

SYLVIA PLATH: A Frosted Profile

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Very few things in literary history have created an impact that has been associated with the suicide of Sylvia Plath. The sad circumstances that have preceded and followed her death have made it even more sinister and intriguing and their shadows have cast a huge veil of uncertainty and darkness which have within no time created a literary and cultural polarization. It also side-lined the modern poetry movement which was just picking up its lost reins after the second world war. Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes should have played a major role in such a revival. On the other hand, a whole generation of literary critics, writers, biographers, and social enthusiasts have focussed more than due attention to biographical details that do not contribute much to literary biography. They were engaged in a battle to establish or bring to light the gross injustice that has been perpetrated against an innocent girl trapped in a wedlock.

The literary world was divided over this issue --- and it was doubtful what they aimed at achieving. The avoidable disaster has already taken place. Whoever is wrong or right --- things have reached a point of no turn. For those of the fans who supported either of them – the battle gave some semblance of hope of finding out the truth behind the beautiful poet's mysterious suicide and also perhaps a satisfactory answer to the bitter questions where each has alleged the other of filial inconsistency and some degree of betrayal of trust. But unfortunately, there are quite a few who liked the poetry of both Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath and for them it has been a two-fold tragedy. The lovers of English poetry and literature and the academic world of both nations have suffered a huge loss ---as there is a literary imbroglio caused by the vituperative publication of material which was based as much on fact as on conjecture and doubt. Though one may appreciate the emotional participation of audience or readers in such a public demonstration of passionate involvement—the time span it has occupied, which happens to be 36 years, is too long and should be construed as wilful diversion of public interest and equally a disservice to public enlightenment.

In the process these critics have conveniently forgotten her repeated attempts at suicide --- and one of these belonged to a time before Ted Hughes came into her life. The American fraternity of critics which would not indulge in such overt character assassination, did it on a large scale and with spiteful vengeance that it took nearly four decades to clear all the allegations. Meanwhile, the same sectarian critics were trying to build a reputation for Sylvia Plath which she richly deserved—the wonderful all time great poet she would have been had she not been subjected to the whims and vagaries of fate and the indifferent treatment of a male chauvinist husband.

Despite passage of reasonable time --- nearly 3 decades --- there is no entirely positive and satisfactory reconsideration of the factors and assumptions that grossly misrepresented the whole issue. It has hurt Ted Hughes immensely and perhaps irreparably but at the same time it has not contributed anything to the reputation of Sylvia Plath the poet or person.

Kate Moses in *The Real Sylvia Plath (I)* says : “ What’s most noticeable about the veritable industry of books and articles about Plath is that none of them succeeded in creating an integrated portrait of their subject.”

The different profiles that emerge from the above study are:

1. A fragile, brilliant immigrant’s daughter scarred by overreaching ambition and her father’s early death.
2. A righteous proto-feminist shrugging off husband, children and the crippling ruins of culturally prescribed domesticity.
3. An unreasonable perfectionist whose outrageous demands alienated everyone who crossed her path
4. A devoted wife and mother shattered by her idolized husband’s betrayal

Sylvia Plath would have survived if she could sort out the anomalies among the four profiles listed by Kate Moses. Let us look at the expression ‘overreaching ambition’. She was a brilliant student and she got more than she deserved ---her position at college was secure and she got attention that any good student ought to get. Her father’s early death --- this happens to a few people, but as she grows up one may shrug off such misfortunes. Neither she nor her father has a hand in that misfortune.

A righteous proto-feminist shrugging off husband and children and the crippling reins of domesticity. This is the real flaw in her mental makeup. This is Sylvia’s identity before she met Ted Hughes. Her reaction to men does not support her hatred of men or marriage. Her reaction to Dylan Thomas and her attempt to kill herself , her hatred of her mother and father-- they all point to an abnormality rather than any particular feeling like hatred which indicates a strong mind and an instinct to dominate.

The other profile is more popular and realistic--- an unreasonable perfectionist with outrageous demands that made supporting her or helping her untenable—as she fluctuated from one extreme to another with a highly unpredictable impulse. She lacked the patience and endurance to allow things to settle or take new and acceptable contours. For all her high-profile, self-glorification or self-indulgence----- and her being known as a woman of many masks, Sylvia Plath fails to exhibit a few iconic qualities shown by some woman writers as well as some others who aspired for a high profile as writers.

It is not clear from when Sylvia Plath is taken seriously as a poet and artist. However, it is assumed that she attained name and fame from the years of her apprenticeship. At least, we can assume that she was a lot more fortunate than the Bronte sisters ---- Anne and Emily Bronte. The male -oriented society still gave her a better and more secure space to evolve. A comparison between these writers and the struggle it took to establish themselves will reveal a few significant truths regarding artistic temperament and achievement.

There is nothing abnormal if she aspires to be a great writer --- but it is essential to note how she went about in achieving her ambitions. Her period of internship should be very clear and any achievement from that period should be treated as a bonus. Anne Bronte, another writer who died very young at 29, had very little time to resolve this. There were hardly two years between the publication of her first novel *Agnes Grey*(1847) and her last novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1849) and she died in the same year. But within that short span of time, she had to absorb the disappointment of the failure of her first book and improve some areas of her

craft and produce a second book. It was amazing the improvements she brought to her art and the way she rebutted the critics showed remarkable spirit, maturity and great skills of self-management. In comparison, Sylvia Plath had five times more time, and her early poems were better received and she had much superior mentors than an elder sister who did not think much of Anne Bronte. Plath had about ten years separating her first publication and her best work. How did she transform as an artist in these ten years?

The next question about Plath's credibility as an artist and person is how seriously she took the advice of her mentors. Early reactions to her work were very encouraging and with time on her side and association with persons like Dylan Thomas, Ted Hughes, Anne Sexton and Robert Lowell--- she had one of the best opportunities to learn and perfect her art. Did she possess the inclination, perseverance, maturity, patience and temperament to make the most of this rare opportunity? Did she concentrate on the one vocation which mattered or ought to matter the most? Was she as single-minded as Keats or Maupassant?

A great example of mentorship is that of the famous French writer Guy de Maupassant who worked under the mentorship of Flaubert (2) and Turgenev.(3) For about ten years the young short story writer was producing drafts that were rejected by his mentor. They were published as 'chroniques' numbering about a thousand. It was Flaubert's iron will and Maupassant's untiring resourcefulness that finally produced 350 unforgettable short stories, 7 novels and 1000 chroniques, the last being published as news paper articles. All this was done in about 8 years and should be considered a very productive career. Sylvia Plath with a similar glitter and gloss failed to produce results commensurate with her promise and early prowess. Certainly, she did not take her career with due diligence--- probably she had too many diversions and distractions.

She admired the talent, poise, and genius of Hughes--- and she wanted to see these qualities in herself. But it was not possible--- she did not have the temperament nor the patience required for emulation. Maupassant too was making the same mistake. He wanted to adopt Flaubert's language, style and other techniques. The result was a total failure, --- a disaster. Then he secretly rejected all the principles of naturalism and along with Daudet found that realism suited their themes better. He worked hard and then rediscovered himself. Towards the end of his career he surpassed both his mentors Flaubert and Zola (4) and this was possible not through any theory of art but through superior artistry. Now, both Sylvia Plath and Maupassant were branded 'spoilt brats' and also they were very popular early in their career. His stories were translated into 160 languages. But then he realised that this popularity may not last and he had the maturity to realize his faults and worked seriously in the later part of his career. That is what we expect from a writer of real quality and rare talent. Now, we come to very important questions-- Did Sylvia Plath produce enough great poems in ten years? And did she do so consistently? Did she at any period in her career show creative energy like Balzac, Dickens or Neruda? Why was she always in doubt whether she were greater than Ted Hughes? Should she compare herself with some one all the time to remain better? Cannot she be a great poet in her own right?

It is here that she and Maupassant encountered a similar predicament --- something common to most aspiring writers. Both of them were not very popular with friends. Sylvia Plath had a slight edge as she did get recognition in some quarters at some point of time. She was one of the brilliant students associated to a prestigious institution---- and she was already into a profession that matches her ambitions.

Though Maupassant had tried his hand in two or three professions, his mother was not satisfied with any of them. She put him under the custodianship of Flaubert and then followed a long period of apprenticeship in which there was not much of encouragement, a lot of

drudgery and fruitless diligence. A strange relationship followed between a mentor who was so sparing in his compliments and a mentee who never expressed his reactions. Under those circumstances it is a great miracle that someone should survive for ten years as stolidly as Maupassant did while all his friends were publishing stories and novels and attaining fame only Maupassant had to languish in the long semi-dark evenings writing but not getting his mentor's nod.

But the persistent doubts Sylvia Plath has about her real worth as a writer force her to depend on other's opinions----- not about the quality of her work but about her ability to write at all-- - and at the bottom of the things this is a glaring fact that has to be addressed time and again. In other words, at no point in her career, does she have an absolute faith in herself which would have resulted in much better output.

Anne Frank,(8) on the other hand, never feels such self-doubt --- hence what she wrote at 13 and what she wrote a year later—all those pages produced under great duress --- have the same solemn tranquillity. Writing for her is not a special act nor is she a self-conscious artist like Sylvia Plath who tries to get out of this in poems like *Daddy* but actually succeeds in *Sheepfog*.

Despite this shortcoming, Sylvia Plath shows great intensity and passion in her poems by creating a persona which very few poets can match. All the *Ariel* poems have strong persona and show a more vibrant and focussed Sylvia Plath who has at last discovered herself and found her voice.

We cannot claim that all self-conscious artists are failures at their work. Keats was painfully self-conscious but most of his greatest work has escaped from those strains. The four of them --- Maupassant, Keats, Anne Frank and Sylvia Plath are artists with great potential. They were not conventional and each of them in their own way aimed for the highest. All of them had to suffer , had to wait for their success, and in the process experience both disappointment and frustration. But when we turn to artistic attainment and lasting recognition, the three of them score over Sylvia Plath. Here, one may not consider their personal misfortunes and dismiss them as the vagaries of fate, and evaluate them purely on potential and attainment.

Not everyone would be as lucky as Maupassant to have a mentor of Flaubert's artistic class and ethical refinement. But it is also their individual attitude that finally determines the process and degree of their artistic attainment. It is true that she exhibited a passionate desire to become a great poet ---- but was her preparation as passionate as the ambition. Maupassant did not get frequent and direct encouragement from Flaubert – but he did try to discuss artistic problems and literary issues with writers of his own age like Daudet and less frequently with the Goncourt brothers. The fact that he did not openly discuss with Flaubert all the points on which he differed from him does not mean that Maupassant was short of original ideas or that he lacked the courage to follow his conviction. It is his ideas of implementation of reality and realism that have finally asserted themselves at the turn of the century and paved the way for the next generation writers. Here the point of great importance is the individual effort that constantly helped him through his career.

Though their careers started in similar ways marked by early success, and an intensity and passion for creativity, Sylvia Plath lacked the will and energy to hold on and repeat the act consistently. She is plagued by doubts and hence would create at her best only occasionally by fits and starts. Maupassant, on the other hand never doubted his talent or prowess and the persistent experimentation and desire to achieve depth and variation that were the hallmarks

of his mature works were missing in Sylvia Plath's works. They happen to be there more by accident than by intent. Her work is uneven and does not reflect the growth and progression of the artist nor does it have the attitude and vision that should guide a literary journey. This is what we precisely see in the case of Maupassant. After the euphoria of his early success was waning and some serious questions were raised against his unconventional style and choice of themes and persona --- he did not panic or resort to any false attempts to conceal those shortcomings. A gradual transition has slowly crept into his work and a mature outlook and the workmanlike organization of his pool of talent produced some rare and innovative masterpieces. It is this great marriage of passion with poise and ebullience with a depth of unerring vision that has lifted his genius from the angst of convention and mundane commonness.

Another remarkable transition is that of John Keats who was misunderstood by all his contemporaries ---- those who hated and heckled at him as much as those who supported and sympathized with him like Shelley, Byron ---- none of them suspected or understood the profound quality of his mind or the pristine strength and uniqueness of his poetic verve. Keats was working at his forge with his ballads, odes and sonnets which have brought a great wealth of new imagery and persona on the poetic horizon. Attainment of such quality and quintessential artistic tenor need not be, cannot be and often has not been recognized by the world. This is revealed by John Croker's review of *Endymion* (9) which not only belittles and humiliates the poet but attacks his mentor Leigh Hunt.

Keats's letters to his friends reveal the struggle, the dilemma, the ambition and the many oppressive moments that the mind experiences in the act of creation.

His predicament was much worse than that of Sylvia Plath, as he was not received well as a poet and his financial position did not allow him to go ahead with his marriage to Fanny Brawne or to establish himself in his career. Beleaguered by all these circumstances, and a fast-catching lethal illness, he had only about three years for creative work. Yet he has left a wealth of poetry that richly contributes to his profile as a poet, while his letters to his friends leave a literary and cultural flavor of Keats, the man. He is one of the English poets greatly admired by critics and the quality of his work, his originality, and his unswerving adherence to his creative impulse and artistic vision, all this translates into a great though short career. This is what one expects from a genuine talent.

In comparison to these two, Sylvia Plath has equal talent and in her work we have ample proof of her intensity and versatility. Her *Unabridged Journals* (10) are real pathways into her highly mercurial and complex psyche. Her admirers and critics would be doing a great service if they can undertake a profound study of her poems and journals and figure out her profile as a poet and her specific contribution to modern poetry. Her poems should be studied in comparison with other confessional poets like Elizabeth Bishop, Anne Sexton and Adrienne Rich. Though a lot of critics wrote about her language, imagery and style – none of them could produce a definitive study of her poems. The momentous events of her life, her vibrant personality and the intensely tragic sense of her unfulfilled vision make her a unique figure in English literature, give her the nostalgic touch of some Russian characters.

Since Sylvia Plath impressed and inspired the literary fraternity of many cultures and nations, it would be a fitting homage to the great soul and a labor of love if her work is studied with due scholastic diligence.

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