**Plath – Thematic Links**

**Context**

Sylvia Plath was born in 1932 in Boston, Massachusetts and died a brief thirty years later in 1963. Her Journals which she began writing in 1950 open with a quotation from the poet ***W. B. Yeats. He states: ‘we only begin to live when we conceive life as a tragedy ....***’ It is true to say of Plath that in her short thirty years she certainly lived and produced a volume of work which only gained the respect it deserved posthumously. ***For her life was always ‘shifting, flowing, melting. .....like quicksand... hopeless from the start.’ The Journals.***

Many people find the work of Plath depressing. Certainly she herself was prevalent to extraordinary mood swings, she contemplated and attempted suicide, she underwent electroconvulsive therapy, she had psychiatric help, she most certainly was depressed many times in her life. But what is fascinating about her work is as ***Ted Hughes said in his Forward to The Journals (1982) is that ‘Her real self showed in her writing....When a real self finds language and manages to speak, surely it is a dazzling event.’ Hughes continues ‘It is important to distinguish between a work that is trying to reach an artistic form using a real event as its basis and a documentary of some event that did happen.’*** Plath basis her work on real events but takes us on incredible imaginative journey. Like the poet Emily Dickinson her poems are mindscapes which present a rich tapestry of pain and suffering. Her poems reflect the intensity of despair and one can only admire a genius who stays and understands.

**Plath as a confessional poet**

* The "confessional" poets were a school including Ann Sexton, John Berryman, Robert Lowell, and Sylvia Plath who were mid-twentieth century American poets who composed **poems in free verse with intensely violent imagery on subjects taken from their inner emotional lives.**

**Theme: Mental Illness and Madness**

* Confessional poets and the theme of mental illness and madness, depression and exhilaration, emotional intimacy with friends or family, self-doubt and self- abasement, suicide and death go hand in hand. Usually the death is the death of a dear one, sometimes of a family member or a friend.
* Ginsberg states at the beginning of “***Howl”: “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness.”*** (Orr 37). Even Robert Lowell confirms: “***We poets in our youth begin in madness: / thereof in the end come despondency and madness.”*** (Lowell 54).
* Sylvia Plath’s poetry thematises her personal suffering, humiliation, betrayal, sexual guilt, alcoholism and psychological breakdowns.
* Sylvia Plath was a narcissist and such persons get haunted by so many psychological problems simultaneously. Some of these problems were so acute that they had assumed dangerous dimensions. Self-withdrawal, estrangement and trauma all contributed to her dreadful plight. The melancholia it bred got condensed to the extent that she began to show signs of obsession with death, probably the only alternative left with her.

**Theme: Identity and Alienation**

* The themes of identity and alienation are visible everywhere in Plath’s poems.  You can see her exploring who she is and what it means to be a **mother** (“Morning Song” and “Edge”), a **wife** (“Daddy”, “Pheasant”, “Winter Trees”), a **daughter** (“Medusa”, “Daddy”), a **writer** (“Words”) and sometimes simply what it means **to live or exist** (“Ariel”, “Blackberrying”, “Poppies in July”, “Mirror”, “Arrival of the Bee Box” “Wuthering Heights”, “Two Campers in Cloud Country”, “Sleep in the Mojave Desert”, “Lady Lazarus”).  In the context of Plath’s poems, alienation is always close behind when she exploring identity.  How can she question her place in the world, her role in society, her very existence, without realising that the act of questioning places her at a distance?  How can she ever feel she belongs when the world, as she portrays it through her poetry, is so often profoundly dark and bleak?
* Plath frequently returned to the issue of double identity in her writing.  The subject of her undergraduate thesis in Smith College was: ‘The Magic Mirror: A Study of the Double in Dostoevsky Novels’.  Her interest in what appears on the surface and what is hidden is reflected in ‘Mirror’.  Here, the depths hide something frightening and sinister; something the woman would prefer to avoid but cannot escape.

 ‘Elm’ also deals with doubleness: the apparent calm of the elm in

 the opening stanzas, and the hidden terrors that surface as she

 talks.  A similar preoccupation is at the heart of ‘The Arrival of

 the Bee Box’.  The practical, square box is a simple container:

 apparently there are no mysteries here.  However, it conceals

 something sinister, but also fascinating.

* What critics like Friedan, Annas, and Nelson share in their readings of Plath is an understanding that Plath’s investigation of identity through her use of biographical material is a strategy by which she assesses her frustrations with the trappings of convention and gender: “***What is my life for and what am I going to do with it?” she asks in an early journal entry from her Smith college years: “I want to live and feel all the shades, tones, and variations of mental and physical experience possible in my life***”
* An intense interest in what appears on the surface and what is hidden underneath fascinated Plath. In her poem Mirror the depths hide something frightening and sinister, something to be avoided but which one cannot escape. Her mirror is a mirror in which each reader sees his or her own concerns reflected. For Plath it is a mirror belonging to a woman whose soul is troubled and tortured, as ‘Faces and darkness separate us over and over.’ Her dual identity as poet and mother are reflected in this poem. She tries to come to terms with the social pressures to reconcile the competing of artistic and domestic life. She feels her younger self is ‘drowned’. She is caught between past and future. Something frightening, dark, terrible and true ‘Rises toward her day after day’. Does this represent her fear of growing old? Or perhaps it is her fear of her troubled, divided self.
* Plath was most concerned with her identity as a writer. She lived in a time when there were significant curtailments imposed by society on women. There were particular expectations of the role of women in the 1950’s. The world of poet and motherhood were as Eavan Boland was to suggest ‘almost magnetically opposed’ (Object Lessons). Yet Plath longed for both. It was a novelty in the 60’s to write about pregnancy and birth. Morning Song is a perfect example of her struggle to fuse the two. The mother’s life is shadowed by the child’s arrival. She is aware of the repetitive nature of looking after children and finds herself standing ‘round blankly as walls.’ However she is soon enriched by the joy of love as ‘All night’ she listens to her child’s ‘moth breath’ as it ‘Flickers among the flat pink roses.’ And with ‘One cry’ she ‘stumble(s) from bed, cow heavy’ to respond. There is a striking difference between the immobility of the parents in stanza two and the warm domestic reality of stanza five.
* Like most poets Plath struggles at times to find inspiration and searches for poetic vision and creativity.

**Theme: Death**

* Sylvia Plath’s contemporary and friend Anne Sexton describes Plath and herself as ‘***death mongers’***. In her article “*The Barfly Ought to Sing” Anne Sexton says: “****We talked death with burned up intensity, both of us drawn to it like moths to an electric light bulb, sucking on it.” (Newman 174)***
* A closer look at her poems reflects a world where there is a deep kinship between poetry and the consciousness of death. This tendency precipitates her to reflect on the sources of despair. Plath’s excessive preoccupation with death is the result of her unbearable agony, anxiety and alienation. Her first collection of poems *The Colossus* reveals her obsessive theme; the theme of death.
* Sylvia Plath’s first encounter with death came with the death of her father, Otto Plath. Strangely enough Plath blamed herself for her father’s death even as she considered her father’s dying as an act of great betrayal. Either of these attitudes was sure to fix death as a lasting impression in her mind. Her semi-autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*, describes the experiences of her life bear witness to her almost pathological fascination with the dead bodies and death. In the novel she talks despairingly about darkness, despair and disillusionment, the symbols which finally lead towards death.
* Plath’s obsession with morbidity since her childhood deepened with maturity. In the early poems “Colossus”, “Watercolour of Granchester Meadows”, “Hardcastle Crags” and “Pursuit” there is an acute awareness of death prevailing all around. As such, she develops a longing for death and takes recourse to drugs to ease the agony. This delirious state is well demonstrated in her poem “Poppies in July”:

 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. (203)

The urge to have a drug-induced death, for example, opium, is escapist in nature and does emerge as a viable alternative to the reality of death.

* However, I would agree with Elizabeth Sigmund, a friend of Plath, “***I hope that people will concentrate on the brilliance of her work. And not constantly talk about her troubles, which were dreadful. Remember her as a living poet – not concentrate on her death.”*** For her ‘dying is an art’ and she ‘presents’ it exceptionally well.

**Theme: Consciousness of Death**

Blackberrying

* In packing her poem with images of life’s abundance and death’s inevitability, Plath points to the uniqueness and the “problem” of human existence: human beings are aware that they will die and there is nothing they can do to change that. Her numerous metaphors and similes for the fruit underscore her joy at life’s abundance, and her personification of the berries shows her emotional attachment to the natural world. This personification occurs in the last two lines of the first stanza when, after the speaker’s fingers are covered with juice, she says, “I had not asked for such a blood sisterhood; they must love me; / They accommodate themselves to my milk-bottle, flattening their sides.” Her sense of death is embodied in the images of the “the choughs in black, cacophonous flocks,” and “the hills’ northern face … / That looks out on nothing.”

**Theme: Psychic Landscapes and Mindscapes**

* Plath is noted for creating a **psychic landscape** in her work. This means that the physical landscape reflects her inner emotional state. In Plath's case this state is often troubled and tumultuous. Idea that imagery and setting portrays her thoughts.
* The way the poet creates 'psychic' landscapes out of concrete places" (41) speaks to Plath's increasingly "metaphorical" use of nature,
* Plath’s abiding interest in the world around her, her interest in nature, is reflected in many poems.  Her descriptions are remarkable for their concrete, precise detail.
* Her painterly style creates graphic images in ‘Pheasant’: the bird itself, the flowers, the hill and elm in the background, the earlier scene where the snow was marked with the ‘crosshatch’ footprints of various birds.  This poem also reflects her stance against the destruction of nature, a concern that features in many of her poems.
* The psychic landscape that she describes generally has a natural ambiance that manifests the dance of life and death as two wheels of the same vehicle. Like her husband, the British poet Ted Hughes, and probably under his influence too, she tries to come to grip with the amoral energy of nature that manifests itself through an imagery of opposite forces. As a result, she involves uncontrollable energy of animals, insects and birds to demonstrate the power of death.

**Theme: Nature**

* Nature isn’t always a pretty place where flowers bloom and cute animals frolic in the sun. It is governed by the cycle of life and death, and the fact that a part of nature must die for another part to exist.

**Theme: Relationships**

* Think about how various poems portray her feelings towards her parents, her husband, her children and herself.

**Comparative Essay**

* When embarking on Comparative Studies it is important to differentiate between your approach to studying Single Text and Comparative Texts. Single Text involves close reading whereas in Comparative Studies you are expected to analyse, contrast and compare moments from your texts. You must not summarise your texts. Remember to compare means to look at similarities and differences.
* It is essential in Comparative Studies that you use the language of comparison and that you continue to weave your texts together. Linking phrases are so important, such as; similarly, as in, texts are linked... typical of both... a corresponding moment...however, unlike...
* Do not tell the story of the text. Marks are awarded for discussion of similarities and contrasts related to the modes of comparison being question.

 

 