

H1 Sample Essay | Sylvia Plath

‘Plath’s provocative imagery serves to highlight the intense emotions expressed in her poetry. Discuss’

Sylvia Plath is an iconic poet, renowned for her thought-provoking and disarmingly honest perspective on life. In exploring her own varying intense emotions and unpredictable psychological states, Plath helps us better understand the insecurities and ambivalence we all experience at some stage in our lives. These poems which universally connect with the reader in a dark but comprehensible manner convey Plath’s esoteric but somewhat elegant view on life through her poetic genius. Plath’s poetry has a tendency to be more pessimistic than optimistic, although poems such as ‘Morning Song’ and ‘Child’ reveal the power of the ephemeral positivity her children bring her.

‘Elm’ exposes the dark, disturbed, deflated world Sylvia Plath lives in through her sinister, striking and at times, shockingly provocative imagery. Plath’s iconic pessimistic and depression-fuelled poetry is perhaps best represented by ‘Elm’. The opening stanza introduces the personified elm tree addressing Plath as it were her conscience. The elm tree arrogantly greets her with ‘I know the bottom, she says. I know it with my great tap root. It is what you fear. I do not fear it: I have been there’. I felt the elm was addressing Plath in an omniscient manner, essentially articulating her pain and emptiness, explaining how it will inevitably worsen. This arresting image shows the sinister outlook Plath has not only on life but herself. The elm tree maintains this authoritative tone throughout, taunting Plath about the elusive nature of love, ‘love is a shadow. How you lie and cry after it. Listen: these are its hooves: it has gone off, like a horse’. The elm offers no reassurance, twisting the proverbial knife at a time when Plath’s marriage was falling apart. The elm tree furthers this torture by reminding Plath of her mediocrity, focusing on her faults and failures, ‘these are the isolate, slow

faults that kill, that kill, that kill'. This threat closes the poem in a shocking but thought-provoking manner as no resolution is offered to the seemingly perpetual suffering.

'Mirror', much like 'Elm' is driven by Plath's intense emotional state. In this poem, the mirror is personified and plays a very similar role to the elm tree. The mirror acts like a conscience to Plath, adopting an omniscient, yet brutally honest tone: 'I am silver and exact, I have no preconceptions'. The mirror insists its judgement is completely unbiased, 'unmistaken by love or dislike'. Plath was known for her beauty and one might think that this poem may possess some positive connotations. Alternatively, the mirror makes Plath aware of the impermanence of beauty. 'Faces and darkness separate us over and over'. This image alludes to the passage of time and its inevitable impact on Plath's beauty. 'In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman rises towards her day after day, like a terrible fish'. A powerfully provocative closing image likens old age to a monster living in the depths within. Ultimately, 'Mirror' exposes Plath's realisation that her beauty will fade away over time and, perhaps, with this the people in her life. This poem is, for me, quite poignant as I feel it marks a point in Plath's life where she is completely overwhelmed by her emotions and could represent the beginning of the end for her.

'Morning Song' reveals a refreshing change in Plath's poetic perspective. The poem is directed towards her first-born child. Plath's emotional state appears relatively stable in this poem as we see her maternal side shine through. The opening line of 'Morning Song' brings an unprecedented optimism to Plath's verse, 'love set you going like a fat gold watch'. Plath is reminiscent of her child's beginning, revealing that they were conceived in love and their birth was a precious memory in her life. She continues to speak fondly of the child and how careful she was to make sure she was a good mother, but as Plath begins to speak of herself it is in self-deprecating and abrupt sentences, 'one cry and I stumble from bed cow-heavy and floral'. In such a dominantly positive poem, Plath uses such a self-loathing image to describe herself, underscoring a sad reality: although she is alert to protect her baby, she fails to mask

the ever-looming insecurities she experiences. Despite this fleeting moment of darkness, Plath returns to positivity, closing the poem with 'the clear vowels rise like balloons'. This heart-warming imagery is gladly welcomed by the reader as a happy change from the usual bleak and perverse overtone endings. This final line inspires a hopeful atmosphere as the baby's cries and giggles echo from room to room. Ultimately, 'Morning Song' is vibrant and uplifting, providing further insight into the psyche of Sylvia Plath through its provocative imagery.

In 'Child', much like 'Morning Song', Plath adopts an optimistic tone as we once again witness her speak fondly of her offspring. This is one of Plath's last poems, written just 2 weeks before her tragic death. In this poem she expresses her love for the child fluently in four stanzas. Plath opens the poem with 'your clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful thing', subtly implying that everything else in life has lost its innocence. This is another example of where we see Plath's intense emotions translate through her poetry, the overwhelming mix of optimism and pessimism. Plath continues to carry this largely optimistic tone into the following stanza using very clever and provocative imagery. 'April snowdrop, Indian pipe', this use of flower imagery symbolising new beginning outlines her hopes for her children to blossom and grow. She wants their experience of life to be better than hers ever was or can be. She wants them to enjoy the little things like flowers. Plath finishes the poem by talking about herself. The poem takes a turn here and becomes negative. She explains how she wishes them to have a 'grand and classical' life, 'not this troublous wringing of hands, a dark ceiling without a star'. She briefly contrasts the end of her life with the beginning of her children's. 'Child' is a short but sweet poem, addressed to Sylvia Plath's youngest child just weeks before she took her own life. This poem uses provocative imagery to demonstrate her intense emotions clearly in a succinct and controlled manner.

Plath's poetry provides honest explorations of her deepest fears and desires. She employs idiosyncratic imagery to articulate her intense emotions in an inarguably eloquent manner. The weight of her despair and depression that we see in the likes of

'Mirror' and 'Elm' show her at her worst, just as 'Morning Song' and 'Child' reveal her at her best. My study of Sylvia Plath's poetry has risen great awareness in me of day to day life and has proved thoroughly enjoyable and rewarding.