

THE INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

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Plath makes effective use of provocative imagery to highlight the intense emotions in her poetry.

Plath's imagery serves to highlight the intense emotions in her poetry. Her poems challenge the reader by presenting us with an insight into a dark and troubled mind; a mind where nothing, not even the joy of childbirth, is free from despair. *In order to do this*, Plath employs a series of complex and provocative images. In "Morning Song" and "Child" she relies on a series of interesting aural images to convey her intense joy. In "Arrival of the Beebox", Plath employs images that personify the sinister quality of the bees, which in turn reflect the intense anxiety of the speaker. Whereas in "Elm", "Finisterre" and "Mirror", Plath relies on metaphors and surreal associations to help us share in the intensely disturbing and despondent emotions that she is attempting to convey.

Plath has a masterful poetic style. *In particular, she frequently relies on aural imagery in order to highlight the emotional intensity in her poems.* This aural quality of Plath's poetry can be both mesmerising and unsettling. In 'Morning Song', one of the most uplifting Plath poems on our course, Plath makes use of a series of aural images in order to convey a joyful message. The jaunty rhythm of 'Love set you going like a fat gold watch' gives way to an awestruck, reverential tone when Plath likens her baby to a 'New statue | In a drafty museum'. These two similes capture the intense joy and awe that Plath is experiencing. This imagery is further strengthened by her use of assonance. The broad vowels contained in 'ah' and 'ooh' mimic the baby-talk of the new parents and allow the reader to share in the joy that Plath is experiencing. Furthermore, the delicate sound created by the onomatopoeia in lines such as: 'your moth-breath | Flickers', *helps us to appreciate more fully*

the tender nature of an image that seeks to highlight just how intense the mother's concern is.

However, the imagery in Plath's poetry can be as disturbing as it is beautiful. In 'Child', for example, the poet uses a number of images that rely on assonance to capture the sound of a child's speech:

I want to fill it with color and ducks,
The zoo of the new

However, in the final stanza of this poem, Plath uses assonance to provoke much darker emotions. The repetition of broad vowel sounds, contained in the image of the "dark ceiling without a star," creates an intensely brooding, gloomy atmosphere that highlights the depressed emotions experienced by the speaker. A similar effect can be seen in 'Poppies in July'. Here, the image of the poppies is enhanced by a number of language techniques that provoke intense emotions. The first line of the poem is energised by the repetitive staccato of the short, disyllabic words contained in the image of the 'Little poppies'. However, Plath contrasts the central image of the poem with the broad monosyllabic sounds of the second line's question, 'Do you do no harm?', in order to provoke a feeling of intense lethargy and mental agitation. The stark contrast in tone between these two lines is a deeply unsettling combination, and a perfect illustration of how Plath expertly employs her imagery in an entrancing and disturbing manner that, to my mind, is highly provocative. It is provocative because it ...

Frequently, Plath explores surreal scenes and employs surreal imagery in order to heighten our appreciation of the speaker's disturbed state of mind. I was particularly unsettled by the images that Plath employs in "The Arrival Of The Bee Box". Her description of the hive as 'the coffin of a midget | Or a square baby' is provocative because it is bizarre, disturbing and strangely comical. Similarly, images such as 'African hands' 'Black on black, angrily clambering' are intensely menacing and claustrophobic. It is this dark undercurrent in the imagery that Plath employs that makes her poetry so distinctive and highly compelling. Here, the extensive use of personification and startling figurative language contained in these images convey and intensify the experience:

The unintelligible syllables.
It is like a Roman mob,
I lay my ear to furious latin

These personifications help us to experience the manic, disturbing energy of the bees. And this in turn causes us to appreciate fully the confused state of mind of the speaker. While with Plath it is often impossible to say exactly just what emotions she is experiencing, she nearly always makes us feel as if we are living the disturbing, underlying force noticeable in so much of her poetry. For example, a dark negative energy permeates the poem "Mirror". And once again, while it is difficult to state precisely what emotion Plath is trying to provoke, we instinctively realise that it is a dark one. Here the extensive use of personification combined with startling figurative language create an emotionally intense experience. When the mirror feels rewarded by the woman's tears and by the 'agitation of [her] hands' we feel uneasy. And when old age is portrayed as a menace that 'Rises toward her day after

day”, in the form of a “terrible fish’ we feel the intense despair experienced by this woman because the image is at once recognisable and surreal.

Plath’s use of imagery does not just shed an interesting light on the external world; it also highlights, in an intense fashion, the deeply disturbed inner landscape of the poet’s troubled soul. This is perhaps best exemplified by her poem “Elm” which is crowded with desolate, disturbing imagery. As with “Morning Song” and “Poppies in July”, Plath makes particular use of aural imagery in this poem to convey the intensity of her feelings of despair and uneasy despondency. The onomatopoeic effect of the word ‘dissatisfactions’ not only approximates the sound of the leaves rustling, but also creates an uneasy, restless sound. This effect is echoed in the fifth stanza by another aural image in the form of the rain, which falls in a ‘big hush’. This is another restless sound that conveys speaker’s intensely disturbed state. In the sixth stanza, the voice of tree informs us that it has:

[...] suffered the atrocity of sunsets.

Scorched to the root

My red filaments burn and stand, a hand of wires.

These powerful images, which obviously form an allusion to Electroconvulsive shock, therapy convey a deeply disturbed psychic state. The image of a “sunset” suggests an end, not a beginning. Furthermore, this sunset is not natural: it is over-bright and worryingly intense. In the second half of ‘Elm’, these feelings of agitated despair are further

reinforced by strange and unsettling imagery. The moon is likened to a cold, barren vision of mutilated femininity:

The moon, also, is merciless: she would drag me
Cruelly, being barren.
Her radiance scathes me [...]
Diminished and flat, as after radical surgery.

For me, these disturbing images capture the poet's unique but troubled view of herself. In the final stanzas of the poem, death appears to close in as the speaker's fears turn to numbness. The poem's final images are surreal and intense. Plath speaks of the "snaky acid's kiss" that "petrifies the will." For the speaker, these are the "isolate, slow faults That kill, that kill, that kill." This is a dark poem that offers us an intense vision of the violent, uneasy and ultimately tragic mental condition of the poet. A mental condition dominated by emotions of despair and agitated confusion.

In 'Finisterre', Plath relies once again on provocative imagery to highlight an interesting view of the world. The poem opens with a depiction of a fragile cliff edge that is surrounded by 'trefoils, stars and bells'. And while the poem lacks the emotional intensity of "Elm", the dark emotions of despair and despondency that we associate with Plath are never far from "Finisterre". The image of cliff, which initially is appealing, takes on a sinister aspect when Plath describes the flora as having been embroidered by 'fingers [...] close to death'. There is an undercurrent of violence present in the poet's description of the rocks hiding 'their grudges under the water'. This seascape is likened to the

hand of a rheumatoid arthritis sufferer. It is 'knuckled and [...] | Cramped on nothing'. This extreme image is juxtaposed by what seems to be a bottomless sea. In a disturbing moment, the water appears as if it has been "Whitened by the faces of the drowned". And in the poet's dark view of the world, the dull and ominous rocks are the 'Leftover soldiers from old, messy wars'. For me, these sinister images provide real insight into Plath's intense and deeply emotional anxiety because they help us see just how disturbed Plath's vision of the vision of the world is. There is no hope in this poem and commonly accepted images of comfort such as "Our Lady" are subverted by Plath in order to convey her bleak perspective. For Plath Our Lady of the Shipwrecked:

does not hear what the sailor or the peasant is saying—

because:

She is in love with the beautiful formlessness of the sea.

This final image of the sea is as unsettling as it is captivating; because, it shows us the intense nature of Plath's disturbed psychic state and it's ability to yield unforgettable moments of dark and intense beauty.

Sylvia Plath's provocative imagery serves to highlight the intense emotions in her poetry, because it helps the reader to become more fully involved in the latent and brooding darkness and brief glimpses of joy present in her poetry. In particular Plath makes use of personification, bizarre and unusual associations and surreal images to highlight the intense emotions of despair, joy and of course anxiety present in so much of her poetry.

Sylvia Plath has written a vast body of extraordinary poetry. I love her poetry for the beauty of its language and the captivating nature of the imagery employed by the poet. I was mesmerised by the latent, brooding violence that underpins so much of her work. Reading Plath provides insight into the often dark mindset of the poet. I sometimes find it uncomfortable to read Sylvia Plath's poetry, but I love it nonetheless.