

# ENGLISH

LEAVING CERTIFICATE  
HIGHER LEVEL

UNSEEN POETRY &  
SYLVIA PLATH



**THE DUBLIN**  
**ACADEMY OF**  
EDUCATION

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# Part 1: Unseen Poetry

**Introduction to poetry and how to study a poem- What your examiner is looking for.**

Let's start with the marking scheme all examiners will use to correct your exam...

In particular 2 quotes from their guidelines:

1. *'Students should be able to... read poetry conscious of its specific mode of using language as an artistic medium.'* (DES English Syllabus, 4. 5. 1)
2. *Reward the candidates' awareness of the patterned nature of the language of poetry, its imagery, its sensuous qualities, its suggestiveness.*

Ok so what does this all mean?

Well **quote 1** means they are looking for students to understand that poetry is an art form. That language is used to express ideas, thoughts, emotion, feeling, descriptions, moments... (You get the idea).

So, to get a good grade in the Leaving Cert you need to be able to:

- Read (and quote from) the poetry.
- Understand what the poetry is about.
- Express your opinion about how well the poet expressed their thoughts through the language they used.

Now look at **quote 2**. It specifically lists 4 areas to concentrate on.

- **Patterned nature of the language**
- **Imagery**
- **Sensuous Qualities**
- **Suggestiveness**

Easy to remember?

## **Patterns**

What makes a poem a poem is how it creates patterns.

These patterns can be:

1. The **shape** of the poem on the page. Think of how a poem looks when you first see it. Why is it organized into stanzas (or not)? How might you describe the shape of the poem? Why has the poet chosen that form? Why do certain lines stand out? How does the poem announce itself on the page?
2. The **repetition** or use of certain words or types of words. Are there groups of words? Words associated with a certain topic/area?
3. Patterns of **sound**: Think rhythm, beat, rhyme, even words which just sound good. All these contribute to the aesthetic feel of the poem.

So when you read a poem be aware of these patterns. They may be obvious or more subtle, but they will be there. This will show the examiner you are aware that Poetry is different from other forms of communication.

## Imagery

Most of us think of an image as something we see, which is correct. But in poetry an image is much more than that. In a poem there can be lots of images, or just one or two developed in more detail.

Now, how are images constructed and what is the effect of imagery? This is what your examiner wants you to show an awareness of.

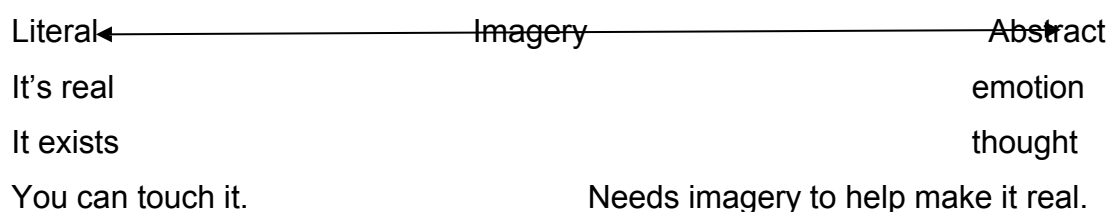
Images, moments, descriptions can mean different things to different people. This is important as imagery therefore affects us all differently. Our response is conditioned by our experience of the word. In order to deal with this we simply need to point to the **vocabulary that has a powerful emotional impact** and explain what that impact is. Your examiner will love if you can bring your own experience into the poem. But be succinct. Use these two words:

Poets enjoy provoking us into seeing things in a new way especially through **comparison and contrast**.

3 types of comparison:

Sometimes it can just simply be used to describe- in other words it is very **literal** (real, it exists). Other times a poet will use imagery to describe an emotion/feeling/thought- in other words the image represents an **abstract** idea/thought.

All you need to do is to explain clearly what the image makes you think about... this is what the examiner loves, a student who “engages” with the poetry.



Poets are often abstract people. What a poem does is to take an abstract idea and make it real (literal) for us through its imagery- we can imagine it.

## **Sensuousness**

Easy. 5 senses:

Sight-

Sound-

Touch-

Taste-

Smell-

Poets particularly enjoy blending two senses in one sentence. Strictly speaking we can only refer to a poem or a piece of writing as being sensuous if there is a marked reliance or use of sensuous imagery. Either the poet **appeals to** different senses throughout the poem or in one sentence blended a number of senses. This is the most important descriptive writing technique.

Effect:

When you read the poem try open up your imagination a little- Ask yourself what does the poet want you to hear, see and feel. Can you **relate** this to your own experience?

Your job in the exam is to comment on how the poet has opened up your imagination- pick out the sensuous images that you felt **engaged** you.

## **Suggestiveness**

This element is a bit more vague. You need to think about what the poet is suggesting to you through the form of the poem, its imagery, and its sensuous qualities.

This is where you can differentiate your answer and gain marks in the exam both in the unseen poem and in your study of the Prescribed Poets.

You need to be clear on your thoughts and elaborate on them with examples and quotes. The key is to be able to explain **how** the poet succeeded in suggesting the ideas that you responded to. Above we have learned how the poet manipulates our emotional response.

Remember this is the aim of aesthetic language.

Vocabulary builder/ Phrases to use to show you are emotionally responding to Poem:

I was struck by ....

The title suggests.....

### **Finally for now:**

Opinion counts. Any poetry question will ask you to express your opinion. But the A grade student is one who is able to explain **how** they have formed their opinion, how

the poem has prompted these thoughts and be able to point to elements of the poets technique and writing skills that evoked this response.

## **How to read any poem:**

Read the poem through once-

Ask yourself:

- Who is talking? (The voice- is it the poet, a character, an object)
- What are they talking about? (The subject of the poem)
- What are they saying about the subject? The message of the poem.
  
- Title – This frames your initial response.
- Structure/Shape- how is the poem structured- Is it divided into stanzas- what happens in each stanza- is there development of the subject matter through the stanzas.
- Vocabulary- what words stand out when you read the poem? Are there any patterns/repeated words?
- Punctuation- is there a lot of punctuation or not- why does the poet want to slow down or speed up the poem through punctuation. Question marks, Full stops, Exclamation marks, Ellipsis...
- Tone- what would the poem sound like when read aloud (sad, happy, angry, depressed, etc.) - the tone will reveal the writer's attitude to what they are speaking about?
- Main imagery- what is the poet trying to get you to picture/suggest to you through his/her imagery?
- Metaphors/Similes/Personification- what comparisons is the poet using- what are they comparing and why are they making these comparisons?
- Imagery- think of an image as a moment- what moment is the poet trying to get you to imagine- how is he/she doing it- through visual descriptions/ sounds/ smells/ comparisons etc.

- What is the rhythm/beat of the poem- are the lines the same length, does it rhyme, are sounds or words repeated? Does the poet use alliteration/assonance/onomatopoeia etc.?
- For all of the above think of why the poet has chosen to use these.

Note: For what used to be known as “the personal response question” you should do more than just describe your thoughts about the subject matter of the poem. You must also respond to how the poet has constructed the poem and how they have got the message of the poem across.

Remember: Poems do not have “hidden” meanings- everything is written on the page in front of you. The poet wants you to discover a meaning/message, they want you to imagine or think about something- just think about what the words images and how they sound are trying to suggest to you.

These ideas or themes are why the poet wrote the poem in the first place. **Poets don't use themes** they want us to see some aspect of our world in a fresh way; perhaps to share their insight into the human experience.

## **Pattern**

We have seen that in order to show an awareness of form (pattern) we can discuss:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

## **Imagery:**

We have examined three ways to approach the imagery in a poem:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

## **Sensuousness:**

We have seen that poet's achieve sensuousness by blending 2 or more senses in one line. This allows us share the experience of the speaker in the poem.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

## **Suggestiveness:**

We have seen that poetry is an aesthetic form of language and as such its purpose is to elicit an emotional response. Give two phrases an examiner will respond to:

- 1.
- 2.

3.

### **2014: SECTION III POETRY (70 marks)**

Candidates must answer **A** – Unseen Poem **and B** – Prescribed Poetry.

#### **A UNSEEN POEM (20 marks)**

Read the following poem by Seamus Heaney from his collection, *Door into the Dark*, and answer **either** Question **1** **or** Question **2** which follow.

#### **THE PENINSULA**

When you have nothing more to say, just drive  
For a day all round the peninsula;  
The sky is high as over a runway,  
The land without marks so you will not arrive

But pass through, though always skirting landfall.  
At dusk, horizons drink down sea and hill,  
The ploughed field swallows the whitewashed gable  
And you're in the dark again. Now recall

The glazed foreshore and silhouetted log,  
That rock were breakers shredded into rags,  
The leggy birds stilted on their own legs,  
Islands riding themselves out into the fog

And drive back home, still with nothing to say  
Except that now you will uncode all landscapes  
By this: things founded clean on their own shapes,  
Water and ground in their extremity.

Seamus Heaney

**1. (a)** In the above poem Seamus Heaney recommends driving “all round the peninsula”.

Based on your reading of the poem, explain why you think the poet recommends undertaking such a journey. (10)

**(b)** Choose two images from the poem that appeal to you and explain your choice. (10)

**OR**

**2.** Discuss the effectiveness of the poet’s use of language throughout this poem. Your answer should refer closely to the text.

## **'Wounds': Michael Longley**

Here are two pictures from my father's head—  
I have kept them like secrets until now:  
First, the Ulster Division at the Somme  
Going over the top with 'Fuck the Pope!'  
'No Surrender!': a boy about to die,  
Screaming 'Give 'em one for the Shankill!'  
'Wilder than Gurkhas' were my father's words  
Of admiration and bewilderment.  
Next comes the London-Scottish padre  
Resettling kilts with his swagger-stick,  
With a stylish backhand and a prayer.  
Over a landscape of dead buttocks  
My father followed him for fifty years.  
At last, a belated casualty,  
He said — lead traces flaring till they hurt —  
'I am dying for King and Country, slowly.'  
I touched his hand, his thin head I touched.

Now, with military honours of a kind,  
With his badges, his medals like rainbows,  
His spinning compass, I bury beside him  
Three teenage soldiers, bellies full of  
Bullets and Irish beer, their flies undone.  
A packet of Woodbines I throw in,  
A lucifer, the Sacred Heart of Jesus  
Paralysed as heavy guns put out  
The night-light in a nursery for ever;  
Also a bus-conductor's uniform—  
He collapsed beside his carpet-slippers  
Without a murmur, shot through the head  
By a shivering boy who wandered in  
Before they could turn the television down  
Or tidy away the supper dishes.  
To the children, to a bewildered wife,  
I think 'Sorry Missus' was what he said.

**'Out, Out—': ROBERT FROST**

The buzz saw snarled and rattled in the yard  
And made dust and dropped stove-length sticks of wood,  
Sweet-scented stuff when the breeze drew across it.  
And from there those that lifted eyes could count  
Five mountain ranges one behind the other  
Under the sunset far into Vermont.  
And the saw snarled and rattled, snarled and rattled,  
As it ran light, or had to bear a load.  
And nothing happened: day was all but done.  
Call it a day, I wish they might have said  
To please the boy by giving him the half hour  
That a boy counts so much when saved from work.  
His sister stood beside him in her apron  
To tell them 'Supper.' At the word, the saw,  
As if to prove saws knew what supper meant,  
Leaped out at the boy's hand, or seemed to leap—  
He must have given the hand. However it was,  
Neither refused the meeting. But the hand!  
The boy's first outcry was a rueful laugh,  
As he swung toward them holding up the hand  
Half in appeal, but half as if to keep  
The life from spilling. Then the boy saw all—  
Since he was old enough to know, big boy  
Doing a man's work, though a child at heart—  
He saw all spoiled. 'Don't let him cut my hand off—  
The doctor, when he comes. Don't let him, sister!'  
So. But the hand was gone already.  
The doctor put him in the dark of ether.  
He lay and puffed his lips out with his breath.  
And then—the watcher at his pulse took fright.  
No one believed. They listened at his heart.  
Little—less—nothing!—and that ended it.  
No more to build on there. And they, since they  
Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.

## Emily Dickinson

Hope is the thing with feathers  
That perches in the soul,  
And sings the tune--without the words,  
And never stops at all,

And sweetest in the gale is heard;  
And sore must be the storm  
That could abash the little bird  
That kept so many warm.

I've heard it in the chilliest land,  
And on the strangest sea;  
Yet, never, in extremity,  
It asked a crumb of me.

This poem makes use of a \_\_\_\_\_ form. This was especially effective as it echoes / stand in marked contrast to the highly \_\_\_\_\_ idea/ theme.

Here we see Dickinson exploring an abstract idea by making use of literal imagery that we can all relate to.

I enjoyed the sensuous imagery in the poem. I particularly enjoyed Dickinson's tactile image of 'the chilliest land' to represent the difficulties of life.

## **SEEN POETRY**

### **Introduction to the Prescribed Poetry section:**

#### **From the marking scheme:**

“Students at Higher Level will be required to study a representative selection from the work of eight poets: a representative selection would seek to reflect the range of a **poet’s themes** and interests and exhibit his/her **characteristic style and viewpoint**. Normally the study of at least six poems by each poet would be expected.” (DES English Syllabus, 6.3)

Note that, in the case of each poet, the candidates have the freedom of choice in relation to the poems studied.

Note that there is not a finite list of any ‘poet’s themes and interests’.

Note that, in responding to the question set on any given poet, the candidates must refer to poem/s they have studied but they are not required to refer to any specific poem/s, nor are they expected to discuss or refer to all the poems they have chosen to study.

In each of the questions in Prescribed Poetry the underlying nature of the task is the **invitation to the candidates to engage with the poems themselves**.

#### **Other points:**

Write a minimum of 4 A4 pages

Realistically you should be referring to and quoting from a minimum of 4 poems by the poet.

You can structure your answer in two ways: point by point or poem by poem.

But: If you do choose to go poem by poem avoid simply summarizing the poem. This structure of an answer often traps you into doing that.

Constantly repeat the key words of the question.

Use plenty of phrases like: I feel, it made me realize, I enjoyed, I think etc. Your aim is to engage with the poems.... You must show the examiner that these poems made you think, reflect and understand. Do that and the marks will follow.

# Sylvia Plath

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**Above all we must understand that Plath suffered from a crippling insecurity. She seems to have felt inadequate in everything that she did. All of us have at times experienced this feeling. This is why we can all identify with the speaker in Plath's poems.**

**An insight into her personality:**

As you read the two quotes below think about what type of person can have this attitude. Are there conflicting messages from the quotes?

**"I am myself. That is not enough."**

'The Jailer', Sylvia Plath – A terrifying depiction of entrapment contains this crucial line.

**"And by the way, everything in life is writable about if you have the outgoing guts to do it, and the imagination to improvise. The worst enemy to creativity is self-doubt."**

'The Unabridged Journals' of Sylvia Plath

Sylvia Plath

Who are we going to study? A woman who clearly had doubts, fears and suffered from depression. But also a woman who had the courage and imagination to reveal this tormented inner self. She was brave, vulnerable and talented. As a poet she explored the immense highs and dark lows in her life, her poetry and her thoughts. Above all Plath was hugely self-aware. Perhaps she was overly focused on herself?

**Now look at what Plath writes in her diary at seventeen years of age:**

- *I am afraid of getting older. I am afraid of getting married. Spare me from cooking three meals a day—spare me from the relentless cage of routine and rote. I want to be free—free to know people and their backgrounds—free to move to different parts of the world so I may learn that there are other morals and standards besides my own.*

**But another diary entry states:**

- *There will come a time when I must face myself at last. Even now I dread the big choices which loom up in my life—what college? What career? I am afraid. I feel uncertain. What is best for me? What do I want? I do not know. I love freedom. I deplore constrictions and limitations.*

Again think about the conflicted spirit, the yearning to be free but the fear about what lies ahead.

## **Her poetic voice- A Voice of Contrasts**

Plath's unique voice rings clear – direct, sometimes angry, sometimes tender, sometimes questioning, sometimes despairing.

Her poems show that she had the courage to write about feelings of powerlessness and lack of hope, alongside those of optimism and love.

It can be difficult reading her poems because of the challenging content, but it can also be an uplifting, joyous experience too!

Too often she is stereotyped as a depressing poet- look out for the moments of hope and joy too. We need to find images of darkness but also be able to find the images of hope and joy too.

Her poetry is uncomfortable to read because of the sadness that lies beneath and because we know how the story ends.

## **Confessional Poetry**

The emphasis is on the self, the individual.

The use of the first person perspective: Consider the effect of using “I”- more personal, direct and revealing. **This allows us relate directly with the speaker.** The first person also creates an expectation of authenticity (We believe 1<sup>st</sup> person more readily. (Who’s the “I?”)

As Plath developed her poetic voice she increasingly felt able to break taboos. She confronted (dealt with) issues and feelings that would not normally be part of poetry and especially not part of public conversation.

Suffering – poetry becomes an outlet, a release valve for many confessional poets. Without recourse to therapist or priest one confesses one’s feelings.

Her Poetry is written in ordinary speech/tone. The audience is not necessarily addressed/acknowledged as the poems are so personal. Poems are almost a means of making sense or dealing with reality for the poet.

Heartfelt, varying in tone and attitude; Plath’s poems explore a range of human experience. (Motherhood, Transience, Artistic impulse...)

Poems are **not** defined as confessional by theme or subject matter, but by how the issue represented is explored:

- Without meekness, modesty, or discretion
- Achieve self-revelation
- Writing as an outlet for demons, can be unflattering.

## **Themes in Plath's poetry**

- Inner struggle, doubt and fear
- The search for inspiration
- Motherhood
- Passing of time
- Power and control/Powerlessness
- Being trapped/ Entrapment and escape
- Childhood and imagination
- Depression

## **Symbols/ideas**

- The sea: Plath's early life (before her father's death when she was 8 years old) was spent by the sea. This idyllic (perhaps idealized) time in contrast to what came afterwards was to define her life experience.
- The struggle to manage/balance womanhood, motherhood, marriage, and writing.
- Man's cruelty especially in relation to dominating women but also nature.
- Loss and betrayal – Her treatment by her husband Ted Hughes caused her huge damage.
- Dealing with depression- Feelings of inadequacy were such that she doubted herself to a dangerous extent. .
- Elements of nature; seasonal changes reflecting mood and emotion; sunrise as a progression of time and change. The use of Pathetic fallacy is especially apparent.
- Shadows: symbolic of the mind, darkness, inner-turmoil.

### **Her style/technique**

- Variety of structures in her poetry. Be especially aware of how her poems change as she develops as a poet. The poems journey from being locked into convention to a much freer form.
- Controlled, highly crafted poems.
- Confessional therefore Use of 1<sup>st</sup> person voice.
- Imagery is suffused with symbols as Plath examines abstract concepts.
- Use of comparison and contrast is especially evident
- Reveals her personality, thoughts and emotions through landscape and location, and pathetic fallacy.
- Markedly sensuous poetry. Plath is especially adept at making use of tactile imagery as she asks us to share her experiences.

## **Black Rook in Rainy Weather**

On the stiff twig up there  
Hunches a wet black rook  
Arranging and rearranging its feathers in the rain.  
I do not expect a miracle  
Or an accident

To set the sight on fire  
In my eye, not seek  
Any more in the desultory weather some design,  
But let spotted leaves fall as they fall,  
Without ceremony, or portent.

Although, I admit, I desire,  
Occasionally, some backtalk  
From the mute sky, I can't honestly complain:  
A certain minor light may still  
Leap incandescent

Out of the kitchen table or chair  
As if a celestial burning took  
Possession of the most obtuse objects now and then ---  
Thus hallowing an interval  
Otherwise inconsequent

By bestowing largesse, honor,  
One might say love. At any rate, I now walk  
Wary (for it could happen  
Even in this dull, ruinous landscape); sceptical,  
Yet politic; ignorant

Of whatever angel may choose to flare  
Suddenly at my elbow. I only know that a rook

Ordering its black feathers can so shine  
As to seize my senses, haul  
My eyelids up, and grant

A brief respite from fear  
Of total neutrality. With luck,  
Trekking stubborn through this season  
Of fatigue, I shall  
Patch together a content

Of sorts. Miracles occur,  
If you care to call those spasmodic  
Tricks of radiance miracles. The wait's begun again,  
The long wait for the angel.  
For that rare, random descent.

## Main Points and Themes:

This poem is about Plath's search for inspiration. The poem shows evidence of Plath's ability to control language. **It is a highly crafted piece of writing that reveals her technical proficiency/ her skill as a poet.** She refers to her inspiration as being "that rare, random descent." I feel that this perfectly captures her anxiety about herself as an artist.

Plath seems to have been plagued by insecurity throughout her life. **Here we see her question her ability as a poet.** She refers to her inspiration as being "a certain minor light." This is all the more troubling, or perhaps frustrating, when we consider how technically excellent the poem is.

The opening visual image is skillfully handled. Plath use of sensuous imagery allows us to vividly imagine the scene. We can almost feel what it must be like for the bird to be arranging and rearranging its feathers in the rain. The adjectives are skillfully handled to allow us to visualize the scene.

Plath's refusal to anthropomorphize the rook is interesting. The rook is only interesting as a means of exploring the writing process. Dickinson wrote one of her most famous poems about a blackbird coming down a walkway describing how "He glanced with rapid eyes." Here, the attribution of the male gender personifies the bird as it is the subject of the poem. **Plath's self-consciousness however is evident in that instead of writing about the bird she wrote the poem about writing the poem about the bird.** The subject of the poem is therefore writing itself and as such the title is misleading.

Note Plath's use of contrast - both gloomy and negative but also vocabulary full of "fire" and "light"

Gloomy opening, lack of expectation and hope "I do not expect a miracle"-  
The resignation with which she accepts this is troubling.

But still desires/yearns to establish a connection with nature around her- to find some light and fire- she feels alienated at present.

She walks on in this bleak world- still with hope “angel may choose to flare”

Hope- “I only know that a rook ordering its black feathers can so shine as to seize my senses”

Plath is tired, searching for inspiration, content- “With luck....I shall patch together a content of sorts”-

On one hand we can seem a sad, gloomy poem but on the other we see glimmers of hope and a realisation there may be salvation and a lifting of the gloom.

We can feel sympathy for Plath- alienation from the world, fear of never having any inspiration. Remember this is a poet writing, someone who depends on inspiration, who needs something to stir the creative fire.

In fact the search for inspiration is a highly conventional theme in poetry. Plath’s treatment of it here is interesting especially in the light of her later writing. In the early poetry of Plath’s we have on our course we see her attempting to adhere to society’s expectations of what constitutes poetry. So in this poem we get a highly conventional theme being dealt with in a highly conventional form. In much the same way she would attempt to do so in her personal life. Her poetry really achieved its greatness when she could trust her own poetic voice and write free of the restrictions imposed by convention. That is her great triumph as a writer.

## The Times are Tidy

Unlucky the hero born  
In this province of the stuck record  
Where the most watchful cooks go jobless  
And the mayor's rôtisserie turns  
Round of its own accord.

There's no career in the venture  
Of riding against the lizard,  
Himself withered these latter-days  
To leaf-size from lack of action:  
History's beaten the hazard.

The last crone got burnt up  
More than eight decades back  
With the love-hot herb, the talking cat,  
But the children are better for it,  
The cow milk's cream an inch thick.

## Main Points and Themes:

This poem is unusual for Plath in the context of her later work. This poem reflects a younger more deferential voice. **This poem is interesting therefore in how it shows her later development.**

No "I"- this makes the poem more public, relevant to us.

General observations about how society is bland and uninteresting. This is best captured by the image of "the stuck record" with its suggestion of endless repetition. Is this something we as readers can relate to or perhaps our world has changed from this world?

Typical of Plath in its use of symbols; of things being stuck, monotonous, never-ending- "rotisserie"

Then a contrast between the past- world of adventure, heroism, fairytales (dragon)- and the present – children are safe and well fed (cream).

Note the dismissive almost sneering tone in the word career. This is highly effective vocabulary selection it captures her disdain for the world we inhabit perfectly.

"There's no career in the venture of riding against the lizard"

Our lives are now unadventurous- bland "History's beaten the hazard"

## Morning Song

Love set you going like a fat gold watch.  
The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry  
Took its place among the elements.

Our voices echo, magnifying your arrival. New statue.  
In a drafty museum, your nakedness  
Shadows our safety. We stand round blankly as walls.

I'm no more your mother  
Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow  
Effacement at the wind's hand.

All night your moth-breath  
Flickers among the flat pink roses. I wake to listen:  
A far sea moves in my ear.

One cry, and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral  
In my Victorian nightgown.  
Your mouth opens clean as a cat's. The window square

Whitens and swallows its dull stars. And now you try  
Your handful of notes;  
The clear vowels rise like balloons



## Main Points and Themes:

The poem explores the contradictions parenthood brings: the child is born of love but its birth means losing part of oneself. There is a sense of distance yet also of intimacy and joy in the poem.

This poem is an expression, as well as an exploration, of a mother's love for her child; consequently the tone is overall one of celebration.

A highly personal poem, Plath explores motherhood and the uniqueness of each birth. It is a highly positive poem, in its tone and most importantly in its ending/conclusion.

**However, be aware of how Plath feels uncomfortable in this new role.** Her description of herself as “**cow-heavy and floral**” captures this perfectly. Although she is a caring mother stumbling (captures her tiredness perfectly) from bed to care for her child she is unsure of her new identity. She feels inadequate here as a woman perhaps. The identity of motherhood is old fashioned and as such she is unhappy with it. She again feels inadequate.

Joyous title- Morning is symbolic of new beginnings, fresh starts even of hope, while song is suggestive of celebration and happiness.

Strong opening- unusual/striking simile captures the rich, precious new life that the new parents are entrusted with.

Time/ Transience is alluded to in the- “gold watch”

Sensuous details of the baby being slapped allows us share the experience. The “bald Cry” announcing its arrival into the world brings us even close to the scene.

Baby compared to a statue in a museum- This unusual comparison captures its unique, special nature.

Note helpless of those standing around; they are vulnerable: “Your nakedness shadows our safety. We stand round blankly...”Why?- Plath realises that this new birth creates a sadness too- baby now has an independence of sorts- the mother is no longer totally necessary- hence the imagery of the cloud. Plath

feels her identity as an expecting mother is now gone. Plath is reminded that as the new baby takes its pace in the world she herself is transient- sees her own mortality.

This feeling passes- motherly again- protective mother hears “all night” the “moth breath”. The delicacy of the child’s breathing is beautifully evoked.

Motherhood- “I wake to listen: a far sea moves in my ear.”- a memory of Plath’s own childhood and connected with the world too.

Unusual cat image- but it works.

Dawn breaking- new beginning- time of colour, new life, music- joy.

**The final simile of this beautiful poem captures the wonder of the new life perfectly.** I like to think of Plath in that moment of perfect happiness. Morning has arrived and now that her child is fed and happy again. Plath is able to relax and enjoy watching her child try out it’s new handful of notes. I feel that the beauty of the image of the vowels rising ‘like balloons’ perfectly encapsulates her happiness. I like to imagine that in that moment Plath was able to forget her anxiety and escape those feelings of inadequacy and just enjoy the moment.

## Mirror

I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.

Whatever you see I swallow immediately

Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.

I am not cruel, only truthful---

The eye of a little god, four-cornered.

Most of the time I meditate on the opposite wall.

It is pink, with speckles. I have looked at it so long

I think it is a part of my heart. But it flickers.

Faces and darkness separate us over and over.

Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,

Searching my reaches for what she really is.

Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon.

I see her back, and reflect it faithfully.

She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands.

I am important to her. She comes and goes.

Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.

In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman

Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.

## Main Points and Themes:

This poem deals with the fleeting nature of youth and beauty due to ageing. This is therefore a poem about transience comparable to W.B. Yeats's great poem 'The Wild Swans at Coole.' However Plath's treatment of the theme is highly disturbing. The final image is terrifying beginning with the drowning of a young girl. Plath doesn't accept her aging as a natural process but instead considers a part of herself to have died. **What is especially poignant about this poem is that Plath seems to identify her identity strongly with her appearance.** She is overly dependent of her appearance and other people's judgement of her which means that she must turn incessantly to the mirror for reassurance. Plath was not yet 30 years old when she wrote this poem.

Plath highlights that it can be difficult to accept the truth about ourselves, instead we sometimes turn to artifice to make reality more palatable.

It raises issues of self-identity and how our appearance is intricately wound up in identity. The consequent risk to our identity/ sense of self as we age must be acknowledged.

This is a dark, frightening poem that forces us to consider our own society's fixation on self-image. Consider the power the mirror has over the woman.

The main point to note is the **personification of the mirror**- interesting and unique voice is adopted as she challenges us to think about these concepts in a new way.

Stanza break is used effectively: 1<sup>st</sup> tells of the mirror's situation whereas the 2<sup>nd</sup> stanza looks at mirror's relationship with this woman.

Plath adds nuance to her poem through the use of symbolism not only through the mirror but also the lake.

**There is something terribly poignant in the image of Plath trying to construct her own identity by “searching my reaches for what she really is.”** I felt that Plath was being hugely honest here. She is prepared to share with us her own uncertainty about her own identity. She also admits that she is dependent on her reflection to help form that identity. I thought this was really honest of Plath. I felt that fact that her reflection leads to tears and her “wringing her hands” was really revealing. This memorable visual image suggests her terrible anxiety. We are allowed share Plath’s feelings of inadequacy.





## **Poppies in July**

Little poppies, little hell flames,  
Do you do no harm?

You flicker. I cannot touch you.  
I put my hands among the flames. Nothing burns

And it exhausts me to watch you  
Flickering like that, wrinkly and clear red, like the skin of a mouth.

A mouth just bloodied.  
Little bloody skirts!

There are fumes I cannot touch.  
Where are your opiates, your nauseous capsules?

If I could bleed, or sleep! -  
If my mouth could marry a hurt like that!

Or your liquors seep to me, in this glass capsule,  
Dulling and stilling.

But colourless. Colourless.



## Main Points and Themes:

The title is arresting. July suggests high summer and poppies being flowers would generally suggest colour and celebration. However it quickly becomes apparent that the Poppies are not to be enjoyed but instead cause intense pain. As such the upbeat title of the poem is an interesting contrast to the dark tone of the poem itself.

**The central idea that drives this poem is Plath's longing to escape.** She is under intolerable psychological strain and wishes to stop feeling altogether. The brightness of the poppies is therefore painful to her.

I feel that Plath is almost overly sensitized in this poem and hence she longs for an escape whether it be through sleep or drugs. The bright red colour of the poppies and their constant motion exhausts Plath. Here the poppies are perhaps a metaphor for the vividness of her own thoughts.

The other challenging concept explored by Plath in this poem is that she **would prefer to feel physical pain to the psychological torment** that she is experiencing. This poem was written as Plath was dealing with the extremely difficult breakdown of her marriage with Ted Hughes. I imagine Plath tormented by thoughts of her husband's infidelity and the new life he was living. The longing for life to be 'colourless' is perhaps understandable in that context.

Again this is a poem which explores and demonstrates Plath's detachment from the world around her. She is tired, weary and feels inadequate. The only way out is through a wish for everything to be dull and colourless.

Note how Plath chose to set the final line apart. This focuses our attention on the line. It reflects the strength of her longing for this state of calm even if this can only be achieved by being desensitized.

This poem precedes 'The arrival of the Bee Box' with its yet darker concluding final line. The similarities in the shape of the poems however

suggest that there is a relationship between the two poems. I think that Plath was showing how her mental state was devolving.



## The Arrival of the Bee Box

I ordered this, this clean wood box  
Square as a chair and almost too heavy to lift.  
I would say it was the coffin of a midget  
Or a square baby  
Were there not such a din in it.

The box is locked, it is dangerous.  
I have to live with it overnight  
And I can't keep away from it.  
There are no windows, so I can't see what is in there.  
There is only a little grid, no exit.

I put my eye to the grid.  
It is dark, dark,  
With the swarmy feeling of African hands  
Minute and shrunk for export,  
Black on black, angrily clambering.

How can I let them out?  
It is the noise that appalls me most of all,  
The unintelligible syllables.  
It is like a Roman mob,  
Small, taken one by one, but my god, together!

I lay my ear to furious Latin.  
I am not a Caesar.  
I have simply ordered a box of maniacs.  
They can be sent back.  
They can die, I need feed them nothing, I am the owner.

I wonder how hungry they are.  
I wonder if they would forget me

If I just undid the locks and stood back and turned into a tree.  
There is the laburnum, its blond colonnades,  
And the petticoats of the cherry.

They might ignore me immediately  
In my moon suit and funeral veil.  
I am no source of honey  
So why should they turn on me?  
Tomorrow I will be sweet God, I will set them free.

The box is only temporary.

## Main Points and Themes:

Four of the seven stanza's in this poem start with 'I'. ('I' appears five times in the 5<sup>th</sup> stanza alone.) **This use of repetition reflects Plath's overwhelming feelings of isolation in this poem.** The experience is solitary and I think this is deliberately drawn attention to by Plath. This becomes all the more troubling given the final line of the poem.

The Bee Box is clearly meant to represent something more than a literal bee box. **In my opinion Plath uses the bee box as an extended metaphor for her own body.** In that context the unintelligible, dangerous bees could be seen as her thoughts. The ideas that she has no control over are made tangible swarming over each other buzzing angrily. Seen in this light the final line of the poem is chilling. Plath set it apart from the rest of the poem in order to strengthen its impact.

Again we see Plath's striking use of symbol and metaphor.

Frantic trapped bees represent her troubled inner state- hidden self.

Box is repression, being trapped.

Imagery of a mob out of control- She cannot control it

The poem takes us through the arrival of the bee box. Note both Plath's curiosity and her insecurity and feeling of inadequacy as she examines the box.

This poem deals with the theme of power and control, something that Plath deals with in a number of her poems.



## Child

Your clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful thing.

I want to fill it with color and ducks,

The zoo of the new

Whose name you meditate--

April snowdrop, Indian pipe,

Little

Stalk without wrinkle,

Pool in which images

Should be grand and classical

Not this troublous

Wringing of hands, this dark

Ceiling without a star.



## Main Points and Themes:

This poem is arguably Plath's masterpiece.

Notice immediately the confidence in the shape of the poem. **Plath has now dispensed with conventional forms of poetry and instead uses language with total freedom.** There is an overwhelming sense of urgency to this poem. Intricate or contrived forms would have been out of place here. **She was desperate to communicate directly to the child that she was unable to care for.** When writing this poem I feel that the idea that had perhaps been first hinted at in 'The Arrival of the Bee Box' was becoming increasingly clear. This haunting poem was written on the 28<sup>th</sup> of February 1963. Just two weeks later Plath completed suicide.

The title of the poem is highly emotive. We respond powerfully to that single word with its suggested innocence and perhaps dependence.

The opening line gives perfect expression of a mother's love for her child. Plath's control of rhythm is evident in this perfect opening line. The steady rhythm captures her certainty regarding the child. However the fact that the child alone is perfect already suggests the bleakness of the world that the Plath/ the speaker finds herself in. **The fact that the poem is addressed to the child immediately enhances the emotional impact of the poem.**

The use of enjambment is enhanced through the use of stanza break in two instances. I felt that moving this was especially effective between the second and third stanza's. **Plath's mastery of form is evident here.** As well as drawing attention to the highly emotive word 'little' by placing it on its own line Plath also captures the speaker's own inner turmoil. The pause created by the use of the enjambment is accentuated by the stanza break to capture the highly emotional tone that this line should be read with. I can almost hear Plath on the verge of tears, perhaps even sobbing, when she says the word little.

Plath returns to an image from 'Mirror' in this poem. The 'wringing of hands' has since Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth been suggestive of mental anguish.

The sense of hopelessness in the final line is desperately sad. We cannot but be moved by the plight of this young woman and mother. Her desperation is such that she feels inadequate as a mother. **She cannot provide her child with a joyful experience of childhood due to her depression.** I feel this poem can therefore be seen as a plea for forgiveness of her son.

Desperate sadness when reading this poem-what must have been going through her mind? In the exam you need to refer to how you felt when reading the poem, not just what the poem was about. This is of course the aim of poetry to evoke an emotional response. Here our feelings are of sympathy, compassion, and sadness.

Note the simplicity of the poem - it is composed of only 2 sentences. This intensifies its emotional impact.

Note the internal rhyming of "zoo" and "new"- adds to happiness. The long vowel sounds encourage a slow meditative reading.

Use of symbols: 'April snowdrop'- fragile, like the child, and suggestive of innocence. "little / stalk without wrinkle"

BUT- here is the contrast

We then move on to images of anguish, despair and depression: "this troublous / wringing of hands, this dark / ceiling without a star."

### **To Finish up**

In the early poetry of Plath's we have on our course we see her attempting to adhere to society's expectations of what constitutes poetry. **In much the same way she would attempt to conform to societal expectations in her personal life.** However her poetry really achieved its greatness when she trusted her own poetic voice and wrote free of the restrictions imposed by convention. That is her great triumph as a writer.

On one hand it is impossible to separate Plath's tragic life from her poetry. It clearly was the inspiration for much of it. Her darkest moments, most personal thoughts and moments of elation are exposed in her poetry for us to share. **There is an intimacy to reading her poetry that is at times deeply troubling** as we are allowed share the darkest moments of her life.

But to characterize Plath as a poet who committed suicide, as one whose life overshadowed her poetry is wrong. She was a brilliant poet, able to capture the contrasts that life holds. She is capable of capturing hope, despair, joy and sadness, at times in the same poem.

As a poet her language is simple, clear and easy to understand. **This accessible style should not be seen as being indicative of simplistic poetry.** The emotions explored are complex, disturbing and thought provoking. And that is what elevates her poetry to the brilliant, not her tragic life, but her ability as a poet to capture it.

Her poetry is unspeakably sad, disturbing, and indeed frightening at times. It is questionable as to whether we should be asked to study Plath as her subject matter is hugely challenging. However I am glad that I was able to explore her poetry in such depth. I have formed a strong appreciation of her work and feel that Plath deserves her place in the cannon (catalogue) of great writers. She has also warned me that even though someone might seem like they 'have it all' feelings of inadequacy must be carefully guarded against.

## Biography

Born October 27, 1932 in Boston.

1936- Moved to Winthrop, Massachusetts– close to ocean which fascinated Sylvia.

During this time her father was very sick but refused treatment He passed away in 1940. This moment had momentous consequences for Plath. She is reported to have said: **“I will never speak to God again.”**

Her first poem was published in 1940 in Boston’s newspapers. **Plath was just eight years old.**

Entered Bradford High School in 1947.

Graduated in 1950 first in her class and won a full scholarship to Smith College.

In August 1950, *Seventeen* magazine published her short story, “And Summer Will Not Come Again.”

*The Christian Science Monitor* published her poem, “Bitter Strawberries.”

(It is interesting to note the titles of the story and poem above. Look at the use of contrast.)

Autumn of 1952: shows physical signs of depression

Worked as one of 20 ‘guest editors’ at *Mademoiselle magazine*, during her junior year in 1953.

Failure to secure a place on a summer writing course run by Frank O’Connor in Harvard in 1953 precipitated a crisis. **She was put on a course of electro-convulsive shock treatments.**

August 24, 1953-she attempts suicide: “...she crawled into a dark, dirty space underneath her mother’s house, where she swallowed pills...”. Plath was missing for three days.

She spent five months at a private hospital which was paid for by Mrs. Olive Higgins Pouty, a generous benefactor of Plath.

- In 1950, Plath had won a scholarship from the Olive Higgins Pouty fund.
- This time of her life is chronicled in her semi – autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*.

In 1954, Plath won several poetry contests at Smith College.

She graduated *summa cum laude* (highest distinction) and won another scholarship – this time to Cambridge University, England

Great academic success at Cambridge.

Plath met Ted Hughes, the British poet a future Poet Laureate in 1956. After a heavy evening drinking when he came to kiss her she bit his cheek hard enough to draw blood. Plath married Hughes just four months later on June 16, 1956.

In 1957, the couple moved to Massachusetts

Began teaching English at her former college – Smith.

The next year, they moved again to Boston.

- Here Plath wrote and attended poetry classes at Boston University (taught by Robert Lowell).

They remained in the US until 1959, when they returned to London, England.

The very next year, their first child, Frieda, was born.

- That same year Plath published her first major work – a collection of poems called *The Colossus and Other Poems*.

In 1961, Plath became pregnant again, but had a miscarriage.

- After this, they moved to Devon, England.

In 1962, Plath's son was born, Nicholas.

- This same year the couple's marital troubles began.
- That summer, Sylvia learned of Ted's infidelity and they separated.

Plath moved with her children to a flat in London.

- Here she started writing poems quickly and voluminously.
- In 1963, *The Bell Jar* was published under a pseudonym, Victoria Lucas.
- Plath lived just long enough to see her book published – tragically committing suicide on February 11, 1963.

So what type of life are we looking at? One that was successful on many levels. She was intelligent and achieved academically and professionally. But her domestic life

troubled her. Think back to her diary entries and contrast that with how her life panned out... marriage, separation, isolation etc.

She was a poet, mother, wife, someone who suffered from depression, someone who excelled and was famous.

BUT: we need to ensure that the tragic elements of her life do not overshadow her poetry. Her life inspired her poetry and her poetry while being a reflection of her life should also be admired for its brilliance alone.

## Sylvia Plath

1932–1963



Sylvia Plath was one of the most dynamic and admired poets of the 20th century. By the time she took her life at the age of 30, Plath already had a following in the literary community. In the ensuing years her work attracted the attention of a multitude of readers, who saw in her singular verse an attempt to catalogue despair, violent emotion, and obsession with death. **In the *New York Times Book Review*, Joyce Carol Oates described Plath as “one of the most celebrated and controversial of postwar poets writing in English.”** Intensely autobiographical, Plath’s poems explore her own mental anguish, her troubled marriage to fellow poet Ted Hughes, her unresolved conflicts with her parents, and her own vision of herself. On the *World Socialist Web* site, Margaret Rees observed, “Whether Plath wrote about nature, or about the social restrictions on individuals, she stripped away the polite veneer. She let her writing express elemental forces and primeval fears. In doing so, she laid bare the contradictions that tore apart appearance and hinted at some of the tensions hovering just beneath the surface of the American way of life in the post war period.” Oates put it more simply when she wrote that Plath’s best-known poems, “many of them written during the final, turbulent weeks of her life, read as if they’ve been chiseled, with a fine surgical instrument, out of arctic ice.”

In the *New York Times Book Review*, former American Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky

declared, “Thrashing, hyperactive, perpetually accelerated, the poems of Sylvia Plath catch the feeling of a profligate, hurt imagination, throwing off images and phrases with the energy of a runaway horse or a machine with its throttle stuck wide open. All the violence in her work returns to that violence of imagination, a frenzied brilliance and conviction.” **Pinsky further stated that Plath “suffered the airless egocentrism of one in love with an ideal self.”** Denis Donoghue made a similar observation, also in the *New York Times Book Review*: “Plath’s early poems, many of them, offered themselves for sacrifice, transmuting agony, ‘heart’s waste,’ into gestures and styles.” Donoghue added that “she showed what self-absorption makes possible in art, and the price that must be paid for it, in the art as clearly as in the death.” *Dictionary of Literary Biography* essayist Thomas McClanahan wrote, “At her most articulate, meditating on the nature of poetic inspiration, [Plath] is a controlled voice for cynicism, plainly delineating the boundaries of hope and reality. At her brutal best—and Plath is a brutal poet—she taps a source of power that transforms her poetic voice into a raving avenger of womanhood and innocence.”

Born in 1932 in Boston, Plath was the daughter of a German immigrant college professor, Otto Plath, and one of his students, Aurelia Schober. The poet’s early years were spent near the seashore, but her life changed abruptly when her father died in 1940. Some of her most vivid poems, including the well-known “Daddy,” concern **her troubled relationship with her authoritarian father and her feelings of betrayal when he died.** Financial circumstances forced the Plath family to move to Wellesley, Massachusetts, where Aurelia Plath taught advanced secretarial studies at Boston University. Sylvia Plath was a gifted student who had won numerous awards and had published stories and poetry in national magazines while still in her teens. She attended Smith College on scholarship and continued to excel, winning a *Mademoiselle* fiction contest one year and garnering a prestigious guest editorship of the magazine the following summer.

It was during her undergraduate years that Plath began to suffer the symptoms of severe depression that would ultimately lead to her death. In one of her journal entries, dated June 20, 1958, she wrote: **“It is as if my life were magically run by two electric currents: joyous positive and despairing negative—whichever is running at the moment dominates my life, floods it.”** This is an eloquent description of bipolar disorder, also known as manic depression, a very serious illness for which no genuinely effective medications were available during Plath’s lifetime. In August of 1953, at the age of 19, Plath attempted suicide by swallowing sleeping pills. She survived the attempt and was hospitalized, receiving treatment with electro-shock therapy. Her experiences of breakdown and recovery were later turned into fiction for her only published novel, *The Bell Jar*.

Having made a recovery, Plath returned to Smith for her degree. She earned a Fulbright grant to study at Cambridge University in England, and it was there that she met poet Ted Hughes. The two were married in 1956. Plath published two major works during her lifetime, *The Bell Jar* and a poetry volume titled *The Colossus*. Both received warm reviews. **However, the end of her marriage in 1962 left Plath with two young children to care for and, after an intense burst of creativity that produced the poems in *Ariel*, she committed suicide by inhaling gas from a kitchen oven.**

Timothy Materer wrote in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, “The critical reactions to both *The Bell Jar* and *Ariel* were inevitably influenced by the manner of Plath’s death at 30.” Hardly known outside poetry circles during her lifetime, Plath became in death more than she might have imagined. Donoghue, for one, stated, “I can’t recall feeling, in 1963, that Plath’s death proved her life authentic or indeed that proof was required. ... But I recall that ‘*Ariel*’ was received as if it were a bracelet of bright hair about the bone, a relic more than a book.” Feminists portrayed Plath as a woman driven to madness by a domineering father, an unfaithful husband, and the demands that motherhood made on her genius. **Some critics lauded her as a confessional poet** whose work “spoke the hectic, uncontrolled things our conscience needed, or thought it needed,” to quote Donoghue. Largely on the strength of *Ariel*, Plath became one of the best-known female American poets of the 20th century.

The writer A. Alvarez, writing in *The Savage God*, believed that with the poems in *Ariel*, compiled and published by Hughes, Plath made “poetry and death inseparable. The one could not exist without the other. And this is right. In a curious way, the poems read as though they were written posthumously.” Robert Penn Warren called *Ariel* “a unique book, it scarcely seems a book at all, rather a keen, cold gust of reality as though somebody had knocked out a window pane on a brilliant night.” George Steiner wrote, “It is fair to say that no group of poems since Dylan Thomas’s *Deaths and Entrances* has had as vivid and disturbing an impact on English critics and readers as has *Ariel*. ... Reference to Sylvia Plath is constant where poetry and the conditions of its present existence are discussed.” **Plath’s growing posthumous reputation inspired younger poets to write as she did.** But, as Steiner maintained, her “desperate integrity” cannot be imitated. Or, as Peter Davison put it, “No artifice alone could have conjured up such effects.” According to McClanahan, the poems in *Ariel* “are personal testaments to the loneliness and insecurity that plagued her, and the desolate images suggest her apparent fixation with self-annihilation. ... In *Ariel*, the everyday incidents of living are transformed into the horrifying psychological experiences of the poet.”

In Plath’s final poems, wrote Charles Newman in his *The Art of Sylvia Plath*, “death is preeminent but strangely unoppressive. Perhaps it is because there is no longer dialogue, no sense of ‘Otherness’—she is speaking from a viewpoint which is total, complete. Love and Death, all rivals, are resolved as one within the irreversibility of experience. To reverse Blake, the Heart knows as much as the Eye sees.” **Alvarez believed that “the very source of [Plath’s] creative energy was, it turned out, her self-destructiveness.** But it was, precisely, a source of *living* energy, of her imaginative, creative power. So, though death itself may have been a side issue, it was also an unavoidable risk in writing her kind of poem. My own impression of the circumstances surrounding her eventual death is that she gambled, not much caring whether she won or lost; and she lost.”

As a very young poet Plath experimented with the villanelle and other forms. She had been “stimulated” by such writers as D.H. Lawrence, James Joyce, Feodor Dostoevsky, Virginia Woolf, Henry James, Theodore Roethke, Emily Dickinson, and later by Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton. She has been linked with Lowell and Sexton as a member of the so-called “confessional” school of poetry. **Ted Hughes** noted that she shared with them a similar geographical homeland as well as “**the central experience of a shattering of the self**, and the labour of fitting it together

again or finding a new one.”

At times, Plath was able to overcome the “tension between the perceiver and the thing-in-itself by literally becoming the thing-in-itself,” wrote Newman. “In many instances, it is nature who personifies her.” Similarly, Plath used history “to explain herself,” writing about the Nazi concentration camps as though she had been imprisoned there. She said, “I think that personal experience shouldn’t be a kind of shut box and mirror-looking narcissistic experience. I believe it should be generally relevant, to such things as Hiroshima and Dachau, and so on.” Newman explained that, “in absorbing, personalizing the socio-political catastrophes of the century, [Plath] reminds us that they are ultimately metaphors of the terrifying human mind.” Alvarez noted that the “anonymity of pain, which makes all dignity impossible, was Sylvia Plath’s subject.” Her reactions to the smallest desecrations, even in plants, were “extremely violent,” wrote Hughes. “Auschwitz and the rest were merely the open wounds.” **In sum, Newman believed, Plath “evolved in poetic voice from the precocious girl, to the disturbed modern woman, to the vengeful magician, to Ariel—God’s Lioness.”**

While few critics dispute the power or the substance in Plath’s poetry, **some have come to feel that its legacy is one of cynicism, ego-absorption, and a prurient (sexual/ voyeuristic) fascination with suicide.** Donoghue suggested that “the moral claims enforced by these poems now seem exorbitant,” adding, “The thrill we get from such poems is something we have no good cause to admire in ourselves.” McClanahan felt that Plath’s legacy “is one of pain, fear, and traumatic depression, born of the need to destroy the imagistic materialization of ‘Daddy.’” Nevertheless, the critic concluded, “The horrifying tone of her poetry underscores a depth of feeling that can be attributed to few other poets, and her near-suicidal attempt to communicate a frightening existential vision overshadows the shaky technique of her final poems. Plath writes of the human dread of dying. Her primitive honesty and emotionalism are her strength.” Critics and scholars have continued to write about Plath, and her relationship with Hughes; a reviewer for the *National Post* reported that in 2000, there were 104 books in print about Plath.

Newman considered *The Bell Jar* a “testing ground” for Plath’s poems. It is, according to the critic, “one of the few American novels to treat adolescence from a mature point of view. ... It chronicles a nervous breakdown and consequent professional therapy in non-clinical language. And finally, it gives us one of the few sympathetic portraits of what happens to one who has genuinely feminist aspirations in our society, of a girl who refuses to be an *event* in anyone’s life. ... [Plath] remains among the few woman writers in recent memory to link the grand theme of womanhood with the destiny of modern civilization.” Plath told Alvarez that she published the book under a pseudonym partly because “she didn’t consider it a serious work ... and partly because she thought too many people would be hurt by it.”

*The Bell Jar* is narrated by 19-year-old Esther Greenwood. The three-part novel explores Esther’s unsatisfactory experiences as a student editor in Manhattan, her subsequent return to her family home, where she suffers a breakdown and attempts suicide, and her recovery with the aid of an enlightened female doctor. One of the novel’s themes, the search for a valid personal identity, is as old as fiction itself. The

other, a rebellion against conventional female roles, was slightly ahead of its time. Nancy Duvall Hargrove observed in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, “As a novel of growing up, of initiation into adulthood, [*The Bell Jar*] is very solidly in the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*. **Technically, *The Bell Jar* is skillfully written and contains many of the haunting images and symbols that dominate Plath’s poetry.**” Materer commented that the book “is a finely plotted novel full of vivid characters and written in the astringent but engaging style one expects from a poet as frank and observant as Plath. The atmosphere of hospitals and sickness, of incidents of bleeding and electrocution, set against images of confinement and liberation, unify the novel’s imagery.” Hargrove maintained that the novel is “a striking work which has contributed to [Plath’s] reputation as a significant figure in contemporary American literature. ... It is more than a feminist document, for it presents the enduring human concerns of the search for identity, the pain of disillusionment, and the refusal to accept defeat.”

*Letters Home*, a collection of Plath’s correspondence between 1950 and 1963, reveals that the **source of her inner turmoil was perhaps more accurately linked to her relationship with her mother.** The volume, published by Plath’s mother in 1975, was intended, at least in part, to counter the angry tone of *The Bell Jar* as well as the unflattering portrait of Plath’s mother contained in that narrative. According to Janet Malcolm in the *New Yorker*, “The publication of *Letters Home* had a different effect from the one Mrs. Plath had intended, however. Instead of showing that Sylvia wasn’t ‘like that,’ the letters caused the reader to consider for the first time the possibility that her sick relationship with her mother was the reason she *was* like that.” Though Hughes exercised final editorial approval, the publication of *Letters Home* also cast a new and unfavorable light on numerous others linked to Plath, including Hughes himself. Malcolm wrote, “Before the publication of *Letters Home*, the Plath legend was brief and contained, a taut, austere stage drama set in a few bleak, sparsely furnished rooms.” Plath’s intimate letters to her family contain unguarded personal commentary on her college years, writing, despair, friendships, marriage, and children.

After Plath’s death, *The It-Doesn’t-Matter Suit*, a book for children, was also discovered among her papers and published posthumously. The story features Max Nix, a resident of Winkelburg, who happily acquires a modest “woolly, whiskey brand-new mustard-yellow suit.” Nicci Gerrard wrote in the *Observer*, “There’s no disturbance in the world of Winkelburg: even Max’s desire for a suit is as shallow and clear as the silver stream that runs like a ribbon through the valley.” Despite the lasting impression of Plath’s bleak art and early death, Gerrard concluded that “small pieces of happiness like this little book remind us of her life.”

Plath’s relationship with Hughes has long been the subject of commentary, not always flattering to Hughes. **Feminist critics in particular tended to see in Plath’s suicide a repudiation of the expectations placed upon women in the early 1960s.** Further criticism attended Hughes’s guardianship of Plath’s papers, especially when Hughes admitted that he destroyed some of Plath’s journals, including several written just prior to her suicide. Materer felt that Hughes’s control over Plath’s papers—a right he exercised only because their divorce had not become final—caused “difficulties” for both critics and biographers. Materer added, “The estate’s strict control of copyright and its editing of such writings as Plath’s

journals and letters have caused the most serious problems for scholars.”

Since Hughes’s death from cancer in 1998, a new edition of Plath’s journals has been published, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath, 1950-1962*. This exact transcription of the poet’s journals, from her earliest days at Smith College to the days of her marriage, has been published verbatim, down to her misspellings. “Uncritical admirers of Plath will find much here that is fascinating,” noted Oates. “Other readers may find much that is fascinating and repellent in equal measure.” Oates concluded, “Like all unedited journals, Plath’s may be best read piecemeal, and rapidly, as they were written. The reader is advised to seek out the stronger, more lyric and exhilarating passages, which exist in enough abundance through these many pages to assure that this presumed final posthumous publication of Sylvia Plath’s is that rarity, a genuine literary event worthy of the poet’s aggressive mythopoetic claim in ‘Lady Lazarus’—Out of the ash/I rise with my red hair/And I eat men like air.”

**Hughes once summarized Plath’s unique personality and talent: “Her poetry escapes ordinary analysis in the way clairvoyance and mediumship do:** her psychic gifts, at almost any time, were strong enough to make her frequently wish to be rid of them. In her poetry, in other words, she had free and controlled access to depths formerly reserved to the primitive ecstatic priests, shamans and Holy men.” The poet continued, “Surveyed as a whole ... I think the unity of her opus is clear. Once the unity shows itself, the logic and inevitability of the language, which controls and contains such conflagrations and collisions within itself, becomes more obviously what it is—direct, and even plain, speech. This language, this unique and radiant substance, is the product of an alchemy on the noblest scale. **Her elements were extreme: a violent, almost demonic spirit in her, opposed a tenderness and capacity to suffer and love things infinitely, which was just as great and far more in evidence.** Her stormy, luminous senses assaulted a downright practical intelligence that could probably have dealt with anything. ... She saw her world in the flame of the ultimate substance and the ultimate depth. And this is the distinction of her language, that every word is *Baraka*: the flame and the rose folded together. Poets have often spoken about this ideal possibility but where else, outside these poems, has it actually occurred? If we have the discrimination to answer this question, we can set her in her rightful company.”

## **Typical questions on Plath**

- ‘Plath’s poetry is angry and uncompromising, confronting readers with raw emotion that is made more frightening by her use of language.’
- “Plath’s poetry explores difficult experiences but she does so in language that is highly satisfying.”

### **2014 Paper Two > Section 3 > Question B > Part 4**

**4. Sylvia Plath**

“Plath makes effective use of language to explore her personal experiences of suffering and to provide occasional glimpses of the redemptive power of love.”

Discuss this statement, supporting your answer with reference to both the themes and language found in the poetry of Sylvia Plath on your course.

### **2013 Paper Two > Section 3 > Question B > Part 4**

**4. Sylvia Plath**

“Plath’s provocative imagery serves to highlight the intense emotions expressed in her poetry.”

To what extent do you agree or disagree with this assessment of her poetry?  
Support your answer with suitable reference to the poetry of Sylvia Plath on your course.

## Sample Answer:

### 4. Sylvia Plath

“Plath’s provocative imagery serves to highlight the intense emotions expressed in her poetry.”

To what extent do you agree or disagree with this assessment of her poetry? Support your answer with suitable reference to the poetry of Sylvia Plath on your course.

Plath once wrote “I am myself. That is not enough.” So often when reading Plath’s poetry we are confronted with a speaker who is plagued by insecurity. I like to think that Plath understood the power of her poetic voice, at least as she neared the end of her all too short life. Plath’s feelings of inadequacy dominate her work. **This feeling of inadequacy resulted in Plath living an intense emotional life which dominates her poetry.** Her unhappiness is given powerful voice in her poetry. Plath shares her feelings of inadequacy as a writer, as a mother and as a woman. I feel that it is these emotions that make her poetry so powerful, as I could relate myself so closely to Plath. I found myself empathizing strongly with the intense emotional experiences captured so powerfully by Plath. **Plath’s skill as a poet is evident in how skillfully crafted her poems are but it is her skillful and at times provocative imagery that really sets her apart.** A close reading of her poems will reveal a poet who is prepared to share her emotional experiences in a highly intimate way. Her skillful handling of imagery is such that her poems still speak to us today.

In ‘Black Rook in Rainy weather’ Plath communicates her feelings of inadequacy as an artist. Marrying Ted Hughes (who went on to win a Nobel prize for literature) probably exacerbated (added to) her lack of

self-confidence. I felt great sympathy for Plath when she describes the occasional moments of inspiration she gets as only being enough to give “A brief respite from fear/ of total neutrality.” The word brief is central to the impact of the line. Here Plath is conveying the almost constant, overwhelming sense of fear that she lives in. **This intense emotion is shared with the reader.** What makes this line all the more poignant is the way in which the poem displays her technical mastery of the poetic form. The opening image perfectly blends visual and tactile elements in a memorably sensuous opening. Plath describes how:

“On the stiff twig up there / hunches a wet black rook / arranging and rearranging its feather in the rain.”

**This image perfectly captures the movements of the bird.** We are able to share the experience with Plath as we picture not only how the bird looks but even how the bird feels. The added adjective ‘stiff’ is instructive of Plath’s accuracy. By describing the branch of the tree as being stiff Plath suggest either that the tree is dead or that it is winter. A living twig is supple and moves. **The skill of the image lies in how much is communicated despite its apparent simplicity.**

In one of my favourite poems on our course, ‘Mirror’, Plath shares her feelings of inadequacy as a woman. Plath’s concern with her appearance is one which I (and probably every teenager) can relate to. In this poem, written when she was not yet thirty, Plath conveys her fear at growing old. However the poem goes beyond this theme of transience to question how our identity is, to a large extent, connected to our appearance. In this poem Plath gives the mirror a voice as she makes use of a different perspective to view herself. Plath describes herself as searching in her reflection “for what she really is.” This is a hugely honest admission from Plath. She is acknowledging how dependent on

her appearance her identity is. **The intense emotion she feels is captured in the powerful image of Plath herself distraught as she tries to make sense of herself.** The mirror tells us that: “She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands.” This image has been taken to be a reference to Shakespeare’s Lady Macbeth and is as such a reference to mental instability. Plath here is candidly (honestly) acknowledging her own mental fragility.

The final image in the poem is terrifying. It begins with the drowning of a young girl. I felt huge sympathy for Plath in this poem. Plath doesn’t accept her aging as a natural process but instead considers a part of herself to have died. **What is especially poignant about this poem is that Plath seems to identify her identity so strongly with her appearance.** She is overly dependent on her appearance and other people’s judgement of her which means that she must turn incessantly to the mirror for reassurance. The old woman rising out of the depths of the mirror “like a terrible fish” is an eerie simile which hauntingly captures Plath’s fear at getting older. The skill in the construction of the image is typical of Plath’s mastery of language.

In ‘Morning Song’ Plath powerfully conveys her experience of motherhood. The poem captures surprising emotions of loss and fear before finishing with a powerful moment of intimacy between mother and child. **The poem makes really effective use of figurative language throughout as Plath allows us to share these powerful experiences.** The opening simile is one of my favourites in Plath’s poetry. Plath describes how “Love set you going like a fat gold watch.” The precious life is reflected in the precious metal, gold, while the adjective fat not only describes the precious watch but also describes the healthy baby

that has been born. I felt that the emotive word 'Love' as the starting point of the poem is especially effective in conveying the emotion of the new mother. The ticking of the watch also alerts us to the importance of time and change in the poem. Plath shares her fear for the child's safety describing how the child's 'moth-breath' flickers. The delicate breath is perfectly captured here with the word flicker.

Plath goes on to describe herself as "cow-heavy and floral / in my Victorian nightgown." **I was uncomfortable with Plath's description of herself in the metaphor.** As she is breastfeeding the child the comparison to a milking cow occurs to her. I felt that Plath was perhaps trying to communicate how uncomfortable she feels in this new role as mother. The fact that she is wearing an old fashioned nightgown adds to this feeling. Plath also tells us that she 'stumbles' from bed. Her movements are clumsy reflecting her tiredness but perhaps also suggesting her discomfort at this new role. **However, the poem concludes in a beautiful image that perfectly captures her happiness with her new child.** The final simile of this beautiful poem captures the wonder of the new life perfectly. I like to think of Plath in that moment of perfect happiness. Morning has arrived and now her child is fed and happy again. Plath is able to relax and enjoy watching her child try out its new 'handful of notes'. I feel that the beauty of the image of the vowels rising 'like balloons' perfectly encapsulates her happiness. I like to imagine that in that moment Plath was able to forget her anxiety and escape those feelings of inadequacy and just enjoy the moment.

In 'Poppies in July' and 'The arrival of the Bee Box' Plath brings us into a much darker world. After the breakdown of her marriage with Ted Hughes Plath **suffered immense emotional pain. She shares those all-consuming feelings with us in these two poems.** In 'Poppies in July' we see Plath longing to escape from the emotions that she is experiencing. The poppies that flicker so brightly are a source of pain. Plath would prefer to feel physical pain to the emotional pain she is experiencing. She longs for an end to psychological torment either through physical pain or through opiates. In 'The Arrival of the Bee Box' on the other hand we see Plath's thoughts being represented as bees. This time her escape from these thoughts leads to a much darker conclusion. The Bee Box is clearly meant to represent something more than a literal bee box. In my opinion Plath uses the bee box as an extended metaphor for her own body. In that context the unintelligible, dangerous bees could be seen as her thoughts. These ideas that she has no control over are made tangible as bees swarming over each other buzzing angrily. Seen in this light the final line of the poem is chilling. Plath reaches the conclusion that "The box is only temporary." It is interesting that in both poems Plath sets the final line apart from the rest of the poem in order to strengthen its impact.

In both 'Poppies in July' and 'The arrival of the Bee Box' we again see Plath's **skillful use of imagery as she allows us to share these powerful emotional experiences.** The poppies are brilliantly described as: "wrinkly and clear red, like the skin of a mouth." This simile perfectly captures the visual image but also suggest how Plath had become obsessed with her husband's infidelity. The mouth is suggestive of her husband's sensuality that Plath has now come to hate. In 'The arrival of the Bee Box' we see Path again make use of imagery brilliantly to

capture the bees shut up in the box. The tactile description of “the swarmy feeling of African hands/ minute and shrunk for export” continues to arouse controversy. However it does effectively capture the claustrophobia Plath is experiencing.

Plath’s final poem ‘Child’ is arguably her masterpiece. In a final act of love Plath achieved absolute mastery of poetic form. Plath has now dispensed with conventional forms of poetry and instead uses language with total freedom. There is an overwhelming sense of urgency to this poem. Intricate or contrived forms would have been out of place here. **She was desperate to communicate directly to the child that she was unable to care for.** When writing this poem I feel that the idea that had perhaps been first hinted at in ‘The Arrival of the Bee Box’ was becoming increasingly clear. This haunting poem was written on the 28<sup>th</sup> of February 1963. Just two weeks later Plath completed suicide.

The title of the poem ‘Child’ is highly emotive. We respond powerfully to that single word with its suggested innocence and perhaps dependence. The opening line gives perfect expression of a mother’s love for her child. **This intensely personal emotion is shared with the reader.** Plath’s control of rhythm is evident in this perfect opening line. The steady rhythm captures her certainty regarding the perfection of her child. However the fact that the child alone is perfect already suggests the bleakness of the world that the Plath/ the speaker finds herself in. **The fact that the poem is addressed to the child immediately enhances the emotional impact of the poem.**

The use of enjambment is enhanced though the use of stanza break in two instances. I felt that this was especially effective between the

second and third stanza's. Plath's mastery of form is evident here. **As well as drawing attention to the highly emotive word 'little' by placing it on its own line Plath also captures the speaker's own inner turmoil.** The pause created by the use of the enjambment is accentuated by the stanza break to capture the highly emotional tone that this line should be read with. I can almost hear Plath on the verge of tears, perhaps even sobbing, when she says the word little.

Again Plath refers to the 'wringing of hands' as she did in 'Mirror'. The sense of hopelessness in the final line is desperately sad. **She cannot provide her child with a joyful experience of childhood due to her depression.** I feel this poem can therefore be seen as a plea for forgiveness of her son. I read this poem for my sister several months after she had her first child. We were both really moved by it. The mother's feelings of guilt, inadequacy yet also of her love for her child was truly moving.

I feel 'Child' is indicative of Plath's poetry as a whole. **She is prepared to share her emotional experiences with us and succeeds in doing so not only through her brilliant use of imagery but also through her mastery of form.** By reading Plath's poetry I was able to imagine what it feels like to be a writer and to not trust myself. Plath shared her own feelings as she saw herself getting older but more than that she asked me to think about how much I base my identity on my appearance. The complexity of a mother's feelings was brilliantly captured in 'Morning Song.' The final poems I examined in this essay were deeply disturbing but nevertheless I felt that they were important to understanding more about the variety of human experience. Her poetry

not only showcases her mastery of form but especially her skillful control of imagery. I know that towards the end of her life she described how she was writing with a sense of terrible urgency. I hope that she understood that at least as a writer she had left behind the younger self who wrote: “I am myself. That is not enough.”



## Sylvia Plath – Sample Answer 2

Topics covered:

1. What you like about Sylvia Plath's poetry
2. Emotions evoked by Plath's poetry
3. Technique/ imagery used by Plath

Sylvia Plath's poetry is intense, deeply personal and sometimes very disturbing. Throughout her poems, a common theme of self consciousness exists. Sometimes that problem becomes as disturbing as self loathing or the work of self annihilation. Plath uses techniques such as personification and similes to express the extent of her mental anguish and obsession with self annihilation.

The poem "Mirror" is an excellent example at Sylvia Plath's themes and techniques. The poem is told from the perspective of a mirror "silver and exact". Exact suggesting that the mirror is unbiased and truthful, while silver has a cold, malevolent connotation. The mirror, which represents Plath's self doubt, quickly grows more dangerous as the poem progresses, until the only thing she can do is weep as the ravages of age choke her. In this poem, Plath certainly deals with the deeply personal topic of ageing and presents us disturbing images like the "terrible fish" in the final stanza. The intensity of language in this poem however, is nothing like in the horrifying poem "Poppies in July". The title sounds light and positive, but the themes presented and language used is anything but that. Plath hysterically says that she "puts her hand amongst the flames (the poppies) but nothing burns". The clear wish to self harm represented in this line is juxtaposition of the idea of the sweet,

Innocent poppies with destructive hellfire. Plath's desire for self harm continues as she wearily says "if I could bleed of sleep! – if my mouth could marry a hurt like that." Here, Plath sounds exhausted, sick of the constant mental anguish she obviously feels, all she wishes for is to "sleep" and "hurt". The use of if the word "sleep" considering our knowledge of Plath's suicide is certainly disturbing and adds an ominous element to an already intense poem. Unlike "Mirror", "Poppies in July" conveys a more self loathing tone rather than just self conscious one. As if time-lining Plath's mental breakdown, this transition is deeply disturbing we are presented with a transition from an insecure ageing woman to a suicidal nihilist. While these two poems may seem like polar opposites when it comes to intensity, they share very similar themes and techniques. Plath constantly alludes to nature to personify her feelings. In "Mirror" the lake she bends over swallows, her youth and identity. And in "Poppies in July" the poppies represent Plath's constant desire for self destruction. The two poems excellently draw from natural scenes to capture the authors emotions and the readers imagination.

Some positive images are also presented in the poem "Morning Song". When describing one of her children Plath says "love set you going like a fat gold watch" The use of language here suggests some warm feelings toward the child. "Gold" evokes a sense of value and beauty and the "love" that set the child going can definitely be felt in the first stanza. As often the way with Sylvia Plath though, the positive language quickly shifts to the darkest depths of despair says "I am no more your mother than a cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow effacement on the wind's hands". Plath clearly spells out that the burden of harboring this child is as inevitable as the destruction of a cloud at the wind's hand. The lack of ability to support the child deeply scared Plath and the same

theme arises in "Child". The tone of the poem is almost objective, with Plath detaching herself from her feelings by presenting a reflective mirror simply steering its cloud's destruction. The way Plath rises to attention when her baby cries is monotonous and the comparison of herself to an unconscious cow is troubling. There is an air of inevitability about Plath's feelings towards poetry, like the fleeting moments of affection will always be crushed, leaving nothing but "dark ceiling without a star".

A theme of control, or lack of it, exists also in some of Plath's work. She addresses this in the poem "Arrival of the Bee Box" where she says "explores how at her mercy the bees are. She says "I need feed them nothing, I am the owner" showing the reader the extent of her power. It is the power over the bees that Plath wishes she held over her own life. At the mercy of her mental illness, Plath has never held control over anything so when presented with the bees the power literally terrifies her. For the majority of her life Plath has been haunted by the demon of mental illness. Her techniques for attempting to control these deacons fail and the sudden ability to control life, albeit not her own, gives her the power she is not accustomed to. In this poem, Plath explores every possibility before finally deciding to "set them free". Plath also searches for freedom from burden and stress which, considering how Plath ended her own life, gives the reader an insight into her thought process at the time. By her suicide, Plath views death as freedom from her personal "box". This viewpoint is extremely disturbing but also fascinating, leaving the reader desperate for more.

As readers, we do not get a sense of Plath's history, which she keeps very close to her chest. Her personal struggles with depression are kept general in her poetry. In the poem "Elm", she gives us a unique insight into her life. She says "Scorched to the root, my red filaments burn and

stand, a hand of wires". The wires here refer to the electroshock treatment that Plath underwent as a teenager. "Scorched to the root" suggests that the experience haunts her and stays with her every day. It further shows how experiences like this have shaped her, in this case in a bad way. In the poem, Plath explores her usual themes of self destruction and depression but gives the reader a deeper glimpse into her family life. Plath shows how betrayed she feels by her family, notably husband Ted Hughes. She says in despair "Are those the faces of love, is it for such I agitate my heart?" This sentence simply spells out Plath's deepest problem; she simply feels unimportant, unloved. The poem "Elm" beautifully depicts Plath's turmoil with constant natural imagery and metaphor. She uses the techniques to give the reader a glimpse into her mind and heart. Her brutal honesty and excellent imagery leave a permanent impression on those who read it, one of betrayal and depression.

The themes explored in all of Plath's poetry are all rich and complex. Her mental anguish leaves disturbing images on the reader. She forces the reader into intensely dark corners, asking deep questions along the way. As Plath said "I am inhabited by a cry, looking for something to love". Her vulnerability is thrown into the spotlight in a very honest way. While her poetry may be dark, intense and very disturbing, Plath forces the reader to dive into your own dark thoughts. It is for this reason Plath is forever engaging and forever inspiring.