“The poetry of Sylvia Plath is marked by great skill and a lasting impact on the reader.”

Write a response to the poetry of Sylvia Plath in the light of this statement, supporting your points with suitable reference to the poems on the course.

Sylvia Plath is a poet who for many years has captured the imagination of readers right across the globe, once fittingly described as ‘using images and phrases with the energy of a runaway horse.’ She was always a poet of great renown, but it was only through the terrible tragedy of her premature death, and the subsequent release of much of her most brilliant work, that a wider audience were given the opportunity to savour the great skill of this gifted poet. I know I am not the first to be deeply impacted by this highly confessional body of work – with its beautiful language, memorable imagery and fascinating insights into a troubled existence. Poems like ‘Black Rook in Rainy Weather’, ‘Mirror’, ‘Morning Song’, ‘Poppies in July’ and ‘Child’ are a remarkable testament to her outstanding talent.

One aspect of Plath’s poetry that I feel clearly displays her great skill is the sheer variety of language she used throughout her work. The combination of the archaic (‘desultory’, ‘portent’ and ‘celestial’ ) and the everyday ( ‘I can’t honestly complain’) in ‘Black Rook in Rainy Weather’, shows both the innovation and the range of her language skills. I was particularly impressed by her use of the alliterative lines ‘..its black feathers can so shine/As to seize my senses…’ to convey the exhilarating impact of the ‘random descent’ of poetic inspiration. The raw energy of her poetry also had a lasting impact on me: in ‘Morning Song’, we see her sum up the unromantic start to her son’s life as ‘The midwife slapped your footsoles and your bald cry/ took its place among the elements’, leaving the reader with a memorable evocation of a child’s birth. Plath brought a vitality to the language she used that I feel is unmatched by many of her peers.

Aside from the innovative language use, no discussion of Sylvia Plath’s talent would be complete without reference to the striking imagery apparent throughout her poetry. For me, it is this aspect of her work that had the deepest impact. Using the metaphor of a ‘new statue’ to highlight both the preciousness of her son and the lack of immediate warmth she felt towards him was daringly original, while the frankness with which she describes her new mother self as ‘cow-heavy’ further illustrates the honesty of her poetic voice . In ‘Mirror’ too, I was really impressed the way she cleverly conveys the mirror’s arrogant power as ‘The eye of a little god’. She further illustrates the destructive influence of the mirror’s reflection over her through a disturbing and startling simile, how ‘In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman/ Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.’ Her poetry does offer the occasional uplifting image: as in the moment when she seems finally at ease as a new parent, when her new baby’s ‘clear vowels rise like balloons.’ However, it is the darker imagery that dominates much of the tone and mood of her work. Although I loved the perfect metaphor she used in ‘Child’ to describe her pure and innocent newborn as a ‘Stalk without wrinkle’, it was the comparison of her own state of mind with a ‘dark/ Ceiling without a star’ that had the greatest impact. It is this simple and extraordinary – yet completely heart-breaking – image that will stay with me long after the Leaving Cert itself is a distant memory. ‘Poppies in July’ too offers its own array off unsettling metaphors. Comparing the gentle flowers to ‘A mouth just bloodied.’ and ‘little hell flames’ offers its own insight into her mental deterioration. The metaphor that intrigued me most however was that of ‘this glass capsule’. This claustrophobic image seems to me to perfectly convey the combination of being constantly in the spotlight, while also feeling desperately and dangerously trapped. I don’t think there can be any doubt that at the heart of Sylvia Plath’s immense poetry lies her rare and precious ability to create original and astonishing imagery.

Another aspect of her work that I think really highlights the sheer depth of her talent is her ability to tackle big themes – particularly from a female viewpoint. I can only imagine how controversial it must have been to discuss new motherhood so honestly in the 1960’s in the way that she does in ‘Morning Song’. The brilliant line ‘Love set you going like a fat gold watch’ is an image that captures the extraordinary moment when a precious new life enters the world, but also I feel, the distance and insecurity Sylvia felt as a new mother. I was happy that after struggling in the ‘drafty museum’ of new motherhood, the poem ended with a happy image of ‘balloons’, giving a sense that she was beginning to savour some of the joys of having a baby.

I suppose in reality, it is Plath’s poems that deal with her deteriorating mental health that are her most renowned. I was really blown away at the insight into the subject of mental health that a poem like ‘Poppies in July’ offers. The issue of mental health and suicide is one that sadly is more relevant now than ever and Plath uses her great skill as a poet to let us know the numbness she feels, where even though she puts her ‘hands among the flames. Nothing burns.’ I was deeply disturbed by this poem and the desperate suffering that seems to lie behind lines like ‘If I could bleed, or sleep!’. Of all the poems I have ever read, this is without a doubt the one that had the most lasting impact on me – made all the more tragic through knowing how her ‘colorless’ life ended not long after this poem was written.

All I knew about Sylvia Plath before I encountered the poems in class was that she fitted into the same celebrity suicide category as people like Kurt Cobain. There’s no getting away from the fact that the unflinchingly honest way that she deals with her mental health offers the reader fascinating – although very disturbing – insights into a universal problem. However I firmly believe that it’s the great skill and ‘energy’ of her language that really mark her as a poet whose work is a joy to discover. I’m not sure if too many of the poets I have studied will stay with me in future years, but I’ve no doubt that the work of Slylvia Plath has certainly left a lasting impact on me.