

In this section, you will hear academic lectures. In the exam you will hear each lecture once before you look at the questions. In this practice test you can control the audio yourself. You can also see the script of the conversation.

*Listen to the lecture about the poet Sylvia Plath. Take notes while you listen. Then answer the questions. Read all the questions before you start listening. You should listen to the audio twice.*

Transcript:

Today we're gonna look at the life and some of the works of one of America's finest modern female poets, Sylvia Plath.

At the time of her death in 1963 Sylvia Plath was on the verge of the critical success and recognition that she had sought for most of her life. Her first novel '*The Bell Jar*' had just been published and the publication of her collection of poems '*Ariel*' had just been agreed.

These poems, which were mostly written during the last year of her life, chronicle the traumatic developments taking place in her personal life and were to make for her a reputation as a first rate poet. But it wasn't until 1982, almost twenty years after her death, that her posthumously published '*Collected poems*' won the Pulitzer Prize for literature. Since this time the fascination and intrigue with her work has continued to grow. Very few modern poets have captured the popular imagination as much as Plath, even to the extent that in 2003 a movie was made about her life and her intense relationship with husband and fellow poet Ted Hughes.



To understand the continued growth in interest in her work, we have to look at the issues which her life and work address. As Susan Bassnett writes in her book on women writers.

'Dying as she did in 1963, Sylvia Plath never knew that so soon afterwards the problems of what and how women write was to become such a crucial matter and was to be debated by so many other women'

So, Sylvia Plath was a woman writing about women's issues before they were recognised as being of any importance.

Sylvia Plath was born at Robinson Memorial Hospital in Boston on 27th October 1932. She was the first born child of Otto and Aurelia Plath, both highly educated academic people. Her father Otto was a professor of biology at Boston University, but her mother had been subjugated into a domestic role as housewife despite her level of education. Her father was not too pleased with the birth of his daughter and demanded that his wife have a son within the next two years. Amazingly enough his wife obliged by giving birth to a son almost exactly two years later.

This domineering father figure became a common theme that recurred throughout Plath's writing. With the birth of her brother, Sylvia had to work much harder to win her father's attention and approval. When in 1936 Plath's father became ill, access to him became even more restricted, and Plath's main means of getting attention from her father was by achieving academic success. This meant that from an early age she began to equate love with success.

In 1940 Plath's father died and this left the family in a very difficult financial situation. They were forced to move away from the seaside home that Plath had enjoyed so much and into a suburb of Boston and her mother had to take a part time job to support the family.

In 1950 Plath graduated from Bradford High School and won a scholarship to Smith College. In the same year she published a short story entitled '*And summer will not come again*' and a poem called '*Bitter strawberries*'.

Plath's time at Smith was difficult as she had very high expectations of herself. She wanted to achieve immaculate grades, but she also wanted to be accepted by her peers and an important part of being accepted was being popular and dating lots of boys. This was difficult because as a scholarship girl she had only a very small allowance to spend on clothes and going out, and each year's continued scholarship was dependent on the level of her grades.

In 1953 Plath won a fiction contest sponsored by Madamouse magazine and was offered the opportunity to go to New York as a guest editor. She relished this opportunity to spend a month working in a professional publishing environment, but Plath returned from New York feeling exhausted and after hearing news that her application to a creative writing course had been rejected, she fell into what was to become one of many depressions.

1. *The Bell Jar* was

- about her father
- her first novel
- a very successful collection of poems
- her last poem

2. Sylvia Plath's '*Collected poems*'

- won the Pulitzer Prize twenty years after it was published
- were written during the last year of her life
- won the Pulitzer Prize in 1982
- were never published

3. Sylvia's husband

- made movies
- died in 2003
- was also a poet
- had a movie made about him

4. Susan Bassnett thought Sylvia's work

- was about her husband
- wasn't very good
- was about work life
- was of great interest to women

5. Sylvia's brother

- was two years older than her
- was born two years after her
- was a professor at Boston University
- was a highly educated academic

6. Sylvia Plath's time at college was difficult because

- she got bad grades
- she won a scholarship
- boys didn't like her
- she was short of money

7. In 1953 Sylvia

- left New York to get a job as an editor
- rejected an offer to teach creative writing
- worked as a guest editor in New York
- returned to new York because she was depressed

8. What does the lecturer imply when she says "*Very few modern poets have captured the popular imagination as much as Plath*"

- Plath was able to understand the hopes of ordinary people.
- Plath has become very popular
- It is unusual for a modern poet to become popular with ordinary people.
- Plath's writing was about modern people and their imagination.

9. What does the lecturer imply when she says "*This domineering father figure became a common theme that recurred throughout Plath's writing.*"

- The image of her father appears in many of her poems.
- Plath often wrote of her love for her father.
- Plath writings were dominated by the image of her father.
- Plath's father often told her what to write about.

10. Which **THREE** sentences best summarise the passage?

- A What's remarkable about Plath's work is that it addresses many women's issues that were ahead of her time.
- B Plath's father was one of her guiding influences and he supported and mentored her until he died in 1940.
- C Plath's early life was spent living happily by the sea with her mother who had a part time job to support the family.
- D The real significance and the greatness of work was never recognised within in her lifetime.
- E Plath's academic path to success was secured by winning an early scholarship. After this she never looked back.
- F Plath's work reflects the many of the personal difficulties that she had whilst growing up and later as a wife and mother.