

# Women before an aquarium

Literature



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Module Woman before an Aquarium painting Patricia Hampl Question How does Hampl use the details of the painting to establish its mood as well as the tone of her poem?

To start with, the picture looks somber. The woman in front of the aquarium looks destitute and almost uninterested in whatever is happening inside the aquarium. Her mind, however, is very active, thinking about her desires, wishes and her happiness. Hampl takes the chance to have a poem that describes what she is doing and use the same words to explain why this particular girl was intriguing her. She looks at her as a lone woman looking aloof rather than an asexual figure lost in the contemplative gaze. She seeks to get deeper into her mind and see what she is seeing (Bock 210-12). She wants to get lost in that same gaze that she is in. she wants to use her words as an entry into the life and times of this distant lady. She wants to understand why Matisse was going around the world looking for such women to capture them in their surroundings. She knew that the secret was in looking deeper than the outer eye could see (River Teeth 130-2).

The words used reflect what the observer can view from whichever position one looking at the portrait. The second stanza talks of a Matisse woman who is ready to study whatever she can based on what she will gain based on the lessons learned by watching the fish swim slowly. It likens this to the world for those who want to survive. Only those willing to bear the brunt like the Matisse women did during the wild nights and the pain of the back crushing the pine needles will survive the round distorted world (Bock 215-7).

Question 2: Does the speaker's diction and imagery in the poem indicate that she is sympathetic to the girl in the painting?

The way she describes this woman shows her sympathy. She seems to be <https://assignbuster.com/women-before-an-aquarium/>

well into her thoughts, wishing she would get into the water and avoid the human smells she has to endure on a daily bases. She says that the woman is “ dressed, a simple western face, a schoolgirl’s haircut, the plain desk of ordinary work...” (Line 26-8). She seems to be desperate for something else instead of being seated in a place where her worth is not recognized. She is an odalisque yet her masters want to see her in a schoolgirl’s haircut and dress in a simple western manner. She is worthless to the masters unless she does as they please, rather than as she wills. The poet also brings out the fear she has as she sits crushing the pinecone of fear oblivious of the fact that it is fear she is dealing with (River Teeth 135-7).

Looking at the aquarium with the goldfish seems like looking into a lantern, giving her a green light that looks like a souvenir from the underworld. The idea is to gather all the hope she can get to console herself despite her situation. Like a mermaid, she can watch from the sidelines everything happen, and then go back to the underworld where she could live happily without worrying about the rest of the people in the room (Bock 220).

Question 3: How do you interpret line 19-20?

A Matisse woman always wants to be a mermaid as captioned in lines 19-20 show a desperate attempt to escape from this world. In the last stanza, the mermaid is sited at the shore of the room glinting with the flicker of the water. She already imagines herself as a mermaid combing her golden strands of human hair thinking about swimming like all mermaids do. The woman has already resigned herself to fate. She can only watch from the sidelines as the rest of the people enjoy their lives. Taking into consideration of the Matisse women the paintings depicting them, their lives were confined to certain areas of the house. She can only stay in the bed where as an

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odalisque; her work was to please others. There was nothing important about her, only her body. Her position was mainly like that of a mermaid basking by the shorelines, wishing to just swimming (River Teeth 139-40).

Her wishes are to be normal again and live a life she is happy with in a place further from where she was then. She wished to be a mermaid so she could swim to the underworld where she could not be found. She would disappear and not be found again (River Teeth 140-2). She wished to become an exotic wall hanging because she would be untouchable then, but since that was difficult and non-enjoyable, being mermaid would be fulfilling because she would still have her feelings and beauty.

Question 4: How is female identity presented in the poem and painting?

Females are seen as hopeless because they can do nothing about their position in the society, as exotic persons for wild nights, and nothing else can rate them other than their beauty. In the poem, the poet looks at her and describes her based on her looks and clothes she was wearing. There is nothing glamorous about her. She is fair, plain and dons a schoolgirl's haircut despite being a woman. That is her worth (Bock 205).

#### Works Cited

Catherine C. Bock & Matisse, *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 12(2),  
The Helen Birch Bartlett Memorial Collection (1986), 200-221  
River Teeth, *A Journal of Nonfiction Narrative* 5. 2. Spring (2004), 129-142.