

English Literature Activities



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Sylvia Plath: A Literary Icon

Sylvia Plath was an American poet, novelist, and short story writer, born on October 27, 1932, in Boston, Massachusetts. She is best known for her intense and deeply personal writing, exploring themes of identity, mental illness, and the struggles of women in a patriarchal society. Plath's talent for poetry emerged at an early age, and she published her first poem when she was just eight years old.



Plath attended Smith College, where she excelled academically but struggled with depression. After a brief period in a mental institution, she returned to her studies and graduated in 1955. In the same year, she married British poet Ted Hughes. The couple had two children, but their marriage was tumultuous, leading to their separation in 1962.

Plath's most famous work, *"The Bell Jar,"* is a semi-autobiographical novel that reflects her own experiences with mental illness. Her poetry collection *"Ariel,"* published posthumously in 1965, is celebrated for its powerful imagery and emotional depth.

Tragically, Plath took her own life on February 11, 1963. Despite her short life, her work continues to resonate with readers and has cemented her status as a significant figure in American literature.



After reading the text answer the questions below:

1 What struggles did Plath face during her time at Smith College, and how did these experiences influence her life and writing?

2 Have you ever read any poems by Plath? How do you feel towards the themes of identity and mental illness that are dominant in her work? Would you be interested in reading more poems?



Now listen to an extract from one of Plath's interviews and answer the questions that follow:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gbNcRhxfF-A>

1 What does she say about the sea, a theme that is used in many of her poems?

2 Plath mentions two other poets, what does she say about them?

Robert Lowell

Anne Sexton

3 What was the reason for her turning to writing?



Read "The Applicant" one of Plath's poems online using all the help and the extra material that the platform provides:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57419/the-applicant>

This poem is an example of a dramatic monologue whose speaker addresses someone who cannot answer back. We have an insistent speaker that is trying to convince another person to buy a wife. The poem was written on the same day that Plath's husband abandoned her for another woman and it is more than obvious that she meant to write a critique over marriage. How did the poem make you feel and why? Think of the place of women in society in the past and express your ideas in a paragraph.





Read another poem with the title "Edge" and the theme of suicide

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.



This poem seems to be about a woman who has recently committed or is soon to commit suicide and it is Plath's last poem, written days before she killed herself. Compare the poem to the painting of Frida Kahlo on the next page and express your ideas and feelings about the two pieces of art.



[The suicide of Dorothy Hale by Frida Kahlo](#) (Phoenix Art Museum)

Dorothy Hale was an American actress and Ziegfeld showgirl. After her husband was killed in a car accident, she had a few unsuccessful relationships and her career was failing. She was left in severe financial trouble and had to live depending on her wealthy friends, so she committed suicide in October 21, 1938. She jumped off from the top window of her luxury apartment suite in New York in her favorite black dress with a corsage of small yellow roses. Clare Boothe Luce, who was Dorothy's close friend and an admirer of Frida Kahlo, also the publisher of the fashion magazine "Vanity Fair", almost immediately commissioned Kahlo to paint a "recuerdo" (remembrance) portrait of their deceased mutual friend. This painting is one of Frida's most shocking and controversial ones depicting the details of every step of Hale's suicide. At the bottom, blood red lettering details the tragic event. At the time this painting was painted, Frida was going through the separation from Diego and was in deep depression and having thoughts of suicide on her mind. information from:

<https://www.fridakahlo.org/the-suicide-of-dorothy-hale.jsp>



Compare the painting with the poem by Plath and express your ideas and feelings in a paragraph:

Sylvia Plath Teacher's C1-C2

Biographical text:

What struggles did Plath face during her time at Smith College, and how did these experiences influence her life and writing?

Plath attended Smith College, where she excelled academically but struggled with depression. Her most famous work, "*The Bell Jar*," is a semi-autobiographical novel that reflects her own experiences with mental illness, a theme that is explored a lot throughout her work. Tragically her depression led to her suicide at a young age.

Video with interview:

1 What does she say about the sea, a theme that is used in many of her poems?

She says that the vivid and colourful experience of the sea is the theme of many of her poems, sometimes she uses the real sea and others a "subconscious sea" which is a sort of flow of thoughts.

2 Plath mentions two other poets, what does she say about them?

Robert Lowell poems with his experiences in a mental hospital, a peculiar, private and taboo theme

Anne Sexton poems with experiences as a mother who's had a nervous breakdown

3 What was the reason for her turning to writing?

An unhappy adolescence combined with an introverted character

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<https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/9290-depression>

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/depression/in-depth/depression/art-20045943>

<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/depression/self-care/>

<https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/tips-and-support/cope-with-depression/>





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