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to the work of sylvia
plath essay sampl...



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Sylvia Plath was one of the leading poets of her time. She was born in Boston and later moved to England where she met and married a leading English poet Ted Hughes. Both her and Hughes were unhappy in their relationship. This lead Plath to become suicidal and paranoid, which reflected in her work. ' Lady Lazarus' was a poem all about her inner pain and frequent suicide attempts. In 1963 she was finally successful and took her own life.

One of her many poems clearly illustrates the paranoia Plath felt and her inner pain as she visualises a pleasant task like blackberrying as a dark and twisted world where she is hunted by her enemies, men!

Blackberrying

Stansa One

To open the play Plath uses the word ' nobody'. With one word she has set the scene as a lonely and destitute place. She reinforces this by describing the lane as ' nothing, nothing but blackberries'. This double negative helps to back up the emptiness, solitude and lack of purpose Plath feels in life. Plath tends to reinforce the topics she brings up and shows this as she continuously uses the word blackberries to give the reader a sense of their huge number.

Plath uses alien metal objects such as ' hooks' and ' pewter'. This metallic theme is also reflected in some of her other poems (i. e. Mirror). Plath uses this type of personification to great affect and she also uses similes and metaphors to help bring the poem to life. Theses techniques help bring feeling and depth to what would otherwise be a very dull poem.

One such example of her use of personification is bringing the blackberries to life and describing how they 'squander' their 'blood' on her fingers. As well as bringing the blackberries to life she has given them a sex she describes their squandering of 'blood' as an act of 'sisterhood' despite this it is more likely that they are male. Thus illustrating her hatred of the male gender and her husband Ted Hughes.

The next line is probably a covert sexual reference as she describes the male blackberries as 'sisters' accommodating themselves to her 'milkbottle'. This signals the end of the first stanza and now the poem focuses on a different organism, the crow. Each stanza seems to deal with a different topic although they are in fact all linked. Plath is using different things to show her pain and hatred of men.

Stanza Two

The idea of using birds struggling against a strong wind was taken from Hughes play 'wind' in which a magpie was blown away by a strong wind, in blackberrying the sky is filled with crows (or 'coughs' as Plath calls them) fighting against a 'blown' sky. The magpies themselves seem hostile but altogether powerless. The idea of the 'blown sky' as a whole gives us the impression that she is fighting against a strong wind, as does the 'burnt paper image'. This is another example of poets seeing things differently as she imagines a strong wind to be attacking her in some way.

Once again we see Plath reiterating herself as she says 'protesting, protesting', when describing the cries of the crows.

The idea of the path going on forever as she does not 'think the sea will appear' reflects her own traumatic life which she also wants to end. Her helplessness is reinforced by the fact that the sea is active while she is passive.

The flies are death. They swarm over the berries and 'hang' there 'blue green bellies' like a 'Chinese screen'. This is a similar idea to the 'high green meadows' which are 'lit from within'. The screen, like the fields shine. To her the flies are magnified and she says the transparency of their wings is like a window, close up.

Stansa Three

'The only thing to come now is the sea'. This gives us the sense that Plath actually dreads getting to the sea, as so often it is a metaphor for death and eternity, something Plath fears more than death.

Plath is then struck by a fierce wind that she describes as 'sudden' as up till this point she has been sheltered from it. Plath describes how she is attacked by 'phantom laundry', which is in fact the fierce gale. We get the idea that she is on a cliff because she says the 'hills are too green and sweet to have tasted salt'.

The cliff that Plath was standing on may have been one near where she lived as she describes how she is at the cliffs 'northern face', she is probably standing on North Devon looking out over the Atlantic.

Plath again repeats the words 'nothing, nothing' mirroring line one. This

repetition is enforcing the poem's sense of emptiness, its negative flavour.
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The 'white' sea is contending with the dominant 'pewter' and 'black'. Sandwiched in between are strange colours that are 'lit from within' like green and orange. This gives an unpleasant vision of this hostile sea. 'Silver smiths are beating and beating' at an 'intractable metal'. This line again refers to light coloured metals and beating and beating go with protesting, protesting.

In spite of this double activity on the part of nature no effect comes of it. The wind blows on, the sea is still an 'intractable metal' and the poem ends with a strong, disturbing emptiness, as it began. It starts 'nobody' and ends on 'metal'.

This poem is a clear indication of Plath's warped mind. She sees a short walk down to the sea as a struggle through personified blackberries and 'phantom laundry'. I will now analyse another of Plath's poems, which is similar to Blackberrying in some ways, and also highlights Plath's fragile state.

In blackberries Plath brings the black berries to life and describes in detail how they 'squander' their 'blood' on 'her fingers'. She also uses similes and metaphors to help describe things and give them more meaning. Plath describes the blackberries as 'as dumb as eyes' and the crows as 'bits of burnt paper'.

Mirror

Stanza One

The mirror is a strange poem, which you have to read twice before you start to understand it. The mirror is actually doing the narrating and describes itself as 'silver and exact'. This is the first clue that the mirror is actually speaking (other than the title).

In this poem Plath seems to have taken her inspiration from fairy tales, books and her fear of growing old. As she describes how the 'reflection' is 'swallowed' and uses the idea of a magic mirror, like the one in Snow White

The mirror tells us how it has 'no preconceptions' and does not judge. There is no question of like and dislike it tells it 'just as it is'. But in this context truth can be worse than cruelty, because the mirror is showing Plath getting older something she dreads. The mirror is like a 'four cornered' God, that is male, and is exact unlike the emotionally untidy woman.

Stansa Two

In the second stanza the mirror has become a lake which the woman bends over and looks at herself. This idea of a lake and someone bending over it is taken from the story of Narcissus who fell in love with himself. Plath is seeing herself grow old in the mirror and the mirror describes how she 'drowned a young girl' in him, the young girl being Plath's childhood, and that an 'old woman rises towards her day after day like a terrible fish'.

Throughout the poem the mirror is personified and the 'candles and moon' are described as 'liars'. Other techniques Plath uses to bring the play to life are metaphors and similes, she describes the mirror as 'a little God' and old age as a 'terrible fish'.

Contrasts, Similarities and Path's Techniques

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Both the poems are similar and both reflect almost equally Plath's disturbed mind. They both have a sexual undertone and are both written in first person narrative, they both have underlying metal themes the mirror is 'silver and exact' and blackberries features a whole range of alien metals. In both Plath has a distinct fear of water as it brings death and old age like a 'terrible fish'. The form of setting and discipline of verses are strict in both mirror and blackberrying.

Conclusion

Poets do definitely see the world through eyes different to other people. This is clearly show as in Plath's world blackberrying is a struggle to survive and mirrors do not show your reflection but your ageing and impending doom.

Plath had a hard life and hated the idea of growing old. Most of her inspiration comes from her paranoia and this is shown in both poems. These

are just two out of over a hundred of Plath's poems but both are similar and have clear underlying tones, of death and ageing.