

### I.

It is the intention of this volume to introduce students to the works of Sylvia Plath, as other volumes have over the years (see bibliography). Yet this edition of *Critical Insights* seeks to present not only introductory ways of interpreting Plath's works, but also new ways of looking at her writing in order to give students a historical look at Plath's work.

Before we look at the essays in this book, let us begin with considerations of womanhood and works by women. The following provocative statement from the essay "Women Poets" by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar remains important: "There is evidently something about lyric poetry by women that invites meditations on female fulfillment or, alternatively, a female insanity" (xx). Hélène Cixous, in her essay "The Laugh of the Medusa," says:

When I say "woman," I'm speaking of woman in her inevitable struggle against conventional man, and of a universal woman subject who must bring women to their senses and to their meaning in history. . . . In women, personal history blends together with the history of all women, as well as national and world history. (291, 298)

As Plath scholar Steven Gould Axelrod has noted, Plath criticism has "largely worked beyond its initial image of Sylvia Plath as a flawed victim or a hopeless confessor. Instead . . . commentary has revealed the originality and insight with which Plath's texts explore a range of psychological, historical, cultural and literary issues."

Our goal in our classrooms, then, is to explore those observations, as do the essays in this book, especially since, as Lisa Narbeshuber says, Plath's poetry is more a "cultural critique, rather than as self-actualization or individual psychological critique" (86).

## II.

The introductory essays of this volume are presented in the Career, Life, and Influence section and Critical Contexts section. Peter K. Steinberg's comprehensive biography of Plath's life, along with his essay on the current critical reception of Sylvia Plath's work, is vitally important for students of Plath to read in both high school and college. Equally important is an understanding of the cultural and historical background surrounding her work. Lynda K. Bundtzen's essay therefore urges us to look at Plath's poetry as more historical critique of social and political problems than autobiography or memoir. She examines the work of both English and American scholars on Plath and concludes:

I am driven back to Plath's contention that her poems are "deflections" about "the issues of every time" and "the conservation of life of all peoples in all places, the jeopardizing of which no abstract doubletalk of 'peace' or 'implacable foes' can excuse" (*Johnny Panic* 64–65).

Tracy Brain's provocative essay "Story, Body, and Voice: Dating and Grouping Sylvia Plath's Poems" shows a creative way to teach Plath to college students. She examines the poet's oeuvre in "three historically related sequences of poems from three intensive writing periods," focusing on "female reproduction," "geographical dislocation," and "the disintegration of a sexual/domestic relationship." She notes that "all three sequences foreground the body."

Diann Blakely anchors her historical study in comparing Plath to other important poets. Blakely states that Emily Dickinson, Plath's "New England foremother," "felt no less keenly than Plath the 'hooks' of the physical body." Yet, of Dickinson, Plath, and the contemporary women poets she discusses, Blakely notes, "Whether one group of men against the other, patriarchal culture against women, or women against their own bodies, what each poet here wants is the 'freedom,' not to commit suicide or starve, but to wield power over her destiny."

The first among the volume's Critical Readings, Jessica McCort's challenging essay "Red-Blooded American Girl: Gender, American Culture, and Sylvia Plath" tackles some issues raised by Plath archivist Kathleen Connors, which have not received enough attention in our high schools or colleges. She asks in her essay: What does it mean to become a "girl" in America? How does Plath deal, in her poems, with the imaginative life of womanhood? In answer, McCort argues, "Throughout her career, Plath constantly returned to the American girl's body and imagination as fabrics riddled with the national institutions of capitalism, materialism, compulsory education, democracy, and gender politics." She notes Plath's remarks in her journal, describing "the girl she wanted to create in the novel she was trying to write at the time . . . 'Make her enigmatic: who is that blonde girl: she is a bitch: she is the white goddess. Make her a statement of the generation. Which is you' (*Unabridged Journals* 289)."

Helen Decker's essay vividly describes how she teaches Plath to high school and college students and how her students react to Plath, and gives examples of innovative lesson plans. Decker's goal is for her students to understand the power of poetry being read. Decker says, "Year after year, my students remain struck by Plath's words." (Additional student reactions to Plath and memoirs about the poet's influence upon their lives can be found in the volume 5 supplement of *Plath Profiles*, Fall 2012.)

In "Sylvia Plath: An American Poet," Teresa Marie Laye introduces Plath's earlier poems in order to explore the development of Plath's talent, which eventually led to her most important collection, *Ariel*. She illuminates the symbolism that pervades Plath's work by examining three key works produced during Plath's time at the Yaddo writers' colony in upstate New York.

Melissa Adamo argues that *The Bell Jar* is a "depression memoir." She discusses the differences between "novels" and "memoirs" and the misconceptions about female depression. She states that "clearly,

many critics from Plath's time as well as our own contemporary time shy away from depression when analyzing and discussing *The Bell Jar*."

Much like Blakely does with the works of Plath, Dickinson, and contemporary women poets, Renee' Burch compares Plath with the American poet Sharon Olds—both of whom she calls "bold poets," especially when they use "father" as subjects or metaphors in their poetry. She, like fellow Plath scholar Linda Wagner-Martin, concludes that had Plath lived longer, she would have become a feminist.

Gail Crowther's fascinating geographical study of Plath's poetry also illustrates the importance of "background" understanding. She explores what she calls the "sociological haunting" in Plath's poems, the way "the past" haunted her imagination and how she used it.

Kathleen Connors, resident expert on the Plath archives at the Lilly Library of Indiana University (the most extensive collection of Plath papers from girlhood to her life in England), advises students who seek to explore Plath materials there. She states in "Odd Notes of a Plath Archivist": "If one has not seen them, it is hard to comprehend . . . how many directions Plath pursued at once in testing her talents. When she thought of a valuable idea or experience, she sometimes developed it in numerous genres and media." Connors also reminds scholars and students that Plath wrote "of her aim to become that 'blonde bitch.'" She notes that Plath not only spoke to her own generation but "continues to speak to new generations, particularly women and teenagers who struggle with depression and self-doubt, with perfecting their art, with sexism in educational and work environments, with unfaithful partners or domineering parents, or with balancing motherhood and career."

The essay here by Ralph Didlake, a medical doctor, answers some of the concerns raised by Melissa Adamo. In "Terms of Art: Medical Lexicon and the Human Body in Health and Disease," Didlake states, "Over the course of her poetry, Plath moves from describing the physical space of the medical world and the people who inhabit it . . . to

representing the actual physical site occupied by health and illness, the body and its component parts.” The “distressed lucidity” of her poems helps us understand the nature of human depression. Plath uses her images, Didlake argues, “to disrupt our comfortable sense of an intact boundary between the sound self and the world without.”

Lastly is Cheryl A. Hemmerle’s essay “Touching the Sacred and Profane in Sylvia’s Last Poems,” which launches a new and important approach to reading Sylvia Plath. She proposes that while the biographical literary approach—supported by “myriad lenses and theories, not the least of which are psychoanalytical, feminist, historical, and cultural” and leading to the “confessional” categorization—has been the predominant analytical mode in Plath criticism for over a half century, “It is more intriguing to approach Plath’s last poems outside these usual avenues, to consider them hermeneutically with the aid of deconstructionism and reader-response criticism.”

Together, the essays published here by Salem Press offer several new directions of interpretation for high school and college students and teachers interested in exploring Sylvia Plath’s works.

## Editor’s Note

Throughout this volume, quotations of Plath’s works, where not referenced by line number, can be found by locating titled poems by page number in the collections listed in the Works Cited of each essay. *Arriel: The Restored Edition* (2004), with a foreword by Frieda Hughes, Plath’s daughter, is currently the definitive edition of that work.

## Works Cited

- Axelrod, Steven Gould. Message to author. Apr. 2012. E-mail.
- Cixous, Hélène. “The Laugh of the Medusa.” *Literature in the Modern World*. Ed. Dennis Walden. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004. 291–300. Print.
- Bundtzen, Lynda K. “Plath and Psychoanalysis: Uncertain Truths.” Gill 36–51.
- Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. “Women Poets.” *Shakespeare’s Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1979. xvi–xxii. Print.

Gill, Jo, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006. Print.

Narbeshuber, Lisa. *Confessing Cultures: Politics and the Self in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath*. Victoria, BC: ELS Editions, 2009. Print.

Wagner-Martin, Linda. "Plath and Contemporary American Poetry." Gill 52–62.

## **“A Red-Blooded American Girl”: Gender, American Culture, and Sylvia Plath**

---

Jessica McCort

Girls repeatedly surface in Sylvia Plath’s work. They emerge as little goody-two-shoes, deviant doll-haters, silenced and scolded daughters, and angry and alienated adolescents in a sea of mean girls. There are the little “unstrung puppet[s]” in “Among the Bumblebees” and “Lesbos” (*Johnny Panic* 320; *Collected Poems* 227); the violent four-year-old who terrorizes her doll and her little sister in “Sweetie Pie and the Gutter Men”; the high school girls being conditioned to an “Okay Image” in “America! America!”; the “Subdebs” against whom Plath’s teenaged protagonists must compete sexually in “Initiation” and *The Bell Jar*; and the flashy, fashionable, and wicked Doreen of *The Bell Jar* and her companion, the socially and mentally ill Esther Greenwood. These girls reemerge in the child-woman personae Plath also developed: the naive and eccentric Dody Ventura from “Stone Boy with Dolphin”; the narrators in the poems “The Disquieting Muses” and “Daddy,” as well as the short stories “The Wishing Box” and “The Fifty-Ninth Bear”; the lost girls in “The Babysitters”; and the doll-woman “sweetie” who comes out of the closet in “The Applicant.” To borrow a phrase that Plath, then a college freshman, used in 1950 to describe the “nightmare” of Smith College, there are “Girls, girls everywhere” (*Unabridged Journals* 26) in Plath’s work—symbols of malleable and fixed identities, competition and rivalry, money and materialism, fashion and image, and flesh and sex.

As a character, the girl persistently materializes as a problem, riddle, or puzzle in Plath’s work. Throughout her career, Plath constantly returned to the American girl’s body and imagination as fabrics riddled with the national institutions of capitalism, materialism, compulsory education, democracy, and gender politics, the high visibility of the girl in Plath’s work mirroring the high visibility of girls in twentieth-century American culture. As Catherine Driscoll explains in *Girls*:

*Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory*, the girl was increasingly placed at the center of American public discourse during the mid-twentieth century, functioning as “an index of broad cultural changes and continuities” (2–3). As Plath remarked in her journal in July 1957, describing the girl she wanted to create in the novel she was trying to write at the time, she viewed herself as just such an index: “Make her enigmatic: who is that blond girl: she is a bitch: she is the white goddess. Make her a statement of the generation. Which is you” (*Unabridged Journals* 289).

Plath sought to create an “I” in her poetry and prose who experienced many of the problems faced by the young women of her generation during their coming-of-age, women who were born in the 1930s and entered womanhood in the 1950s, a span of American history that witnessed the Depression, the Second World War, the rise of the American middle class, and the reinstatement of the “angel in the house,” albeit in a new dress and heels. Importantly, Plath’s girls not only reflect the various surfaces of the society in which they move; they are also resistant to the girl’s role as mirror.<sup>1</sup> Capturing this dualism in the girl, one of both surface and substance, proved vital to Plath as she sought to transform her life into art, particularly throughout the mid-to-late 1950s. During this period, she emerged from girlhood, married, and concentrated, especially in her prose, on her experience of growing up an American girl and trying to assert a meaningful identity. “Unriddle the riddle,” she encouraged herself in February of 1958. “Why is every doll’s shoelace a revelation? Every wishing-box dream an annunciation? Because these are the sunk relics of my lost selves that I must weave, word-wise, into future fabrics” (*Unabridged Journals* 337).

Placing herself at the center of her critical lens, Plath often positions her girls ensconced in a layer of narratives designed by American culture to produce proper girls and women.<sup>2</sup> Through this, Plath seeks to critique the forces that put pressure on the girl’s mind and body, demonstrating just how crucial the American girl was to the structure of her culture—not just to the institutions of marriage and

the family, but to the success of American capitalism and the country's vision of its national character. Moreover, Plath examines girls in her work as agents of political struggle and potential change, emphasizing their negotiations of these immobilizing narratives during a period that strongly reinforced gender roles. For Plath, girlhood tends to represent both a liberated, free space that stands for imagination and creativity and a stage of life when girls are trained to adapt to the roles prescribed for them. As a result, the girls in Plath's work emerge as two-faced riddlers, subjects who stand at one moment for anxious complicity to the norm and at others for iron-resolved rebelliousness bent on disrupting the status quo.

Plath's sense of being constrained by social narrative parallels what Gina Hausknecht has recognized as a central motif in literature that seeks to tell girls' stories. In her essay "Self-Possession, Dolls, Beatlemania, Loss: Telling the Girl's Own Story," Hausknecht pits against one another two types of narrative, "the Girls' story" and "the Girl's own story." "The Girls' story" represents cultural narratives of girlhood that promote feminine norms. "The Girl's own story," on the other hand, stands for individual girls' rejection of those narratives by writing their own stories. According to Hausknecht, the Girl's own story reveals the Girls' story to be "a bewildering script that a Girl cannot enact without the surrender of her own self-image and self-imaginings" (22).

Plath captured just this sense of self-surrender in August of 1952, when she was nineteen and about to return to Smith for her fateful (and almost fatal) junior year. In her journal, she expressed frustration that, in the act of projecting herself as a "dream-vision" for her date, she had allowed her identity to be usurped by an unwieldy "nonexistent" image constructed to match the boy's expectations: "[I am] close to tears because of giving him the ideal, the girl idea which he can always have with him. She is nonexistent, this girl he considers beautiful, soft, loving, intelligent perfection. She is a dream-vision I perhaps conjured up unwittingly . . . For him, perfection with the name Sylvia exists. And so she is" (*Unabridged Journals* 135). In this entry, Plath

describes a spectral Sylvia as the “girl idea,” an external shell of the self that has replicated her society’s vision of the “perfect” girl. Like the Iron Maiden that Naomi Wolf uses to describe “the beauty myth”—“a body-shaped casket painted with the limbs and features of a lovely, smiling young woman”—this new Sylvia, powerful in her own right, encapsulates and obliterates the old (17). As Plath later wrote in her journal in January 1958, describing her ideas for a story titled “The Fringe-Dweller,” the girl, after copying the images that she “devours . . . from windows (stories, movies, overheard talk & sights in the street, pictures in newspapers, etc.),” eventually comes to realize, as she “awakes to voices, nail-taps outside her coffin,” that “she [is] her own tomb” (*Unabridged Journals* 320).

The Girl’s own story in Plath’s work takes up a particular set of motifs: girlhood as symbolic of innocence and hopefulness, the marriage plot, the girl’s body as battleground and cage, her reliance on material goods in order to create herself, coming-of-age as both a loss and an accretion of identity, self-hatred, competition, and entrapment. Plath’s layering of these motifs demonstrates the dangerously paralyzing nature of the narrative and social structures of girlhood in American society during the mid-twentieth century, but it also considers girls’ empowering negotiations of those structures and the very appeal that narratives of girlhood could hold for the adult female imagination. At the heart of all of this are the girl’s voice and her silence. Above all, Plath tries to consider in her Girl’s stories, in relation to all of the Girls’ stories told to the American girl between the 1930s and the 1960s, that the dominant narratives never “consider[ed] how a girl felt” (*Bell Jar* 81). The Girl’s own story was always left out.

From the earliest stages of her career, Plath’s writing about girlhood often takes as its starting point one of the most dominant images of the girl in American culture during the mid-twentieth century: the female child as a symbol of innocence and future promise. The ideal little American girl during this period was perhaps best personified by the iconographic child star Shirley Temple, whose phenomenal rise to

fame indicates the increasing public fixation on the female American child during the 1930s and beyond. Born in 1928 (just a few years before Plath), Temple became the lead actress in over forty films during the 1930s; these films capitalized on Temple's persona to suggest that America could, as before, pull itself up by its bootstraps (Olson 22–23). In such films as *Bright Eyes* (1934) and *Poor Little Rich Girl* (1936), Temple epitomizes the precocious innocence, hope, and optimism that were imagined as the terrain of American childhood, characteristics that resonated with the nation's public during the economic devastation of the Depression. Often eroticized, her hair done up in perfect pin curls, her body dolled up in either a pinafore or some outrageous adult getup (in each case her face polished by cosmetics), Shirley Temple represented “the positive apotheosis of childhood: precociously talented but un-self-consciously childish, appropriately assertive and appropriately deferential, self-assured but not conceited, and, of course, healthy and pretty” (Olson 22).<sup>3</sup> Temple's saccharine image became the ideal for the female child in the American public imaginary, the epitome of what little American girls were supposed to be.

The 1950 poem “Bitter Strawberries” reflects Plath's early engagement with this version of the female child. In this poem, Plath positions a “little girl / With blond braids” (*Collected Poems* 299) working in a strawberry field against the terrifying possibility of Cold War annihilation, eerily foretelling the infamously disturbing “Daisy” television advertisement that ran in favor of Lyndon B. Johnson during his 1964 campaign against Barry Goldwater, which obliterated the image of a little girl in a quiet field counting the petals of a daisy with the mushroom cloud of nuclear holocaust (“Daisy”). “Bitter Strawberries” pits Cold War hysteria, symbolized by an older woman who talks about bombing the Russians “off the map,” against that of childish laughter and play. In the poem, however, the blond-haired, blue-eyed little girl mainly symbolizes the nation's fear, not its promise. Her “blue eyes [swim] with vague terror,” and she tries unsuccessfully to silence the older woman, who suppresses her protests (*Collected Poems* 300,

299). As the poem draws to its close, the Girls' story of promise and innocence is blatantly uprooted, the girl plucked from her relative safety. Plath links the female child to the strawberries that are being picked in the fields, the workers'

quick practiced hands,  
Cupping the berry protectively before  
Snapping the stem  
Between thumb and forefinger. (300)

The imagery here doubly suggests the young girl's induction to adult sexuality and her "deflowering." In "Bitter Strawberries," the female child—by comparison with the strawberries that, if bitter, have been plucked before their time—has had her world violently upended by the threats of war and encroaching femininity rustling in the fields. The protective bubble of her childhood is popped by both global and gender tensions.

As Plath deftly demonstrates in "America! America!," a brief essay published in April 1963, after the end of her career, the "tailor[ing]" of herself and her "compatriots" to an acceptable image was also an important part of American children's initiation into culture (*Johnny Panic* 53). In this essay, Plath argues that pledging allegiance to "the great green queen" was especially humiliating for young girls in wartime and postwar America (52). She recounts the induction of herself and her fellow schoolgirls into the "two sororities" of American adolescence, "Subdeb and Sugar 'n' Spice," suggesting that this induction rooted women's public identities in their appearance and their adherence to social mores (55). In order to achieve a "smug admittance to the cherished Norm," the girls had to endure "Initiation Week," during which they became the servants of their Big Sisters and learned what it would take to become "sugar 'n' spice, and everything nice" (56). Throughout Initiation Week, the Big Sisters sought "systematically to destroy [their little sisters'] ego[s]" by making their "strangeness evaporate," to use

## Chronology of Sylvia Plath's Life

---

- 1932** On October 27, Sylvia Plath is born in Boston's South End to Otto and Aurelia Plath. The Plath family lives in the Jamaica Plain neighborhood of Boston at 24 Prince Street.
- 
- 1934** Otto Plath's landmark book *Bumblebees and Their Ways* is published by the Macmillan Company, New York.
- 
- 1935** Plath's brother, Warren Joseph Plath, is born in Jamaica Plain.
- 
- 1936** The Plaths move to 92 Johnson Avenue in Winthrop, Massachusetts.
- 
- 1937** Plath enrolls in Winthrop's Sunshine School.
- 
- 1938** Plath enters the Annie F. Warren Grammar School in Winthrop. The greater Boston area is struck by a fierce hurricane.
- 
- 1939** While her father's health declines, Plath spends time living with her maternal grandparents at 892 Shirley Street, Winthrop, in a neighborhood called Point Shirley.
- 
- 1940** In August, Otto Plath stubs his toe and develops gangrene. In September, Plath enters Winthrop's E. B. Newton School. In October, Otto Plath is admitted to the New England Deaconess Hospital in Boston and has his gangrenous left leg amputated. On November 5, Otto Plath dies from an embolism in his lung. The funeral for Otto Plath takes place at the First Methodist Church, Winthrop Center, and he is buried in the lower town cemetery on Azalea Path. The Plath children do not attend the service.
- 
- 1941** On August 11, Plath's "Poem" appears in the *Boston Herald*, her first publication.
- 
- 1942** Aurelia Plath and her parents sell their Winthrop homes and move to 26 Elmwood Road, Wellesley. Plath enters the Marshall Perrin Grammar School.
- 
- 1943–44** During the summer, Plath attends Camp Weetamoe in Center Ossipee, New Hampshire.
-

# Works by Sylvia Plath

---

## Poetry

- The Colossus and Other Poems*, 1960  
*Ariel*, 1965 (revised as *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, 2004)  
*Uncollected Poems*, 1965  
*Three Women: A Monologue for Three Voices*, 1968  
*Wreath for a Bridal*, 1970  
*Child*, 1971  
*Crossing the Water*, 1971  
*Crystal Gazer and Other Poems*, 1971  
*Fiesta Melons*, 1971  
*Lyonnesse*, 1971  
*Million Dollar Month*, 1971  
*Winter Trees*, 1971  
*Pursuit*, 1973  
*Trois Poemes Inedits*, 1975  
*Two Poems*, 1980  
*Two Uncollected Poems*, 1980  
*The Collected Poems*, edited by Ted Hughes, 1981  
*Dialogue over a Ouija Board: A Verse Dialogue*, 1981  
*Selected Poems*, edited by Ted Hughes, 1985  
*Plath: Poems*, selected by Diane Wood Middlebrook, 1998  
*The Spoken Word: Sylvia Plath*, 2010  
*Sylvia Plath: Poems Chosen by Carol Ann Duffy*, 2012
- 

## Fiction

- The Bell Jar*, 1963  
*A Day in June: An Uncollected Short Story*, 1981  
*The Green Rock*, 1982
- 

## Nonfiction

- Letters Home*, edited by Aurelia Schober Plath, 1975  
*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, 1977–79  
*The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, edited by Ted Hughes and Francis McCullough, 1982  
*Above the Oxbow: Selected Writings*, 1985  
*The Magic Mirror: A Study of the Double in Two of Dostoevsky's Novels*, 1989  
*The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath, 1950–1962*, edited by Karen V. Kukil, 2000