



# UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

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**“The Short Life & Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath”:  
A Sermon for National Poetry Month**

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April is National Poetry Month, and this is our annual Poetry Service in which we explore the life and legacy of a particular poet. Although individual poems can be moving and meaningful without knowing anything about the author, learning about a poet’s background can make their work even more deeply resonant. In recent years, we’ve focused in turn on Elizabeth Bishop, Gwendolyn Brooks, Mary Oliver, and Emily Dickinson. And in the future, I look forward to sharing with you other major poets, including Adrienne Rich, Czesław Miłosz, Denise Levertov, Audre Lorde, and more. For today: **Sylvia Plath (1932 - 1963)**.

To briefly connect back to our Women’s History Month service on “Building a New Mythology,” **many aspects of Sylvia Plath’s life invoke the archetype of Icarus**, who escaped the island of Crete on wax wings (Clark xvii). He was warned to fly neither too low (where the ocean’s dampness would clog his wings) nor too high (where the sun’s heat might cause his wings to melt).

**Plath was born in 1932, a time when many people thought that women weren’t supposed to fly high. Nevertheless, she persisted.** She kept spreading her wings through her writing, trying to touch the sun. And also like Icarus she was ultimately brought low from her lifelong struggle with depression, exacerbated by life’s circumstances and the crushing sexism of her time.

She died at age thirty on February 11, 1963. The same morning, only a mile and

a half away from her house in London, the Beatles arrived hours later to begin recording their first album (Clark 894). That timing underscores that **at the time of Plath's death, the counterculture often associated with the 1960s would not even really begin until the next year.** Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, a book that helped catalyze Second-wave feminism was not published until about a week after Plath's death. Dr. King wouldn't make his "I Have a Dream" speech until that August. And JFK wasn't assassinated until that November.

**If Plath were alive today, she would be ninety years old.** I wish we had had the opportunity to experience all the work she would've done and could have written over the past six decades. At the same time, I'm grateful for the legacy she was able to leave behind.

It is further significant that Plath was a Unitarian; I was inspired to choose her as the focus of this year's Poetry Sunday, when I learned that an incredible new biography had been published about her, titled *Red Comet: The Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath* by Heather Clark, a professor of contemporary poetry at the University of Huddersfield in England. *The New York Times Book Review* named it one of the "10 Best Books of 2021." If this service leaves you curious to learn more, be forewarned that although the book is fascinating and extremely well written, it also weighs in at more than 900 pages. If you want something shorter, preparing for this sermon also motivated me to finally get around to reading *The Bell Jar*, which is also great—and as many critics have noted has a 'feminism meets *Catcher in the Rye*' vibe. There is also her ***Collected Poems for which she was posthumously awarded the Pulitzer Prize.*** Or you can check out her much shorter *Selected Poems* (937).

To begin to share with you some of Plath's story, she was born in 1932, three years into the Great Depression (29). And although it was a hard time, she was a precocious child, and in response to her mother's emphasis on reading regularly to her children, Plath was both reading and writing by age five (38).

In 1940, when she was only eight years old, she experienced a major early loss when her father died of complications from undiagnosed diabetes (44). Her father was a respected biology professor at Boston University, but he was highly resistant to seeing doctors; by all indications, he died unnecessarily of a condition that could have

been easily treated (46).

Despite the devastation of her father's death, she continued to write, and only a few months later—**at only eight years old—she had her first publication, a poem titled "Poem"** in the *Boston Herald* (55).

Years later, while in college, Plath wrote a poem about her father's death that played on the fact that one of his major publications was about bees, and that, like a bee sting, he died of a cause that in most cases is minor and easily treated.

I invite you to hear an excerpt of that poem, titled "Lament":

The sting of bees took away my father  
who walked in a swarming shroud of wings  
and scorned the tick of the falling weather....

He counted the guns of god a bother,  
laughed at the ambush of angels' tongues,  
and scorned the tick of the falling weather.

O ransack the four winds and find another  
man who can mangle the grin of kings:  
the sting of bees took away my father  
who scorned the tick of the falling weather. (49)

Here's another early poem, this time from 1948 when she was sixteen. It's titled "Recognition." In this poem Plath is wrestling with what Jon Kabat-Zinn later called "Wherever I Go There I Am." In other words, wherever she went in her life, she, like all of us, had a tendency to fall into repetitions of patterns from her past:

And when I realized that the paint  
Had camouflaged an accent door,  
And that beneath the smooth shellac  
There lay a templated hardwood floor,  
I looked about through angry tears.

For that remodeled house was all

That I could ever own. And while  
I gazed around the shallowed hall  
My mouth curved in a bitter smile:

**I knew I had lived there before.** (28)

Along these lines, there's a lot to say about Plath's childhood and how her early family system—and her relationship with her mother and father—continued to reverberate throughout her life. But for our purposes, I'd like to instead focus for a bit on her Unitarianism. As I researched further, I've come to learn that she was even more Unitarian than I initially thought. After her father died in 1940, when Plath was eight years old, their family joined the nearby Wellesley Unitarian Church, and her mother began teaching Religious Education classes (60). That congregation, the UU Society of Wellesley Hills in Massachusetts, is still around today.

So she grew up going to R.E. classes each week, and later was an active participant in the Unitarian youth group (134). In addition, she was deeply moved by participating in Unitarian youth conferences on Star Island off the coast of New Hampshire. While there, she wrote in her diary, "Chapel is lovely.... **There is something here I have never experienced before—complete peace and love for all...** (127-128).

Unitarianism also shaped her social conscience. Her youth group visited a local jail, raising her awareness of the inhumanity and cruelty that are so often a part of what we have come to call the Prison-Industrial Complex (98). As a high schooler during World War II she explored pacifism, and was challenged to question the reflexive nationalism and militarism of that time (99).

In 1950, when Plath was around age 18, a time when we UUs often hold "Coming of Age" rituals for our young people graduating from high school, Plath described herself as a Unitarian "by choice." Speaking fairly bluntly she said, "I don't like the idea of salvation being spooned out to those too spineless to think for themselves." She added that she could fairly be "labeled an atheist," but that she also had "respect for life" and hope in the potential of humankind, which is all very UU (143). Similarly, she wrote in a letter home to her mother that she believed in "the impersonal laws of science as a God of sorts..." (DUUB).

As a freshman at Smith College she wrote a paper for a religion class on “Unitarianism: Yesterday and Today” in which she described herself as an “agnostic humanist” (DUUB). She said further that she, “joined the Unitarian Church—which preached a human Jesus and the Bible as literature—on account of its tolerance, inclusion, and emphasis on reason.” And in a quite progressive interpretation of the Bible, similar to what we explored a few weeks ago, she continued that, “Unitarians looked to the moment Adam ate the forbidden fruit not as original sin, but as unbounded possibility—‘his greatest virtue—the way to the fullest realization of all his potentials as a human being’ (192). In other words, we should all *want* to grow up and relish taking a big bite from that fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil!

A decade later, in 1961, in what we now know was toward the end of her short life, she wrote another letter to her mother in which she said that she would always be a “pagan-Unitarian” (669).

Another significant influence on Plath’s life were her teachers, particularly one high school English teacher, Wilbury Crocket, who strongly shaped and encouraged her early on. For three years, she and her fellow young literature enthusiasts followed his lead in reading almost a book a week by major American and British authors and writing four five-thousand word papers a year (104-105). That’s a pretty high bar for high school.

Here’s a poem she wrote at age sixteen about her growing commitment to writing, titled, “Neither Moonlight Nor Starlight”:

Why do I stay at my inkstained desk  
From the dim gray dawn to the dusk of day?  
Why do I linger in the loneliness of this bleak place  
When I could be bathing in moonlight, stardust  
Or the spilling gold of the sun?  
(Neither moonlight nor starlight are for me.)

You ask me why I spend my life writing?  
Do I find entertainment?  
Is it worthwhile?

Above all, does it pay?  
If not, then, is there a reason?  
(Ah, I would like to give you an answer  
To satisfy you completely, but that is impossible.)  
Listen awhile, and believe in me,  
There is a reason for my writing, yes.

**I write only because**

**There is a voice within me**

**That will not be still.** (113-114)

And here I want to emphasize that too often Sylvia Plath's story has been told in a way that foretell mental illness and allows her early death to unduly overshadow the contributions of the rest of her life. Although her suicide was one significant factor in her life, there was so much more, including her passionate impulse to write.

She was an "academic superstar and perennial prizewinner." Even after spending a few months in an inpatient ward following a depressive episode in which she first tried to end her own life, she still graduated *magna cum laude* from Smith College. She was then awarded a prestigious Fulbright Fellowship to attend Cambridge University, where she graduated with high honors. She was so impressive that her undergraduate *alma mater* then invited her back to begin teaching even though she didn't have a Ph.D.:

Her mastery of English literature's past and present intimidated her students and even her fellow poets.... Later, Plath made small talk with T. S. Eliot at London cocktail parties, where she was the model of wit and decorum. Very few friends realized that she struggled with depression, which revealed itself episodically. In college, she aced her exams, drank in moderation, dressed sharply, and dated men from Yale and Amherst. She struck most as the proverbial golden girl. (xx)

In retrospect, it is clear that a major contribution to her premature death was that she was failed by the sexist mental health treatments of her day. To put the point sharply, **it seems unlikely that her psychiatrist would "have recommended shock**

**therapy on a brainy but depressed Yale man after just two outpatient sessions”**

(266). In turn, that psychiatrist was failed by the sexist training he received. At that time in the early 1950s, 91% of psychiatrists were men, and they:

were **trained to regard high ambition and strong willed women as pathological**.... And [women] who refused to function domestically, in terms of cleaning, cooking, childcare, and shopping when they returned home...were often recommitted” (267).

Plath famously wrote about her experience in her lightly fictionalized novel, *The Bell Jar*.

In 1956, at age 23, Plath married the British poet Ted Hughes (1930–1998) (447). Although her posthumous fame has far eclipsed his, he was quite successful in his own right and is remembered as one of the "The 50 greatest British writers since 1945." Here's the opening of a long poem she published in 1958 in *The New Yorker* during the early years of her marriage, titled "Mussel Hunter At Rock Harbort":

I came before the water —  
Colorists came to get the  
Good of the Cape light that scours  
Sand grit to sided crystal  
And buffs and sleeks the blunt hulls  
Of the three fishing smacks beached  
On the bank of the river's

Backtracking tail. (537)

We know in retrospect, that in early 1960, at age twenty-eight, she was entering the final two years of her life. But at the time, there were many reasons for happiness and hope: “She had married a brilliant poet; she was soon to become a mother; she had found a charming flat in central London; she had just signed a contract for her first book” (592-593). And two years later, if she had just received a little more support, and if she hadn't been so scarred from previous mistreatment at the hands of mental health professionals of the time, her life could have gone much differently.

I invite you to hear some of the title poem from that first poetry collection, "The Colossus," which is about a number of things, but perhaps most centrally about her anger at her lost father (615):

I shall never get you put together entirely,  
Pieced, glued, and properly jointed.  
Mule-bray, pig-grunt and bawdy cackles  
Proceed from your great lips.  
It's worse than a barnyard.

Perhaps you consider yourself an oracle,  
Mouthpiece of the dead, or of some god or other.

**Thirty years now I have labored  
To dredge the silt from your throat.  
I am none the wiser.**

To say a little about her marriage, it was, in some ways, quite progressive for the time. Ted was in the room the whole time for the birth of both their children, which, at that time, was unusual for fathers (597). Also atypically, they split the childcare to give one another undistracted writing time. Plath, however, did end up with a vastly disproportionate share of household chores (646).

As their marital strife increased, eventually breaking on the rocks of Hughes' blatant infidelity, she channeled her rage into writing (720). I'm sure Freud would have had a field day in that her father was a biologist and her husband had a strong side interest in zoology. I'll read you just part of a poem she wrote about Hughes, playing on all that, titled "Zoo Keeper's Wife" (633-634). The subtext is very thinly veiled:

You checked the diet charts and took me to play  
With the boa constrictor in the Fellow's Garden.  
I pretended I was the Tree of Knowledge.  
I entered your bible, I boarded your ark  
With the sacred baboon in his wig and wax ears  
And the bear-furred, bird-eating spider  
Clambering round its glass box like an eight-fingered hand.



I can't get it out of my mind

How our courtship lit the tindery cages ---  
Your two-horned rhinoceros opened a mouth  
Dirty as a bootsole and big as a hospital sink  
For my cube of sugar: its bog breath  
Gloved my arm to the elbow.  
The snails blew kisses like black apples.  
Nightly now I flog apes owls bears sheep  
Over their iron stile. And still don't sleep.

And related to the support that communities like UUCF can offer at their best, it is haunting that in March of 1962, at the beginning of what would be the final year of Plath's life, to read that she was moved to tears when a friend mailed her a copy of a sermon she had heard preached recently at a Unitarian congregation. Plath wrote her back, **"I'd really be a church-goer if I was back in Wellesley or America—the Unitarian church is my church. How I miss it!!! There is just no choice here"** (690). Her life really could have gone differently if she had been less isolated in that final winter of 1963 (690).

At the same time, there were periods in that final year when she reached her greatest heights of groundbreaking productivity and creativity. In October 1962 alone she wrote "almost a poem a day" of incredible work. **That month has been called "one of the most extraordinary literary outpourings of the twentieth century"** (765). The poems from this final period were posthumously published as her *Ariel* poems.

The title of Heather Clark's biography, *Red Comet*, is drawn from a poem written during this time, titled "Stings" (769). I'll read you just the final two stanzas:

They thought death was worth it, but I  
Have a self to recover, a queen.  
Is she dead, is she sleeping?  
Where has she been,  
With her lion-red body, her wings of glass?

Now she is flying  
More terrible than she ever was, red  
Scar in the sky, red comet  
Over the engine that killed her—  
The mausoleum, the wax house

It is not a coincidence that Plath's death from depression and suicide happened on the same day she was scheduled to re-enter an inpatient mental health facility. Whereas many people today receive immense help from inpatient care, Plath had PTSD from the mistreatment she received previously (926). Heightening the tragedy, there was a new ward at the facility she was scheduled to enter that may well have given her the support she desperately needed, but she was more familiar with this particular hospital's bad reputation and did not know the details of the new and improved ward. Her fear was too great that her horrific experience during college would be repeated (xxi).

When Hughes wrote to Plath's mother following Sylvia's death, he rightly recognized that she was a world class talent, but sadly his words still include some of the sexism of the time: "In her last months she became a great poet, and no other woman poet except for Emily Dickinson can begin to be compared with her, and certainly no living American" (905). The British literary critic Alfred Alvarez (1929 - 2019) also helped draw attention to Plath's work in the wake of her death. He wrote that, "In the last few months she had been writing almost as though possessed." He said that she was a "genius" and that, "her recent poetry represents a totally new breakthrough in modern verse and establishes her as the most gifted woman poet of our time... The loss to literature is inestimable" (930).

Today it is clear that she is a world class poet and writer—*period*. Furthermore, a decade after her death, her work was particularly influential in the women's movement in the 1970s. In addition to her poetry, her novel *The Bell Jar* continues to sell about 100,000 copies a year (933).

As I prepare to conclude, let me bring us back full circle. We noted at the beginning that Sylvia Plath's life has often been likened to Icarus, who launched too far

and fast and flew too close to the sun. As with many things, the Icarus analogy is true, but partial. It doesn't capture the fullness of Plath's life and legacy.

Plath's biographer Heather Clark invites us to consider that an equally important archetype for Sylvia Plath is the mythical Ariadne, who spun a thread to help Theseus find his way back out of a labyrinth. Like Ariadne, Plath left behind threads of influence that live on. Her writing continues to help lead an ever-increasing number of readers out of the oppressive mazes in which they find themselves. Her life and books challenge us to follow her lead in taking the risk of exploring our creative impulses. Her legacy calls on us to demand greater freedom and liberation for ourselves and those around us.

As UUs, it is also significant that Sylvia Plath was one of our own. And as we continue to hold her life and legacy in our hearts, let us together recommit ourselves to building the better world that might have better supported Sylvia Plath.