
SYLVIA PLATH

Sylvia Plath's diary entry for November 13, 1949, written when she was a high-achieving high school senior preparing to enter Smith College (B.A., 1955), reflects the conflict between her two consuming goals, to attain perfection as a writer and as a beautiful woman. Women who came of age in the 1950s were expected to marry early and have children—a deterrent to creativity, Plath believed. Yet Plath fulfilled all these expectations, marrying English poet Ted Hughes in 1956 and having two children by the early 1960s, while establishing her reputation as a poet with *The Colossus* (1960). She explored her inability to resolve this conflict in the comic, semi-autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* (1963), and in much of her best poetry, angry and sardonic, published posthumously in *Ariel* (1963). Her suicide in 1963 contributed to the myth into which critics claim she increasingly transformed her life, using not only her poetry but her *Letters Home* (1975) and *Journals* (1982) to focus on the tragic "fall from childhood innocence to adult experience, from grace to loss."

❁ Sylvia Plath at Seventeen¹

November 13, 1949

¹ As of today I have decided to keep a diary again—just a place where I can write my thoughts and opinions when I have a moment. Somehow I have to keep and hold the rapture of being seventeen. Every day is so precious I feel infinitely sad at the thought of all this time melting farther and farther away from me as I grow older. *Now, now* is the perfect time of my life.

² In reflecting back upon these last sixteen years, I can see tragedies and happiness, all relative—all unimportant now—fit only to smile upon a bit mistily.

I still do not know myself. Perhaps I never will. But I feel free—unbound by responsibility, I still can come up to my own private room, with my drawings hanging on the walls . . . and pictures pinned up over my bureau. It is a room suited to me—tailored, uncluttered and peaceful. . . . I love the quiet lines of the furniture, the two bookcases filled with poetry books and fairy tales saved from childhood.

At the present moment I am very happy, sitting at my desk, looking out at the bare trees around the house across the street. . . . Always I want to be an observer. I want to be affected by life deeply, but never so blinded that I cannot see my share of existence in a wry, humorous light and mock myself as I mock others.

I am afraid of getting older. I am afraid of getting married. Spare me from cooking three meals a day—spare me from the relentless cage of routine and rote. I want to be free—free to know people and their backgrounds—free to move to different parts of the world, so I may learn that there are other morals and standards besides my own. I want, I think, to be omniscient. . . . I think I would like to call myself "The girl who wanted to be God." Yet if I were not in this body, where *would* I be? Perhaps I am *destined* to be classified and qualified. But oh, I cry out against it. I am I—I am powerful—but to what extent? I am I.

Sometimes I try to put myself in another's place, and I am frightened when I find I am almost succeeding. How awful to be anyone but I. I have a terrible egotism. I love my flesh, my face, my limbs, with overwhelming devotion. I know that I am "too tall" and have a fat nose, and yet I pose and prink before the mirror, seeing more and more how lively I am. . . . I have erected in my mind an image of myself—idealistic and beautiful. Is not that image, free from blemish, the true self—the true perfection? Am I wrong when this image insinuates itself between me and the merciless mirror? (Oh, even now I glance back on what I have just written—how foolish it sounds, how overdramatic.)

Never, never, never will I reach the perfection I long for with all my soul—my paintings, my poems, my stories—all poor, poor reflections . . . for I have been too thoroughly conditioned to the conventional surroundings of this community . . . my vanity*desires luxuries which I can never have. . . .

¹ Title supplied.

8 I am continually more aware of the power which change plays in my life. . . . There will come a time when I must face myself at last. Even now I dread the big choices which loom up in my life—what college? what career? I am afraid. I feel uncertain. What is best for me? What do I want? I do not know. I love freedom. I deplore constrictions and limitations. . . . I am not as wise as I have thought. I can see, as from a valley, the roads lying open for me, but I cannot see the end—the consequences. . . .

9 Oh, I love *now*, with all my fears and forebodings, for now I still am not completely molded. My life is still just beginning. I am strong. I long for a cause to devote my energies to. . . .