Contrasting emotions with beauty illuminates Plath’s ‘Tulips’

by Brooke Russi

The poem “Tulips,” by Sylvia Plath, struck me with its interchanging expressions of calm and rage. Prior to reading the poems presented in class, I’d only read her poem “Mirror,” and have found a new and increased appreciation for her work. Plath is an American poet who not only added greatly to her art, she helped serve to change it. She is among several poets during her time that helped shape what is now referred to as confessional poetry. A majority of the interpretations and discussions concerning Plath tend to focus on the more sensational aspects of her life, most notably her untimely death. While these aspects are entirely relevant, her poems also show the complexities of life through objective and beautiful expression. Throughout “Tulips,” Plath presents a vivid perspective of emotional emptiness and strife, contrasting these two opposing forces, and effectively illustrating their impact through the personification of colors.

Sylvia Plath was born in October of 1932 in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts (Wagner-Martin, par. 1). She was the daughter of Otto Plath, a German immigrant, and Aurelia Plath, daughter of Austrian immigrants, and had one younger brother, Warren (Axelrod, par. 3). Otto was a Professor of German and Zoology at Boston University and wrote a book, Bumblebees and their Ways (Axelrod, par. 3). When Sylvia was eight years old, her father passed away from gangrene due to diabetes complications (Axelrod, par. 3). Aurelia moved her children to Wellesley, Massachusetts, where her parents helped care for the two young children (Wagner-Martin and Stevenson). Plath’s mother returned to teaching and always placed education as a strong priority for her children (Wagner-Martin and Stevenson).

Plath attended Smith College on scholarship and by that time had already published poems and short stories in newspapers and ladies’ magazines (Wagner-Martin and Stevenson). She was also selected for the College Board of Mademoiselle magazine, and spent a summer in New York City (Ames 5). After she returned, and during her junior year at Smith, Plath was hospitalized following a suicide attempt (Stevenson, par. 2). Thereafter she graduated summa cum laude in English and was awarded a Fulbright scholarship to study at Cambridge University (Ames 8).

While Plath studied in England, she met Ted Hughes, a fellow poet with whom she had a short courtship and married in June of 1956 in London (Wagner-Martin and Stevenson). The couple soon lived in Boston, where Plath taught at her former school, Smith College (Wagner-Martin, par. 5). While in the states, Plath attended a poetry class taught by Robert Lowell, where she also met the poet Anne Sexton (Wagner-Martin, par. 5). She also worked part-time at Massachusetts General Hospital as a secretary in the psychiatry department, at times transcribing patient’s dreams (Wagner-Martin, par. 5). Before returning to England, Plath and Hughes attended a writers’ workshop at Yaddo in New York (Wagner-Martin, par. 6).

Once back in England, Plath gave birth to her first child, daughter Frieda, and a second, son Nicholas, two years later (Stevenson, par.3). Plath later separated from her husband, and left the country area of Devon to return to London, renting a house once occupied by William Butler Yeats, an aspect in which Plath reveled (Ames 12). During a notably brutal winter in 1963, Plath took her own life (Ames 15). Her first novel, The Bell Jar, and her book of poems, Ariel, from which “Tulips” comes, was published shortly thereafter (Wagner-Martin, par.10).

In the poem “Tulips,” a young woman welcomes a consuming peace as she rests in a hospital, while at the same time reflecting upon and struggling to push away life’s chaos. This new serenity is mirrored in the hospital’s atmosphere of sterility and solitude, as the color white is first used to illustrate this strong scene of physical and emotional absence. In the first stanza, the narrator notices “how white everything is, how quiet, how snowed in” (Line 2). Here, Plath reiterates a sense of calmness, while defining the color white in relation to the poem and comparing its purity with the imagery of snow. The young woman is simply lying by herself, quietly, surrounded by "white walls" (Line 4), which parallel her current state of emptiness. Plath powerfully references the color not only to create a descriptive image, but more significantly, to present the color’s emotional undertones. The reader continues to be pulled into this serenity and bareness, as the narrator begins to see her new peaceful existence in those who tend to her.

In the second stanza, a beautiful metaphor parallels the calmness the narrator is experiencing with the nurses who tend to her. Plath repeats the verb pass four times between two lines to eloquently describe the repetitive action of the speaker’s caregivers. Like the stoicism of her immediate surroundings, the young woman
In regards to "Tulips," I tended to reasoning upon her death is often, and life and work of Plath, offering There is a great amount of carefully analyze her descriptions of colors serve to richly illuminate the prominent scenery within the poem. Plath uses these colors to present to the reader. Colors cannot be underestimated, as it reflects around her. Plath's keen observation of the world and its contradictions. Blame and reasoning upon her death is often, and unfairly, attributed to her husband Ted Hughes. In regards to "Tulips," I tended to disagree with most interpretations.
presented, yet still the process of discovering others' perspectives helped me understand the poem more from my own point of view as compared to those of others.

After exploring and examining "Tulips," and formulating my own ideas, I was interested to see how this poem had left an impact on others and was interpreted through their unique perspective. Here, as elsewhere, it appears that Plath's personal life serves as an overly dominating force in which her work is analyzed. In one such analysis, Jeannine Dobbs concludes that for the speaker it is "not tulips but death is the gift she wants." While the poem clearly states, "I have wanted to efface myself," (Line 48) this is proclaimed in the past tense, and serves to suggest more the extent in which the speaker requires rest. Similarly, another interpretation of the poem narrowly focuses on the author's desire for and eventual death. According to Barbara Hardy, the narrator of the poem "wanted death" and suggests "moving back from the poem to the other poems and to her [Plath's] real death, as she wanted it in life" (Dobbs et al.). Here, as elsewhere, the more controversial aspects of Plath's personal life takes precedence and blurs the distinct line between author and narrator. Often the two appear inseparable and it becomes difficult to determine whom a discussion refers to, Plath herself or the distinct speaker of her poems.

One interpretation of "Tulips," which did not focus on Plath's death, offers an interesting and abstract explanation for Plath's repeated use of the color white throughout the poem. According to Renee R. Curry, the color white refers to skin color, as she states "the exquisite and languorous passivity that Plath demonstrates in ÔTulips' marks white women as the culpable incapables that they are in the face of white dominance." I strongly disagree with this interpretation. As stated above, I find Plath's repeated use of colors to be an extension of her metaphors and a strong visual alliteration to the intensity of conflicting emotions. As I found many compelling interpretations of Plath's work, it is through her own words, both personally and within her art, which ultimately attest to her true voice. In an interview, Plath states, "I think that personal experience is very important, but certainly it shouldn't be a kind of shut-box and mirror looking, narcissistic experience" (Orr, "Interview") . Ultimately, interpretations are just that, an individual's perspective that is shaped by their own experiences and their own ideas.

In "Tulips," I discovered a woman struggling to define her feelings and ultimately herself, as she views her surroundings objectively and relates them to her inner turmoil. The colors Plath utilizes and reinforces serve to enhance the strength and validity of the speaker's feelings and the nature in which two seemingly opposing emotional states collide. Plath clearly labored intensely on her art and exerted herself to express different aspects of both her personal life and ideas. She did, however, search outside herself, and sought to write clearly from her subject's perspective. Each poem I've read of hers from the beginning of this assignment has its own unique beauty, which comes to life through her organization of words and ideas. While it is evident that she wrote about very personal matters, this should not be the sole basis upon which her work is judged. Her writing gains a unique strength in its ability to leave an immediate impact upon the reader, yet still cleverly leave behind an ever-present intrigue. Ultimately, it is within this intrigue that the beauty and power of Plath's words prevail.

Works Cited:


