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It is More Natural to Me, Lying Down

The use of floral imagery in several of Sylvia Plath's works offers insight into her psychological state throughout various times in her life and career. She also plays with contrasting metaphors such as the different meanings of the poppy flowers in "Poppies in October" and "Poppies in July." Plath was also able to go beyond literal interpretations and provide more implicit floral references and imagery as seen in "Surgeon at 2 a.m." and "Edge." The personification of the flowers in "I am Vertical" and "Tulips" creates a unique dialogue between humans and plants. In all of these poems, Plath skillfully represents various aspects of her life, from feministic sympathy to the disdain of living, encompassing her feelings of inadequacy as a mother, and her struggle to treat her depression, all through floral metaphors.

Though known for the overriding theme of death in her poetry, "Poppies in October" presents a different side of Plath's writing. Written in 1962 while Plath was living in England, "Poppies" reveals her frustration with the gender roles in Britain at that time. The title flowers in this poem are feminine; their petals are arranged like "skirts" of such a brilliant red-orange color that not even the sunrise can mimic them. The speaker also compares their color to an injured woman bleeding to death in the back of an ambulance. This woman may not actually be bleeding, but rather suffering and essentially hurting herself by giving everything she has to others, especially men. She gives a "love gift" that is "Utterly unasked for" yet she felt compelled to give it nonetheless. The poppies share a similar burden by using the sun's energy

unwillingly and automatically to serve the environment in which they grow. Just as the poppies are kept tamed under the fiery sun, so are women in society “Dulled to a halt under bowlers,” the bowlers being hats typically worn by the same men who repress women like the narrator.

However, the poppies fight this oppression, triumphing over it by “cry[ing] open / In a forest of frost, in a dawn of cornflowers.” The imagery of these lines alludes to men in a similar way “bowlers” does in the previous stanza. Cornflowers are also known as bachelor’s buttons, and the line suggests that the female poppies are able to grow while being surrounded by the male cornflowers that create a “forest of frost” in an attempt to hinder the poppies’ progress. The speaker is envious of the poppies exclaiming, “O my God, what am I” in comparison to the poppies since they have learned to thrive in such conditions while she has not. The speaker in “Poppies in October” admires the flowers and wishes to be like them.

Plath’s envy and admiration of flowers are also evident in the poem “I Am Vertical,” written earlier than “Poppies” in March of 1961. The poem invokes Plath’s feelings of incompetence towards being a mother through the comparison of the speaker with a garden. The speaker is not “a tree...sucking up minerals and motherly love” which can be passed on to the tree’s leaves, and comparatively, the speaker’s child. Her jealousy is quite clear in the line, “Nor am I the beauty of a garden bed / Attracting my share of Ahs and spectacularly painted.” The speaker is upset that the flowers in the garden bed can both breed new life and maintain their own attractiveness; she feels she cannot do this. When comparing herself to the plants, she wishes to have the seeming immortality of the tree and the boldness of the flowers. By finding a way to obtain these attributes, the speaker will be able to believe in her own abilities.

As the poem progresses, the narrator’s attitude towards the flowers seems to change from pure envy to a camaraderie of sorts. She walks along the garden late at night, trying to connect

with the plants, imagining that in her sleep she “most perfectly resembles them [the flowers]” since that is the time she is free of thought and the stresses of daily life. Though the poem is not directly about death, lines such as “I would rather be horizontal” and “It is more natural to me, lying down,” give a darker mood to the poem. If indeed the speaker would rather be dead, she wants her final resting place to be among that flowerbed. The flowers are idyllic, and to lie with them and talk to the sky is the speaker’s goal. Throughout the poem, the narrator feels she is less than the flowers, even though she is human and capable of advanced thought and creativeness, she will never live up to the ideals the flowers represent. Ideals such as beauty, strength, poise, and power over their own life cycles intrigue the speaker. Through lying down with the flowers, she can feel closer to them and be more like them. The flowers too will “have time for” the narrator and the trees will touch her for once, instead of the other way around. “Vertical” in this way describes the need to escape and find who you are in something quite unlike yourself. In this case the narrator, worried about her role as mother, wife, and woman, seeks out the perfect flowers as a way to cope. She wants to relate to them so that she can see some glimpse of perfection in herself and maybe dispel her feelings of inadequacy. The speaker will go so far as to lie down with the flowers permanently, as in death, because it will make her feel more human and perfect by fueling the flowers’ growth.

The connection between plants and the human body are further explored in “Surgeon at 2 a.m.” though in a more negative way. The point of view is from a surgeon going through his normal routine. However he sees himself as a gardener and the human body as his garden bed. His patients are “tubers and fruits / Oozing their jammy substances.” The skin and blood vessels of the patient are like a “mat of roots” as the nurses assisting him clamp back the folds of skin to begin surgery of the chest cavity. Then he describes the organs using floral imagery, with the

“lung-tree” and the coils of the intestines resembling the spiraling runners of orchids. In the center of all this is the heart, a “red-bell-bloom, in distress.” All of the images convey a sense of being bound to the earth and to living.

This, however, is not perceived as a positive thing to the speaker. In this hospital, where everything is sterile and illuminated in white light, he observes, “The soul is another light. / I have not seen it.” So even though the hospital resembles the ideal of a white heaven, it is “artificial” and brings no comfort to the souls and minds of the patients. The patients are still earth-bound and organic, like the flowers, yet they cannot find peace in this. The surgeon is prolonging this stay, by giving one patient a “pink plastic limb,” replacing what was decaying with something fake so as to extend the person’s life, even if they wanted to die. The surgeon describes himself as the sun, and similar to the sun in “Poppies in October,” he is an oppressive figure, though unintentionally so. All he strives for is to save his patients from death, even if they want to die. Instead of dying however, their “Gray faces, shuttered by drugs, follow [the surgeon] like flowers.” They have become resigned to their state of living, and silently wait for the surgeon to release them, reliant on him as flowers are to the sun.

Coming back to the image of poppies, “Poppies in July” is a very different poem than its October counterpart. Instead of identifying with the poppies and personifying them in a feministic manner, the speaker of “July” sees the poppies as a source of relief, but they do not give it freely. The poem draws on a more negative view of the flowers akin to the view presented in “Surgeon at 2 a.m.” The poppies are still a blazing red color and the speaker describes them as “little hell flames.” Their color is so vivid that the narrator feels she needs to “put [her] hands among the flames,” but is surprised that “Nothing burns.” This could also mean that the speaker is devoid of feeling; she physically and psychologically cannot associate with the flowers, unlike

“October” and “Vertical” in which those speakers felt a kinship with the flowers. The narrator becomes agitated with the poppies, “it exhausts me to watch you / Flickering like that,” she claims. She wants to feel something from them, even if it’s a painful sensation, and when she realizes that they cannot “do no harm” physically, she looks to their pharmacological abilities. The poem takes on a frantic tone as the speaker begs, “Where are your opiates, your nauseous capsules? / If I could bleed, or sleep!—,” reinforcing the narrator’s need to either bleed from touching the poppies or let their chemicals lull her to sleep. Finally, she gets her reprieve, the poppies’ “liquors seep...Dulling and stilling.” Interestingly, the brightly colored poppies are now contrasted with the “colorless”-ness the speaker feels as the opium takes effect. The poppies have done their job, yet they have given up the life and vitality that was embodied in their color, just as the narrator has given up her ability to sense all other things in order to dull her pain and depression.

In “Tulips,” the title flowers are utterly offensive to the speaker. There is no hint of the respect and companionship found in “October” and “Vertical” or even the basic need for them as seen in “Surgeon” and “July,” they are simply an intrusion into the narrator’s white, peaceful hospital room. The tulips are described as “too excitable” and their bold red color are unpleasant to the speaker who wants “nothing to do with explosions,” comparing the presence of the red tulips in her room to a bright bomb going off. The narrator wants to die, she describes the ambiance of her room as being like winter and she is “learning peacefulness” by lying there, essentially waiting to die. The tulips then become a glaring reminder of life, something the speaker wants to leave behind but the tulips sit there and force her to think of it. They remind her of the family photo sitting on her table, the smiles acting as “hooks,” keeping her here in the living world.

The speaker further personifies the tulips as an “awful baby,” eating her oxygen and demanding her attention when before nobody watched her, which allowed her to drift into a peaceful death. The speaker views these baby-like tulips as dependent on her, needing her to stay and look after them, much like the family in the photograph, and for this she hates them. Before they arrived the “air was calm” but now it is filled with “loud noise,” encouraging even the walls to be more lively. The tulips are so intrusive to her peace she believes they should be “behind bars like dangerous animal,” unable to bother her. Yet, near the end of the poem, the tulips have started to influence the narrator. The “red bloom” of her heart, the same imagery used in “Surgeon,” continues to beat and she becomes more aware of it, almost as if she is waking up from her dying. The tulips, though still hated, have convinced or forced the speaker to continue living in spite of her previous resolution to death.

Written days before Plath’s suicide, the floral imagery in “Edge” is a composite of the ideas in her other poems. Not strictly about flowers, “Edge” depicts a dying or possibly already dead woman as a Greek statue. The woman it represents is perfect because of the long life she has lived and all she has endured, therefore she can finally rest, unlike the speakers of “Vertical” and “Tulips” and the patients in “Surgeon,” who still have to go on living. The woman is accompanied by “Each dead child..., a white serpent.” The dead children and white serpent are the woman’s former ties to the living, much like the “smiling hooks” of the family in “Tulips,” except these people are no longer alive which frees the woman of “Edge” from the guilt of leaving people dependent on her behind. She is able to simply fold “Them back into her body as petals / Of a rose close when the garden / Stiffens and odors bleed.” Her body is like the petals of the rose, closing up at day’s end, to sleep through the night. The rose is also described as a “night flower,” furthering the idea of achieving a peaceful death. An interesting contrast between the

red rose and the red tulips forms, because now instead of instigating the subject of the poem to live, as is the case in "Tulips," the red flower now invites and creates the image of the woman folding up her body and dying. Though not completely focused on floral metaphors, "Edge" is able to convey the ideas and themes of Plath's other flower-based poems, unifying them and culminating in the ultimate end that is death.

Whether the images are subtle or direct, Sylvia Plath is able to expertly detail some of her rawest feelings and thoughts in her poetry. The use of flowers as symbols for these emotions allows for numerous interpretations and complex, layered metaphors. Often the idea the flower represents can change, as in the differing imagery of "Poppies in July" and "Poppies in October," thus expanding the depth of the flower's meaning. The desire to be like the flowers and hatred of them is obvious in poems such as "I am Vertical," "Surgeon at 2 a.m.," and "Tulips." Plath can also use the flower as a background image, as in "Edge," where it serves the purpose of supporting the main theme of a restful death. The flowers of Plath's poetry change as her life experiences and psychological state change, fluctuating from motherhood, to sickness, depression, feminism, and finally, peace in death.