Plath's provocative imagery serves to highlight the intense emotions expressed in her poetry. To what extent do you agree or disagree?

Introduction

After studying a selection of Plath’s poems, I most certainly agree that her vivid and obscure imagery allows readers to delve into the inner depths of her psyche and examine her oscillating mental states. Plath’s poems often feature rather morbid, and at times troubling images, which gave me an insight to her saddening preoccupation with death. While Plath’s depression had a devastating impact on her personal life, it also inspired some of her most renowned poems. These poems showcase her bountiful poetic talent, and seem to point towards a correlation between despondency and creativity. Plath herself admitted that her life fluctuated between two electric currents, ‘joyous positives and despairing negatives’. Indeed, these two emotional extremes become tangible in her poems through her use of dramatic imagery.

Child

‘Child’ is a bittersweet poem in which the imagery evokes a beautiful sense of childhood innocence, and feelings of awe and wonder. “Your clear eye was the one absolutely beautiful thing”. Plath sees this child’s eye as an unspoiled symbol of purity. The word ‘one’ has a certain weightiness, as it shows Plath’s struggle to find a sense of beauty and hope in the world around her. The imagery in the first two stanzas is beautiful in its hopefulness, as Plath’s enthusiasm and aspirations for this child become palpable, “I want to fill it with colour and ducks.”
The flowers in the second stanza seem to symbolise tranquility and new beginnings, both of which were strongly desired by Plath. In stanza three, we see how precious and pure this child was to Plath through the tender image of a “stalk without wrinkle”. Plath then goes on to describe the fulfilling life she wishes for her child with images of abundance and prosperity;

“pool in which all images should be grand and classical”.

The tone of excitement and hopefulness becomes contrastingly gloomy in the final stanza as she struggles to ignore the feelings of despair and anxiety which cloud her mind. Plath concludes on an utterly bleak and sorrowful note;

“this dark ceiling without a star”

This poignant image became even more troubling to me upon learning of her tragic suicide two weeks after writing this poem. It is a deeply emotive and powerful poem which showed me that despite her good and noble intentions, she sadly succumbed to the overwhelming wrath of her depression.

**The Arrival of the Bee Box**

‘The Arrival of the Bee Box’ is a poem of intense mental anguish which is full of distorted and terrifying images. Immediately, the box takes on an ominous, oppressive presence, as it represents the psychological problems which plagued Plath’s life. Plath uses unsettling and morbid imagery to describe the box,

“the coffin of a midget, or a square baby”

These unusual and almost grotesque images point to her preoccupation with death during this dark period. The mystery of the creatures within this box creates fear within her. She describes it almost as a confining prison, and this restriction seems to only magnify her trepidations, “there is only a little grid, no exit”. It is likely that Plath is referencing the extreme apprehension people felt at this time when discussing mental health. The confinements of this box cleverly represent the suffocating grip of the stigma that once surrounded psychological issues. Indeed, learning of the suffering Plath endured as a result
of this taboo makes me thankful for the tremendous strides modern society has made towards abolishing this stigma.

In stanza three, the sinister and threatening tone is amplified once more by the dark and chaotic imagery,

“black on black, angrily clambering”

This frantic image seems to underscore the erratic and destructive nature of Plath’s depression. “It is like a Roman mob”, this violent simile implied the overwhelming and overbearing nature of her illness. It seems to me that she feels helpless and weak, with every effort she makes to fight this plague proving futile.

The tone changes dramatically in the final stanzas, as she becomes empowered by her ability to abandon this “box of maniacs”. Perhaps this liberation will come in the form of her own demise “funeral veil”. I felt I was taken on a journey, as her vivid use of imagery brings readers with her. Because of this, I was filled with a sense of pride and admiration due to her ultimate resilience and perseverance in the face of this tremendous struggle,

“the box is only temporary”.

Elm

‘Elm’ is a dark and unsettling poem which again deals with Plath’s psychological suffering. Immediately, we are shown imagery of a bleak and hopeless terrain, representing her state of mind “I know the bottom”. This elm tree takes on a rather lofty and supercilious presence,

“It is what you fear. I do not fear it. I have been there.”

Plath’s heartbreak and sadness is met with a harsh, mocking and condescending tone;

“Love is a shadow. How you lie and cry after it.”

An image of a weak, fragile and broken woman is conjured up in my mind. The meagre voice of the woman is pitiful when compared to the menacing tree, and this juxtaposition adds great depth and profundity to the poem.
As the poem continues, we are met with graphic and grotesque imagery of the elm’s own suffering;

“scorched to the root, my red filaments burn and stand, a hand of wires”.

These disturbing images of pain and trauma result in desperation “I must shriek”. It’s difficult to determine if these images actually represent the horrific trauma that Plath endure in her own life, such as her electric shock therapy, though it is likely.

As the voice of the elm and the woman merge, the harrowing images of pain and turmoil become more upsetting. The pain and heartbreak, it seems, was equally damaging for both parties, “is it for such I agitate my heart?” This poem concludes with nightmarish images

“so murderous in its strangle of branches”

Not only do these images underscore Plath’s fear of her mental illness, but instill a visceral sense of fear within me as a reader, which is testament to the vivid and at times chillingly theatrical imagery.

**Black Rook in Rainy Weather**

In ‘Black Rook in Rainy Weather’, Plath discusses her longing for poetic inspiration. Plath’s descriptive language creates imagery of a bleak and dismal landscape, which of course represents her inspirational drought “this dull, ruinous landscape.” The glum and “desultory weather” seems to mimic her feelings of utter lethargy and pessimism. She yearns to re-establish the connection with the nature surrounding her which she once seemed to have.

Plath’s thirst for inspiration begins to be associated with some divine light or heavenly force. She describes a brilliant image of a resolute and tremendous light,

“a certain minor light may still leap incandescent.”

It is Plath’s outstanding wordsmanship which creates such graphic imagery within the minds of readers. Plath’s use of banal objects “kitchen table or chair” seems to tell us that her expectations are in no way inflated, rather she would gratefully accept inspiration in any
form it came in. Religion becomes very much linked to inspiration as Plath seems to associate the creative process with divinity. She goes on to paint beautiful and angelic imagery,

“whatever angels may choose to flare at my elbow”

Plath begins to realise she can find inspiration in seemingly mediocre things, like the humble rook, whose “black feathers can so shine”.

Readers can understand her “fear of total neutrality” as she longs to break free of her artistic barrenness. The bleak landscape is awakened in our minds once more as she describes her unfulfilling “trekking stubborn through this season of fatigue”. We are left in a state of suspense as Plath awaits this almost magical angel of inspiration “for that rare, random descent.”

**Pheasant**

‘Pheasant’ boasts copious examples of striking imagery. It is a simple poem in which Plath desperately pleads for the life of this exquisite bird to be spared. Plath isn’t fascinated by the bird for mystical or obscure reasons, but rather because she understands its “kingliness” and “right”. Perhaps she sympathises with the creature because she too feels hunted by her depression, yet still feels entitled to a long, fulfilling life, which she wishes for this bird. Plath’s attention to detail and use of colour allows the bird to be animated within our minds “it’s a little cornucopia”. Plath ends the poem on a tranquil and soothing note, which is a welcome change from her other work, “Let be, let be.”

**Conclusion**

Undoubtedly, Plath’s artistic imagery allows new, fascinating dimensions to become implemented in her work. I felt as though her poems came alive with each unusual and unique image. The images she creates are deeply personal and often metaphorical which offers us an insight to her talented and troubled mind. Her mental states fluctuate wildly which is reflected effectively in her imagery. The provocative imagery accentuates and
beautifully accompanies Plath’s memorable and poignant words, and makes for a complete and skillful body of work.