### NARRATIVE VOICES & THEMATIC PREOCCUPATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>narrative voice</th>
<th>effect</th>
<th>key poems</th>
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| First-person    | Intimately engages the reader; used in many poems | ‘Face Lift’  
|                 |        | ‘Tulips’   |
| Third-person (observer) | Produces a sense of distance from the subject of the poem; used only in a few poems | ‘Spinster’  
|                 |        | ‘Edge’     |

<table>
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<tr>
<th>themes</th>
<th>images and relationships</th>
<th>key poems</th>
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| Seeking one’s place in the universe; the moon as poetic muse | The moon and nature | ‘The Moon and the Yew Tree’  
|                 |                      | ‘Elm’     |
| Personal growth and rebirth | Hospitalisation (as setting and source of imagery) | ‘Face Lift’  
|                 |                      | ‘Tulips’   
|                 |                      | ‘The Stones’ |
|                 | Father figures | ‘Full Fathom Five’  
|                 |                      | ‘Little Fugue’  
|                 |                      | ‘Daddy’     |
| The search for a sense of identity | Images of mirrors, reflections, stones, hooks | ‘Ariel’  
|                 |                      | ‘Mirror’    |
| Competing roles of women | Daughter (characterised by feelings of betrayal and inability to communicate) | ‘Full Fathom Five’  
|                 |                      | ‘Daddy’     |
|                 | Wife (conflicting roles and desires) | ‘Daddy’  
|                 |                      | ‘Tulips’    
|                 |                      | ‘Lesbos’    |
|                 | Mother (a wide range of emotions are depicted) | ‘Lesbos’  
|                 |                      | ‘The Manor Garden’  
|                 |                      | ‘Morning Song’    
|                 |                      | ‘Nick and the Candlestick’ |
|                 | Artist (images of sterility, disconnection and/or death) | ‘Words’  
|                 |                      | ‘The Munich Mannequins’  
|                 |                      | ‘Edge’    |
INTRODUCTION

Sylvia Plath’s poetry has had a far-reaching influence on both readers and writers since her premature death in 1963. It is valuable for its stylistic accomplishments, bringing together as it does traditional poetic forms with experimental free-form structures, and for its ability to reach contemporary readers. Her concern with problems such as gender conflicts, sexual inequality and discrimination against women is expressed frankly, particularly in the remarkable poems written shortly before her death.

Although Plath’s personal experiences of marriage and of being a female artist in a world dominated by men made her feel both betrayed and powerless, the poetry is not about herself. Rather, it expresses universal values and concerns on behalf of her fellow human beings. The anger and pain that comes through in her work is for the benefit of those of us who suffer dispossession, or battle against established mores that leave us feeling both impotent and vulnerable. We must not, however, mistake her outspokenness on issues that affect women as a platform for feminist ideals. Plath predates the women’s revolution of the late 1960s and 1970s and her concerns are much more inclusive than such a limited application would suggest.

It is important, as well, to note that Plath’s personal and psychological history is not of primary importance when it comes to analysing her poetry. A concentration on her life circumstances can draw the attention of readers and students away from the poetry, grafting meanings onto the poems that they do not have. Plath manipulated her emotional experiences to make them relevant to larger human issues; otherwise her poems would not have engaged her readers. The publication of her journals has made it possible for us to know and understand Plath’s personal journey, but these must be recognised as a discrete work to be assessed separately from the poetry.

Plath’s posthumous award of the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for her Collected Poems recognised her contribution to literature. Beset by mental and physical illness and periods of deep depression, Plath wrested her art from great darkness. That all Plath’s work still remains in print is a testament to her achievement, as is the huge body of critical response
her writings have generated. Nevertheless, part of Plath’s attraction is that despite our ability to know much about her she remains, as a woman, as enigmatic to us now as she was to her readers half a century ago.
BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Sylvia Plath (1932–1963)

The daughter of middle-class immigrants, Sylvia Plath was born in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, the older child of Otto and Aurelia Plath. Her father was a professor of German and Entomology (the study of insects) at Boston University; her mother, a high-school teacher, had been his assistant. Both parents valued learning. In 1940, when Sylvia was eight, Otto died of complications after a leg amputation and Aurelia returned to teaching. His death was to have far-reaching ramifications for Sylvia, who believed he had betrayed and deserted her. The genetic disposition to depression that was widespread in Otto’s family haunted Sylvia, who was never free of the mental instability that was to lead to her early death.

Due to her mother’s influence, Sylvia tried to live up to an old-fashioned feminine ideal of perfection. She attempted to play the role of flawless femininity becoming a wife and mother with an impeccable record for cooking and domesticity. Her mother’s influence was detrimental for Sylvia in many ways because Sylvia was always trying to live up to a false, middle-class view when, in fact, the reality of her life warred with her mother’s ideal. In Letters Home the relationship between mother and daughter is documented, but it is a false document because, in reality, there was a distance and lack of comprehension between the two women. Indeed, part of Plath’s pain stemmed from her awareness that she was unable to have an honest relationship with her mother and she struggled against her awareness of that dishonesty.

Although Plath was a brilliant student and seemed supremely confident, she was extremely insecure and, having the highest expectations for herself in her writing, fulfilled them only at the very end of her life. She tried to balance her domestic role with that of writer, experiencing a constant self-doubt that led to depression. She craved recognition, pushing herself relentlessly, and much of her poetry reveals her struggle against both herself and the external world.

It was evident early that writing was to be Plath’s vocation. By the time she went to college in the early 1950s she had published poems in newspapers and written over fifty short stories, some of which won prizes.

At college she was interested in painting and became quite accomplished in that art, which might explain the predominance of painterly images in her poetry.

In 1953 she suffered a nervous breakdown while attending the prestigious Smith College, Boston. She was given electroconvulsive shock treatments, but in August she attempted suicide. After six months of intensive therapy Sylvia returned to Smith and to her accustomed academic success, but she never fully recovered from her breakdown and her sanity was forever damaged by the shock treatment. For her honours thesis at Smith she wrote on the Russian novelist, Dostoyevsky, and won a Fulbright Fellowship to study at Cambridge. The title of the thesis, ‘The magic mirror: a study of the double in two of Dostoyevsky’s novels’, is revealing of Plath’s later fascination with imagery of the double that is evident through her poetry. In 1955, she went to England.

There she decided to meet the poet, Ted Hughes (later to become the Poet Laureate), because his work had impressed her. At Cambridge she felt impelled to combine intensive study with sexual experience, prompted by a rebellion against her mother who could never accept her daughter’s sexual involvements. As her writing shows, she protested against double standards in male/female relationships and believed that women could successfully combine sexual passion with intellectual pursuits, as men did.

She and Hughes were married in 1956, with Plath assuming they would have an ideal life together. After she passed her examinations at Cambridge, the Hugheses returned to America where Sylvia taught at Smith while investing a great deal of energy into making Ted a success. His first book of poetry, The Hawk in the Rain, won a major prize, but Plath found it difficult to develop her own voice as a writer. It was in Boston, too, that Plath worked part-time as a secretary in the psychiatric division of Massachusetts General Hospital, transcribing patients’ histories. She was later to use this experience extensively in her poems. She also resumed therapy for her depression.

By 1959 both Plath and Hughes decided that they needed to work professionally on their writing and bravely abandoned their teaching jobs to return to England. Before they left they spent some months at the

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2 Plath was treated at McLean, the same psychiatric hospital at which the poets Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton were also treated for mental illness.
artists’ colony at Yaddo in New York State where Plath produced the first of her most notable poems, ‘Poem for a Birthday’, where her theme is her own breakdown and suicide attempt in 1953.

In England Frieda was born and Plath wrote her novel, *The Bell Jar*, her first book of poetry, *The Colossus and Other Poems*, was published in October 1960. It was well received and was subsequently published in the US. Hughes was becoming well known and was in contact with important poets such as T. S. Eliot, but the couple had little money. By 1961, these financial difficulties, combined with Plath’s jealousy of Hughes’ female acquaintances, her self-centredness and the return of her depression, put enormous strains on the marriage.

There were many outbursts of jealous rage. In one incident, Plath became jealous of a female voice on the telephone asking for Hughes. He returned home to find that his work in progress, his notebooks and his precious copy of Shakespeare had all been torn to shreds. The commitment to art that was the mainstay of their marriage crumbled under such assaults. A few days later, in February 1961, Plath miscarried and also faced hospitalisation for an appendectomy. It was at this time that she wrote the tender poem ‘Morning Song’. While in hospital she was inspired to write ‘Tulips’, a poem that shows how well she had become the mistress of her imagery, using the colours white and red to convey her imagined death and resurrection. Indeed, after the operation Plath showed a quick return to health, as hospital had provided a welcome respite from looking after baby Frieda. She returned to writing *The Bell Jar* but further bouts of depression were not far away. As well, Plath was again pregnant and suffering from isolation and sinus problems.

After the birth of Nicholas in January 1962, Plath faced up to the fact of Hughes’ infidelity and, as a consequence, began expressing herself through increasingly angry but powerful poems. Hughes and Plath separated. Alone with the children in Devon, Plath wrote most of the poems that later appeared in *Ariel*. After moving to London, in less than two months she produced the forty poems of rage, despair, love and vengeance that made her famous posthumously. These included ‘Daddy’, ‘Poppies in July’, ‘Ariel’, ‘The Bee Meeting’, and the heartbreaking poem to her baby son, ‘Nick and the Candlestick’. However, none of the magazines to which she sent these poems accepted them, increasing her depression.
These mature poems reveal a preoccupation with death and rebirth and a recurring theme of the redemption of a meaningless life through art. Fuelled by her anger, her voice became much stronger. Within the framework of her own psychodrama she revealed her tragically wounded personality and her last poems show the point of nihilism, or feelings of nothingness, that she had reached, for which there was no escape except through death. In January 1963, after the publication of *The Bell Jar*, she was engulfed by a deep, clinical depression and on the morning of 11 February she committed suicide. She was just thirty years old.

Plath’s poems show that she wrote out of the experience of deep personal pain and yet she believed in the possibility of a better future for humankind. Although she never fulfilled her own life’s promise, she wrote in ways that touch people across cultures and across generations. This is the lasting legacy of her work.

**Plath’s father**

Otto Emil Plath was a German-speaking emigrant from Grabow, a biologist specialising in entomology and the author of *Bumblebees and Their Ways* (1934). He heavily influenced Sylvia’s behaviour, dying when she was eight. She never forgave him for deserting her. The betrayal of the father figure is prominent in many of her poems.

From this figure issues both the historical poems, containing German or Nazi references, and such non-historical work as the bee sequence, where the grief informing the earlier bee poems and the desire to reunite with the dead father are transformed to fury – the same fury revealed in ‘Daddy’.

**Historical context**

Plath’s sense of entrapment, her sense that her choices were profoundly limited, is directly connected to the particular time and place in which she wrote poetry. The feminist Betty Friedan describes the late fifties and early sixties for American women as a ‘comfortable concentration camp’ – physically luxurious, mentally oppressive and impoverished. The recurring metaphors of fragmentation and rebirth, particularly in Plath’s late poetry, are, therefore, socially and historically based. She grew up during World War II and this, combined with the politically ‘tranquilised fifties’ (as Robert Lowell put it), also left a mark on Plath. The images of Nazi concentration camps, cannons, trains, ‘wars, wars, wars’ (p.52,
‘Daddy’) and ‘Out of a gap/A million soldiers run’ (p.58, ‘Cut’) reflect back to the war, while images of kitchens, refrigerators, adding machines, typewriters and the depersonalisation of hospitals are representations of modern American life in the 1950s.

It is evident from the poems that Plath is very much a woman of the 1950s – educated, intelligent but still restricted in terms of what it was possible for a woman to aspire to. The world she describes in ‘The Munich Mannequins’ (pp.74–5), for example, is created by men rather than women, since men control the forces of production and their desire to change and dominate the world has transformed women into mere puppets. She sees her era as one of underlying depersonalisation in an economic and social structure that equates people with objects.

Plath was doubly alienated from such a world, objectified by it and, as a woman artist, isolated within it. Isolated both from a past tradition and a present community, she found it difficult to structure new alternatives for her own future.

**Literary influences**

**Ted Hughes**

Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes inspired each other to explore new pathways for their respective talents. Their backgrounds were entirely different: he was English and part of the English tradition of writing, while she was American and influenced by the new literary writings in America. Hughes has said that they ‘dreamed a lot of shared or complementary dreams’ although their methods of writing were entirely different. Plath’s was:

> to collect a heap of vivid objects and good words and make a pattern; the pattern would be projected from somewhere deep inside, from her very distinctly evolved myth ... Her method was more painterly ...

Hughes encouraged her when she was seeking inspiration and she always sought his approval of her writing. At times, his support enabled her to break out of periods of writer’s block. She envied Hughes’ ability to work ‘unencumbered by any fake image of what the world expects of him’.

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