

FROM DICKINSON TO PLATH: ART AS A MIRROR OF THE ARTIST

By

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ABSTRACT

The following essay examines the role of the artist within her art through an analysis of the poetry of Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath. Although each poet wrote clearly different work, their canons are intertwined at certain points, particularly in regards to the ideas of eternity, mirrors, and artists. I seek to identify those points of intersection, as well as explore the concept of self-reflexivity within art. Through conducting close reading of several poems from each author, as well as considering their work in the contexts of their lives, I strive to explore the ways art and artists become indistinguishable from one another. I explore the idea of art as a mirror and as a distortion of reality, as well as art as a tool for subverting societal norms and expectations. Both themes are important to the work of Dickinson and Plath, and considering the authors together gives insight into what it means to be a female artist during different periods in American history.

In the *Arnolfini Portrait* by Jan van Eyck, a couple embraces in the foreground. The viewer immediately sees these figures, but only gradually perceives that a hidden meaning lies behind them. A mirror appears on the far wall, reflecting not only the figures but also an image of another person who is likely the artist himself. Thus, van Eyck injects himself into his own art. Artist and art work converge. The creation and the creator become one, raising questions about the relation between reality and representation.

The Arnolfini Portrait is far from the only example of this occurring within Western art. In *Las Meninas* by Diego Velázquez, the artist depicts himself painting members of the Spanish Royal family. The viewer feels him or herself standing behind Velázquez's canvas, and the artist appears to look beyond the frame of the painting towards the viewer. Like van Eyck, Velázquez also uses a mirror in the background of his painting, and we catch a glimpse of the possible subjects of his painting within the painting, perhaps the King and Queen of Spain. Velázquez's decision to incorporate art within his own art acts as a figurative (and even literal) mirror, adding another dimension to the work and increasingly distorting the boundary between creator and creation.

While Velázquez and van Eyck's work center on incorporating themselves, artists also often make art about the work of other artists. This is called ekphrasis, or in laymen's terms, "art about art."¹ Possibly the most iconic portrayal of this is John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," in which the speaker describes (and reflects upon) an ancient piece of Greek art. Other prominent examples include "My Last Duchess" by Robert Browning, in which the speaker looks upon a portrait of his late wife and even Homer's *The Illiad*, which turns Achille's shield into verse.

¹ "Ekphrasis - Glossary Terms - Poetry Foundation." *Poetry Foundation*. Poetry Foundation. Web. 04 May 2016.

These examples beg the question: just what is the effect of transforming art into a different kind of art? The new art seems to both reflect and reflect upon the old, adding a layer to the creation and enabling art of the past to stay increasingly relevant. The ekphrastic art pieces mirror the art that inspires them, and as they do so, they work to create the infinity that artists often strive so hard to achieve.

Writing hundreds of years after van Eyck and Velázquez painted, Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath explore similar themes. Both women find ways to step into their own art, enabling their poems to function as their own kinds of mirrors. But since, in the traditions of western culture, women have traditionally had a complex relation to mirrors and have often figured as the objects of the male artist and *his* gaze, such mirroring may take on a different meaning in the hands of a woman. A close analysis and juxtaposition of their poetry offers insight into what it may mean, for a female poet, both to create and to reflect on oneself creating.

Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath are arguably two of the most important American women writers in American history. Dickinson, virtually unknown to the literary world of her own era, is now recognized as a revolutionary literary genius, a pioneer of poetic form—a multifaceted artist whose work has immense visual and lyrical implications. Over a century after her death, her nearly two thousand poems—most of them unpublished in her lifetime—are still acutely relevant and admired. Through her cryptic, experimental, verbally dazzling texts, she celebrates both the world and the word, and offers profound insight into what it means to be human. She also subverts societal expectations of what it means to be a woman and an artist. She never married, and according to conventional perspectives has been seen as a recluse, perhaps tormented by depression or some other type of mental illness. However, that reclusiveness allowed her to compose her poetry rife with unconventional insight and creative brilliance.

According to the official website of the Emily Dickinson Museum, Dickinson grew up in Massachusetts, raised by a relatively wealthy family. As a child, she attended Amherst Academy and later (albeit briefly) Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. She was encouraged to engage intellectually, and she loved to explore the world around her, especially through gardening. As she got older, she experienced the deaths of several close friends, and she gradually became less social. She did most of her writing in her twenties and thirties. While she shared her work with close friends and mentors, she strayed away from publication. Although she was a seemingly social child, Dickinson had largely retreated from the world by the time of her death in 1886. She lived with her family, keeping to herself, save for a few close friendships.

In *The Life of Emily Dickinson*, Richard B. Sewall depicts a deeply introspective woman, shrouded in mystery and difficult to understand for even the most attuned biographer. He writes: “I think it can be said that Emily Dickinson’s manner of life and her way of telling about her life were symptomatic of her sense of the mystery about things. Central to this mystery (certainly central to the biographer) was the mystery of herself” (Sewall, 5). Emily Dickinson was not an easy woman to understand, and her poetry can appear equally confusing. However, through a careful consideration of some of her key works, her ideas begin to emerge.

Born approximately 100 years after Dickinson, Sylvia Plath famously struggled with mental illness and depression, eventually leading to her suicide. While her works are less revolutionary than Dickinson’s, Plath strove to subvert societal expectations in her own way. Like Dickinson, she challenges gender roles and calls into question the stereotypical identity of woman as artist. And like Dickinson, Plath used her poetry as a kind of mirror, allowing her both to reflect and to reflect upon the act of creation.

Sylvia Plath also grew up in Massachusetts, raised by a particularly harsh father who left a lasting impression on her in terms of men. Although he died when Plath was still a child, her deep ambivalence about men would continue throughout the rest of her life. Like Dickinson, she was extraordinarily gifted from the start, and she attended Smith College. She eventually met fellow artist Ted Hughes while on a Fulbright Scholarship in England, but their marriage would be full of strife. Shortly after publishing *The Bell Jar*, a memoir, Plath would succumb to her lifelong battles with depression and commit suicide.²

Considering Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath's work together gives us powerful insight into the role of the artist within her poems. We see the artist as creator, and we learn about the ways in which her art reflects her. Ultimately, art, living beyond its creators, allows them to move beyond gender limitations and attain a kind of eternity. Analyzing poems about the relationship between the woman artist and her art, as well as the type of infinity such poems both ponder and create, provides a greater understanding of the self-reflexive ways artists may insert themselves into their own creations.

Emily Dickinson's poems are often deeply personal. She did not initially write them for a public audience, and she did not expect many of them to ever be published at all. Rather, she wrote for herself and close friends or literary mentors. For example, she often sent poems to her sister-in-law Susan Dickinson and to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a major literary critic who admired her work even when he didn't fully comprehend it. The two enjoyed a deep literary friendship and meaningful, intellectual connection, culminating in his role in shepherding her

² See *Poets.org*. Academy of American Poets. Web. 04 May 2016.

poems into posthumous publication. Writing poetry for these privileged readers was a private exercise, and not necessarily indicative of Dickinson's need to be read publicly.³⁴

Rather than seeking fame or attention, then, Dickinson made art for art's sake. As she notes in one famous poem, "Publication is the auction/of the Mind of Man-/Poverty- be justifying/ for so foul a thing" (ll. 1-4). Here, she views publication as a means for selling off one's intellect, a process that cheapens and ruins creative thought. She would rather be poor than quantify her art in sales numbers. In the ending lines, she declares: "reduce no Human Spirit/To Disgrace of Price" (ll. 15-16). Refusing to publish her work allows Dickinson to maintain complete control of her writing. Prior to publication, she was able to express herself in a way that is distinctly her own, untainted by editors or critics. This allowed her to subvert societal expectations whenever she wished.

In [They Shut Me up in Prose], Dickinson speaks directly to her poetic vocation. She may be "shut up" in prose, but her mind naturally and inevitably gravitates toward poetry. The poem begins, "They shut me up in Prose-/As when a little Girl-/They put me in the Closet-/ Because they liked me "still-"" Here, "they," is perhaps the society that restricts women and is intent upon keeping them compliant and quiet. Prose, like a closet, limits artistic expression and stifles art. Despite society's attempts to confine the speaker, she is so unique that society's expectations do not even align with any part of her desires. Attempts to control her are useless.

³ See "Emily Dickinson's Biography | Emily Dickinson Museum." *Emily Dickinson's Biography | Emily Dickinson Museum*. The Emily Dickinson Museum. Web. 27 Apr. 2016.

⁴ See Wineapple, Brenda. *White Heat: The Friendship of Emily Dickinson and Thomas Wentworth Higginson*. 1st ed. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008. Web.

Dickinson continues: “Still! Could themselves have peeped-/And seen my Brain- go round-/ They might as well have lodged a Bird/ For treatment in the Pound-”. This analogy shows that not only are society’s expectations ineffective, but they are also pointless. There is simply no stopping the speaker’s brain from expressing itself in a poetic way, no matter how hard the world tries. The image of the bird calls to mind a creature determined to be free. Pounds may be adequate prisons for other types of animals, but would be utterly ineffective for a bird, who could simply fly out of the enclosure. This suggests that the ability to write poetry (or make art in general) is similar to the ability to fly. Talent enables artists to rise above the worldly into the ethereal. Art becomes a tool for subverting norms, and it can help render society’s impositions meaningless.

In the final paragraph, Dickinson states: “Himself has but to will/And easy as a Star/Look down upon Captivity/And laugh- no more have I-” (l. 9-12). The comparison to the star incorporates ethereal, heavenly imagery. The poet is a bird; the poet is a star. Both of these images show that she is removed from society, but not in a way that is unpleasant or isolating. Rather, she is separate from society in a liberating way. Above the world, the individual can reign supreme. Art functions as a means for freeing the self. Through poetry, the female poet, even in the nineteenth century, can “look down upon Captivity/And laugh.” She makes a mockery of those who try to confine her, and art becomes an exercise not only of expression but of free will.

Nancy Walker writes: “The bird ‘laughs’ at its would-be captors: claiming the same freedom from the varieties of “Prose” to which she is subject, Dickinson laughs at both the conventions of language and the images of herself mirrored in the assumptions of those around her” (58). In this way, the poem serves as a mirror of Dickinson’s self— for what she is and also

for what she refuses to be. Her art is a reflection of herself, helping her combat society's stereotypes and expectations.

In order to achieve this meaning, Dickinson uses poetic devices in a purposeful way. For example, she uses unconventional capital letters in order to instill an importance within her nouns and pronouns. "Prose," the "Girl," the "Brain," the "Bird," "Treason," "Pound," "Himself," and "Captivity" are not simple things but wholly important entities that define either the speaker's identity or society's impositions. We also see Dickinson employ her infamous dash in order to both encourage the reader to pause in tandem with line breaks and to help the poem to achieve a visual flow. In the final line, the poem ends with a dash. While dashes do encourage pauses, they are also typically followed by another line or another phrase. As a result, the reader is left expecting another line that never comes. This signifies that in a way, the poem (or art in a larger sense) will continue beyond the page. Art, like a bird or star, exists in another, unconfined realm. This realm has an infinite quality that society, despite its attempts, cannot stop. Dickinson also employs an ending dash in her famous poem beginning, "Because I could not stop for death," which likewise gives that poem an air of infinity—"eternity"—beyond death itself.

Dickinson's [A Solemn Thing] also provides us with a meditation on what it means to create art. The speaker presents us with two versions of a woman. She writes: "A solemn thing- it was- I said-/ A woman- white- to be" (ll. 1-2). This "white woman," has a stained, purple double. The second stanza continues: "A hallowed thing- to drop a life/ Into the purple well-". This image is the purple well of art and imagination, and it will give the woman the power to expand her life into eternity. The dark well creates a distorted reflection of the original woman, transforming her from human being to artist.

This idea of the well fascinates the speaker, and she contemplates how it will feel to immerse herself into art: “I pondered how the bliss would look-/And would it feel as big-/ When I could take it in my hand-/ As hovering-seen-through fog-“(ll. 9-12). The inner world of art and imagination is alluring, and it calls to the speaker. However, beyond that, art also seems to grant the speaker’s life new meaning.

In the final stanza, the speaker reflects: “And then- the size of this “small” life-/ The Sages- call it small-/ Swelled- like Horizons- in my vest-/And I sneered- softly- ‘small’”! (ll. 15-18). Here, the speaker shows that however it may appear to outside judges, her own life is not small at all thanks to art. Art not only enlarges her “horizons” as she creates it, it will also allow her life to continue long after her physical death. She achieves an infinite life through creation. Contrary to societal beliefs, she is more than an unmarried, insignificant woman. Rather, through art, she is all-powerful and eternal.

Entering the well means leaving behind society, and the speaker will become a sort of “fallen woman” as a result. Physically, she will fall into the well and enter another realm. The purple ink functions as a different colored scarlet letter, marking the speaker as different forever. At the same time, entering this well means embracing a different kind of life or belief system: one that is focused on art and creative expression. Thus, just as the speaker is a fallen woman, she is also an acolyte, a servant to something greater than herself: art itself. Later, Plath will touch on similar ideas in her “Disquieting Muses.” Often, for the female artist, embracing art means leaving behind conventional society in favor of a darker, more creative realm. This realm challenges- and subverts- everyday societal norms.

For Dickinson, art not only functions as a means for subversion, but also for a true celebration of the world around her. Much of her poetry centers on nature, and she appears to

truly be in love with the universe in which she lives. From butterflies to lakes, Emily Dickinson is captivated by nature. She views nature as a type of art just as she glorifies it through her own art, which both reflects and reflects on the natural world.

An example of this type of expression appears in [I counted till they danced so]. Dickinson describes snowflakes as well as her desire to commemorate and preserve nature through the arts. The speaker tries to draw snowflakes as they fall, stating “I counted till they danced so/ Their slippers leaped the town/ And then I took a pencil/To note the rebels down” (ll. 1-4). The speaker attempts to preserve the snowflakes, despite the fact that they are innately impermanent and only fleetingly beautiful. No matter what, the snowflakes will eventually melt. However, their transient beauty inspires the speaker so much that she not only tries to celebrate them through drawing, but through dance as well, remaking her restrained persona as an ebullient performer: “And then they grew so jolly/I did resign the prig./And ten of my once stately toes/Are marshalled for a jig” (ll. 6-8).

The speaker celebrates the snowflakes- as well as grants them an eternal life- through both visual arts and dance. She sketches the snowflakes quickly in pencil, drawing them in a way that is not meant to stand the test of time, but instead to hastily capture their likeness. While neither of these mediums endure in comparison to the written word, the poem itself serves as another commemoration and allows the impermanent snowflakes to achieve a kind of immortality, since the poem will be read again and again. While Dickinson may not have expected this and her other poems to be published in her lifetime, her very effort to preserve them in handmade books testifies to her belief in the enduring power of the artist. Through her words, she enables the snowflakes to become infinite. They will continue to fall, long after their physical selves melt.

Dickinson's creation of those famous books, which critics term "fascicles," opens yet another perspective on her use of punctuation. Her dashes were not only inventive and revolutionary for the time in which she wrote; they also give her poems an immense visual power. Not only are the poems works of literary art, but they also appear as iconographic art on the page. Dickinson's use of punctuation is not only inventive and revolutionary for the time in which she writes, but it also gives her poems an immense visual power. Not only are they works of literary art, but they also appear as visual art on the page. Visually speaking, her dashes call to mind a type of stitch, mirroring the physical way in which Dickinson compiled her poems: she "self-published" by sewing her books together, creating literal artifacts made up of stitched art. Her punctuation, then, both creates meaning and aligns with her poems' physical appearances. Thus she simultaneously practices both literary and visual arts, sewing together not only the lines of poetry, and but also the poems themselves as components of handmade books. She is in complete control of her art, and she becomes the master of her craft from beginning to end.

The dashes distinguish Dickinson's poems from those of her contemporaries. She is now renowned for her use of punctuation, but her strange markings confused her first readers, so much that her first editors, Mabel Loomis Todd and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, altered them in the initial publications of her poetry. Edith Wylder, in her essay "Emily Dickinson's Punctuation: The Controversy Revisited" explains that the atypical use of punctuation allows Dickinson to intimately connect with the reader and manipulate the way he or she internally interprets the poem. She also uses similar punctuation in her personal letters. This should not be confused with helping the reader to orally read the poem, however; rather, Dickinson's punctuation appears to connect with the way the poems sound within the reader's mind. Wylder writes:

Simply by moving the notations from their traditional position over words to that of the normal punctuation they replace, the poet is able to register the tonal modulations of her speaker's voice—whether it rises or falls or remains level as it pauses, whether it is pitched higher or lower than normal to emphasize a point, undulates to suggest a slight questioning, or modifies an obvious question or exclamation by rising or falling with it. In this way the poet is able to refine and enhance her meaning, to communicate her written thought more immediately and clearly—more “alive” and “breathing”— than she could with standard punctuation.

The poems are visual expressions of Dickinson's thoughts and feelings, but the punctuation allows them to become a sort of audio reflection of her innermost emotions as well. Her art becomes multi-faceted. She manipulates both the way that her poetry appears on the page, as well as the way it sounds within our heads. She is thus not only a literary artist, and a visual artist who makes her books as artifacts, but also, in a way, even a type of musician.

This engagement of the reader's ear, especially when one considers Dickinson's life in general, shows that her poetry may reflect her voice. As a reserved, quiet, and reclusive person, Dickinson was not perceived as loud in a physical sense.⁵ However, internally, she was seemingly very spirited. Although she avoided publication and perhaps increasingly even people in general, the fact that she made these individual choices reveals some of her own power and autonomy.

In [I'm Nobody! Who are you?] the speaker expresses the anonymity that likely comes with being a woman—and an unpublished poet— in Victorian society. In the opening lines, the

⁵ See "Emily Dickinson's Biography | Emily Dickinson Museum." *Emily Dickinson's Biography | Emily Dickinson Museum*. The Emily Dickinson Museum. Web. 27 Apr. 2016.

speaker proclaims: “I’m Nobody! Who are you?/ Are you- Nobody- too?” This pun between “too and two” introduces another bit of self-reflexivity in a way similar to that in [A Solemn Thing it Was.] The speaker questions doubly: Are you nobody, as well? Are you a second nobody—nobody two? Just as the woman in white and her inked counterpart act as reflections or doubles of one another, the speaker and the person she addresses work as a pair in “I’m Nobody! Who are you?” They both reflect each other and reflect onto each other.

The speaker identifies as Nobody, and he or she believes the audience does as well. In the second stanza, the speaker proclaims: “Then there’s a pair of us!/ Don’t tell! They’d advertise-you know!” (ll. 3-4). The speaker mocks the idea that being “advertised” or receiving attention from society is horrifying. She prefers to live in anonymity, and this may reflect the desires of Dickinson herself. She refrained from publishing her works and preferred to live an introspective life. The poem could also be a commentary on gender roles, as women were typically treated as second class, less important citizens in Dickinson’s day.

In the second stanza, the speaker proclaims: “How dreary- to be- Somebody!/ How public- like a Frog-/ To tell one’s name- the livelong June-/ To an admiring Bog!” (ll. 4-8). Once again, Dickinson utilizes the dash to distinguish between key phrases, giving the poem a musical, jolting, jumping quality, in a way that mirrors the movements of a frog. This further contributes to the mocking tone of the poem, preventing it from feeling like a meek declaration of timidity.

Despite the fact that the poem is about being “nobody,” the speaker appears to be exulting in her status of anonymity. For her, avoiding the public eye sounds as if it is more of a conscious choice than a punishment. The speaker gets to choose and exalt her own identity, and in a way, the poem allows her to regain control of the self. Society does not get the satisfaction of telling her that she is no one, or that she is unimportant. She gets to make the decision for

herself. Through adopting the title of “nobody,” Dickinson beats society to the punch, so to speak. In a way, through artistic expression, she becomes the “somebody” she supposedly so hopes to avoid.

However, her highly expressive poetry (coupled with the dynamic use of punctuation) forces the reader to hear her loudly and clearly. Like the bird in “A Solemn Thing,” Dickinson is a “warbling teller” (“The Bible is an Antique Volume”) and she writes, as Dr. Susan Aiken describes in “Revisiting Emily Dickinson,” in order to wake the world. Her voice becomes a powerful song. Coincidentally, she was also a gifted pianist, which allowed her to express herself through music in addition to poetry. Although her urge to write overshadowed her desire to play the piano, both abilities prove that Dickinson was fiercely expressive despite her seemingly innocuous, meek demeanor. Dickinson’s art is almost synonymous with her own voice. She has a sort of strength, confidence, and charisma in her poetry that she may have lacked in her private life, but this does not mean that she was wholly timid or meek.

People like writer Thomas Higginson felt the strength of her presence. In *White Heat: The Friendship of Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Emily Dickinson*, Brenda Wineapple describes the way Dickinson was able to captivate Higginson, a writer for *The Atlantic* and prominent literary critic. Higginson, who would later edit Dickinson’s poems along with Mabel Loomis Todd and attempt to preserve the authenticity of her work (punctuation and all), recalls his initial thoughts when reading the first poems Dickinson sent him:

The impression of a wholly new and original poetic genius was as distinct on my mind at the first reading of these four poems as it is now, after thirty years of further knowledge; and with it came the problem never yet solved, what place ought to be assigned in literature to what is so remarkable, yet so elusive of criticism.

Higginson recognized Dickinson's fierce originality from her very first letters, and he was awed by her quiet strength upon their first meeting. He knew that she was different in a way that was almost intimidating. Her genius gave her an otherworldly quality, and it has since allowed her to achieve an immortality through her art.

This juxtaposition of the finite and the infinite finds another expression in poem 1175. To Dickinson, infinity can be found within life, if one tries hard enough to see it. She writes: "Contained in this short Life/ Are magical extents/The soul returning soft at night/To steal securer thence" (poem 1175, ll. 1-4). The capitalization of "Life," conveys that life is a grand, expansive experience. It may appear short in comparison to eternity, but paradoxically, the two are not necessarily separate. Bouts of brilliance occur in moments of quiet and respite that are food for the soul. The use of sibilance in the third and four fourth lines helps create an aura of tranquility and introspection that seems to go on forever. However, in the second stanza, Dickinson shows that freedom is also part of the "magical extents" of life. While introspection is important, people also have a natural desire to be free, to expand their horizons. She proclaims "As Children strictest kept/turn soonest to the sea." The continuation of sibilance serves to unite the two stanzas, underscoring that introspection and outward freedom are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, people seem to have a natural inclination to practice both. We wish to roam far and wide, but at the end of the day, the soul softly returns to its places of security. As with the Sea, "Whose nameless Fathoms slink away/Beside infinity" (ll. 7-8), in this space, names disappear and identities blur together. Everything is connected in one infinity, which in a way, makes it become nothing. Like the sea, life ebbs and flows, and everything converges in an infinite cycle.

The magical extents or moments not only punctuate life, but they link life together, creating infinity. The needs for freedom and introspection are constant and will continue forever, much like the all-encompassing sea. There is a sharp contrast between the “short Life” mentioned in the first line and the infinity of the last. Individual lives may be short, but in a way, humanity has no end. Human nature seems infinite.

In the essay, “The Trap of Time in Emily Dickinson,” scholar Charles R. Anderson analyzes the ways in which Dickinson utilizes time to create meaning and explore what it means to be human. The hazy type of infinity that Dickinson creates in poem 1175 is not an anomaly. Rather, Dickinson creates this type of eternity relatively often. Infinity not only merges the poem’s imagery, but it seems to combine poet and poem as well. Perhaps art itself creates infinity. Anderson writes:

In the motionlessness of eternity there will be no distinction between the soul and its setting, between perceiver and perceived. Just as in mortal time the sun’s disk sets only to rise again in visible splendor, so the soul’s disk, escaping from this limitation, sinks only to rise again according to a schedule unfathomable from this side of the grave.

Art functions to help create eternity and infinity. Emily Dickinson expresses these views through poetry, her art form of choice. This suggests that art is a means for blurring life and death. After all, art can serve as a bridge between the living and the dead. While the artist is deceased, the living are able to experience his or her art. Emily Dickinson may have passed away many years ago, but we are still able to read, analyze, discuss, and appreciate her ideas. We step into her mind in a way that blurs time and space and lasts for eternity. We experience eternity within her poetry, and we put eternity into practice by continuing to read Dickinson’s work long after her death.

Scholar Claudia Schwarz also analyzes Dickinson's uncanny ability to navigate time. She writes that Dickinson conveys time in two ways: an unending, inescapable push towards death, and as an extraordinary space capable of containing miraculous events. Dickinson does not see time as an obstacle, but as an opportunity to allow her art to transcend her own life. In a metaphysical manner, Dickinson integrates infinity into her art. She utilizes a sort of mirrored approach, in which her poems both reflect and contain a kind of eternal span of time. Schwarz writes:

By transgressing the limitations of time, Emily Dickinson radically reframes the conventional understandings of life, earth, and nature- as imposed on the Puritan mind by religion- and challenges the read to measure them against the background of infinity. The journey through time follows the lines of Emily Dickinson in order to meet the poet in the timeless sphere beyond. The approach is not historical but metaphysical and based on concepts rather than dates.

To Dickinson, time is not about dates at all. Rather, time (and infinity and eternity) consist of indistinct, endless moments. In "Forever- is composed of Nows-" Dickinson makes her views on infinity clear. Like the sea in her earlier poem, time seems to eternally ebb and flow. Exact details become distorted in favor of an infinite blend of moments: "Forever-is composed of Nows/ 'Tis not a different time- Except for Infiniteness/And Latitude of Home-" (ll. 1-4). The concept of forever is defined by the present. This idea aligns with the celebrations of moments in nature that are common to Dickinson's canon, and the poem once again integrates the dash, which here starts to define the "nows." The reader pauses according to Dickinson's punctuations, creating the small present moments within her own poem that the poem describes. The form directly reflects the meaning. Not only is "forever composed of nows," but Dickinson's poems

are routinely composed of breaks. Perhaps as a result, they are able to achieve the type of infinity and eternity to which Dickinson aspires.

Special moments, rather than numbered dates, punctuate this eternity. Although time could be viewed as one large, endless mass, special occasions give time meaning. The speaker states: “From this- experienced Here-/ Remove the Dates- to These-/Let Months dissolve in further Months-/ And Years- exhale in Years-“ (ll.4-7). Just as the calendar dates and numbered years provide small breaks as the transition from one to the other, the dashes symbolize the pauses that occur during the passage of time. Still, the years would seem endless and meaningless without small moments of brilliance.

In the final stanza, the speaker proclaims: “Without Debate- or Pause-/ Or Celebrated Days-/ No different Our Years would be/ From Anno Dominies-“ (ll.8-11). The pauses in life and special occasions are necessary to mark the passage of time. Dickinson’s art imitates life here, because her own marks are necessary to punctuate her home. The reader intimately feels the passage of time through the poem, as the parallel structures in the lines (“Let months dissolve in further Months-/ And Years- exhale in Years-“) seems to mirror the way in which the waves of the sea infinitely touch the coast and create a lulling, unchanging undertone.

Through structure, theme, tone, rhythm, and imagery, then, Dickinson’s poetry creates infinity. Her art allows her to live on forever, and her poems perhaps serve as her own type of dashes: they punctuated her life, but they also allow us to consider the small, brilliant moments she experienced and take pause. It is perhaps not surprising that the visual elements of her poetry have lent themselves nicely to visual art. Many visual artists have used Dickinson’s poetry as inspiration for their own work. Janet Malcolm, a collage artist, created a series of collages to reflect Dickinson’s meaning through visual pieces. She distills Dickinson’s poetry into key

images such as the stars or moon and works to reflect the poetry into new forms of art (“How Janet Malcolm Turns Emily Dickinson’s Poetry into Visual Art”). Jen Bervin, another contemporary artist, has focused on Dickinson’s use of punctuations, depicting her dashes in large-scale textiles. Bervin aims to call attention to the dashes once removed by early editors, and the large size of her pieces makes ignoring Dickinson’s marks impossible (Jen Bervin: Official Site). Thus, art reflects art. Just as a mirror facing a mirror creates an image that goes on forever, other artists like Malcolm and Bervin reflect Dickinson’s poetry into itself, creating a new type of infinity through art. The appropriations of her poems bring her work into the modern world, allowing them to continue through time. Rather than being confined to a page, the poems become dynamic, taking on new life with every artist who uses them in a new way.

Sylvia Plath tackles similar themes in her own poetry. A century separates her from Emily Dickinson, so a comparison of the two is useful to reveal both some of the evolution and some of the continuities of poetry by American women. Plath and Dickinson may be very different artists, but both were preoccupied with the nature of art, the role of the woman artist, and the concept of infinity.

Like Dickinson, Plath also seems to believe in the power of individual moments to instill beauty in life. Plath is notorious for suffering from mental illness that led to her committing suicide, but her poem “Black Rook in Rainy Weather” shows us that those characteristics should not define her. Although she is famous for being a tragic figure, engulfed by depression and darkness, this poem conveys that Plath is not oblivious to the light of the world. In fact, like Dickinson, she is more attuned to nature’s quaint miracles than many. We should not view her as frozen in history behind her bell jar, perpetually agonizing over a distorted reality. Instead, we should remember that in “Black Rook in Rainy Weather” Plath is aware of how extraordinary

nature can make ordinary life appear. These magical moments last only seconds, but they convey that Plath is more than a tortured woman. She has a soul capable of great feeling (good and bad), and she reminds us how divine the small things in life can be. The poem's subtle, nuanced form mirrors this vision of the world and makes the meaning all the more evident. If one pays attention in life, one may notice amazing, enriching things.

In "Black Rook in Rainy Weather," the speaker spends many of her days in a subdued cloud, underwhelmed by the very ordinary, drab qualities of the world. However, despite- or perhaps because of- the haze in which the speaker of "Black Rook" often finds herself, she is also deeply aware of the life's small, radiant miracles. These bits of magic are as simple as a rook "arranging and rearranging its feathers in the rain" (l. 3). We can assume this speaker is probably Plath herself, since there are no clues otherwise. However, beyond revealing to us aspects about Plath's personality, the identity of the speaker does not matter. The meaning is still the same. From a rook to a ray of light, ordinary images ignite the world. They give life beauty and brilliance.

In keeping with this view of the power of simplicity, Plath does not allow "Rook in Rainy Weather" to be any more elaborate than necessary. The situation itself is certainly not highly ornamented. The speaker is simply looking at a black rook, reflecting on how awe-inspiring it (and other things like it) can be. Since she remarks that the rook is located "on the stiff twig up there," we can assume that she is outside in the rain, looking up at a tree (l. 1). Thus, the poem's grandeur does not lie within its setting or within its speaker. It simply lies within the speaker's contemplations and emotions. This mirrors the meaning of the poem. The poem tells us that life's magic does not lie within the grand or ostentatious, but within the simple. Thus, the poem's speaker and situation are kept simple as well.

The element of surprise is key in regards to the speaker being taken by beauty. Through imagery, Plath makes it clear that she does “not expect a miracle/or an accident” (l. 4-5). She does not seek out any kind miraculous moments, but believes in letting “spotted leaves fall as they fall,/without ceremony or portent” (l. 10). The speaker does not view the world as one in which everything is a miracle- instead, like Dickinson, she views it as one in which miracles can unexpectedly occur, despite how mundane the rest of the world is. The spotted leaves act as a metaphor for the world’s events as they occur most of the time. Things usually lack any kind of additional meaning. The leaves fall as they fall, and events happen as they may. There is no warning that something more- something magical- will occur.

Small miracles do indeed happen, but they happen subtly. They are not large explosions of the extraordinary, but nuanced and quiet flares instead. They are the “certain minor light” that leaps out from the mundane “mute sky,” “as if a celestial burning/took Possession of the most obtuse objects” (ll. 13-18). This recalls Dickinson’s “There’s a Certain Slant of Light,” in which a quick, brilliant light illuminates the world and seems to imbue within it an eternal quality- if only for a second. Here, the light inspires a type of existential sadness within the speaker. Even as it brightens the world, the light reminds the speaker of how much she will never understand. Dickinson’s poem is more macabre than Plath’s, and the images of “There’s a Certain Slant of Light” almost seem to march towards death.

However, in “Black Rook in Rainy Weather,” the small pieces of nature’s magic illuminate the world, which is otherwise drab and boring. Extraordinary characteristics come to “obtuse objects,” if only for a second (l. 18). The alliteration in that phrase uses the repetition of harsh sounds to emphasize the stark normality of the objects. The phrase, when spoken, does not sound pleasing, and the objects are not typically pleasing either. However, at times, they can

appear miraculous. For mere seconds, they can cease to only be objects and become bestowed with “largesse, honor, one might say love” (ll. 21-22). The black rook is one example. Bits of extraordinary emerge in the ordinary, but like light, this is very fleeting and subtle.

To Plath, the world does not fall neatly into happy, obvious patterns. Subtlety is key, and this is evident within the poem’s form as well. The rhyme scheme is not what we would consider traditional or clear. After all, this world is not songlike, nor rhythmically cheery, as a traditional rhyme scheme might suggest. Just like the miracles, rhyme does occur, but it is not easy to detect. The words do not rhyme with each other at the end of each line. Instead, Plath employs *rimas dissolutas*, meaning that words in each stanza rhyme with the words in other stanzas. For example, “fire” (at the end of the first line in the second stanza) rhymes with “desire,” the word at the end of the first line of the third stanza. This sort of rhyme adds an underlying rhythm to the poem. As the words rhyme across stanzas, “Black Rook in Rainy Weather” becomes subtly melodic. The rhythm is not obvious, but it is there. Thus, the form reflects the meaning. Just like the rhyme scheme, life’s magical moments may not be immediately apparent, but they are nevertheless present.

Plath lives in a mundane world, but this does not prevent her from noticing pieces of its beauty. If anything, the contrast between the brilliant and the boring only makes the special things more noticeable. The setting is a “dull, ruinous landscape,” but Plath does not give up hope for a glimpse at something greater (l. 24). She is continuously searching for “a brief respite from fear/of total neutrality” (l. 31-32). She longs to be able to find something that will allow her to feel connected to the world. She wishes to be enthralled and to “patch together a content of sorts” through the knowledge that the world is not entirely bad (lines 35-36). Thus, her life

becomes cyclical. She lives a monotonous life, but now and again, a brief moment occurs in which something extraordinary captivates her.

The heavy use of enjambment in the poem reflects the way Plath walks through life. Just as the poem's sentences carry from one line to the next, the ordinary parts of the world merge with the extraordinary, and if we do not pay attention, we may miss the miracles that "Black Rook in Rainy Weather" glorifies. Like enjambment, Plath's own quest is fluid and continuous. She lives her life "trekking stubborn through this season/of fatigue," and those lines themselves show that her trek never pauses (line 33). The poem's sentence does not stop with the end of a line. It carries over into the next line, and Plath's desire for a little miracle is continuous as well. Her life exists in cycles of "the long wait for the angel" that are punctuated by "that rare, random descent" (lines 39-40). In this way, the form of the poem follows its function, and we learn that the black rook in rainy weather is one of the "spasmodic/tricks of radiance" that break up the monotony of Plath's life (lines 35-36). "Spasmodic/tricks of radiance" itself shows enjambment. The words are separated by a line break, but the sentence itself still continues fluidly. This is similar to the way small miracles affect Plath; they "grant/A brief respite from fear," but they do not interrupt the cyclical quality of her life for very long (line 31).

Enjambment is also instrumental in expressing the characteristics of those extraordinary moments. Plath writes, "I only know that a rook/ordering its black feathers can so shine/as to seize my senses, haul my eyelids up..." (lines 27-29). Here, the enjambment conveys the rook's ability to deeply touch Plath. Just as the sentence carries from one line to the next, the rook carries Plath's eyelids (and her spirits) up to the heavens. The rook is an angel that flares suddenly at Plath's elbow (lines 26-27). Despite the fact that birds are often foreboding or symbolize darkness, the rook in this poem represents light. The poem's tone is reverent towards

the rook, as well as towards any object similar to it. The rook is an ordinary creature, but in that moment, it is imbued with extraordinary characteristics. The tone is joyful and awed as the speaker is touched by the world's beauty. Enjambment carries the poem's sentence over the obstacle of a break in lines, and the image of the rook itself helps to carry Plath through the depressing monotony of life.

"Black Rook in Rainy Weather" shows us that we should not find the name Sylvia Plath synonymous with depression. She does not live constantly inside a bell jar, unable to recognize any good in the world. Rather, like Dickinson's, her life consists of waiting for simple miracles, the "spasmodic/tricks of radiance" that give life meaning and set the world aflame with beauty for just a second (lines 37-38). From its form to its meaning, the poem reveals to us the subtlety of everyday magic. It teaches us that even if we must be trapped within a bell jar, we can still look out, look up, and notice the beauty of a rook.

Plath's response recalls Dickinson's, in "A Bird Came down the Walk." Like the speaker in Plath's poem, Dickinson's speaker also looks upon a bird and is struck by its beauty. Similar to the snowflakes of her earlier poem, the bird is an ordinary image that becomes extraordinary. Dickinson is its quiet observer, and the bird's beauty captivates her: "He glanced with rabid eyes/ That hurried all abroad/ They looked like frightened Beads, I thought-/He stirred his velvet head" (ll. 8-12). Awed, the speaker watches the bird fly away, and the creature seems to enter an eternal sky.

Much like Dickinson, through her art, Plath creates her own kind of beauty. She may be tormented by her own inner demons, but she brings (and creates) extraordinary moments in the world. When we consider Sylvia Plath as an artist, we must note that she was not only a poet. As a student at Smith, she originally studied studio art. In *Eye Rhymes: Sylvia Plath's Art of the*

Visual, Plath scholars analyze Plath's paintings and relate them to her poetry. She deeply cared about the visual arts, and she considered painting a hobby. She continued to paint throughout her life, but her visual art came second to her literary arts. She elected to change her major from studio art to literature because she doubted her abilities to get satisfactory grades. Kathleen Connors, in her essay "Living Color: the Interactive Arts of Sylvia Plath" describes Plath's early fascination with the visual arts. Connors writes:

What is not commonly known about Sylvia Plath is her serious devotion to the visual arts from a very early age. She moved between art-making and writing constantly, often recreating the colorful world of children's books that inspired her to become an artist and storyteller. As a child she considered a poem she had written or transcribed to be complete when illustrated by a picture, whether copied, cut out of magazines, or formed from her imagination.

Plath nurtured this passion for art, both literary and visual, throughout her life. She continued to keep the visual arts in mind when she wrote as an adult, and she even wrote early poems centered on famous artists such as Rousseau and Gauguin such as "Yadwigha, on a Red Couch, Surrounded by Lillies." The visual arts and the artists that create them also helped inform and mold her later poetry. This is important background knowledge to any analysis of the way Plath expresses what it means to be an artist and to make art. As with Dickinson, we see aspects of the visual arts emerge within her poetry, and viewing her as more than a writer helps us to better understand her perspective on what it means to create. With this knowledge in mind, we are better able to analyze the way she writes about the relationship between art and the artist. This dynamic is complicated, and it forms the basis of many of her poems.

In “The Disquieting Muses,” inspired by Giorgio De Chirico’s painting by the same name, Plath refers to a prominent concept in Western art: that of the muse. Muses are traditionally represented as beautiful goddesses that captivate and inspire the artist. Emily Dickinson mockingly invokes this traditional image, for example, in her “Valentine’s Day” poem, which begins with the tongue-in-cheek repetition of the conventional epic invocation: “Awake ye muses.” Plath’s version of the muses, like De Chirico’s, contrasts sharply with the glamorous or romantic idea of the muse that popular culture has often promulgated. In De Chirico’s painting, the muses appear as strange, morphed creatures. There is a faint influence of traditional Grecian muses, but the muses of the painting are morphed into strange creatures with obscure faces and bizarre heads. The shapes are unsettlingly simple and linear, and stark primary colors dominate the scene. Plath’s muses emulate those of De Chirico. Rather than enticing the speaker, the muses torment her. They haunt her throughout her childhood, “with heads like darning-eggs to nod/And nod and nod at foot and head/And at the left side of my crib” (ll. 6-8).

The speaker addresses her mother, whose well-meaning, utterly conventional attempts to protect and encourage her daughter all ended badly, because the muses—the daughter’s inner demons, inseparable from her creativity, continually interfered. The opening question is out of a fairy tale or myth, wherein the mother unwittingly invites an ugly outsider to the baby’s crib, unintentionally bringing down a curse upon the newborn child. From crib to adolescence to adulthood, we see the speaker dogged by these weird, disquieting ladies. Rather than benevolently greeting the artist, the muses haunt her, breaking into her inner world. She and her brother are fed “cookies and Ovaltine” as a storm whirls around them, and the muses shatter the window panes and disturb what should be a scene of domestic peace. The mother tries to comfort

her children, but she is powerless against the storm. She cannot begin to grasp who her daughter really is, especially in terms of the inner turmoil the girl faces.

As the speaker ages, the muses—invisible to others— never leave her side. Not only do they fail to peacefully inspire the speaker to make art, but they also appear to prevent her from expressing herself in conventional “feminine” arts. Disappointing her mother’s aspirations, she cannot dance, and she struggles to make music. She watches her fellow schoolgirls dance and celebrate, but finds herself paralyzed, “heavy-footed, stood aside/in the shadow cast by my dismal-headed/ Godmothers, and you cried and cried:/ And the shadow stretched, the lights went out” (ll. 25-28). At an early age, the speaker bungles her piano lessons. Her mother encourages her despite the fact that “each teacher found my touch/Oddly wood in spite of scales/And the hours of practicing, my ear/Tone-deaf and yes, unteachable”- a line whose own jolting rhythm echoes the jarring notes (ll. 35-38). The caesura used allows us to almost hear the speaker’s jumbled scales. Here, the muses function in a different way. While the speaker is unable to make art in the traditional, acceptable setting, she states that she had a different teacher: the muses. While her mother hired the teacher and did not bring the muses upon the speaker, the muses stay with the speaker nevertheless. The young speaker’s ability to make art is more like a disease than a gift.

The role of the mother is also noteworthy in this poem, since she appears to wish to force her daughter to make art as long as it is on traditional terms. She signs her up for piano lessons and robotically praises her “arabesques and trills,” aspects of art that are stereotypically pretty and feminine. Thus, the mother also functions as a fourth type of muse. She is the antithesis to the muses that lurk on the ground with the speaker. She encourages her daughter to live up to a stereotypical societal ideal and to reflect the expectations others. However, unfortunately (or

fortunately) for her daughter, doing so is impossible. We are reminded of Dickinson's [They Shut Me up in Prose,] in which the speaker is physically and mentally unable to conform to the whims of the world.

At the end of the poem, the mother figure physically rises above the speaker and the muses. Plath writes: "I woke one day to see you, mother/Floating above me in bluest air/On a green balloon bright with a million/Flowers and bluebirds that never were/Never, never found anywhere" (ll. 40-45). Thus, the type of art (and perhaps even the life) that the mother envisions for the speaker appears to be unattainable. This pretty world of flowers and arabesques floats away.

The speaker loses her mother, but the muses remain. In the final stanza, imagery of death appears. Plath re-writes de Chirico's imagery: "Day now, night now, at head, side, feet/They stand their virgin in gowns of stone, faces blank as the day I was born/Their shadows long in the setting sun/That never brightens or goes down" (49-52). Thus, the muses now seem to be caught in some kind of permanent dusk, like death. Their gowns of stone echo tombstones, and the speaker has now come full circle from birth to death. Throughout her entire life, these muses have stalked her, and now they appear to join her forever.

These figures, typically used to inspire art and support artists, become more similar to demons. Plath's muses appear to afflict the artist in a way similar to mental illness, taunting and teasing her as one imagines her own inner demons might. Considering Plath's own history, the muses here represent a pivotal connection between inspiration and mental illness. Like Plath's own inner turmoil, the muses are always with her, preventing her from creating art even as they seem to force her to do so. We get the idea that the need to make art (or the inspiration for art) is

akin to an inner demon clawing its way out of the speaker. Perhaps mental illness functions in the same way- at times compelling, at times inhibiting.

As she closes her poem, the speaker proclaims: “And this is the kingdom you bore me to, Mother, mother./But no frown of mine/ Will betray the company I keep” (ll. 42-45). Her mother may not have wished this torment upon her daughter, but the torment of the muses is inevitable. The ending refusal shows that speaker has accepted her fate. She has abandoned the frilly, classical world of her mother in favor of the muses’ darkness. However, with this embracing of the darkness comes a sort of independence, individuality, and resolve. The speaker’s art is not that of her mother; it is her own.

Scholar KG Svetich concurs with this analysis in her article, “Plath’s the Disquieting Muses,” published in a 1991 edition of *The Explicator*. Svetich views the poem as a testament to the burdens that come along with artistic genius. She writes: “Her [Plath’s] despondent resignation to her talent is a heartbreaking illustration of how the ease of simple-mindedness can seem a paradise when compared to the brooding mentality to which Plath is condemned” (132). The ability to create great art is an extraordinary gift, but it carries with it the pain of perhaps being tormented by the need (and ability) to express oneself in a way that many fail to understand.

“Disquieting Muses” shows Plath as an artist in terms of the poetry she creates and in the pain she feels. Svetich comments: “The “curse” of artistic fertility thwarts the poet’s chances to enjoy the simple and unburdened ease of an ordinary upbringing” (132). An easy, simple childhood is not possible for Plath to obtain. This poem serves as a window into what are likely some of Plath’s most deeply engrained struggles. There’s a type of otherness that comes with

having great talent, and Plath seems consumed by feelings of ostracism and isolation. The artist we experience is not content with her abilities, but rather, made miserable by them.

“Disquieting Muses” gives us insight into Plath’s commentary on what it means to make art and engage in the creative process. The poem “Sculptor” also explores this issue. In this work, the speaker no longer assumes the role of the artist in the first person, but views a different artist from the outside. Plath’s perspective of the artist rotates a bit, and our view shifts along with her.

In “Sculptor,” Plath refers specifically to another artist: Leonard Baskin. Baskin was a close friend of Plath’s husband, Ted Hughes, and professor at Smith while Plath was a student. She admired him, but she also wished to challenge him and prove her worth. The poem is dedicated to the professor, and it gives further insight regarding Plath’s beliefs about the role of an artist. In an article in the *Art Journal* written at approximately the same time as Plath’s poem, report Robert Spence refers to Baskin as a prominent and prolific sculptor. He is known mainly for his bronze and wood works, and he focuses on accessible forms such as men and animals. The article states that Baskin “holds the calling of the artist sacred” and that “the responsible artist can play a significant role in fostering the sanity so essential to life in the atomic age” (88-89).

If we follow Spence’s analysis, Baskin does appear to have values in line with those that Plath expresses in her poem about him. Whether or not she is intentionally reflecting his beliefs— or likewise expressing them herself— is up for some debate. She showcases him in an ethereal, powerful light. She knows him in her personal life as a man, but within the poem his role as an artist elevates him beyond the status of human being.

For Plath, the sculptor is akin to a god. He gives life to his subjects, and they flock to him for guidance as they would a holy figure: “To his house the bodiless/ Come to barter endlessly/Vision, wisdom, for bodies/Palpable as his, and weighty” (1-4). People visit the sculptor as they would a priest or deity. They hope to gain the guidance and structure that they lack. Like many who visit religious figures, they wish for the sculptor to make them whole.

Similar to the way in which God makes Adam and Eve, the sculptor makes beings out of the elements. In the second stanza, he even appears to be superior to a priest. The speaker describes how his hands as, “hands moving more priestlier, invoke no vain/ Images of light and air/but sure stations in bronze, wood, stone” (ll. 6-9). Rather than depicting frivolous, light images, the sculptor creates sturdy, lifelike figures. Space and light fall away as the sculptors’ forms take shape. They are solid, bronze, and dominant.

The sculptor enables his works to “eclipse inane worlds of wind and cloud” (1ll. 2-13). While people inevitably die, the sculptor’s creations live forever. He gives his work, “place, time, and their bodies” (ll. 17-18). Somehow, his art is more solid than any living thing. The speaker states that the sculptures have “life livelier than ours.” They transcend being alive and appear to exist in a different sort of sphere. Like the muses, they have a kind of eternal existence. To be shaped by his chisel is to become not mere inanimate matter, but immortal.

In this poem, we see the artist as a God, a giver of life. We, mere mortals, are small in comparison to the artists’ creations. As with the muses in “Disquieting Muses,” art appears to have the power to make things last forever. The muses are with the speaker always, in a setting sun that never quite sets or rises. The sculptures too are stuck in a sort of limbo, eternally living in a realm that is not quite worldly but appears to be frozen in time. This idea is almost akin to that of Keats in “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” in which the urn is glorified for its ability to preserve

the past. Its creators are long dead, but the art itself is able to transcend both time and space. Through creation, man is able to achieve a type of immortality. Art has a powerful staying power and enables us to obtain a type of eternal- if limited- life.

We must also further consider the context of the poem, since Plath explicitly dedicates “Sculptor” to Leonard Baskin. Baskin, as stated earlier, was a close friend of Ted Hughes. Plath was fascinated by these powerful male artists. She worshiped them, but she seemed to also covet their abilities and power. She wanted to assert her dominance, whether through seduction or creating art. Plath, as a woman in the 1950s and 1960s, had a history of ambivalent relationships with powerful, creative men. She struggled particularly with her husband, whom she simultaneously worshipped as a genius and despised as her frustrating lover. This dynamic calls to mind Dickinson’s relationship with Thomas Higginson, another powerful and intelligent man. Dickinson also seemed intent to draw Higginson into her, but their relationship was based on more of a friendship (and mutual respect) than Plath’s relationship with Baskin entailed. Still, Dickinson, like Plath, remained ambivalent about Higginson. She felt he did not completely understand her, though she still trusted his opinions. Were there time, a full contrast of the relationships between Dickinson and Higginson and Plath and Baskin (and Hughes) would make for an interesting analysis. Both women admired these men, even as they resented them.

“The Sculptor” enables Plath to reflect indirectly on her complex relationship with prominent male artists. She glorifies “the sculptor,” just as she aims to distort or control him. Baskin “is simply “the sculptor”; the poem defines his identity wholly through his role as an artist. Doing so allows Plath to elevate him to the level of a deity. More than a man, he is an artist, and his life takes on a sort of mythological quality. Once again, we see art as an almost magical force. The muses made a kind of magic in “The Disquieting Music,” and the sculptor

creates magical figures here. But Plath, the artist who “creates” the sculptor in her poem, functions as an even more powerful magician. She puts this seemingly great man into her own art, and she controls the way that he is portrayed. As a result, she implicitly establishes a sort of dominance over him, reclaiming the power society tells her she cannot have.

Plath is also deeply ambivalent about the role of the artist, which further complicates her assertions of the artist’s godlike power. While the language surrounding the sculptor is explicitly adulatory, Plath seems to have a complicated relationship with the man. She admires him, but she also wishes to compete with him. She, the creator of the sculptor himself, is perhaps the ultimate artist of the poem. Regardless, “Sculptor” serves as another example of Plath’s interaction with and depiction of the artist. We see the importance she places upon the creative process, and we gain insight into her views on the ways in which art and identity relate.

While “Disquieting Muses” and “Sculptor” convey Plath’s commentary on the artist as a creator, “Metaphors” shows the speaker and the poem colliding as she seeks tropes to describe her pregnancy. The artist, gestating both a child and the poem itself, becomes part of the poem and proclaims: “I’m a riddle in nine syllables” (ll. 1). The mood is ebullient; the speaker takes the form of fresh fruit, newly minted money, and a cow in calf. Like the sculptor, this speaker brings new life into the world. She has become her art, and the results are electric. “Metaphors” shows us that the artist can not only create new life in general, but also new life for herself. The speaker both creates and becomes the poem with a happiness reminiscent of Dickinson’s [I Counted Till they Danced so].

Considering “Metaphors” in terms of Plath’s life, however, adds a dark quality to a seemingly short, sweet, and uplifting work. While it appears to glorify and celebrate pregnancy at first glance, the poem has deeper, more somber implications. Widely considered to have been

bipolar, Plath is not known to have lived a life of sparkling light. This poem perhaps gives us insight into Plath in one of her brighter, more manic moments. Yet the ending reveals that the poem is perhaps not what it seems. The speaker declares: “I’ve eaten a bag of green apples,/ Boarded the train there’s no getting off” (ll.8-9). This unsettling idea- of boarding an endless train while suffering a seemingly endless bout of morning sickness- appears to have a dual meaning. The speaker may be endlessly committed to the train of life, but she is also trapped on a wild journey with no ending. Motherhood is this permanent, wild train. The speaker is unable to undo its creation, and she is queasily resigned to the life it creates.

The contextual knowledge of Plath’s life—infamous for its bouts of mental illness and eventual suicide—hints at a darker meaning for the artist than originally meets the eye. The speaker becomes the metaphor, even as she creates the metaphor. She has the child, and the child defines her. While becoming part of her art can be liberating for the artist, it can also be frightening. After all, is that not what Plath does when she writes the *Bell Jar*? She merges her life with her art in an autobiographical memoir about how her struggles with mental illness and inner demons. “Metaphors” hints at a lack of control that comes with artistic expression, perhaps the same sort of lack of control that we see in “Disquieting Muses,” in which the speaker is tormented by muses who refuse to leave. With this in mind, Plath is likely not entirely glorifying the sculptor. Scholar Karen Alkalay-Gut further explores the impact of creation (and pregnancy) on a person’s sense of self. She writes:

Upon a second or third reading, the introductory statement, “I’m a riddle,” is answered laughingly by the reader with the dismissal, *pregnancy*. But to begin a poem with that line is to introduce the question of identity that may characterize the state or pregnancy. The speaker’s altering body and her situation have the inevitable result of altering her

concept of self, and indeed the nine lines, corresponding to the nine months of gestation, shift the concept of self in each.

As the metaphors evolve in each line, the speaker changes form. This leaves the poem with a feeling of change and uncertainty, similar to the evolutionary process of pregnancy. As the speaker's body changes, she changes internally. She, like a metaphor, can represent different things depending on the time or situation.

The role of the mother suggests an interesting connection between "Metaphors" and "Disquieting Muses" in terms of the role of the mother. In a way, artists and mothers could almost be considered parallel figures. Both create something and allow it to enter the world, only to find that it eventually becomes separate from themselves. As a child grows into adulthood, it finds its own identity and goes further and further away from its parents. While a child could be considered a version of his or her mother, he or she is also his own human being. Similarly, people's art may be reflections on themselves or aspects of their souls, but the art almost becomes its own entity upon completion. When do we fail to have complete ownership of our children? At what point do the sculptor's works fail to be only his own?

Plath further explores this idea the creation and creator almost painfully separating from one another in the poem "In Plaster." Here we see the artist literally transforms herself into a piece of art. The speaker refers to a plaster figure, likely inspired by Plath's time in the hospital for appendicitis when she shared a room with a woman in a plaster body cast. The speaker, uncomfortably encased in a plaster cast, becomes both damaged body and work of art, both pure and impure, mortal and immortal—at war with herself, with her own double. This idea of the double once again reminds us of Dickinson's [A Solemn Thing,] in which the woman in white

and the hypothetical woman in purple are seemingly at odds, even as they need one another to survive.

Distressed, Plath's speaker begins: "I shall never get out of this! There are two of me now: This new absolutely white person and the old yellow one" (ll. 1-2). The speaker looks at herself in plaster in a way similar to looking at oneself in a mirror, but the plaster appears to be vastly superior. Although cold and devoid of personality, the sculpture is white—perfectly pure—and free of human needs like hunger. The speaker is incredulous at first and finds the sculpture frightening. She does not understand the sculpture's cold perfection. It is similar to herself, but not entirely like her. It does not appear to exist wholly within the realm of the living, nor of the dead.

As the artist and the art are inseparable, neither is happy. Plath writes: "I blamed her for everything, but she didn't answer!/ I couldn't understand her stupid behavior!/ When I hit her she held still, like a true pacifist" (ll. 3-4). Artist and art interact in an aggressive way and have difficulties coexisting. We see a separation between creator and creation, and the artist appears jealous of her own art. However, when she realizes that she gives the art life and makes the art possible, the two are able to live together more peacefully. Plath writes: "I gave her a soul, I bloomed out of her as a rose/ Blooms out of a vase of not very valuable porcelain/ And it was I who attracted everybody's attention/ Not her whiteness and beauty, as I had at first supposed" (ll. 15-19). As long as the artist does not feel inferior to her own art, she is able to be happy. The human being and sculpture have a positive relationship for a time, but this camaraderie is short lived.

There is one significant difference between the two beings: the cast/sculpture theoretically has the ability to endure indefinitely, but the speaker (or artist) herself will

eventually die. This causes the strife between the two beings, suggesting that an artist can almost be jealous of his or her own art. While a poem or painting can live forever, the artist herself cannot. Plath writes: “Then I saw what the trouble was: she thought she was immortal./ She wanted to leave me, she thought she was superior/ And I’d been keeping her in the dark, and she was resentful” (ll. 35-37). The speaker and art piece are at odds with one another. The speaker enables the sculpture to exist, but the speaker is also insecure in her inability to compete with the sculpture’s perfection. Each resents the other, but both are dependent upon one another at the same time.

However, even as art and artist are seemingly at odds, they also need one another to survive. The speaker laments: “I wasn’t in any position to get rid of her. She’d supported me for so long I was quite limp—I had even forgotten how to walk or sit” (ll. 42-44). The speaker may be jealous, but she is also hopeless without the cast/sculpture. In a powerful declaration, Plath writes: “living with her was like living with my own coffin:/ Yet I still depended on her, though I did it regretfully” (ll. 42-43). To coexist with the art is to almost coexist with death. Once again, Plath, like Dickinson, shows that art exists in a complicated realm between life and death. Art is immortal in that it may endure through centuries, but it lacks the authenticity of a living creature. Like Keats’s urn, it “lives” forever, but it is not technically alive.

Much like the muses and the works of the sculptor in the earlier poems, this plaster figure is likewise dependent on a living human being. The speaker insists: “She [the plaster figure] may be a saint, and I may be ugly and hairy/ But she’ll soon find out that that doesn’t matter a bit./ I’m collecting my strength; one day I shall manage without her,/ And she’ll perish with emptiness then, and begin to miss me” (ll. 53-56). In these lines, Plath reminds us that art cannot exist without someone to make it. Sculptures are given life by their artists. However, at the same

time, artists can feel almost recklessly driven to make art. There is a sort of conflict and torment that comes with having artistic ability. The artist is not the God described in “The Sculptor.” Rather, in “In Plaster” and in “Disquieting Muses,” artists are essentially sickened by their own talent even as they feel compelled to explore it. Thus, Plath, like Dickinson in [A Solemn Thing,] suggests that it is very difficult- or perhaps impossible- for artists and their art to exist independently.

The rules change a bit once the art is completed. There is a certain lack of control that comes when an artist finishes his or her work and allows it to enter the world. Sometimes, as in this poem, the art can take on a life of its own and become separate from the artist entirely. The theme of losing autonomy in artistic expression that we see in “Disquieting Muses” emerges again. The speaker in “In Plaster” is proud of this idealized version of herself, but she also fears it and covets its perfection. She struggles to completely distinguish her own identity from it, and she is jealous of the way in which the plaster figure can cheat death. She wishes to compete with it and resolves to outlive it. Perhaps even Keats’s Grecians, if asked, would resent the staying power of their urn and would like to be immortal themselves instead.

As we consider these themes, we must remember that we are analyzing art in multiple contexts. We are not only considering the way the speaker interacts with art, but we are also viewing Plath’s poems as art themselves. She and Emily Dickinson may be long dead, but their art still survives and takes on new meaning as it is experienced by more and more people. This provokes a question: have Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath in a way lost control? Have they put themselves into plaster- or poetry- and been outdone by their own creations? Or have they enabled themselves to become immortal through their words? In some sense, both propositions are true. The artists themselves are undoubtedly reflected by their work, but how well can we

really trust the validity of these reflections? There may be no clear answer to these questions, but the way artists interact with their own work allows us to appreciate their work in deeper, more comprehensive ways.

In "In Plaster," the plaster figure becomes a sort of distorted reflection of the artist, allowing her to look upon a version of herself that is both satisfying and frustrating. We see the same type of theme in Plath's "Mirror." The speaker is the mirror itself and the poem forces us to consider our own reflections. The personified mirror brags: "I have no preconceptions/ Whatever I see I swallow immediately/ Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike" (ll. 2-3). Almost cannibalistically, the mirror implies that it will swallow itself. Mirrors reflect themselves, after all. It is an objective force, claiming to show people and things as they appear in reality, unaffected by emotions or feelings. The mirror stares at the wall, interrupted by faces peering into it and light casting shadows over it. All its reflections are also a reversal of the world it reflects. Still, the mirror believes that it is a true and genuine reflection. The mirror does not consider the fact the perspectives of its viewers will always affect the way in which they interpret its reflection, regardless of how objective the mirror strives to be.

In a way, the mirror functions very similarly to art. Art may reflect the artist him or herself, but the viewer has the ability to skew its meaning depending upon his or her own beliefs. In this way, perhaps we are able to only experience distorted depictions of Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath through their poetry. Dickinson steps into different characters and reflects different images onto herself through her work, and Plath does as well. This art, then given to the reader to interpret according to his or her own beliefs, morphs the artist into something different. Reflection after reflection, meaning can become distorted. Interpretations become infinite, like the images in two mirrors held up to each other, and reality itself is called into question.

Later on in "Mirror," the speaker becomes a lake. The lake tells the reader: "a woman bends over me,/ Searching my reaches for what she really is" (ll. 10-11). We look for our own identities in our reflections and perhaps in our art. Our art reflects us, and it helps create the identity that we present to the world. Often, we dislike what we find in our reflections. The lake mocks the woman: "She turns to those liars, the candles or the moon" (ll. 12). The woman strives to find a softer depiction of herself, with flaws blurred and imperfections obscured. Perhaps this explains the discontent between the plaster woman and the real woman that Plath describes in her earlier poem. When we look deeply into ourselves, we sometimes find that we dislike aspects of our own character. We see ourselves losing our beauty, our talent, and sometimes, ourselves.

Still, we dwell on our identities. We remain curious about who we are, even if we do not like the answers we seek. The lake goes on to state, "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" (ll. 14-18). We are fascinated by the reflections of ourselves, even as the reflections horrify us. This idea gives us insight into the way the artists view their own art. Their creations are reflections of themselves, much like an image in a mirror or lake. Like the woman in the poem, artists can become obsessed with what they create, even if their creations frustrate and even horrify them.

When we read "Mirror," we see multiple reflections of Sylvia Plath, the artist. The mirror and lakes as objects reflect other objects within the poem. Serving as partners within the same poem, they also cast reflections upon one another. The poem itself, as art, is a reflection of Sylvia Plath. The reflections, if analyzed deeply enough, could continue to carry on forever, just as mirrors, when positioned facing one another, cast reflections that seemingly go on into

infinity. In a way, art has the power to do this as well. It casts reflections upon the artist and upon the viewers that get distorted as times change and as new art is made. These types of infinite reflections may help lend art its immortal quality.

This idea of infinity also occurs because art not only serves as means for reflection of the artist, but also a tool for introspection into the artist. At the same time that art faces outward to the reader or viewer, it also looks inward into the artists' soul. Scholar William Freedman in "The Monster in Plath's "Mirror"" examines this idea that "Mirror" shows art turning inward. He writes,

In this poem, the mirror is in effect looking into itself, for the image in the mirror is woman, the object that is itself more mirror than person. A woman will see herself both *in* and *as* a mirror. To look into the glass is to look for oneself inside or as reflected on the surface of the mirror and to seek or discover oneself in the person (or nonperson) of the mirror.

Freedman believes that the woman is a mirror in that she reflects the expectations and ideals of society. She is eager to see herself reflect the desires of men, including beauty, youth, and delicate perfection. These ideas are the "frills" and "arabesques" of "Disquieting Muses" or the "closet" of [They Shut Me up in Prose]. The artist is conflicted by the need to both subvert and embrace societal expectations. She wishes for her reflection to live up to others' ideals, but this increases the conflict between art, identity, and self. The hunger to be reflected— and the endless need to experience this reflection—speaks to the infinite quality mentioned earlier.

Freeman supports this assertion, writing,

The woman/mirror, then seeks her reflection in the mirror/woman, and the result is a human replication of the linguistic phenomenon the poem becomes. Violating its implicit

claim, the poem becomes a mirror not of the world, but of other mirrors and of the process of mirroring. When living mirrors gaze into mirrors, as when language stares only at itself, only mirrors and mirroring will be visible.

The concept of the mirror distills the poems to their most basic forms. When we consider Plath's poems as separate, artistic entities, they function as their own mirrors. The artist both makes the mirror and is the mirror. The poet both writes and becomes the poem. Thus, they function as reflections that extend forever.

The insecurities of the woman in "mirror" also form an interesting connection to "Metaphors" "The Disquieting Muses," and "In Plaster." Like the speakers of those poems, the woman wishes to live up to some sort of standard or ideal. This failure to be a positive, accurate reflection of the ideal causes the anxiety and discontent present within each piece of art. The artist appears to struggle to reconcile the organic need to express herself with the societal pressure for this reflection to represent an ideal.

Within this conflicting space, the line between art and artist, creator and creation, becomes blurred. Identity itself is uncertain, and the way in which we evolve along with our art makes the process of making art at once an exaltation and a multi-faceted ordeal. We reflect ourselves in our own creations, but our creations often reflect our conflicting feelings regarding our reflections. The mirror appears to go on forever, until all that is left is the object and meaning becomes so distorted that it falls away.

This quest for true meaning and identity forms a link between Plath and Dickinson's works. As they write about art and artists, each gives us insight into her views regarding her role as a creator. The relationship between artists and art is complicated, but the two are also profoundly and permanently intertwined. As in the *Arnolfini Portrait*, Plath and Dickinson, in

their own distinctive ways, step in their own art. Each artist creates her poems, and she also becomes part of them. Creations and their creators reflect one another, to the point where they become almost infinitely indistinguishable.

In Emily Dickinson's, [I dwell in Possibility], the speaker proclaims: "I dwell in Possibility/ A fairer House than Prose-/ More numerous of Windows- Superior for Doors-" (ll. 1-2). Poetry is her home, and it provides more freedom than any other kind of art. Within poetry, the possibilities are endless. While the human being is limited by physical restrictions and mortality, poetry grants true liberation. Dickinson's poem concludes: "For Occupation- This-/ The spreading wide my narrow Hands/To gather Paradise" (ll. 10-12). As art and the artist blend together, the artist achieves an infinite potential, and paradise is achieved.

Perhaps this is why Dickinson and Plath felt so compelled to write poetry. Restricted by external, societal structures, both became consumed by their inner worlds. They needed to express themselves, to feed the talent eating away at them and to gnaw away at the shackles male-dominated societies wound around their wrists. As women, they were particularly limited by societal ideals, and art gave them an outlet to turn society's values into their own. Instead of attempting to conform to society, they chose to "dwell in possibility," and make art instead. Art creates a mirror, but this mirror is not necessarily a perfect reflection of reality. Rather, the artist can control the mirror, and she can distort reality in the way that she wants.

This concept also provides insight into why artists are so drawn to the work of other artists. This need to dwell in possibility appears to be relatively common to art, and it may attract artists to one another. Through engaging in ekphrasis, artists are able to engage with others' "possibilities," and they can make those possibilities their own. As a result, artists become infinitely connected to one another. Human beings may inevitably die, but human nature is

eternal, due to the connections we make and the art we create. Possibilities, like images reflected by millions of mirrors, continue forever. They are composed of nows.

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