**Sylvia Plath – Poetry Questions**

**Black Rook in Rainey Weather**

1. What is the mood of the poet? How does the weather described in the poem reflect this mood?
2. In your opinion, why do you think Plath sees light coming from ordinary household objects such as kitchen tables and chairs?
3. What do you think the final stanza mean? Consider the phrase ‘The wait’s begun again’. What is the poet waiting for?
4. What attitude to the rook and the weather does the speaker of the poem express in the first two stanzas? What do these stanzas suggest to you about the speaker?
5. How do you understand the idea of celestial burning, as presented in the poem? In your experience can ordinary objects be seized in the way described between lines 14-22 of the poem?
6. Consider the character of the speaker of the poem, as suggested by the adjectives (‘Wary’, ‘Sceptical’, ‘Politic’)in lines 23-25. Having read the poem, what additional adjectives would you use to describe the speaker?
7. What is the fear referred to at the outset of stanza 7? Consider the possible meanings of the word ‘neutrality’. How might the rook allay this fear? What is the relationship between the rook and the celestial burning referred to in stanza 1?
8. What is it that the speaker hopes to achieve ‘with luck’ (lines 32-36)? What is your reaction to this hope?
9. Comment on the phrase ‘this season/ Of fatigue’ and what it tells us about the speaker.
10. What belief is expressed in the final stanza? How is the belief qualified?
11. ‘The wait’s begun again’. Comment on the word ‘again’.
12. The beauty of the last two lines of the poem has been remarked on by critics. What, in your view, makes them beautiful?
13. Examine the stanza form employed by the poet and comment on it.
14. (i) Comment on the images of heat and light in the poem, and their relevance to the poem.

(ii) Consider the title of the poem and its relevance to the theme of the poem.

(iii)What does the poem say to you about imagination and the vision of the poet?

1. ‘The speaker of the poem is poised between hope and despair’. Comment on this view of the poem, supporting your answer by reference to the poem.
2. ‘Behind the controlled language of the poem, there is a glimpse of a fearful and nightmarish personal world.’ Do you think this is a fair assessment of the poem?

**The Times are Tidy**

1. What is suggested by the poem’s title? Is Plath cynical about modern life? Develop your response in a short paragraph.
2. Select one image from the poem that suggests that the past was much more dangerous and exciting than the present. Comment on its effectiveness.
3. Do you agree or disagree with the speaker’s view of modern life? Give reasons for your answer.

**Morning Song**

1. Comment on the suitability and effectiveness of the simile in line 1.
2. What is the attitude of the mother to the new arrival? Does her attitude change in the course of the poem? Refer to the text in your answer.
3. A metaphor links two things so that one idea explains or gives a new viewpoint about the other. Choose one metaphor from the poem and comment on its effectiveness.
4. Comment on the importance of the words ‘Love’ and ‘elements’ in the first stanza of the poem.
5. In what way is the child a ‘new statue’?
6. Explain, as clearly as you can, the museum imagery in stanza 2. What does it suggest about the relationship between adults and the newborn child?
7. Tease out the meaning of the statement, “your nakedness/ Shadows our safety.”
8. What is the tone of the declaration “I’m no more your mother”?
9. What kind of relationship between mother and child is described in the cloud/ mirror/ wind imagery? Do you think it is a distinctive view or does it express a general truth?
10. ‘Although tender in tone, the poem is clear-sighted and unsentimental’. Discuss this view of the poem.
11. ‘Even though the poem celebrates motherhood, the mother appears as an isolated and estranged figure.” Do you agree with the assessment of the poem? Support your answer by reference to the poem.

**Finisterre**

1. Would you agree that this is a disquieting poem that is likely to disturb readers? Refer to the text in your answer.
2. There are several changes of tone in this poem. Describe two contrasting tones, using close reference to the text.
3. What does the poem reveal to you about Sylvia Plath’s own state of mind? Use reference to the text in your response.
4. The first five lines give a vivid account of the beliefs/ fears once held about the sea. Describe these. Is there a relationship between these fears/ beliefs and private fears?
5. How is Finisterre regarded now, according to lines 6-9? Comment on the rock imagery in these lines.
6. Examine the description of the flowers and the mist in stanza 2. How are both associated with death?
7. Comment on Plath’s use of the verb ‘bruise’ in line 15. Is it effective?”
8. “I walk among them, and they stuff my mouth with cotton. / When they free me, I am beaded with tears” (lines 17-18). What do you make of these lines and the drama they describe?(Are the mists/ souls presented as hostile? Do they prevent her from speaking? Is the speaker in the poem more in sympathy with the ancient or the modern view of the place…?)
9. How is Our Lady of the Shipwrecked presented in the third stanza? Is it a surprising representation?
10. Comment on the phrase ‘the beautiful formlessness of the sea’. (Line 27)
11. In lines 31-35, the peasants speak of the pretty trinkets that the sea hides, which comes from a place far away. How do you interpret these lines? What, for example, is the other place ‘tropical and new’?
12. Does the poem end on a hopeful note?
13. In your view is the speaker of the poem attracted to the sea? Plath regarded the sea as an image of the artist’s subconscious. What does the description of the sea in the poem suggest about Plath’s subconscious and its concerns?
14. The poem arose from a holiday visit to a seaside resort. What does her treatment of this visit in the poem suggest to you about the personality and imagination of the poet? Support the points you make by quotation from the poem.

**Mirror**

1. Select two images that suggest the dark, sinister side of the mirror. Would you consider that these images show an unforgiving way of viewing oneself?
2. What are the parallels and contrasts between a mirror and a lake? Develop your response in a written paragraph.
3. Write your own personal response to this poem, referring closely to the text in your answer.

**Elm**

1. What impression of the elm is created by her statements in the first stanza?
2. Examine the questions posed by the elm in stanza 2. What do they suggest about the elm and the person she addresses?
3. What image of love is created in stanzas 3-4? Is the elm comforting or cruel in these stanzas?
4. Stanzas 5-9 describe the elements of rain, sun, wind and moon and their relationship to the elm. What aspect of each is emphasised? How does each affect the elm? What, in your view, is the most striking image in these stanzas?
5. What is the elm’s attitude to the moon? Where is this attitude most apparent?
6. What do stanzas 5-9 suggest about the nature of the elm’s existence? Select the words or phrases that strike you most forcefully.
7. “How your bad dreams possess and endow me” (line 27). What relationship is suggested between the elm and the “You” of the poem in this statement? The line can be read as either the elm addressing the woman or the woman addressing the elm. What is the effect of each reading? How do you read it?
8. The last five stanzas are rich, complex and difficult. How does the speaker view herself? What images strike you as particularly disturbing or vivid? What is your reaction to the use of the words “faults”? What is the tone of the extraordinary last line of the poem?
9. ‘“Elm” vividly conveys suffering, self-doubt and despair.’ Give your response to this assessment of the poem, supporting the points you make by quotation from the poem.
10. “Elm” is a poem with many striking visual images. Perhaps you might like to offer your own creative response to, or interpretation of, the poem, in visual form.

**The Arrival of the Bee Box**

1. Do you find the imagery of the first stanza strange, disturbing, amusing? Explain your answer.
2. ‘In line 7, “I have to live with it overnight”, we see that the bee box represents the speaker’s unconscious and is linked to the imagery of “the dark thing that sleeps in me”, referred to by the speaker in ‘Elm’. Do you agree with the reading of this line? Support the points you make by reference to the poem.
3. What impression is created of the box and its contents in stanzas 3-4? What phrase or image strikes you as particularly effective?
4. In stanza 5, the speaker seems to gain a sense of control over the box. What brings this about? What change of heart is apparent in stanza 6?

**Child**