

**A
Case Study
On
A Thematic Study of Sylvia Plath's Work**

**In partial fulfillment of the requirements for Award of Degree of
B.A English (Hons)**



Submitted By:

**Vrinda Maheshwari
A0706110596**

Supervised By:

**Ms. Shivani Sharma
Professor in-Charge**

Amity Institute of English Studies and Research

AMITY UNIVERSITY UTTAR PRADESH

India

DECLARATION

Date: 17th March 2017

I, Vrinda Maheshwari student of B.A English (H) of Amity Institute of English Studies and Research, Amity University Uttar Pradesh, hereby declare that I have completed the Case Study on 'A Thematic Study of Sylvia Plath's Work' in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of B.A English (H)

I declare that it is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for award of any other degree or diploma of any University or Institution.

Vrinda Maheshwari

A0706115096

AMITY UNIVERSITY

-----UTTAR PRADESH-----

Amity Institute of English Studies and Research

Date: 17th March 2017

CERTIFICATE

- This Case Study titled 'A Thematic Study of Sylvia Plath's Works' submitted by Vrinda Maheshwari Enrollment No. A0706115096 of Amity Institute of English Studies and Research, Amity University Uttar Pradesh, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of B.A. English (H), is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or full, for award of any other degree or diploma of any University or Institution.

This Case Study may be placed before the examiner/s for evaluation.

Ms Shivani Sharma

Professor In-Charge

Prof Kanwal Bawa Bhalla

Head of Department

Amity University Campus, Sector – 125, Noida – 201303, Gautam Buddha Nagar, U. P. (India)

Tel.: + 91(0)-120-4392192, 2219, 2641, 4392538, 2428,2427, 439000

E-mail: aiebc@amity.edu Website: www.amity.edu/aiesr

A Thematic Study of Sylvia Plath's Works

The purpose of this paper would be to analyze the life and works of the celebrated, yet highly disturbed author, Sylvia Plath. How her work and writings were already foreshadowing her impending doom and how her poems were laced with symbols and allusions of death. The books that this research paper will tackle will be her acclaimed pseudo-autobiography, *The Bell Jar*, the only book she ever wrote. And, a few selected poems from her collection of poetry, *Ariel* and *The Colossus*.

An author who cut her life short by years, a poet whose words strike a note of strong melancholy in the mind of one who reads. A writer who wrote, not to create an impression, but to vent out her anger, her fear, her sadness. Such was the likes of Sylvia Plath. She committed suicide around the age of 30, leaving behind her two children and a legacy of work that few can mirror, or even come close to. Her poetry and her writings are cases in point of the disturbed and troubled mindset that Plath had, and how all this ultimately led to her taking the final step.

Plath was one of the first writers to write in the genre of 'Confessional Poetry'. Confessional poetry is an expression of the self, the I. It is a highly individualistic form of writing with the emphasis on "I", the ego. This style of writing emerged in the period of the 1950s and the 1960s, when the English world had just entered the epoch of Modernity. The term "confessional" can be related to the Christian custom of confessing to a priest in a church of their sins.

Born on the 27th of October, to an Austrian mother, Auerelia Schober and, a German father, Otto Plath. It was noted that Plath had begun writing at a very young age, having been

published at an age as young as eight. It was in the children's section of the *Boston Herald*. Over the course of the few years, Plath began to frequent as a writer, as a poet, in the newspapers. And, at a young age of eleven, she started keeping a journal which is now provided an insight into her troubled yet brilliant mind.

At an early age, almost eight, Plath had started showing signs of depression. The first breakdown came with the death of her father. He died due to a complication which arose because of his diabetes. Even though Otto Plath was a strict and a rigid father, the death of her father left Plath with a sense of being lost and she felt that her father had abandoned her and this led to serious repercussions in the future. Plath said in one of her works "sealed themselves off like a ship in a bottle—beautiful inaccessible, obsolete, a fine, white flying myth". She had been studying in a Hons, B.A. programme in the Smith College, and although she graduated with maxima cum laude, a serious bout of depression had led her to attempt suicide after which she was given electroconvulsive therapy. To romanticize death is something that this morbid poet excels at. Her attempt to kill herself using her mother's pill, and lying there for three days, unfound, led her to say that she "blissfully succumbed to the whirling blackness that I honestly believed was eternal oblivion."

Soon afterwards her graduation, in a chance meeting at a party in Cambridge, Sylvia Plath met Ted Hughes in 1956 and life was never going to be the same. Plath used the most beautiful of words to describe the love of her life, a fellow poet whom she had admired since a long time. She said that he was "a singer, story-teller, lion and world-wanderer" who had "a voice like the thunder of God". A poet in love could only write something so beautiful and profound. Theirs was a marriage that went smoothly till the year 1961, when Plath came to know that her husband was having an affair with their neighbor, Assia Wevill. This led to the

separation of the couple, and the children's custody was given to the mother. But, the abandonment of her husband brought up repressed feelings of the death of her father and Plath spiraled into an extremely deep depression. But this extreme melancholy led to her writing few of her best works, including the final poems in *Ariel*. She had even released her pseudo-autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* in January 1963, albeit under the name of Victoria Lucas.

The novel related to many real life events of Plath's life and even narrates a similar suicide attempt that Plath herself had tried. It was in the coming month that Plath took the final step, having gassed herself in the early hours of the morning, while her children slept in the next room. Thus, such was the life of the great poet who made a huge mark on the map of the literary arena of English language, giving it a wide number of poems.

One realizes after reading about Plath's life that her attempts to kill herself were not something that just arose out of desperation at the loss of her husband to another woman. The depression had come onto the writer at a very young age, and has shaped her intellectual and emotional capabilities as a poet.

When, as a young girl, she visited the grave of her father, soon after which she wrote the poem "Electra on Azalea Path". Her memoir to her father. Because he had died early on in age, Plath had felt that she had been betrayed by him. She felt a desire for her father she couldn't understand. The poem resonated of the deepest thoughts she had of her father.

"O pardon the one who knocks for pardon at
Your gate, father -- your hound-bitch, daughter, friend.
It was my love that did us both to death." (Plath)

Another poem that Plath wrote for her father is the critically acclaimed “Daddy”. The poem ended with the speaker calling her father a “bastard”, someone who abandoned her when she needed him the most. For her, the speaker, it was a selfish act on his part. The poem strongly reflects her feelings and anger towards a man who was supposed to take care of her, be there for her, and behave like a patriarch. After many years, her husband, a celebrated poet, Ted Hughes, did something similar. He abandoned her, albeit for another woman. Her latent fears, and her “daddy-issues” all came rushing back to her and she soon culminated in her killing herself and ended her manic, depressive life.

“There’s a stake in your fat black heart

And the villagers never liked you.

They are dancing and stamping on you.

They always *knew* it was you.

Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through.” (Plath, “Daddy”)

The Ariel

There were almost twenty-six poems that Plath wrote during the end days of her life, which were compiled into *The Ariel*. “Lady Lazarus” was one of the most heart wrenching, vivid, imaginative yet morbid poem that Plath wrote. It is about death and resurrection. It is a woman talking about how, in every ten years, she kills herself, yet she comes back to life. But, she goes through this process of death and re-birth every ten years. But, Plath makes quite a few direct reference to the life of the Jews in Nazi controlled Germany and many a times, even identifies the speaker with the Jews. The poem is filled with grotesque images and symbols and alludes to the ways the Nazi tortured the Jews, stripping them off their humanity. The poem is a dark, dreary one but is probably one of the best works of Plath.

“Beware

Beware.

Out of the ash

I rise with my red hair

And I eat men like air.” (Plath, “Lady Lazarus”)

“Edge” is a work of poetry that allowed Plath to make an extremely bold statement. She is talking about a woman, a Greek woman who is dead. The poem is one of her more ambiguous poems and hence, to give it one exact meaning couldn’t be possible. Plath is mourning about a woman who has committed suicide and has a “smile” of contentment on her face. Another poem that is filled with the imagery of death, it can be suggestive of Plath’s own experiences with it. And, an interesting fact would be that Plath wrote this piece only a few days before she took the extreme step of taking her own life.

“The woman is perfected.

Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment,

The illusion of a Greek necessity

Flows in the scrolls of her toga,

Her bare

Feet seem to be saying:

We have come so far, it is over:” (“Edge”, Plath)

The Bell Jar

Plath’s acclaimed novel, *The Bell Jar*, has numerous aspects to it: the social, political and cultural outlook of women in the America of 1950s; the feminist aspect. But, a brief reading of the novel lets one realize that the entire novel seems to revolve around the theme of death. The novel begins on a grim note, the execution of the Rosenberg’s and how the protagonist cannot stop thinking about the “gruesome” head. The title of the novel also suggest an airtight tomb.

When the protagonist, Ester, tries to kill herself, she realizes that her body is not partaking in her wishes. Esther remarks that if it were up to her, she could kill herself in no time, but she must outwit the tricks and ruses of her body. When she tries to drown herself, her heart beats, “I am I am I am.” It repeats the same phrase when Esther attends Joan’s funeral.

“I listen to the old brag of my heart. I am. I am. I am.” (Plath, *The Bell Jar*)

This is probably the best line from the book and it depicts how her body was fighting for her to live, while she was mentally determined to kill herself. Plath’s own mental state was extremely fragile, and probably her children were the reason that she hadn’t taken the step for a very long time.

When both the poems and the novel are studied in depth, it is quite clear that death was something that Plath had always been preoccupied it. And, she was never shy from confessing these things to paper. Her reality were her words. It couldn’t then have come as surprise to a lot of people when Plath finally killed herself. Her childhood fear of abandonment, losing her father

to Death, her slow descent into an unstable state of mind, and her husband leaving her all culminated in an awful step. A step that, according to her poems, Plath didn't regret taking. Truly, she was a poet true to herself, and the world.

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“Another poem that Plath wrote for her father is the critically acclaimed “Daddy”. The poem ended with the speaker calling her father a “bastard”, someone who abandoned her when she needed him the most. For her, the speaker, it was a selfish act on his part. The poem strongly reflects her feelings and anger towards a man who was supposed to take care of her, be there for her, and behave like a patriarch”