is severely damaging the patient's mental state. In Plath's case, this situation is staying with her unfaithful husband, who refuses to part neither with her or his lover, Assia Wevill.⁷⁶ Such a situation makes the affected patients much more prone to developing other psychological blocks associated with depression, not to mention worsening their current depressive state.

The betrayal and Hughes' inability to decide for either of the women, Plath agreed to separate from her husband. Plath did not believe in divorce, which led her to seek a solicitor. She started with establishing her new life in London, by becoming financially independent on Hughes. Plath set up work projects and found a flat, which was meant to become her fresh start in life. She decided to move to London, instead of returning to the United States, because of two reasons. The first reason was that she had an increasingly big audience as a writer in England, which she hoped to use in creating poetry and succeeding as a writer, just like she always wanted. The second reason was to be able to organise a co-parenting schedule for the sake of her children since Plath herself felt the loss of one of her parents.⁷⁷

*'I shall simply have to fight it out on my own over here. Maybe someday I can manage holidays in Europe with the children. The children need me most right now, so I shall try to go on for the next few years writing mornings, being with them afternoons and seeing friends or studying and reading evenings'*⁷⁸

Here Plath explains the feelings of loneliness, fighting against the whole world. Against all the odds, Plath is trying to keep some enthusiasm for her future with her family, planning future holidays and introducing the daily routine, she established for them. This routine creates time for her to both, take care of her children and keeping her daily writing.

⁷⁵ LIEBER, Arnold. PSYCOM: Major Depression (Unipolar Depression). : Major Depressive Disorder Can Often be Treated for Better Quality of Life [online]. 2019, 2019 [cit. 2020-06-13]. Accessible from: <https://www.psycom.net/depression.central.major.html>

⁷⁶ 'I realised Sylvia knew about Assia's pregnancy - it might have offered a further explanation of her suicide': The Guardian. The Guardian [online]. 1999, 23 April 1999 [cit. 2020-06-09]. Accessible from: <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/1999/apr/23/features11.g21>

⁷⁷ PLATH, Sylvia. (2000). The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath. Edited by Karen V. Kukil. New York: Anchor. ISBN 0-385-72025-4

⁷⁸ PLATH, Sylvia. Letters Home. Correspondence 1950-1963, February 4, 1963, ed. Aurelia Schober Plath, New York, Harper Perennial, 1992

The hope for a different life lit a spark in Plath that started the most productive part of her writing career. She moved to her new home with both of her kids and got a contract for publishing her new autobiographical book *The Bell Jar*, which was to be released in Autumn. Over the Winter Plath worked on her poems and took care of her children. Her husband was visiting her frequently. He was full of attention to the needs of their children, buying them what they needed and coming to London, to visit them, as often as he could. Nevertheless, he was still continuing the liaison with Assia Wevill. Wevill just started to take the first steps to divorce her third husband David, for whom she married in 1960. Shortly after Wevill became pregnant.⁷⁹

At that time, Plath was beginning to hope for reconciliation with Hughes. For the sake of children and her own, she still had feelings for him, as he was her husband, the father of their family and the professor, who's talent once captured Plath. Sadly, these plans for the future were not met with Hughes' ideas. Hughes left Assia Wevill and begun a brand new affair with Susan Alliston. Hughes and Alliston even lived together, at the time when Wevill discovered her pregnancy.⁸⁰ In the middle of these circumstances, Sylvia Plath was living through one of the worst depressive episodes she experienced in her life. All those new information stroked her like bullets in quick succession and deepened her feelings of Sisyphus' fight in life.⁸¹

In her last poems, there can be recognized some sort of readiness for what was about to come. One of these poems is called *Contusion*, as a metaphor for all the pain that is invisible, yet leaves very visible marks.

*'The heart shuts,
The sea slides back,
The mirrors are sheeted.'*⁸²

⁷⁹ 'I realised Sylvia knew about Assia's pregnancy - it might have offered a further explanation of her suicide': *The Guardian*. *The Guardian* [online]. 1999, 23 April 1999 [cit. 2020-06-09]. Accessible from: <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/1999/apr/23/features11.g21>

⁸⁰ 'I realised Sylvia knew about Assia's pregnancy - it might have offered a further explanation of her suicide': *The Guardian*. *The Guardian* [online]. 1999, 23 April 1999 [cit. 2020-06-09]. Accessible from: <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/1999/apr/23/features11.g21>

⁸¹ PLATH, Sylvia. (2000). *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*. Edited by Karen V. Kukil. New York: Anchor. ISBN 0-385-72025-4

⁸² PLATH, Sylvia Plath - *Poems*: Chosen by Carol Ann Duffy. Erscheinungsort nicht ermittelbar: Faber and Faber, 2012. Print

Hughes knew about the poor mental state of his wife and tried to visit her as often as he could. A few days before her suicide, he received a letter predicting her acts. He rushed to her, but she tried to keep her face in front of him, took back the letter and destroyed it. That became the last time they saw each other. However evident or concealed her true mental state was, stayed between the two of them. This letter and meeting inspired Hughes' poem *The Last Letter*, in which he describes the fatal feelings he had when he found out his wife killed herself.⁸³

The rest of his life, Hughes devoted to his children and literary work. He became the first person, who made a selection through Sylvia Plath's poetry and published it in 1965, only two years after her death. The collection *Ariel* became the extraordinary work, for which Plath yearned all her literary life, as it brought her the international recognition and acclaimed position between the cream of the literary society.

⁸³ HUGHES, Ted. *Birthday Letters*. London: Faber and Faber, 1999. ISBN 0571194737

8 Suicide attempts

There were two recorded suicide attempts in the life of Sylvia Plath. The first attempt is the one, which Sylvia Plath literary recorded herself. It is the most unifying theme of her life work. It was an experience that changed Plath's world from the foundations. It inspired many of her poems and also her autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*. In most of her poems, she is trying to explain, reason and defend her behaviour. It is essential for her that the whole world understands and witnesses it. This behaviour is suggesting that she was advocating it in front of herself, too. Even though this experience made Plath study her reactions and feelings carefully, in order to prevent another catastrophe. With which she was helped by psychiatrists, psychologists and her own family.⁸⁴

8.1 The first attempt

The reasons why Plath attempted to commit suicide are many with underlying mental troubles. It took place in the family home of the Plath family, on August 24, 1953, when Sylvia Plath decided to swallow a large number of fifty of her mother's sleeping pills. At that time, 20 years old Sylvia struggled with the continuum of depression for several years. After swallowing the pills, she crawled under their garden porch and passed out. The search for her lasted two full days when her whereabouts were unknown to her family. It was conducted on the grounds of the family home, Boston streets and especially at the Smiths College, where Plath was studying at the time. In the local newspapers the *Boston Globe*, a quote of her mother was published, maybe clearing up Sylvia's motivation to disappear like that.

*'She recently felt she was unworthy of the confidence held for her by the people she knew. For some time she has been unable to write either fiction or her more recent love, poetry. Instead of regarding this as just an arid period that every writer faces at times, she believed something had happened to her mind, that it was unable to produce creatively anymore'*⁸⁵

One of the reasons, often mentioned as the starter that ignited Plath's depressive episode, is her unsuccessful try to get into the Harvard writing course. She set it as a milestone of her future career as a poet. However, she was not admitted, and it helped to

⁸⁴ COOPER, Brian (June 2003). "Sylvia Plath and the depression continuum". *J R Soc Med*. 96 (6): 296–301. doi:10.1258/jrsm.96.6.296. PMC 539515. PMID 12782699

⁸⁵ "Wellesley Woods Searched: Police, Boy Scouts Hunt Missing Smith Student." *The Boston Globe*. Evening Edition. August 25, 1953

escalate her continual struggles with depression.⁸⁶ Eventually, she was found under the porch, dizzy, still under the influence of the sleeping pills. Her family let her escort to the Boston hospital and later admitted her to a psychiatric institution, to help her with both physical and psychological recovery.⁸⁷

Her stay in the hospital became the primary source of inspiration for her only finished novel, *The Bell Jar*, which was published in January 1963, shortly before the second suicide attempt happened. The novel is partly autobiographic, and it is classified as a *Roman à clef*, meaning that the events in the book mirror events that occurred in real life. In this particular case, events that happened to Sylvia Plath personally. Her experiences are written down in her extensive Journals. There she was not only documenting incidents, that inspired her while she was writing *The Bell Jar* but also short scabbled excerpts she was planning to compose into the book or one of her poems. Her poetry work is the third mirror of one situation in this case because Plath was using her inspiration repeatedly in different branches of her work. One of the examples is the before mentioned visit of her father's grave, which was depicted in *The Bell Jar*, in her poems, namely in the poem *Rhododendron*, and also in Plath's journals.

The Bell Jar follows the life and struggles of a young woman, Esther Greenwood, who moves to New York, by which she is disappointed. After being kicked out of her internship, she is contemplating current events happening in America, like the execution of the Rosenberg killers. Later that year, she returns back to her family home, where she gets the news, about not being accepted to her preferred writing course. She is contemplating her life choices and trying to pick a life journey appealing to her. However, she finds out that none of the variants available seems sufficiently satisfactory because all of them are typically attributed to women. Esther becomes exponentially depressed and gets admitted to a psychiatric hospital, where she undergoes electroconvulsive therapy. In the hospital, she introduces her feels of falling into the trap of womanhood, of becoming pregnant. Her fears are elevated by her doctor, who gives her a diaphragm, and after undergoing the therapy, she is free to leave.

The novel is a reflection of Sylvia Plath's fear of becoming a slave to modern men ruled society, in which she does not have the free will to establish a successful writing career.

⁸⁶ BASSNETT, Susan, *An introduction to the poetry, Sylvia Plath*, Susan Bassnett, Ch 1, Macmillan Basingstoke, 1987

⁸⁷ COOPER, Brian (June 2003). "Sylvia Plath and the depression continuum". *J R Soc Med*. 96 (6): 296–301. doi:10.1258/jrsm.96.6.296. PMC 539515. PMID 12782699

These worries were very much present in her younger days, but at around her thirtieth year, she was already a mother of two, still pursuing her career, in the pursuit of greatness and perfection. In the end, Plath made precedence for modern women, that it is possible to have a successful career in the typically men's field and to take care of children, all at once.

Plath's arguably most famous poem Lady Lazarus is also describing the feelings she had during this period of her life when she felt at her worst. It is one of the less wordy poems from her collection, but it shows the feelings of inevitable doom, Plath believed was written in the stars for her. She created this poem during the creative period in Winter 1962, somehow predicting the events of the day of her suicide.

*I have done it again.
One year in every ten
I manage it
...
Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.
...
Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware.*

*Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.⁸⁸*

8.2 The second attempt

The last push over the edge of life was for the unhappy Plath in the strong Winter of 1962, the struggle with her new flat. She felt like she was facing the whole world and had to win, and at this moment, once again, her comfort was disrupted by the unusually cold winter. Plath's original anticipations for the change of her situation connected with moving to London disappeared together with the mild Autumn. She was slowly discovering the struggle

⁸⁸ PLATH, Sylvia Plath - Poems: Chosen by Carol Ann Duffy. Erscheinungsort nicht ermittelbar: Faber and Faber, 2012. Print

of a single parent when her son became sick with the flu. Additionally, the Winter weather made her apartment a freezing place with not functioning water piping, which froze in the thin walls.⁸⁹

*'The next five months are grim ones. I always feel sorry to have summertime change, with the dark evenings closing in mid-afternoon, and will try to lay in some physical comforts these moths – the best insurance against gloominess for me.'*⁹⁰

At that time, Plath was at the peak of her professional career. She was writing almost every day with an incredible number of poems produced from each session.⁹¹ He was also anticipating the publishing of her novel, *The Bell Jar*, which was in January 1963. With not very pleasant reviews, it became one of the causes of her depressive episode. Around this time, Plath visited her physician and asked for antidepressants, to change her mental condition for the better. From the personal point of view, Plath was prescribed antidepressants that time, fearing another depressive episode. According to her medication, at the time of her suicide, she was just at the beginning of the onset of efficacy of her medicine. It is still being debated whether or not it had already started influencing her nerves.⁹²

However, before her condition got too dangerous, Plath experienced a time in her life, when she could focus on the events she lived through. She was able to put general meaning to them and, with the use of her bottomless wit, create the freest poems of her career. Some of these poems are simple descriptions of her life's problems. Other poems are taking her back with memories of childhood. The whole last period seems to be as if her life was flashing before her eyes, and she had the privilege, to comment on its beauty and misery for the last time.

The poem *Edge*, which happened to be the last one Sylvia Plath ever wrote six days before her suicide, is an incredibly chilling testimony of Plath's last thoughts. It is the last memory Plath shares as the viewpoint, from which she is looking back at her life so far.

⁸⁹ BASSNETT, Susan, *An introduction to the poetry, Sylvia Plath*, Susan Bassnett, Ch 1, Macmillan Basingstoke, 1987

⁹⁰ PLATH, Sylvia. *Letters Home. Correspondence 1950-1963*, November 5, 1962, ed. Aurelia Schober Plath, New York, Harper Perennial, 1992

⁹¹ BASSNETT, Susan, *An introduction to the poetry, Sylvia Plath*, Susan Bassnett, Ch 1, Macmillan Basingstoke, 1987

⁹² COOPER, Brian (June 2003). "Sylvia Plath and the depression continuum". *J R Soc Med.* 96 (6): 296–301. doi:10.1258/jrsm.96.6.296. PMC 539515. PMID 12782699

'The woman is perfected.

Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment

...

Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,

One at each little

Pitcher of milk, now empty.

...

The moon has nothing to be sad about,

Staring from her hood of bone.

She is used to this sort of thing.

Her blacks crackle and drag.⁹³

It seems like Plath went over the whole of her life and decided that her journey in this world came to an end. As chilling as it might be, and clouded by her depression at the worst phase, Sylvia Plath died on February 11, 1963, at the age of 30.

⁹³ PLATH, Sylvia Plath - Poems: Chosen by Carol Ann Duffy. Erscheinungsort nicht ermittelbar: Faber and Faber, 2012. Print

Conclusion

The major depression is widespread in the lives of creative people, especially writers. Sylvia Plath sadly was not an exception, as her life was marked by extensive depressive periods and two impactful episodes.

As Plath's writings were always deeply personal, which is proven in her journals and personal correspondence, it is possible to trace the depression to her poems and prose. The amount of influence each had on the other is hard to describe because there were times in her life, that they became one. Her professional career was depending on the mental state in which Plath found herself at the moment, chasing the ultimate goal of creating a piece of literature precise enough, it could convey her emotional state. In other cases, the rejection with which she was dealing in the literary world changed her psychological problems for the worse.

Regarding her family life, Plath was trying to find a balance between her personal and professional life. One of her most innovative thoughts was the pursuit of a career in the professional field, that was at the time predominantly inclined to favor men. She fought for not being put into one box of female writers by creating dark and profound poetry, in which she was more than successful.

Unfortunately, this did not happen up until her death. This raises the question of the connection between her suicide and the international acclaim of her work. That is the ultimate finite way, in which her psychological condition influenced the poetry of Sylvia Plath.

REFERENCES

1. BASSNETT, Susan, *An introduction to the poetry, Sylvia Plath*, Susan Bassnett, Ch 1, Macmillan Basingstoke, 1987
2. BATISTA SILVERMAN, Ligia. *Double Entendre: Sylvia Plath and Psychiatric Diagnosis: Plath Profiles* [online]. 2015 [cit. 2020-06-09]. Accessible from: <file:///Downloads/20638-Article%20Text-45851-1-10-20151215.pdf>
3. BBC. *BBC News: Ted Hughes 'was in bed with lover' when Sylvia Plath died* [online]. 2015 [cit. 2020-06-13]. Accessible from: <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-34378064>
4. BLACK, Rosemary. *PSYCOM: Psychotic Depression: What It Is and What You Should Know* [online]. 2019, 2019 [cit. 2020-06-13]. Accessible from: <https://www.psycom.net/psychotic-depression-what-you-should-know>
5. BROWN, Sally and TAYLOR, Clare L. (2004), ODNB. "Plath, Sylvia (1932–1963)". *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford University Press. ISBN 0-19-861411-X
6. COOPER, Brian (June 2003). "Sylvia Plath and the depression continuum". *J R Soc Med*. 96 (6): 296–301. doi:10.1258/jrsm.96.6.296. PMC 539515. PMID 12782699
7. HUGHES, Ted. *Birthday Letters*. London: Faber and Faber, 1999. ISBN 0571194737
8. 'I realised Sylvia knew about Assia's pregnancy - it might have offered a further explanation of her suicide': *The Guardian*. *The Guardian* [online]. 1999, 23 April 1999 [cit. 2020-06-09]. Accessible from: <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/1999/apr/23/features11.g21>
9. LIEBER, Arnold. *PSYCOM: Major Depression (Unipolar Depression). : Major Depressive Disorder Can Often be Treated for Better Quality of Life* [online]. 2019, 2019 [cit. 2020-06-13]. Accessible from: <https://www.psycom.net/depression.central.major.html>
10. *Miller-Keane Encyclopedia and Dictionary of Medicine, Nursing, and Allied Health*, Seventh Edition. 2003 by Saunders, an imprint of Elsevier, Inc. All rights reserved.
11. ORR, Peter. *A 1962 Sylvia Plath Interview with Peter Orr: Modern American Poetry* [online]. 1962, 1962 [cit. 2020-06-20]. Accessible from: <https://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/content/1962-sylvia-plath-interview-peter-orr>

12. Peter Orr. Poetry Foundation: Poets [online]. 2020, 2020 [cit. 2020-06-20].
Accessible from: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/peter-orr>
13. PLATH, Sylvia. *The Bed Book*. Faber and Faber, 1976. ISBN 0571109292
14. PLATH, Sylvia. *The bell jar: [a novel]*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2005. Modern classics (Harper Perennial). ISBN 0-06-017490-0
15. PLATH, Sylvia, (1967). *The Colossus*. London: Faber and Faber. ISBN 0-571-09864-9
16. PLATH, Sylvia. *Letters Home. Correspondence 1950-1963*, ed. Aurelia Schober Plath, New York, Harper Perennial, 1992
17. PLATH, Sylvia. "Letter from Sylvia Plath to Eddie Cohen." Plath manuscripts II, 1932-77. Plath Manuscript Collection, Lilly Library, December 28, 1953
18. PLATH, Sylvia. Poem. *Boston Herald*. Boston, 1940, 1940.
19. PLATH, Sylvia Plath - *Poems: Chosen by Carol Ann Duffy*. Erscheinungsort nicht ermittelbar: Faber and Faber, 2012. Print
20. PLATH, Sylvia. *Ariel: The Restored Edition*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2004
21. PLATH, Sylvia. (2000). *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*. Edited by Karen V. Kukil. New York: Anchor. ISBN 0-385-72025-4
22. PLATH, Sylvia, HUGHES, Ted, ed. *The collected poems*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2008. ISBN 978-0-06-155889-4
23. POPOVA, Maria. *Poets in Partnership: Rare 1961 BBC Interview with Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes on Literature and Love*. *Brainpickings: Two of a Kind: Poets in Partnership* [online]. 2013 [cit. 2020-06-20]. Dostupné z: <https://www.brainpickings.org/2013/07/16/sylvia-plath-ted-hughes-bbc-interview-1961/>
24. "Psychotic Depression Can Be Effectively Treated but is Often Tragically Missed." 26 August 2011. Brain and Behavior Research Foundation. Available at: www.bbrfoundation.org/content/psychotic-depression-can-be-effectively-treated-often-tragically-missed

25. ROLLYNSON, Carl. *American Isis. The Life and Art of Sylvia Plath*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 2013, p. 244 EVANS, Michelle L. (2009). "Wrongs Committed During a Marriage: The Child that No Area of the Law Wants to Adopt". *Wash. & Lee L. Rev.* 66
26. *The New Yorker: Sylvia Plath's Last Letters* [online]. 2018, 5 November 2018 [cit. 2020-06-08]. Accessible from:
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/11/05/sylvia-plaths-last-letters>
27. "Wellesley Woods Searched: Police, Boy Scouts Hunt Missing Smith Student." *The Boston Globe. Evening Edition.* August 25, 1953