

# PAL: Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide - An Ongoing Project

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## Chapter 10: Sylvia Plath (1932-1963)

Page Links: | [Primary Works](#) | [Selected Bibliography 1980-Present](#) | [MLA Style Citation of this Web Page](#) |

| [A Brief Biography](#) |

Site Links: | [Chap. 10: Index](#) | [Alphabetical List](#) | [Table Of Contents](#) | [Home Page](#) | February 3, 2008 |



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### Primary Works

*The Colossus*, 1960; *The Bell Jar*, 1963; *Ariel*, 1965; *Crossing the Water*; *transitional poems*, 1971; *Winter Trees*, 1971; *Letters Home: correspondence, 1950-1963*, 1975; *The Bed Book*, 1976; *Johnny Panic and the Bible of dreams: short stories, prose, and diary excerpts*, 1979; *The Collected Poems*, 1981; *The Journals*, 1982.

*The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*. Brennan, Claire (ed.). NY: Columbia UP, 1999.

*Ariel: The Restored Edition*. Hughes, Frieda (foreword). NY: HarperCollins, 2004.

### List of Awards, etc.

First place in the *Boston Globe* contest for a news story, top prize in *Atlantic Monthly* Scholastic contest for fiction. Sylvia was offered a full scholarship to Wellesley College, which was close to her home. She accepted instead partial scholarships to Smith College where she would live on campus.

First prize in *Mademoiselle* Fiction Contest for "Sunday at the Mintons" (\$500).

A Fulbright Scholarship was awarded to Sylvia Plath to attend Cambridge University in England. Concurrently she had been selected for a Woodrow Wilson Scholarship for study in the United States but elected to study in England. The Dylan Thomas honorable mention was awarded for "Parallax," *Mademoiselle*. The Academy of American Poets Prize awarded her \$100.00. The Ethel Olin Corbin Prize for a sonnet earned her \$40.00. Marjorie Hope Nicholson Prize (tied for first place) for her honors thesis; was awarded \$50.00. Vogue Prix de Paris. Sylvia was one of 12 winners to receive \$25.00. *Atlantic Monthly* prize for "Circus in Three Rings" \$25.00. *Mademoiselle* contest published "Two Lovers and a Beachcomber by Real Sea."

*Collected Poems* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry.

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| [Top](#) | Sylvia Plath (1932-1963): A Brief Biography

### A Student Project by Carol Wyant

Sylvia Plath was born October 27, 1932, in Boston Massachusetts and according to Linda Wagner-Martin, author of [Sylvia Plath A Biography](#), she was born to highly educated parents, Otto Plath and Aurelia Schober Plath. Otto was a Polish immigrant who spoke three languages, German, Polish, and French, before learning English. After he had received his Doctorate of Science in entomology, he was entrusted with a permanent position at Boston University. This academic success on his part; however, did not earn him a higher status in his family. Otto's parents expected him to become a Lutheran minister and after studying the works of Charles Darwin, he became more convinced that the life of a minister was not for him. His grandparents took this as a sign of rejection and struck his name from the family bible. (Wagner-Martin, 18)

Aurelia Schober worked as a librarian and typist at Boston University where she met Otto Plath. Along with being Salutatorian of her high school class, she was Valedictorian of her college class and taught English and German at Brookline High School as she studied for her M.A. degree(19). Like Otto she broke from her religion of Catholicism, finding in it a "controlling and repressive ideology"(19). Otto Plath, a protestant and married, began to see Aurelia socially in 1930. They shared their interest of languages, science and made plans to work on academic projects together. In the winter of 1931, Aurelia's mother drove Otto and Aurelia to Reno, Nevada so that Otto could divorce his wife and then they traveled on to Carson City to be married. (19)

Sylvia Plath was born with in the year and two years later her brother Warren was born. Warren was a sickly child, and being that Otto's life revolved around his scholarship, Aurelia had a difficult time giving "Sivvy" the attention she needed. Sylvia, being a lively child, spent much of her young years with her maternal grandparents who lived on Point Shirley in Winthrop, Massachusetts(21). Sylvia's second family was as gifted as Aurelia. Grammy (who has the same name as her daughter Aurelia) graduated from the Vienna Schools, and was selected to present a bouquet of

flowers to Emperor Franz Josef on a parade holiday (21) and she was also a talented musician. Sylvia's grandfather, Frank Schober, Sr. spoke and read Italian, French, German, and English ranking highest in his class in Austria (21).

As if Warren's poor health was not a large enough burden on the family, Sylvia's father Otto started to experience a degeneration of his health. Not believing he needed a doctor he went unchecked for the next few years. Aurelia's attentions were clearly focused towards Warren and Otto and Sylvia received the attention she needed through long stays with her grandparents. Sylvia did not know her father like she did her grandparents (26).

Sylvia soon found that to receive attention from her father that she must be a high achiever at school. From her young years, the situation to achieve was fostered by her father. Linda Wagner-Martin, author of [Sylvia Plath : A Biography](#) writes,

Perhaps for twenty minutes in the evening he would be strong enough to see the children. Then Sylvia and Warren would show off. They discussed what they had learned that day, recited poems, made up stories, performed. Hardly a normal interchange, this kind of session created the image of father as critic, judge, someone to be pleased. It robbed the children of the chance to know their father in the way they knew Grampy Schober or to see him as a loving and supportive parent. ( 26)

Otto's illness got progressively worse. By the time Aurelia sent for the Doctor his condition had progressed to diabetes mellitus. An infection in his toe had progressed to gain green and as a result of this condition the doctors were forced to amputate his leg. Otto never returned from the hospital. According to Wagner-Martin, he died of poor hospital care; however, Aurelia Plath in the introduction of [Letters Home by Sylvia Plath](#), states that she was informed that Otto died in his sleep when an "embolus had struck his lung" (24). After Sylvia heard the news of her father's death, she proclaimed, "I will never speak to God again!" (Plath, 25)

After Sylvia's father died, she worked tirelessly in school, excelling at everything. She was editor of *The Bradford*, her school newspaper, and along with keeping up her studies she would write short stories and poetry and send them out to the popular women's and teen magazines. At one time, Sylvia counted 60 to 70 rejection slips. However discouraging this may have been, her perseverance paid off and in her Senior year of high school Sylvia had been published by *Seventeen*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, and *The Boston Globe*. She had a total of nine acceptances earning money totaling \$63.70 (Wagner-Martin, 47).

After high school Sylvia went on to Smith College where she had an English Teacher who consistently gave her work "B's." Receiving an "A" on two papers raised her average to a "B+ " (63). Among all of Sylvia's accomplishments, she felt inadequate and questioned whether she would ever be able to reach her goals. Sylvia wrote in her diary, " Never never never will I reach the perfection I long for with all my soul----my paintings, my poems, my stories." (47) According to Wagner, "Whatever Sylvia tried, it had to be done perfectly. Sylvia's idealization of herself, or talents and capabilities, pushed her to try to excel at everything." (47) Sylvia looked to the writers Willa Cather, Virginia Wolf, and Lillian Hellman for inspiration and wondered what they were like (65).

| [Top](#) | These women and their works were not the only questions she had. She also wondered and worried about whether she should pursue an education and career or a man. She wanted a man, but she did not want to be the submissive Christian wife. She did however realize that "Immortality exists through writing." (65).

Sylvia experienced much success her sophomore year of college. Not only was every professor who knew her impressed by her but the work she was submitting to national magazines was once again being published. *Seventeen*, *Annual Anthology of College Poetry*, and *The Christian Science Monitor* were all paying Sylvia for her stories. It was also that year in 1952 that she took first prize in the *Mademoiselle* Fiction Contest (Wagner, 78). Even though Sylvia never felt her successes were good enough, she did come to recognize the value of the intuition in her poetry versus the male logic of her father (83).

The next year was not so good for Sylvia. Even though she had sold some articles, she could not afford the high tuition of Smith College. A depressed Sylvia had to attend Lawrence from 1952-1953. During this period she experienced writers block, disappointment, and fear which all stemmed from her "insatiable demands for perfection" (109). She experienced a mental breakdown which led to a suicide attempt and a year in a mental hospital where she endured electroshock and insulin shock therapy. She later recounted her experience in her only novel, [The Bell Jar](#). Unlike Sylvia's life; however, the protagonist, Esther Greenwood seems to suffer more of a psychosis. This fits with the fact that Plath used Shirley Jackson's [The Bird's Nest](#) as an opportunity to explore this area of the mind (164). When this is coupled with the fact that Sylvia's mother later learned of depression in Otto's (Sylvia's father's) family (110), it can be inferred that Sylvia Plath suffered from depression at a time in history when the drugs were not available and the treatment was crude.

The next year, February 1953, Sylvia was able to return to Smith, fully recovered. She graduated *summa cum*

*laude* and won the Fullbright Fellowship to Cambridge in England (119).

During these next years after her breakdown, Sylvia experienced more and more with developing her own sexuality. She had numerous sexual partners both at Smith and while in Cambridge (123) and according to Wagner-Martin, "Lovemaking blotted out her anxieties about going to Cambridge"(123).

While in England, Sylvia met and married Ted Hughes a young Faber & Faber poet. Being that Sylvia thought of herself as a clairvoyant, she was comfortable with Ted's mystical family and mythical beliefs(138). If Sylvia was conflicted before, now she knew what she wanted. Even though she wanted to write, she put Ted's writing career first often working to support them both so that Ted could write (140). She also taught one year at Smith College during this time; however, she was not up for the work involved in the reading and grading all of the student's papers (142). Sylvia worked, taught, and did the housework, and meanwhile her resentment for Ted grew(152).

Ted and Sylvia had a stormy relationship which ended after the birth of their second child Nicholas when Sylvia learned that Ted had taken a lover. Overcome with poor health, exhaustion from raising her two children alone and some unfavorable reviews of her novel, The Bell Jar, Sylvia Plath took a hand full of sleeping pills and turned on the gas to her oven and stuck her head inside. She died on February 11, 1963 (244).

Plath's achievements and awards include: Mademoiselle College Board Contest in 1953; Irene Glascock Poetry Prize, 1955; Fullbright fellowship, 1955-1957; Bess Hokin Award (Poetry magazine), 1957; first prize in Cheltenham Festival, 1961; Eugene Saxon fellowship, 1961.

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| [Top](#) |