

# Ariel

by Sylvia Plath

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## About the Book

"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).

## Discussion Guide

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?

## Author Bio

Sylvia Plath was born in 1932 in Massachusetts. Her books include the poetry collections THE COLOSSUS, CROSSING THE WATER, WINTER TREES, ARIEL and COLLECTED POEMS, which won the Pulitzer Prize. A complete and uncut facsimile edition of ARIEL was published in 2004 with her original selection and arrangement of poems. She was married to the poet Ted Hughes, with whom she had a daughter, Frieda, and a son, Nicholas. She died in London in 1963.

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