

Sylvia plath poetry notes

Profession, Writer



Sylvia Plath's poetry depicts her quest for poetic inspiration and vision: In her early poems, like 'Black Rook', Plath sees inspiration as transcendent, something that would announce itself to her from the external world. Plath's language implies that she awaits a visitation of beauty, like the Annunciation by the angel in the Bible. Plath longs for an occasional 'portent' or 'back talk from the mute sky'. She doesn't believe in religious epiphany; but she uses Christian language as an analogy to convey her longing.

Her longing is for even brief moments of revelation from things, nature or the universe: 'As if a celestial burning took possession of the most obtuse objects now and then—Thus hallowing an interval otherwise inconsequent'. Throughout the poem 'Black Rook', Plath uses 'fire' and associated words as an analogy for poetic inspiration or vision. See the extended note on this point in Imagery below. In 'Black Rook', Plath is resigned to the fact that inspiration involves a 'long wait'. The euphoria of inspiration is 'rare, random' and brief.

By the time Plath wrote 'Finisterre' four years later, she had ceased to seek or discern enlightenment or any transcendent reality in nature and the universe: 'Our Lady of the Shipwrecked ... does not hear what the sailor or the peasant is saying - She is in love with the beautiful formlessness of the sea' [Finisterre]. Instead, she discerns: 'Black admonitory cliffs' and 'Souls, rolled in the doom-noise of the sea'. Plath's perception of the world is therefore very bleak. In the poem 'Mirror', the poet's quest for beauty and vision has turned inwards. She gazes inwards towards the self.

She seeks despairingly for enlightenment through self-examination. What she finds appals her: 'A woman bends over me, searching my reaches for

what she really is... tears and an agitation of hands'. In 'Pheasant', Plath declares her atheistic stance: 'I am not mystical. It isn't As if I thought it had a spirit. It is simply in its element.' However, Plath shows that not all her poems are bleak. She experiences the aesthetic beauty of nature. She enjoys the beauty of a natural creature in its environment: 'It unclaps, brown as a leaf, and loud, Settles in the elm, and is easy.'

In 'Elm' Plath probes her subconscious, and states she is saturated with self-knowledge. Plath experiences harrowing visions within the inner self. Plath invents a demon in her subconscious that gives her a very self-destructive vision: 'I am incapable of more knowledge. What is this, this face So murderous in its strangle of branches? — Its snaky acids kiss. It petrifies the will. These are the isolate, slow faults That kill, that kill, that kill.' [Elm] In 'Poppies in July', Plath seems so emotionally exhausted that she has given up the rational pursuit of the truth or any kind of vision.

She longs for drugged relief, for a 'colourless' state: 'Where are your opiates, your nauseous capsules'. In 'Child' Plath has lost the capacity to find beauty for herself: 'this troublous Wringing of hands, this dark Ceiling without a star' But she feels a desire to provide visions of wonder and beauty for her infant's eye: 'I want to fill it with color and ducks, The zoo of the new' [Child] Plath explores her own depression. Plath is exhausted and aimless: 'not seek any more in the desultory weather some design... this season of fatigue' [Black Rook]

Plath predicts her own fading away, destruction or 'effacement': 'I'm no more your mother than the cloud that distils a mirror to reflect its own slow effacement at the wind's hand' [Morning Song] Plath uses a bleak landscape

to portray her own despair: ‘ This was the land's end: the last fingers, knuckled and rheumatic, Cramped on nothing. Black Admonitory cliffs, and the sea exploding With no bottom, or anything on the other side of it, Whitened by the faces of the drowned. Now it is only gloomy, a dump of rocks... Bay of the Dead’ [Finisterre] Plath reveals intense grief: ‘When they free me, I am beaded with tears’ [Finisterre] Plath confesses her deep anguish: ‘ She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands’ [Mirror] Plath is very self-critical: ‘ I trespass stupidly. Let be, let be. ’ [Pheasant] Plath’s fears becomes ever more nightmarish: ‘ I am terrified by this dark thing that sleeps in me’ [Elm] Plath reveals that she is inflicting suffering on herself: ‘ Is it for such I agitate my heart’ [Elm] Plath confesses the traumatic effect of electric-convulsive treatment: ‘ I have suffered the atrocity of sunsets.

Scorched to the root My red filaments burn and stand, a hand of wires’ [Elm] Plath confesses that isolation and lack of love haunt her: ‘ I am inhabited by a cry. Nightly it flaps out Looking, with its hooks, for something to love’ [Elm] Plath reveals that she is becoming powerless to deal with her illness: ‘ Its snaky acids kiss. It petrifies the will’ [Elm] Plath has moments when she longs to escape her mind through drugs: ‘ Or your liquors seep to me, in this glass capsule, dulling and stilling’ [Poppies]