

Sylvia Plath | Sample answer

‘Plath makes effective use of language to explore her personal experiences of suffering and to provide occasional glimpses of redemptive power of love’ (2014)

The poetry of Sylvia Plath is fundamentally a combination of suffering, desolation and the occasional glimpse at the redemptive power of love. There is no escaping the fact that Plath's life was an incessant battle with depression; a battle in which she was forced to endure until the age of thirty, when she ended her own life on the 11th of February 1963. Despite this, or perhaps by virtue of this, her poetry is wrought with effective language and jarring imagery in order to explore her personal experiences with these distinct and universal emotions. Her ever-growing readership is perpetually struck by the visual intensity of Plath's poems and by the hallucinatory, almost surreal quality of her metaphors and symbolism. Plath flawlessly demonstrates her profound knowledge in poetic form and literary techniques, lacking in the monotony and inaccessibility that often infiltrate poets of a similar regard. The poems that I believe best represent her unique style are "Finisterre" "The Arrival of the Bee Box" "Poppies in July" "Morning Song" and finally "Child".

Plath's poetry is often haunted by her personal experience of suffering with a plethora of mental illnesses such as depression. In "Finisterre", the sea's violent fury is often taken to represent Plath's tumultuous mental state. The ocean is depicted as a terrifyingly vast "exploding force" that "canons" into the coastline "with no bottom, or anything on the other side of it". Plath's use of a hyperbole suggests a comparison between the infinite void of the ocean and her own suffering mind. As we have seen, the images associating the water with an invading army reinforce our sense of its volatile violence. She describes how the mist "erases" the rocks and yet she still enters it. It's as if on some psychoanalytical level she herself desires to be erased from existence. It is evident that the effective imagery of the souls almost choking the speaker highlight Plath's self-destructive desires as they "stuff [her] mouth with cotton". There is only a slight semblance of hope in "Finisterre". The peasants mention a peaceful place "tropical and blue". As the poem concludes, I am left with a yearning for the faraway waters to which the peasants have "never been", symbolising the hope for inner peace within the poet herself.

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"The Arrival of the Bee Box" depicts Plath's personal experience of mental suffering just as effectively as "Finisterre". The sight and sound of the locked box fills the speaker with dread as she mentions "the box is locked, it is dangerous". Her suffering is exacerbated by the fact that she cannot see into it. Later in the poem, the speaker imagines herself wearing the protective garments of a bee-keeper. She describes the face covering as a "funeral veil". This use of effective imagery suggests that she is anticipating her own demise, perhaps on some level, even desiring it. Such suffering is also evident in "Morning Song" and arguably "Child". Unlike those poems, however, "The Arrival of the Bee Box" features a tangible and introspective glimpse at the redemptive powers of love. The speaker is able to overcome her fear of the bees by releasing them and recognising herself as "the owner". Thus, escaping the anxiety associated with the claustrophobic "coffin" initially presented to us "with no windows". This gives me, the reader, a sense of hope and belief in the ability to overcome our demons.

While Plath's desire to be released from human consciousness is "only temporary" in "The Arrival of the Bee Box", the same desire is perpetually present in "Poppies in July" and is marked by its effective albeit nightmarish imagery. Plath compares the crimson flowers with "little hell flames", immediately associating the shimmering of the petals with malevolence. She evokes a similar feeling of deliberate unease with her comparison between the flowers and blood. This is through the disturbing imagery of the "little bloody skirts" and a "mouth just bloodied". The speaker of the poem is evidently exhausted and vividly depicts her personal experience with suffering through the juxtaposition of the "colourless" world with the brightly coloured flowers. The fact that she feels nothing causes her great mental anguish, which she transfers to me as the reader, evoking a sense of stress and almost horror. She longs for some form of extreme physical sensation to cut through her apathetic numbness and she reaches out to the poppies in the hope that they might "harm" her. Alas, she is incapable of feeling them as she declares "I cannot touch you, I put my hands among the flames. Nothing burns". She feels numb, and in reading this, I feel intense sympathy for Plath's suffering.

"Morning Song" follows the birth of Plath's daughter Frieda. While her portrayal of motherhood is never sentimental, the opening line reveals that the child was conceived through the redemptive power of love, stating that "love set you going like a fat gold watch". This peculiar simile suggests that the new baby is precious and her life is worth more than gold. It also reminds me, however, that the child has entered a world of time, a world where transience and mortality are unalterable

realities. Contrast is effectively used in order to depict Plath's volatile emotional state during a battle with her maternal insecurities. The infant's vulnerability is portrayed through her flickering "moth breath". This image of fragility is soon juxtaposed, however, as with "one cry", the mother stumbles "from bed, cow-heavy" covered in a "floral Victorian nightgown". This use of self-deprecation highlights Plath's personal experience of struggling with her own self-worth as a mother.

"Child" often appears to be a relatively uncomplicated comparison to the maternal complexities felt in "Morning Song." Beneath the semblance, however, this poem is an effective illustration of the poet's personal experience of suffering through a mind plagued with melancholia. Written merely two weeks before her suicide, this poignant poem conveys the despair felt by a person unable to respond in an adequate fashion to an unspoiled thing of beauty and wonder. The fact that the child's eye is "the one absolutely beautiful thing", comparing it to an "April snowdrop, Indian pipe", implies that everything else in the speaker's life is somehow compromised with imperfection. She yearns to fill her life "with colour and ducks, the zoo of the new". The use of enjambment creates a gentle, titling momentum as she also employs assonance to capture the sound of infantile speech. Rather than being capable of offering the child what it deserves, however, the speaker can only provide the child with "this troublous, wringing of hands" which is a typical gesture of anxiety and anguish, and "this dark ceiling without a star" which is an effective use of imagery, depicting the way in which Plath's personal experience of suffering is one without hope, a world in which she feels trapped and confined. The darkness here allows for nothing positive and contrasts greatly with the "colour" and innocence of earlier lines, effectively portraying the internal conflict in Plath's mind.

As is evident through the poems analysed above, Plath's poetry is extremely powerful in portraying her own personal experiences with suffering, through clever poetic techniques, imagery and language. We, of course, also see poignant moments of redemption, hope and love, but in the knowledge that these moments were unfortunately not enough to beat Plath's demons. Her poetry had a deep, emotional effect on me, allowing an invaluable insight into the human psyche, and I am eternally grateful that it lives on and is celebrated after her.