Sylvia Plath grew up at a time of intense poetic ferment in the United States. It may surprise you to learn, however, that she wrote only two volumes of poetry before her suicide at the age of 31. During her short life, she craved fame but it was her posthumous collection, *Ariel*, which was published in 1965, that astonished the literary world. Despite its dark, brooding nature, this collection has become one of the best-selling volumes of poetry ever published. Sylvia Plath is, quite simply, an iconic literary figure. From the myths that grew up around her following her suicide, she emerged larger than life. Her poems explore the depths of the human psyche and, as a result, can be confusing and difficult to understand. The mind is, after all, a confusing and difficult terrain to chart accurately. Yet notwithstanding its difficulty, her poetry is unforgettable. The harmony and musical quality of her language often give way to frighteningly dark statements about life and death. The unique and, at times, chillingly authentic voice that Plath fashioned from the tragedy of her life may not be one that you want to hear. Her poetry can be likened to dreams and nightmares. It is this ability to confront the darker sides of human consciousness that makes Plath’s work so fascinating.
Finisterre

This was the land’s end: the last fingers, knuckled and rheumatic,
Crumped on nothing. Black
Admonitory cliffs, and the sea exploding
With no bottom, or anything on the other side of it,
Whitened by the faces of the drowned. 5
Now it is only gloomy, a dump of rocks—
Leftover soldiers from old, messy wars.
The sea cannons into their ear, but they don’t budge.
Other rocks hide their grudges under the water.

The cliffs are edged with trefoils, stars and bells 10
Such as fingers might embroider, close to death,
Almost too small for the mists to bother with.
The mists are part of the ancient paraphernalia—
Souls, rolled in the doom-noise of the sea.
They bruise the rocks out of existence, then resurrect them. 15
They go up without hope, like sighs.
I walk among them, and they stuff my mouth with cotton.
When they free me, I am beaded with tears.

Our Lady of the Shipwrecked is striding toward the horizon, 20
Her marble skirts blown back in two pink wings.
A marble sailor kneels at her foot distractedly, and at his foot
A peasant woman in black
Is praying to the monument of the sailor praying.
Our Lady of the Shipwrecked is three times life size,
Her lips sweet with divinity. 25
She does not hear what the sailor or the peasant is saying—
She is in love with the beautiful formlessness of the sea.

Gull-colored laces flap in the sea drafts
Beside the postcard stalls.
The peasants anchor them with conches. One is told: 30
'These are the pretty trinkets the sea hides, 
Little shells made up into necklaces and toy ladies. 
They do not come from the Bay of the Dead down there, 
But from another place, tropical and blue, 
We have never been to. 
These are our crêpes. Eat them before they blow cold.'

glossary

The title, ‘Finisterre’, refers to a département in the northernmost part of Brittany in France. The name ‘Finisterre’ means ‘land’s end’. Plath visited the area in 1961. 
1 rheumatic – this is a reference to rheumatism. The hands and knuckles of people suffering from this condition often become disfigured. Plath is using the image of an arthritic hand to describe the Breton landscape. Notice, also, how the physical shape of the poem approximates the shape of a jagged coastline. 
3 Admonitory – warning.
10 trefoils – any three-leafed plant, such as shamrock or clover. Trefoils often appear on coats of arms. 
13 paraphernalia – equipment or bits and pieces. 
19 Our Lady of the Shipwrecked – here, the poet refers to a statue of Our Lady (the mother of Jesus Christ) who prays for the dead souls of the shipwrecked sailors. 
27 formlessness – without shape. 
30 conches – large seashells. 
31 trinkets – small, ornamental pieces of little

1. Content

‘Finisterre’ is a dark and somewhat disturbing poem that opens with a statement in the past tense. Referring to the place named in the title, the poet says ‘This was the land’s end’. This landscape is likened to the hand of a rheumatoid arthritis sufferer. It is ‘knuckled and [...] | Cramped on nothing’. The dark cliffs overlook what seems to be a bottomless sea. In a disturbing moment, the water appears as if it has been whitened by the faces of the drowned. The dull and ominous rocks are seen as being akin to ‘Leftover soldiers from old, messy wars’. For a brief moment, the poet considers what might lie under the water but then draws back. In the second stanza, she returns to the cliff edges.
They have been embroidered with ‘trefoils, stars and bells’. In her imagination, the speaker sees the decorative covering of clover that adorns the cliff edge as being embroidered by fingers close to death. She then returns her gaze to the sea. The mist seems unconcerned with this imaginary figure who is nearing death. In Western literature, the mists of the sea have long been associated with the souls of the dead. Plath can now see these souls as they roll in the ‘doom-noise of the sea’. When they do manage to break free, their only action is to:

 [...] bruise the rocks out of existence, then resurrect them.

They go up without hope, like sighs. As the wind lashes the coast, the poet feels as if she is walking among these souls. They ‘stuff [her] mouth with cotton’ and when they free her, she is ‘beaded with tears’. In the third stanza, the poem becomes even more disconnected from the actual world as the speaker imagines that:

**Our Lady of the Shipwrecked is striding toward the horizon,**

**Her marble skirts blown back in two pink wings.**

This is most likely intended to be a description of a statue of the Virgin Mary. At the foot of this figure, a ‘marble sailor kneels’. ‘A peasant woman in black’ is also ‘praying to the monument’. However, it is the statue of the Virgin Mary that keeps the speaker’s attention. She is ‘three times life size’ and her ‘lips [are] sweet with divinity’. Worryingly, she appears to ignore the prayers of the people at her feet:

**She does not hear what the sailor or the peasant is saying—**

**She is in love with the beautiful formlessness of the sea.**

For most of ‘Finisterre’, the speaker has the courage to face the dark and dangerous sea on her own. However, in the closing movement of the poem, she makes a marked withdrawal from the cliff’s edge. The surreal seascape that has dominated the poem now yields to the more human landscape of ‘postcard stalls’, ‘pretty trinkets’, ‘necklaces’ and ‘toy ladies’. In a final reference to the dark, watery world she has just visited, the speaker reminds us that these seaside souvenirs ‘do not come from the Bay of the Dead down there’. They come from ‘another place, tropical and blue’. In the final line of the poem, a
human voice interrupts the speaker’s thoughts. She is told to eat her pancakes before they go cold.

2. Stylistic Features

The disturbing tone of Plath’s poetry underscores a depth of feeling that can be attributed to few other poets. Writing in The Observer, Al Alvarez described her work as being ‘of great artistic purity’. Her obsession with death and her near-suicidal attempts to communicate a frightening vision of the world often overshadow all discussion of stylistic technique. Nevertheless, it is possible to detect stylistic features in ‘Finisterre’ that are also present in much of Plath’s other poetry on the course. In her poems, the sea is often associated with death by drowning. In this respect, ‘Finisterre’ is no different. The title of the poem is suggestive of death or the end of a journey. Interestingly, the poem opens in the past tense. This unusual choice of tense (given that the place still exists) hints at the symbolic meaning of the poem. The opening image of old, rheumatic fingers clinging desperately to the land is a disturbing one. The cliffs that these fingers cling to warn of danger, and far below, the sea explodes angrily. Many of Plath’s seascape poems depict a turbulent sea that is, in fact, a reflection of the poet’s troubled state of mind. The world of this poem is reminiscent of the images contained in a surreal painting. It is a world that has been ‘Whitened by the faces of the drowned’. By the end of the first stanza, the poet has succeeded in establishing a threatening, sinister and uneasy atmosphere through her use of personification. A battle is being waged between the sea and the rocks. At times, the souls of the dead, in the form of mist, appear to break free from their watery graves only to be drawn back into the water again. This seems to be an endless struggle. You should pay attention to the visual quality of the poem. The colours black and white appear in many of Plath’s later poems. When she uses these colours, black is usually used to convey despair and gloom, while white symbolises emptiness and deadness. The introduction of ‘Our Lady of the Shipwrecked’ does little to lessen this dark and gloomy atmosphere. Normally a symbol of hope and comfort, in this poem Our Lady turns her back on those looking for her help. In the closing stanza of the poem, the dark atmosphere continues to prevail. As the poet moves away from the daunting seascape of Finisterre, she returns to the human world of commerce, ‘crêpes’ and ‘pretty trinkets’. The fact that none of these comes from the place that she has just been to reinforces in the reader’s mind the idea that Finisterre is a dark and disturbing place. In fact, throughout this poem, human concerns
seem trivial when one considers the darkly powerful and elemental conflict that takes place between land and sea. The sea has often been used as a metaphor for the subconscious in literature and it is entirely possible to read the sea as acting as such in this poem. In any case, this poem deals with extremes and extreme states. The act of reaching the edge of a cliff is strongly suggestive of a mental breakdown. While the jerky and jagged appearance of the stanzas mirrors the physical landscape of Finisterre, it may also be suggestive of the poet’s state of mind. If the sea does represent her subconscious, then it is obviously meant to depict a troubled mind.

3. Essay Writing

‘Finisterre’ is one of the most memorable poems by Plath on the course. This fact alone merits its inclusion in any response to Plath’s poetry that you may be asked to make. If you wish to include ‘Finisterre’ in a response to her poetry, you may wish to include some of the following points.

a. The imagery in the poem is dark and powerful.
b. The sea can be interpreted as a metaphor for Plath’s subconscious mind. This fact may provide you with an opportunity to link your discussion of the poem to other poems on the course.
c. Once again, Plath turns to nature in order to make concrete the inner workings of her mind.
Mirror

I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.
Whatever I see I swallow immediately
Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.
I am not cruel, only truthful—
The eye of a little god, four-cornered.
Most of the time I meditate on the opposite wall.
It is pink, with speckles. I have looked at it so long
I think it is a part of my heart. But it flickers.
Faces and darkness separate us over and over.

Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,
Searching my reaches for what she really is.
Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon.
I see her back, and reflect it faithfully.
She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands.
I am important to her. She comes and goes.
Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.
In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman
Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.

glossary

1 preconceptions – fixed ideas.
3 unmisted – here, the poet uses this word to mean that the mirror’s judgement is not clouded by love or any other emotions.
6 meditate – to ponder or contemplate.
11 reaches – range or extent of the mirror’s surface.
14 agitation of hands – shaking of hands.
Critical Commentary: Mirror

1. Content

‘Mirror’ opens with two short, clipped sentences that capture the mirror’s essence perfectly:

I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.

The voice of the mirror goes on to tell us that whatever it sees, it swallows ‘immediately’. The mirror does not seek to alter the image that it reflects. It is ‘unmisted by love or dislike’. As this series of statements may appear harsh, the mirror quickly seeks to reassure us that it is ‘not cruel, only truthful’. The tone of the mirror’s voice changes slightly in the fifth line. It tells us that it is like:

The eye of a little god, four-cornered. When no one passes in front of the mirror, it ‘meditate[s] on the opposite wall’. In fact, this mirror has spent so much time contemplating the ‘pink’ and speckled wall that it believes the wall to be part of its heart. There is a sudden shift in the narrative in the second stanza. The mirror now sees itself as a lake over which a woman is leaning:

Searching my reaches for what she really is.

The woman then turns to the ‘candles’ and the ‘moon’. The mirror views these traditional symbols of romance as being ‘liars’. Suddenly, the looking-glass takes on a sinister aspect. It feels rewarded by the woman’s tears and the shaking of her hands. It feels that it occupies an important place in the woman’s life. In this mirror, the woman has watched herself change from a young girl to an old woman:

In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman
Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.

2. Stylistic Features

In order to capture the essence of the mirror, the poet endows it with human characteristics. This use of personification renders the mirror more interesting and sinister. The opening statement by the mirror suggests that it is honest and
open. However, its short, clipped sentences and its metallic appearance lead us to believe that this mirror is cold and harsh:

I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.
Whatever I see I swallow immediately
Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.
I am not cruel, only truthful—

Something of the mirror’s sinister ego is revealed when it likens itself to ‘The eye of a little god’. The mirror’s tone of voice is smug and disturbing. Even more troubling is the manner in which the woman rewards its behaviour. She searches its ‘reaches’ for who she really is and, in the process, gratifies it. By including a human figure, Plath expands the scope of the poem. In this manner, the shallow belief that surface appearances can reveal deeper truths is exposed for what it is. The foolhardy trust that the woman seems to place in superficial, outward appearances feeds the mirror’s monstrous ego. Whenever she attempts to seek comfort elsewhere, such as from ‘those liars, the candles or the moon’, the mirror’s resentment is almost palpable. The other noticeable aspect of the poem is the manner in which it charts the woman’s ageing. In a disturbingly ironic moment, the woman is swallowed up as a result of her own egotism. Her desperate need to be reassured by what she sees leads her to worship her own self-image. However, this act results in the complete annihilation of her personality. She literally drowns in her ego and in the process is transformed into a ‘terrible fish’. Ageing is seen to lead to a difficult and even frightening transformation. As we have said, this is a process that gratifies the cold mirror.

3. Essay Writing

‘Mirror’ is a fascinating poem and worthy of inclusion in a personal response to Plath’s poetry. If you are considering writing about ‘Mirror’ in an essay, you may want to include some of the following points.

a. The poet’s language captures the essence of the mirror in chilling detail.

b. The poem is structured in such a manner so as to appear symmetrical. Both stanzas are carefully measured and, in this sense, the form of the poem mirrors the subject matter.

c. Once again, Plath draws on unusual and memorable imagery so as to retain the reader’s attention.
I know the bottom, she says. I know it with my great tap root:
It is what you fear.
I do not fear it: I have been there.

Is it the sea you hear in me,
Its dissatisfactions?
Or the voice of nothing, that was your madness?
Love is a shadow.

How you lie and cry after it
Listen: these are its hooves: it has gone off, like a horse.

All night I shall gallop thus, impetuously,
Till your head is a stone, your pillow a little turf,
Echoing, echoing.

Or shall I bring you the sound of poisons?
This is rain now, this big hush.
And this is the fruit of it: tin-white, like arsenic.

I have suffered the atrocity of sunsets.
Scorched to the root
My red filaments burn and stand, a hand of wires.

Now I break up in pieces that fly about like clubs.
A wind of such violence
Will tolerate no bystanding: I must shriek.

The moon, also, is merciless: she would drag me
Cruelly, being barren.
Her radiance scathes me. Or perhaps I have caught her.

I let her go. I let her go
Diminished and flat, as after radical surgery.
How your bad dreams possess and endow me.
I am inhabited by a cry.
Nightly it flaps out
Looking, with its hooks, for something to love.

I am terrified by this dark thing
That sleeps in me;
All day I feel its soft, feathery turnings, its malignity.

Clouds pass and disperse.
Are those the faces of love, those pale irretrievables?
Is it for such I agitate my heart?

I am incapable of more knowledge.
What is this, this face
So murderous in its strangle of branches?—

Its snaky acids kiss.
It petrifies the will. These are the isolate, slow faults
That kill, that kill, that kill.

glossary

The title of the poem, ‘Elm’, refers to the majestic and stately deciduous tree. Ruth Fainlight is an American poet born in New York in 1931. The poem takes the form of a dialogue between the speaker and the elm tree. In the opening line, it is the elm that speaks first.

1 tap root – the principal root in the tree.
5 dissatisfactions – disappointments. Notice how the sound of the word approximates the sound of the rustling of leaves. This effect is known as onomatopoeia.
10 impetuously – impulsively, rashly.
15 arsenic – a powerful, white-coloured poison that kills almost instantly. The poet may be associating this image with snow.
16 atrocity – an extremely violent incident or massacre.
18 filaments – thin wires or fibres.
19 clubs – a thick stick used as a weapon. Here, the poet is likening the branches of the tree to clubs.
21 shriek – scream.
23 being barren – unable to conceive children.
24 radiance – brightness.
24 scathes – causes harm.
26 flat, as after radical surgery – in this disturbing simile, Plath compares the moon to a woman who has had her breasts removed.
27 endow me – bestow on me. Here, the speaker is asking the tree to bestow on her some of its qualities.
33 malignity – evil or illness.
34 disperse – scatter.
35 irretrievables – those things that cannot be returned to how they were.
36 agitate – worry or trouble.
40 its snaky acids kiss – its snake-like poisons. Note that some editions use the word ‘hiss’ instead of ‘kiss’ here.
Critical Commentary: Elm

1. Content
‘Elm’ is a complex, even confusing, poem. The poem takes the form of a dialogue between the speaker and an elm tree. Because both voices in the poem employ the personal pronoun ‘I’, many readers find it difficult to make sense of the narrative structure of ‘Elm’. The poem opens with a startling statement from the tree:

I know the bottom, she says. I know it with my great tap root:
It is what you fear.

It is possible to read the next line as a reply from the speaker to what the elm has just said. Here, the speaker refutes the tree’s suggestion that she is afraid of the bottom:

I do not fear it: I have been there.

In the second three-line stanza, the elm questions the speaker. It asks her whether or not she hears echoes of her own ‘dissatisfactions’ or ‘madness’ in the movement of the tree. In the third stanza, the voice of the speaker claims that ‘Love is a shadow’. The elm reminds her that she still yearns for love, but the speaker replies that love has disappeared:

Listen: these are its hooves: it has gone off, like a horse.

What is presumably meant to be the voice of the elm then tells the speaker that it intends to ‘gallop [...] impetuously | Till [her] head is a stone’. In the fifth stanza, the voice of the elm offers to bring the speaker ‘the sound of poisons’. In the sixth stanza, we are made aware that the tree has ‘suffered’ terribly. The ‘atrocity of sunsets’ that the elm refers to has ‘Scorched [it] to the root’. The abrupt change in action in the seventh stanza is signalled when the elm tells us that it ‘break[s] up in pieces that fly about like clubs’. This scattering effect refers to the physical action of the wind on the trees, but it also hints at a troubling break-up of the tree’s being. In the eighth stanza, the elm tells us that the ‘moon, also, is merciless’. The imagery becomes even more troubling. In the
eyes of the elm, the moon is a sinister figure. It is ‘barren’ and its ‘radiance scathes’ the tree. For a moment, the tree feels that it has caught the moon in the tangle of its branches. However, it quickly lets the moon go. For its part, the moon has been disfigured by the encounter with the tree. It is as if it has been forced to undergo a mastectomy or some other form of ‘radical surgery’.

At this point in the poem, it becomes difficult to separate the voice of the speaker from that of the tree. The tree tells us that it feels ‘inhabited by a cry’. This ‘dark thing | That sleeps’ in her is soft and its ‘feathery turnings’ are described as being malign. Meanwhile, the ‘Clouds pass and disperse’. These fleeting images are likened to the faces of past loves. They, too, have been changed radically and can never be restored to the way they once were. The fact that these ‘faces of love’ are irretrievable is a source of pain and agitation for the speaker:

Is it for such I agitate my heart?

In the final two stanzas, the poem becomes more difficult to decipher. The imagery is increasingly surreal and it is no longer clear who is speaking. Perhaps the narrative voice is meant to represent both speakers in the poem. In any case, the speaker tells us that it is ‘incapable of more knowledge’. A face appears in the ‘strangle of branches’ and its ‘snaky acids kiss’ literally ‘petrifies the will’ of the speaker. The final words of the poem are disturbing. In language that is violent, both speakers are effaced, or erased. The physical assaults that it has been subjected to take their toll on the elm. Similarly, the emotional damage that the female speaker has suffered destroys her. These ‘faults’, both physical and emotional, are seen as being the ones:

That kill, that kill, that kill.

2. Stylistic Features
The critic Tim Kendall feels that while it is given the single date of 19 April, ‘Elm’ ‘perfects themes and images with which Plath had been struggling for weeks’. During the five months preceding her suicide, Plath wrote almost the entire body of poems that were to be collected two years later and published as Ariel. These poems amount to a personal catalogue of the loneliness and insecurity that plagued her. Crowded with desolate, disturbing imagery, Ariel lays bare her fixation with death. ‘Elm’ was first published in this collection. Plath’s early drafts of the poem were published by her husband, Ted Hughes, in her Collected Poems. The notes to this early version of the poem reveal that
Plath intended ‘Elm’ to capture a disturbed psychic state. Plath’s first draft opened with the line, ‘She is not easy she is not peaceful.’ The final version, which appears in this anthology, also contains an uneasy attempt to express the pain of a mind in torment. While there seem to be two speakers in the poem, at times it is as if their identities merge. ‘Elm’ contains some of Plath’s favourite images: trees at night and the icy pallor of the moon. It is typical of Plath’s poetry that nature mirrors the emotions of the poet and this is certainly the case here. The voice of the elm empathises with the female speaker in the poem. It shares her emotions and recognises her fears and insecurities. The personification of the tree leads us to believe that the elm really can empathise with the speaker’s troubled emotional state. This process begins in the second stanza. The onomatopoeic effect of the word ‘dissatisfactions’ not only approximates the sound of the leaves rustling, but also creates an uneasy, restless sound. This sound is echoed in the fifth stanza by the rain, which falls in a ‘big hush’. This is another restless sound that may be intended to mirror the speaker’s emotional state. In the sixth stanza, the tree informs us that it has:

 [...] suffered the atrocity of sunsets.  
Scorched to the root  
My red filaments burn and stand, a hand of wires.

This may well be an allusion to electro-convulsive shock therapy. This treatment is used on patients who suffer from depression and other mental illnesses. Plath underwent shock treatment at Valley Head Hospital following a serious mental breakdown and attempted suicide in 1952. It seems more than coincidental that the voice of the tree should articulate a sensation that closely resembles being electrocuted. It is important to realise that the central image here is not a hopeful one. The image of a sunset suggests an end, not a beginning. Furthermore, this sunset is not natural: it is over-bright and worryingly intense. If the elm has suffered, it is also capable of empathy. It senses the speaker’s own suffering and pain. It understands how she has been tormented by ‘love’ and ‘madness’. In response to this suffering, the elm offers to assuage the speaker’s pain with the ‘sound of poisons’. As we have already discussed, sounds are very important to the overall feelings of unease in this poem. In the second half of ‘Elm’, these feelings are reinforced by some strange and unsettling imagery. The moon is linked to a cold, barren vision of a mutilated femininity. Could this be a projection of the poet/speaker’s self-image? In the final stanzas of the poem, death appears to close in as fear turns to numbness. As the poem draws to a close, both personae adopted by the poet become submerged. Neither the tree
nor the speaker emerges fully in the final stanza. It is as if both speakers have been destroyed by their encounter with one another. It is impossible to provide an accurate description of what takes place in this poem. The lack of logic and loose narrative structure in ‘Elm’ reflect the speaker’s own troubled state of mind. This is a dark poem that offers us a glimpse into the violent, uneasy and ultimately tragic mental condition of the poet.

3. Essay Writing
‘Elm’ embodies many of the qualities that make Plath’s poetry so memorable. If you are writing a paragraph that makes use of this poem, you might want to include some of the following points.

a. The language of the poem is haunting and troubling, yet it is also very beautiful.

b. The poem reveals to us the extent of Plath’s disturbed mental state.

c. Once again, the poet draws on nature to make her innermost feelings intelligible to her readership.
Poppies in July

Little poppies, little hell flames,
Do you do no harm?

You flicker. I cannot touch you.
I put my hands among the flames. Nothing burns.

And it exhausts me to watch you 5
Flickering like that, wrinkly and clear red, like the skin of a mouth.

A mouth just bloodied.
Little bloody skirts!

There are fumes that I cannot touch.
Where are your opiates, your nauseous capsules? 10

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.

But colorless. Colorless.

glossary

The title, ‘Poppies in July’, is significant. Opiates are extracted from the seeds of these small red flowers. Many opiate-based drugs, such as heroin, are obtained from poppies; as a result, the flower has often been associated with delirium.

1 little hell flames – given that the flowers are red, the speaker views them as being like flames.

9 fumes – this is a reference to the drugs that can be obtained from the poppies.
10 opiates – narcotics.
10 nauseous – sickening.
13 liquors – juices.
13 glass capsule – drugs are often contained in a glass vile.
15 colorless – this is most likely a reference to the general numbing of the senses that opiates can induce.
Critical Commentary: Poppies in July

1. Content
A concise and powerful poem, ‘Poppies in July’ opens with an unusual description of the poppies. From her hospital bed, the speaker views the flowers as ‘little hell flames’. She then addresses the poppies directly, asking them if they do any harm. In the second couplet, the poet continues to gaze at the flowers. She cannot touch them. They flicker like flames but, importantly, they do not burn. The experience of staring at the flowers so intently ‘exhausts’ the poet. The petals of these small, red flowers remind the speaker of the ‘skin of a mouth’. The image is extended in the fourth couplet. Here, the speaker tells us that she views the poppies as being like a ‘mouth just bloodied’. She goes on to say that these flowers remind her of ‘little bloody skirts’. As the speaker’s senses become increasingly dulled, she continues to stress the fact that she cannot touch these flowers. Aware of the poppies’ scent, the poet now searches for their ‘opiates’ and ‘nauseous capsules’. In the sixth couplet, the imagery becomes more disturbing. The speaker longs for release from her numbed state:

If I could bleed, or sleep!—
If my mouth could marry a hurt like that!

The juices of the poppy (from which opiates are derived) continue to seep into her. As a result, the speaker feels that her senses have been dulled. Eventually, everything becomes ‘colorless’.

2. Stylistic Features
‘Poppies in July’ is another darkly disturbing poem. The tone of the speaker’s voice suggests a masochistic desire for self-harm. At the centre of the poem is the belief, on the speaker’s part, that sleeping and bleeding are solutions to her present state of mind. Interestingly, the flowers refuse to co-operate with the speaker. They might be ‘little hell flames’, but they refuse to burn the speaker even when she puts her hands amongst them. This poem was written during a period of great emotional turmoil for Plath and it captures the poet’s desperate desire, loneliness and confusion. The speaker uses synaesthesia in the poem in order to convey her bewildered state. She attempts to touch the ‘fumes’, yet the imagined flames fail to burn her. Notice how the predominance of broad vowel sounds mirrors the poet’s lethargic and numbed
state of being. Yet Plath manages to juxtapose these broad vowel sounds with the more lively, slender sounds used to describe the flowers. The ‘Little poppies’ ‘flicker’ and dance in front of her. Their movement and energy are in sharp contrast to the stupor of the poet. Despite the speaker’s attempts to capture the poppies’ negative power, they remain symbolic of life. At the end of the poem, the poet views the world as being ‘colorless’. However, the vivid blood-red of the poppies lingers on in the memory of the reader. They refuse to yield to the speaker’s harmful impulses and seem to insist on life. ‘Poppies in July’ is another disturbing and exhilarating poem that manages to convey something of the poet’s troubled mental state.

3. Essay Writing
‘Poppies in July’ is another one of the poems by Plath on the course that offers us a glimpse into the poet’s troubled mental state. If you are going to use this poem in an essay on Plath, you might want to make use of some of the following points.

a. The poem illustrates Plath’s obsession with self-harm.

b. The use of colour in the poem reveals the intensity of Plath’s emotional state.

c. As its title suggests, ‘Poppies in July’ draws on the natural world in order to make sense of the poet’s troubled mental state.
Child

Your clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful thing.
I want to fill it with color and ducks,
The zoo of the new

Whose names you meditate—
April snowdrop, Indian pipe,
Little

Stalk without wrinkle,
Pool in which images
Should be grand and classical

Not this troublous
Wringing of hands, this dark
Ceiling without a star.

glossary

5 Indian pipe – a small flower native to North America.
6 Little Stalk – little stem of the plant.
9 classical – beautiful or statuesque.
10 troublous – agitated or full of trouble.
Critical Commentary: Child

1. Content

‘Child’ is a dark yet beautiful poem which captures Plath’s growing sense of insecurity concerning her marriage and her mixed feelings at being a mother again. In January 1962, Plath’s son, Nicholas, was born. Unfortunately, the birth of the child coincided with a very painful time for Plath, during which her marriage broke up. Ted Hughes, her husband, who was in love with someone else, moved to London, leaving a bitter and beleaguered Plath with the two children in Devon; she wrote to her mother in August that she wanted a legal separation because:

I simply cannot go on living the degraded and agonized life
I have been living, which has stopped my writing and just
about ruined my sleep and my health.

Struggling with her desolation and disenchantment, she kept herself occupied with beekeeping, took up horse-riding and wrote passionate and often violent poems. In this poem, she outlines her first impressions of her new son. She says that his ‘clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful thing’. Her journal entry, written the day after Nicholas was born, echoes these sentiments:

I felt very proud of Nicholas, and fond. It had taken a
night to be sure I liked him – his head shaped up beautifully
... a handsome, male head with a back brain-shelf. Dark, black
blue eyes, a furze of hair like a crew cut.

In the second line of ‘Child’, the speaker says she wants to fill the baby’s clear eye with ‘color and ducks’. In playful, childlike language, she describes this new arrangement of colours and ducks as being ‘The zoo of the new’. In her estimation, her new baby is like an ‘April snowdrop’. Its beautiful eyes should reflect noble and grandiose images, not the nervous agitation of its mother. The poem ends in a sombre, troubling manner. The child’s eye now reflects a ‘dark | Ceiling without a star’.

2. Stylistic Features

‘Child’ charts the poet’s confused state following the birth of her child. To begin
with, the poem suggests a hopeful and joyous mood. Colour is extremely important in Plath’s poetry and this poem opens with the speaker longing to fill the clear eye of her child with colour. The language of the poem is childlike and deliberately attempts to simulate the sounds a mother makes when talking to her child. Likewise, the lilting rhythm and simplistic rhyming scheme of the poem work to create an almost nursery rhyme effect. The poem’s narrative is related in four tercets. This three-line structure is normally used by Plath to contain separate viewpoints. However, in ‘Child’, the tercets are linked together by a series of run-on lines. The use of enjambment allows Plath to maintain its gentle momentum. In the fourth stanza, the tone and mood of the poem darken. The actions of the troubled mother are seen through the eyes of the child. A poem that began in a hopeful manner is utterly transformed in the final stanza. The brightness and hope that we associated with the clarity of the child’s eye are now replaced by a dark despondency.

3. Essay Writing

Motherhood is an extremely important theme in the poetry of Sylvia Plath. Bearing this in mind, you may wish to include ‘Child’ in a response to the poetry of Plath that you have studied. Consider some of the following points.

a. Unlike ‘Morning Song’, this poem has a darker tone.
b. The poem reveals intimate details about the poet’s private life.
c. Notice the contrast between dark and light in the poem. As we have mentioned previously, colour is extremely important in Plath’s poetry.
Morning Song

Love set you going like a fat gold watch.
The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry
Took its place among the elements.

Our voices echo, magnifying your arrival. New statue.
In a drafty museum, your nakedness
Shadows our safety. We stand round blankly as walls.

I’m no more your mother
Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow
Effacement at the wind’s hand.

All night your moth-breath
Flickers among the flat pink roses. I wake to listen:
A far sea moves in my ear.

One cry, and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral
In my Victorian nightgown.
Your mouth opens clean as a cat’s. The window square
Whitens and swallows its dull stars. And now you try
Your handful of notes;
The clear vowels rise like balloons.

glossary

2 The midwife – a person who is specialised in the delivery of babies.
3 the elements – in ancient times, the ‘elements’ were earth, air, fire and water.
7 I’m no more your mother | Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow | Effacement – here, Plath employs a complex image to describe the relationship between mother and child. The cloud produces the rain that forms puddles that, in turn, reflect the cloud.
8 distills – purifies.
9 Effacement – wiping or rubbing out.
13 cow-heavy – heavy with breast milk.
14 Victorian – a fashion typical of the period under Queen Victoria’s reign (1837–1901). Here, Plath means that her nightdress is old-fashioned.
18 vowels – the letters a, e, i, o and u.
1. Content

‘Morning Song’ was first published in Plath’s most famous collection of poems, Ariel. In the words of Al Alvarez, this collection of poetry contains poems that are ‘despairing, vengeful and destructive’. However, it also contains pieces that are warm, tender and unusually clever. While ‘Morning Song’ contains moments of insecurity, it is basically an optimistic poem. It opens with a direct and warmly inclusive statement:

Love set you going like a fat gold watch.

We learn that the midwife slapped the child’s feet in order to prompt it to take its first breath. As a result, the baby’s ‘bald cry | Took its place among the elements’. In the second tercet, the narrative takes on a slightly surreal aspect. This is most likely a conscious attempt on Plath’s part to mirror her feelings of disorientation following the birth. The baby is likened to a museum piece. What are presumably the adults are seen to be shadowed by this naked, newborn baby. The poet then reveals her insecurity and uncertainty by proclaiming in the third stanza:

I’m no more your mother
Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow
Effacement at the wind’s hand.

Here, the poet compares the complex relationship between mother and child to that between a cloud and a pool of water. The cloud produces water that forms a pool, and the pool, in turn, reflects the cloud. In the fourth stanza, the speaker’s attention focuses on her child. The child’s breath is described as being like the fluttering of a moth. Its lips are likened to pink roses. In many of Plath’s poems, flowers are at best viewed in an ambiguous light and at worst as being threatening. However, here the roses act as symbols of maternal warmth. Lying awake, the poet listens and is reminded of a ‘far sea’ moving in her ‘ear’. Alerted by the baby’s cry, she stumbles (despite the fact that she is ‘cow-heavy’) in its direction. The baby responds to her arrival by opening its mouth. ‘The window square | Whitens and swallows its dull stars’. As the poet contemplates this sight, her child begins to cry once again, ‘[its] handful of notes | […] rise like balloons’.

2. Stylistic Features
Plath wrote ‘Morning Song’ after the arrival of her first child, Frieda. This poem makes use of detailed and beautiful imagery in order to evoke the mother–child relationship. So many of Plath’s poems are dark and disturbing, but ‘Morning Song’ is different in that it is a genuine and tender expression of love. The poem opens in a direct and inclusive manner that draws the reader into the narrative and invites him or her to share in the beauty of the scene. The descriptive language employed by the poet to illustrate her feelings on becoming a mother is as precise as it is original. For the most part, she concentrates on the sounds that the child makes. Its cry is described as being ‘bald’ and its breathing is likened to the fluttering of a moth. These unusual associations underline the newness of this experience for the poet. She cannot rely on the traditional or standard images of poetry to describe how she feels. In order to convey to the reader the idea that her baby is an entirely different and new person, the speaker makes use of a captivating simile. The baby’s mouth ‘opens clean as a cat’s’. Her baby, having left the womb, is no longer a part of her. It is a new and unique individual. However, the child does reflect aspects of the poet. In order to convey this aspect of their relationship, Plath relies on the unusual natural imagery of rainwater and clouds. The intensity of the mother’s feelings is captured by the surreal description of the adults in the room standing ‘round blankly as walls’. Notice how the echo of the adult voices seems to magnify the importance of the child’s arrival. However, while the poet is expressly joyous in her outlook, she also has the honesty to admit to feelings of unease. The baby is described as shadowing the safety of its parents. This line reflects the poet’s sense of disquiet and uncertainty. A way of life that was safe and established is obviously about to be turned on its head. It would be wrong, however, to read this poem in a negative light. It is, above all, a celebration – an honest celebration of the single most important event in the lives of most parents.

3. Essay Writing

‘Morning Song’ provides us with a welcome respite from the darker aspects of Plath’s poetry. Motherhood is a major theme in her poetry and you may want to consider devoting a paragraph to this theme. If you are going to use ‘Morning Song’ in an essay, you may wish to use some of the following points in your paragraph.

a. The poet is proud and protective of her newborn child. The tone of the poem is warmly inclusive.

b. Colours play an important role in the poem. This is, of course, true of many of
Plath’s poems. You may wish to devote an entire paragraph to her use of colour.

c. The arrangement of the stanzas in six tercets is controlled and measured. This prevents the poem from becoming over-sentimental.

The Arrival of the Bee Box

I ordered this, this clean wood box
Square as a chair and almost too heavy to lift.
I would say it was the coffin of a midget
Or a square baby
Were there not such a din in it.

The box is locked, it is dangerous.
I have to live with it overnight
And I can’t keep away from it.
There are no windows, so I can’t see what is in there.
There is only a little grid, no exit.

I put my eye to the grid.
It is dark, dark,
With the swarmy feeling of African hands
Minute and shrunk for export,
Black on black, angrily clambering.

How can I let them out?
It is the noise that appalls me most of all,
The unintelligible syllables.
It is like a Roman mob,
Small, taken one by one, but my god, together!

I lay my ear to furious Latin.
I am not a Caesar.
I have simply ordered a box of maniacs.
They can be sent back.
They can die, I need feed them nothing, I am the owner.

I wonder how hungry they are.
I wonder if they would forget me
If I just undid the locks and stood back and turned into a tree.
There is the laburnum, its blond colonnades,
And the petticoats of the cherry.

They might ignore me immediately
In my moon suit and funeral veil.
I am no source of honey
So why should they turn on me?
Tomorrow I will be sweet God, I will set them free.

The box is only temporary.

glossary

5 din – loud noise or racket.
10 grid – a metal grille.
13 African hands – most likely, the poet is referring to African bees.
17 appalls – shocks or upsets.
18 unintelligible – incoherent or garbled.
18 syllables – the sounds that make up the parts of a word.
19 mob – a noisy, often violent, gathering of people.
22 Caesar – Julius Caesar, the famous Roman ruler who laid the foundations for the Roman Empire.
23 maniacs – crazy people.
29 laburnum – a type of tree with long yellow flowers.
29 colonnades – pillars.
30 petticoats – underskirts.
32 moon suit – the protective suit worn by beekeepers resembles that worn by astronauts.
Critical Commentary: The Arrival of the Bee Box

1. Content

In ‘The Arrival of the Bee Box’, the opening statement by the speaker is arresting. She tells us that she has ordered a ‘clean wood box’. It is ‘Square as a chair and almost too heavy to lift’. Considering the box further, the poet feels that it could be the ‘coffin of a midget’ or even a ‘square baby’. This disturbing association with death is temporarily countered by the lively sounds that come from the box. However, in the second five-line stanza, the poet sees the box as being ‘dangerous’. Drawn to this danger, she says that she simply ‘can't keep away from it’. She moves closer to the bee box in the third stanza and puts her ‘eye to the grid’. The place is dark, angry and claustrophobic. In the fourth stanza, the speaker believes that she will never be able to let these creatures out. The noise they make ‘appalls’ her. She is shocked by the incoherent buzzing, which she likens to the noise a ‘Roman mob’ might have made. The thought of all these bees acting with a single purpose unnerves her:

Small, taken one by one, but my god, together!

In the fifth stanza, the poet compares the sounds of the bees to a furious form of Latin. Then, she develops the allusion to ancient Rome. While she views the bees as being akin to a ‘Roman mob’, she, as their owner, does not believe she is Caesar:

I am not a Caesar.
I have simply ordered a box of maniacs.
They can be sent back.
They can die, I need feed them nothing, I am the owner.

There is a change in the tone of the speaker's voice here. As she asserts her own will, she reveals a darker side to her own persona. There is a cruel selfishness to her assertion that she can ‘feed them nothing’. In the sixth stanza, the poet wonders how the bees would react if she ‘undid the locks and stood back and turned into a tree’. Dressed in her beekeeper’s ‘moon suit’, she feels that the bees would ‘ignore’ her. She is not a ‘source of honey’. In the final
lines of the poem, the speaker promises to be sweet and to set them free. In her eyes, ‘The box is only temporary’.

2. Stylistic Features

At the heart of ‘The Arrival of the Bee Box’ lies an exploration of the concept of control. As the poem opens, the speaker attempts to describe her first impressions of the bee box. The first simile that she uses compares it to a ‘chair’ that is ‘too heavy to lift’. The poet quickly dismisses this comparison in favour of the disturbing metaphors that follow. Firstly, the box is likened to the ‘coffin of a midget’ and then to that of ‘a square baby’. The point here is that the language of the poem is unable to control or label the bees correctly. In the words of Tim Kendall, the ‘specificity of the box resists comparisons’. Inside the box is a dark and ‘dangerous’ world. This danger is captured by carefully constructed sound effects. Onomatopoeic words and phrases, such as the ‘din in it’ and ‘noise’, hint at the sound of the bees. This buzzing, swarming sound adds to our impression that the atmosphere in the bee box is claustrophobic and angry. Meanwhile, outside the box, the speaker remains nervous and jumpy. In ‘The Arrival of the Bee Box’, the poet attempts to assert her identity and, in the process, control this buzzing, maniacal mass. Notice how the poet uses the personal pronoun ‘I’ 18 times. It is as if her ownership of the bees causes her to become hyperaware of her own sense of self. This intense consideration of her relationship with the world is, of course, typical of Plath’s poetry. However, the speaker is not entirely at ease with her new role as a god. The comparison with ‘African hands’ alludes to the slave trade, where the strong controlled the weak. The speaker says that she can control this mass of bees by not feeding them. However, by comparing them to a ‘Roman mob’, this control is called into doubt. In fact, her frantic proclamation that she is ‘not a Caesar’ almost sounds defensive. Julius Caesar met a bloody end at the hands of the people he tried to control. The poem ends with the speaker promising to liberate the bees. She releases her control over them. Strangely enough, Plath never fully articulates what these bees are meant to symbolise. At the end of the poem, the very box that provoked such concentrated and intense consideration of identity and control is viewed by the speaker as being only ‘temporary’.

3. Essay Writing

If you are thinking of including ‘The Arrival of the Bee Box’ in one of your essay’s paragraphs, you may want to consider some of the following points.
a. The nervous and edgy tone of voice adopted by the speaker mirrors the poet’s uneasy mental state.
b. On the face of it, the arrival of a box of bees is a run-of-the-mill event. However, when viewed from Plath’s unique perspective, the event is transformed.
c. The language of the poem is intense and works to create a claustrophobic atmosphere.

Sylvia Plath: An Overview

Now that you have read a selection of Plath’s poetry, you should take the time to look at the following general points. The purpose of these is not to tell you what to think, but rather to help you to form your own opinions. When you have read these points, you may wish to take the time to reread Plath’s poetry. You should notice that the general points made here can be used to form the backbone of your paragraphs when it comes to writing on poetry. From now on, try to think about Plath’s poems not only in terms of what they say, but also in terms of how they say it. Open your mind to any reasonable interpretation of the poems; remember, your opinions are as valid as anything printed. However, you must be prepared to ground these opinions in fact. If you find this process difficult, that is entirely normal.

Remember that a poem is not meant to be studied and dissected in the manner that the Leaving Certificate requires of us. While we have to keep the exam in mind, you should not allow it to detract from your enjoyment of the poetry on the course.

1. Plath’s poetry is dark and disturbing. She confronts the murky recesses of her psyche in a bold and thoroughly unique manner.

2. Despite the latent violence and powerful emotions contained in so many of Plath’s poems, her style is at all times measured and controlled.
3. Nearly all of the poems by Plath on the course contain the personal pronoun 'I'. In this sense, her poems tend to be brutally honest explorations of her deepest fears and desires.

4. Plath had a difficult life that ended in the tragedy of her suicide. This tragic aspect to her personality is fully represented in her poems.

5. The selection of poems by Plath on the course contains some very unusual and unexpected images, metaphors and similes. Plath often examines the world in obsessive detail. The result is a body of poetry that is as articulate as it is intense. This list of general points is, of course, in no way exhaustive; there are quite literally thousands of perfectly valid observations to be made about the poetry of Sylvia Plath. Finally, as you reread her poems in this anthology, try to do so with an open mind. Remember, your opinion is as valid as any of the points mentioned here. Try to consult these points frequently, as they will help you when it comes to writing essays.

Past Leaving Certificate Questions

In 2004, students were asked to answer the following question on Sylvia Plath. 'I like (or do not like) to read the poetry of Sylvia Plath.'

Respond to this statement, referring to the poetry by Sylvia Plath on your course.

In that year, correctors were told to look out for the following possible points:
• Striking originality – a distinctive poetic voice.
• Language and imagery are unusual, startling.
• Poetry offers insights into her life.
• Intensity and energy of the verse.
• An interesting preoccupation with life’s darker side.
• The density, complexity of the poems.

Sample Questions

Before you try these questions, you may wish to consult the examination technique guidelines.
1. ‘Reading Sylvia Plath.’
Write out the text of a short article you would write for a school magazine using the above title as a starting point. Support your point of view by reference to the poetry of Plath that you have studied.

2. If you were asked to give a public reading of a small selection of Sylvia Plath’s poems, which ones would you choose to read? Give reasons for your choices, supporting them by reference to the poems on your course.

3. Write an essay in which you outline your reasons for liking or disliking the poetry of Sylvia Plath. Support your points by reference to her poetry.

4. Write a personal response to the poems by Sylvia Plath on your course. Support your points with reference to the poetry on your course.

5. Write a speech to be delivered to your classmates on the impact that Sylvia Plath’s poetry had on you. Your answer should focus on both themes and the use of imagery/language. Support your answer with the aid of suitable reference to the poems on your course.

6. ‘Sylvia Plath – a poet who looks at the world in an unusual way.’
Write an introduction to the poetry of Sylvia Plath using the above title. Your introduction should address her themes and the impact of her poetry on you as a reader. Support your points with reference to the poems you have studied.

7. Write an introduction to the poetry of Sylvia Plath for new readers. Your introduction should cover the following:
   - The ideas that were most important to her.
   - How you responded to her use of language and imagery.
Refer closely to the poems by Sylvia Plath that you have studied.

8. ‘What Sylvia Plath’s poetry means to me.’
Write an essay in response to the above title. Your essay should include a discussion of her themes and the way she expresses them. Support the points you make by reference to the poetry on your course.

9. Imagine you have been asked to edit a small collection of poetry by Sylvia Plath. State what poems you would suggest for inclusion and give reasons for your choice.
Qualities the Examiner Looks For

On a general level, the corrector will be looking for four different qualities in your answer.

1. The first of these is Clarity of Purpose. Here, the corrector will want to see that your answer engages with the question asked. This is worth 30 per cent of the available marks.

2. The second area that the corrector will consider is the Coherence of Delivery.

3. The third area that the corrector will concern him/herself with is Efficiency of Language use. The corrector will want to see clear evidence of your ability to manage and control your language so as to achieve clear communication. This is worth 30 per cent of the available marks.

4. The final area that the marking scheme addresses is called Accuracy of Mechanics. This is basically spelling and grammar. Ten per cent of the available marks are given for this.

In the future, you should try to shape your answer with these four areas in mind. Remember, your essays must satisfy the demands of the marking scheme in order to meet the requirements set down by the State Examinations Commission. Now that we have seen what the corrector is looking for, it is time to consider

Poetry is worth 70 marks on the Higher Level paper. Fifty marks are available for seen poetry and 20 marks for unseen poetry. It is extremely important that you do everything you can to maximise your chances on the day of the examination. The first thing that you need to do is to become familiar with the marking scheme. When your questions are being graded, the corrector will be using a number of guidelines. Your ability to write a response to a poet or a poem in accordance with the demands of the marking scheme will determine your final grade.

Here, the corrector wants to see an ability to sustain your response throughout the entire answer. This is worth 30 per cent of the available marks. We will look at how this might be best achieved later.
1. Clarity of Purpose

In order to achieve Clarity of Purpose in an answer, it is important that your essay is completely focused on the question asked. This means that you must address the key words in the question. In 2004, the following question appeared on the paper.

Imagine you were asked to select one or more of Patrick Kavanagh’s poems for inclusion in a short anthology entitled The Essential Kavanagh. Give reasons for your choice, quoting from or referring to the poem or poems you have chosen. In order to get the full 15 marks available for Clarity of Purpose, you would have to:

- Provide an original and fresh answer. (Slavishly learned-off material can often damage your prospects in the exam.)

- Show that you understand the genre of poetry. This means that you demonstrate a technical knowledge of poetry as evidenced in Kavanagh’s work.

- Focus on your experience of reading Patrick Kavanagh’s poetry. In other words, you would have to state explicitly how you felt about Kavanagh’s poetry. It would not be acceptable simply to say, ‘I liked his poetry.’ You must always justify your statements by providing examples from the poems on the course.

You would lose marks for Clarity of Purpose by:

- Retelling what each poem that you have studied is about. This is known as paraphrasing. Remember, you are expected to know the content of the poems. The content of a poem is only useful in so far as it illustrates a point that addresses the question asked. The chief examiner’s report in 2001 specifically mentioned this point, saying that candidates should be aware that while questions on poetry will require them to come to terms with the content of poems, they may also require them to deal with the language of poetry. The easiest way to avoid paraphrasing is to deal with the poetry in a global sense. Paragraphs that deal with the poetry on a poem-by-poem basis lend themselves to paraphrasing.

- Reproducing an essay that you learned off by heart that does not address the question fully.

- Failing to show an awareness of the genre of poetry. Remember, it should always be perfectly
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- Reproducing an essay that you learned off by heart that does not address the question fully.

- Failing to show an awareness of the genre of poetry. Remember, it should always be perfectly
clear to the corrector that your essay is a response to poetry.

2. Coherence of Delivery

In order to gain the full 15 marks available for Coherence of Delivery, you need to sustain your essay in a manner that demonstrates:

- Continuity of argument: In other words, your ideas need to follow on from one another.

- Management of ideas: You must control the manner in which you present your ideas in an essay. The easiest way to ensure this is to write in focused paragraphs.

- A focused paragraph deals with one aspect of the poet’s work. This one aspect can be technical, e.g. use of rhythm, or thematic, e.g. death, love, etc.

- Engagement with the texts: You must show that you understand how the poems function and achieve their impact. It is not simply enough to know what the poem is about. A statement such as ‘this is a dramatic poem’ is useless unless you show how the poem is dramatic.

You will lose marks for Coherency of Delivery if you:

- Fail to shape your argument. Remember, your essay must have a beginning, a middle and a conclusion.

- Write in disorganised paragraphs that lack focus. Remember, the definition of a paragraph is a group of sentences dealing with one idea.

- Use the wrong register. Your tone of voice and the type of language that you use are important aspects of your essay. While you should try to write in a natural style, the fact that you are writing an essay implies a certain degree of formality.

3. Efficiency of Language

If you want to obtain the full 15 marks available for Efficiency of Language, you must:

- Control your expression. This means that your sentences should flow naturally.

- Avoid very long sentences. If something can be said clearly in a short sentence, don’t try to make it more complicated. You must ensure that the syntax (word order) of your sentences is logical.

- Ensure that your paragraphs are structured correctly. As previously stated, you must write in ordered paragraphs that work together to answer the question. Try to link your paragraphs
where possible. Sometimes contrast can work as a link between paragraphs.

- Use lively, interesting language and phrasing. Try to vary your sentence length and avoid repetition of words and phrases. Once again, knowledge of the technical aspects of the poet’s work can help make your language more interesting.

You will lose marks for Efficiency of Language if you:

- Fail to write clear and logical sentences that make complete sense to the person reading them. The golden rule is, if you are slightly unclear about what your sentence is saying, then the person reading it will be completely lost.
- Use learned-off material that does not logically fit in with the rest of your argument or address the question asked.

- Write an essay that does not contain ordered paragraphs.

4. Accuracy of Mechanics

There are 5 marks available for grammar and spelling. While the corrector will not punish you for obvious slips of the hand, you will be penalised for poor grammar.
I do/do not like to read the poetry of Sylvia Plath. Respond to this statement, with reference to the poetry you have studied on your course.

Despite the fact that Plath’s can be extremely depressing, I do like to read her poetry. The absolute control which Plath has over her work, her unique use of imagery and the insight her poetry provides into her personality and her state of mind are just a few of the reasons that I was, and still am, drawn to Plath’s poetry.

Plath has a masterful poetic style. Her work is intricately sculpted and crafted, which is one of the main reasons why I find it so beautiful and enjoyable to read. The aural quality of Plath’s poetry can be both mesmerising and unsettling. ‘Morning Song’, one of the most uplifting Plath poems on our course, makes great use of sound in conveying its message. The jaunty rhythm of ‘Love set you going like a fat gold watch’ gives way to an awestruck, reverential tone when Plath describes her baby as a ‘New statue | In a drafty museum’. Here, the assonance of the ‘ah’ and ‘ooh’ sounds mimic the baby talk of the new parents. The delicate sound created by the onomatopoeia in lines such as ‘your moth-breath | Flickers’ provides us with an example of how Plath’s technical accomplishment makes her poetry so enjoyable to read.

Often, however, the language in Plath’s poetry can be as disturbing as it is beautiful. In ‘Child’, for example, the poet uses assonance to capture the sound of a child’s speech:

I want to fill it with color and ducks,
The zoo of the new

The use of enjambment creates a gentle, lilting momentum. However, in the final stanza, Plath uses assonance to create a far darker tone. The repetition of broad vowel sounds (‘troublous’, ‘dark’, ‘star’) creates a brooding, gloomy atmosphere. Furthermore, the sibilance present in the final stanza adds an almost menacing feeling to the poem, which leaves the reader feeling troubled. A similar effect can be seen in ‘Poppies in July’. The first line of the poem is energetic because of the repetitive staccato of the short, disyllabic words ‘Little poppies’. However, the broad monosyllabic sounds of the second line’s question, ‘Do you do no harm’, evokes a lethargic atmosphere. The stark contrast in tone between these two lines is an unsettling combination, and a perfect illustration of how Plath expertly sculpts her poems to be both entrancing and disturbing.
Similarly, I found the unusual images in Plath’s work captivating and enthralling. Of course I have to admit that I was also unsettled and even alarmed by her imagery. Her description of the hive as ‘the coffin of a midget | Or a square baby’ in ‘Arrival of the Bee Box’ is bizarre, disturbing and strangely comical. However, images such as ‘African hands’ ‘Black on black, angrily clambering’ are menacing and claustrophobic. Yet it is this dark undercurrent that makes Plath’s poetry so distinctive and compelling. In ‘Finisterre’, Plath depicts a fragile cliff edge that is surrounded by ‘trefoils, stars and bells’. However, the darkness is never far from her poetry. The image takes on a sinister tone when Plath goes on to say that the flora looks as if it has been embroidered by ‘fingers […] close to death’. There is an undercurrent of violence present in the poet’s description of rocks hiding ‘their grudges under the water’. This sinister quality is also present in the poem ‘Mirror’. There is a disturbing underlying force present in this poem. The mirror feels rewarded by the woman’s tears and by the ‘agitaton of [her] hands’. Old age is portrayed as a menace that ‘Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish’. I found this image troubling, yet also intriguing. One of my favourite things about Plath’s writing is that it is thought provoking because it shows the world in an entirely new light.

Plath’s poetry does not just shed interesting light on the external world, however. The confessional nature of her poetry allows the reader to explore something of her troubled personality through reading her work. ‘The Arrival of the Bee Box’ provides us with an interesting example of Plath’s confessional poetry. The combination of short, one-line sentences and long run-on lines works to make the poem feel almost like a stream of consciousness. In the poem, Plath uses the personal pronoun ‘I’ a total of 18 times. Plath explores her psyche through the depiction of an external event. I feel that the bees in the box can be taken to refer to Plath’s own thoughts and visions. They are maniacal, clambering and dark. She describes them as ‘dangerous’ and they appal her, yet she is fascinated by them. I think that the poem reveals more about Plath’s persona than it ever does about the bees. We get an insight into Plath’s obsessive tendencies when she tells us that she ‘can’t keep away from it’. We glimpse her controlling personality when she proclaims: ‘I need feed them nothing, I am the owner.’ Her chilling narrative voice is enthralling in its blunt, even cruel honesty, and this honesty is one of the main reasons I enjoy reading Plath’s work.

Sylvia Plath has written a vast body of extraordinary poetry. I love her poetry for the beauty of its language and the captivating nature of the imagery employed by the poet. I was mesmerised by the latent, brooding violence that underpins so much of her work. Reading Plath provides insight into the often dark mindset of the poet. I sometimes find it uncomfortable to read Sylvia Plath’s poetry, but I love it nonetheless.