CHAPTER-II

FORMATIVE INFLUENCES
The brief life span of Sylvia Plath was packed with literary activity. She made a mark in the literary world with the publication of *The Colossus* in 1956 and *The Bell Jar* in early 1963. However, it was with her posthumously published work that Sylvia Plath acquired her present status as an important poet of the sixties. The intensely personal note that is found in her poetry, the admissions of failure, guilt and inadequacy, the underlying wish for suicide and death are features of her poetry which are also found in the work of Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, John Berryman and Theodore Roethke. Not surprisingly, Sylvia Plath is placed among the confessional poets and her poetry is often referred to as the feminine version of Robert Lowell's work.

All works of art express, in one way or another, the personality of the creator. Studying the biography of a writer can prove useful as it can help unfold the compulsive urges underlying the work of art, thus illuminating some hidden aspects. An artist makes use of material from his personal life but in the work of a truly great artist the personal element, when treated artistically, is changed beyond recognition and acquires universal applicability.
even though the roots may lie in private experience. The work of Sylvia Plath has its roots in autobiography; therefore it would be worthwhile to take a close look at her life and background.

Sylvia Plath was born on the 27th of October, 1932, the first child of two German speaking intellectuals: Dr. Otto Emil Plath, professor of Biology at Boston University and Aurelia Schober who met Otto Plath while studying for her master's degree in German. Otto Plath had emigrated at the age of sixteen to America from Garbow, a town in the Polish Corridor. As a young boy he had developed a lifelong interest in entomology by observing the nesting sites of bumblebees and learning the technique of extracting wild honey. His skill won him the name of Beinenkonig (bee-king) and he later published his book Bumblebees and their Ways (1934). Aurelia Schober was a first generation American of Austrian descent. After her graduation she taught English in a school for a year and then returned to the university for a master's degree in English and German. She registered for the German course under Otto Plath. The two became good friends and finally got married in January 1932 in Carson City, Nevada. Their daughter, Sylvia was born the same year and son, Warren, in 1935. Life for Aurelia and Otto Plath was primarily academic. Both worked together first on Otto Plath's book
and then on a treatise on "Insect Societies". Social life for them as a married couple was almost non-existent. Otto Plath made all important decisions and dominated the family.

In 1936, the Plaths shifted from Jamaica Plain to Johnson Avenue, Winthrop, Winthrop, Massachusetts, where the Schobers lived close by at Point Shirley. Otto Plath's health, however, started deteriorating but he stubbornly refused to consult a doctor, withdrawing more and more into himself. Aurelia Plath now faced the task of rearing the two children alone. Sylvia Plath spent a lot of time with her, grandparents especially her grandfather- and grew very attached to them. Since her father was too ill to devote much time to her, she found a father surrogate in her grandfather who influenced her during the formative years. This accounts for the fusion of identities that take place in her works- the father sometimes appears as the grandfather and the grandparent is often called father( LII.22)

In August 1940 the nature of Otto Plath's illness was discovered: his was a far advanced case of diabetes mellitus which, treated in time, could have been controlled. His gangrened foot and leg had to be amputated but he could not recover and died on November 5, 1940. Left alone to earn a living for herself and her children, Aurelia Plath combined her family with her parents' and started teaching again. Selling off the Winthrop house, the family settled down in a
small house in Wellesley, a suburb of Boston Mrs. Plath thought that the move away from the seaside would prove beneficial for Warren's frequent bouts of bronchitis and Sylvia's sinusitis.

During her Junior high school year Sylvia Plath concentrated on winning scholastic awards and maintaining A's throughout—"fifteen years of straight A's" as Esther puts in the The Bell Jar. She wrote rhymes, drew sketches to accompany them and contributed regularly to the School magazine. In 1947 she entered Bradford High School. Her interest in creative writing was greatly encouraged by her English teacher, Mr. Crockett. In a long, unpublished poem she explained the urge to write which obsessed her:

"You ask me why I spend my life writing?

I write only because
There is a voice within me
That will not be still."

(LH.34-35)

This voice that would not be still was expressed in numerous poems and stories. And at last the efforts were rewarded when rejection slips from various magazines started turning into notes of acceptance. In 1950 Seventeen published her story "And Summer Will not Come again" and The Christian
Science Monitor published her poem "Bitter Strawberries".

Aurelia Plath recalls that it was at this time that Sylvia Plath realised that her "exuberant joyous outbursts in both poetry and prose brought rejection lips, while the story or poem with pathetic twist was found more acceptable. More people would identify with the plain heroine beset with doubts and difficulties. The old adage to 'get your hero up a tree, throw stones at him, then let him extricate himself still held true at this time. Advice and experience in regard to writing led her now into an examination and analysis of the darkest recesses of self." (LH.35-36).

Sylvia Plath joined Smith College on a scholarship from Olive Higgins Prouty. She strove hard for high grades to prove herself worthy of the financial aid she was receiving. She also tried to win recognition in the field of creative writing. In 1952 Mademoiselle published her story "Sunday at the Mintons" and the following year invited her as guest editor to New York for a month. She spent that month in New York City interviewing important writers for Mademoiselle. This trip to New York was the turning point of her life. After the hectic month in a busy city she faced the prospect of spending the remaining dull, seemingly endless summer at home. Aurelia Plath recounts that she spent the rest of the summer in a state of depression: at times she would pour out endless streams of self-deprecation and self-
recremation (LH.123). This feeling of dejection finally led her to attempt taking her own life. She hid herself in the basement of the house and took an overdose of sleeping pills. However she was found on the third day and rushed to the hospital. Electroconvulsive therapy and psychotherapy followed. The account of this attempted suicide is vividly described in *The Bell Jar*. It took her about six months to recover; by spring 1954 she was well enough to rejoin Smith with no obvious effects of her breakdown.

In 1955 Sylvia Plath graduated 'Summa cum Laude' from Smith, winning a Fulbright scholarship to Cambridge England. In England she met and married the poet Ted Hughes in June 1956. After completing her studies she returned with her husband to America and taught at Smith for a year. Then, relinquishing their jobs, the Hughes moved to Boston, hoping to live on earning from their writings. It was at this time that Sylvia Plath audited Robert Lowell's poetry classes with Anne Sexton and George Starbuck. In 1959 December the Hughes returned to England and took a flat in Chalcot Square, London, where their daughter was born the following April. In November 1960 Sylvia Plath's *The Colossus* was published. 1961 was a difficult year for Sylvia Plath. Appendectomy was followed by a miscarriage. In September the Hughes moved to Court Green, a house in North Tawton, Devon. In January 1962 their son, Nicholas, was born. In the same year Sylvia Plath completed *Three Women*, a radio play for three voices. The
period between June and August 1962 was marked by family tension following the discovery of Ted's adultery. Finally the two separated and Ted Hughes went back to London alone. Sylvia Plath, left alone with the two children in a not-too-friendly countryside, wrote the poems of Ariel and Winter Trees. The winter gloom and her own loneliness account for the cheerless landscape of the poems. Finally, unable to stand it any longer, she shifted to London in December taking up a flat in a house in which Yeats had once lived.

Alvarez tells us that in London, Sylvia Plath spent the coldest winter that England had seen for many years. Her health remained indifferent and after an attack of influenza she was left in a debilitated state. However, she continued writing, her target being at least a poem a day. In January 1963. The Bell Jar was published under the pseudonym of Victoria Lucas. Though it was partially successful, the controversy it aroused made Sylvia Plath recoil from it emotionally. This added to her depression. Her physical energies depleted by illness, anxiety and overwork, she was finally unable to cope with the problems she found herself face to face with and decided to put an end to her life. On February 11, 1963, she was found dead, with her head in the gas oven.

Sylvia Plath's interest in poetry dated from her childhood when she wrote simple nature poems with no deeper meaning. She later described aspects of nature, birds, bees, spring, fall as "subjects which are absolute gifts
to the person who doesn't have any interior experience to
write about." 3 Her first poem was published in Boston
Sunday Herald when she was just 8 years old-about what she
saw and heard on hot summer nights:

"Hear the crickets chirping
In the dewy grass.
Bright little fireflies
Twinkle as they pass." 4

Though not indicative of her later genius, it did show an
aptitude for poetry which was to be greatly developed later
on. The poet's mother, Aurelia Plath, herself greatly
interested in literature, had a big hand in the development
of her children's creative imagination. The two children
would make up rhymes, limericks and stories patterned on the
tales she read out to them. Sylvia Plath was particularly
moved when her mother read out Matthew Arnold's "The Forsaken
Merman". She recalled the impact of the poem in a published
reminiscence years later: I saw the goose flesh on my skin.
I did not know what had made it. I was not cold. Had a ghost
passed over? No, it was the poetry. A spark flew off Arnold
and shook me like a chill. I wanted to cry. I felt very odd.
I had fallen into a new way of being happy." 5

Among the influences that shaped the personality of
Sylvia Plath, the most important was that of her father.
While Otto Plath was still alive Sylvia Plath's desire to
write, together her with hero-worshipping adoration of her father made her cook up verses to recite for him every evening after dinner. Her father's death created a void in her life and she never wholly recovered from this emotional loss. His shadow looms large in her poetry, as an ominous figure, a "man in black", as a colossus, or as a creature of the nether world inviting her to join him. She felt that had he survived, her life would have taken a different course. His death is imaginatively viewed as an act of desertion, or as a lover jilting his beloved. This sense of betrayal often turns her love for her father into hatred for him in her poems. Thus the memory of her dead father arouses ambivalent feelings of love and hate. She once recalled her feelings for her father to her friend, Nancy Steiner: "He was an autocrat. I adored him and despised him, and I probably wished many times that we were dead. When he obliged me and died. I imagined that I had killed him." The autocratic father becomes a hated Nazi a one-legged panzer-man in her poetry. But, throughout her work, underlying the forceful expressions of hatred for her father is a fierce love for him.

An obvious and important influence on the life and work of Sylvia Plath was none other than her husband, Ted Hughes. To begin with, this large hulking Yorkshire poet made her aware of the sights and sounds of nature that she had not even noticed so far. Animals and birds started
finding their way from his poetry into hers. In a letter to her mother she admitted that he was teaching her the vocabulary of woods and animals and earth" (LH.235). Her poem "Metamorphosis" (LH.234) speaks of a night when they went out into the moon-light to find owls. "Ode for Ted" and "Song" (LH.238-9) are poems written just before her marriage about the world of nature that Ted Hughes helped her discover. After their marriage they worked as a team, each being the other's best critic and guide. In fact, Sylvia Plath thought they made a much better team than Yeats and his wife. In her poetry we come across numerous references to their shared experiences. Ted Hughes recollects that they devised "exercises in meditation" which would help them write poetry. For example, they would concentrate on a given theme for awhile and then allow their thoughts to take shape and express themselves. Poems like "The Moon and the Yew Tree" are products of such exercises in meditation. 7 And again, it was her subsequent unhappiness with her husband that led to the bitter poems written during the last nine months of her life.

Among the poets she admired, Robert Lowell's influence on the work of Sylvia Plath is worth nothing. With Anne Sexton and George Starbuck she audited Robert Lowell's poetry classes in 1958-59 in Boston. Admiration for the poet inspired her to write poetry in his style. Initially she tried to intamate his earlier style but it was his later Style
that totally captured her attention. She felt that with *Life Studies* came a new "breakthrough into very serious, very personal, emotional experience" which had hitherto been taboo.\(^8\) Lowell's poems manage to transmute personal experience into public meaning. For example, his private terror of madness is related to his vision of a chaotic world full of greed and violence. His poems are based on specific, usually painful experience but he manages to give a political meaning to private events. From him Sylvia Plath learnt the knack of converting private suffering into public sorrows and at the same time, converting public sorrows into personal pain. For example she feels that the pain in her heart is akin to the public suffering experienced by the Jews at the hands of the Nazis and she says, "I think I may well be a Jew" ("Daddy"). And hearing about the victims of Hiroshima, she feels their pain on the personal level.

Under the influence of Lowell, Sylvia Plath moved from the formal structures of *The Colossus* to the freer forms of *Winter Trees* and *Ariel*. It was Lowell who taught her to lose self-consciousness enough to project personal experience with ease in poetry. As George Steiner says, "Sylvia Plath carries forward in an intensely womanly and aggravated note, from Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, a book that obviously had a great impact on her."\(^9\)
Sylvia Plath herself acknowledged the influence of Anne Sexton and Theodore Roethke on her work. Her early poems echo the sounds and themes of Roethke's poetry. The last group of poems in *The Colossus*, "Poem for a Birthday, in particular, comes strongly under the spell of Roethke. There are close imagistic and metaphoric parallels to his *Praise to the End*! E.M. Aird believes that Sylvia Plath encountered Roethke's influence at an important point in her development when the menace in her work was becoming more and more insistent. "A sympathetic study of Roethke showed her how to allow the sinister elements to rise to the surface of the poem without overwhelming it. "Under his influence she was able to fuse internal preoccupation with outer perception and discard the formality and restraint of her earlier work in favour of a freer style. This influence was more important than his verbal and rhythmic influence and brought her work thematically and stylistically closer to her later work. According to Robert Phillips, Sylvia Plath shared with Roethke a gift for Keats's 'negative capability', a personal identification with the poetic subject, be it a stone or a saint.

The influence of Roethke, together with that of Lowell and Sexton, completed the transition of her poetry which, as a result, acquired new themes and forms. Anne Sexton's themes are bold and her books, when published, shocked readers with their stunning realism. Robert Phillips believes that with
Anne Sexton the poetry of misfortune reaches some sort of apogee and one can construct a "hellishly unhappy life" from her nakedly autobiographical poems.12 Anne Sexton herself says in the "Author's Note" to Live or Die that her books read like "a fever chart for a bad case of melancholy". In Boston, after attending Lowell's poetry classes, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and George Starbuck would go to the Ritz for martinis. "While downing three or four martinis, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath would either discuss their suicide attempts or read out their poetry to each other. Anne Sexton felt that Plath had not yet"found a voice of her own, wasn't, in truth, free to be herself and that her poems missed the point entirely probably because of her preoccupation with form."13 Anne Sexton's poems, with their unabashed honesty and stark realism, served as a contrast that made Sylvia Plath aware of a different approach to poetry. Years later, in a British Council interview she admitted being impressed by the poetry of Anne Sexton.

Charles Newman draws parallels between the works of Sylvia Plath and Emily Dickinson. He believes that Emily Dickinson is the beginning and Sylvia Plath the culmination of the movement" whereby the imagination, sated with the abstraction of myth, is driven back to the concrete."14 Among common themes that both worked upon are death and despair. The despair, in both case, arises from the feeling of incompetence—a dread of not being equal to the task before
them. Both speak of the artist's isolation from the rest of the world. Like the recluse of "Spinster", theirs is a secluded world where none can enter. According to Newman, Sylvia Plath's obsession with death may be traced to the poetic tradition from Edward Taylor and Anne Bradstreet to Emily Dickinson. He further says that for both poets the brother/father, husband/lover relationships are finally significant as they affect the poet's chosen personae.

Emily Dickinson treats the theme of love with candour and Sylvia Plath carries forward the tradition. Rejecting the traditional role of woman as heroine, they give us woman as the 'hero' who not only can be dominated but is also dangerous as she can rise in revolt and "eat men like air".  

Judith Kroll traces the influence of Giorgio de Chirico, Robert Graves and J.G.Frazer on Sylvia Plath was searching for her own voice and vision, she borrowed from the ready-made vision of others: "I borrow the stilts of an old tragedy," she says in "Electra on Azalea Path". Some of her poems have roots in the surrealist landscapes found in Giorgio de Chirico's paintings, particularly. "The Disquieting Muses" and "Enigma of the Oracles". The paintings of Chirico contain an illusory atmosphere wherein architecture, objects and figures appear remote and detached from reality. For example, heads are featureless and bald, like moons, and bodies are often depicted as stone columns: there are strange, hallucinatory lights and lengthening shadows. James Thrall Soby, in his
book, Giorgio de Chirico, explains that these images appeal to that part of our subconscious"where ecstasies bloom white and the roots of fear are cypress black and deep." For Sylvia Plath the metaphysical landscape provided a visual setting for the drama of the psyche. On such a stage she could easily project her autobiographical and psychological concerns. The strange, disquieting, mysterious world of "The Disquieting Muses" and "On the Decline of the Oracles" by Plath is a verbal reproduction of Chirico's paintings. The first poem speaks of muses which bear a close resemblance to those of Chirico, "with heads like darning eggs"... "mouthless, eyeless, with stitched bald heads" and the light and shadow effects are equally startling. "On the Decline of the Oracles" begins with an epigraph taken from Chirico's essay. "The Feeling of Prehistory": "Inside a ruined temple the broken statue of a strange god spoke a mysterious language." It described Chirico's painting, "Enigma of the Oracles."

Sylvia Plath was also influenced by painters like Rousseau and Paul Klee. "The Ghost's Leave-taking" was inspired by Paul Klee and "Snakecharmer" by Rousseau. According to Ted Hughes, these poems show "how native she was to the world of primitive painters. Her vision, particularly in its aspect-strong at this time-of the deathly paradise, belongs with theirs perhaps more readily than anything in poetry, but these poems are, ultimately, about
her world, not theirs, and it is not a world of merely visual effects. 'Snakecharmer', after a picture by Rousseau, is what she did not know, a specific vision revealed to yogis at a certain advanced stage, to take just one instance."
Hughes also states that some of the gods that the sculptor Leonard Baskin was carving also became a part of Sylvia Plath's pantheon—"namely, the huge bald angel, the mutilated dead men, the person with the owl growing out of his shoulder."18

Kroll believes that Sylvia Plath was considerably influenced by Robert Graves' *The White Goddess*. Graves' contention is that true or pure poetry has only a single language and a single infinitely variable theme which is connected with the ancient cult ritual of the White Goddess and her son. He maintains that "a true poem is necessarily an invocation of the White Goddess or Muse... The test of a poet's vision... is the accuracy of his portrayal of the White Goddess."19 According to Kroll, the white Goddess myth gave shape to Sylvia Plath's development as a poet, helping her absorb her experiences into poetry. The theme of betrayal is expressed in her late poems through the White Goddess myth, particularly through two motifs— the killing of the male God and the rebirth of the Goddess. In "Daddy" and "Little Fugue" the true self has been sacrificed to the God and the unreal false self survives. In order to break the cycle of mourning and bring the true self back...
life, the God (who is now identified as the Devil) must be Kill. The ritual of killing the God and setting free the true self is enacted in "Daddy" by piercing the "fat black heart" of the father (who is the devil incarnate) with a stake, and "dancing and stamping" on him. In "Purdah" the heroine prepares to destroy her male oppressor and liberate the true self which has been long suppressed:

"And at his next step
I shall unloose
I shall unloose-
From the small jewelled
Doll he guards like a heart-
The lioness
The shriek in the bath
The cloak of holes."

("Purdah")

Lady Lazarus threatens to do the same:

"Herr God, Herr Lucifer,
Beware
Beware.
Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air."

("Lady Lazarus")
"Mae" and "The Beast" of "Poem for A Birthday" (The Colossus) further develop the theme of the dying God and the mourning Goddess.

The Golden Bough by J.C. Frazer sheds further light on the mythic patterns in Plath's poetry. According to Frazer all customs and rituals originate in the universal desire to ensure the rebirth of crops every spring. Kroll believes that Plath's relationship to her dead father obviously found confirmation in the 'scared marriage' which is an indispensable element of many of the myths and rituals discussed by Frazer and Graves, and which precedes the death (and often resurrection) of the 'dying God'. In the early poetry of Sylvia Plath we find the myth of the death and resurrection of the God whereas in the later poetry (poems like "Lady Lazarus" and "Purdah") the primary concern is not with the God's resurrection but with the protagonist's liberation from the God (devil) that holds her in thrall. The themes of the poems may be related to Paul Radin's African Folk Tales which Sylvia Plath had read with great interest. As Ted Hughes says, in them "she found the underworld of her worst nightmares throwing up intensely beautiful adventures, where the most unsuspected voices thrived under the pressures of a reality that made most accepted fiction seem artificial and spurious."
Thus the work of Sylvia Plath is not just straightforward confession as it may appear at first glance. In fact, it may even be compared to the work of T.S. Eliot: just as Eliot shored against his ruins fragments from all corners of the literary world, so Sylvia Plath, too, manages to absorb into her work the quintessence of numerous artists whose craft she greatly admired and sought, in her own manner, to emulate.

However, this does not mean that any other artist or poet placed under similar influences would produce the kind of work that Sylvia Plath did. It is not the experiences of an artist combined with the influences on him that are alone responsible for the kind of work he produces. Living at the same time, in the same kind of atmosphere and circumstances we may have two very different artists—a poet of gloom and a poet of sunshine, a Tennyson and a Browning. No doubt, they are influenced by their background and experiences but what proves to be the major factor responsible for the kind of poetry they produce is their individual temperament and attitude towards life; it is their way of thought that given form and shape to their work. There is a close relationship between the mind that creates and the finished product—in this case, the poem. Sylvia Plath's experiences were not really unique. The manner in which her mind acted upon them made them acquire a strange mythical
aura so that they could easily become a part of her poetry. Before speaking of her experiences in her poems, she first absorbed them into her own personality.

The first striking feature of Sylvia Plath's poetry is the intensity of feeling it portrays. Whatever she writes of—be it a bruise, a painting, a piece of sculpture or some-thing as abstract as a relationship—is treated with so much of intensity that it leaves us in no doubt of the genuineness and sincerity of the emotion contained, particularly in her later poems. Even though at times the intensity of feeling distorts the perception startlingly, yet it serves to add greater depth to the emotion depicted. For example the kitchen in "Lestos" (Winter Trees) is not merely a place which makes the protagonist feel ill at ease, it is a place of suggested evil: there is "Viciousness in the kitchen: The potatoes hiss" and there is "a stink of fat and baby crap". The baby itself is like a Σ "fat snail... You could eat him." The poem is one of hate but it is not an ordinary kind of hate: it is a passionate, even murderous hate: "I am silent, hate/Upto my neck, / Thick, thick."

In "The Other" (Winter Trees) the rival is perceived as "moon-glow" with a "womb of marble". The protagonist cries out against "The stolen horses, the fornications" and the "sulphurous adulteries" of the rival who is compared with glass: "Cold glass, how you insert yourself// Between myself
and myself." Helpless, all she can do is "scratch like a cat" while the other books on and smiles a smile that is "not fatal". Here, again, the intensity of emotion is portrayed through an appropriate choice of words and images.

In "Tulips" (Ariel) the protagonist is laid up in a hospital bed. She longs to be left alone in peace. This desire to be left alone is so intense that it makes her visualise everything around her as an encroachment upon her privacy: harmless objects like flowers and photographs become unwelcome, even threatening. Flowers sent by a well-wisher antagonise her with their bright red gaiety. She feels that they are "dangerous animals" that should be behind bars. She sees the smiling picture of her husband and child but her response is not what one would expect: she sees them as "smiling hooks" (Hooks—With parasitic connotations) that do not leave her in peace.

The emotions of love and hate portrayed by the poet are also described with equal intensity. In "Daddy" the "girl with an Electra-complex" feels that her father has let her down by dying. She tries to get back to him somehow but in vain. And so her love changes into an almost uncontrollable rage at his betrayal and she tries to destroy his memory completely by enacting rituals of exorcism,
finishing with "Daddy, daddy, you bastard. I'm through, "Similarly, the protagonist's attitude towards her mother is ambivalent. Sometimes, when she looks back at the past, she visualises her mother's world as one in which there was security and comfort- in which "witches always/ Got baked into gingebread". In other poems, the mother-figure becomes a sinister, malevolent figure, a Medusa, threatening to strangle its offspring in its snaky hair.

The same ambivalence is found in the poet's attitude towards her husband and children. The husband, whom she loved dearly, that "large, hulking, healthy Adam.... With a voice like the thunder of God", by betraying her becomes a 'vampire' who drinks her blood for the seven years that he is married to her( "Daddy"). The child whom love set going "like a fat gold watch" and whose "clear vowels rise like balloons"( "Morning Song") becomes a mere encumbrance- a "hook" or a "fat snail". In "Edge" the two children are depicted as two serpents. In the The Bell Jar, Esther vehemently says that children make her sick.

As one may infer, the subjects of Sylvia Plath are ordinary-not exalted-but they lose their ordinariness by the intensity of feeling with which they are portrayed. The poet has a way of scrutinising her subjects intently until
they acquire some special attribute. For example, "Sow" (The Colossus) written in a mockheroic manner, speaks not of an ordinary pig but a vast.

"Grobdingnag bulk

Of a sow lounged belly-bedded on that black compost,

Fat-rutted eyes

Dream-filmed. What a vision of ancient hoghood must

Thus wholly engross

The great grandam:—our marvel blazoned a knight,

Helmed, in cuirass,

Unhorsed and shredded in the grove of combat

"By a grisly-bristled

Boar, fabulous enough to straddle that sow's heat."

"Blue Moles" speaks of two dead moles that the poet and her husband had found at Yaddo. Again, Sylvia Plath concentrates on the dead animals so intensely that they lose their original characteristics and become "flung gloves.... Blue suede a dog or fox has chewed". In "Cut", a cut thumb becomes a "little pilgrim" whose scalp has been axed by Indians and in "Contusion", watching a breeze acquire a dull purple colour, the poet is reminded of "a pit of rocks" where the "sea sucks obsessively."
A. Alvarez believes that her poetry acted as a "strange, powerful lens through which her ordinary life was filtered and refigured with extraordinary intensity.\textsuperscript{23} It records the response of a sensitive soul to a world that is indifferent. It is her sensitivity that makes her feel public miseries as her own. An Attack on humanity is taken as an attack on her own self. The Bell Jar starts with the line: "It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs." Esther cannot help identifying herself with the Rosenbergs, "wondering what it would be like, being burnt alive, all along your nerves. "Not only does she get terribly upset over this execution, her depression multiplies tenfold on hearing the callous comments of Hilda on the matter. Such imaginative identification with the victimised and the vulnerable pervades the poetry of Sylvia Plath. Perhaps, as Steiner says, "It is only those who had no part in the events (of the concentration camps) who can focus on them rationally and imaginatively: to those who experienced the thing, it has lost the hard edges of possibility it has stepped outside the real."

The poems of Sylvia Plath constitute "an act of identification, of total communion with those tortured and massacred."\textsuperscript{25}

Her sensitive nature makes her magnify events so that they are blown out of proportion. Like Eliot's Prufrock, she concentrates upon a theme so much that it assumes a magnitude far beyond recognition and becomes an
obsession with her. Aurelia Plath, in her comments on Letters Home, testifies to her daughter's tendency to magnify events out of proportion but she believes that the intention could be to convey a sense of urgency (LH. 461).

Apart from her sensitivity, an important trait in Sylvia Plath's character, as noted by her friends, was her ambitious nature. "Driven by the demons 'to succeed', (she) neglected aspects of her life other than the academic," says Gordon Lameyer. Her friend at Cambridge, Jane, "sensed that Sylvia was driven by an array of formidable ambitions" as though she were trying "to satisfy someone very difficult to please." 26

Being a perfectionist, she tried to excel in everything: she was not satisfied with her academic record unless it was all A's and she was not satisfied with her poetry unless it seemed perfect in every way. Ted Hughes, in "Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's Poems" recounts how slowly and painstakingly she wrote her early poems, with her Thesaurus open on her knee: "If she didn't like a poem, she scrapped it entire. She rescued nothing of it. Every poem grew complete from its own root in that laborious inching way, as if she were working out a mathematical problem."

27 It was this training that was responsible for the success of her later poetry.

Between the world of Sylvia Plath's poems and that of her letters, there exists a wide gulf. In her letters
she appears full of life, wit and vitality whereas the poems are just the opposite—bleak, bitter, intense. In fact, the letters and the poems written at the same time do not seem to be by the same person. For example "Tulips", written about the time when the poet was recuperating after appendicitis, speaks of the husband and the child as unwelcome "smiling hooks" which encroach upon the patient's privacy. However, a letter written at this time—that also refers to the husband—speaks in a different vein; in it (LH, 411) the poet speaks of her husband as an "absolute angel" who looks after her lovingly. This makes one feel that she had a dual personality: her inner black and gloomy thoughts were reserved for her poetry whereas in her letters to her mother she put up a brave, optimistic front. Plath was fascinated by the complexities of the psyche. Her experience of psychotherapy and also her experience as a secretary in a psychiatrist's clinic in Boston during the summer of 1958 made her aware of the intricacies of human nature. The Bell Jar is full of characters who are doubles either for herself or for those close to her. To her friends she often seemed to be two different persons. Peter Davison, in his autobiography, Half Remembered, recalls the manner in which she recounted her life, her love affairs and her successes at Smith to him: "It was as though she were describing a stranger to herself, a highly trained circus horse." Nancy Hunter Steiner feels that Sylvia Plath was not only aware of an opposition between the life of her
poetry and the life she led "she harnessed this opposition to charge her themes and shape the forms of her verse.\[29\]

Peter Davison also tells us that when he heard the account of Sylvia Plath's attempted suicide from her, he was alarmed by "so dedicated an attention to the approaches to death, so molten an obsession.....she spoke as though the gamble with her own life was the only thing that really counted, the only experience that had ever taught her who she was."\[30\] The morbid streak in her made her take delight in death, murder, suicide and the like. David Compton, one of her acquaintance... (Sylvia Plath dedicated The Bell Jar to him and his wife, Elizabeth) recounts how she would pin up old clippings from newspapers and magazines over her desk which dealt with bizarre murders and other extremes of behaviour. Clarissa Roche, another friend of hers, says, "I cannot think of her without thinking of death------ she had picked up this habit when she was far too young and, rather than shake it off, she had conscientiously hooked herself further, boastfully calling herself a connoisseur of death........ Rather arrogantly Sylvia liked keeping death beside her, flirting and teasing it with a thrill of mastery ...."Sylvia courted death to stimulate life, she fancied herself the temptress, not the tempted."\[31\] In The Bell Jar, as Esther, she tries to experiment with death, trying out the different ways of committing suicide: she tries to drown herself off Egg Rock, but cannot: she looks for a place from where to hang herself, but can find none suitable: she
thinks of just sitting still at the sea shore and allowing the in-coming tide to steal over her, but again her courage fails her; she thinks of slashing her wrists in the bath tub and imagines the water"gaudy as popples": and finally, she inflicts cuts on her legs, to spill a little blood for practice"and feels thrilled watching the blood roll down her ankle.

A reference may also be made to Sylvia Plath's interest in occult practices. Both, she and her husband, believed in horoscope readings and supernaturalism, and often referred to their Ouija board for guidance. Her interest in the arcane and blackmagic and her feeling of kinship with the dead creeps into her poetry off and on, mainly in connection with her father. She conjures up his spirit, usually in the form of an old man rising from the sea, complaining of the cold: she longs for knowledge of the nether world so she appeals to the Rhine maidens to take her to a world "more full and clear": even a tree can come to her aid as she feels its tap roots link this world with the under world. Her final longing is for unity with the other world though it involves physical death.

Sylvia Plath's personality was moulded by her background and the influences on her so that it became essentially egocentric. Her poetry focuses attention on her own self and matters relating to the self. This is a prerequisite of confessional poetry— it has to hinge on the
poet's reaction to the world in which he finds himself. The confessional poet is the pivot of his own small world. No doubt, there are references to the external world, too, but external events are transmuted in such a manner as to lose their public value and are felt on the personal level.
NOTES & REFERENCES

1. For the biographical details I have depended mainly on Aurelia Plath's editorial comments on Sylvia L.
   Plath's Letters Home (London: Faber & Faber, 1975),
   hereafter cited as LH, followed by the page number.

2. These details are from "Prologue: Sylvia Plath "
   in The Savage God( London: Weidenfield & Nicolson,

3. Interviewed by Peter Orr. The Poet Speaks( London:

4. Quoted by E.M.Aird in Sylvia Plath: Her life and

5. "Ocean 1212-W" in The Art of Sylvia Plath,ed. C.
   Newman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press,

6. A Closer Look at Ariel( New York: Harper & Row,

7. "Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's


10. Sylvia Plath: Her life and Her Work, p. 38.


12. Ibid., p. 73.


14. "Candour is the only Wile," in The Art of Sylvia Plath, p. 29. George Steiner, too, compares Sylvia Plath to Emily Dickinson (ibid., p. 216), pointing out the difference: whereas Emily Dickinson was obliged to "shut the door on the roots and humiliations of the flesh, thus achieving her particular dryglightness. Sylvia Plath 'fully assumed her own condition."


17. Quoted by Kroll, ibid., p. 25.


20. The White Goddess myth is discussed in great detail by Judith Kroll in *Chapters in a Mythology*, pp. 39-79.


23. The Savage God, p. 23.


26. "Notes on the Chronological Order...." p. 188.
27. Gordon Lameyer's article. "The Double in Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar," in Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work (pp. 143-165), is a detailed study in this field.

