
Sylvia Ashton-Warner: Of difficulties and differences

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This paper examines the life of Sylvia Ashton-Warner in the light of Erikson's Eight Ages of Man (Erikson, 1963, *Childhood and Society*:247-269. To be abbreviated from hereon to C & S). I will show that the difficulties Sylvia experienced in her mature adulthood were closely related to the problems she suffered during her childhood, teenage years, and early adulthood. There are two political claims to action that I intend to focus on. The first is Sylvia's drive to gain recognition for her reading theories and to see her Little Books published. The second is her desire for recognition as a writer in her own country (Hood, 1986:12). This paper is to give a better understanding of why neither of these objectives was achieved.

Erikson sets out a Freudian model for human development which is divided into eight stages corresponding to what he called the ages of man. The degree of success we have with each stage influences the way we deal with that area of our life for the remainder of our existence. If we have coped well with that stage, there is unlikely to be problems for us in that particular sphere. If we do not handle a particular stage well, there will be recurring difficulties for us (C & S:263).

Although Erikson in 1960's language uses "man" here I will use "she" in its application because it is being applied to a particular person. Erikson calls his first stage "*Basic Trust vs. Mistrust*" (C & S:247-251). This is the stage of the newborn who is entirely dependent on others for survival. Erikson says that the child learns to feel comfortable with feeding, sleeping, and the use of her bowels. However the child needs more than this to give her the basic trust that will put her in a good position to deal with the problems ahead. She needs to feel a sense of belonging, a sense of continuity, and that she has a place in the community. If the mother is viewed as personally trustworthy by the community, this will be absorbed by the infant. It is a social achievement when, recognising her mother, she lets her out of her sight happily, knowing she will return. These events are the beginning of ego identity, connecting familiar sights and sounds with remembered sensations and images. She can put up with many problems and frustrations, if she is comfortable that things will continue to flow along as they always have.

Erikson writes that the first test of this relationship is teething. The infant feels abandoned and grasps whatever she can find to ease the pain. This situation may be the model for the masochistic tendency to enjoy being hurt in an attempt to ease pain, when escape from the pain is impossible.

Erikson considers that the absence of basic trust is characterised by infant schizophrenia, and if this situation is not resolved it can result in habitual adult depression. There must be a certain amount of firmness, but the child needs a belief that there is a reason for behavioural restrictions.

As a Freudian theory, for Erikson, each stage has a relationship to a social institution as a result of contemporary involvement. Organised religion forms the basis for the parental faith that allows for developing infantile trust, while some derive this faith from social action or scientific pursuits. Some people have never achieved trust in their surroundings or those surrounding them.

Erikson's second stage is called "*Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt*" (C & S:251-255). As the child's muscles develop, the child experiments with holding on and letting go. Both can lead to destructive or benign attitudes, as in cruel retention against a caring "to have and to hold" attitude, and destructive release against "let it be." The child needs firm protection against her untrained sense of discrimination as to right and wrong, and she must not be exposed to early failure, leading to doubt in her own ability. This is expressed in adult life in perceptions of persecution.

Erikson considers that shame is not the same as guilt. It is more akin to self-consciousness, or embarrassment, and is much used by primitive people as a behaviour modification device. Too much shame can lead to defiance or attempts to get away with undesirable behaviour. This stage is also important for the balanced development of love and hate, co-operation and willfulness, freedom of self expression and its suppression. The recognition of law and order by those around the child increases her sense of dignified independence.

Erikson's third stage is called "*Initiative vs. Guilt*" (C & S:255-258). The child is now walking and taking pleasure in attack and conquest. Less aggressive children may show this by snatching or by making themselves endearing (catching in a different way.) There is growing awareness of the genitals and the excitement attached to them. A danger is a feeling of guilt over the goals and achievements made possible by increased mobility and mental power.

For Erikson, this stage is a separation between infantile and parental processes. The infant enjoys the challenges and achievements of continuing growth, while being aware of the discipline and self control that a parent must exercise. There is a blending of the two processes throughout life, sometimes to the point of danger when children over-control themselves.

A deep conflict, sometimes resulting in hatred, can occur when a child realises that the parent she has been modelling herself on is guilty of transgressions. In adulthood difficulties with childhood initiative lead to inhibitions, impotence or over-compensatory showing off. Psychosomatic disease is another result that is becoming more common.

Erikson considers that this is a period of great learning potential. The child identifies with the parent of the same sex, and begins to look for ideal adults to hero worship.

The fourth stage is called ***Industry vs. Inferiority*** (C & S:258-261). The child is now at school, already learning to be a worker and potential provider. She accepts that she must apply herself to a variety of tasks and learn to use a variety of tools. Literate communities educate the child for a wide choice of careers. School seems to be a world in itself with its own challenges and disappointments.

Erikson tells us that the danger for the child is a possible sense of inadequacy and inferiority. If the family has not prepared her for school, or initial promise is not sustained, development can be disrupted. Freud calls this the latency stage; the quiet before the storm of puberty.

This is an important stage socially. The child begins to interact with others, and is becoming aware of differences. Her identity is beginning to establish itself and it should be as she wishes it to be, rather than how she feels society sees her. Work is not her only function in life and other areas of ability and worth are just as important.

Erikson's fifth stage is called ***Identity vs. Role Confusion*** (C & S:261-263). With the onset of puberty and an established relationship with tasks and tools, childhood proper has come to an end. Accepted concepts are questioned and peer pressure becomes a factor. Situations accepted in earlier years are queried, and those adults who were friends and confidantes are now adversaries. The rate of growth equals that of early childhood and sexual maturity is taking place.

Erikson says that role confusion is a danger. Where sexual identity is established, the most likely problem is the inability to settle on an occupation. Falling in love is the expected thing even though it may not be a sexual matter at all.

Young people are very group oriented and to belong to the group can be a matter of great importance. The exclusion of someone with the wrong clothes or accent, while cruel, is a defence against role confusion. The formation of cliques and groups consolidates ideals and identities, even if only temporarily.

Erikson considers that this stage is essentially a hiatus between the morality of the child and the ethics of the adult.

The sixth stage is called *Intimacy vs. Isolation* (C & S:263-266). At any stage the skills learnt at the previous stage can be built on and extended. With identity successfully established, the young adult can now branch out and form close relationships. She is ready for intimacy. The opposite of intimacy is distantiation, where those who threaten territory or seem dangerous, are isolated or possibly destroyed. The same people may be involved in both intimacy and distantiation, as relationships evolve and dissolve.

Erikson writes that only now can true genitality or satisfactory sexual relationships occur, for without intimacy sexual experiences are temporary and experimental. However, fulfillment should not be expected as a matter of course, as there are often other considerations of time, duty, or situation. Psychoanalysis has suggested that genitality is the universal cure for all ills, and while Erikson suggested that this may be going too far, there are number of conditions, some physical and some emotional, which must be met in order that the relationship be satisfactory.

Those who avoid this experience suffer isolation, and become absorbed in themselves. Partners who isolate themselves as a couple are ill-prepared for the devastation that death can bring, and have difficulty with the next stage.

This seventh stage is called *Generativity vs. Stagnation* (C & S:266-268). This encompasses the concern of one generation to guide and establish the next. When this does not take place, purposeful development ceases, and self concern becomes paramount. An individual begins to regard herself as if she were her own child, and physical or mental deterioration will occur. This can happen when there is lack of trust

in early childhood, and the child does not achieve a belief in her place in the community, or when there is excessive self love. In spite of the variations of the individual, all institutions and cultures share a concern for generativity.

Erikson's eighth stage is called *Ego Integrity vs. Despair* (C & S:268-269). Only she who has looked after others, and has adapted to difficulties and disappointments will pass through this stage successfully. She knows that one life is insignificant, but that the species will continue, and she has contributed. With this view death is not unfriendly. Despair is the realisation that there is now not time to try again, to do better, and death becomes an enemy to be fought to the last. Erikson epitomises the relationship between adult integrity and infantile trust with the words, "Healthy children will not fear life if their elders have integrity enough not to fear death" (C & S:269).

Now I will apply these ideas to the life of Sylvia Ashton-Warner using as my major source material the work of Lynley Hood (1988, 1990).

Sylvia was born in March 1905, a full term baby. Her sister Daphne was born safely the year before, but the year before that another Sylvia had been born prematurely, and died shortly after birth. Sylvia's conception would have been exactly a year after the death of the first Sylvia, and it is probable that she was intended as a replacement (Hood, 1988:17). This was a source of guilt for her throughout her life "Which Sylvia am I?" (Hood, 1990:23). Erikson mentions guilt in stage three (C & S:255) and Sylvia certainly carried her share.

Hood (1988:18) tells us that the first few weeks of her life would have been filled with music and the noise of children's voices. The piano was an important part of the family's lives and it is probable that the baby basket was placed on top of it, to keep the baby out of harm's way. In the novel *Incense to Idols* (Ashton-Warner, 1960:123) the new baby, Germaine (Ashton-Warner, 1960:39), was kept safe in this manner. Sylvia grew up with a love of music and an aversion to loud discordant noises as did Germaine. While Sylvia was still small she went to school with her teacher mother, tied into a basket on the front of the horse. As she became more wakeful, she was moved out on to the porch. When this became difficult, she was left at home with her father, who was bedridden with encroaching rheumatoid arthritis. Hood (1988:18) says that this cannot have been a satisfactory arrangement, and she must often have been wet and hungry. While most children of that age learn that punishment comes after a crime, she was learning the reverse. She must have done something to be left

alone all day. Didn't her mother love her? Perhaps it was to do with her father, who called out all day to a cruel God to "release me from Hell" (Hood, 1988:19). This neglect by her mother would have put the development of basic trust at risk, and may have been the cause of the depression she suffered (C & S:247).

Infant trust would have been damaged further by the fact that her mother was not seen as a worthy person in the community (C & S:249), continually falling foul of school committees and inspectors. Sylvia attended eleven different primary schools as her mother tried to keep in work. However, she seemed to enjoy shifting, and regarded new schools as a challenge, (Pearson, 1984:1) although it must have diminished her sense of security. Her education probably did not suffer as much as one would expect as her mother taught her most of the time.

Her mother was a very strict disciplinarian, and with the domestic burden she carried had little time for love, as can be imagined. However, Sylvia may have understood even at that age the necessity for this, and her feelings of trust might, as in Erikson's stage one, have benefited. As she became more able to take care of her own personal needs she developed a close relationship with her immobilised father, which may have compensated for the lack of love from her mother. He told the children endless stories when they were around the fire at night, and this relationship stood her in good stead later on, when she was able to form a long-lasting partnership with her husband (Hood, 1990:73).

Everyone had their own special niche in the family (Pearson, 1984:4). One was pretty, another was athletic, another was a good cook. Sylvia believed she had no special characteristics, and this feeling of inferiority caused her to be jealous of her younger sister Norma (Hood, 1988:21). This would have been an early manifestation of the inferiority mentioned in Erikson's fourth stage (C & S:260).

When she began school her left-handedness caused problems for her. In keeping with the theories of that time, her mother tied her left hand behind her back (Pearson, 1984). As a result she could draw a picture with two hands at once, or write on the blackboard starting at either end, and meeting in the middle (Hood, 1988:4). The renewed wisdom about this treatment is an inability to make decisions, and Sylvia used this as an excuse on many occasions. She blamed fate for her reluctant entry to teaching, and often avoided taking responsibility for her own decisions (Hood, 1988:46).

Another result was a divided personality, a confused identity, and this was always with Sylvia. Erikson in his stage three talks about the division of infantile and parental processes and how they may never fully separate (C & S:257). This was certainly the case with Sylvia. The five year old version was always likely to pop up her head, and enthrall or irritate her audience (Hood, 1988:24).

Sylvia's burden of guilt was increased by her left-handedness. Why was she different? Why did her mother do this to her? It must be the vengeful, unloving God who upset her father so much (Hood, 1988:24). This threatening God was further manifested in the school inspectors, who caused her mother so much difficulty. The family moved again and again, and there was continual discord between the parents. This was an unhappy phase of life for Sylvia, and in a later breakdown she could not discuss the torture of listening to her parents fighting (Hood, 1988). The terrible scenes of physical and mental abuse of her father surfaced in her novel *Greenstone* (Ashton-Warner, 1966:113), and she justified them to a sceptical reviewer, by saying it actually happened in her own family (Hood, 1988:29).

The family had very few material possessions, even though the father came from an ancient lineage of which he was very proud (Pearson, 1984:9). Sylvia's family considered they were the social superiors of most of the people with whom they mixed, and Ashton was added to the family name of Warner when Sylvia was at primary school. This caused some resentment among their local communities. Sylvia took refuge from poverty in dreaming of better things and better places. In her autobiography *I Passed this Way*, (Ashton-Warner, 1979:28) she writes about the period they spent at a small country settlement in the Hawkes Bay, where they were all unhappy. The location is easily recognisable, but the mysterious girl in the beautiful blue dress cannot be identified. This happens again and again in her novels. Erikson writes about the dangers of role confusion and lack of identity in stage five (C & S:262). Sylvia's difficulty in distinguishing reality from fantasy had the dire consequence of a complete mental breakdown when she was thirty.

Things went from bad to worse for the Warner family. A period without work for the mother meant that they lived on charity in a derelict house. Sylvia dreamed more and more. In *I Passed this Way* (Ashton-Warner, 1979:40), she tells the story of how she and her sisters stole some dolls, of which she says there were one hundred and forty four. Her sister, when asked by an interviewer said there were two, and her brother, who supposedly made them take the dolls back, cannot remember the incident at all (Hood, 1988:32).

At the next school her mother, always ambitious for her children, enrolled Sylvia in standard five, which was too high a class. When she was demoted she blamed the holes in her shoes and said it was because they were poor (Hood, 1988:32). This is the first time the idea of persecution has appeared. Erikson mentions this as a danger in stage two, and Sylvia certainly suffered from perceptions of persecution all her life (C & S:254).

It was a difficult year for Sylvia. Hood tells us how she was cold and malnourished (Hood, 1988:33). For the first time she had a teacher who was not her mother, and who was a man into the bargain. She had the new, exciting experience of being cuddled by a man not her father (Pearson, 1984:13). This new interest in sexual matters, and the dangers of the accompanying guilt, are described by Erikson in stage three (C & S:255). This experience, or one similar, is a model for the experiences of Anna Vorontsov in *Spinster* (Ashton-Warner, 1958:83) and Germaine in *Incense to Idols* (Ashton-Warner, 1960:139). When Sylvia was receiving therapy for her breakdown, she wrote about the same experience, so it obviously loomed large in her life.

She continued to create for herself heroines and now heroes to worship and dream about (Hood, 1988:33). She would project hero qualities on to some unlikely person, and worship them from afar. A particularly unprepossessing girl at school was the object of her attentions for a while, and later on her writing was full of characters who could often be identified. Always they had no idea of what Sylvia was doing. She was given a larger, better doll than she had ever had before by her older sister, but its attractions did not last long. She preferred her dreams (Hood, 1988:37). This identity confusion is mentioned in Erikson's stage five, and was an important factor in Sylvia's later difficulties.

She had a stumbling sexual encounter with a boy at school, after which she ran away. This set a pattern of coquettishness, jealousy, and pride for future relationships (Pearson, 1984:15). She needed unconditional love for a relationship to succeed, and that was hard to find.

Her older sister was invited to live with an adult sister, so she could go Wellington College. Sylvia really wanted to go too, and used every means at her disposal to get her own way. She was an expert at tantrums and sulks, and made life so unpleasant for everyone that finally she was allowed to go (Hood, 1988:38). Erikson talks about this

sort of behaviour in stage three. The child enjoys the challenges of increasing power, while recognising the control a parent must exercise. Sylvia probably achieved the balanced development of love and hate that comes at this stage, balancing the intense love she felt for her father, against the lack of feeling and a later professed hatred for her mother. However she may not have achieved a similar balance between willfulness and co-operation (C & S:257).

She enjoyed her time in Wellington. Her poor home background was safe from discovery, and while she enjoyed some social life, she had no idea how to behave in such situations. There was always an element of performance as she tried to get people to like her. There was also a botany teacher, a spinster, who was a new heroine for her to love. She was the loving mother of Sylvia's dreams, and Sylvia adored her (Hood, 1988:39). Hero worship is a characteristic of Erikson's stage three, and Sylvia never grew out of it (C & S:258).

For the times, Sylvia had an unusual attitude towards spinsters. They were generally seen as sour frustrated objects of pity. Sylvia saw married women, personified by her mother, as second class citizens. In her eyes an unmarried woman was independent, dedicated and free from the drudgery of family responsibilities. They inspired admiration and romantic attraction, and she sought them out all through her married life, as a source of alternative close relationships (Hood, 1988:39).

After only a term, Sylvia had to return to home for schooling, which was then a series of small schools on the outskirts of Masterton. She had to ride a bike seven miles to Masterton District High School, and felt the loss of status keenly. She was desperately ashamed of her home and background, and became aloof and distant. The shame she felt goes back to an early stage according to Erikson, and jeopardises the development of autonomy and independence (C & S:252). She could not join in after school activities because of a lack of equipment and her long bike ride home. She retired into her outgoing older sister's shadow feeling resentful, angry, and inferior (Hood, 1988:39).

The next term Daphne returned to Wellington. Although freed from Daphne's shadow and happy with the new bike she had inherited, Sylvia remained withdrawn. The school had been upgraded to a full high school, and she found the sheer size of everything intimidating. Even though the family was more comfortable than they had ever been (Pearson, 1984), she saw the poverty they lived in as crippling and began to invent a more affluent lifestyle to impress her schoolmates. This was discovered as untrue when she was taken home unwell, and from then on she saw herself as a scapegoat and a pariah (Hood, 1988:40). However photographs of her as part of a laughing group of girls indicate that this may have been a figment of her imagination (Hood, 1990:222). The usual beautiful friend featured in the chapter concerned with high school in *I Passed This Way* (Ashton-Warner, 1979) but, as usual, she could not be identified by people who lived in the district at the time.

Two more moves resulting from her mother's difficulties with inspectors and school committees, took her progressively further away from the school, until she was biking fifteen miles each way. During this period her successes at school fluctuated. She was demoted a class and promoted again. She unexpectedly filled a vital slot in an end of year concert, but was unacknowledged. She had a teacher who encouraged her to write (Pearson, 1984), and after being initially denied the opportunity, passed her matriculation examination. Her sister Daphne did not pass, and Sylvia felt guilty about this. She played again at a concert, and this time was acknowledged. She was not chosen to be a prefect, and did not see herself as one of the crowd. Each time her fortunes dipped she felt she was being picked on as a scapegoat (Hood, 1988:43). Tired from her long ride to school, she rested in the library at lunch times and discovered the joys of reading (Ashton-Warner, 1972:61). The persecution worries of Erikson's stage two were still with her, and were never to leave her (C & S:254).

At the end of the year she was however not awarded her Higher Leaving Certificate about which she was very bitter, although she was awarded several prizes, one in particular being an important essay prize. She was always grateful to the guest speaker who told her to "Keep on writing" (Pearson, 1984:2).

Now it was career decision time. In her mother's eyes, the only fit careers for girls of her status were teaching or nursing, and nursing was for those with no brains. Sylvia secretly wanted to do commercial art, but in the absence of a suitable course, arranged to go to a Wellington school to be a pupil teacher. However, the night before she was supposed to go, her beloved father died. She was devastated, and refused to accept his death. She felt that he was the only person who had ever loved her, and whom she had

ever loved (Hood, 1988:47). She tried to cope with the pain of that night through writing, and similar scenes, although not all ending in death, occur in *Spinster* (Ashton-Warner, 1958:16) and *Greenstone* (Ashton-Warner, 1967:204). She suppressed her grief and her increasing fear of death, and with a sense of having been abandoned, went to Wellington. Fear of death is the main focus of Erikson's last stage (C & S:269), and perhaps Sylvia had premonitions of the struggle she would have when her turn came.

Life in Wellington was very different from life at home, and Sylvia blossomed (Hood, 1988:49). She boarded at the Y.W.C.A. With a modern haircut and heavy makeup she was constantly performing for her fellow boarders. She had a relationship with an older man, but he would not give her the commitment she wanted.

She did not like pupil teaching, but as a result of being on the other side of the blackboard, began to see her mother in a more positive light (Hood, 1988:49). She had a series of spinster crushes, and, in the perceived role of scapegoat again, was expelled from the hostel. She had another unsatisfactory relationship, and decided that she would not be hurt again. She would not get deeply involved, and would leave a relationship before it became dangerously intimate. The avoidance of intimacy, and the compensating distantiation is discussed by Erikson in his sixth stage. It was some years before Sylvia was secure enough with her identity to venture again into intimacy (C & S:264).

Sylvia successfully applied to go to Auckland Training College, now Auckland College of Education, where she was recognised as being different, but was liked as a personality with flair and style. She was popular with the family with whom she boarded. She found them warm and friendly, answering her dream of a warm, friendly mother, although she never mentioned her father. Hood (1988:57) considers she may have been role-playing, with the real Sylvia, an awkward misfit, never far away.

At college she met Keith Henderson, a quiet, sensible young man from a well-respected family (Pearson, 1984:27). Their courtship lasted for about three years before they were finally married. During the interim, Sylvia dated many others, all of who were given the name of Floyd in her autobiography (Ashton-Warner, 1979:212), but she never became emotionally involved with any of them. She considered that marrying Keith meant a choice between love and freedom, as she could see that marriage to a school teacher inevitably meant teaching herself.

She was initially disappointed in their marriage. Keith was a dedicated teacher, in a one teacher school, and she resented the time he spent away from her (Ashton-Warner, 1967:30). She did not get on in the community, as she was too unconventional. She never learnt to cook, and right through their marriage it was Keith who kept the home together. The following year they moved to another one teacher school, where their three children were born. She did not cope with the first pregnancy well, and on the medical advice a second pregnancy was terminated. Sylvia always felt guilty over this lost baby and in her biography there is a puzzling gap here. She writes “Five years and two babies later ----” (Ashton-Warner, 1980:246). When questioned about this she replied, “Some things are too deep for tears, too close, too untouchable” (Hood, 1988:69). She went to stay with a family in the nearby town when the birth of her third child was imminent, and she developed a close friendship with Janet Hughson, the first of several such friendships with women.

Soon after the birth, on Sylvia’s urging, they moved to a two teacher Maori School. She thought she would be more a part of Keith’s life in that situation, and also that she would have a higher status in a Maori community than in a Pakeha one. She began teaching again, and missing Janet terribly and unable to find a substitute in such an isolated area, she began to succumb to loneliness and the stress of trying to teach with her family of toddlers at her feet. It was not long before she was spending more time in bed than at school, and eventually suffered a complete breakdown (Pearson, 1984:45). There were few psychologists available at that time, and she was sent to a neurologist, a Freudian, Dr. Donald Allen. She learnt from him the two basic biological drives, one being the survival of the individual, which is essentially selfish, and the other being the survival of the species, which is essentially selfless. She translated these into Fear, and Sex, and this duality became the cornerstone of her recovery, and later her work (Hood, 1988:83). Allen encouraged her to separate reality from fantasy, and likened her dreaming to “common theft” (Clemens, 1996:24). After a long period of therapy, which involved the writing of endless unposted letters to Dr. Allen, she was able to return to her family.

Allen had given her new knowledge of sex and contraception, which meant she and Keith were able to resume the sex life they had abandoned for fear of further dangerous pregnancies, and sex became important to her. She never actually discussed the unfortunate sexual episodes of her childhood with Dr. Allen, and this continued as an unresolved area of her life. However her novels had a powerful sexual basis which undoubtedly sprang from his teaching (Hood, 1988:84).

Her return home however was not without problems. The divided identity problems that developed in her childhood surfaced again, and she would sometimes revert to behaving as a five year old (C & S:262). She had a childlike determination to be famous. The next year disaster struck when her daughter was almost killed in a serious accident for which Sylvia blamed herself, even though the circumstances are not clear (Hood, 1988:87). Her teaching grades were only average, and she felt that she was being victimised. She was developing her Little Books, and teaching reading by using interest words and situations (Cutting, 1995:17-18), and this did not always meet with approval. She put great deal of time and effort into this project. The books were, of course, hand written and hand illustrated, involving stories and pictures of interest to Maori children. They were passed from one Education Department official to another, always with a different reason as to why they should not be published. This situation continued for many years and they were never published.

She hated growing older (Hood, 1988:126), and flirted outrageously whenever she got the opportunity. She loved many men from a distance, and they appeared in her books under different names, often quite identifiable. They were frequently surprised by what Sylvia wrote about them, as sometimes they hardly remembered her. This interest in men, coupled with intense friendships with women, may have been an indication of difficulty with sexual identity. Or was she simply trying to make sure she was not labelled as lesbian? In her biography, the suggestion of lesbianism was made by an American acquaintance, but was later discounted (Hood, 1988:183).

She revisited Dr. Allen, who stressed that she must stop dreaming, or she would break down again, and she returned home determined to stop. She would make her dreams a reality, and set herself the goals of becoming a better teacher, a writer, and a worthwhile person (Hood, 1988:Introduction).

She discovered a deserted whare not far from home, and Keith helped her turn it into a comfortable place where she could write. She called this place “Selah,” which is a Hebrew word meaning “pause” or “rest” (Hood, 1988:92). After that, wherever they moved to, Sylvia always had a Selah as a refuge. She spent more and more time there, (Ashton-Warner, 1967:124) and Keith staunchly filled in for her, teaching her classes, and looking after the family. He considered she was destined to be a great writer, and should not be bothered with domestic trifles. Considering her unhappy childhood, it is surprising she made such a successful marriage. She must have had a very strong bond with her father for this to have been possible (Hood, 1988:20).

She began a friendship with the local district nurse, and this became a passion, although it does not appear to have been a sexual relationship. For three years Joy was a major focus (Hood, 1988:96). When this came to an end, Sylvia was devastated, and decided that such intimacy was not for her (C & S:264). This was an echo of a decision made many years ago when she was at Training College. She began a long passionate correspondence with a young woman writer, Barbara, and this filled her need to be loved for many years. Barbara was twelve years younger than Sylvia, and perhaps for this reason they never met.

Drinking began to be a problem. It is possible that she had been drinking for some time and Keith had covered up for her. She developed a paralysing fear of strangers, perhaps seeing them as a threat to her own identity, and antagonised the local community with theatrical behaviour and lack of domesticity (Hood, 1988:115). Keith continued to hold the family together as Sylvia became more and more absorbed in her own affairs. In spite of having received a very poor teaching grading, she continued to push her “Key Vocabulary,” (the child’s own list of interest words) and the Little Books. This grading reinforced her perception of personal persecution for the books, in spite of the fact that she paid little attention to mundane things of teaching like playground duty or the three R’s, spending most of the day on music and drama.

In 1958 her novel *Spinster* was published in America, after having been turned down by several publishers in New Zealand. It was an overnight best seller and four years later was made into a film starring Shirley MacLaine. Two years later *Incense to Idols* was published to a mixed reception. In 1963 the novel *Teacher* was published, again in America, receiving high praise. In *Teacher*, Sylvia details her reading theories, and the “Key Vocabulary” (Ashton-Warner, 1963:31), and bemoans the fact that the Little Books had been lost, probably burnt in a clean up of departmental offices (Hood,

1988:175). This caused outrage in America, and was no doubt very embarrassing to the New Zealand Education Department, particularly as she was being hailed in America as one of the great educational innovators of the century. There had been some tentative interest expressed in her work in New Zealand, but for Sylvia, it was too little, and too late.

Although deluged with invitations to visit America, she was afraid of flying and would not go. She would not accept any approbation in New Zealand, refusing all interviews and even putting a notice on her gate that said “Go away” (Hood, 1988:175). She was determined to maintain her hatred of New Zealand and she needed constant rejection to keep it alive. Two American educators came to New Zealand to visit her, expecting the bad-tempered, strange woman they had heard about, but over a period of five days she charmed them totally. More books were published, all in America, but they did not receive good reviews, and she antagonised her publishers with frequent changes of mind. Finally, *Teacher* was published in New Zealand, but it was the only one of her books that was. Probably her hatred of the country, and her difficulty with publicity were reasons enough for this decision. She may also have been afraid of being sued, as many of her characters were identifiable and would have been still alive (Hood, 1988:183).

She was fast losing popularity in her home country. She criticised New Zealand at every opportunity, her books were not generally available, and when she left all her literary papers to Boston University it was the last straw. The literary community deserted her. Only Keith was left to support her, and his health was failing. After a frantic round of surgeons and specialists it was found that he only had a few months to live. He stayed in his beloved Maori schools, finally dying in January 1969 at the age of sixty (Hood, 1988:186).

Without Keith, Sylvia appeared lost, but only for a short time. After three months she gathered her strength, and set off for Israel where she had been offered a teaching post. However this did not eventuate, and after spending some time with her daughter-in-law in London she returned home to write *Three* (Asthon-Warner, 1970), a novel which caused bitterness within the family with its caricatures (Hood, 1988:195). Soon, with funds running low, she travelled to America, where she had been invited to teach at an innovative community school in Aspen. She arrived to a hero's welcome but the gloss wore off quickly as she found the school ill-prepared, and ill-financed. Sylvia herself was drinking to excess, and taking codeine in large quantities. She refused to teach when and where she was expected to, and finally ran programmes in her living

room. Before her year was up she quietly left and went to Canada, where she was offered a post at a university in Vancouver. By 1973 her health had deteriorated further, and her bizarre behaviour and teaching methods were causing concern so she gave up the post and travelled home to her family. It is an accepted psychological fact that excessive alcohol can produce perceptions of persecution (Hood, 1990:231). Although Sylvia had this perception even as a teenager, we will never know whether it was exacerbated by her alcohol consumption.

She was very depressed when she arrived home. She was no longer a celebrity. Her health improved a little and she consented to her first television interview. It was successful and she began to write her autobiography *I Passed This Way* which was completed in 1978. For this she received an American honour, a New Zealand Book award and in 1982, an M.B.E. She returned to the New Zealand ceremony, receiving the Book Award in person, and later consented to a television interview with Angela d'Audney. However, her reconciliation with her home country did not go so far as to allow her to amend the very uncomplimentary preface to her autobiography (Ashton-Warner, 1985:vii).

She finally consented to co-operate with a biographer and in March 1983 began a series of interviews with Lynley Hood. These continued over the next year. By February 1984 her health was deteriorating rapidly and the end was near. Her family was with her all through this time, with a grand-daughter having moved in with her. They were obviously concerned for her so the assumption may be made that she also had concern for them. Although she isolated herself from them at various times she was still prepared to drop what she was doing and go when they needed her (Hood, 1990:73). In 1983, she enrolled in a correspondence course to learn how to write a film script, so she was certainly learning and developing her skills as long as she was physically capable. There was no stagnation so it is probable that there was generativity.

It is doubtful whether she had a great deal of what Erikson calls *ego-integrity* (C & S:268). She did not care for others except for what they could do for her, and did not seem to think she was a very worthy person. Whether she thought she could have done better with her life it is impossible to know, but she was certainly afraid of death (Hood, 1990:66). Towards the end she would sit upright in a chair at night, afraid to go to sleep in case death came in the dark. She was afraid of the dark as a child (Clemens, 1996:16) and this fear surfaced again now. She dozed in the daytime, when there were people around and she felt safer. At last she could fight death no longer,

and she died on 28th April, 1984. Her biography was published in 1988.

Sylvia Ashton-Warner's Little Books were never published, and a variety of reasons have been put forward to justify this. I think the main reason was because it is possible they were too advanced for education in this country at the beginning. However later on Sylvia was so antagonistic that she would not allow it. They are very similar to the books used in junior classrooms in New Zealand today. Her Key Vocabulary was not used as she used it, but elements of it are found in most junior classrooms. This raises questions as to whether she was reflecting the possibilities of the times.

There is no doubt that in New Zealand she did not receive the recognition as a writer that she should have. Again, towards the end it was there if she had wanted it, but for her it was too late. The difficulties of her early childhood undoubtedly contributed to her failure to achieve her ambitions. Her perceptions of persecution prevented her from achieving success at the last, when all could have been as she wanted it to be. Her problems with identity, while not having a direct effect on her ambitions, made her a difficult woman to live and work with. Many saw her as a nuisance, while others worshipped her. She was "loathed or loved" (Hood, 1988:12). Her multiple addictions of alcohol, nicotine, codein, valium, and caffeine were almost certainly a prop for the feelings of inferiority and shame, that stemmed from her childhood. Over the years many gifted artists have been denied recognition during their lifetimes, only to be honoured as they deserved, when it was too late for them to hear. This is how it was for Sylvia - who is remembered in the name of the Sylvia Ashton-Warner Library at the Auckland College of Education.

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(Ashton-Warner, 1958; Ashton-Warner, 1960; Ashton-Warner, 1966; Ashton-Warner, 1970; Ashton-Warner, 1979; Clemens, 1996; Cutting, 1995; Erikson, 1963; Hood, 1988; Hood, 1990; Pearson, 1984)