



#3668

SYLVIA PLATH

Grade Levels: 11-13+

58 minutes

ANNENBERG/CPB PROJECT 1998

DESCRIPTION

American poet Sylvia Plath died in 1963 at age 30, a suicide. Poets, critics, former teachers, friends, and her mother share their analysis of her work and recall her life. Representative poems emphasize different phases of her poetic development. Her suicide attempt at 20 and her father's death ten years earlier profoundly affected her. Presentation helps clarify the mystery of Sylvia Plath.



ACADEMIC STANDARDS

Subject Area: Language Arts

- ◆ Standard: Demonstrates competence in the general skills and strategies for reading a variety of literary texts
 - Benchmark: Applies reading skills and strategies to a variety of literary texts (e.g., fiction, nonfiction, myths, poems, biographies, autobiographies, science fiction, supernatural tales, satires, parodies, plays, American literature, British literature, world and ancient literature) (See Instructional Goals #4, #6, #7)
 - Benchmark: Understands historical and cultural influences on literary works (See Instructional Goals #1, #3, #4, #5)

INSTRUCTIONAL GOALS

1. To present a biography of Sylvia Plath.
2. To dramatize selected excerpts from the poems and stories of Sylvia Plath.
3. To examine her works from the perspective of critics, historians, biographers and other poets.
4. To identify her style of writing and its impact on literature and poetry.
5. To demonstrate dominant literary themes in her poetry.
6. To stimulate critical thinking in the analysis of her lifestyle and its impact on her work.
7. To motivate reading of her work.

VOCABULARY

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| 1. diaries | 3. sonnets |
| 2. villanelle | 4. gentility |

BEFORE SHOWING

1. Select a variety of Plath's poems to acquaint students with her style, subject matter and imagery.
2. Discuss some of the reasons people commit suicide.
3. Familiarize students with the works of other poets mentioned in this film including: John Donne, Dylan Thomas, W. B. Yeats, W. H. Auden, Virginia Woolf, Theodore Roethke and Ted Hughes.
4. Locate a map of the world and find the following places:
 - a. Winthrop, New York
 - b. London, England
 - c. Smith College, Massachusetts



AFTER SHOWING

Discussion Items and Questions

1. How did the events of her life shape her poems?
 - a. Which event could be considered most significant?
 - b. How were these events evident in the evolution of her poetry?
2. Describe her personality.
 - a. Explain how her life could be categorized as a dichotomy.
 - (1) always – never
 - (2) academic – popular
 - (3) life – death
 - (4) being a good girl – committed to disquieting forces
 - b. Debate the possibility that she had a mental illness.
 - (1) What was the effect of her reading Freud's Abnormal Psychology?
 - (2) What might a diagnosis of her reveal today?
 - c. Hypothesize what demons she faced.
3. What was the underlying theme of her poetry?
4. How did she feel about being a mother? What influence did that have on her poetry?
5. What was the significance of beekeeping to her?
6. Discuss the reasons behind Plath's disillusionment at age 9. How much of this was caused by her genius?
7. Discuss the influence each person had on her life and work.
 - c. Father
 - (1) Were the influences real or imaginary?
 - (2) How was this characterized in her later works?
 - d. Mother
 - (1) How was she characterized in her works?
 - (2) What kind of relationship did they have?
 - e. Ted Hughes
 - (1) How did he help her find her voice?

- (2) How did help her know more about her past?
 (3) What was the effect of his leaving her?
8. What kind of poetry did she write?
 - c. Explain what she meant by “using the sensuous and emotional experiences but to be able to control and manipulate them with an informed and intellectual mind.”
 - d. Discuss why she tended to delve into the deep dark realms of the human psyche.
 9. Suicide was a big part of her life.
 - c. What did it symbolize to her?
 - d. How did she characterize it in her poems?
 - e. Why was she trying to kill herself?
 - f. After her first attempt she remarked: “That was my last act of love.” What did she mean?
 10. Sylvia disappeared after her stint in New York City with Mademoiselle, in 1953.
 - c. What possible reasons could be contributed to her disappearance?
 - d. Could she have been hiding from something?
 - e. How did this disappearance affect her work?
 11. Describe her life at Smith College.
 - c. Why did she like the all-girls’ school?
 - d. How were the girls made into “ladies”?
 12. What was instrumental in bringing her out of her breakdown? How did it accomplish this?
 13. Why was she so enamored of the English?



Applications and Activities

1. Examine the quote: “Immature poets imitate, mature poets steal” by Eliot and apply it to Plath.
2. The video mentions that a big part of Sylvia’s writing style involved keeping journals.
 - a. Keep a journal/diary for a selected period of time. (Include impressions and descriptions.)
 - b. Write a poem about your most distinct impressions or memorable events.
3. Obtain various poems by her and search for the imagery of the sea.
4. Discuss her style of writing and how each part evolved along with her.
 - a. forms used
 - b. subject matter
 - c. phrasing and punctuation
 - d. imagery
5. Research her works as they relate to her state of mind.
6. Compile an anthology of her poems put in chronological order. Note the pattern of subjects, tones and evolution of forms.

7. Compare her work to that of Virginia Woolf.
8. Discuss her as a foreseer of the women's movement.
9. Obtain a copy of the poem The Moon and the Yew Tree. Analyze this poem to find the "old" Sylvia and the "new" Sylvia coming together both in style and in personality.
10. Obtain a copy of the poem "Ariel." Debate whether this poem is a long suicide note or about a horse.
11. Obtain a copy of the poem Daddy. Discuss whom the poem is actually about, her father or the "daddy" inside of her.

RELATED RESOURCES



Captioned Media Program

- Edgar Allan Poe: Terror of the Soul #3236
- Emily Dickinson: A Certain Slant of Light #6200
- Depression: The Dark Side of the Blues #2052
- Langston Hughes: The Dream Keeper #3625
- Robert Frost #3651

World Wide Web



The following Web sites complement the contents of this guide; they were selected by professionals who have experience in teaching deaf and hard of hearing students. Every effort was made to select accurate, educationally relevant, and "kid-safe" sites. However, teachers should preview them before use. The U.S. Department of Education, the National Association of the Deaf, and the Captioned Media Program do not endorse the sites and are not responsible for their content.

- **VOICES AND VISIONS SPOTLIGHT—SYLVIA PLATH**

www.learner.org/catalog/literature/vvseries/vvspot/Plath.html

A Web site sponsored by the publishers of this video. A short synopsis of the video, a video clip and many good links to other Internet sites.

- **SYLVIA PLATH—THE ACADEMY OF AMERICAN POETS**

www.poets.org/poets/poets.cfm?prmID=11

A site sponsored by the Academy of American Poets containing a short description, selected poems, bibliography and other Internet Web sites.

- **SYLVIA PLATH HOMEPAGE**

<http://ilabws.informatik.uni-leipzig.de/~beckmann/plath.html>

A short biography, books by and related to Plath, essays, videos, translations and more.

- **SYLVIA PLATH LINKS**

www.geocities.com/~emily777/PlathLinks.html

A "complete" listing of the sites on the Internet related to Plath. Sites are broken down into categories.