

FROM THE INSTRUCTOR

The final paper for WR 150 “Modern and Contemporary American Poetry” builds upon the analytical, argumentative, and research skills introduced in the first two papers. In order to enlarge the scope and complexity of their arguments, students are asked to conduct a more substantial exploration of multiple poems or a longer poem by any American poet of their choosing. Similar to Papers 1 and 2, students must find their motivation for writing in the arguments of others; however, this time students are not provided any exhibit or argument sources for their consideration. Paper 3 requires students to locate and engage with all source material independently. Beyond this, the paper has to be 2000–3000 words in length and use at least five sources, at least two exhibits and two arguments.

Molly Doomchin’s paper “Sylvia Plath: The Dialogue between Poetry and Painting” demonstrates an extraordinary amount of critical and creative thinking, particularly her use of the “academic gap” as her motivation to write. After conducting a substantial amount of exploratory research, Molly found that most of what has been written about Plath has to do with the more sensational or psychological aspects of Plath’s work, with poems such as “Daddy” and “Lady Lazarus” receiving primary attention. Molly’s paper also ambitiously blurs genres; it is both literary and art criticism, offering exemplary close readings of linguistic and visual exhibits in support of her claims. Ultimately, she has composed a source-based academic argument that both general and scholarly audiences will find thoroughly engaging and enjoyable to read.

Jason Tandon
WR 150: Modern and Contemporary American Poetry

FROM THE WRITER

When exploring potential topics, I discovered that Sylvia Plath had written a poem about one of my favorite paintings, *The Dream* by Henri Rousseau (1910). Upon researching further, I uncovered an academic gap; I noticed that critics focused on labeling Plath as a confessional poet, absorbed in her own thoughts and feelings. I could not find any scholarship discussing Plath's poetry about paintings. My paper claims that through her ekphrastic poetry, Plath engages herself in a conversation with artists of the past, debunking the selfish, narcissistic label critics are so quick to throw at her.

MOLLY DOOMCHIN is a rising sophomore in Boston University's College of Arts and Sciences, majoring in Art History. A lifelong New Yorker, Molly has always had a passion for paintings and someday hopes to become a curator. She also loves playing guitar and songwriting. She would like to thank Professor Jason Tandon for his guidance, patience, and kind words.

MOLLY DOOMCHIN

SYLVIA PLATH: THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN POETRY AND PAINTING

As documented in her journals, Sylvia Plath was a frequent museum patron. Plath's relations with paintings were particularly strong in early 1958, when she and her husband, Ted Hughes, were living in New England. Attempting to get out of a "publishing drought," Plath sought inspiration for her works by going to the library to "pore over books of reproductions of paintings" (Alexander 214). The majority of her painting focus was on more contemporary artists, such as the twentieth-century Italian De Chirico, the French Symbolist Post-Impressionist Gauguin (Plath, *Journals* 324), the Naïve Post-Impressionist Rousseau (332), the Cubist Picasso (338) and the Swiss Klee (334). She discussed her encounters with paintings with a deep sense of serenity and joy, declaring "how lovely it will be to spend my mornings, after coffee, working on poems, an art poem... and a long poem about the spirit, luminous, making itself manifest in art" (352). Looking at various paintings in great detail, dissecting each of their forms, she eventually picked a few to focus on in her works, aiming "to have my art poems: one to three (Gauguin, Klee & Rousseau)—completed by the end of March (345). Upon completion, she wrote about such poems very highly, going as far as stating "I feel these are the best poems I have ever done" (*The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, Hughes, 210).

Despite her apparent fondness of works of art and her poems they inspired, critics typically do not discuss Plath's art poetry, nor her affinity for particular pieces and artists. Instead, the focus of both scholars and the general public is overwhelmingly centered around Plath's personal life and the works that highlight her mental state and experiences. Plath committed suicide the morning of February 11, 1963, by submerging her head in a running oven (Alexander 214), a mere week after writing "Edge," a presumed suicide note, and two weeks after publishing "The Bell Jar," one of her best known works. Prior to her death, Plath had attempted to take her own life numerous times, a culmination of years dealing with personal trauma and battling depression (Wagner-Martin and Davidson). Poems critics frequently discuss are "Daddy," a poem intended "to kill her father's memory" (Phillips) by utilizing Holocaust and World War II imagery, and "Lady Lazarus," where she "again equates her suffering with the experiences of the tortured Jews," further highlighting her depression (Aird).

Because of the naked honesty and vulnerable pain associated with such works, Sylvia Plath has garnered the title of a "confessional poet." Poems of this variety are ones where "they [the poets] put the speaker himself at the centre of the poem in such a way as to make his psychological shame and vulnerability an embodiment of his civilization" (Britzolakis). Her categorization as a confessional poet has led many to criticize her works; for example, Irving Howe claims that "Sylvia Plath herself, has abandoned the sense of audience and cares nothing about—indeed, is hardly aware of—the presence of anyone but herself." Additionally, Peter Davison claims that her poems "are written for nobody's ears except the writer's. They have a ritual ring, the inevitable preface to doom." All of these criticisms exemplify the belief that Plath's poetry is self-absorbed and

narcissistic, that she is blind and deaf to the rest of the world, only aware and receptive of what is going on in her own mind; she is pigeonholed as a poet stuck in her own world. This presumed poetic selfishness coupled with her well-known biography contribute to the romanticism of depression and suicide, something she never intended to do.

Plath recognizes the personal aspect of the poem but denounces the title critics and the general public have bestowed upon her. In an interview, she asserted, “I think that personal experience is very important, but certainly it shouldn’t be a kind of shut box and mirror-looking, narcissistic experience. I believe it should be *relevant*, and relevant to the larger things, the bigger things...” (“The Poet Speaks,” 593). Plath believed that her poems were greater than her experiences, even though her experiences *did* play a role in what she wrote. Critics that instantly label her confessional fail to acknowledge the significance of her poems about paintings. By writing about works of art, Plath inserts herself into an ongoing dialogue, a dialogue larger than the one in her own mind. In certain instances, like in “Yadwigha, On a Red Couch, Among Lilies” (based on Henri Rousseau’s *The Dream*), Plath engages in conversation directly with the artist and the painting’s subject, offering up her criticism and praise for controversial works; she shows that she is aware of and respects the art of the past and wants to use her poems to connect with past works. In other instances, like in “The Disquieting Muses” (based on Giorgio de Chirico’s painting of the same name) Plath uses striking, memorable images from paintings and utilizes them in her poetry to aid a narrative she creates; her innovation and the painting work in tandem to tell a story, and she is building upon past art. While both cases are different, Plath always pays homage to the painter by integrating specifics in the painting into her poem, essentially painting with her words. Due to this intimate relationship with painters and their canvases, one cannot claim that Plath is merely a self-absorbed poet of confessional nature, but one conscious and receptive of the art world around her.

DEFINING PLATH

While Plath is traditionally categorized as a confessional poet, critics like Howe and Davison fail to recognize the ekphrastic quality of many of Plath’s poems. As defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, ekphrasis is “a literary device in which a painting, sculpture, or other work of visual art is described in detail.” Each poem in which Plath comments on or discusses a work of visual art can be defined as an ekphrastic poem. Ekphrastic works are interactive and draw clear links between writers and artists. By writing an ekphrastic poem, one enters a pre-existing conversation; one work could not exist without the other. In essence, many of Plath’s works are dependent on works of others, showing her deep veneration for the painters whose works she incorporates in her own.

HENRI ROUSSEAU: PLATH IN THE JUNGLE



The Dream, Henri Rousseau, 1910.

“Yadwigha, On a Red Couch, Among Lilies,” Plath’s 1958 poem, was written in response to Henri Rousseau’s *The Dream*, painted forty-eight years prior in 1910. The painting, Rousseau’s last and largest work, places a young nude female reclining on a red sofa in the middle of a lush jungle, full of vibrant foliage and lively animals. According to the *Bulletin of the Art Institute of Chicago*, “Though the public was thoroughly perplexed, the artists rightly hailed *The Dream* as one of the milestones of modern art” (“The Henri Rousseau Exhibition,” 20). Plath, in her poem, points to the perplexed reaction of the public, choosing to address Rousseau about his painting by discussing their questions.

Plath responds to the structure of Rousseau’s painting in a compelling way. The painting appears to have a random composition; elephants, lions, birds, monkeys, and other animals seem to be randomly strewn about the canvas, interlaced with overwhelming amounts of greenery and lilies; mysterious snake charmer is shown emerging out from some trees, and the nude figure, Yadwigha, is arbitrarily thrown onto the canvas lounging on a sofa. There is no clear order to how Rousseau arranges things. Additionally, the subject depicted, a nude on a couch in the jungle, is incredibly random and perplexing. However, Plath contrasts this randomness by approaching her poem in a methodical way. She chose to write her poem in sestina form; a sestina is “a poem of six six-line stanzas (with an envoy) in which the line-endings of the first stanza are repeated, but in different order, in the other five” (Oxford English Dictionary). The form is structured, complicated and deliberate. Plath clearly put a lot of thought into how the poem was arranged.

For the sestina’s six line-endings she repeats, Plath picks the painting’s most pertinent images and concepts: “you,” “couch,” “eye,” “moon,” “green,” and “lilies.” “Lilies,” “green,” “couch,” and “moon” are all visuals that stand out in Rousseau’s work. The repetition of the painting’s pertinent images allows the reader to envision the painting through her words and points to her astute attention to detail and respect for the painting. Her use of “you” underlines that this is a poem in which she is talking both to Rousseau and Yadwigha (depending on the stanza) because she wants to interact with both the artist and the subject. “Eye” represents the “eyes” of different aspects of the painting [“under the eye/Of uncaged tigers and a tropical moon,” (4–5), “Dreamed yourself away in the moon’s eye” (28)]; Rousseau’s vision [“But to a friend, in private, Rousseau

confessed his eye” (35), “To feed his eye with red” (38)]; and the eyes of critics and museum patrons [“It seems the constant critics wanted you... To turn you luminous, without the eye” (8, 12), “The couch glared out at the prosaic eye” (20)]. This emphasis allows Plath to differentiate between artistic vision and critical response, recognizing that there is merit to both points of view. She notes that art is meant to be created and commented on. Plath features the imperative relationship between artist and critic, taking on the role as critic by writing her poem. In turn, her poem is a piece of art—she is aware that it will be criticized, just as Rousseau’s painting was. This recognition through mentioning critics directly in the work signals a parallel Plath draws between Rousseau and herself, making her connected to the art of the past. She is clearly mindful of “the presence of anyone but herself,” unlike what Howe asserts.

Like the planned juxtaposition of her structured poem and Rousseau’s scattered painting, Plath’s carefully planned diction points to her opinions of the work. Her critique is unquestionably favorable; it is clear that she does not agree with the tepid and confused response of the public. She begins her poem “Yadwigha, the literalist once wondered how you” (1). It is clear that she is not “the literalist” she mentions because later on, she writes “Yadwigha, pose on, that he put you on the couch” (37). “Pose on” signals that she approves of Rousseau’s inclusion and placement of Yadwigha and of the painting holistically. This positive outlook is further exemplified through positive word choice. She writes of “bird of paradise” (24), “gigantic lilies,/Marvelingly numbered the many shades of green” (29–30), and “those great lilies” (39). “Paradise,” “marvelingly,” (a word Plath made up) and “great” all suggest positivity; such words would not be included if Plath were responding negatively to the work. Additionally, Plath would not describe Rousseau’s painting in such vivid detail if she did not appreciate the details she described. Particularly vivid images she portrays are “intricate wilderness of green” (5), “Heart-shaped leaves” (6), “leaves and lilies flattened to paper behind you” (16), “mille-fleurs tapestry” (17), “red against fifty variants of green” (19), and “bright moon lilies” that “Nodded their petaled heads around your couch” (29–30). One can envision the “heart-shaped leaves,” and “bright moon lilies” and is impressed by the countless shades of green Plath claims are in the work. By writing that the leaves and lilies “flattened to paper,” Plath recognizes the flat, two-dimensional aspect of Rousseau’s work; she does not mention this in a negative light, but rather she speaks of the paper-like quality fondly. If this were not a work she enjoyed, she would not have gone into the level of detail she did when describing what she saw. Every word used was calculated, conveying to the reader that she loved *The Dream*.

Plath’s deliberate diction also points to her feelings about art and poetry critics. In the fourth stanza, line 2, she refers to the “prosaic eye” of the critic. “Prosaic” indicates “dull or commonplace matters, considerations, observations, etc.” (Oxford English Dictionary). Effectively, she condemns the public that condemned Rousseau; in her mind, their reactions to the work are pedestrian and simple and, thus, should not be taken seriously. Her dissatisfaction with the general public is also shown when she writes, “And that, Rousseau told the critics, was why the couch/Accompanied you” (31–32) followed by “But to a friend, in private, Rousseau confessed his eye” (35). Here, she subtly hints that Rousseau had to dumb down any explanation of his work for the general public, but any explanation he gave was not what truly motivated his questionable subject. In Plath’s opinion, he provided the simpletons with answers they desperately wanted for their questions, though they were not the answers he felt. She hints that while people crave answers and explanations for art, some art remains unanswered—some art has no answers.

In “Yadwigha, On a Red Couch, Among Lilies,” Plath relates Rousseau’s experience with critics to her own. Around the time she wrote this poem (1958), Plath was handed countless rejections by publishing agencies, bruising her ego. In an April 22, 1958 journal entry, she vented, “A day of misery: The New Yorker rejection of all the poems (O, Howard Moss, or ‘They’ liked The Disquieting Muses & The Rousseau Sestina)—a burning sense of injustice, sobs, sorrow: desire to fight back.” It is evident that Plath did not respond well to rejection; she forges a connection to Rousseau, an artist she believed was unjustly berated and misjudged by critics, just as she felt she was.

GIORGIO DE CHIRICO: THE DARK SIDE OF ART



The Disquieting Muses, Giorgio de Chirico, 1916–1918

While Plath makes it clear that “Yadwigha, On a Red Couch, Among Lilies” is a poem about a specific painting, that kind of clarity is not present in “The Disquieting Muses” (1957). In this instance, her poem’s subject is not the painting itself but her own narrative. This poem is deeply personal, made evident by Plath’s use of “I.” The speaker of the poem, presumably Plath herself, addresses “Mother” throughout the poem—she repeats it at the beginning of the first, third, and sixth stanzas, placing emphasis on the importance on the mother figure presented. The poem is a deep manifestation of the feelings she felt toward her mother. According to the Norton Anthology, “The Disquieting Muses” showcases “Plath’s ambivalence toward her mother” (594). However, if Plath were truly ambivalent toward her mother, or feeling “contradictory emotions (as love and hatred) towards the same person” (Oxford English Dictionary), she would not have utilized de Chirico’s painting as inspiration for her work; she describes the figures as “three terrible faceless dummies” and a “sinister trio of women” (Norton Anthology, 594), clearly pointing to the negative feelings she intended this poem to portray.

De Chirico’s work showcases three figures, or “muses,” seemingly made out of wood with balloon-shaped forms for heads. The sky is an unnatural shade of green, adding to the peculiarity of the image. De Chirico makes his painting even more unsettling by adding violent contrasts between light and dark, creating intense shadows and particularly rigid, sharp, and angular lines. In “The Disquieting Muses,” Plath references these three figures on various occasions. Every time they are

mentioned, they are painted in a negative light. First, she writes “that she/Sent these ladies in her seed/With heads like darning-eggs to nod” (4–7); the figures are vaguely called “these ladies,” giving the poem a mysterious, uneasy quality. In the following stanza, she references “Mouthless, eyeless, with stitched bald head” (15), “but those ladies broke the panes” (24); the reader is forced to envision a head with no mouth nor eyes and a bald head that has been “stitched,” which is a rather ugly, alarming image. In the third stanza, Plath discusses a hurricane hitting, about to destroy the windows keeping her family safe; of the figures she writes, “But those ladies broke the panes” (24), directly citing them as causers of harm, making her unsafe. The fourth stanza points to “the shadow cast by my dismal-headed/Godmothers”; “dismal-headed” is an incredibly negative way to describe someone or something, affirming the stance that these figures are negative that had been established early on. In the fifth stanza, Plath discusses feeling abandoned by her mother, leaving her to “[face] my traveling companions” (47), companions she clearly does not want to be in the company of. She ends her poem discussing the figures’ cruel natures, writing, “Faces blank as the day I was born/Their shadows long in the setting sun/That never brightens or goes down” (51–53). In the final lines, it is clear that Plath resents her mother for being an ineffective shield from the negative forces and people in the world: “And this is the kingdom you bore me to/Mother, mother” (54–55). Plath felt a strong negative emotional reaction toward the three mysterious figures in the de Chirico painting, using them as a visual representation of the evil she blames her mother for not protecting her from.

In addition to the muse motif, Plath inserts other integral aspects of de Chirico’s *The Disquieting Muses* in her poem of the same name. For example, she focuses on shadows being cast; she writes “In the shadow cast by my dismal-headed/Godmothers” (29–30), “And the shadow stretched” (31), and “Their shadows long in the setting sun” (52). The shadows in the painting are harsh and abrupt, representing the harsh and abrupt darkness she felt she was subjected to in both her childhood and her adulthood. She also hints to darkness throughout, declaring “Nodding by night around my bed” (14), “The lights went out” (31), “Day now, night now” (49), and “Their shadows long in the setting sun/That never brightens or goes down” (52–53). De Chirico’s painting pays close attention to contrast in hues and values, juxtaposing jarringly bright oranges and dull greens, for example. Plath relates this theme to her own life, discussing how all the lights in her life turned to irreparable darkness. The muses cast their deep shadows and left her in a never-ending dismal night. In both cases, Plath uses painterly characteristics of de Chirico’s work and makes it applicable to her own, taking elements of his style and transforming them.

Plath also transforms the purpose of the balloon heads of the muses in de Chirico’s painting. In the sixth stanza of her poem (lines 42–48), she writes of what she believes to be her mother’s greatest betrayal, the poem’s climax of sorts:

I woke one day to see you, mother
Floating above me in bluest air
On a green balloon bright with a million
Flowers, and bluebirds that never were
Never, never found anywhere.
But the little planet bobbed away
Like a soap-bubble as you called: Come here!
As I faced my traveling companions

She describes her mother floating away in a balloon, taking with her all the good and positive aspects of life Plath herself never experienced, leaving her alone with the horrifying muses. The balloon heads of de Chirico's muses represent her mother's emotional abandonment, the motivating theme behind Plath's poem. As she did with the muses themselves, shadows, darkness, and balloons, Plath reinterpreted them in a way that would best help her paint the story she wanted to, using the de Chirico work as inspiration. While critics like Howe and Davison might argue that this exemplifies Plath's selfish poetry, it is important to note that Plath's poem would not exist without the de Chirico painting. Instead of being labeled a narcissistic work, it should be labeled an innovative, inspired one.

A COMMONALITY

While one poem aims to speak directly to an artist and his painting and the other aims to write a new script through an artist and his painting, Plath ends both "Yadwigha, On a Red Couch, Among Lilies" and "The Disquieting Muses" similarly. Plath chooses to end both poems on determined, relatively uplifting notes. In the Rousseau poem she writes "Yadwigha, pose on...In the midst of all that green and those great lilies!" (37-39); she offers her approval to Rousseau, voicing support for a painting so misunderstood, saying she understands. In the de Chirico, she ends declaring "But no frown of mine/Will betray the company I keep" (55-56); while she feels forlorn and in unwanted company, she suggests that she is still determined to tackle life's hardships and struggles, even though her mom is not there to guide her. Somehow, Irving Howe was blind to this in his declaration "Sylvia Plath's inability to do more with her theme than thrust it against our eyes, displaying her wound in all its red plushy woundedness" (*Sylvia Plath: a Partial Disagreement*). She proves, by ending her poems encouragingly, that she is more than her "wounds," more than the confessional, self-pitying box critics are so quick to throw her in. With these two poems in particular, it is made clear that she is more than her depression—she is part of something bigger than herself. She is strong: an admirer, an innovator, an artist.

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