

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The first quarter of the twentieth century produced a number of poets who continued to write in the Romantic and Victorian manner. But ^{there} were other poets who responded to the new trend that was perceptible in the Georgian poetry. The second quarter of the twentieth century yielded rich harvest and poets like W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot, W.H. Auden, Stephen Spender and many others produced the poetry of social conflict and personal conflict. The poems of the forties were the products of melancholy, frustration, bitterness and modernist in articulation.

We find a reaction against the neo-romantic poetry of the forties and emergence of the modernist and neo-symbolist trends in the third quarter of the twentieth century. The movement of the fifties and it sees the poet as a man speaking to men. The poetry of the fifties was experimental. Some poets of the fifties wrote a very different kind of poetry on topics that were neglected in English poetry. The great moderns experimented not just to make it new formally, but to open up to new areas of experience. And these new areas of experience are the painful truths both of the inner life and of the present time.

Sylvia Plath is one of the most talented new poetess as well as novelist. Her poetry speaks for her era as well as for her tormented self. She has been studied by different scholars and critics from different points of view. Her fiction too has been found to be very important. Her poetry requires a special thematic study. Most of her poems revolve round the central theme of death.

Sylvia Plath, more than any other contemporary poet, wrote poetry that imaged forth her own life and psychiac tensions. In order to understand the significance of her fiction, Sylvia Plath's personal life is presented. These details reveal some aspects of her artistic psychology and formative influences on her.

Sylvia Plath is a major women poet associated with the tradition of confessional poetry. Besides being a poet, she was also a fiction writer and story writer. She has written only one novel The Bell Jar (which is an autobiographical novel) and also a collection of short stories. We see that a great deal of critical work has already been done on Sylvia Plath poetry. But comparatively, her fiction has not received the kind of critical attention it deserves.

The present dissertation seeks to provide a modest critical statement on Sylvia Plath's fiction as included in her two works, The Bell Jar (1966) and Johnny Panic and The Bible of Dreams (1977). Since Sylvia Plath's personal life is inextricably bound up with her creative work, the section that follows gives a detailed account of her life and works.

II

Sylvia Plath was born in Boston's Memorial Hospital on October 27th, 1932. Her father, Otto Emil Plath, a German by birth, an autocrat at home, always busy with his scientific work, was a renowned man of science and

teaching Biology at Boston University. Sylvia's mother Aurelia Schober was his second wife. She had been his student, twenty one years junior. Immediately after her marriage Aurelia Schober Plath yielded to her husband's wish and become a full-time home-maker. her father had come to the America at the age of fifteen from the Eastern area of Germany known then as the Polish Corridor and had become Professor of Biology at Boston University, specialising in ornithology and entomology. Two years after Sylvia's birth he published a treatise on Bumble bees and Their Ways. Aurelia Plath, her mother, had been born in Boston of Austrian parents and had met her husband whilst studying for a masters degree in English and German. Of their marriage Aurelia Plath says little but what she does say is significant. She notes that her husband insisted on her giving up her teaching post after marriage to become full-time home-maker and comments also that social life was almost nil for us as a married couple.

After Sylvia's birth, when Otto was working on his Bumblebee Book, the picture that emerges from Aurelia Plath's account, is of a husband and wife moving rapidly in different directions. The age difference between us (twenty one years), Otto's superior education, his long years of living in College rooming for himself, our former teacher-student relationship, all made this sudden change to home and family difficult for him, and led to an attitude of rightful dominance on his part. He had never known the free flow of

communication that characterised my relationship with my family, and talking things out and reasoning together just did not operate. At the end of my first year of marriage, I realized that if I wanted a peaceful home- and I did- I would simply have to become more submissive, although it was not my nature to be so.

After graduation from Boston University, Aurelia Schober decided to earn a Master of Arts degree in English and German. While studying for an M.A. in German, Aurelia Schober met the future husband, a very-fine-looking gentleman, Dr. Otto Emil Plath. He was a Professor of Biology, a gifted linguist and a specialist in bees. Their friendship developed, deepened and they married in January 1932. Sylvia their first daughter, as they hoped, was born on October 27th, 1932. At that time Otto Emil Plath hoped for a son two and half years then. By coincidence Warren was born on April 27th, 1935, only two hours after the schedule. Otto was greeted by his colleagues as “the man who gets what he wants when he wants it.”¹

Most of her childhood was spent in the seashore town of Winthrop, Massachusetts; but often she visited her maternal grand parents at Point Shriley. Otto thoroughly enjoyed observing the development of his daughter, both as a father and as a scientist. When he held her at the age of six months against a rope fastened vertically to a bamboo shade on the povel, he was delighted by the fact that her feet grasped the rope in the same manner as her hands to him

proof of man's evolutionary process as well as the gradual loss of flexibility when man started to wear shoes and used his feet only for walking.

“Although her father occasionally experimented with Sylvia, more often the baby was the responsibility of her mother. Sylvia was rocked and sung to, and Aurelia systematically and energetically recited poems and rhymes to her. Whenever Sylvia was called, cried, she was picked up and held.”²

The Plaths believed that in a natural, healthy existence for their daughter, she was fed well and often she weighted ten pounds at one month and thirty one pounds at two years. She was frequently taken to the ocean which she loved from an early age and she was frequently sunned. Aurelia wrote in Sylvia's baby book crowded with notes and observations - that during the first spring of Sylvia's life she lay in the sun daily and sometimes twice daily, so that by summer, only eight months old, she was deeply tanned. According to Aurelia, the baby walked alone at ten and a half months and said four or five recognizable words even before that time.

Her mind was as active as her body. One of her early games was asking her mother for a many seeds, beans, small objects all alike, from which she made patterns and designs. At that time Sylvia looked much like her mother. She had prominent cheek bones, wide features and a gentle, alert

expression. She also had her father's ruddy complexion, straight forward stare, and tall, slender body structure. As a child she wore her hair in short curls, with a ribbon around the crown of her head tied in a bow to the side. Sylvia's dark eyes sparkled. The energy fairly sparked from her, and she was consistently adventurous. Her mother Aurelia Plath spent hours taking her on walks and telling her stories. Aurelia Plath says about her nature when Sylvia was only one year, at that time the house fronted on a bay of the Atlantic ocean. Sylvia was creeping on the sand, wading, being carried into the blue green waves. One of her first memories was crawling out on the sandy edge of the water, heading into those waves, and being saved from exploring right into the ocean by her mother's firm hold on one foot. She was already the curious, daring, Sylvia, she would be later in her life.

Most of the childhood was spent in the seashore town of Winthrop, Massachusetts, but often she visited her maternal grandparents at Point Shriley. Aurelia gives some information about Sylvia's nature when entertaining diminished during the third year of their marriage when Aurelia was pregnant with their second child. Sylvia was nearly two, an energetic and active child. She was sometimes disruptive at home, but she benefitted from the constant attention of her maternal grand parents. Despite of her closeness the new baby's birth, Sylvia reacted angrily to her brother. She felt rage at his invasion of her territory. As she recalled much later, "A baby- I hated babies. I who for

two and a half years had been the center of a tender universe felt the axis wrench and a polar chill immobilize my bones. I would be a by stander... she may have been, but she was also an outright trouble maker. Whenever her mother fed Warren, Sylvia became her most demanding. Special toys were purchased for her, she read letters arranged into words, sometimes in newspapers. Sylvia read the STOP sign on the corner as "Pots". And at the same time she dug holes under the fence and crawled away to freedom.

Another part of her fantasy as a child was that the sea would always protect her. The Schober house was a haven partly because of its location in the ocean edge. All the family loved the sea. They would spread blankets on the shore and picnic there, their entertainment, the movement and changing colours of the water. That the grand parents telephone number also suggested the sea (it was Ocean 1212-W, which Sylvia used as the title of the late essay) created for her furious of her family-and the sea itself. The child loved movies and her art class at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

Despite her love for the grandparents, her hurt at being sent away from her own home to their house seems clear in letters written during the spring of 1938. Sylvia was five and a half, and she was living at the Schobers because Warren was ill, Aurelia, her mother wrote her daughter letters telling her she was lucky to be able to live with her grandparents. She also wrote instructive letters, sending Sylvia pictures to colours or directions to read and follow.

Sylvia's early childhood alternated between her feeling lovely which she was even at the Schober's house and being the centre of attention. Because she was afraid of being abandoned she learned to develop, the language skills that won her parents attention. She talked early, she spoke in complete sentences, she had a large vocabulary, she made up rhymes and stories, and she read and later, wrote. But she also misbehaved sometimes she ran away, locked herself in rooms, and had temper tantrums. Her father, the dominant parent, much preferred a "good" daughter. He praised Sylvia's intellectual and verbal accomplishments and was more at ease with his daughter as she grew older than when she was a child. When she started school, Sylvia was the most excitable. She was a .. bit frightened to be leaving her mother but thrilled to be a part of other children's lives. Aurelia walked to the Sunshine School, a Private Kindergarten close to home. She was genuinely at ease at school. For years she had watched children walk past her house and she had played school with Warren. Now she was eager to prove how good and how bright she was in the real setting. Sylvia's straight 'A' (grade) record in the Winthrop Schools indicates that she was both motivated and gifted, and suggests that her friendships with other children helped her survive the increasingly confusing circumstances at home. Even at age eight, Sylvia could see that her father was becoming a different person. It is continuous tiredness, his short temper, his almost complete withdrawal from the family's life left her lonely and

abandoned. As Otto grew more and more weary from the long battle with illness, Sylvia was less often welcome in his study. Otto's condition grew worse, but by this time the disease was far advanced and on October 12th, 1940 Otto's leg was amputated at the thigh. Dr. Otto Plath died on November 5th, 1940. He suffered from a chronic cough. In those days, Warren, too, was suffering from pneumonia and Sylvia was under the care of her grandfather. When her father was ill, at that time, Sylvia served her father bringing fruits and cold drinks. Indeed, November 5th was the blackest day in her life on which her dear father left the world forever. In her most celebrated poem 'Daddy' she mourns :

Daddy, I have had to kill you.

You died before I had time...

Sylvia's reaction to his death was, 'I will never speak to God again'.

When Otto Plath died at that time his wife Aurelia Schober Plath wrote in her introduction to Letters Home commented that Sylvia had written on a Piece of Paper, "I PROMISE NEVER TO MARRY AGAIN. Signed.." ³ It was signed by the mother. It was interpreted by mature Sylvia as indifference:

"My mother never had time to mourn my father's death".

Esther Greenwood in The Bell Jar says,

"After that I had never been happy again." ⁴

Esther Greenwood's experiences are the experiences of her author. Esther visited the grave of her father for the first time and commented, "The grave yard and even his death, had always seemed unreal to me." Sylvia Plath faced courageously a terrible blow in her father's tragic death. We find a great impact of this event on her poetry. To Nancy Hunter Steiner she said;

"He was an autocrat. I adored and despised him and I,
Probably wished many times that he were dead. When he
obliged me and died, I imagined that I had killed him."⁵

Losing Otto, then made Sylvia heavily dependent on her mother. Her later fiction showed that shifting alliance, from the father as head of the family to the mother as the source of support and love. Her father's death may have struck like a hurricane, but the efforts of her extended family helped her to rebuild her young, promising life.

We see her development in the adolescence period (1940-1947). After Otto's death Sylvia and Warren had a great deal of attention. They no longer had to share Aurelia's energy with an ailing husband and they gained the care of their grand parents as well. For the Plath Schober family certainly for Sylvia 1942 was the year decision, it was the year that the family moved in land that is in October, 1942, move to Wellesley came at the same time. In fact, she was eight years old when her father died in 1940 and nearly when the family moved away from Winthrop in 1942. She writes in The Bell Jar that she was the

happiest before she was nine. One of the reasons for the move to Wellesley was that Aurelia had been offered a position at Boston University. In course in Medical Secretarial Procedures, which she created, she taught methods of interviewing patients, the nomenclature of disease procedures for handling insurance forms, case histories and office maintenance.

Sylvia's seventh Grade year, 1944-45, saw her receiving all 'A' grades once again, except for a first term 'B' in sewing. At the June twenty Awards Assembly she was given the Wellesley Award, as the outstanding student in seventh grade. In this period her highschool time she made posters and drawings and often sketched in pastels and ink. In this period she also wrote a great deal- diary entries and poetry. Some of her most interesting writing appears in her Letters Home from summer camp.

As regards her illustrious academic career, she was encouraged by her mother. Both used to talk about literature, music and paintings. Sylvia went to Wellesley Highschool where she developed work habits and skills in art and writing. She won Prizes from Scholastic competitions. In her highschool years she played tennis and basketball, was co-editor of the school newspaper and participated in the school play. Again, we see Sylvia's Bradford Highschool period (1947-50) when Sylvia entered Gamaliel Bradford Highschool (Now Wellesley Highschool) in September of 1947 at that time her appearance was like, she was tall, slim, five feet eight inches, weighing 119

pounds, with the long arms and legs inherited from both her parents, she was a competent basketball player. She was a good deal more likely to be writing scripts for variety shows than to be singing and dancing in them. In this highschool she recounted to her mother triumphs in English class, her essay was better than even her classmates. During the tenth grade, the group studied American literature, during eleventh British literature, and during twelfth, World literature; especially Greek Russian and German. She reads Hemingway, Eliot, Frost, Dickinson, Faulkner, Hardy, Joyce, Woolf, Dylan Thomas, much Shakespeare, Plato, Greek drama. Her teacher Crockett thought Sylvia was an extremely well adjusted vibrant, outgoing, and brilliant student, always interested in what she read, always willing to talk about her feelings. She had "joy bounce, and lovely enthusiasm". She read with great maturity but was tolerant of the views of other students, even those not at her level. When she learn excellence at school at that time there is a financial problem and hence Sylvia also came to realize that her only route to a good college education was through scholarships. Her financial situation did not make Sylvia poor, but it did undermine her sense of self during the years at highschool, and later college because she was surrounded with comparatively wealthy friends. Worries about money surfaced often in Sylvia's journals and diaries. She did not need Crockett's encouragement to submit her writing for publication. she was already doing that, hoping, for extra income. Sylvia sent

her work to places that she knew paid well Seventeen, The Christian Science Monitor, The Atlantic, Mademoiselle. Generally, Plath's stories from this period depict a girl or woman protagonist desperate for a lover, yet here a broken romance is the climatic event. Sylvia was exploring women's lives in considerable dimension. At that time Sylvia has the most important event of her senior year was her decision to attend Smith College, she wrote, 'I know my whole life will be different because of my choice'. Her choice was either to live at home and go to Wellesely College or to use a number of scholarships and go to Northhampton. At highschool she learnt her fear of change, worries about money, her father's death, academic pressure. At that time, Sylvia was a fearless highschool student, the remainder of school years would not be carefree. At an early age she began to write poems and to collect prizes with her first publication of each. By the time she was 17, her interest in writing had become disciplined and controlled. Publication, however, did not come easily; she has submitted forty five pieces to the magazine Seventeen before her first short story, "And Summer Will Not Come Again", was published in the August 1950 issue. A poem, "Bitter strawberries", a sardonic comment on war, was accepted and published in the same month by The Christian Science, Monitor. In her highschool yearbook, the Wellesleyan the girl who later described herself as a "rabid teenage pragmatist" was pictured.

In September 1950, Sylvia entered Smith College in Northhampton, Massachusetts, the largest Women's College in the world. She went on scholarship are from the Wellesley Smith Club and are endowed by Olive Higgins Prouty, the novelist, and later a friend and Patron. These were the years in which Sylvia wrote poetry on a precise schedule, circled words in the red leather the sourns which had belonged to the father, maintained a detailed journal, kept a diligent scrap book, and studied with concentration. Highly successful as a student, she was also elected to class and college, offices, she became a member of the editorial board of 'The Smith Review', went for week ends to Men's College and published stories and poems in Seventeen. But at that time she wrote in a letter, for the few little outward successes I may seem to have, these are acres of misgiving and self doubt.

At she became increasingly conscious herself as a woman, the conflict between the life style of a poet, intellectual and that of a wife and mother became a central preoccupation, and she wrote, "It is quite amazing how I have gone around for most of my life on in the rarefied atmosphere under a bell jar". In August 1951 she won Mademoiselle magazine's fiction contest with a short-story, "Sunday at the Mintons", and in the following year, her junior year in college, Sylvia was awarded two Smith Poetry Prizes and won elected Phi Beta Kappa and to Alpha the Smith College honourary society for the arts.

Then in the summer of 1952 she was chosen to be a guest editor in Mademoiselle's College Board contest.

At Smith College she became the "Smith Cinderella" and won all the prizes. She tried to build her own image of the all round person and to fulfil her burning desire to become a poet. Sylvia has pointed out her motive for writing poetry in a poem written between the age of fifteen and seventeen. Sylvia Plath was an artist, her poetry developed slowly and steadily into intensity. Ted Hughes has remarked about her enthusiasm in writing poems: "Her attitude to her verse was artisan-like; if she could not get a table out of the material, she was quite happy to get a chair, or even a toy. Between her junior and senior years, she had a mental break down. In August 24th, 1953 suicide attempt in Wellesley, subsequent hospitalization at Mclean Hospital, Belmont, Massachusetts. At that time she made a sudden attempt of suicide. It was a period of emotional sterility. To her, everything seemed empty and meaningless. Physically and mentally, she was frustrated. She was neither interested in her science course nor in her meaningless existence. She was disgusted with the sordid world. Once she told her mother, Oh, mother, the world is so rotten! I want to die! Let us die together.

On August 24th, 1953, in a depressed mood, Sylvia unlocked her mother's safe took out the bottle of fifty sleeping pills and went down into the cellar leaving a note. "I am going for a long walk." It was a misleading note.

She hid herself in the unused corner of the cellar, then she swallowed all the pills one by one. She lay unconsciously in the dark for more than two days. On the third day she became conscious and banged her head for help. By chance her brother, Warren listened her moaning and she was saved from death.

We really see the representation of suicide is common place in literature, few studies have explicitly dealt with the meaning of suicide in her works of Sylvia Plath. In her The Bell Jar, Esther Greenwood survives her suicide attempt and is able to reconstruct her personality. However, the novel is thinly disguised autobiography, and approximately ten years later, Plath herself had a relapse and committed suicide. In the year before her death she wrote some of her greatest poems, published posthumously as Ariel. While Plath's life and work fit more easily into the paradigm of feminine suicide. Many poems in Ariel portray the female speaker as a rebel against the tyranny of patriarchy.

We see that after her recovery, we see her theatrical come back in a broad way to the art of poem making and her rise from a precious undergraduate to a renowned poet. Before her mental break down and suicide attempt, in January 1955, she submitted English honours thesis, on the "double" in Dostoevsky's Novels at Smith College. In May 1955, she was awarded a Fulbright scholarship to Newnham College, Cambridge and these two Fulbright years made her life exciting and colourful like a rainbow. She

enjoyed active life of reading, talking and living fully. At Cambridge, most of the students thought of her a second Virginia Woolf. Nancy Hunter Steiner has reported the majority opinion at Smith about Sylvia in the following words :
“Except for the penetrating intelligence and the extraordinary poetic talent she could have been an airline stewardess. In May 1955, she wins Academy of American Poets Prize and the Ethel Olin Corbin Poetry Prize, and graduates from Smith College. In October 1955, she begins study on a Fulbright Grant at Newnham College, Cambridge University. At Cambridge Sylvia met the English poet Ted Hughes, the son of a carpenter on February 25, 1956. After graduation in 1954, he was doing some school teaching and was taking various odd jobs including work in a Zoo and had started to write poems. Both (Sylvia and Ted Hughes) had read each others poetry before they met, each admiring the work of the other. The immediate effect was that Sylvia increased her concentration on poetry. They should daily read the common enterprise of writing poetry.

In her letter to her mother on April 17th, 1956, she praised her future husband in the following words :

“I met the strongest man in the world, ex-Cambridge brilliant poet whose work I loved before I met him, a large, healthy Adam, half French, half Irish with a voice like ‘the thunderer of

God' a singer, story teller, lion and world-wanderer, a vagabond who will never stop.'⁶

Sylvia married Ted Hughes on June 16, 1956 as he was the only man whom she could never boss. After marriage, she felt like 'Adam's woman' living with the male counterpart of herself.

Their real honeymoon had at last begun with their plan for simple living, studying and writing. Then flourished their remarkable creative partnership. Sylvia obtained her an M.A. degree while Ted Hughes worked as a teacher in nearby school. The next year they moved to America and Sylvia returned to Smith as an instructor, triumphantly successful in the role of 'triple-threat' woman: wife, writer and teacher says George Stade in his introduction to A closer look at Ariel - Indeed she was a scholar. She has shown her efficiency in study, looking, housekeeping, horseback riding, writing and nourishing children. In 1957 she submitted poetry manuscript, "The Lovers and a Beach Comber", for English Tripos and M.A. degree at Newnham College. In June, 1957 she returned to America with Ted Hughes, at that time she wins Bess Hokin Prize (Poetry magazine).

Afterwards Sylvia took a judicious decision and abandoned teaching for the sake of her vocation, that is, writing poetry.

Then she worked as a part-time Secretary in the record office at Massachusetts General Hospital writing up case histories. Sylvia alongwith

Anne Sexton and George Starbuck; she attended Robert Lowell's lectures on poetry at Boston University. When Ted Hughes received a Guggenheim Foundation Award, they wandered all over the States, spent two months at Yaddo; the writers colony near Saratoga Springs Wrote poems. In September-November, 1959 Sylvia Plath worked on poetry at Yaddo, Saratoga Springs, New York. Meanwhile the Hughes had moved to a small apartment on Beacon Hill, "living as a shoestring for a year in Boston writing to see what we could do. Sylvia had made the difficult decision to give up teaching and to discard an academic plan for which she had been groomed since childhood in exchange for a less certain existence but one which she hoped would give her more time to write. However, as the year progressed, and her book of poems was repeatedly submitted and rejected under ever changing titles.

In December 1959, Ted and Sylvia returned to England and settled first in London, then in Devon where Ted Hughes still lives with an orchard on one side and churchyard on the other. Their first daughter, Frieda Rebecca was born on [?]April, 1960. In October, 1960 'The Colossus' (poems) [?]published by William Heinemann Limited. was Subsequently Sylvia suffered a miscarriage, then an appendectomy, and then became pregnant again. On May 1, 1961, she again applied for a Eugene F. Saxton Fellowship this time in order to finish a novel which she described as one-sixth completed about fifty pages. In July, she wins ^{te}first prize in the Cheltenham Festival Contest. (The Guinness Poetry

Award). At that time both Ted and Sylvia gave [?] decision to purchase house in Devon, England. In November, 1961 she receives Eugene F. Saxton Grant to work on The Bell Jar. When she received this grant at that time she says, "I was very happy to receive your good letter today telling about the Saxton Fellowship. I certainly, do plan to go ahead with the novel and the award comes at a particularly helpful time to free me to do so." //

Then Sylvia Plath gave birth to a son, Nicholas Farrar Hughes on 17th January, 1962. The days were divided among the babies, house work, and writing, but ^{on} as February 10, 1962, Sylvia punctually delivered her first quarterly report on the progress of her novel to the Saxton Trustees : "During the past three months the novel has progressed very satisfactorily, according to my drafted schedule. I have worked through several rough drafts to a final version of chapters five to eight, completing a total of one hundred five pages of the novel in all, and have outlined in detail chapters nine to twelve. Then she gave in detail the plans for The Bell Jar. Although the novel was going well, Sylvia complained to a friend that she felt she was doing little work. On May 1, 1962 in the next quarterly report to the Saxton Trustees, she wrote, the novel is getting on very well, and according to the schedule. I have completed Chapters nine to twelve. In May 14, 1962, "The Colossus and Other Poems" published in the United States by Alfred A. Knopf. In June 1962, Mrs. Plath arrived for a visit in Devon, and returns to the United States in early August.

In July, 1962, she really learnt of her husband's involvement with Assia Gutman. In September, 1962, Sylvia and Ted went to trip to Ireland, returns alone to Devon. Sylvia and Ted separate by the end of the month, (a) early October. In October, 1962, atleast twenty six poems written in the first month of separation from her husband. (In) October 30, 1962 her poems and interview recorded for the British Council in association with the Poetry Room in the Lamont Library of Harward University. In the month of December Sylvia moved with her two children to a flat in London.

It was Sylvia's most creative and critical period. She became the full-time exile. 'A rootless sufferer, she found no settled happiness in marriage or in herself.' Sylvia's jealousy was aroused because of her husband's affair with somebody else. Ted Hughes abandoned her, for another woman and it was followed by painful separation. Now this Sylvia was experiencing death-in-life. Like her father Sylvia had sinusitis in her childhood and in her youth she was under the care of the Psychiatrist because of neurosis and had received electric shock treatment. Her mother was there to serve her as a caretaker. But now the situation was different. Sylvia was a lovely but determined woman facing marital torments, she got it and settled in London along with her two children.

Terribly exhausted, degraded and agonized Sylvia disliked life. Like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, Sylvia Plath saw her age as an age of crisis and of decay in morality. The world observed by Plath was grim, sordid and rotten.

Robert Lowell in his forward to Ariel has commented about her last days, dangerous, more powerful than man, machine like, from hard training, she herself is little like a race horse, galloping relentlessly with risked, out-stretched neck; death hurdle after death hurdle topped.

Sylvia Plath made three suicide attempts in her short lived but throbbing life. To her it was a performance and she did it once in every decade. She believed that drowning was the kindest and easiest way to die, and burning the worst. After her father's death Sylvia had tried drowning at ten. She kept her hands on her breast and dived in water. But she lay unconscious at the shore as the water had spat her up into the sun. As already mentioned, Sylvia made half-hearted attempt of suicide at twenty swallowing fifty sleeping pills. At this juncture, she was contemplating suicide. She had hidden herself behind logs in a corner of the cellar. There was police search and newspaper headlines regarding the missing girl. By a miracle she was discovered and saved. She had blacked out and ran off the road deliberately in a suicidal burst. At this time she wanted to die but was rescued.

Alvarez writes about her:

"I suspect that finding herself alone again now, however, temporarily and voluntarily, all the anguish, she had experienced at her father's death was reactivated: despite herself, she felt abandoned, injured, enraged and bereaved as purely and defencelessly on she had as a child twenty years before."⁷

It was a hard time. There was her husband utter lack of attention. Now her mother was a slumbering, middle-aged woman ill and depressed Sylvia shouldered herself all responsibilities and faced bitter cold, snow storms and blackants. In January 1963 her great autobiographical novel The Bell Jar was published by William Heinemann Limited, under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas. In her last days, she needed help badly. She did not want to die but everything was against her. Finally Sylvia Plath a great poetess and novelist, helplessly, committed (a) suicide by putting her head into the gas oven on the morning of Monday, February 11th, 1963. Really it was a tragic death of Sylvia Plath. Sylvia Plath took her own life. It was already implicit in her poetry. In a well known poems written in her last days, 'Edge' we see her death provisioned, Sylvia Plath herself has confessed in "Lady Lazarus" that dying is an art and she has done it exceptionally well. Sylvia Plath's untimely and dramatic death was a major and an inestimable loss to American poetry, novel and short stories.

III

Having taken a broad survey of the relationship between Sylvia Plath's life and works, we now propose to take in this section, a similar broad survey of all her works in order to bring out their general critical reception. Sylvia Plath's major works are :

1. The Colossus and Other Poems (1960)
2. The Bell Jar (1966)

3. Ariel (1965)
4. Crossing the Water (1971)
5. Winter Trees (1971)
6. Letters Home (1975) *the*
7. Johnny Panic and Bible of Dreams (1977)
8. Sylvia Plath : Collected Poems
9. Journals of Sylvia Plath (1982)

About the fiction, The Bell Jar, Rober Scholes says, It is a fine novel, as bitter and remorseless as her last poems.... The world in which the events of this novel takes place is a world bounded by the cold war on one side and the sexual war on the other. We follow Esther Greenwood's personal life from her summer job in New York with "Ladies Day" magazine, back through her days at New England's largest School for women, and forward through her attempted suicide, her bad treatment at one asylum and her good treatment at another, to her final re-entry into the world like a used tyre: patched, retreated, and approved for the road. This novel is not political or historical in any narrow sense, but in looking at the madness of the world of madness it forces us to consider the great question posed by all truly realistic fiction. What is reality and how can it be confronted?... Esther Greenwood's account of her year in The Bell Jar is as clear and readable as it is with and disturbing.

About this fiction, The Bell Jar, Lerner, Laurence says, The Bell Jar triumphs in its criticism of American society and its language. The author has an almost poetic delicacy of perception. This is a brilliant and moving book.

Ariel (1965), Sylvia Plath's best known book was published in 1965; it is a collection of poems and written in 1962 and 1963, was edited by Ted Hughes. In this book we really see that Sylvia Plath's last poems, written just before her death in 1963 have impressed themselves in many readers with the force of myth.

It was only her determination to face her most inward and terrifying experiences, and to use her intelligence in doing so. So as not to be overwhelmed by them that she managed to write these extraordinary last poems.

Nancy Hunter Steiner's A Closer Look At Ariel: A Memory of Sylvia Plath, clarifies the contrast between Sylvia Plath's public image and poetic personality and finds a vivid portrait of Sylvia Plath in youth and maturity.

Crossing the Water (1971)

In 1971 Ted Hughes published a second posthumous collection of Plath's late poems. In this volume, which precedes Winter Trees Ted Hughes has collected a number of poems written by Sylvia Plath in the traditional period between The Colossus and Ariel.

Crossing the Water is full of perfectly realised works. ^{Its} (It is) most striking impression is of a front rank artist in the process of discovering her

true power. Such is Plath's control that the book possesses a singularity and certainty which should make it as celebrated as The Colossus or Ariel.

Winter Trees (1971) was published in 1971. Nearly all the poems here have the familiar Plath daring, the same feel of bits of frightened, vibrant, indignant consciousness translated instantly into words and images that blend close, experienced horror and icy, sardonic control.

Letters Home (1975) : Letters Home by Sylvia Plath, correspondence 1950-1963, selected and edited with commentary by the poet's mother, Aurelia Schober Plath (1975) was revitalized by firm convictions. Critics maligned Plath's mother for her role as editor presenting the poet as a sugary daughter who never lost her temper, trying to disguise the psychological problems that must have been apparent. In fact, critics seemed to disbelieve the Plath Persona as it appeared in these hundreds of letters written from Smith College and the subsequent locations in England, and were ready to blame their own disbelief on any likely explanation.

Johnny Panic and The Bible of Oceans (1977) : This collection of short stories, prose, essays was published in 1977 in Britain and two years later in the United States. Again edited by Hughes, the material provided the first short fiction available to readers. It was however generally criticised as being apprentice work.

The stories are important because they show Plath's, 'short circulating her own genius', as a poet in her attempt to become a successful writer of fiction. The stories provide biographical information well; however, read for their own sakes, they are often tedious.

The Collected Poems (1981)

The Collected Poems published in 1981, edited and arranged by Ted Hughes. The volume was an immediate critical and commercial success; reviews were almost uniformly positive, and the book surprisingly won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1982. The 274 poems in the volume show why Plath changed the direction of contemporary poetry. They prove repeatedly that a versatile structure, the poet's ability to reflect mood in every nuance of the poem, from image to single line to patterns of sound repetition- is more important than any perspective technique. And they show with even more surprisingly consistency how successful Plath was in shifting those structures, molding tone and pace and language to reflect the poem in its unique form- both tragic and comic called by a wide range of distinguished reviewers 'the most important collected volume of the last twenty years, a triumph of hard work and artifice.'

The Journal of Sylvia Plath

The Journal of Sylvia Plath was published in the spring of 1982. Sylvia Plath began keeping a diary when she was a child. She kept it right up until her

death, and next, to her poems, it is her most important book. About The Journals of Sylvia Plath Marni Jackson says, 'Plath's vulnerability, not only is the writer's love of the world here, but so is the fearful fifties woman driven to be everything to everyone, she managed, but in her own mind she was always falling short. Her private writing is one long ache of self incrimination.'

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