

The Poetry of Sylvia Plath

A reader's guide to essential criticism



Edited by Claire Brennan

ICON READERS' GUIDES

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EDITED BY CLAIRE BRENNAN

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David Holbrook's *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence* (1976), and readings concerned with defining the mythical structure of Plath's poetry such as Judith Kroll's *Chapters in a Mythology*. The debate over Plath's use of Holocaust imagery continues, with critics such as Irving Howe and Joyce Carol Oates accusing Plath of misappropriation and solipsism. The second half of the 1970s is dramatically defined by the emergence of feminist literary studies which, by adopting a largely biographical/cultural approach, begin to establish Plath at the centre of a feminist canon. Extracts from two central articles by Sandra Gilbert and Carole Ferrier illustrate the shift in emphasis towards defining Plath as a woman writer.

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chapter is Jacqueline Rose's impressive and stimulating book *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, a text that profoundly influences Plath studies. Concentrating on the chapters most concerned with textual readings, 'No Fantasy Without Protest' and centrally 'Daddy', this generous selection will provide the reader with an appreciation of the critical importance of Rose's argument.

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INTRODUCTION

■ Arrogant, I think I have written lines which qualify me to be The Poetess of America (as Ted will be The Poet of England and her dominions). Who rivals? Well, in history Sappho, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, Amy Lowell, Emily Dickinson, Edna St. Vincent Millay – all dead. Now: Edith Sitwell and Marianne Moore, the aging giantesses, and poetic godmother Phyllis McGinley is out – light verse: she’s sold herself. Rather: May Swenson, Isabella Gardner, and most close, Adrienne Cecile Rich – who will soon be eclipsed by these eight poems: I am eager, chafing, sure of my gift, wanting only to train and teach it – I’ll count the magazines and money I break open by these eight best poems from now on. We’ll see . . . □

Sylvia Plath, journal entry, March 1958¹

In these confident, boastful, yet surely teasing, comparisons, Plath offers herself as the latest addition to the lineage of women’s poetry. A young woman of twenty-five, Plath’s confidence springs from her recently written cluster of poems inspired by the paintings of De Chirico and Rousseau, two of which, ‘On the Decline of Oracles’ and ‘The Disquieting Muses’, were to be included in her first collection of poetry, *The Colossus and Other Poems* (1960). Innocently raising questions of gender and nationality by identifying herself as the now redundant ‘poetess’, and foreshadowing Hughes’s poet laureateship, these comments clearly show Plath’s ambition and dedication to writing as she dismisses McGinley’s ‘light verse’ in favour of a place among the literary nobility. That Plath has gained her place within the twentieth century is certain: her second volume of poetry, *Ariel*, published in 1965, is one of the defining texts of this period, and the eventual appearance of her *Collected Poems* in 1981 distinguished her as a major writer. Within the space of a few years, Plath’s poetry has received considerable critical attention, often becoming the focus of critical and theoretical debates, particularly in relation to feminism. For the student new to Plath’s poetry, the volume of criticism can often be daunting and confusing, Plath variously described as feminist and feminine, mythological and political, an English Romantic and an American Modernist. In the following discussion

and selection of extracts, this guide will explore and explain these various responses within their critical context, considering the significant trends and identifying the influential critics on Plath's poetry. Rather than reductively arriving at a single, authoritative understanding of Plath's poetry, this guide will provide a critical tour of the poetry, placing the dominant critical positions into perspective by considering their impact and influence on Plath studies. This is not to suggest, however, a harmonious progression of opinion; there are disagreements and disputes, many crosscurrents and undercurrents of opinion, critical approaches that are complementary and oppositional. This guide, however, will map out the broad, shifting, critical demarcations in Plath studies. While the most influential and major extracts rightly dominate this guide, where space permits I have offered extracts from less well-known pieces, which often foreshadow later debates. This introduction begins with a short biography of Plath, focusing on her development as a writer. A novelist as well as a poet, we will briefly consider the critical reception of Plath's prose and offer some suggestions for further reading, before providing an overview of the critical developments in Plath studies.

From a very young age, Plath had aspirations to be a writer. Born in 1932, the oldest child of academic parents, Plath's childhood was spent in Winthrop, a seaside suburb of Boston, until, a couple of years after her father's death, the family moved inland to Wellesley, an experience which she explores in her 1962 essay 'Ocean 1212-W': 'And this is how it stiffens, my vision of that seaside childhood. My father died, we moved inland. Whereon those nine first years of my life sealed themselves off like a ship in a bottle – beautiful, inaccessible, obsolete, a fine, white flying myth.'² She regularly published poetry and stories in local newspapers and her school magazine until, in 1950, after nearly fifty rejections, the American teen magazine, *Seventeen*, accepted her short story 'And Summer Will Not Come Again'. The following year Plath entered Smith College, an exclusive women's college near Boston, with a part scholarship from the popular novelist Olive Higgins Prouty. A gifted student, Plath won a guest editorship for the college edition of *Mademoiselle* magazine in August 1953, an experience later shared by the feminist critic Sandra M. Gilbert who wittily describes the contest as 'the literary young woman's equivalent of being crowned Miss America.'³ Although Plath's journalesque does not compare to her later poetry in terms of accomplishment, many recent critics have explored the concerns and interests that this often formulaic work shares with the intensity of *Ariel*. On her return from New York and *Mademoiselle*, assumed to be suffering from emotional stress, Plath attempted suicide in the summer of 1953. Plath's life can fascinatingly be traced through text and print; while she was missing from her family home, unconscious in the basement after an overdose, the Boston press ran dramatic headlines

appealing for her safety: 'Beautiful Smith Girl Missing at Wellesley', an experience with fame and notoriety that is reflected in Joan's hoarding of lurid suicide newspaper clippings in Plath's 1963 novel *The Bell Jar*.⁴ At Olive Higgins Prouty's expense, Plath recovered in McLean hospital in Belmont, until she returned to Smith in January 1954. Graduating *summa cum laude* in 1955, Plath won a prestigious Fulbright scholarship to Cambridge University, entering Newnham College in October 1955.

Although over the next few years Plath was to struggle with career and emotional choices, she was certain of her need to be a writer. After marrying Ted Hughes in April 1956, they increasingly devoted their lives to writing. With Plath's encouragement, Hughes entered and won the New York Poetry Center competition with *Hawk in the Rain* in 1957, which subsequently established him as a major young poet, while Plath was regularly published in poetry journals, finally publishing *The Colossus* in 1960. While they were a professional literary couple, both promising and admired poets, Hughes was undoubtedly the literary star, photographed in 1960 with T.S. Eliot, Louis MacNiece, W.H. Auden and Stephen Spender, all five representing Three Generations of Faber Poets. In January 1959, while Plath and Hughes were living in Beacon Hill near Boston, *Mademoiselle* featured 'Four Young Poets', including this former guest editor's success story: returning from an English education with a handsome poet husband, Plath was the embodiment of *Mademoiselle's* dreams and ambitions. Yet the accompanying photograph is rather telling; Hughes, darkly handsome and imposing, studies a book while Plath, crouched behind the chair, peers over his shoulder, appearing to be almost complementary.⁵ As we will see, many feminist critics have returned to this dynamic, concerned with the difficulty of establishing oneself as a woman poet in the mid-century.

In 1960, Plath and Hughes settled in England, living in London before moving to Devon in late 1961. Now the parents of two small children, it was hoped Devon would provide a sanctuary for writing and family life, but the marriage deteriorated in 1962 and Hughes left the family home. Plath continued to live in Devon, writing many of the poems that would be collected in *Ariel*: '... writing like mad – have managed a poem a day before breakfast. All book poems. Terrific stuff, as if domesticity had choked me',⁶ until in December 1962, she moved to London to live in what she felt was a fortuitous home, excitedly writing to her mother: 'it is *W.B. Yeats' house* – with a blue plaque over the door, saying he lived there!' (*LH*, pp.477–8). Her novel *The Bell Jar* was published in January 1963 under Plath's chosen pseudonym Victoria Lucas. Plath, perhaps disingenuously, referred to it as a 'pot-boiler' (*LH*, p.477), although it received admiring reviews welcoming 'Lucas' as a female Salinger. Despite the recognition of this work, Plath is believed to have suffered from emotional exhaustion and depression, taking her own life

in February 1963. Although a published and hard-working writer, Plath was known in the gossipy London literary circles more for being the deserted wife of Ted Hughes than as a major poet of this century.

To return briefly to the opening quotation, Plath's identification of Adrienne Rich as her rival invites an early comparison. In 1958, the two seemed to have a lot in common; both women were of a similar age, graduates of exclusive American colleges, promising and talented poets producing precise, disciplined, accomplished poems, which pleased an academic readership. In her early publications, Rich's softening inclusion of 'Cecile', which almost appears to suggest that femininity is her middle name, seems to reflect the societal expectations of a woman poet in the mid-century. Yet Rich decisively challenged these expectations; the publication of her poetry collection *Diving Into the Wreck* (1976) is recognised as a feminist landmark, while her further contributions to feminist debates as a critic and theorist included her seminal *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* which briefly discusses Plath and her mother.⁷ For critics, there is a sense of progression and development in Rich's work, a productive exchange between her critical writing and her own poetry.

In contrast, while the critic approaching Plath is presented with a fairly substantial body of writing, including her poetry, novel, and short stories, there are few of her own insights into the work. A couple of significant essays, 'Context' (1962) and 'A Comparison' (1962), a much quoted interview with Peter Orr for the British Council, *Letters Home*, which documents her correspondence with her mother, and a published journal which prematurely finishes in 1959, do offer limited reflections on her own work. In October 1962, Plath wrote to her mother, '... I am a genius of a writer; I have it in me. I am writing the best poems of my life; they will make my name.' (*LH*, p.468) While this is an acute realisation of her own talent, there is an unfortunate lack of critical perspective in Plath's commentary on her own writing. Subsequently, the initial reviews of *Ariel*, posthumously published in 1965, struggle to progress beyond the drama of her life. Plath's early death seems to lock her writing into a self-perpetuating, enclosed crisis of interpretation. The early critical obsession with Plath's life limits the readings, however incisive and insightful they may be, to problematic biographical interpretations, initially very concerned with debating the morality of Plath's writing. One of the major, if not crucial, developments in recent Plath studies has been the increasing critical distance placed between her personal life and her writing.

Although Plath is primarily considered a poet, there are also many critical studies of *The Bell Jar*, and of her short stories, some of which are collected in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams and other prose writings*.

The Bell Jar had been praised initially, but when it was reissued in Britain in 1966 under Plath's own name, critics largely compared it unfavourably to the poetry; C. B. Cox, for example, described it as 'a first attempt to express mental states which eventually found a more appropriate form in the poetry', although he does commend a 'notable honesty' and 'something of that fierce clarity so terrifying in the great poems of *Ariel*'.⁸ When it was eventually published in the United States in 1971, American critics responded rather more enthusiastically, convinced by the 'American college girl of the fifties' who seemed to embody the tensions and paranoias of that era,⁹ while Tony Tanner's influential *City of Words: American Fiction 1950–1970* (1971) did, however fleetingly, refer to *The Bell Jar*.¹⁰ Many of the critics explored in this Guide also offer complementary readings of *The Bell Jar*, but for an entertaining yet intelligent consideration of the novel's context I would recommend Pat MacPherson's *Reflecting on The Bell Jar*.¹¹ The other significant critical debate surrounding *The Bell Jar* has been concerned with issues of women's writing and autobiography, and Linda Anderson's recent *Women and Autobiography in the 20th Century: Remembered Futures* contains an excellent chapter on Plath.¹² While *The Bell Jar* is established as an epochal American novel, Plath's short stories, mainly written for a magazine audience, disappointed critics on publication in 1977, reviewers finding them largely contrived and formulaic.¹³ However, Margaret Atwood perceptively recognised *Johnny Panic* as:

■ . . . the record of an apprenticeship. It should bury forever the romantic notion of genius blossoming forth like flowers. Few writers of major stature can have worked so hard, for so long, with so little visible result. The breakthrough, when it came, had been laboriously earned many times over.¹⁴ □

In recent years, Jacqueline Rose has argued most forcefully for the relevance of Plath's short stories to an appreciation of the poetry in her valuable consideration of high and low forms of art in Plath's writing.¹⁵

In 1975, the publication of *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950–1963*, containing a generous selection of letters that Plath wrote to her mother, seemed to critics dramatically to contradict the image of Plath found in her poetry, Jo Brans reviewing them as an exercise in 'bright insincerity'.¹⁶ Marjorie Perloff locates an inverted prose version of the poems in the letters, suggesting that Plath carefully constructed a perfect daughter persona, 'Sivvy', in order to satisfy her mother while she revealed her true, antagonistic self through the poetry.¹⁷ Along with the letters, the American publication of *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* in 1982 contributed to readings of Plath's poetry, as this Guide will show. However, the incompleteness of the journals, which end in 1959,¹⁸ and the highly

selective editing of the extracts have led to considerable discussion over authorial ownership and control, which often overshadows the contribution of the journals to an appreciation of the poetry. We will see the way in which critics such as Jacqueline Rose and Sarah Churchwell approach these problems in relation to the poetry, but for a critical analysis of the editing of the journals I would recommend Dee Horne's article 'Biography in Disguise: Sylvia Plath's Journals' where she compares the published journals with the original manuscripts, arguing that much of Plath's 'creativity and sensuality . . . her pain and anger' is edited from the text.¹⁹ Fuller versions of the journals and Plath's letters, along with poetry manuscripts and other personal documents, are housed in two Plath collections: Smith College broadly contains material from Plath's marriage including the *Ariel* manuscripts, and Indiana University holds material from Plath's life in America, including the full manuscript of *Letters Home*.

The Plath Estate's notorious resistance to biographies has not successfully deterred their publication. To date, there are five biographies of Plath, several personal memoirs (the most notable of which is Nancy Hunter Steiner's *A Closer Look at Ariel*), and a recent metabiography, *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* by Janet Malcolm, an investigative study into the genre of biography that takes Plath as its subject.²⁰ Anne Stevenson's finely written *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* (1989) is the only biography to have received assistance from the Plath Estate, and is thus the most detailed, but it has come under severe criticism for being overly unsympathetic towards Plath.²¹

Chapter one of this Guide will consider the reviews of *The Colossus* (1960) and *Ariel* (1965), contrasting the earlier, considered response to *The Colossus*'s crafted, accomplished poems, with the critical shock that greeted *Ariel*. Plath's early death undoubtedly determines the critical response, with the contemporary opinion former, A. Alvarez, stressing the extremist nature of Plath's poetry, while the influential critic M.L. Rosenthal defines Plath as a confessional poet belonging to a school of American poetry; their two interpretations determine readings of her work for several years. Initially in chapter two, we will consider the publication of further collections of poetry in 1971, *Crossing the Water* and *Winter Trees*, which allow for the first full-length studies of the poetry to emerge, tentatively announced by Eileen M. Aird's biographically driven *Sylvia Plath: Her Life and Work* (1973). The 1970s become increasingly dominated by the totalising, mythic interpretations of Judith Kroll and Jon Rosenblatt, alongside the problematic psychoanalytical readings of David Holbrook. The second half of this decade is authoritatively defined by the emergence of a feminist literary criticism which concentrates on constructing an alternative canon of women's writing. Sandra M. Gilbert's essay on Plath, collected in the seminal study of women's

poetry, *Shakespeare's Sisters*, is one of the first critical studies to define Plath primarily as a woman poet, powerfully arguing that she seeks a true female authorial voice through the restrictions of the masculine, lyrical 'I'.

The following two chapters are concerned with the impact of theoretical advances in literary criticism on discussion of Plath's poetry. Chapter three focuses on the emerging historical and political readings of her work, largely informed by Marxist criticism and often preoccupied with the debate surrounding Plath's so-called 'Holocaust' poetry. Critics such as Stan Smith and James E. Young define Plath as a politically aware poet, often reading her work as embodying the consciousness of an era. This chapter develops to consider increasingly cultural, gendered readings, principally Pamela Annas's reflections on the self and society in Plath's prose-play 'Three Women', and Alan Sinfield's consideration of the particular meaning of the Holocaust as metaphor for women writers. The following discussion of essentially feminist critics in chapter four is designed to illustrate the impact of *l'écriture féminine*, in particular the French feminist theorists' interest in 'the body', on Plath criticism, but it is important to stress that this is largely an adaptation of these ideas in order to complement a predominantly materialist, Anglo-American approach to feminism, evident in the negotiations of Alicia Ostriker, Susan Van Dyne and Liz Yorke. Chapter four concludes with extracts from biographical/psychoanalytic readings of Plath's poetry by Stephen Gould Axelrod and Toni Saldivar, before a detailed consideration of Jacqueline Rose's ground-breaking book *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*.

Chapter five gives us an opportunity to anticipate possible new directions in Plath criticism, many of which are a response to Rose. Anna Tripp's use of post-structuralist strategies is an attempt to retrieve the authorial 'I' from restrictive biographical interpretations, while Marilyn Manners offers a further engagement with French feminism in her comparative reading of Plath and Hélène Cixous. We finish with two articles by Tracy Brain, which consider Plath's writing in the light of eco-feminism, further portraying her as a politically engaged writer, and the midatlantic nature of Plath's poetry, raising issues of nationality and alienation.

CHAPTER ONE

1960s: Reviews of *The Colossus* and *Ariel*

■ [...] the first British publisher I sent my new collection of poems to (almost one-third written at Yaddo;¹ 48 poems in all, after countless weedings and reweedings) wrote back within the week accepting them! Amaze of amaze. I was so hardened to rejections that I waited till I had actually signed the contract [...] before writing to you. □

Sylvia Plath to Aurelia Plath, February 11, 1960²

After struggling for over a year to find an American publisher for her first volume of poetry, and after much 'weedings and reweedings', Plath secured the British publisher Heinemann to publish the collection she now called *The Colossus and Other Poems*,³ which appeared in October 1960, in the week of her twenty-eighth birthday.⁴ Her delight in this success is evident from the above letter to her mother where she signs herself 'Your new authoress', a playful signature but one that reveals her dedication and determination to become a professional writer; and her favoured, yet disappointed, choice of the United States for initial publication reveals her desire to be recognised in her own country.⁵ Heinemann did arrange Alfred Knopf as the American publisher, and the American edition appeared in May 1962, reduced to forty poems after much of 'Poem for a Birthday' was cut due to concerns that the series was too derivative of Theodore Roethke. On both sides of the Atlantic, *The Colossus* was favourably, if fairly quietly, received by the critics, and Plath subsequently became a successful, although minor, literary figure. While living in England, *Critical Quarterly* commissioned her to edit an American supplement, she recorded her own poetry for the BBC, and she was regularly asked to contribute reviews, essays and poetry to leading journals. However, it was not until the posthumous publication of *Ariel* in April 1965, followed by the American edition in 1966, that Plath became established, perhaps more accurately notorious, and the intense

debate over her reputation as a poet began. This chapter will consider the initial reviews of both these volumes, selected from the standard source *Sylvia Plath: The Critical Heritage*,⁶ alongside the critical reception of Plath's poetry in the 1960s, contrasting the calm, measured response to *The Colossus* to the critical shock that *Ariel* induced. We will also consider key extracts from Plath's own reflections on her poetry in her letters and essays.

Reviews of *The Colossus and Other Poems*

By the time Plath signed the contract for *The Colossus*, she had been a published writer for many years, confessing in an interview from October 1962: 'I wrote my first poem, my first published poem, when I was eight-and-a-half years old. It came out in *The Boston Traveller* and from then on, I suppose, I've been a bit of a professional.'⁷

After her early prize-winning successes and great promise, *The Colossus* temporarily rescued Plath from fears of stasis in her writing. Although her poetry regularly appeared in journals, and she had a 'first-reading' contract with the *New Yorker*, she desperately wanted her early achievements to be realised in a volume of poetry. The British critics responded well to *The Colossus*, particularly praising Plath's considerable achievements in clarity of form and language, admiring the careful precision and intelligence of her poetry. Bernard Bergonzi's review in the *Manchester Guardian* is typical of this approval, concentrating on Plath's impressive control of language:

■ Miss Sylvia Plath is [...] a young American poetess whose work is most immediately noticeable for the virtuoso qualities of its style. . . . She writes of people or natural objects in a detached yet sympathetic way, with a fastidious vocabulary and a delicate feeling for the placing of the individual word.⁸ □

Critics responded enthusiastically to Plath's technical skill, variously enjoying her 'cleverness', 'complex but beautifully clear syntax'⁹ and 'verbal precision'.¹⁰ Welcomed as a poet of 'exceptional promise',¹¹ a gifted writer with admirable technique, this was generally agreed to be an assured first collection. These reviews of *The Colossus* now seem characteristic of the critical climate of the early 1960s, consistently adopting a slightly paternal tone, offering a measured, scholarly response to clever, intellectually stimulating poetry. John Wain's description of *The Colossus* as 'clever, vivacious poetry, which will be enjoyed most by intelligent people capable of having fun with poetry' is typical of an academic response.¹² A. E. Dyson's illuminating review in the *Critical Quarterly*, which concentrates on the themes of *The Colossus*, briefly compares Plath's poetry to Ted Hughes's, anticipating a line of inquiry that we will see developed in

later chapters. In this short article, Dyson perceptively observes the distinction between their early writing: 'Ted Hughes is heroic and violent in his dominating mood, Sylvia Plath brooding and tentative.'

Also, at this early stage of Plath's career, Dyson almost intuitively enters into a debate that is to dominate Plath studies for many years by drawing attention to the possible latency of 'Mushrooms': 'The associations which the word 'mushroom' have for us since Hiroshima may enhance the effectiveness, which is not, however, dependent upon them.'¹³ Any reservations about the effectiveness of the poetry are focused on a concern that Plath could be too derivative, articulated by Roy Fuller's criticism of her 'controlled and rather ventriloquial voice',¹⁴ a concern later echoed by the American reviewers.

The most perceptive review of *The Colossus*, which most accurately defines the nature of Plath's developing talent, comes from the influential critic A. Alvarez, who was literary editor for the *Observer*. Published under the title 'The Poet and the Poetess', Alvarez's admiration and particularly incisive criticism established Plath on the literary scene in London, and led to a friendship developing between the poet and the critic.¹⁵ Alvarez begins his review by dismissing conventional literary reservations, before enthusing over the effective combination of Plath's technical skill and concentrated intensity, especially in his famous reference to the dark, mysterious world lurking at the edge of her vision.

■ Sylvia Plath's *The Colossus* needs none of the usual throat-clearing qualifications, to wit: 'impressive, considering, of course, it is a first volume by a young (excuse me), American poetess.' Miss Plath neither asks excuses for her work nor offers them. She steers clear of feminine charm, deliciousness, gentility, supersensitivity and the act of being a poetess. She simply writes good poetry. And she does so with a seriousness that demands only that she be judged equally seriously. She makes this plain in the first stanza of her first poem ['The Manor Garden']:

The fountains are dry and the roses are over.
Incense of death. Your day approaches.
The pears fatten like little buddhas.
A blue mist is dragging the lake.

There is an admirable no-nonsense air about this; the language bare but vivid and precise, with a concentration that implies a great deal of disturbance with proportionately little fuss.

I think Miss Plath can allow herself this undemonstrativeness because most of her poems rest secure in a mass of experience that is never quite brought out into daylight: