

The poetry of sylvia
plath is intense,
deeply personal, and
quite disturbing.

[Profession](#), [Poet](#)



Sylvia Plath was a brilliant writer and is my favourite writer on our course. She was also highly accomplished in other fields, was an intense and complex woman, and a woman who was frequently ill. She died at a young age. It is often the latter facts that come to mind when we think of Sylvia Plath. In the minds of many, her short life and personality have overwhelmed her work. First and foremost, however, we must now remember Plath as a brilliant writer. It is on this basis alone that – along with Kavanagh, Frost, Boland, Montague, Mahon and others – she has been included in our poetry anthology.

Like these other poets, her writing was illuminating and innovative and frequently beautiful, if shocking. This does not mean that her life becomes irrelevant in the study of her work. Far from it. But we must remember to keep the proper balance between considering her life and appraising her work. Plath, of course, was an extremely personal writer – a confessional writer. In this answer I must examine whether or not her poetry is “intense, deeply personal and quite disturbing”. And that requires studying her work in relation to her life. “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.” Plath wrote the poem ‘Elm’ in 1962. She would die at her own hand the following year. Her father died when she was just eight years old. Depression was rampant on his side of the family, an illness that she would suffer with all her life. Her mother was conservative and expected Plath to conform to conservative, feminine ideals. On the surface, Plath managed to do that for some time. Inside, however, conflicts

raged that in themselves are symbolic of her entire psychological life: she wanted a completely different life from the one expected of her.

Plath was a brilliant and energetic student but shifted abruptly between periods of confidence and elation to periods of self-doubt, depression and terror. These shifts became more frequent, erratic and severe the older she became. She attempted suicide aged twenty-one. One of Plath's famous 'early' poems, 'Black Rook In Rainy Weather', sets out many of the issues that preoccupied her. " On the stiff twig up there Hunches a wet black rook Arranging and rearranging its feathers in the rain. " Plath loved nature. Here the rook represents ordinary nature imposing its own order on the world, something she struggled and failed to do.

She often used nature to depict her own mental condition. At this point in her life she believed that, from time to time, inspiration and revelation would be revealed to her from the external world. Thus she waits for nature to reveal itself and desires " occasionally, some backtalk/ From the mute sky. " And sometimes nature does reveal itself, sometimes the sky does talk back, " hallowing an interval/ Otherwise inconsequent" and granting " a brief respite from fear/ Of total neutrality" (Black Rook). Later she would be denied even this expectation.

Her writing became extremely personal. In her world, nothing is of more consequence than her world and her experience of it. This means that she writes predominantly of her troubled mental state, which forms her whole worldview. Even at the end of " Black Rook", a comparatively optimistic

poem, the wait has begun again, “ The long wait... For that rare, random descent. ” ‘ Black admonitory cliffs, and the sea exploding/ With no bottom... ” she writes in ‘ Finisterre. ‘ Here, again, nature’s unforgiving, stony backdrop is used to represent her sad and jagged spirit.

The sound effects employed in parts of this poem add to its harsh outlook, starting with the consonance in the very first line, which sets the tone: “ This was the land’s end: the last fingers, knuckled and rheumatic, Cramped on nothing. Black. ” This brilliant personification and its harsh sounds add considerably to the image of the rocks that she is trying to create in our minds. It also contrasts impressively with the mournful assonance that further describes the cliffs, which are “ edged with trefoils, stars and bells. ” The rocks represent reality, as Plath perceives it, in a poem that deals, in part, with the affect of war upon soldiers.

The assonance sounds help establish her (and our) sad response to this reality. Completing the mournful atmosphere that she establishes in this poem, the four-beat rhythm drags out each line and the feeling or mood of each line. Plath’s intensity, then, arises out of the combination of the personal nature of her poetry with the startling language she uses to express herself. Some of the images she creates are amazing and surreal. “ Souls, rolled in the doom-noise of the sea” (Finisterre). And again, in Finisterre, “ The sea... whitened by the faces of the drowned. As her illness and despondency intensifies – and she widens this personal net to include her husband, his mistress, her children, her childhood and all of her troubles – it is further testament to her writing skill that the personal nature of her writing

rarely overtakes the writing itself. Through deteriorating mental health and in response to her husband's infidelity, her writing becomes increasingly angry in poems like 'Pheasant' and 'Elm'. "Love is a shadow. How you lie and cry after it Listen: these are its hooves: it has gone off, like a horse" (Elm).

In 'Elm, she and the tree – referred to in this answer's opening quotation – become one both symbolically and in the first person 'I'. Both of them have touched the bottom. Plath is anticipating death and is disturbingly, distressingly upset. "Now I break up in pieces that fly about like clubs. A wind of such violence Will tolerate no bystanding: I must shriek." In my opinion, for the reader these moments are more distressing than disturbing. In the half-century since her death there have been improvements in mental health services. There is a long way to go and for some the subject is still taboo.

But I feel that were she alive now she could have availed of much better, if not ultimately successful, treatments and advice. Regardless, I am not disturbed by her condition because I know that it is an illness but I am distressed by her condition, like I would be for anyone who is seriously sick. "I am terrified by this dark thing/ That sleeps in me," she writes in 'Elm'. Is she hysterical, as some critics have said? Yes. But is she able to express this poetically? Yes she is. 'Elm' concludes with allusions to the Garden of Eden and portents of impending doom. The time when she waited for revelation has long passed. I am incapable of more knowledge. What is this, this face So murderous in its strangle of branches? — Its snaky acid kiss. It petrifies

the will. These are the isolate, slow faults That kill, that kill, that kill. Here, the rhyming of her ' will' with three-times ' kill' rams home the terrifying point. Indeed, her poetry can be all the things suggested by this question's initial assessment. I would like to finish, not by concentrating on the events around Sylvia Plath's death, but by examining her late poetic relations to those whom she loved most: her children.

Although by the time she wrote ' Child' – two weeks before her death – she regarded herself as a " ceiling without a star", the love she feels for her newborn child is palpable in tender, playful and poignant language: " Your clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful thing. I want to fill it with colour and ducks, The zoo of the new. " Unfortunately she could not escape her own troubles to achieve this. I conclude with a question. Which, in hindsight, is preferable: a sick Sylvia Plath who left us with her poetry or a healthy Sylvia Plath who never wrote a word?