

Jo Gill



The Cambridge **Introduction** to

Sylvia Plath

# The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath

---

JO GILL



**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521686952](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521686952)

© Jo Gill 2008

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2008

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*

Gill, Jo, 1965–

The Cambridge introduction to Sylvia Plath / Jo Gill.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-521-86726-9 (hardback) – ISBN 978-0-521-68695-2 (paperback)

1. Plath, Sylvia -- Criticism and interpretation. 2. Women and literature -- United States -- History -- 20th century. I. Title.

PS3566.L27Z665 2008

811'.54 -- dc22 2008025534

ISBN 978-0-521-86726-9 hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-68695-2 paperback

---

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

---

## Preface

Sylvia Plath is widely recognised as one of the leading figures in twentieth-century literature and culture. Although in her lifetime she published only one collection of poems, *The Colossus*, and one novel, *The Bell Jar*, the posthumous publication of the magnificent poems of *Ariel*, of her edgy and finely crafted stories and sketches, and of her *Letters Home* and *Journals* have consolidated her position as one of her age's most important and influential writers. As Marjorie Perloff puts it: "This is a body of work quite unprecedented in twentieth-century American poetry."<sup>1</sup>

From its first appearance, Plath's writing has remained constantly in print on both sides of the Atlantic and in numerous other countries in translated editions. The Plath catalogue continues to expand, with recent unabridged editions of the *Journals* and a new 'restored' edition of *Ariel* offering further material for readers to consider. From the outset, her work has been accompanied by a plethora of scholarly responses and interpretations and each new Plath edition stimulates yet more. The first aim of *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath* is to offer new readers an accessible, authoritative and comprehensive guide to Plath's writing. The second is to provide an incisive and insightful overview of key tendencies and developments in Plath criticism. This is an immense and varied field. I have tried in the discussions that follow to offer fair summaries of distinct and valuable perspectives and to present a representative range of critical voices. In my analyses both of the primary work and of the secondary criticism, it has been necessary to be selective. In the case of the latter, the guide to further reading which closes the book offers a list of critical resources that students who wish to continue their studies independently can pursue. In the case of the former, the aim of this *Introduction* has been to cover as wide a range of poems and stories as possible, while reserving sufficient space to address key texts in the detail they deserve. Inevitably, there are poems that this introductory book has not had space to consider or to read as fully as the poems themselves demand. Nevertheless, I hope that the examples, arguments and resources that are included will inform and inspire readers' own further readings and evaluations of a range of additional works.

*The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath* begins with an overview of Plath's life and of the literary and historical contexts in which her work was produced and read (Chapters 1 and 2). The next three chapters assess the early poetry, *Ariel* and later poems, and *The Bell Jar* and other prose in some detail. Chapter 6 examines the background and substance of Plath's *Letters Home* and *Journals*, while the final chapter surveys biographies of Plath and provides an analysis of the critical reception of her work.

Inevitably, an *Introduction* such as this owes a debt to the many excellent scholars who have gone before. Their contributions to Plath studies and to my own understanding of the field are acknowledged throughout the book. Finally, this book is intended as an introduction for students and general readers of Plath and is conceived as a supplement to the primary texts. This *Introduction* aims to open out Plath's writing to nuanced and informed interpretation, not to replace a close reading of her own words.

## *Acknowledgements*

Thanks to Ray Ryan, Maartje Scheltens and Libby Willis of Cambridge University Press and to colleagues in the Department of English at the University of Exeter. I have had the privilege at various times of working with Plath scholars Tracy Brain, Tim Kendall and Robin Peel, and I acknowledge the influence of their work here. Final thanks, again, to Neil, Jacob, Freya and Keziah.

## *Abbreviations and textual note*

Unless otherwise indicated, poems discussed in this volume are from Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (London: Faber and Faber; New York: Harper & Row, 1981). References to this and other primary sources are to the English editions.

- A Rest.* Sylvia Plath, *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, ed. Frieda Hughes (London: Faber and Faber, 2004).
- Bib* Stephen Tabor, *Sylvia Plath: An Analytical Bibliography* (London: Mansell; Westport, CT: Meckler, 1987).
- BJ* Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (London: Heinemann, 1963 (under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas); London: Faber and Faber, 1966; New York: Harper & Row, 1971 (as Sylvia Plath)).
- BL* Ted Hughes, *Birthday Letters* (London: Faber and Faber; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998).
- CP* Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (London: Faber and Faber; New York: Harper & Row, 1981).
- J* Sylvia Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath: 1950–1962*, ed. Karen V. Kukil (London: Faber and Faber, 2000); *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Anchor, 2000).
- J Abr.* Sylvia Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, ed. Ted Hughes and Frances McCullough (New York: Dial, 1982) (abridged edition).
- JP* Sylvia Plath, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* (London: Faber and Faber, 1977; New York: Harper & Row, 1979).
- LH* Sylvia Plath, *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950–1963*, ed. Aurelia Plath (New York: Harper & Row, 1975; London: Faber and Faber, 1976).
- LTH* Ted Hughes, *Letters of Ted Hughes*, ed. Christopher Reid (London: Faber and Faber, 2007; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2008).
- PS* Peter Orr, ed., *The Poet Speaks: Interviews with Contemporary Poets* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966).

- WP*      Ted Hughes, *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*, ed. William Scammell (London: Faber and Faber, 1994).
- WT*      Sylvia Plath, *Winter Trees* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971; New York: Harper & Row, 1972).



# Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
<i>Abbreviations and textual note</i>	xii
<b>1 Life</b>	1
Family	1
Marriage	7
England	10
<b>2 Contexts</b>	14
Literary contexts	15
‘Poetess of America’	17
Confessional poetry	19
Historical and ideological contexts	21
World War II	22
Postwar cultures	24
Domesticity and the suburbs	26
England	28
<b>3 Early poetry</b>	29
Juvenilia and other early poems	30
English influences	33
<i>The Colossus</i>	35
Creativity and self-creation	40
<i>Crossing the Water</i>	43
Transformation and change	44
Displacement	49

<b>4 <i>Ariel</i> and later poetry</b>	51
<i>Ariel</i>	53
Echoes	53
The bee sequence, 'Lady Lazarus' and 'Daddy'	58
<i>Ariel: The Restored Edition</i>	64
<i>Winter Trees</i> and other late poems	66
<i>Three Women</i>	69
 <b>5 <i>The Bell Jar</i> and <i>Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams</i></b>	 73
<i>The Bell Jar</i>	73
Narrative voice	78
The double	79
Subjectivity	83
<i>Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams</i>	84
Value	85
English stories	90
America	91
 <b>6 <i>Letters Home</i> and <i>Journals</i></b>	 93
<i>Letters Home</i>	93
Rendering account	97
Leaving home	100
<i>The Journals of Sylvia Plath</i>	101
<i>The Journals of Sylvia Plath</i> (1982): the abridged edition	101
Masks	104
<i>The Journals of Sylvia Plath</i> (2000): the unabridged edition	105
 <b>7 Reception</b>	 111
Biography	111
Confessional	115
Mythology	117
Feminist readings	119
Psychoanalytical approaches	123

History and politics	125
New directions	128
<i>Notes</i>	129
<i>Further reading</i>	140
<i>Index</i>	146

## Chapter 1

# Life

---

Family 1

Marriage 7

England 10

In the opening line of her engaging essay on Sylvia Plath, critic Sandra M. Gilbert explains, ‘Though I never met Sylvia Plath, I can honestly say that I have known her most of my life.’<sup>1</sup> The familiarity that Gilbert reports is one that many readers of Plath share. The bare facts of her life come to us from multiple sources – from her *Journals* and *Letters Home*, her stories and prose essays, her novel, *The Bell Jar*, and of course from the poems themselves. Beyond this, we pick up clues and information from biographies and memoirs, from critical commentaries and, of late, from other people’s poems (notably Ted Hughes’s 1998 *Birthday Letters*) or fiction (Kate Moses’s 2003 *Wintering*) or film (Christine Jeffs’s 2003 *Sylvia*). From these fragments we construct what we believe to be the biographical truth. We learn something, too, from the broader cultural, historical and ideological circumstances in which Plath lived and wrote; as Stan Smith puts it, ‘For Sylvia Plath . . . identity itself is the primary historical datum: the self is a secretion of history.’<sup>2</sup>

Plath’s life, then, seems overdetermined. It is told to us over and over again (indeed, she tells it to herself over and over again, rehearsing certain moments in multiple genres) in so many overlapping layers that it seems, finally, to form a kind of carapace – a papier-mâché shell which masks a gap. Biographical accounts of Plath’s life have, as Chapters 6 and 7 will show, been bitterly contested. Nevertheless, it is useful to begin by at least sketching the bare bones of Plath’s life and times in order the better to situate her work in its personal, literary and historical contexts. This also helps us to understand the pressures which brought it into being and which have shaped its reception.

## Family

Plath described herself as first-generation American on her father’s side and third-generation on that of her mother (*PS* 169). Her father, Otto Emil Plath,

was born in around 1885 in Grabow, a town on the Polish/German border (or in the Polish Corridor, as it was then known). His parents were German, but one of his grandmothers was said to have been Polish. As a child, he developed a fascination for bees. He excelled at school and when his grandparents, who had emigrated to the USA earlier in the nineteenth century, learnt of his promise, they sent for him to join them. Otto Plath travelled to the USA in 1901 at the age of 16. He worked in New York for a year, earning a living in his uncle's grocery store and sitting in on lessons in a local school in order to learn English (*LH* 8). His grandparents had settled on a farm in Wisconsin and were determined that their grandson should earn a place at the state's Northwestern College. They had aspirations for Otto to train for the Lutheran ministry but he did not share their ambitions. At the Lutheran seminary he became disenchanted with his fellow students and was dismayed to find that the works of Charles Darwin were banned (*LH* 9). He was subsequently cut off from his family. After studying at several universities throughout the USA, he became a university professor and an expert in entomology, specialising in the study of bees. His doctoral thesis, *Bumblebees and their Ways*, was submitted to Harvard University in 1928 and eventually published in 1934.<sup>3</sup>

It was while working as a professor at Boston University that Otto met Aurelia Schober. Aurelia was the daughter of a German-speaking Austrian family who had emigrated to the USA earlier in the nineteenth century. She was his junior by two decades and a graduate student in his Middle High German class. Aurelia's family had expected their daughter to acquire a vocational education and she obeyed by following a business curriculum at the Boston University of Practical Arts and Letters, though she also fitted in additional courses in literature and history and worked simultaneously in secretarial, library and other roles. On graduation Aurelia worked for several years as a teacher and then returned to university to study for an MA. There she met Otto Plath and in January 1932, after a two-year courtship during which Aurelia taught high school English and German, they married. Otto had first to seek a divorce from his previous wife, Lydia, from whom he had separated some thirteen years earlier. Comments made by Aurelia in the memoir with which she opens *Letters Home* (the selection of Plath's letters which she edited for publication in 1976) indicate a mismatch between her expectations of married life and those of her husband. She was a generation younger than him and was accustomed to a degree of independence. His expectations, she intimates, were that she would play a more passive and domestic role (*LH* 5–10).

The Plath's first child, Sylvia, was born at the Robinson Memorial Hospital, Boston, on 27 October 1932. Their second, Warren, was born exactly two and a half years later.<sup>4</sup> At this time the Plaths were living in Jamaica Plains, a suburb

of Boston. In preparation for Warren's birth, Sylvia was sent to her maternal grandparents' home at Point Shirley on the Massachusetts coast. She recalls this experience in the prose memoir 'Ocean 1212-W' (*JP* 117–24). In 1936 the family moved to the coastal suburb of Winthrop, close to the Schober grandparents at Point Shirley (*LH* 13–18). Warren was often ill as a young child, thus Sylvia spent much time at the Point Shirley home. The short story 'Among the Bumblebees' looks back to this period, albeit with a fictionalised subject, Alice, and the rather telling conflation of father and grandfather figure (*JP* 259ff; see also *CP* 110). Shortly after Warren's birth, Otto's health began to decline. Apparently fearing that he had cancer, Otto refused to consult medical experts until a minor accident in the home in August 1940 forced him to seek advice. He was diagnosed with advanced diabetes which required urgent amputation of one leg. However, the operation did not halt the progression of the disease and in November of that year he died (*LH* 22–4). Sylvia was eight. A number of poems (most famously 'Daddy', 'The Colossus' and 'Full Fathom Five') reflect on this time as do entries in Plath's *Journal* – for example, one of 15 June 1951 where Plath ponders the biological, emotional and intellectual legacy of her father's death (*J* 64–5). Subsequent entries, particularly those which record her psychotherapy sessions with Dr Ruth Barnhouse Beuscher in late 1958, analyse the trauma of this period in rather more detail and with acerbic frankness (*J* 429–30). In recalling her relationship with her father, Plath inevitably also assesses her complicated relationship with her mother. Aurelia was, by all accounts, devoted to her children and to giving them every possible opportunity, even if this came at the price of her own exhaustive labours and personal sacrifice. The debt Sylvia owed to her mother and to subsequent mentors was one she felt acutely and referenced on numerous occasions.

In 1942 the family moved to a small 'white frame' house in Wellesley, a suburb west of Boston which promised good schools, lower taxes and the possibility in time to come of a scholarship for Sylvia at the highly regarded Wellesley College. Money was a pressing issue for the family. As Sylvia was later to note, her father did not have a pension – a source of deep bitterness to her mother – and the costs of his illness and funeral had exhausted any spare savings (*LH* 29). The critic Louis Simpson has suggested that their new home was an inauspicious place for a poet to begin to write: 'a white frame house is particularly dispiriting, antiseptic and antipoetic'.<sup>5</sup> However, as we will see later, Plath and others of her peers (Anne Sexton and Maxine Kumin, for instance) were to put this peculiar suburban and domestic locale to good use in their work, creating in Plath's case a compelling, if sometimes dystopian, view of modern life.

Sylvia was a high-achieving A-grade student throughout her school career, first at the Marshall Livingston Grammar School and then at the Gamaliel

Bradford Senior High. Simpson reports that one of her teachers remembered her as ‘the kind of student who turns up wanting to know why she has received an “A minus” instead of an “A.”’<sup>6</sup> In addition to her wide-ranging academic strengths, she was an accomplished artist (at one time she considered art as her future career and her poetry is often influenced by painting and sculpture), a burgeoning poet and novelist and an inveterate diarist (*LH* 30–1). Her earliest childhood publications are poems published in the early 1940s – in the *Boston Herald* of 10 August 1941 and the *Phillipian* (the newspaper of the local Phillips Academy, Andover) in 1945 and 1946. Sylvia also co-edited her high school newspaper, *The Bradford* (*Bib* 102–3). She achieved her first major publication in August 1950 when after countless rejections her first story, ‘And Summer Will Not Come Again’, was published in *Seventeen* magazine. Her persistence in sending out manuscripts in spite of rejections (her mother mentions forty-five from *Seventeen* before its first acceptance) is one of her hallmarks, as is a willingness, perhaps born of this experience, to research her markets carefully and to tailor her submissions appropriately (*LH* 35).<sup>7</sup> The summers of Sylvia’s high school and college years were spent in various temporary jobs including waitressing, babysitting and farm work, and in frantic dating. These were all experiences that Sylvia relished because they provided settings, plots and characters which she could use in her writing – ‘dismembered or otherwise’ as Aurelia recalls her daughter commenting (*LH* 37).

In 1950 Sylvia won a place at the prestigious Smith College, Northampton. This was a fraught time for her; it represented the achievement of her own and her mother’s dreams (in her early letters home from Smith, she repeatedly declares her shock and delight at becoming a ‘Smith girl’ (*LH* 46, 48)), yet it also heralded a prolonged period of anxious self-examination. Fellow student Nancy Hunter Steiner describes the ‘almost savage industriousness – a clenched-teeth determination to succeed’ – that characterised the Smith students.<sup>8</sup> Sylvia may have felt this pressure more than most because her studies were funded by a package of grants and awards which included a contribution from Olive Higgins Prouty, a well-known novelist of the time (she emerges as Philomena Guinea in *The Bell Jar*). She was intensely hardworking and intensely concerned about her ability to make an academic and social success of her Smith years. Her *Journal* entries indicate that she made huge demands of herself, was involved in energy-sapping extracurricular activities, worried about her grades in the Sciences (which threatened her ‘A’ averages) and about her emotional and financial obligations.

In trying to understand Plath’s experience as a young woman at Smith, we need to be alert both to the specific and personal pressures she was under and to the ideologies of the period, in particular how these defined success as a student

and as a young woman. She was ambivalent about her relationships with the succession of boys she dated, probably the most significant of which were Dick Norton, a model for Buddy Willard in *The Bell Jar*, and Gordon Lameyer, a student of English at nearby Amherst College.<sup>9</sup> Her letters and entries in the *Journals* from throughout this period trace the pressure on young women to date but to remain chaste, to study hard and to play hard (*LH* 45, 49, 52; *J* 28). Robin Peel suggests that during her years at Smith, Plath's immediate and 'constant' goal was one of 'self-improvement'. As he says, 'the focus on self-development and achievement itself reflects the dominant American ideology of the period. Plath imbibed this so deeply that "success or death" became the rhetorical options to which this ideology was reduced.'<sup>10</sup> We will return to these broader cultural pressures in the next chapter. For now, though, it is useful to point out the peculiar contradictions of life for bright young women in 1950s America.

This was immediately before the rise of what became known as 'second wave' feminism (and a decade before the publication of Betty Friedan's groundbreaking *The Feminist Mystique* (1963)). Women were faced with contradictory and seemingly irreconcilable demands to be both clever and attractive, confident and submissive; to be high achievers yet to recognise that their greatest achievements would be marriage, children and home. Aurelia notes that during her daughter's high school years, she (Sylvia) was aware of 'the prejudice boys built up among themselves about "brainy" girls' (*LH* 38). Plath returns to and wrestles with these expectations again and again in her *Journals* and in *The Bell Jar*, where the impossibility of the choices available to women such as her heroine Esther Greenwood are exposed to dreadful effect. A friend from Plath's later years in Cambridge recalls that after her secret marriage to Ted Hughes, she exclaimed, ' "Jane, you can't imagine what a relief it is to be free of that dreadful social pressure." '<sup>11</sup>

Throughout her early years at Smith College, Sylvia continued to write and to take on editorial responsibilities, for example, the editorship of the *Smith Review* (*LH* 100). She won a \$500 prize in 1952 in *Mademoiselle* magazine's national college fiction competition (*J* 108, 679) and in the following year was awarded one of twenty prestigious guest editorships for the college issue of the magazine. In June 1953 she travelled to New York and, with the other guest editors, experienced a month-long internship. Laurie Levy's memoir 'Outside the Bell Jar' captures something of the excitement and the intensity of this adventure for the young women involved:

By plane and train, from coastal cities and dusty inland towns, we crossed the Rockies, the Mason-Dixon, and the Mississippi.



Twenty – count 'em, twenty – from urban universities and the towers of academia and many a Babbittville campus thick with the rotting lilacs of that fruitful May . . . we marched twenty abreast from the hotel for women on glamorous Lexington to the office on glamorous Madison. We whispered in awesome places atop pastel carpets thick as cream cheese, our palms and upper lips sodden: each too self-immobilized to involve herself in the others' worlds, yet eager to submerge identity by joining the group.<sup>12</sup>

The experience and its aftermath are fictionalised in *The Bell Jar*. On her return home to Wellesley from this month in New York, Sylvia was met with the news that she had been unsuccessful in her application for a place on a high-level creative writing course, run by the short story writer Frank O'Connor. According to her mother, Sylvia blanched visibly at the news (*LH* 123). This, coupled with emotional and physical exhaustion, and the prospect of a long and fruitless summer at home in the Boston suburbs, seems to have been the final catalyst for a psychological breakdown. The few journal entries for this period (only two for July 1953) record Sylvia's sense of confusion, frustration and horror at what she seems to have recognised as an incipient mental crisis (*J* 185–6). In August she attempted suicide by taking an overdose of pills. Alex Beam glosses the situation thus:

Trapped at home . . . drained of energy, she began to contemplate suicide. After a half-serious attempt to drown herself, Plath hid in a crawl space underneath her family's house and swallowed an overdose of sleeping pills. She very nearly died. ("BEAUTIFUL SMITH GIRL MISSING AT WELLESLEY" and "TOP RANKING STUDENT AT SMITH MISSING FROM WELLESLEY HOME" were two of the front-page headlines in the Boston papers.)<sup>13</sup>

Sylvia was hospitalised at McLean Hospital, on the edge of Boston (subsequently regarded as the 'hospital of choice' for creative artists; Robert Lowell and Sexton were to follow Plath in spending time there). Beam explains that she was under the care of Dr Ruth Beuscher – the Dr Nolan of *The Bell Jar* – who, after conventional therapies such as the prescription of Thorazine failed to make any improvement, proposed ECT (electroconvulsive or 'shock' therapy). This was applied in December 1953 and by the New Year she had shown sufficient improvement to be able to return to college in time to register for the second semester of that academic year. Back at Smith she began reading for her honors thesis, 'The Magic Mirror: A Study of the Double in Two of Dostoevsky's Novels', which she was to submit the following year. Alongside Dostoevsky, Sylvia was reading Erich Fromm, Karl Jung, Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx,