Doubletake: the obsessions of Sylvia Plath

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Doubletake:
The Obsessions of Sylvia Plath
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"I hope to really get into my second novel this winter and finish it as soon as I get to London and can find a mother's help. It is to be called 'Doubletake,' meaning that the second look you take at something reveals a deeper, double meaning...."
Sylvia Plath letter to Olive Higgins Prouty 11-20-62

"We continue to brood about Sylvia Plath in ways that have more to do with our own obsessions than with hers."
Author Jon Rosenblatt in Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Initiation (3)

"At any rate, I admit that I am not strong enough, or rich enough, or independent enough, to live up in actuality to my ideal standards. You ask me, what are those ideal standards? Good for you."
Sylvia Plath in her journals, September 1951
For twenty five years, analyses of the link between Sylvia Plath’s life and writings have too often focused on selected rebellious incidents and a handful of poems written in the last six months of her life. These shallow and often sensational literary autopsies reach seemingly pre-determined conclusions about Plath and usually blame Plath’s mother, her husband, and male-dominated 1940s and 1950s America for the vitriolic tone of her writings and for her suicide at age thirty. Unfortunately, oversimplification is the rule in Plath studies.

Examinations of Plath are particularly hazardous because such an enormous amount of her work was autobiographical in some way. The danger lies in assuming that every poem or story is taken from her experiences. Her best known works, The Bell Jar, and the Ariel collection of poems, address death and suicide relentlessly. Incorrect assumptions are taken a step further when people assume that Plath’s works are about her own morbid, self-destructive obsessions. Some are. But a greater number are not.

For some, part of the ghoulish interest in reading Plath comes in tracing the path to suicide. This approach, however, is tired and misleading. A clearer and more accurate picture of Sylvia Plath emerges by examining the perplexing set of relationships between the poet and her
family and friends and between the poet and her cultural environment. These relationships shaped the way the poet looked at herself and her world. Crucial facets of Plath's thinking—her sense of social and intellectual inferiority, her views on the roles of men and women, her voracious appetite for achievement and inclusion—were more a result of the poet's own interpretation of the social and cultural messages she processed than is commonly believed. Her own failures and exaggerated perceptions of these failures played a more significant role in her life than did her mistreatment by others. Significantly, Plath's impossibly, perhaps fatally, high goals and standards were the result of her personal relationships and absorption of cultural signals.

Sylvia Plath was far more susceptible than the average person to the influence of friends and society. Two personality traits contributed to this condition: Plath's unbelievably keen powers of observation and her tendency to be overly concerned with approval or rejection by others. The latter trait probably developed from early childhood attempts to please her extraordinarily demanding father. In addition, Plath was obviously a brilliant and extraordinarily sensitive person who often took small matters too seriously. Together, these traits made her hypersensitive to everything she saw, heard, read, and experienced and too quick to accept
other people's judgments of her as fact.

Although she was aware of her gift and believed that she could achieve fame and success one day, letters and journals show that Plath lacked consistent self-esteem. Successes were savored cautiously, but failures were often devastating and had a disproportionate effect on her outlook. One of the few reviews of her works published before her death zeroes in on this facet of her character: "Miss Plath has some of the excusable faults of youth: the attempt to blow up the tiniest personal experience into an event of vast, universal, and, preferably, mythic importance...." (Simon 464).

The best-known manifestation of this trait was the suicide attempt following her junior year at Smith College. Her drug overdose and subsequent stay in a mental hospital, described in The Bell Jar, came about after a series of demoralizing failures, the last of which was her exclusion from a Harvard Summer School writing course taught by novelist Frank O'Connor. By that stage of her life, she had already decided that she wanted to be a writer. Plath interpreted her rejection by an established writer as a referendum on her first twenty years. Her Harvard rejection followed a month's stay in New York City, where she had interned with Mademoiselle. At Mademoiselle, fierce competition with top-flight young
women from across the country coupled with the relentless criticism of a demanding editor had begun to erode Plath's already low self-esteem.

This brief period in her life is in some ways representative of her entire life. Plath misinterpreted criticism as condemnation and allowed others to measure her self-worth. Small failures and struggles appeared as insurmountable obstacles to Plath, who was unaccustomed to any type of setback involving her writing. Plath had faced crises before—death, illness—but writing was the one area in which she considered the possibility of rejection to be remote. Consequently, she was unprepared for it when it came. It was inevitable that she would later find herself beset by a more serious collection of circumstances with which she would be unable to cope.
1932-1942

It would be foolish to say that his father's absence or death makes no difference to a child, or that it's easy for a mother to make it up to him in other ways. But if the job is well handled, the child, either boy or girl, can continue to grow up normal and well adjusted.--Dr. Benjamin Spock in *Baby and Child Care* (466)

Sylvia Plath's home life was less than ideal. She was born in Jamaica Plain, Mass. in 1932, and her family moved to Winthrop, Mass. in 1937, two years after the birth of her brother, Warren. Her father, Dr. Otto Plath, emigrated from Germany's Polish Corridor and became a professor of biology and German at Boston University. He was a leading entomologist and published *Bumblebees and Their Ways* in 1934. (Sylvia Plath's beekeeping experiences in Britain are reflected in the series of bee poems in the *Ariel* collection). His second wife, Aurelia, was twenty-one years his junior and the daughter of Austrian immigrants. Their marriage was a troubled one. Domineering seems too mild a word to describe Plath's father; despotic fits better. The Plaths met when Aurelia took his German class at B.U. This initial pupil/teacher, inferior/superior relationship apparently shaped their nine years of marriage. Mrs. Plath writes:

At the end of my first year of marriage, I realized that if I wanted a more peaceful home--and I did--I would simply have to become submissive, although it was not my nature to be so...[he had] an attitude of "rightful" domination....He had never known the free flow of communication....While Otto did not take an active part in tending to or playing with his children, he loved them dearly (L 13, 16).

Aurelia Plath confided to friends that the marriage was imperfect (WC
1-1-88). A quarter of a century later, her daughter faced the same type of husband and the same doubts about compromise.

Sylvia Plath's memories of her father were mixed and ranged from deification to labeling him "an ogre" (J 267). While growing up, Plath felt herself to be "queer"—an outsider who did not quite fit in. She placed much of the blame for this feeling on her parents and seemed embarrassed by her peculiar father. Part of Plath's sense of alienation was likely related to her being the daughter of two German-speaking people in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Her true feelings about her heritage are hard to gauge.

As a teenager, Plath expressed pride in her heritage, and when given a choice of foreign pen pals in high school, she chose to exchange letters with a German high school student. "I feel a strong kinship for anything German...whenever I meet anyone with a German name or German traits, I feel a sudden secret warmth," she tells him (HJN 10-10-49). Plath's letters to her German friend are less self-centered than most of her correspondence and are full of questions about life in Germany. Her curiosity was fueled by an interest in her parents' beginnings and by an interest in Europe (Plath was frustrated that she could not afford a summer bicycle trip to Europe with her high school class) (WC 1-1-88).
Despite this interest in Germany, much evidence, most notably the Nazi imagery in the *Ariel* poems, indicates that Plath was uncomfortable with her ethnicity.

The Sylvia Plath Collection at Smith College's Neilson Library includes a series of revealing explanatory blurbs from Plath which correspond to the original typescripts of the *Ariel* poems. Plath did what poets are often loathe to do: she gives a presumably autobiographical explanation of what is possibly her best-known and least-understood poem--"Daddy" (*Poems* 222-4, *Plath Reads...*). Her comments indicate that by age thirty she had revised her childhood assessment of her father:

> Here is a poem spoken by a girl with an Electra complex. Her father died while she thought he was God. Her case is complicated by the fact that her father was also a Nazi and her mother very possibly part Jewish. In the daughter the two strains marry and paralyze each other--she has to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it (*Ariel* typescripts, Appendix).

Plath ultimately accepts her father's mistreatment of her mother and her own misguided deification of him.

"My German-speaking father, dead since I was nine, came from some manic-depressive hamlet in the black heart of Prussia," complains Plath's autobiographical double protagonist, Esther Greenwood. One of her short stories, "The Shadow," involves a young girl who is a grade school outcast during World War II because her father is German (JP 143-51). She also
exaggerates in *The Bell Jar* when she says that her mother was stoned at school during World War I for speaking German (36). Mrs. Plath, however, did feel handicapped because she did not speak English until she began school. She writes that there were no other small children to play with in her neighborhood and that German was spoken in her home (L 4).

Sylvia Plath did not ultimately dislike either of her parents because of their origins. She had reasons far better than heritage to question her father. He ran their house as if he had three children instead of two—Sylvia and Warren never were permitted to eat at the same table with him (WC 1-1-88). He was 47 years old when Sylvia was born and 49 at the time of Warren's birth. His young wife, nearly half his age, was his paternal project. He taught and looked after her; she, in turn, would do the same with the children. (I imagine that Otto Plath was even more of a tyrant than is apparent. The major source of information about him is Autrelia Plath. Since she occasionally embellishes the facts of her daughter's life, I speculate that she does the same in portaying her late husband.) The circumstances surrounding his death provide the most alarming evidence of his eccentricity.

Having seen a friend die after unsuccessful attempts to treat lung cancer, Otto Plath distrusted all doctors. His friend's demise caused him
to distrust all doctors. Plath himself became ill in 1936 and, believing he had also developed cancer, refused to see a doctor. The illness was actually diabetes, which could have been treated. In 1940 his toe became infected and he developed gangrene. Only then did he seek medical help. He died that fall. For the last five years of his life, Plath had been physically unable to do much beyond his teaching. The disease left him weak and with little energy for his small children. His daughter's journals address his senseless death: "Me, I never knew the love of a father, the love of a steady blood-related man after the age of eight....the only man who'd love me steady through life" (J 266). She often describes her father as "queer" and sounds as embarrassed as she was saddened by his strange demise. Plath could not help but feel angry at her father for having allowed his imagination to precipitate the destruction of four lives.

Otto Plath's death was the first in a series of periodic upheavals in the life of Sylvia Plath. She would later lump together the death of her father and her move to Wellesley, Mass. at age nine as a sad line of demarcation in her life. Plath writes autobiographically in *The Bell Jar* of feeling happier one day at age nineteen than she had since she was nine (82). Her family's move from Winthrop in 1942 was a lifelong source of anguish for Plath, who longed to return to a life on the coast. Many of her best short
stories and poems take place on the ocean. Several poems, including "Lament" and "Full Fathom Five," combine two of her favorite subjects--the ocean and her father (Poems 92-3, 315-6).

Few, if any, of her poems are set in Wellesley. Later in life, Plath always considered Winthrop her hometown and made a point of saying so in her journals. In "Superman and Paula Brown’s New Snowsuit," Plath synthesizes and relates her personal childhood cataclysms of 1940-42 to the more serious worldwide event: "That was the year the war began, and the real world, and the difference" (JP 275).
1942-1950

"Not being perfect hurts"—Sylvia Plath (J 178).

Not surprisingly, Plath's life from age nine to seventeen was the period which, depending upon one's point of view, made or broke her life. Adolescence cemented the resentment and feeling of otherness which was beginning to fester in the young girl whose strange father had left her at age eight. The sensation of otherness was crucial. Wellesley made her feel that she was inferior and different, and she in turn blamed her parents for this uneasiness. She observed those around her and assumed that she should change to be more like them. Her peers' money and "normal" families somehow made them superior, she felt. It never occurred to her that she might be as good as or better than the rest. Plath had a desperate need to belong and to be accepted.

The Plath Matriarchy

One source of frustration was the matriarchy which was now her home. Left with barely enough money to cover funeral expenses, Aurelia Plath began teaching high school German after her husband's death. Plath's maternal grandmother, who lived in Winthrop, spent much time in
Wellesley caring for her grandchildren, and her mother's sister lived in the next town over (L 29). To Sylvia Plath, the absence of a man in the house was a factor which smothered her development. As evidenced by a journal entry from 1958, she felt it unnatural and stifling to grow up in an all-female environment:

The little white house on the corner with a family full of women. So many women, the house stank of them. The grandfather lived and worked at the country club, but the grandmother stayed home and cooked like a grandmother should. The father dead and rotten in the grave he barely paid for, and the mother working for bread like no poor woman should have to and being a good mother on top of it. The brother away at private school and the sister going to public school because there were men (but nobody liked her until she was sweet sixteen) and she wanted to: she always did what she wanted to. A stink of women: Lysol, cologne, rose water and glycerine...lipstick red on all three mouths (J 266).

To a late 1980s reader, a matter-of-fact line in a letter written by Plath at sixteen reflects her view of sex roles and might be humorous if it were not so sad. She explains, "My father is dead now, so my mother teaches instead" (HJN 6-14-48).

Plath's was an atypical American household. In 1948, only a quarter of all women with school-age children were employed outside the home (Woloch 502-3). The figure was probably closer to nil in Wellesley. The unfortunate situation was worsened by society's view of working mothers. Dr. Benjamin Spock's Baby and Child Care reached fourteen million readers between 1946 and 1960 and conveyed the grim warning that working
mothers were shirking their responsibilities to the detriment of their children and society:

> Some mothers have to work to make a living. Usually their children turn out all right, because some reasonably good arrangement is made for their care. But others grow up neglected and maladjusted....It doesn't make sense to let mothers go to work making dresses in factories or tapping typewriters in offices, and have them pay other people to do a poorer job of bringing up their children (459-60, Woloch 499).

Plath bought Spock's book when she became a parent and appears to have read it with care. Her copy, now at Smith, has extensive underlining.

World War II left many households without men for extended periods of time (and, obviously, permanently in some cases), but Plath probably felt that her case was different since her father was not coming back and her family had little to look forward to. The post-war euphoria of a returning man would not engulf the Plath home as it would others. 1945's waves of happiness, felt in other homes, would contrast with the feeling in the Plath home and would only reinforce Sylvia's sense of deprivation.

At a time when women were forced out of the job market and back into the home, the woman in Plath's family had to continue working. Sylvia seems to have adopted her father's view that her mother's proper place was in the home. Without a man in the house, Aurelia Plath was forced to assume masculine roles which caused her to appear grotesque to her daughter. The daughter seems to have twisted this perception of her
mother and applied it to the other female members of the family. Plath's view of family gatherings is tainted by her disappointment with her non-traditional, fatherless family and by her evident dislike of the females in her family. Her poem "Family Reunion" paints the family visitation through her eyes:

Outside in the street I hear
A car door slam; voices coming near;
Incoherent scraps of talk
And high heels clicking up the walk;
The doorbell rends the noonday heat
With copper claws;
A second's pause
The dull drums of my pulses beat
Against a silence wearing thin.
The door now opens from within.
Oh, hear the clash of people meeting—
The laughter and the screams of greeting:

Fat always, and out of breath,
A greasy smack on every cheek
From Aunt Elizabeth;
There, that's the pink, pleased squeak
Of Cousin Jane, our spinster with
The faded eyes
And hands like nervous butterflies;
While rough as splintered wood
Across them all
Rasps the jarring baritone of Uncle Paul;
The youngest nephew gives a fretful whine
And drools at the reception line.

Like a diver on a lofty spar of land
Atop the flight of stairs I stand.
A whirlpool leers at me,
Absorbent as a sponge;
I cast off my identity
And make the fatal plunge (Poems 300-1, Appendix).

The first stanza establishes the family reunion as a cataclysmic invasion. Violent and destructive terms dominate the poem: guests are hardly welcome when the bell "rengs the noonday heat/With copper claws."
While the arriving men win no prizes, the women are certainly worse. The two female relatives here again reflect Plath's feeling of entrapment in a matriarchical world. She fears that she will become either the spinster or the repulsive aunt.

Her relatives' arrival in the poem is a disruption which forces her to temporarily adopt a plastic personality—something Plath did well. She felt she had to be all things to all people, and nowhere is this more evident than in her written correspondence. Plath wrote thousands of letters in her life. By the content of her letters a reader can immediately discern whether the addressee was a close friend, a family member, or an acquaintance. Those in the first category were rare. Plath had no great confidante. But she wanted everyone to think that they were her confidante and best friend. As she "cast[s] off [her] identity" in the poem, she often casts off her real demeanor in her letters in order to make the reader more comfortable. Although she dwells on morbid and disturbing topics in her journals, she rarely does so in letters.

This phenomenon is most evident later on in a comparison of her diaries and her "relentlessly cheerful" letters home to her mother (Leonard). While it is not unusual for a correspondent to tailor her message to her addressee, Plath's different voices are striking because of the often
alarming disparity in letters she wrote in the same week or day. Her
diverse personalities in letters, diaries and poetry expose the strain she
felt in attempting to juggle fronts and facades for different people.

Sylvia and Warren Plath

The sole male in the house was Warren Plath. While biographers and
literary critics have spilled gallons of ink over the mother-daughter
relationship in the Plath family, without exception their articles and
books are devoid of information about the sibling relationship in the
family. A reasonable explanation for this is Warren Plath's refusal to
grant interviews about his sister. He saw what happened to his mother
when she chose to enter the literary fray, and he chose to steer clear.
Nevertheless, some analysis is necessary. Warren's story would be an
invaluable source of information and would allow additional evaluation of
the Plath personality. What little is known about him suggests that he
was his sister's intellectual equal--no small statement.

In a preface to her published collection of Sylvia's correspondence,
Aurelia Plath notes that her daughter's reaction to Warren's birth was
disappointment that he was not a girl. At least two persons who have
spoken to Aurelia Plath relate that she goes so far as to say that Sylvia resented her brother's birth and "lorded over him" during childhood (SVD 2-5-88; WC 1-1-88). Sylvia was an intense competitor with everyone she ever came in contact with; this competition was heightened between brother and sister. They competed for the approval and love of their mother. Plath's journals show that she and her brother always equated love with approval.

Whether she intended to or not, Aurelia Plath drove her children to overachieve to the point where they felt they would not be loved without constant tangible accomplishments to lay before their mother. Two explanations for Sylvia Plath's believing this seem plausible, though neither is particularly satisfying. First, as a child of eight, Plath sensed (irrationally) that she was somehow responsible for her abandonment by her father. Failure to appease her mother might lead this remaining parent to depart as well, believed the child. Secondly, some Plath scholars claim that she had viewed her father as the person who protected her from her mother. Once he was gone, the daughter feared that she would be the object of constant criticism and verbal abuse fueled by the mother's knowledge that Plath had loved her father more. They explain that Plath worked diligently to please her so as to avoid criticism by her
I see this compulsion to share her triumphs with her mother as a hint at the problem between Plath and her mother. Biographer Wagner-Martin describes the family dynamics after the death of Otto Plath:

> No wonder Sylvia was fearful about her standing with her mother: she had in the past been judged more critically, she felt, by Aurelia than by Otto. It was her mother's letters that urged her to be better, to do more difficult things, to try to excel (29-30).

Plath probably grew to resent her mother not because she was critical of her, but because she constantly praised her and expected the world of her daughter. I think she would have had greater respect for mother if Mrs. Plath had been more critical of her once in a while.

Aurelia Plath explains that Sylvia stopped listening to her endless praise in college and deflected any kind words by saying, "Oh, you only say that because you're my mother" (AP notes). I doubt Plath was feigning modesty. She was annoyed at what she perceived to be her inadequacy and was dismayed that her mother could be so proud of anything short of perfection. After years of listening to her praise, Plath, who had a poor self image, began to feel that her mother was pathetic for wasting her encouragement on an unworthy person.

In a sad passage, Mrs. Plath acknowledges what she sees as a misunderstanding:
When Sylvia became ill in 1953, I realized she thought love and praise were linked and that if she couldn't achieve, she would lose both. Of course, we all praised her work, taking pride in it and rejoicing with her when it was recognized, mainly because the acceptance of it meant so much to her. But that didn't mean we'd love her any the less if she never produced another poem or painting. In her depression, she was deaf to all explanations (AP notes).

Another 1958 Plath journal fragment reads, "Old need of giving Mother accomplishments, getting reward of love....Hate of mother, jealousy of brother...." (J 277). Feeling that love was at stake, the Plath children felt a deeper need to compete than most sibling rivals.

Plath was jealous of her brother's academic achievements. He was an excellent student who attended Exeter and Harvard. Incessant written descriptions of Smith and Harvard as "the Best colleges in the United States" were Plath's way of reminding herself that she was on her brother's academic and intellectual plane (L 220). Again, her insecurity surfaces. She hoped to convince herself that Smith was truly as prestigious as Harvard. The entire academic establishment represented by Harvard seemed to bother Sylvia, particularly after she was rejected for a mere summer course there. " Feeling, too, of competing with Warren: the looming image of Harvard is equated with him," noted Plath to herself (J 280).

Plath finally made it to Harvard Yard for a summer course in German the summer after her suicide attempt (Wagner-Martin 115). However, this
acceptance came too late to be very satisfying for Plath. She felt that her brother had been invited to enter Harvard through the front door and that she had been forced to crawl in through a back door. Her brother's apparent academic superiority was particularly crushing because of Plath's tunnel vision. To her, home was the proving ground for the outside world. She seemed to reason that if she could not even be the best in her own house, she would have immense difficulty competing in the outside world. Of course, this fear was absurd, since Sylvia was at least immodest enough to see that the Plaths were not the average children.

A likely aggravating factor in their competition was America's attitude towards the relative importance of educating women as compared to educating men. As a female, Plath had to work harder than her brother to prove herself worthy of a top-notch education. Since women at that time were thought destined for motherhood and domestic life, educating them was less important than instilling in them values which would be vital to raising families. A woman's education was, therefore, to be more practical. Betty Friedan believed that America's diminution of women's education was a grave problem: "The key to the trap is, of course, education. The feminine mystique has made higher education for women seem suspect, unnecessary and even dangerous" (357).
Wilbury Crockett concedes that there was an understanding at that time in Plath's high school that a male's education was of greater importance than a female's. This attitude seems to have made more of a dent in Aurelia Plath than in her daughter; nevertheless, Sylvia was not unscathed by it. Professor Ira Sadoff explains that twentieth-century women poets have tried to compensate for this societal perception. He suggests that numerous successful female poets have consciously or unconsciously felt the need to fill their poems with obscure classical allusions in order to prove that they are as erudite as their male counterparts, such as Eliot or Lowell. Elizabeth Bishop, Anne Sexton, and Adrienne Rich all do this, says Sadoff. Plath's poetry indicates that she too yielded to this compulsion. She wanted to demonstrate that her education ranked with any other.

Although Plath claims after the fact that she wanted to attend public schools, I suspect she envied her brother for his education. Her letters and journals often mention Warren with some reference to his private schooling. It could be that the bias against female education led her mother to send only her brother to an exclusive private school. More likely, the Plaths' financial situation made it impossible to send both children.
Another focus of competition for the Plath children was marriage. Both were ingrained with the idea that marriage was the only course to take in life. As the oldest child, Sylvia worried about the possible consequences of her brother's marrying first. She thought seriously about marriage as a task before her as early as high school and eventually beat Warren to the altar by six years (AP notes). Her husband, Ted Hughes, was not the first man she considered marrying.

Plath's hunt started early, as she felt pressured to meet some biological and social marriage deadline. Even as a sophomore at Smith, she wrote worriedly, "The fact remains, I have at best three years in which to meet eligible people" (J 38). Fellow Smith alumna Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963, the year Plath died, announced that "seventy-four percent of all American women now marry before they are twenty-four" (Friedan 25). Plath wed four months before her twenty-fourth birthday.

Because Plath was a perceptive and unflinching analyst of her own shortcomings, she recognized her envy of her brother as well as other petty jealousies, which were more often reserved for females. "Among the Bumblebees," a short story written at Smith, shows a repentant Plath in the character of Alice:

Alice Denway was her father's pet....Her baby brother Warren
favored their mother’s side of the family, and he was blond and gentle and always sickly. Alice liked to tease Warren, because it made her feel strong and superior when he began to fuss and cry. Warren cried a lot, but he never tattled on her (JP 306-7).

The ruthless young protagonist goes on to torment her brother physically and psychologically. The story was written in her first two two years at Smith, but her recognition of the cruelty she had shown her brother came just before college: “Then there is your brother,” she writes, “You fought with him when you were little, threw tin soldiers at his head, gouged his neck with a careless flick of your ice skate...and then last summer, as you worked on the farm, you grew to love him....” (J 26, JP 306). “The only perfect love I have is for my brother. Because I cannot love him physically, I shall always love him,” was Sylvia Plath’s assessment years later, recorded just weeks before meeting a man with whom she fell in love immediately: Ted Hughes (J 102). Her statement proved to be sadly prophetic.

_Wellesley High School_

Plath found, however, that competing with her brother was a simple task next to the intense social and economic competition she faced upon moving to Wellesley. Her family was not in the same financial league with
those of most of her classmates. She parodies her own plight in *The Bell Jar*:

> Look what can happen in this country, they'd say. A girl lives in some out-of-the-way town for nineteen years, so poor she can't afford a magazine, and then she gets a scholarship to college and wins a prize here and a prize there and ends up steering New York like her own private car (2-3).

Academics were going to be the equalizer in life for her, and she knew it.

Plath knew she was an exceptional child. Modesty could not have come easily to a girl who was first published in a Boston newspaper at age eight (Plath Interview). Nevertheless, a perceived social inferiority bred in Plath an underdog mentality which drove her to prove herself.

Free-lance writer Rachel Cowan graduated from Wellesley High School less than ten years after Plath. Like Plath, Cowan moved to the town around the age of ten (Cowan 18). In *Growing Up Yanqui*, a book about Cowan's experiences with the Peace Corps, she spends a few pages explaining Wellesley in the fifties. (We can safely assume that the Wellesley she knew differed little from the Wellesley Plath experienced, since the 1950s description Cowan gives still fits Wellesley today.)

Cowan's compulsion to live up to the social standards of her new surroundings paralleled Plath's. After draping Wellesley in the requisite adjectives—Protestant, upper-middle class, conservative, safe—she compares her community in Virginia and Wellesley society:
Wellesley's values were antithetical to the ones I had grown up with....it was as if we had arrived in a foreign country. Back in Virginia, nobody cared how big your house was, or what your father did, or how you dressed. Nobody fenced off his yard, so we could roam all over, and we called the grown-ups by their first names. In Wellesley it was different. We sat in rows at school, we bowed our heads to repeat mechanically the Lord's Prayer, and we had to memorize "In Flanders Fields" and "The Courtship of Miles Standish." Even in sixth grade, we noticed what clothes other kids wore, and the "best" children went to Miss Ferguson's dancing class, wearing white gloves. In Virginia we used to sing, "Whistle while you work, Nixon is a jerk, Eisenhower's going sour, whistle while you work." In Wellesley everybody's parents had voted for Eisenhower in 1952; they all admired Senator Joseph McCarthy (Cowan 18).

Clearly, some of Cowan's impressions stem from North-South cultural differences and may be hyperbole, yet these observations from another newcomer are instinctive in understanding the place that became Plath's bell jar.

A letter she wrote to her German pen pal in 1948 discusses Wellesley. The letter is valuable as it forces Plath to sum up her life and country in a matter of pages. She is conscious of being a fortunate, intelligent, sheltered girl, but her attitudes simultaneously reveal her as the product of her protected childhood. The letter begins with Plath's acknowledgement that she lives in a "snug, sunny little home...[in a] complacent little town." But before long, Plath is offering conservative value-laden explanations of American society to her friend, Hans. "Men and women are preferred" when they are college graduates, Plath asserts (HJN 9-24-48).
A person mentioned often in Plath's letters to Germany was Wilbury Crockett, her honors English teacher for each of her three years at Wellesley High School. "Father figure" and "high school mentor" are two titles often foisted upon him by Plath's biographers, but neither quite fits this extraordinary man. Another student's description of Crockett echoes Plath's affection for the man:

I feel that my years in Mr. Crockett's classes were a pivotal influence in my life choices. Under his gentle tutelage, I learned a respect for critical thinking, clear writing and academic quality which led to a career closely tied to the university. In the high school atmosphere of the 1950s, it was not easy for a woman to value her intellectual ability and Mr. Crockett was a potent catalyst (Program 4-9-83).

Plath had a nasty revisionist streak in her which often caused her to downgrade and belittle people and events from her past. Almost all things Wellesley were targets of this reassessment process. Her admiration for Crockett, however, did not waver. After her suicide attempt in 1953, Crockett was the only visitor she would allow. Theirs was a close relationship which continued by mail and visits until Plath's death.

The poet's assimilation of conservative American values was accelerated by the fact that she became a teenager in 1945, at the outset of a conservative period of American history. World War II played a major role in shaping Plath, because the War's end was responsible for the atmosphere in which she attended high school. Crockett talks about the
post-war period at the school:

I think they were the golden years of the school. The intellectual atmosphere was such that it has never been since. Academic achievement mattered a great deal. Students never came to class unprepared... It was a reactionary period. There was a huge sigh of relief that the war was finally over. There was a feeling of "let's get on with it" (WC 1-1-88).

When the war ended, the stress was on the return to normalcy. Wellesley students again worked to achieve the only conceivable or socially acceptable post-high school goal—college. Competition for admission to American colleges was especially fierce when Plath applied to Smith. The wave of returning college age men caused college enrollment to double between 1945 and 1950 (Woloch 508). As Plath approached graduation in 1950 she never considered any option other than college. Plath's teacher alludes above to the the kind of high standards and competition which both helped and haunted the poet for the remainder of her life.

Her academic achievements came in droves, but Plath never managed to overcome concerns about the inferior status label she felt had been placed upon her and her family. Plath actually employed small strategies to combat what she perceived to be a lower-class image. Clothes, for instance, were a serious matter to her. Esther's cathartic rooftop dress disposal in The Bell Jar, while symbolic, also reflects Plath's very real sartorial obsession (124). Extraordinary academic achievement was a
method of overcoming social and financial insecurity, and so was fashion.

Aurelia Plath always went far out of her way to clothe her daughter extravagantly, recalls Wilbury Crockett. A combination of Plath’s penchant for fashion and her good looks later helped her land a job modeling bathing suits for a campus newspaper in London (L 236-7).

Outwardly, Plath downplayed her materialism, writing to her German friend, "I am so tired of all the young girls here who think of nothing but party dresses....Why must people try to fool themselves by thinking that money, clothes, and cars are so important?" (HJN 1-2-50). Despite these complaints, her actions did not match her words. Professor Garry Leonard advances a very plausible theory which addresses Plath's material concerns. He points to advertising in women’s magazines of the 1950s and explains that many of the ads carried the message that women could make superficial, cosmetic adjustments which would actually bring about sweeping changes in their lives. A new hair style or pair of stockings was enough to solve almost any problem a woman could have, suggested the ads (GL Mile 3). Friedan’s chapter entitled “The Sexual Sell” takes a similar tack in demonstrating ways in which advertisers and retailers trivialized the lives of women by telling them that a particular product would validate their domestic experiences (Friedan 206-32).
One of Plath’s last essays, “America! America!,” published posthumously, addresses the conforming pressures she felt in high school. Plath wants others to believe that she could successfully repel outside influences, so she paints herself as a more valiant, individualistic martyr than she probably was: “Somehow it didn’t take—this initiation into the nihil of belonging. Maybe I was just too weird to begin with....The privilege of being anybody was turning its other face—to the pressure of being everybody; ergo, no one” (JP 55). Plath again celebrates her supposed high school individuality in “Initiation,” a short story about her resisting the lure to join a high school sorority, an incident mentioned in “America! America!” [JP 285-94].

Her revisionist tendencies extended to herself as well as to other people and events from her past. As Plath looked back, she tried to revise memories of her own conformity because she wished later that she had been a strident individualist. Both “Initiation” and “America! America!” have revisionist aims. I am particularly suspicious of “America! America!” since it was written to appeal to British editors and readers. Written shortly before her death, at a time when Plath was desperate for money, the essay is her most famous and one that may be less than sincere. Plath knew what would sell—an essay critical of American
education would be more marketable in Britain than a laudatory piece would be. And during the winter of 1962-3, money was more important to Plath than was the truth.

Both these questionable essays dwell on status and material wealth. Plath’s tone indicates that she felt she was somehow better off for having come from a middle class family. This attitude, however, is the product of twenty-twenty hindsight. In a passage written during high school Plath voices her true frustration about the drawbacks of her relative social position:

To learn that a boy will make a careless remark about "your side of town" as he drives you to a roadhouse in his father's latest chromium-plated convertible. To learn that you might have been more of an artist than you are if you had been born into a family of wealthy intellectuals (J 21).

The reference to convertibles and wealth denotes the keen class-consciousness which Plath is reluctant to admit. Attitudes like these above are evidence of her central paradox: the coexistence of her manic drive and ambition with her low self-confidence and inordinate emotional pliability.

She dismissed the strengths in her family background and measured her family by unreasonably high standards. Her father had been a well-known college professor and her mother was an educator who had been offered a position as a dean at Northeastern University, yet Plath felt shortchanged
by not coming from a family of wealthy thinkers (Wagner-Martin 41). By the end of high school, Plath's expectations about intellectual achievement and status had become almost unreasonable. As she was rarely content to accept her standing in any area, her impossibly high expectations were a constant source of colossal disappointments.

Plath was extremely bitter about her relative poverty. She longed to share the experiences more wealthy Wellesley classmates took for granted. Travel was one such experience. As an aspiring writer, she knew that she would have far more material for stories and poems if she had the chance to travel. Esther Greenwood voices Plath's frustration just four pages into the novel:

These girls looked awfully bored to me. I talked with one of them, and she was bored with yachts and bored with flying around in airplanes and bored with skiing in Switzerland at Christmas and bored with men in Brazil. Girls like that make me sick. I'm so jealous I can't speak. Nineteen years, and I hadn't been out of New England except for this trip to New York.

High school and college journal entries reveal that Plath was deeply concerned about maintaining her stream of scholastic accomplishments, probably because this was the area in which she could outdo her classmates as well as the area in which she expected most of herself.

Seemingly schizophrenic paragraphs alternate nervous self-congratulation for lists of awards and successes with castigation for her rare failures.
One conceited journal entry in the wake of awards from a *Mademoiselle*
writing contest sounds has the inflated sound of Biff Loman before his
immersion in reality:

Face it kid, you've had a hell of a lot of good breaks. No
Elizabeth Taylor, maybe. No child Hemingway, but God, you
are growing up. In other words, you've come a long way from
the ugly introvert you were only five years ago. Pats on the
back in order? O.K., tan, tall, blondish, not half bad. And
brains, "intuitiveness" in one direction at least. You get
along with a great many different kinds of people. Under the
same roof, close living, even. You have no real worries
about snobbishness, pride, or a swelled head. You are
willing to work. Hard, too. You have willpower and are
getting to be practical about living--and also you are
getting published. So you got a good right to write all you
want. Four acceptances in three months--$500 *Mile*, $25,
$10 *Seventeen*, $3.50 *Christian Science Monitor* (from caviar
to peanuts, I like it all the way) (J 53).

But self-satisfaction inevitably wears off and negativism returns.

Plath was never one to accentuate the positive.

*Boys And Girls*

She accentuated the negative when she wrote in her journal on the
topic of girls. Plath had a small, close circle of female friends in high
school, but she found it easier to identify with males (WC 1-1-88). I
think her dissatisfaction with her own life and her habit of glorifying
what she did not have (a father, money, etc.) causes this disdain for
females. Plath explores the reasons for her peculiar sentiments:

You wonder if the absence of an older man in the house has
anything to do with your intense craving for male company and the delight in the restful low sound of a group of boys, talking and laughing...Being born a woman is my awful tragedy....Yes, God, I want to talk to everybody I can as deeply as I can. I want to be able to sleep in an open field, to travel west, to walk freely at night...My greatest trouble, arising from my basic and egoistic self-love, is jealousy. I am jealous of men.... (J 26, 29-30,34).

The clear implication here is that Plath felt that a man's life was free of many of the societal restrictions that hindered women and was therefore the life worth living. Boys simply had more fun, believed Plath. In describing a ride by car with three boys from Cape Cod to Wellesley, a rather boring nuisance under normal circumstances, Plath makes it sound like a grand festival: "...the three boys and the beer and the queer freeness of the situation makes me feel like laughing forever" (J 48). She again implies that males have a wider range of experiences available to them and are somehow freer than females. This assessment was undoubtedly correct in the 1950s.

Beyond this surface jealousy of males lies a contempt for women which is likely seeded in her turbulent relationship with her mother. She blames the older women she has known for a feeling which sounds much like Friedan's "problem that has no name," her description of the societally-condoned and societally-perpetuated emptiness in the lives of women:

It is all the mothers I have known who have wanted me to be what I have not felt like being from my heart and...the society which seems to want us to be what we do not want
to be from our hearts: I am angry at these people and images. I do not seem to be able to live up to them. Because I don't want to (J 271, Friedan).

Plath believed that the older women in her life were forcing her towards the horrible type of life led in her novel by Dodo Conway, the mother with so many children who "got a special discount from the local milkman" (BJ 130). At the same time, Plath had ambivalent feelings about criticizing women like her mother.

She knew that her mother, widowed early, had worked hard to provide her children with a home and an education and was wary of sounding like an ingrate. Her mother's sacrifice made her feel obligated to love her in times when she resented her. Ironically, her mother's concern and years of work was at the source of their problem. Sylvia could not bear to feel indebted to another. However, their relationship improved when Plath left for college and they ceased to live on top of one another.
1950-1955

"His father had been murdered by his enraged serfs; the young man had neither money nor friends, and detested his enforced studies."--Underlined passage in introduction of Plath's own copy of *The Brothers Karamazov* (Dostoevsky v.).

In light of her already low opinion of female social life, Plath's decision to attend Smith seems misguided. Plath's life would have been vastly different had she attended a coed college instead of Smith. As far as I can tell, Plath only considered Smith and Wellesley. Her mother plays cultural historian as she explains how they arrived at these two:

Sylvia and [I] agreed that it was better to go to a girls' college where one could work as diligently as one pleased without the punishment of rejection by boys who would refuse to date a girl with the reputation of "being a grind." In the 1950s it was still wise for a bright girl to "hide her light under a bushel" (AP notes).

If she applied and was rejected by any other schools, it is a well-kept secret. Her mother favored Smith, despite the clear financial advantages in her living at home and attending Wellesley (WC 1-1-88).

Mrs. Plath's explanation above stresses the idea that academics was the consideration upon which all decisions were to be based. Her mother's life and death emphasis on scholastic success undoubtedly put pressure on Plath. Drafts of Aurelia Plath's introduction to *Letters Home by Sylvia Plath* demonstrate that she was as ambitious, calculating, and concerned with long-range goals as her daughter was. Mrs. Plath writes that she
chose to move to Wellesley because she knew that Wellesley College offered scholarships to a number of residents each year and hoped that Sylvia could earn one (AP notes).

She eventually received a different scholarship—one given by the Smith Club of Wellesley and financed by mystery writer Olive Higgins Prouty, a resident of nearby Brookline, Mass. Prouty later played an enormous financial role in Plath’s life. She paid for medical expenses incident to Plath's first suicide attempt and sent large checks to her during her years in Britain. Although mystery was not a genre that appealed to Plath, she viewed Prouty as she did most "established" writers—with awe. Her benefactress' advice, usually encouraging, carried significant weight with Plath.

*Beginning Smith*

Smith only exacerbated the sensations of inferiority and deprivation Plath felt in Wellesley. Most of Smith's 2,000 young women were as wealthy and well-connected as the girls in her high school. Little wonder that Plath despaired that she would never be able to compete with people who had far greater resources and opportunities than she. Although her
family was decidedly middle class, they had always been surrounded by wealthy people in Wellesley. Plath felt poor next to her neighbors and could not fully understand that she was actually privileged in comparison to the vast majority of America.

More than half of the members of Plath's graduating class at Smith came from private schools (Boroff 124). A look at Plath's page from the 1955 yearbook probably gives some clue as to the social position of her classmates: four of twelve girls on the page list prestigious Manhattan addresses as home (Hamper 132, Appendix). The March 1961 issue of *Mademoiselle* includes an article on Smith. The college "is uniquely America in mid-century...the goals of suburbia triumphant—and underneath, a nagging disquietude about the flaccidity of life," gushes *Mademoiselle* (Boroff 123). I'll accept the first assertion but am dubious about the second.

Although the article oozes with the style of 1950s women's magazines and is difficult to get through, it yields some explanations of the atmosphere which enveloped Plath for five years (she attended Smith for nine semesters because of her attempted suicide). The article's second paragraph evokes Betty Friedan's worst nightmare:

> At Smith, the all-American girl—upper-class style—is apotheosized and trained. She emerges fully accoutered to rout the forces of darkness in the suburban community in
which she will ultimately settle. At the very least, Smith offers basic training for P.T.A. chairmanship. But there are loftier reaches too: Smith women are deployed all over the world as helpmeets for successful and influential husbands, and as shakers and movers in their own right. An awe-struck member of the faculty said reverently: "The Smith girl is the kind who winds up administering a museum and two hospitals, and serving as a trustee of the Boston Symphony" (Boroff 122).

Both the content and the word choice are revealing in this paragraph.

Solid, suburban, second-class citizenship--the type of life for which Aurelia Plath was originally destined—is the "lofty" dream outlined here.

Women are deployed much as footsoldiers are. "Helpmeet," a Southern word for companion, helper, or wife, according to Webster's, is also an excellent choice, for it carries a subservient, subordinate connotation and conjures the limited life which Smith women saw ahead of them (Mish 563). Historian Nancy Woloch writes of the 1950s, "As college attendance became an increasingly 'average' part of life, the aspirations of college women [undergraduates] tended to become average as well" (509). This description appears to have fit Plath's college, if not Plath herself.

Mademoiselle's piece cites a campus survey by a sociologist who asked Smith students where they saw themselves in ten years. Marriage, children, travel, "cultural activity," and "a vocation in reserve" were common responses which prompted the sociologist to complain sadly, "Nobody wanted to go to the moon; nobody even wanted to be a millionaire" (Boroff 183). Smith students experienced a "steady, relentless pressure"
to marry, but, the writer adds reassuringly, "It is absurd...for young women to rush into marriage. They obviously can have it both ways--career, at least a fling at it, and marriage" (Boroff 185). Characteristically, a woman's career is demeaned and described by a term used to describe a sexual relationship. If a woman is to choose one or the other--career or marriage—it had better be the second, implies the author. A job can be tried and discarded, but marriage is a non-negotiable part of a young woman's future.

The content of this article gives credence to Friedan's assertion that women's magazines were partially to blame for "the problem that has no name" (Friedan 34). The cultural messages sent to Plath and her contemporaries said that even college-educated women should have low aspirations. Marriage and motherhood were supposed to be as fulfilling as any career could be. Women were "taught to pity the neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy women who wanted to be poets or physicists or presidents," writes Friedan (15-6). Adlai Stevenson's shocking commencement address delivered at Plath's graduation, discussed below, reinforced the "aim low" message. Most women who entered Smith in the fall of 1950 were thus programmed to have low aspirations.

While Plath, like her peers, was obsessed with marriage, she did not
dismiss a future that would include writing. As she arrived at Smith, one psychological lift spurred her to give equal time to writing and husband hunting. Her short story "And Summer Will Not Come Again" was published, conveniently, in the August 1950 issue of *Seventeen*, shortly before Plath headed for Northampton. *Seventeen* was undoubtedly near the top of the reading lists of many of Plath's classmates, and the story made her a celebrity when she arrived (Wagner-Martin 57). However, this one coup was not enough to bolster her confidence for long.

**Success And Failure**

Doubts about her talents plagued her during freshman year. A year-end B+ in English seemed the end of the world to the girl who had never seen less than an A in English. This defeat was enough to make her consider an art major (Wagner-Martin 63). (Plath was indeed an excellent artist and later hoped to write and illustrate children's books.) Plath biographer Linda Wagner-Martin has a rare moment of insight:

The most noticeable trait of Sylvia's personality in 1950, as she entered college, was the relentless demand she made on herself. Anything less than complete success in all areas was failure to her. Now that she had achieved such successes as her academic record, her admission to Smith, even her social life, she might have been ready to believe in her own abilities and talent. But Sylvia was not....She was reassured only by A's on assignments and by boys calling her for dates (60,62).
Plath felt as if she were on an academic treadmill from which there was no escape. 1980s college students can understand how even a person far less driven than Plath could lose herself so completely in the quest to satisfy societally-defined markers of success.

Life is probably easier for a C student who gradually works up to an A because there is virtually nowhere to go but up. Academia contributes to this situation. "The Applicant" to a college or graduate school is told that preference is given to students who demonstrate improvement and that academic dissipation can be fatal. A student such as Sylvia Plath has everything to lose. At Smith she suffered from academic acrophobia—a fear that she could not maintain her impressive grades.

Plath actually uses the circus highwire as a metaphor for her own tense existence in "Aerialist," a poem she wrote at Smith:

```plaintext
Each night, this adroit young lady
Lies among sheets
Shredded fine as snowflakes
Until dream takes her body
From bed to strict tryouts
In tightrope acrobatics

Nightly she balances
Cat-clever on perilous wire
In a gigantic hall,
Footing her delicate dances
To whipcrack and roar
Which speak her maestro's will

Gilded, coming correct
Across that sultry air,
She steps, halts, hung
In dead center of her act
As great weights drop all about her
```
And commence to swing.

Lessoned thus, the girl
Parries the lunge and menace
Of every pendulum;
By deft duck and twirl
She draws applause; bright harness
Bites keen into each brave limb

Then, this tough stint done, she curtsies
And serenely plummets down
To traverse glass floor
And get safe home; but, turning with trained eyes,
Tiger-tamer and grinning clown
Squat, bowling black balls at her.

Tall trucks roll in
With a thunder like lions; all aims
And lumbering moves
To trap this outrageous nimble queen
And shatter the atoms
Her nine so slippery lives.

Sighting the stratagem
Of black weight, black ball, black truck,
With a last artful dodge she leaps
Through hoop of that hazardous dream
To sit up stark awake
As the loud alarmclock stops.

Now as penalty for her skill
By day she must walk in dread
Steel gauntlets of traffic, terror-struck
Lest, out of spite, the whole
Elaborate scaffold of sky overhead
Fall racketing finale on her luck (Poems 331-2, Appendix).

Numerous elements of Plath's problems are here. She cites the feeling of
"weights" on her, the need for "applause," and "walks in dread" out of
worries that the world will come crashing down around her if she lets up
for a second.

One of the saddest elements of the poem is Plath's acknowledgement
that her pressures and fears are a "penalty for her skill." She senses that
she and others expect a great deal from her since she is phenomenally
talented. The confusion is in the identity of the "maestro" in stanza two; Plath may be suggesting that someone else is calling the shots for her, but I see Plath as her own maestro. Her conductor is an apt and sanitary personification of her collected anxieties and ambition. Plath is reluctant to concede that it is she who contributes most to the "weight" she feels obligated to carry.

The burdens she dreaded were not only scholastic. In addition to the rigmarole of high school measurements of achievement—marks, SATs, class rank, college acceptance—Plath had to withstand the intense approval-motivated competition of her home. If she ever rested for too long, she feared, her brother would surpass her. Her compulsion for unadulterated success and her exaggerated fear of the consequences of failure caused her to avoid subjects and pursuits where she did not excel. The hard sciences were a source of angst for Plath.

The facts of Plath's sophomore battles in laboratory science classes do not mesh with the breezy, satirical accounts in The Bell Jar. This disparity is related to Plath's consciousness of her failure phobia. She must have realized that she sometimes avoided risks and challenges and tried to dismiss and defuse the problem with humor. Esther Greenwood's explanation of her evasion of chemistry (Plath's in actuality) is witty:

The day I went into physics class it was death....
studied those formulas, I went to class and watched balls roll down slides and listened to bells ring and by the end of the semester most of the other girls had failed and I had a straight A....That's what gave me the idea of escaping the next semester of chemistry. I may have made a straight A in physics, but I was panic-struck. Physics made me sick the whole time I learned it....I knew chemistry would be worse....I would fail outright....So I went to my Class Dean with a clever plan....I needed the time to take a course in Shakespeare, since I was, after all, an English major. She knew and I knew perfectly well I would get a straight A again in the chemistry course, so what was the point of my taking the exams....Mr Manzi [her physics professor] was in perfect agreement with my plan (BJ 37-39).

While the story about Plath's con is true, her real-life fear of chemistry was a good deal more serious than Esther lets on. As a preface to the following letter from her daughter, Aurelia Plath noted that Sylvia's pre-chemistry crisis was an example of "her magnifying a situation all out of proportion":

Every week I dread opening my science book; it is the subject of the course that annihilates my will and love of life....I feel that if I could only drop it second semester I could at least see the light of life again....Science is, to me, useless drudgery for no purpose.....Oh! Every fibre of me rebels against the unnecessary torture I am going through. If only I wanted to understand it, but I don't. I am revolted by it, obsessed (L 98-9, Appendix).

The letter and Bell Jar excerpt show two ways Plath dealt with failure. In some instances she avoided the dangerous subject completely. Plath dropped German during her senior year when it became clear that she was headed for a B (L 172). At other times she denigrated the subject matter in an attempt to explain her falling short of mastery. She stretches her explanation by complaining that she preferred classes requiring creativity to those requiring "memory and rote" (L 98).
One is taken aback to read how Plath, the daughter of a scientist, dismisses science as "useless drudgery" instead of simply acknowledging that she was not Smith's best science student. "You wish you had been made to know botany, zoology, and science when you were young. But with your father dead, you leaned abnormally to the "humanities" personality of your mother," she complained in her journal (26). Plath probably grew complacent in her humanities classes and could not bear to begin a class in which the material did not come naturally to her.

The above letter to her mother includes a rare display of weakness and disarray. Most of Plath's letters home from Smith were filled with reassuring news of scholastic, literary and extracurricular achievements. Some of these included: election to the Honors Board, selection as editor of the Smith Review, selection as a guest editor for the August 1953 issue of Mademoiselle, election to Phi Beta Kappa in her junior year, completion of a senior honors thesis on Dostoevsky, and various poetry awards. Perhaps the most alarming fact of her life at Smith is that the social demands Plath made on herself were as frenzied and unreasonable as the academic goals she aspired to. When these demands are considered in tandem with the fact that heredity and Plath's body chemistry made her virtually unable to function on less than ten hours of sleep per night, her
regimen appears all the more Spartan (L 172). If success with males mattered less to Plath than getting A's, it was at least a close second.

Outside The Classroom

The following high school diary entry speaks volumes about Plath:

Just now I don't care where I end up at college. I have a new formal, a row of dates with a fine, sensitive boy, an eye for color and form in the springtime, and two nicely-shaped legs to pedal my bike to school. Art + writing are always with me. I love people. And a few of them love me back. I am the one who creates part of my fate, and I'll fight destiny all the way. So! (L 41).

In one small, remarkable paragraph she manages to enumerate many of her greatest concerns in life—writing, boys, looks, clothes, and manipulation by outside forces. Also of note is her dismissal of worries about college. This mask of unconcern is a signature of her correspondence.

Social success meant giving in and changing herself to suit those around her. Plath often worried that boys would be intimidated by her superior intellect and fierce competitive spirit. Until she met Ted Hughes, who may or may not have been in her intellectual league, Plath's relationships with males normally revolved around activities of interest to the male. She writes later of the pleasure she found in nights spent listening to Hughes reading aloud (L 256). But in high school and college
she probably found few young men who shared her idea of a fun date.

Since her brains seemed to get in the way with boys, Plath tried on occasion to alter her image and escape into another persona. Summer, the only time of year when she could escape her own self-induced academic hysteria, was the appropriate time to try on a new personality. Plath spent part of one high school summer on Martha's Vineyard and adopted the nickname "Sherry," presumably thinking that this name projected a less bookish image than her own (Wagner-Martin 43). Elly Higginbottom is the strange alias Esther Greenwood presents to new male acquaintances on two occasions. When she becomes Elly she is released from the pressure of living up to the expectations that burden Esther. Temporarily becoming someone else freed her from the drudgery of being Esther or Sylvia.

As she was with nearly everything else, Plath was dissatisfied with her appearance. At 5' 9" she considered herself physically intimidating to many boys. Not only was she smart, she thought, but gawky, too. Her complaints were groundless. High school and college pictures show an indisputably attractive young woman. I would have been more intimidated by her voice than by her height or brains. Plath spoke with an unbelievable accent which falls somewhere between George Plimpton and Sir Laurence Olivier. In a 1962 BBC interview she declares that she is
more American than British, but one is hard pressed to take her seriously because she makes her declaration in a nearly British accent (Plath Interview).

Plath also made cosmetic changes to shake up her social life. During the summer of 1954 Plath decided to bleach her light brown hair to a Monroe-like platinum. Her mother noted then, "It was more than a surface alteration; she was 'trying out' a more daring, adventuresome personality...." (L 138). Garry Leonard would suggest that this change was inspired by messages and images of blondes absorbed in reading women's magazines. Friedan cites a point in the 1950s when three out of ten women dyed their hair blonde (17). While hair color seems a frivolous point, Plath took the matter seriously and saw it as crucial to her identity. Esther attends a movie and relates that the blonde female lead was "nice," while the black-haired girl was "sexy" (45). As one critic explains, this characterization is consistent with the long-prevailing stereotype: "The blonde...represents genteel, pure femininity, while the brunette...symbolizes a more full-blooded, passionate and spontaneous nature" (Cawelti 75-6). Typically, Plath was unsatisfied with choosing between the two personas and strove to have it both ways.

In the same manner that she monitors her literary conquests, Plath
keeps an actual tally of dates accepted and turned down in her journals (Wagner-Martin 48). She appears to be computing her romantic grade point average. As with her academic life, Plath was inclined to live and die by the judgment of her suitors. A rejection by a male was tantamount to an F in English. She needed constant male approval as desperately as she needed academic assurances.

Like many of her Smith classmates, much of her social life in college revolved around Ivy League males. Plath became caught up in a social regimen which involved weekends with Yale men. Never one to settle for second best, Plath seems to have traveled in some of Yale’s most exclusive circles. A letter to her mother includes a description of a party at William F. Buckley’s house (L 82). Plath was a friend of his sister’s. Two of Plath’s longest relationships involved Ivy Leaguers: Dick Norton of Yale and the Harvard Medical School and Yalie Richard Sassoon (Wagner-Martin 67). Her experiences with Norton are instructive in exposing Plath’s sentiments about traditional sex roles and the complicated realities of marriage.

Years of inundation by conservative ideas in Wellesley and Northampton left Plath a vehemently traditional woman. In a BBC radio interview four months before her suicide, Plath declared, "I'm an old-fashioned American."
That's probably why I'm in England and why I'll always stay in England. I'm about fifty years behind, as far as my preferences go." Specifically, Plath's family situation and fraternization with conservative people molded her ideas about the relative importance of males and females in the world. She notes in her journals that a college friend once tried to cheer her up with the following reassurance: "But think how happy you can make a man someday" (14). In fact, Plath did want to find a man and make him happy. This ambition was second only to her goal of literary renown.

Her mother explains, "From the time Sylvia was a little girl, she catered to the male of any age so as to bolster his sense of superiority....She did not pretend the male was superior; she sought out those who were..." (L 297). She was inclined to give the average male far more credit than the average female. Many reasons can be found for this trend, including her early deification of her father and villification of her mother and her competitiveness with females. Plath makes Spock appear to have been a prophet when he wrote, "A child, whether he's young or old, boy or girl, needs to be friendly with other men if the father is not there" (467). She was very close to the few older males in her life.

Ties with her maternal grandfather, with an uncle just thirteen years
her senior, and with Wilbury Crockett were at once free of the confusing Electra aspects of Plath’s father-daughter association and more relaxed than the often tense bond between her and her mother. Her short stories include several kind uncle characters who take the young female protagonist aside and shield her from assorted dangers and injustices. Plath viewed these men as friends and protectors rather than competitors. Unavoidably, competition figured prominently in Plath’s romantic pursuits.

Competing for male attention had a more personal angle than competing for grades or awards. Winning the war with other girls was distinct from excelling in class. Finding a companion depended upon a male’s approval of her looks and personality as well as her mind. A desire to beat out other women led her to find fault in them when it was unreasonable to do so. But Plath’s patience with females wore thin for reasons beyond jealousy and competition. The same resentment voiced about her childhood “house full of women” surfaces over and over again in later years.

While living in a house with other women in Britain, Plath lashes out at her housemates: "...it is damn uncomfortable...with girls...[the] house bristles with suspicion and frigidity...the damnable thing is that they can sense insecurity and meanness like animals smell blood" (J 104). She describes women in terms befitting predatory creatures. Plath either
considered herself their prey or recognized that she was as much a predator as they were. Other journal notes accuse women of being catty, petty, weak, overly emotional, and intellectually inferior. Upon arrival in Britain, she wrote, "It seems the Victorian age of emancipation is yet dominant here: there isn't a woman professor I have that I admire personally!" (L 219).

Those who would portray Plath as some feminist martyr have their work cut out for them in explaining Plath's journals. In reaction to her unhappy matriarchal upbringing and her traditional central European father, she became more misogynist than feminist. Wilbury Crockett speculates about Plath's reaction to feminism: "She would have hooted at it" (1-1-88). She blamed women for the collective problems of women and only began to alter her opinion after being wronged by Hughes. Significantly, Plath never felt that magazines or publishers treated her any differently than they did men. Plath was quick to blame herself for everything and was not inclined to look at men as oppressors. All of her literary heroes—Eliot, Dostoevsky, Joyce, Auden, Shakespeare—affected her profoundly, and all were men.

She resented others for employing the same tactics she did. Clothes, status, and other frivolities obsessed her competitors, she thought,
somehow convinced that she was immune to such behavior. Meanwhile, she went ahead and dissected her intricate male-catching strategies in her journals (137-8). The competition was fierce. Male friends were of greater value because of their potential for marriage and because they were more likely to be the people headed for the organization-man career tracks after graduation.

Plath satirizes the prevailing attitude: "Get a nice little, safe little, sweet little loving little imitation man who'll give you babies and bread and a secure roof and a green lawn and money money money every month. Compromise" (J 267). Plath's cut-throat drive to impress men partially explains why her male friends outnumbered the females. Female ties would only last so long—Plath's close, post-Smith, female friends can be counted on one hand. One Wellesley friend who became a boyfriend was Dick Norton.

An editorial note in Plath's journals describes him as follows: "Dick Norton in many ways represented a sort of fifties ideal: the serious, attractive boy-next-door who wanted to be a doctor and have a proper doctor's wife" (38). Norton, whose mother was close to Aurelia Plath, bears the dubious distinction of having been the inspiration for The Bell Jar's Buddy Willard. Plath and Norton dated off and on during Plath's first
three years at Smith. As was the case with most of her romantic
interests, Norton was three years older than Plath. A product of a
wealthy, conservative family and a somewhat medieval mother, Norton
saw life as a logical series of necessary steps, one of which was
marriage. He fell in love with Plath and wanted to marry her.

Plath never seriously considered marrying him. A non-negotiable
criteria for Plath was a respect for her attempts at writing. Norton
counted himself out of Plath's future when he declared, "A poem is but an
infinitessimal speck of dust." "That killed any possibility of
understanding between them," writes Aurelia Plath (AP notes). Plath also
perceived that he sought a docile, housebound mother for a wife. Realizing
this life was not for her, she re-assessed her relationship with Norton:

The most saddening thing to admit is that I am not in love. I
can only love (if that means self-denial—or does it mean
self-fulfillment? Or both?) by giving up my love, of self and
ambitions. Why, why, why, can't I combine ambition for
myself and another....[Dick] accuses me of "struggling for
dominance"....Sure, I'm a little afraid of being dominated...But
that doesn't mean I...want to dominate...It is only balance
that I ask for. Not the continual subordination of one
person's interests to the continual advancement of another's
(J 39,43).

She is almost apologetic about desiring equality and is too unsure of her
convictions to confront Norton. Additionally, Plath's sentiments show a
fear that making choices automatically results in making compromises.

By committing to Norton she would be abandoning her personal ambitions,
she believed. She was unable to envision a middle ground.

One of the best-known images in *The Bell Jar* addresses Plath's exacerbation with the way marital and career choices were particularly irrevocable and limiting for women:

> I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was...the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and offbeat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out.

> I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs to choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet (BJ 85).

Electing one career means closing off the rest. "I could never be either a complete scholar or a complete housewife or a complete writer: I must combine a little of all, and thereby be imperfect in all," she wrote to her mother (219). The warning would be depressing enough to a man; it was even more complicated for a woman who felt obligated to work marriage into the equation.

Plath's confusion was exacerbated by the commencement address at her Smith graduation in 1955. Adlai Stevenson, the standard bearer for 1950s
liberalism, came to Northampton and delivered a speech which sounded better suited to 1855 than 1955. Plath, who was politically progressive, called Stevenson "the Abe Lincoln of our age," and in 1952 she wrote to Warren to express her disappointment with the outcome of the election (Wagner-Martin 98, L 96). While she was proud of being a "traditional" person, she knew the difference between "traditional" and backwards.

Her mother was backwards, she thought. Plath believed that her support of Stevenson was a concrete symbol of the difference between her outlook and that of her mother, who was an Eisenhower devotee. She maintained a liberal political outlook throughout her life. In 1956 she lashed out at her mother for supporting the President and his policies in Korea (L 283).

Her political thinking seems to be one area in which Plath was relatively unscathed by external influences. Evidently, she rejected the prevailing political sentiments of her conservative college and high school. By graduation she was vehemently opposed to Eisenhower and was particularly concerned about the threat of atomic war.

I doubt the 1988 commencement speaker at Smith will address the class as "girls," as Stevenson did (Stevenson 195). He began with miles of circumlocution apparently designed to establish the enormous importance
of American women in the future of Western culture. The role of women was far less trivial than it looked, he assured. Stevenson detailed how women were to help men make a better world. Their lives would be lives of *useful* subordination. "Now as I have said, women, especially educated women such as you, have a unique opportunity to influence us, man and boy, and to play a direct part in the unfolding drama of our free society," said Stevenson. Never did he suggest that women could actually play a meaningful role on their own. His idea of a "direct role" was a supporting one.

Here are excerpts of this truly amazing, reactionary speech:

> You may be hitched to one of these creatures we call "Western man" and I think part of your job is to keep him Western, to keep him truly purposeful, to keep him whole. In short, while I have had very little experience as a wife or mother.....This assignment for you, as wives and mothers, has great advantages. In the first place, it is homework. You can do it in the living room with a baby in your lap or in the kitchen with a can opener in your hands. And, secondly, it is important work worthy of you, whoever you are, or your education, whatever it is, because we shall defeat totalitarian, authoritarian ideas only by better ideas....I hope I have not painted too depressing a view of your future, for the fact is that Western marriage and motherhood are yet another instance of the emergence of individual freedom in our Western society.....women "never had it so good" as you do. And in spite of the difficulties of domesticity you have a way to participate actively....In short, far from the vocation of marriage and motherhood leading you away from the great issues of the day, it brings you back to their very center and places upon you an infinitely deeper and more intimate responsibility than that borne by the majority of those who hit the headlines and make the news and live in such a turmoil of great issues that they end by being totally unable to distinguish which issues are really great....in modern America the home is not the boundary of a woman's life. There are outside activities aplenty.....what you have learned here can fit you as nothing else can for the primary
task of making homes...I could wish for you no better vocation than that (Stevenson 196-7, Appendix).

Suddenly, one of the leading progressives of the century was pushing her in the same direction her mother wanted her to go. Moreover, Stevenson sent Plath a confusing signal which her mother had never conveyed—that femininity and scholarship do not go hand in hand. He explains that a woman helps her society most by tending to her husband and children. This message did not derail Plath's plans to continue writing and to attend graduate school, but it may have caused her to feel guilty for pursuing her dreams.

Plath's journals and letters make no reference to the speech, but I speculate that Stevenson's domestic mandate likely had disastrous effects on Plath since she was so fatally susceptible to influence by those she worshipped. She had little confidence in her own views and probably had difficulty questioning the wisdom of a recognized statesman like Stevenson. When Plath found that her ideas did not jibe with those of a mentor, she normally looked to change herself to solve the problem. She was hesitant to question those she held to be authority figures.

At Smith Sylvia Plath's diploma was *summa cum laude* (one of only four in her class) (Commencement Program). Journal entries show that she began planning her successful assault on a Fulbright Scholarship as early as her sophomore year (J 40). Had she not received the Fulbright, she
would have faced a crisis regarding the direction her life should take.

Plath would have dismissed her mountain of Smith achievements as
meaningless if she had been denied a Fulbright. The Fulbright gave her an
important confidence boost which spurred her to continue her writing. In
September of 1955 she sailed for Britain to begin her year of Fulbright
study.
1955-1963

In a few years the world will be marvelling at us; we both have such strength and creativity and productive discipline.--Sylvia Plath (L 254)

While no one knew better than Sylvia how to celebrate life, her double, the shadow of her brilliant flame, betrayed her. Her vulnerable ego, her fatal flaw, gave way under prolonged stress and caused her to view herself as rejected and as an utter failure. Always within her lingered the driving fear that an arid period in her writing would again engulf her. When it came or threatened, she could not wait it out in faith that it would pass.--Aurelia Plath (notes)

An incident alleged to have taken place even before Plath arrived at Newnham College is at least indirectly related to the pressures which both drove and constricted her. On the voyage to Britain, Plath exploded in a frenzy of promiscuity, spending time with so many male passengers that she became the talk of the ship. In a twist worthy of Melville, the ship was named the S.S. United States. The story comes from a passenger close to Wilbury Crockett, who would undoubtedly squash the tale about Plath if he thought it false (WC 1-1-88). Biographer Wagner-Martin relays the story, too, but inexplicably chooses not to footnote her source (123).

By all accounts, Plath was not a paragon of chastity, but she was concerned with image and propriety. The obvious way, then, to interpret her voyage is as a cathartic release from accountability, responsibility, and expectations. Safely out of her mother's reach for the first time, in the middle of the Atlantic with a group of people she neither knew, cared
about, nor expected to see again, the effect was that of a hand releasing a stiff steel spring compressed tightly for too long. She was discarding her disciplined, repressed self and temporarily adopting another new image. Plath wrote later, "It's a hell of a responsibility to be yourself. It's much easier to be somebody else or nobody at all" (J 270).

Shortly after her arrival, she wrote to herself:

There is a certain need of practical Machiavellian living: a casualness that must be cultivated...I have powerful physical, intellectual, and emotional forces which must have outlets, creative, or they turn to destruction and waste (e.g. drinking...and making indiscriminate love) (J 108, 131).

Sylvia Plath seeking "casualness" is an incongruous thought. At Smith she had been careful to watch her step publicly for fear of losing her scholarship, but on the ship she felt no tangible sword of Damocles. Another possible explanation is that she acted secretly to spite her mother from a safe distance. Plath and her mother never saw eye to eye on sexual issues.

She felt her mother's attitudes toward sex were Victorian. Most of the time Plath avoided the subject completely, as in her antiseptic collection of letters to her mother. She did her best to rebel against her mother's wishes. Esther Greenwood makes light of this serious dispute in my favorite lines from The Bell Jar:

When Constantin asked if I would like to come up to his apartment to hear some balalaika records I smiled to myself. My mother had always told me never under any
circumstances to go with a man to a man's rooms after an evening out, it could mean only the one thing. "I am very fond of balalaika music," I said (BJ 88).

Plath's alter ego later ridicules her fictional mother by citing an article from Reader's Digest entitled "In Defense of Chastity," a piece which her mother had cut out and mailed to her at school (BJ 88-9).

Their mother-daughter relationship included discussions about sex, maintains Aurelia Plath. After they had both read works by Henrik Ibsen, Havelock Ellis, and others, the two would discuss the books and the themes of intimacy. Mrs. Plath drew upon discussions with her high school students to gain information about the mores of her daughter's contemporaries. "Our shared reading went far afield and intense discussion went on intermittently throughout her senior high school years and the first three years in college" (AP notes). Plath never mentions these talks.

Ted Hughes

Mrs. Plath was not completely in the dark regarding her daughter's romantic preferences:

Sylvia told me that the man she married would always have to "out distance" her in something; if she ever married a writer she would want to be sure he would keep ahead of her always. In Ted Hughes, she had absolute confidence that this would be so (AP notes).
Wilbury Crockett seconds this, adding that she wrote that "she could never marry a man who she could dominate" (1-1-88). Plath sought a cross between a parasitic and symbiotic relationship: "I must pour my energies through the direction and force of my mate. My only free act is choosing or refusing that mate" (J 23). Implicit in this statement is a belief in a loss of power as soon as the chase has ended and the marriage begins. She wanted to be led more than she wanted to lead. Plath, ambitious and headstrong, nevertheless wanted to allow her husband to shape her career and life.

Friedan addresses Plath's desire:

The feminine mystique permits, even encourages, women to ignore the question of their identity. The mystique says they can answer the question "Who am I?" by saying "Tom's wife...Mary's mother." But I don't think the mystique would have such power over American women if they did not fear to face this terrifying blank which makes them unable to see themselves after twenty-one (71-2).

Plath put off her crisis by deciding early on that she would pursue a Fulbright. However, she could not picture what she would do after the second year of her grant. She met Hughes just before her scholarship was renewed for her second year at Newnham College. Hughes gave her something she could grasp and served as a guide to her uncertain future.

All her life, Plath lived from accolade to accolade. Depending on the importance of the prize, it might buoy her spirits and fuel her life for a
day or a month. Prizes gave Plath something tangible to work towards in high school and college. When she finally finished her education, Plath suddenly had to bring direction and goals to her own life:

\[
\text{My worst habit is my fear and my destructive rationalizing. Suddenly my life, which had always clearly defined immediate and long-range objectives—a Smith scholarship, a Smith degree, a won poetry or story contest, a Fulbright, a Europe trip, a lover, a husband--has or appears to have none (J 250).}
\]

Forced to evaluate her own efforts, she invariably concluded that her writing and other deeds were inferior.

Strangely, life was easier for Plath when she could rely on some prize committee or professor to measure her worth. She was in need of a yardstick against which she could measure her accomplishments. Hughes filled the rapidly approaching void just in time. Her relationship with him bolstered her self-esteem and legitimized a continued pursuit of a career in writing. Together, Plath and Hughes would go on having their worth judged by others—magazine editors and publishers. But their greatest marks of acceptance came long after Plath's death. She would have needed fifty pages in her journal to describe the excitement she would have felt had she lived to receive the 1982 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry and would not have been surprised at Hughes' being named Poet Laureate in 1984 (Sherry 275).

I think it amazing that Plath and Hughes found each other. Very few
men would have fit Plath's rigid marital specifications. Plath considered
the possibility that her perfect man might never materialize:

Let's face it, I am in danger of wanting my personal absolute
to be a demigod of a man, and as there aren't many around, I
often unconsciously manufacture my own. And then, I
retreat and revel in poetry and literature where the reward
value is tangible and accepted. I really do not think deeply,
really deeply. I want a romantic, nonexistent hero (J 78).

She sought an attractive man who was on or above her intellectual plane (a
minute group, to be sure), shared and supported her interest in writing,
brought her prestige and the chance of an exotic life, and who had the same
lofty standards and goals. Ted Hughes was so obviously her match that
they married just four months after being introduced at a party. Plath
placed him on a pedestal which decayed with time.

When Plath married, she actually made more unreasonable demands of
herself than ever before. Two of the most striking features of the
marriage were the constant competition between the pair and Plath's
inclination to live vicariously through Hughes. One sure harbinger of the
marriage was that the two had read and admired each other's poetry before
they met (L 181). Even so, their relationship began from practically the
same superior/inferior point which had launched Plath's parents; when
they married in 1956, Hughes was two years older and was a more
accomplished poet. This situation was a mixed blessing, for their
marriage was soon as troubled as Plath's parents' had been. The strength
of their personalities probably made it inevitable that their marriage would be unsuccessful.

Plath wallowed in the fact that she was married to a rising British literary figure, but also felt insecure about her own writing when she compared herself to Hughes. Any Plath praise for contemporary poets was usually spoken begrudgingly (she made a career out of knocking Adrienne Rich, among others), but she gushed over Hughes:

Ted is probably the most brilliant boy I know. I am constantly amazed at his vast fund of knowledge and understanding....I'm starting to send out batches of Ted's poems out to American magazines because I want the editors to be crying for him when we come to America next June. He...writes prolifically as shooting stars in August. I have great faith in his promise (L 251, 253).

She was happy to settle for a position as the wife of a famous poet until she could earn the title of "famous poet" for herself. Plath had come of age in a decade where advertising, media, presidential candidates, and the arts had conveyed the message that women who assumed secondary roles found fulfillment (Woloch 499). Her willingness to postpone her primary goal—success as a poet—is a sign of the love and admiration Plath must have felt for Hughes. "I live in him until I live on my own," wrote Mrs. Ted Hughes, who spent an enormous amount of time typing her husband's works without reciprocity.

Her vicarious satisfaction parallels the pleasure Aurelia Plath took in
(or from) her daughter's achievements. Plath was annoyed by her mother's feelings, which extended beyond normal maternal pride:

Read Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia* this morning after Ted left for the library. An almost exact description of my feelings and reasons for suicide: a transferred murderous impulse from my mother onto myself: the "vampire" metaphor Freud uses, "draining the ego": that is exactly the feeling I have getting in the way of my writing: Mother's clutch....[I] don't write because [I] feel [I] have to give the stories to her, or that she will appropriate them....So my work is to have fun in my work and to FEEL THAT MY WORKS ARE MINE. She may use them, put them about her room when published, but I did them and she has nothing to do with them....MY WRITING IS MY WRITING IS MY WRITING (J 279-80).

For Plath, the drawback of her husband's success was that she felt obligated to keep pace with him. Money continued to be a motivating concern in her life. I think she considered it her duty to type his works so that she might make up for the disproportionate share of their income brought in by him. Acceptances and earnings were the only real way to assign comparative values to their efforts, and Plath despaired that she inevitably came out on the short end. Hughes tried to assist his wife by drawing up long, strange lists of possible topics for poems (Appendix).

She failed to stop and consider that she was completing her second B.A. at Newnham College, that Hughes had a two-year head start with publishers, and that he enjoyed the celebrity of a Briton writing in Britain. While she felt insignificant in America's literary world, Plath was even more intimidated by London's old guard. The two made plans to move to
the United States upon completion of her Fulbright work. Plath planned to obtain a college teaching post and probably anticipated that returning home would put her in a better position to write and share in supporting her husband.

Returning to Smith

Plath was as ruthless in her pursuit of a job as she was in her pursuit of men or literary glory. Consistent with her early reverence for Smith and Harvard, Sylvia Plath bought into the still-prevalent Eastern educational snobbery which discounts the value of all but a few select colleges. When applying to graduate school as a Smith senior, Plath looked to Columbia and Radcliffe, announcing, "Harvard is the only place I really want to go!" (L 141,152-3). In 1957 Plath had no advanced degree and had never taught a day in her life, yet when she applied for teaching positions she characteristically wrote to a formidable group of schools: Radcliffe, Tufts, Brandeis, and Smith. The sheltered and narrow-minded young woman who had not been west or south of New York wrote, "I have no desire to go west, even middle-west," and added, "I would rather be an office typist in New England than teach in Michigan" (J 71, L 291).
Plath landed a position with her alma mater in 1958 and fantasized about regaining the stature she once had on the campus. The experience proved to be disastrous, and Plath describes it in a way befitting a literary figure: "How everything shrinks on return— you can't go home again...." (J 182). She found college to be more exhausting from the chalkboard side of the classroom and was miserable because she had little time to write (though her husband was writing full-time). Away from it for a time, Plath began to idealize writing, an activity which had left her despondent many times before. By November of '58 she wrote, "If I get through this year, no matter how badly, it will be the biggest victory I've ever done" (J 179).

Class preparation was an endless task for the neurotic new professor. Plath was quick to decide that she was a failure at teaching, even though Smith invited her to return for the following year. She was never satisfied with what she had or what she was doing at a particular time. Plath explained away her quitting by imagining that leaving Smith would instantly cure her problems. The circumstances were similar to those surrounding her difficulty with science as a student at Smith. She imagined that she could become an exemplary professor immediately, since she loved literature and was familiar with Smith. As always, she
was impatient. When she found that teaching was a vocation that did not come quickly or naturally, she dismissed the possibility that she would continue teaching.

Plath was embarrassed to concede that she had erred in returning to Smith. Her ego was bruised when she saw that few people remembered her and that the members of the English faculty were not the wonderful people she had made them out to be while a student. Overreacting and revising, Plath began to doubt the value of her undergraduate years at Smith.

*Beacon Hill and Magazines*

Her departure from Smith had a positive effect on her outlook, if only temporarily. Plath and Hughes found a small apartment on Boston's old money Beacon Hill with plans for both to write full time. She was in awe of the wealth and the staid atmosphere of her new neighborhood. The original young, upwardly-mobile intellectual, Plath was about twenty-five years ahead of her time. The Hughes' were in over their heads. Their tastes were Beacon Hill, but their income was not—a point which distressed Plath. To alleviate this, Plath took secretarial jobs at Harvard and the Massachusetts General Hospital (L 322). Hughes stayed at home to
write. They lived and died by the acceptances and rejections which appeared in their mailbox.

Plath's pre-conceived notions of social success pushed her towards a fantastic, heady world from which there was no turning back. Considering her mind-set and the company she kept, her high standards seem a logical result. She lived on Beacon Hill, audited Robert Lowell's poetry class, and went for after-class martinis at the bar of the Ritz-Carlton with classmate Anne Sexton. As a young outsider who lacked the time or money to compete, Plath felt the way a bad golfer would in a foursome with Palmer, Nicklaus, and Hogan.

Plath was a worshipper of what she perceived to be establishment institutions and sought their acceptance and approval. She thought in terms of black and white. To her, there was no such thing as partial success or moderate success; Plath's goals were all or nothing. Being published in the Atlantic or Poetry was gratifying, but the published poem was tainted in her eyes if it had been rejected by The New Yorker, Plath's idea of the literary promised land. The New Yorker was the establishment entity which plagued her as Harvard had years before. She was uncompromising in her disdain for settling for second best. As a person who grew to take only moderate solace in an acceptance from the Atlantic,
Plath's pleasures must have been few and far between.

Women's magazines exercised a substantial influence over Plath. Being published in *Mademoiselle* and *Ladies' Home Journal* was an early goal of hers. She placed acceptances from these magazines among other elusive targets: "I need to have written a novel, a book of poems, a *Ladies' Home Journal* or *New Yorker* story, and I will be poreless and radiant....When I write my first *Ladies Home Journal* story I will have made a step forward" (J 286, 297). Years of reading what she found on her mother's Wellesley coffee table shaped her notions of literary success. As she did with other goals, she had a plan for achievement:

...I can write for the women's slicks: More and more this comes over me—as *easily* as I wrote for *Seventeen*, while keeping my art intact: I shall call myself *Sylvan Hughes*—pleasantly woods, colorful—yet sexless and close to my own name: a perfectly euphonious magazine name (J 214).

As far as I can make out from context, Plath is serious here.

Plath's month interning for *Mademoiselle* led her to seek acceptance by the women's periodicals. Her editor at the magazine was a departure from the fawning professors of Smith. The woman was highly critical of her writing; the problem was one of style. An able writer, Plath had trouble imitating the friendly, affected style peculiar to *Mademoiselle* and a few of its competitors. Plath had written press releases as part of a campus job and was accustomed to a more formal type of writing. She aspired to
appear in the women's magazines but never indicated that she hoped to develop their style of writing. Once at Mademoiselle, however, her view changed instantly. She concluded that she must master their ways in four weeks or be a failure (Wagner-Martin 98).

She never did perfect their style and exaggerated the importance of this shortcoming. Plath had been assigned an article before she went to New York and had completed it before her arrival. Her editor stunned her by demanding weeks of rewrites, something Plath had probably never heard of before (Wagner-Martin 98). Plath took the entire experience too seriously and it affected her for many years. I think her perceived rejection by Mademoiselle in June of 1953 made her more determined to submit material to women's magazines. Through Mademoiselle's dissatisfaction with her writing, all of the women's magazines had shown that they were her superiors, a notion which made Plath respect them. A rejection was a both a challenge and a damaging indictment of her inadequacies. Plath grew determined to beat her previous nemeses.

The New Yorker, while not a women's magazine, held Plath spellbound. Long after she had published stories in most of the prominent magazines, the "disdainful" New Yorker continued to shut her out (L 285). Plath feels compelled to note that she is an oppressed outsider in order to account for
her poor luck:

We have two depressing rejections: Ted's poems from London magazine and my story from *The New Yorker*. A Smith girl secretary there [at *The New Yorker*]...who admired my work told me they accept stories only from a very narrow clique of writers usually; better to send poems, which I did (L 284).

Plath is apologizing to herself and to her mother for her inability to appear in the magazine. Her mother was not upset with her, but Plath was bothered because she knew how happy her mother would be if she finally made *The New Yorker*. When the magazine finally accepted two of her poems in 1958 she wrote to her mother an ecstatic letter full of capital letters and exclamation points and noted that she had received "a glowing letter" (L 345, Appendix). This acceptance was arguably the high point of her two-year stay in the United States. A photograph in the Smith's Plath Collection shows a beaming Plath reading an August 1958 issue of *The New Yorker* containing her first poem.

*Britain and The Bell Jar*

Most of Plath's Boston writing was devoted to short stories; she sold very few of these. Sensing that it was again time for a change and that Hughes would be happier in Britain, the couple left for London in the fall of 1959. During the last eight years of her life, Plath never lived in one place
for more than a year. When her writing slowed or some other problem arose, she inevitably decided that a change of scenery was the needed elixir. She believed that her surroundings as well as specific physical materials affected her success.

Professor Susan Van Dyne of Smith College has done extensive research which sheds light on Plath's material insecurities. Her examination of Plath's manuscripts revealed that certain objects had an almost mystical effect on Plath, who was, surprisingly, quite superstitious and intrigued by the occult. For example, the poet claims that the name for "The Colossus," both a poem and the title of her first published collection of poetry, was provided by a Ouija board (L 346, J 244). Van Dyne presents explanations which suggest the hidden significance of the pink stationery Plath used when she wrote The Bell Jar and the Ariel poems. Examining Plath's idiosyncrasies seems totally frivolous but actually explains a great deal about her very real obsessions:

The novel itself was typed on the back of Smith College memorandum paper. During her year of teaching, she'd appropriated enough of the high-quality pink bond memo pads for several drafts of her anticipated novel. It could be that she hoarded her stock of good paper. I'm prone to believe the gesture is also tinged with a desire for sympathetic magic. The novel was safely in the hands of the printer in October; it would be published the next January. Nothing gave Plath such a sense of security and conviction of her own generativity as the tangible evidence of past success. The impressive stack of novel manuscript was at once satisfying proof of her productivity and a familiar stimulus to feelings of creativity ("More...5).
This simple, logical explanation is thought-provoking stuff to anyone who has ever mounted a diploma on a wall or set a trophy on a desk. However, it also speaks to Plath's insatiable desire for tangible reminders of her worth.

She endured the excruciating post-graduate spells between acceptances and awards by wallowing in past triumphs. The Smith stationery brought her back to a place she had conquered as a student and must have erased her uncomfortable year as a professor there. Each time she typed a new page, she received a needed jolt of confidence and strength from the sight of the letterhead. Before typing the novel she explained her bizarre emotion-driven kleptomania in her journal:

> Got a queer and most overpowering urge today to write, or typewrite, my whole novel on the pink, stiff, lovely-textured Smith memorandum pads of 100 sheets each: a fetish: somehow, seeing a hunk of that pink paper, different from all the endless reams of white bond, my task seems finite, special, rose-cast. Bought a rose bulb for the bedroom light today and have already robbed enough notebooks from the supply closet for one and a half drafts of a 350 page novel. Will I do it....(J 201).

The strange plot thickened considerably when Plath wrote the *Ariel* poems in the fall and winter of 1962-3. She gave herself a double reinforcement by writing these poems on the back of the *Bell Jar* manuscript. But her mental gymnastics did not stop there. When she wrote out a poem, she attempted to inscribe it on the reverse of a *Bell Jar* page which had a theme parallel to the dominant theme in the new poem.
"The Bee Meeting," written the day after the caustic "The Courage of Shutting-Up," rounds out a venomous pair of poems (Poems 209-12, Appendix). Plath's careful choice of words eliminates any doubts about the tie to the *Bell Jar* manuscript. "I am as nude as a chicken neck" refers to the disarming line in the novel where Esther compares Buddy Willard's manhood to a turkey neck. The poem is typed on the back of the page which contains the very line. Plath's autobiographical speaker describes herself as "A gullible head untouched by their animosity," and a "pillar of white in a blackout of knives," and declares, "I am the magician's girl who does not flinch" (Poems 211-2, Appendix). Like Esther Greenwood, the speaker feels victimized and tries to remain stoic.

Van Dyne discusses the bee poems and their thematically-related flip sides: "It seems too neat to be coincidence that Plath should begin drafting these poems that respond so immediately to the break-up of her marriage with Hughes on the reverse of the chapter that marks Esther Greenwood's discovery of Buddy Willard's deception" ("More...5). I agree. As is clear from her poetry and prose, Plath reveled in ironic twists. Her attacking Ted Hughes on the back of pages which slash Dick Norton had to have given her private satisfaction which she could not achieve as directly in public. Writing on the reverse of *The Bell Jar* gave the poetry a semblance of order.
at a time when her life approached chaos.

Lashing out at Hughes for his mistreatment of her and at herself for having been so gullible becomes a more rational process when she reminds herself of a previous betrayal. As a perfectionist, Plath was particularly enraged that she had let herself make the same mistake twice. In writing the *Ariel* poems, her strange choice of stationery and twinning of thematic pages allowed her to attack her tormentors and to alternately punish and laud herself for past wins and losses.

1962-3

The high points of Plath's last few years—the births of her daughter and son and the publication of *The Colossus* and *The Bell Jar*—were matched by equally devastating setbacks, including a miscarriage, an appendectomy, and her husband's leaving her for another woman. Aurelia Plath lists a number of other factors which pushed her daughter to suicide on February 11, 1963:

1. The winter of '63—no sun visible for months (Sylvia is the mother)
2. Blackouts—London, not prepared for deep snow & ice
3. Alone at night—no light for reading
4. Deserted—sense of failure
5. Fear when pseudonym of the author of *Bell Jar* was revealed
6. Illness (AP notes).
In true twisted Plath fashion, the morbid list is scrawled on the back of a review of the novel in *The New Yorker*. What Mrs. Plath fails to note, and what probably disturbed Plath immensely, was that she had become her mother; she was suddenly a single young woman with two small children and little money.

When the marriage failed in the spring of 1962, Plath initially looked inward for the cause. Her poetry shows that she gradually overcame this compulsion and placed the blame on the proper person—Hughes. "Words heard, by accident, over the phone," "The Rabbit Catcher," "Burning the Letters," "The Jailer," and other well-known *Ariel* poems from 1962-3 give Hughes his due (Poems 202-3, 204-5, 193, 226-7). However, her blaming Hughes for the break-up did not stop her self-condemnation. Plath was furious at having committed herself so completely and for failing to anticipate the outcome of the relationship. Poems critical of herself and poems critical of Hughes dominate *Ariel*.

Robert Lowell’s 1966 foreward to *Ariel* includes this elegant description of Plath:

*She is driven forward by the pounding pistons of her heart. The title *Ariel* summons up Shakespeare’s lovely, though sightly chilling and androgenous spirit, but the truth is that this Ariel is the author’s horse. Dangerous, more powerful than man, machine-like from hard training, she herself is a little like a racehorse, galloping relentlessly with risked, outstretched neck, death hurdle after death hurdle toppled. She cries out for that rapid life of starting pistols, snapping tapes, and new world records broken. What is most heroic in*
her, though, is not her force, but the desperate practicality of her control, her hand of metal with its modest, womanish touch. Almost pure motion, she can endure "God, the great stasis in his vacuous night," hospitals, fever, paralysis, the iron lung, being stripped like a girl in the booth of a circus sideshow, dressed like a mannequin, tied down like Gulliver by the Lilliputians... apartments, babies, prim English landscapes, beehives, yew trees, gardens, the moon, hooks, the black boot, wounds, flowers with mouths like wounds, Belsen's lampshades made of human skin, Hitler's homicidal iron tanks clanking over Russia. Suicide, father hatred, self-loathing—nothing is too much for the macabre gaiety of her control. Yet it is too much; her art's immortality is life's disintegration (vii-viii).

As Lowell makes clear, Plath's need to purge herself of painful self-destructive obsessions—her husband, father, self-hatred—destroyed her while simultaneously inspiring her most powerful poetry. It makes sense that the caustic, critical side of Plath should produce her greatest art, for this was her most calculating and determined side.

Plath had endured ten years of trying to be a poet, and one problem I see during these years is that she had few normal life experiences from which to draw material. She tried to write without taking time to gain experiences to write about. When her life was suddenly flooded with catastrophic events, Plath felt compelled to criticize herself and her destroyers and gained an enormous reservoir of material for new poems. The result was Ariel.

While Hughes' infidelity was crushing, equally infuriating was the effect of the split on her career. A letter to her best friend from Smith explained that Plath and Hughes had always sold their writings through the
same literary agents in London. Word of the pair's impending divorce spread quickly through the close-knit writing community, and Plath was snubbed by many for fear of offending Hughes, who was a much more valuable commodity (SP notes). Plath had reason to believe that her writing income might soon slow to a trickle.

To me, returning to the United States would have been the obvious solution, but Plath's pride prevented her from making anything but a triumphant return. She was determined to overcome the end of the marriage. Showing Hughes and the world that she could flourish without him was her motivation. But her mother has an eloquent description of what happened instead:

Her physical energies had been depleted by illness, anxiety and overwork, and although she had for so long managed to be gallant and equal to the life-experience, some darker day than usual had temporarily made it seem impossible to pursue (L 500).

Plath's final essay, "Snow Blitz," makes light of her situation during Britain's killer winter of '62-3, one of the worst in a century (JP 27-35). Her tone is that of a person who is more amused than depressed by a bad situation. Plath laughs at inconveniences and danger in the essay, but letters from these final days show that her true state was desperate. Her journals would have held the best record of her violent mood swings. She kept a journal until three days before her death, but her personal writings from the last three years of her life were destroyed by her husband (J xv).
Her last two poems also reflect Plath's alternating calm and self-flagellation. "Balloons," dated February 5, 1963, is a straightforward work about her children (Poems 271-2). Even the most ardent feminist, biographical, or Freudian critic could find nothing there about Hughes or her deteriorating mental and emotional state. The same cannot be said of "Edge," written the same day:

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.

Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,
One at each little

Pitcher of milk, now empty.
She has folded

Them back into her body as petals
Of a rose close when the garden

Stiffens and odors bleed
From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower.

The moon has nothing to be sad about,
Staring from her hood of bone.

She is used to this sort of thing.
Her blacks crackle and drag. (Poems 272-3, Appendix).

British critic A. Alvarez states that this poem is "a poem of great peace and resignation, utterly without self-pity" (209). Plath was normally too hard on herself to conclude that other people and
circumstances were the sources of her anguish. In "Edge," she is resigned
to her fate but does not beckon for sympathy as she probably had a right to
do. The line "The moon has nothing to be sad about" and the body's "smile
of accomplishment" signal the reader not to mourn the woman's fatal
choice. She deflects sadness over the demise of the woman in the poem by
shifting the focus from the woman to the children to the moon. The
speaker concludes that perfection, Plath's quest, is achieved through
death.

Perfection is a singular concept which cannot be achieved
incrementally. A look at the way Plath divided the world in two hints at
her idea of perfection. The first world is the common world--the less
educated, less famous, less prestigious world which she has passed
through. She places herself above this world and has no desire to return to
it. Her haughty comments about a meeting with faculty from the
University of Massachusetts expose her feelings of Smith superiority and
her contempt for this first world:

Saturday night we drove down to meet some people on the
University of Massachusetts faculty. Very different people.
Somehow pathetic, wistful, or just pedantic and cranky. At
least Ted was relieved, and the prospect of work doesn't
worry him now, as these people are hardly genii (L 335).

A far different message comes across when Plath compares Hughes and
herself to people she respects: "...brilliant and rare as we are, how can we
hope to compete either with the regulation Ph.D.-experienced people or the 10-books-of-poetry-published people? Heaven knows" (L 291). This second world is the only one Plath strove to live within for most of her life.

She could have competed with anyone, but unfortunately she wanted to compete with everyone at once. To reach her perfect world, Plath tried to do too much at once and ended up overcommitting herself. Her desire to accomplish *everything* sometimes paralyzed her and prevented her from achieving *anything*. Unfortunately, she had no answer for a question she posed to herself in 1958: "Why do I feel I should have a Ph.D., that I am aimless, brainless without one, when I know what is inside is the only credential necessary for my identity?" (J 272).

One side of Plath is hopelessly mired in an irrational inferiority complex, while another part of her has some notion of her abilities and potential and will stop at nothing short of mastery of many aspects of life--poetry, prose, motherhood, marriage. She did not give a second thought to those she considered to be below her. Plath was not proud to rank above people for whom she had no respect. Her only concern was for those she admired and considered her competition. Of course, Plath's artistic drive was behind her quest for status. She wanted to produce
great poetry, but she could not enjoy the fruits of her labor. Plath always needed someone else to tell her that it was great.

The status which concerned her was not economic or social; rather, it was literary. Plath would have coveted an invitation to dinner with the editor of *The New Yorker* more than an invitation to dine at the White House. She would only accept that she had become a great artist when she could look around to see herself in the company of other poets she admired. Plath would never have been able to judge her own work fairly. She needed to achieve literary status in order to believe that she had achieved literary success.

She achieved, but seldom did she step back to savor the new level of success achieved. Plath dismissed her triumphs soon after they were achieved and began searching for the next one. When she published *The Colossus*, it seemed to be the proudest day of her life. Less than two years afterward, she said that she could not bear to read most of the poems in the collection (Plath Record). Plath was unable to put her success or ability in a relatively realistic perspective. Her standards forced her to live as if with blinders which caused her to always look skyward.

All that mattered was her poetry and her standing in the world of which she wanted to be part. She believed that in order to reach that
world she had to produce poetry and prose which met her own rigorous standards and, more importantly, the standards of the writers and editors she feared and admired. Plath could only be happy in a small, rarified, sparsely-populated world--the upper-most echelon of literary fame. Her success exceeded the dreams of ninety-nine percent of the people who set out to write, but she was never going to satisfy her own insatiable and ever-escalating goals and demands.

In 1956, three years after Plath's first suicide attempt, her mother wrote to her regarding the son of a family friend who was deeply depressed. Sylvia Plath's response included the following:

Try to give him a life perspective....Get him to go easy on himself; show him that people will love and respect him without ever asking what marks [grades] he has gotten. I remember I was terrified that if I wasn't successful writing, no one would find me interesting or valuable....Marks have no doubt become the black juggernaut of his life....Let him be gentle in his demands; tell himself he has as much right to work and be at Harvard as anyone...Tell him...that I only want to share some of my own experiences with him...that I thought...that my case was utterly hopeless....When he dies, his marks will not be written on his gravestone. If he has loved a book, been kind to someone, enjoyed a certain color in the sea--that is the thing that will show whether he has lived (L 133).

How eerie it is to read the kind of counsel that should have been given to Plath coming from her own hand. Her suicide is tragic for many reasons. Perhaps foremost among these is that she was conscious of her self-destructive obsessions and had some idea of how to defeat them, but
was finally rendered helpless against herself.
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Plath's obituary from London's *The Observer*, February 17, 1963:

Last Monday, Sylvia Plath, the American poetess and wife of Ted Hughes, died suddenly in London. She was thirty. She published her first and highly accomplished book of poems, *The Colossus*, in 1960. But it was only recently that the particular intensity of her genius found its perfect expression. For the last few months she had been writing continuously, almost as though possessed. In the last poems, she was systematically probing that narrow, violent area between the viable and the impossible, between experience which can be transmuted into poetry and that which is overwhelming. It represents a totally new breakthrough in modern verse, and establishes her, I think, as the most gifted woman poet of our time....She leaves two small children. The loss to literature is inestimable (Alvarez 213).
Here is a poem spoken by a girl with an Electra complex. Her father died while she thought he was God. Her case is complicated by the fact that her father was also a Nazi and her mother very possibly part Jewish. In the daughter the two strains marry and paralyze each other—she has to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it.
FAMILY REUNION

Outside in the street I hear
A car door slam,
An interval, with voices coming near:
Incoherent scraps of talk
And high heels clicking up the walk.
The door-bell rends the noonday heat
With copper claws.
A second's pause.
The dull drums of my pulses beat
Against a silence wearing thin.
The door now opens from within.
Oh, hear the clash of people meeting--
The laughing and the screams of greeting;

Fat always, and out of breath,
A greasy smack on every cheek
From Aunt Elizabeth;
There, that's the pink, pleased squeak
Of Cousin Jane, our spinster with the faded eyes
And hands like nervous butterflies;
And rough as splintered wood across them all
Raps the jarring baritone of Uncle Paul;
The youngest nephew gives a fretful wain
And drools at the reception line.

Like a diver on a lofty spar of land
Atop the flight of stairs I stand.

But there is nothing...nothing that can save,
And I must plunge into the flat green wave.

A whirlpool leers at me.
Absorbent as a sponge;
I cast off my identity
And make the fatal plunge.
June 17, 1948

Dear Hans-Joachim,

This afternoon I found your letter in the mailbox, so you see that it takes about a month for mail to cross the ocean.

As for your writing, I think that it is remarkably nice. I can imagine how difficult it must be for you to learn English - there are so many idioms and exceptions to every rule. Your printing is very neat and readable. If only you could see mine! The printing of a few of my classmates - yours is so much better by comparison.

I wish that you could visit me sometime or that I could visit you! You must work very hard in school. If we want to go to college (or a university), we must study hard and get good marks. However, a great part of American youth is carefree and happy, thinking only of parties and fun. Perhaps you have been told this already, but all in all, many of us have...
(Do send me a sample of your

drawings). I was under the impression that we have special magazines for young people. Have you any ideas and competitions for both girls and boys? I read in one of these magazines that you are to publish an example of your work. So we have to review all the books in every subject. These tests are for school - this week we have 31/2 hour examinations. As for my father, he worked at Boston University and the history of the bumblebee, so my mother must have been a professor at Boston University and wrote a book on the biology of the bumblebee instead of her book on the history of the bumblebee. It's a bit too much work, so I told you, before my mother passed away. I must ask you, if we are skilled enough to exchange ideas and win recognition. Perhaps you can win enough money to sponsor competitions.
December 24, 1950

Dear Hans-

How nice it was to hear from you again, and to get your wonderful picture! I appreciated it very much. Do not think I amcrest at your not writing for a while. I understand how busy and crowded life is, and I know that often it is hard to find a piece of time to write to far-off friends across the Atlantic.

I am now home from Christmas in New York, and it is a rest from college life. I finished working on the farm in September and then decided to head for Smith college in Northampton, Ill., which is only 100 miles away from home. I am very fortunate, for I could not have been able to go had I not received a scholarship which paid most of my expenses. Smith is a large place (3500 women students) and although I feel lost at times among such a great number of talented, intelligent girls, I am beginning to love the place with all my heart. This is such a wonderful opportunity for a good education here— and I always have to work hard to keep up my grades so I can renew my scholarship next year.

Sincerely,

[Signature]
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Aerialist

Each night, this adroit young lady
Lies among sheets
Shredded fine as snowflakes
Until dream takes her body
From bed to strict tryouts
In tightrope acrobatics.

Nightly she balances
Cat-clever on perilous wire
In a gigantic hall,
Footing her delicate dances
To whipcrack and roar
Which speak her maestro's will.

Gilded, coming correct
Across that sultry air,
She steps, halts, hung
In dead center of her act
As great weights drop all about her
And commence to swing.

Lessoned thus, the girl
Parries the lunge and menace
Of every pendulum;
By deft duck and twirl
She draws applause; bright harness
Bites keen into each brave limb.
Then, this tough stint done, she curtsies
And serenely plummets down
To traverse glass floor
And get safe home; but, turning with trained eyes,
Tiger-tamer and grinning clown
Squat, bowling black balls at her.

Tall trucks roll in
With a thunder like lions; all aims
And lumbering moves
To trap this outrageous nimble queen
And shatter to atoms
Her nine so slippery lives.

Sighting the stratagem
Of black weight, black ball, black truck,
With a last artful dodge she leaps
Through hoop of that hazardous dream
To sit up stark awake
As the loud alarmclock stops.

Now as penalty for her skill,
By day she must walk in dread
Steel gauntlets of traffic, terror-struck
Lest, out of spite, the whole
Elaborate scaffold of sky overhead
Fall racketing finale on her luck.

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SYLVIA'S COPYRIGHT

While I had the physical possession of these letters, I had to obtain permission from Sîlvia's husband, Ted Hughes, to publish them. Also he had claimed right of final approval of the manuscript, for when Sylvia died she had not obtained her divorce, nor had she left a will. Therefore, her husband inherited her copyright. He kindly allowed me to bring out these letters, reserving the right to final approval of the manuscript.

Sylvia showed absolutely no sign of emotional instability—no abnormal swings from heights to depths—when she won a prize, of course, she was elated; but when she received 45 rejection slips before the age of 17, she took it all philosophically and was pleased that the editor wrote her a personal note instead of enclosing a printed rejection—the notes were encouraging. (L7 Magazine)

When she was 20 in her Junior year at Smith, she became very tense—every obstacle assumed exaggerated proportions; her dislike of the study of physics frightened her—although she received high grades in her tests—it was the first time she had to study something uncongenial. Now she experienced "highs" and "low-lows" alternately.
She crowded her schedule, held several responsible, time-consuming offices, wrote for a town newspaper, wrote poems in great number (had acceptances from Harpers and other literary magazines)—made "Junior Phi Beta", took her final exams and then went right to New York to work on the College Issue of Mademoiselle magazine—living a life of continual excitement, work, late hours—and she required much sleep—and developed inability to sleep due to over-exertion, tension, intense striving to fit into a level of sophisticated living for which she was totally unprepared.

Her application to enter Frank O'Connor's class in creative writing at Harvard Summer School was sent in late; her application was rejected; however she felt SHE had been REJECTED as a promising student. This blow began the descent into deep depression.

Not until Sylvia was considered well again and back in Smith, did my husband's youngest sister write me that in their family their mother, a sister, and a niece suffered depressions—the mother, seriously enough to have been hospitalized. All made some sort of recovery, however. I did not tell Sylvia of this, feeling I would do so when she was older, for she so revered her father's memory—I didn't want her breakdown with his background.
The Commencement Address contained many sallies of the famous Stevenson wit, particularly in his introduction, which are lost in the exiguities of space. We begin in midstream:

...vast periods of history and over most of the globe the view has prevailed that man is no more than a unit in the social calculus. Tribal life—the way of life pursued by man for by far the longest period of his history, of which there are remnants today in Africa—knows no individuals, only groups with disciplines and group sanctions. But then at a certain point in time and place there took place the most momentous revolution yet achieved by mankind—a revolution compared with which such achievements as the discovery of fire or the invention of the wheel seem modest. In the origins of our Western civilization, among two small peoples of the Eastern Mediterranean, the Greeks and the Jews, the great Copernican revolution of politics began: the discovery that the state exists for man, not man for the state, and that the individual human personality, spirit, soul—call it what you will—contains within itself the meaning and measure of existence and carries as a result the full range of responsibility and choice. Once the Greek vision of reason and the Jewish concept of moral choice had sent man forth onto the stage of history in this new guise of self-determination and responsibility, clearly only one form of society would provide a framework for the new energies and capacities that could now be released. That form of society is the free society upon which the peoples of the West have been engaged for the last 2000 years, with disasters and setbacks, with triumphs and tragedies, with long sweeps of history's pendulum between the extremes of freedom and tyranny, of individualism and collectivism, of rationalism and spiritualism. The peoples of the West are still struggling with the problems of a free society and just now are in dire trouble. For to create a free society is at all times a precarious and audacious experiment. This bedrock is the concept of man as an end in himself, as the ultimate reason for the whole apparatus of government, and the institutions of free society fulfill their task only in so far as this primary position of the free citizen—the homo liber et legalis—is not lost to sight. But violent pressures are constantly battering away at this concept, reducing man once again to subordinate status, limiting his range of choice, abrogating his responsibility, and returning him to his primitive status of anonymity in the social group. And it is to these pressures in their contemporary forms that I want to call your attention because I think you can be more helpful in identifying, isolating and combating these pressures, this virus, than you girls perhaps realize.

Science breaks old fetters, imposes new

As you have learned here at Smith, science, among other things, arose out of the disintegration of feudal society and the rebirth of individualism in the Reformation and the Renaissance. As the individual mind was released from medieval bondage, as reason again became the test of faith, the processes of free inquiry opened vast new fields of knowledge and human endeavor. There followed an almost explosive expansion of mental horizons. Science, born of freedom, and technology, born of science, grew by leaps and bounds into a giant of power and complexity. Certainly the material well-being of Western man was advanced and a speed and to an extent never before seen on earth. And there were great spiritual advances.

But, as always, history's pendulum swung too far, this time toward the extreme of social fragmentation, of individualism, of abstract intellectualism. And it seems to me that the very process which, in the name of individual liberty, disintegrated the old order—this very process has developed into a powerful drive toward the precise opposite of individualism, namely totalitarian collectivism.

Let me put it this way: individualism promoted technological advances, technology promoted increased specialization, and specialization promoted an ever-closer economic interdependence between specialties. The more intense the specialization, the more complete the interdependence of the specialties; and this necessity of interdependence constitutes a powerful economic drive toward that extreme of a machine state in which individual freedom is wholly submerged.

As the old order disintegrated into this confederation of narrow specialties, each pulling in the direction of its particular interest, the individual person tended to become absorbed—literally—by his particular function in society. Having sacrificed wholeness of mind and breadth of outlook to the demands of
personalities and potentials will largely determine the spirit of such institutions have been lost to sight. Worse than that, we have even evolved theories that the paramount aim of education and character formation is to produce citizens who are "well adjusted" to their institutional environment, citizens who can fit painlessly into the social pattern.

While I am not in favor of maladjustment, I view this cultivation of neutrality, this breeding of mental neutrals, this hostility to society and controversy. One looks back with dismay at the possibility of a Shakespeare perfectly adjusted to bourgeois life in Stratford, a Wesley contentedly ministering a county parish, George Washington going to London to receive a barony from George III, or Abraham Lincoln prospering in Springfield with nary a concern for the preservation of the crumbling Union.

It seems to me that we need not just well-adjusted, well-balanced personalities, not just better groupers and conformers (to coin a phrase; a couple of fine words), but more idiosyncratic, unpredictable characters (that rugged frontier word "cuntry" occurs to me); people who take open eyes and open minds out with them into the society which they will share and help to transform.

But before any of you gallant girls adopt any rebellious resolutions for the future, make no mistake about it: it is much easier to get yourself and yours adjusted and to accept the conditioning which so many social pressures will bring to bear upon you. After all, tribal conformity and archaic dictatorship could not have lasted so long if they did not accord comfortably with basic human needs and desires. The modern dictators are reviving a very ancient and encrusted way of life. Hitler discovered this. The Fascists knew it. The Communists are busy brain-washing all over Asia. And what they are washing out is, precisely, independence of judgment and the moral courage with which to back such judgments. And there are, alas, some leaders in our country who certainly have a brain-washing glint in their eye when they meet with an unfamiliar idea.

There is no need for frustration

Now as I have said, women, especially educated women such as you, have a unique opportunity to influence us, man and boy, and to play a direct part in the unfolding drama of our free society. But I am told that nowadays the young wife or mother is short of time for the subtle arts, that things are not what they used to be; that once immersed in the very pressing and particular problems of domesticity, many women feel frustrated and far apart from the great issues and stirring debates for which their education has given them understanding and relish. Once they read Baudelaire. Now it is the Consumers' Guide. Once they wrote poetry. Now it is the laundry list. Once they discussed art and philosophy until late in the night. Now they are so tired they fall asleep as soon as the dishes are finished. There is, often, a sense of contraction, of closing horizons and lost potentialities. They had hoped to play their part in the crisis of the age, but what they do is wash the diapers.

I hope I have not painted too depressing a view of your future, for the fact is that Western marriage and motherhood are yet another instance of the emergence of individual freedom in our Western society. Their basis is the recognition in women as well as men of the primacy of personality and individuality. I have just returned from Africa where the illiteracy of the mothers is an obstacle to child education and advancement and where polygamy and female labor are still the dominant system. The common sight on the road is an African striding along swinging his stick or his spear, while a few feet behind comes the wife with a load of firewood on her head, a baby on her back and dragging behind her two or three wives, similarly encumbered.

The point is that whether we talk of Africa, Islam or Aryan women "never had it so good" as you do. And in spite of the difficulties of domesticity you have a way to participate actively in the crisis in addition to keeping yourself and those about you

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straight on the difference between means and ends, mind and spirit, reason and emotion—not to mention keeping your man straight on the differences between Botticelli and Chianti.

In brief, if one of the chief needs in these restless times is for a new quality of mind and heart, who is nearer to the care of this need, the cultivation of this quality, than parents, especially mothers, who educate and form the new generation?

Responsibility to the citizens of tomorrow

So add to all of your concerns for Western man your very special responsibility for Western children. In a family based upon mutual respect, tolerance and understanding affection, the new generation of children stand their best chance of growing up to recognize the fundamental principle of free society—the uniqueness and value and wholeness of each individual human being. For this recognition requires discipline and training. The first instinct of all our untutored egos is to smash and grab, to treat the boy next door as a means not an end when you pinch his air rifle.

Perhaps this is merely to say that the basis of any tolerable society, from the small society of the family up to the great society of the state, depends upon its members' learning to love. By that I do not mean sentimentality or possessive emotion. I mean the steady recognition of others' uniqueness and a sustained intention to seek their good. In this, freedom and charity go hand in hand and they both have to be learned. Where better than in the home? And by whom better than the parents, especially the mother?

In short, far from the vocation of marriage and motherhood leading you away from the great issues of our day, it brings you back to their very center and places upon you an infinitely deeper and more intimate responsibility than that borne by the majority of those who hit the headlines and make the news and live in such a turmoil of great issues that they end by being totally unable to distinguish which issues are really great.

Yet you may say that these functions of the home could have been as well fulfilled without your years of study, performed perhaps better by instinct and untrodden by those hints of broader horizons and more immortal longings which it is the purpose of a college education to instill.

Well, there are two things to say to that. The first, of course, is that in modern America the home is not the boundary of a woman's life. There are outside activities aplenty. But even more important is the fact, surely, that what you have learned here can fit you as something else can for the primary task of making homes and whole human beings in whom the rational values of freedom, tolerance, charity and free inquiry can take root. You have learned discrimination. You have the tolerance which comes from the realization of man's infinite variety. Because you have learned from history the pathos and mutability of human affairs, you have a sense of pity. From literature you have learned the abiding values of the human heart and the discipline and sacrifice from which those values will flower in your own hearts and in the life of your families.

There can be no waste of any education that gives you these things. But you can waste them, or you can use them. I hope you'll use them. I hope you won't be content to wring your hands, feed your family and just echo all the tribal ritual refrains. I hope you'll keep everlastingly at the job of seeing life steadily and seeing it whole. And you can help others—husbands, children, friends—to do so, too. You may, indeed you must, help to integrate a world that has been falling into bloody pieces. History's pendulum has swung dangerously far away from the individual, and you may, indeed you must, help to restore it to the vital center of its arc.

Long ago at the origins of our way of life it was written of a valiant woman in the Book of Proverbs:

Strength and dignity are her clothing; and she laugheth at the time to come. She openeth her mouth with wisdom; and the law of kindness is on her tongue. She looketh well to the ways of her household, and eateth not the bread of idleness. Her children rise up, and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praiseth her.

I could wish you no better vocation than that. I could wish a free society no better hope for the future. And I could wish you no greater riches and rewards.
June 24, 1958

Dear Miss Plath:

MUSSEL-HUNTER AT ROCK HARBOR seems to me a marvelous poem, and I’m happy to say we’re taking it for The New Yorker, as well as NOCTURNE, which we also think extremely fine.

There are some problems, as always. Because of its length and because of previous publication scheduling, we’re not absolutely certain we can run MUSSEL-HUNTER this summer. We might have to hold it until next summer, the summer of 1959. If there is a book coming out, that would be awkward. Do let us know. If there is a book we’ll try to schedule it this summer, in spite of the staggering number of poems we are committed to print between now and September.

There is also some question about the ambiguity of the last two lines. It is probably an intentional one, but we want to make sure. Some editors read the line "...this relic saved, face to face, the bald-faced sun." Some read it "...this relic saved, face to face, the bald-faced sun." A word from you on this would be helpful.

There was also a suggestion by someone that there are two kinds of crabs in the poem, the ordinary hard-shelled ones — "in mottled mail of browns and greens" — and the fiddler crabs. The way I read it, all the crabs are fiddler crabs.

We would like to suggest changing the title of NOCTURNE to A WALK IN THE NIGHT, or some such. We have no really valid reason for this; we simply don’t like titles like "Nocturne," "Aubade," etc., very much. If you would prefer to keep it, we will do so, of course.

We will probably change some punctuation in both poems, but since all punctuation matters come up on the author’s proofs, we can go over them there.

We are happy indeed, to have these two poems for The New Yorker. Thank you for sending them to us, and we hope to see others.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Howard Moss

Miss Sylvia Plath
Apt. 3 rear
337 Elm Street
Northampton, Mass.
1. The Bee Meeting

Who are these people at the bridge to meet me? They are the villagers. The rector, the midwife, the sexton, the agent for bees. In my sleeveless summer dress I have no protection. And they are all waved and covered, why did nobody tell me? They are smiling and taking out veils tacked to ancient hats.

I am nude as a chicken neck, does nobody love me? Yes, here is the secretary of bees with her white shop smock, buttoning the cuffs at my wrist and the slit from my neck to my knees. Now I am milkweed silk, the bees will not notice. They will not smell my fear, my fear, my fear.

Which is the rector now, is it that man in black? Which is the midwife, is that her blue coat? Everybody is nodding a square black head, they are knights in visors, breastplates of cheesecloth knotted under the armpits. Their smiles and their voices are changing. I am led through a beanfield, springs of tinfoil and the black leaves winking like people, fanning their hands in a sea of bean flowers, creamy bean flowers with black eyes and leaves like bored hearts. Is it blood clots the tendrils are dragging up that string? No, no, it is scarlet tendrils that will one day be edible.

Now they are giving me a fashionable white straw Italian hat and a black veil that molds to my face, they are making me one of them. They are leading me in to the shorn grove, the circle of hives. Is it the hawthorn that smells so sick? The barren body of hawthorn, etherizing its children?

Is it some operation that is taking place? It is the surgeon my neighbors are waiting for. Here he is now, in his green helmet his gloved gloves, his suit. Is it the butcher, the grocer, the postman, someone I know?

I cannot run, I am rooted, and the gorse hurts me with its yellow purses, its spiky armory. I could not run without having to run forever. The white hive is snug as a virgin, sealing off her brood cells, her honey, and quietly humming.

Snow in the grove, the snow of lies. The mind of the hive thinks this is the end of everything. Here they come, the outriders, on their hysterical elastics. If I stand very still, they will think I am cow parsley, a gullible white head untouched by their animosity,
The Bee Meeting (2)

Not even nodding, a personage in a hedgerow.
The villagers open the chambers of honey, they are hunting the queen.
Is she hiding, is she eating honey? She is very clever.
She is old, old, old, she must live another year, and she knows it.
While in their fingerlength cells the new virgins

Dream of a duel which they will win inevitably,
A curtain of wax dividing them from the bride flight,
The upflight of the murderess into a heaven that loves her.
The villagers are moving the virgins, there will be no killing.
The old queen does not show herself, is she so ungrateful?

I am exhausted, I am exhausted—
Pillar of white in a blackout of knives.
I am the magician's girl who does not flinch.
The villagers are untying their disguises, they are shaking hands.
Whose is that What have they accomplished, why am I cold?
fine, clean boy Buddy Willard was, coming from such fine, clean parents, and how everybody at church thought he was a model person, so kind to his parents and to older people, as well as so handsome and so intelligent. All I'd heard about, really, was how fine and clean Buddy was and how he was the kind of person a girl should stay fine and clean for. So I didn't really see the harm in anything Buddy would think up to do.

"Well all right, I guess so," I said.

I stared at Buddy while he undid his chino pants and took them off and laid them on a chair and then took off his underpants that were made of something like nylon fishnet.

"They're cool," he explained, "and my mother says they wash easily."

Then he just stood there in front of me and I kept on staring at him. The only thing I could think of was turkey neck and turkey gizzards and I felt very depressed.

Buddy seemed hurt I didn't say anything. "I think you ought to get used to me like this," he said. "Now let me see you."

I thought there must be something wrong with me, / undressing in front of Buddy suddenly seemed worse than having your picture taken at college where you have to stand naked in front of a camera, knowing all the time that a picture of you stark naked, both full view and side view, is going into the college gyms to be marked A B C or D depending on how straight you are.

"Oh some other time," I said.

"All right." Buddy got dressed again.
were like that and you couldn't honestly accuse them of anything until you were at least pinned or engaged to be married.

Actually, it wasn't the idea of sleeping with somebody that bothered me. I mean I'd read about all sorts of people sleeping with each other, and if it had been any other boy I would merely have asked him the most interesting details and maybe gone out and slept with somebody myself just to even things up and then thought no more about it.

What I couldn't stand was Buddy's pretending I was so sexy when all the time he'd been having an affair with that tarty waitress and must have felt like laughing in my face. It was almost lying. I began to think it might even be worse than lying. It was letting people make up their own lies without really lying yourself.

"What does your mother think about this waitress?" I asked Buddy that weekend.

Buddy was amazingly close to his mother. He was always quoting what she said about the relationship between a man and a woman, and I knew Mrs. Willard was a real fanatic about virginity for men and women both. When I first went to her house for supper she gave me a queer, shrewd, searching look and I knew she was trying to tell whether I was a virgin or not.

Just as I thought, Buddy was embarrassed.

"Mother asked me about Gladys," he admitted.

"Well what did you say?"

"I said Gladys was free, white and twenty-one." Right answer.

Now I knew Buddy would never talk to his mother as rudely as that for my sake. He was always saying how his mother said What
Feb. 5
1963

The Edge

Here I am again

Don't the dead woman & perfected

Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment

The illusion of a deed preceding

Flows in the social of her nique,

Her bare

But seem to be saying

We have come so far, it is over;

Always nothing can happen

We step up in any like beacons

Each dead child to call it, a white serpent,

She is stung from with the

One at each tale

Pit of milk now empty,

She has folded body as

From back into her petals

Of a rose close when the garden

Stiffens odours bleed

From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower.

No mean has nothing to be said about

Singing from the hood of love.

She is used to this sort of thing.

Her tracks are like a drag.