

ASSESSING SYLVIA PLATH'S TRAGIC PROSOPOGRAPHY THROUGH HER FAMILY TREE

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Tragedy is found not only in the genre of drama as Aristotle's or Shakespeare's would propagate; instead, it is an indispensable fact of human existence. It is not a petty imitation or a fantasy but often an unsayable horror as absolute as happiness and misery in the daily affairs of life, and depression is one of the most common comorbid psychiatric disorders in people who die in cataclysmic suicide. It does happen. If so, could such a monstrous thing be genetically inherited or an outcome of social environment? There is growing evidence that familial and transmissible factors, marriage, and stress-festered events contribute to the risk of self-slaughter acts. Even before the turn of the 20th century until now, its prevention has become a severe effort of every concerned individual. Suicide is on the rise today, which is why we stand in extreme need to put an end to such sad deeds because it is not over-comed yet. Sylvia Plath, a famed American 20th-century author, is one such representative victim. Therefore, this article attempts to assess Sylvia Plath's tragic prosopography through her family tree, especially her despondency, depression, trauma, suicide, and finally, the tragic end.

Keywords: Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, family tree, tragedy, depression, suicide

Introduction

*I'm alone...
Like the last eye left
To a man going to join the blind...*

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Yet when I die you will all be reading my poems and shedding tears of tender emotion over them (Brown, 2015, p. 13).

Familial transmission of psychiatric disorders such as bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, significant depression, substance misuse, and specific personality disorders heightens the likelihood of engaging in suicide conduct. However, it is important to note that having a family history of suicidal conduct does not imply that individuals would inevitably experience it. Rather, it suggests that these individuals may be more susceptible and should, therefore, proactively seek intervention and treatment at the first indication of mental illness in order to mitigate their risk.

Mangal (2007) quotes Darwin's saying, "*Life presents a continuous chain of struggle for existence survival*" (p. 524). Sylvia Plath is sometimes criticized for her reputation as a prominent figure of marital failure who tragically took her own life. She is more widely recognized for the sorrow and despair that permeated her life rather than for her significant contributions to modern American writing. She is labeled as self-destructive due to her inability to confront her surroundings and her refusal to acknowledge the undeniable and essential realities of human existence. Kumlu (2011) is candid, "*that Schizophrenic woman.*"

The significance of Plath lies in her creative brilliance, which illuminates the struggles faced by women in the mid-twentieth century. Her writings delve into a culture of feminist martyrdom inside a patriarchal and gendered society, a reality that is starkly confirmed by the betrayal of Plath by her husband, Ted Hughes. At Cambridge University, students knew how great a "seducer" and "womanizer" Plath was; he had a "reputation as a seducer" (Mangal, 2007, p. 92). At Smith College, she obtained numerous accolades and prizes for her thesis on psychic phenomena, specifically focusing on concepts such as multiple personalities, as shown in Dostoyevsky's novel. Plath is a tormented spouse who eventually becomes a mentally damaged psychiatric patient, prone to suicide at the young age of 30, leaving her two young children, Nicholas and Frieda, without a mother. The ignominy of her behavior appears to persist and recur throughout Hughes' lineage over time, as evidenced by the remnants of her genealogy.

Family Tree

McCarthy et al. note, "*querying a patient about his or her family history puts the client in the role of the expert*" (Cherlin, 2010, p. 9). A family tree is a visual representation of one's genealogy, displaying the individuals who belong

to a family in both the recent and remote past. It provides information about one's lineage, the expansion of their family, and their initial place of origin. If a genetic condition is present in the family, it will probably be inherited by the children, influencing their identity, characteristics, and behavior. Bennett (2011) claims: "*To cherish the memory of our ancestors is a plain dictate of piety. Only those who care not for their destiny can be careless as to their origin [...]. The path of my destiny was further laid by my maternal grandmother, Marjorie Warvelle Harbaugh, who stoked my mind with the art, poems, and images of my ancestors intertwined in elaborate genealogical trees*" (p. xxiii).

With the advancement of genetics, researchers are uncovering new insights into the comprehension and treatment of diseases intricately woven into family lineages. Lichter and Qian (2004) states, "*History tells us that family change is inevitable and often adaptive, and therefore should not be a source for alarmist rhetoric*" (p. 169). In the United States, there exists a cultural concept that one's identity and personal achievements are determined by their own efforts and choices. Consequently, individuals are anticipated to exhibit self-sufficiency and assume personal accountability for their decisions. Americans' dating customs closely resemble those of other English-speaking Western societies. Couples often meet through their social networks, workplaces, or shared interests and engage in meaningful discussion over a meal or drink to familiarize themselves with each other. It is also customary for them to engage in simultaneous dating or getting to know multiple individuals over a period of time. Individualism has an impact on the dynamics inside a family.

An American Couple and Marriage Trend

Family structures in America exhibit notable variations among diverse ethnicities and races. "*Marriage, although optional, remains the most highly valued form of family life in American culture, the most prestigious way to live your life*" (Cherlin, 2010, p. 9); for the majority of individuals, it represents a mutual dedication between two partners based on their affection for one other, rather than being a familial arrangement or a relationship driven by economic or societal factors. An increasing number of Americans are choosing to marry at a later stage in life, following a period of cohabitation with an unmarried spouse and having children before marriage. Certain couples opt for a de facto partnership instead of a legal marriage yet still maintain the same function and relationship dynamics as a married pair.

The divorce rates are consistently decreasing. Families that adhere to religious or conservative principles perceive marriage as an essential element for establishing a stable family unit and anticipate that resilient couples will

choose to marry. Tahir (2021) says, "*The result should be happier marriages*" (p. 4). The conventional interpretation of the ordinary family traditionally refers to a nuclear family residing apart from their extended relatives.

Plath's Prosopography Preview, A Social History

Sylvia Plath is the result of having grandparents of mixed German and Austrian descent who immigrated to the United States in the 19th century with high hopes for their children, Otto Plath (1885–1940) and Aurelia Schober (1906–1994). Otto Plath diverges from his parents' aspiration to pursue a career as a Lutheran minister, resulting in his estrangement from the family. He is employed and sustains himself by working at his uncle's grocery store in New York. Additionally, he attends classes at a local school to learn English, where he excels naturally and gracefully. By fortunate circumstances and his own merit, he becomes a professor at Boston University. It is during this time that he encounters Aurelia, his graduate student who is twenty years younger than him. Both individuals come from middle-class backgrounds and share a deep respect for self-improvement through diligent effort.

In order to wed Aurelia, Otto must initiate divorce proceedings with his former spouse, Lydia, with whom he had been estranged for years. Aurelia's comments in the memoir *Letters Home* suggest a discrepancy between her anticipations of married life and her spouse, resembling the portrayal of Friedan (2010) as "*Fulfilment as a woman had only one definition... the housewife-mother*" (p. 86). She is one generation younger than him and is used to living independently, contrary to her husband's desire for her to have a more submissive and domestic role. This subsequently has a negative impact on their children due to the absence of a suitable role model. Plath reveals her thoughts and emotions, "*I could never confess my fears to my parents, who had their troubles, and already looked at me as if I were an alien*" (Kottler, 2005, p. viii).

Aurelia's excellent behavior contrasts with Otto's, as she dutifully adheres to her parent's expectations and excels in additional courses in literature and history. Furthermore, she impressively works simultaneously in several professions, such as secretarial and library positions. Both Otto and Aurelia were of Middle European descent. They were educated, diligent, and ambitious, consistently succeeding in their everyday endeavors. They readily sacrificed financial pleasures and leisure activities without any noticeable negative consequences.

Like the protagonist Tess in Hardy's novel, the Hughes family also experiences tragic circumstances due to the premature death of Plath's father. Cooper (2003) relates the story of the reserved Plathian family. In Sylvia's eighth year, Otto, who had been ailing for some time, developed gangrene in one foot after minor trauma and was found to have late-stage untreated diabetes mellitus. It transpired that he had neglected his condition because of a conviction that it was cancer. The leg was amputated, but three weeks later, while still in hospital, he suffered a pulmonary embolism and died. The circumstances of his illness and death are strongly suggestive of depression, though neither he nor his wife had any recorded psychiatric history.

Aurelia, widowed at an early age following her husband's death, is compelled to single-handedly dedicate herself to her children, ensuring they have every available opportunity despite the toll it takes on her physically and emotionally. Over time, as demands on a single mother like Aurelia increase, she becomes emotionally unavailable and absent, lacking the warmth and understanding that is essential for a strong bond with her children. This absence of motherly affection and empathy causes Plath to feel deeply hurt and disconnected, similar to the lament expressed by Fitzgerald and Brucoli (1978) in *Notebooks*, "*There never was a good biography of a good novelist*" (p. 129). Mother Aurelia lives long enough as if meant to witness and bemoan the self-slaughtered daughter.

The family faced a significant financial limitation. Sylvia subsequently observed that her father lacked a pension, which caused her mother significant resentment. The expenses associated with his illness and funeral had depleted all available savings. Deprived of parents and lacking wealth, their new residence was an unpromising environment for a poet to commence writing, as Plath observes from a mature standpoint, "*genuinely public. Everyone went*" (*Intelligent Education*, 2015, p. 2). The experience is discouraging, sterile, and lacking in lyrical qualities. Nevertheless, Plath effectively utilizes this distinctive suburban and home setting in her literary creations, crafting an occasionally dismal perspective on contemporary existence.

The death of her father left her perpetually empty and profoundly isolated, with an unmistakable agony and irreversible grief that prompted detractors to characterize her as having a Freudian psychological "*father obsession*." Plath's paternal challenges are evident in numerous poems she wrote, including "*The Colossus*," "*The Beekeeper's Daughter*," "*Daddy*," etc. commence with the demise of her father. As she can now only perceive her father's presence through death, her sole persistent longing is to perish in

whatever manner. "A strong woman who recklessly throws away her strength is worse than a weak woman who has never had any strength to throw away." "Did you say the stars were world's, Tess?" (Hardy & Wright, 1960).

In the poem "Elm," the poet's once cheerful and lively surroundings are filled with themes of weeping, moaning, suffocation, and dejection. She reiterates, "I am inhabited by a cry" (Plath, 2020, p. 10). The symbolic image of the Plathian family is suggestive of the family tree, yet it is toxic, like the elm tree. The irony here is that the family is aware of their mental condition, which they choose not to acknowledge out of shame, yet the tree itself clearly depicts it. It proceeds: "I know the bottom, / It is what you fear. / I do not fear it / I have been there" (Plath, 2020, p. 2). The poem's lines clarify their thoughts, but Plath's in particular:

*A wind of such violence
Will tolerate no by standing: I must shriek.
[...]
I am terrified by this dark thing
That sleeps in me;
All day, I feel its soft, feathery turnings, its malignity.
Clouds pass and disperse.
Are those the faces of love, those pale irretrievable?* (Plath, 2020, p. 21).

Plath is a replica of her time, the "Roaring 20s", the "Lost Generation," and the "Jazz Age," very much in line with "The Biography of the Nation" (Fitzgerald & Bruccoli, 1978, p. 8). She enthusiastically immersed herself among the casual acquaintances and charming suitors. However, her melancholic state was deeply gratified by the anguish it inflicted upon her, as if the malevolent force from the depths of the underworld was her closest companion rather than Ted Hughes, her romantic partner. Meanwhile, her ideal self diligently fulfilled its task of providing her solace amidst her despair. She regained her confidence to appear ordinary in order to dazzle everyone, particularly the stylish fashion enthusiasts, high-class individuals, and frequenters of nightclubs. She aimed to captivate others with her superficial allure while secretly longing for a deeper connection in genuine love, akin to the biblical figure Mary Magdalene.

The artistic prowess of Plath remained undiminished. Arnold's renowned poem exhibits an initial burst of creative enthusiasm in "Forsaken

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Mermaid,” where sea images come alive: “A spark flew off Arnold and shook me like a chill. I wanted to cry, I felt very odd, I have fallen in a new way of being happy” (Newman, 1970, p. 266), is the way she uses metric composition to express her melancholy. Sadly, though, she was able to delude herself under overwhelming emotion as an evil to murder and butcher and leave this crazy world. “It’s an odd thing that one half of mankind is looking for salvation in the future and the other half in the past,” notes the anti-hero Ulrich in Musil’s classic novel *The Men Without Qualities* (1953) (Niro, 2021, p. 105).

Plath must write because her life story is a jumble of painful visions that must be released therapeutically. Writing as a kind of healing, or script therapy, is how she overcame trauma to write her autobiography. Ironically, the most heartbreaking story is that, as she admits in *The Unabridged Journal of Sylvia Plath* (1956), she was always frightened to express her crippling agony. She begs for help with this: “I need a father. I need a mother. I need some older wiser person to talk to. I talk to God, but the sky is empty” (Majumdar, 2002, p. 40).

Sylvia Plath and Her Husband Ted Hughes’ Tragic Storyline, An Extension of Genealogy as Exposed in the Author’s Works

The abrupt and significant decline in the marital affection between Ted and Sylvia Plath marks the instant downfall of their relationship, as Ted publicly develops feelings for his tenant lover starting in 1960. Experiencing intense frustration, she accuses him of being a traitor., “Ted lies to me, he lies all the time, he has become a “little” man” (Tiwari, 2020, p. 22). Due to Ted’s unfaithfulness, she felt compelled to make a prompt decision to withdraw from this intolerable existence.

The occurrence of sadness, beginning at the age of twenty, which is linked to excessive labor and professional setbacks, pales in comparison to the hardships she endures in her marriage. Even minor setbacks caused her to experience profound despondency. She penned a letter addressed to her friend, Eddie Cohen, “I underwent a rather brief and traumatic experience of badly given shock treatments” (Biggs, 2018). She proceeded to ingest all of her sleeping medications and entered a comatose state for two days, during which her relatives became aware of her audible distress. The individual in question expresses: “Dying/ Is an art, like everything else. / I do it exceptionally well” (Plath, 2020, p. 43). Following resuscitation at the hospital, she was transported to the mental clinic, where she had a second round of electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) and psychotherapy. Although she initially showed signs of improvement, her rehabilitation was tragically cut short by suicide.

Sylvia's posthumous collection of poetry, *Ariel*, solidified her renown and propelled her celebrity to its zenith, even as she grappled with a profound struggle against despair that consumed her from the inside. The concluding piece of Plath's last compilation is the poem titled "Ariel," "*Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through*" (Plath, 2020, p. 82). Her fury transforms into hopelessness and despair, resulting in a prevailing sense of melancholy. "*I felt very still and very empty*" (Plath, 2013). The specter of death haunted her relentlessly, driving her towards thoughts of suicide. She is prepared to accept that the immediate cause of her broken relationship with Ted Hughes, her husband of only 6 years, was his abrupt and disrespectful rejection of her. The poem "The Colossus" expresses the anguish of a furious daughter who has lost all hope and feels insignificant, like a tiny ant on the verge of vanishing.

*I crawl like an ant in mourning
Over the weedy acres of your brow
[...]*

*A blue sky out of the Oresteia
Arches above us. O father, all by yourself*

You are as pithy and historical as the Roman Forum (Plath, 2018, p. 12).

Therefore, Plath tragically died from carbon monoxide poisoning on 11 February 1963 in Primrose Hill, a picturesque area of London, England, during the harsh winter. England has never had a winter of this magnitude in its entire history. The *Daily Mail* implies that Plath's parents indirectly contributed to her death by passing on a genetic predisposition to depression, which may be seen as a "suicide gene." If this is the case, it is conceivable that the tragic family tree has been inherited by another generation, allowing it to establish a stronger foundation and take root more deeply.

Conclusion

Setting aside the act of stigmatizing, Plath encompasses the entirety of women's experiences and serves as a microcosm of the immense suffering and tragedy of life. Contemporary critics have allowed other writers to thoroughly analyze Plath's work and recognize her significant contribution to American literature. They refuse to categorize her solely as a product of imaginary depression. Overall, Plath is predominantly acknowledged for her suicide rather than her literary contributions. Nonetheless, enthusiasts of literature derive inspiration from examining her work. The inquiry into the factors that

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led to her demise remains a subject of ongoing and inquisitive investigation, which is met with heightened empathy and admiration, as she foretold in her emotionally charged poetry. “*I am vertical*”:

And I shall be useful when I lie down, finally:

Then the trees may touch me for once, and the flowers have time for me (Plath, 2017, p. 19-20).

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