



## Ariel

By Sylvia Plath  
ISBN: 9780060931728

### Plot Summary:

"Love set you going like a fat gold watch."  
"From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars /  
Govern a life."

Between the first and last words of this remarkable collection, between love and life, between the infant's "clear vowels" of "Morning Song" and the final poem's "white skull" and "Words dry and riderless," Sylvia Plath created an unprecedented poetic vision. First published in England in 1964, and in the United States a year later, *Ariel* was, in the words of then-editor Frances McCullough, "a sensation." The impact of these poems in England and America alike was astonishing.

Perhaps the most famous, still, of the *Ariel* poems are "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy," and those that present a sensitive young woman battling the forces of society and her own demons to achieve an imaginative transformation determined solely by herself. Grappling with both the minutiae of daily life and historical and mythic grandeur, these poems seem to be an attempt to raise existence--and the poet herself--to a new level of transcendence and intensity. Alternately brutal and gentle, slashing and caressing, Plath's verses have been seen as both out of proportion and unbalanced, on the one hand, and unprecedentedly focused and courageous. Whether speaking as Mary, Medusa, or herself, Sylvia Plath fashioned poems that remain "proof of the capacity of poetry to give to reality the greater permanence of the imagined"(George Steiner).

### Topics for Discussion

1. In what ways do the *Ariel* poems speak directly to conditions and qualities of life in the late 1990s?
2. What images of the feminine appear in these poems? With what women from history, literature, religion, and myth do the speakers in these poems compare or contrast themselves? Do you agree with Robert Lowell's statement that, in these poems, "almost everything we customarily think of as feminine is turned on its head"?
3. What instances can you identify in the poems of the powerful, frequently destructive, devouring female or female spirit and of female embodiments of power and wisdom? In what ways might these be related?
4. To what extent do instances and images of disintegration, illness, and fragmentation define the basic vision of these poems and the conditions of life expressed in them?
5. In one of his "Birthday Letters" addressed to Plath, Ted Hughes writes, "Red was your color. /...[Red] Was what you wrapped around you." How does Plath use the color red in these poems? Does any other color attain a comparable importance?
6. In what guises and circumstances does death appear in these poems? Do any of the poems counter death and dying with intimations or hopes of resurrection, rebirth, or renewal?
7. What instances do you find of physical, emotional, and mental violence and destructiveness, including self-destructiveness? Are there equivalent instances of tenderness and nurturing?
8. How does Plath characterize "the Father" in "Daddy" and other poems? Do you agree with Ted Hughes when he writes, in The Birthday Letters, that "a god / That was not your [Plath's] father / Was a false god."
9. Are the numerous allusions to Nazi brutality and the Holocaust, in "Lady Lazarus" and other poems, justified? What is their purpose?
10. What characterizes many of the poems' natural settings and elements drawn from the natural world? Do qualities and conditions of nature invoked contrast or accord with the poems' primary themes?
11. Is there a single poem in *Ariel* that you think is more representative than any other poem of Plath's art and poetic voice? In what ways does this poem seem representative?

**About the Author:** To this day, Sylvia Plath's writings continue to inspire and provoke. Her only published novel, *The Bell Jar*, remains a classic of American literature, and *The Colossus* (1960), *Ariel* (1965), *Crossing the Water* (1971), *Winter Trees* (1971), and *The Collected Poems* (1981) have placed her among this century's essential American poets.

Sylvia Plath was born on October 27, 1932, the first child of Aurelia and Otto Plath. When Sylvia was eight years old, her father died--an event that would haunt her remaining years--and the family moved to the college town of Wellesley. By high school, Plath's talents were firmly established; in fact, her first published poem had appeared when she was eight. In 1950, she entered Smith College, where she excelled academically and continued to write; and in 1951 she won Mademoiselle magazine's fiction contest. Her experiences during the summer of 1953--as a guest editor at Mademoiselle in New York City and in deepening depression back home--provided the basis for *The Bell Jar*. Near that summer's end, Plath nearly succeeded in killing herself. After therapy and electroshock, however, she resumed her academic and literary endeavors. Plath graduated from Smith in 1955 and, as a Fulbright Scholar, entered Newnham College, in Cambridge, England, where she met the British poet, Ted Hughes. They were married a year later. After a two-year tenure on the Smith College faculty and a brief stint in Boston, Plath and Hughes returned to England, where their two children were born.

Plath had been successful in placing poems in several prestigious magazines, but suffered repeated rejection in her attempts to place a first book. *The Colossus* appeared in England, however, in the fall of 1960, and the publisher, William Heinemann, also bought her first novel. By June 1962, she had begun the poems that eventually appeared in *Ariel*. Later that year, separated from Hughes, Plath immersed herself in caring for her children, completing *The Bell Jar*, and writing poems at a breathtaking pace.

A few days before Christmas 1962, she moved with the children to a London flat. By the time *The Bell Jar* was published under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas, in early 1963, she was in desperate circumstances. Her marriage was over, she and her children were ill, and the winter was the coldest in a century. Early on the morning of February 11, Plath turned on the cooking gas and killed herself.

Plath was posthumously awarded a Pulitzer Prize in 1982 for her *Collected Poems*.