

NOTES ON SYLVIA PLATH'S POEM "To Eva Descending the Stair"

The following is an excerpt of a 16-page essay in *Goliath Business News*:

SYLVIA PLATH's letters and journals document her knowledge of and interest in painting--especially modernist paintings. In the letters and journals she mentions De Chirico, Gauguin, Goya, Gris, Klee, Matisse, Picasso, Rousseau, van Gogh and others.

Prior to 1956, Plath was already incorporating references to art works in her poetry. In "Midsummer Mobile"--a rather shallow poem of instructions to a would-be painter, she refers to "a sky of Dufy blue," to "Seurat: fleck[ed] schooner," "the mellow palette of Matisse," and "a rare Calder mobile" (Hughes 1981, 324). Furthermore, not only does the title of her "To Eva Descending the Stair" echo that of Marcel Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase," but so does the poem's theme: that stasis is impossible and that "stillness is a lie," because "The wheels revolve" and "the universe keeps moving" (303).

Her first mature poems about paintings were motivated, as so frequently was the case with Plath, by the possibility of publication and payment for publication. (1) In January, 1958, *Art News* wrote her offering her "from \$50 to \$75 for a poem on a work of art" (Plath 1975,336). On the day she received the letter, she immediately thought of Gauguin. On January 26, referring to "the red-caped medicine man, the naked girl lying with the strange fox, [and] Jacob wrestling with his angel" she writes, "I shall sit and stare at Gauguin in the library, limit my field and try to rest, then write it." Two weeks later she writes, "I'm hoping to go to the Art Museum, and meditate on Gauguin and Rousseau" (1975, 336). On March 5, she writes that she plans "to have my art poems--one to three (Gauguin, Klee and Rousseau)--completed by the end of March," and exclaims, "I feel my mind, my imagination, nudging, sprouting, prying and peering" (Hughes 1982, 202). By March 20,1958, she has "narrowed down poem subjects to Klee (five paintings and etchings) and Rousseau (two paintings)" (208). (2) Two days later, after getting "piles of wonderful books from the Art Library," she feels she is "overflowing with ideas and inspirations, as if I've been bottling up a geyser for a year" (Plath 1975, 336), and she writes to her mother, "These ['Virgin,' 'Perseus,' 'Battle-Scene,' and 'Departure of the Ghost'] are easily the best poems I've written and open up new material and a new voice. I've discovered my deepest source of inspiration, which is art" (336). Then on March 28, she records in her journal, "I wrote eight poems in the last eight days, long poems, lyrical poems, and thunderous poems: poems breaking open my real experience of life in the last five years: life which has been shut up, untouchable ... not to be touched. I feel these are the best poems I have ever done" (Hughes 1982, 210). She says that she speaks with "a broad wide voice [that] thunders and sings of joy, sorrow and the deep visions of queer and terrible and exotic world s" (211).

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The following is an essay written by a 12th grade English student not in this class:

Sylvia Plath's poem "To Eva Descending the Stair" may at first seem a simple, pretty piece with a few good uses of alliteration and which plays upon the overused mystery of the cosmos; however, beyond the references to the moon, sun, and stars, Plath cleverly hides deep symbols of pagan religion and the feminine Divine.

The title of the poem is the first and only mention of Eva, presumably the addressed "you" in the rest of the poem. Eva could easily be a variation of the Biblical Eve. Plath, herself a feminist during the early 1960's, most likely chose Eva, or Eve, to represent humanity, rather than representing it in the more common masculine form of Adam.

Assuming Eva is humankind as a whole, her descent down the spiral staircase can be interpreted as man's progression through the ages. Thus, just as history repeats itself, a person can walk down a spiral staircase in repetitive circles, his lateral position limited to the diameter of the stairway. The spiral stair can also be considered a reference to Paganism in two ways. First, because its spiral shape reminiscent of the cyclical pattern or circadian rhythm, upon which many pagan religions are based. Second, many spiral staircases are built according to principals originally discovered and explained by the Greek philosopher and physicist Archimedes, who explored mathematics and science long before Christianity emerged and silenced the voices of many brilliant scientists during the Dark and Middle Ages, and well into the Renaissance.

One of two repeated (and perhaps more important) lines in the poem is "clocks cry: stillness is a lie, my dear." Taken at its most obvious meaning, this phrase simply reminds us that the ticking of the clock continues even in the silence and stillness of night, and we are powerless to pause or slow it. The "my dear" at the end of the line adds a sense of familiarity, but the real interest here may be the clock. Again, Plath hides a reference to pagan worship in a seemingly simple word. Our current measurement of time was originally devised by the ancient Babylonians, who used a number system based on 12's (hence, we have 60 seconds to a minute, 60 minutes to an hour, and 24 hours in a day.) The Bible, on the other hand, usually features numbers that sit well with our decimal (base-10) number system. Thus, Moses wandered the desert for 40 years, not thirty-six.

Besides the repeated mention of clocks and staircases, there are many references to nature and specifically the more cyclical processes in nature. Plath's repeated references to pagan religion can be understood not as a rejection of Christianity, but as an extension of her feminist beliefs. In Christianity, the focus is upon man. The book of Genesis says that God created man in His own likeness, which implies that man exclusively is based upon the same "blueprint" as the divine being. Assuming this, a woman is seen as the lesser of the two sexes because she is not created in the exact likeness of God--or at least, that's how Christian scholars across the ages have stated it. Pagan religion, on the other hand, is based mainly upon the worship of nature as a manifestation of the Divine, who is a child-bearing female.

Circadian rhythms, which appear in nature as lunar cycles, the elliptical orbits of planets, the rise and set of the sun, and even the sleep cycles of animals (including humans), are seen as an important part of nature. Women, who had the power to bring forth new life, were seen as part of the divine cycle of birth, death, and renewal. As part of this cycle, they were considered equal, if

not superior, to men. Other symbols in the poem, including planets, stars, the color red and a rose are all related in some way to Paganism.

Sylvia Plath's poetry expresses her beliefs in a way that is both intriguing and creative. Her use of repeated lines, unstructured rhyme scheme, and the interesting way in which she presents her theme make her poem both poignant and memorable.

NOTES ON THE NOTES:

1) While you are not expected to know the complete biographies of all (or even any) of the poets on the AP Exam, you can see that knowing something about their past or even about their time in history offers an added layer of depth and hence more fodder for explication.

2) The student essay focuses A LOT on Paganism, which could be problematic, because it's just one possibility (and perhaps a far-fetched one). There are many other potential interpretations. But this essay does show one how to: 1) consider the title; 2) use the Bible as a reference; and 2) employ history as a backdrop. While this student does go a bit overboard in proposing that Plath's poem is some sort of didactic feminist manifesto, it does highlight how you can take an idea and fully explore it. Had I been this student's teacher, I might have encouraged a second half to this essay – one that explores an entirely different angle.