

## Brief Biography

Born in 1932 to middle class parents in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, Sylvia Plath published her first poem at the age of eight. A sensitive person who tended to be a bit of a perfectionist she was what many would consider a model daughter and student - popular, a straight A student. She won a scholarship to Smith College in 1950 and even then she had an enviable list of publications. While at Smith she wrote over four hundred poems.

However, beneath the surface of her seeming perfection were some serious problems. During the summer after her junior year in college, Sylvia made her first (and almost successful) attempt at suicide by overdosing on sleeping pills. After a period of recovery, she once again pursued academic and literary success, graduating from Smith in 1955 and winning a Fulbright scholarship to study in Cambridge, England.

In 1956 she married Ted Hughes, an English poet, and in 1960, at the age of twenty-eight she published her first book. However, less than two years after the birth of their first child the marriage disintegrated.

In the winter of 1962-63, one of the coldest in centuries, Sylvia lived in a small flat in London, with her two children, ill with the flu and nearly broke. The difficulties in her life seemed to reinforce her need to write and she often worked between four and eight a.m., before the children awoke. She would sometimes finish a poem a day. In her last works it seems as though some deeper and more powerful self had grabbed control of her. In those poems death is given a cruel, physical allure and psychic pain becomes almost tactile.

On February 11, 1963, Sylvia Plath succeeded in killing herself with cooking gas at the age of thirty. Two years after her death, *Ariel*, a collection of some her last poems was published, that was followed by *Crossing the Water* and *Winter Trees* in 1971 and in 1981 *The Collected Poems* was published, edited by none other than Ted Hughes.

*Edited from poemhunter.com*

# Child

Your clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful thing.  
I want to fill it with color and ducks,  
The zoo of the new

Whose names you meditate-  
April snowdrop, Indian pipe,  
Little

Stalk without wrinkle,  
Pool in which images  
Should be grand and classical

Not this troublous  
Wringing of the hands, this dark  
Ceiling without a star.

## Glossary

Indian Pipe, also known as 'Corpse Plant' is a small, white flower which doesn't have any chlorophyll (the stuff that makes plants green). It has flowers that droop and tiny, scale like leaves. It grows in shady woods with rich soil and decaying plant matter. This plant is often found near dead stumps.



Snowdrop



Indian Pipe

## Summary and Analysis

Plath says that her child's eye is pure and beautiful. Because she says the child's eye is 'the one' thing that is so lovely, it implies that everything else in the poet's life is somehow tainted or imperfect. This hints at sadness and despair. This opening is therefore a blend of joy at her child's beauty and despair that nothing else in the poet's life is similarly lovely.

The poet wants to fill her child's life with happiness and ensure that he has wonderful experiences. The tone is excited here as she thinks about the fantastic new things her child will learn. That everything new is compared to a zoo shows how exotic and exciting all these new things will appear to the young child, and evokes a sense of the child's wonder and innocence about the world. He will 'meditate' or think about all these experiences.

Plath mentions two flowers as examples of the sort of thing her child will learn about. It is interesting that she chooses the two examples she does. They are both small, white, drooping flowers, but both have different connotations. They may be symbolic of the difference between her life and her child's life. April snowdrops suggest freshness, spring, hope, innocence (white). Indian pipes, on the other hand, are also known as 'corpse flowers' and are associated with darkness and death. This seems to me to be a blend of the hopeful and the hopeless, perhaps mirroring Plath's own feelings at this time. Only two weeks after she wrote this poem, she took her own life. This comparison between her own life and what she wishes for her child recurs later in the poem when she talks about her life being like a dark ceiling without any glimmer of light.

The flower imagery is continued in the next stanza in the metaphor which compares the child to a smooth, flawless stalk. Like a stalk shooting up out of the ground, the child has the potential to blossom.

The child's eye is like a pool and the poet wants it to be filled with 'grand and classical' images, which will allow the child's intellect to develop. These images will feed the child's mind and enable it to grow.

In the last stanza, the poet expresses her wish that her child's life should be happier than hers. In a bleak and despairing image, she compares her life to a dark room which has no gleam of light. The mention of 'wringing of the hands' suggests anguish and inner turmoil. Does she feel that she cannot offer her child the life he deserves?

Theme: This poem is a blend of the poet's deep love for her child and hope for his happy future, and despair and hopelessness when she thinks of her own life.

## Poppies in July

Little poppies, little hell flames,  
Do you do no harm?  
You flicker. I cannot touch you.  
I put my hands among the flames. Nothing burns  
And it exhausts me to watch you  
Flickering like that, wrinkly and clear red, like the skin of a mouth.  
A mouth just bloodied.  
Little bloody skirts!  
There are fumes I cannot touch.  
Where are your opiates, your nauseous capsules?  
If I could bleed, or sleep!  
If my mouth could marry a hurt like that!  
Or your liquors seep to me, in this glass capsule,  
Dulling and stilling.  
But colorless. Colorless.

### **Glossary:**

**Opiates:** drugs, specifically opium which is derived from poppies. Opiates put the user into a calm state. It is a heavy tranquilliser which was used to be a form of pain relief.

### **Summary and analysis**

The poet is looking at a field of poppies. However, this is not a pleasant poem about flowers. Plath is deeply agitated or upset. The metaphors she uses to describe the poppies tell us this. They remind her of hell 'little hell flames'; they remind her of bleeding mouths 'A mouth just bloodied'; and their petals are like skirts covered in blood 'Little bloody skirts'. Such a link between flowers and physical violence is deeply unsettling.

The poet's mood is one of exhaustion. She says that even looking at the poppies tires her. She is so depressed and numb that she actually wishes for drugs or physical pain – anything to end the way she feels at the moment. She knows, however, that simply sniffing the flowers will not provide opium: 'There are fumes I cannot touch'. The opiate in the flower is inside the seed head. She

longs for its 'dulling and stilling' effects. Startlingly and distressingly, Plath also wishes that she could bleed like the poppies. It seems that she would rather any condition than the one she is in at the moment. The use of the word 'marry' in the twelfth line may suggest that Plath's marriage is causing her pain. Certainly, her marriage was in trouble at the time the poem was written, which is likely to have contributed to her depression.

The image of the 'glass capsule' suggests that Plath is both trapped and isolated. She is apart from the rest of the world.

The last lines of the poem could be interpreted in different ways. Plath may be referring to the colourless, liquid opiate; or she may be referring to the soundless and colourless state she longs for. If she were drugged, or even dead, all of the sights and sounds of the world would be lost to her. She would be in a state of oblivion.

The rhythm of the poem adds to the feeling of agitation and depression. The lines are short and the regular use of end-line punctuation creates a choppy effect. Combined with the images of violence, the overall effect is one of a nightmare of sorts.

**Theme:** The poet longs to escape from a world which contains nothing but misery for her. This is a deeply personal poem which offers us an insight into Plath's despair.