

The Ekphrastic Experience in English Poetry from the Late 1930s to the Mid-1960s

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Abstract

This paper investigates the ekphrastic phenomenon in a number of the most important poems over the period from the late 1930s to the mid-1960s. The poems discussed include poems written about paintings, sculptures as well as imaginary works of art. In addition, the poems are written by male as well as female poets. Auden's 'The Shield of Achilles', 'Musée de Beaux Art', Williams's 'Landscape with the Fall of Icarus', Plath's 'The Disquieting Muses' and Sexton's 'The Starry Night' are among the poems investigated. Certain aspects, such as grief, suffering and death wishes are found to be in common among most of the ekphrastic poems discussed. The paper points out that in almost all of the ekphrastic poems, the poet ventures a step beyond whatever suggested by the work(s) of art.

Keywords: Ekphrastic Poetry – Interdisciplinary – Works of Art – Twentieth Century

ملخص

تجربة وصف الأعمال الفنية شعريا في الفترة من أواخر ثلاثينيات الى منتصف ستينات القرن العشرين

يدرس هذا البحث تجربة وصف الأعمال الفنية شعريا في الفترة من أواخر ثلاثينيات الى منتصف ستينات القرن العشرين. يشتمل البحث على دراسة بعض القصائد المستوحاة عن لوحات فنية و أخرى مستوحاة عن أعمال نحت كالتماثيل و بل و قصائد مستلهمة من أعمال رسما خيال الشاعر. تتنوع القصائد في هذا البحث بين قصائد كتبها شعراء و أخرى كتبها شاعرات. من بين القصائد موضع الدراسة في هذا البحث قصيدة "درع أكيليز" و قصيدة "متحف الفنون الجميلة" لأودن و قصيدة "منظر طبيعي لسقوط ايكاروس" للشاعر ويليامز و قصيدة "الهات الالهام المزعجات" لسلفيا بلاث و قصيدة "ليلة مرصعة بالنجوم" للشاعرة ان سكستون. ثمة سمات مثل الحزن و المعاناة و الرغبة في الموت تجمع بين معظم القصائد في هذا البحث. من نقاط البحث الهامة أن الشعراء في قصائدهم المستوحاة من الأعمال الفنية يضيفون أبعادا جديدة للأعمال الفنية.

كلمات مفتاحية: شعر – الوصف الشعري – الاعمال الفنية – الدراسات البيئية – القرن العشرين

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Remarkable interest in ekphrastic poetry, i. e. poetry inspired by works of art, characterises English poetry from the late 1930s to the mid-1960s. During that period, many British and American poets turned to works of art for inspiration. W. H. Auden, William Carlos Williams, Adrienne Rich, Philip Larkin, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton, for instance, ekphrasised. Poems written in response to works of art during that time have become a notable poetic phenomenon worth investigating. Heffernan admits that, “[w]herever we turn in contemporary poetry, we find poems incited by works of visual art” (136). It can be said that art-inspired poetry of that period has importantly contributed to the poetic tradition of the century.

This paper aims at investigating the ekphrastic experience that characterised English poetry of the time defined. The paper will show how poets of that period was greatly influenced by artworks like paintings and sculptures. Reasons that instigated poets to respond to such paintings will be discussed. Exploring new dimensions poems can add to the works of art discussed is one of the important aims of the paper. In addition, common features among the poems discussed will be figured out and examined. The research will respond to some important questions like: to what extent are the poems discussed influenced by works of art that inspired them? Why are some poets, Sylvia Plath, W. H. Auden and W. C. Williams for instance, more responsive to works of art than others? In what way(s) can a poem add new dimensions to the audience’s understanding of a work of art?

Since this paper takes ekphrastic poetry to its focal interest, it is appropriate to shed some light on the term ekphrasis prior to coming to grips with the poems. According to *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, ekphrasis (ecphrasis) refers to a verbal description of, or meditation on, a non-verbal work of art, real or imagined, usually a painting or sculpture (Baldick). Ekphrastic is, thus, an interdisciplinary approach in which poetry avails itself mainly of the discipline of art. The term refers commonly to poems inspired by, or written in response to, works of art, whether these be paintings, sculptures, drawings, etc. and, equally important, whether the work of art is real or imagined. The poems discussed in this paper were published between 1937 and 1965. These include W. H. Auden's 'The Shield of Achilles', 'Musée de Beaux Art', W. C. Williams's 'Landscape with the Fall of Icarus', A. Rich's 'Mourning Picture', P. Larkin's 'An Arundel Tomb', S. Plath's 'The Disquieting Muses' and A. Sexton's 'The Starry Night'.

It is worth noting that certain paintings attracted the attention of some poets more than others did. Brueghel's painting *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, for instance, was responded to by both W. H. Auden and William Carlos Williams. In its turn, *The Disquieting Muses* was responded to by both Sylvia Plath and Mark Strand. This raises the question of whether certain aspects in such works attract the attention of poets more than others.

W. H. Auden is a pioneering twentieth-century ekphrastic poet. His 'The Shield of Achilles' and 'Musée de Beaux Art' (Museum of Fine Arts) are two of the poet's best-known ekphrastic experiences. These are such two much-celebrated ekphrastic poems of Auden's. The former of these, 'The Shield of Achilles', the eponymous title of Auden's volume of verse published in 1955, is a description of Achilles's shield. In his *The Iliad*, Book 18, lines 478-608, Homer gave a detailed description of Achilles's shield. This encouraged many artists to represent the work in paintings. In their turn, the paintings have inspired many poets to describe such paintings of the shield.



(Shield of Achilles by Angelo Monticelli 1820)

The latter of Auden's poems mentioned above, 'Musée de Beaux Art', is the poet's meditation on the Dutch Brueghel's (1525-1569) *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (1560). Auden's ekphrasising in 'The Shield of Achilles' is only imaginative in the sense that he gives readers a description of what he imagines Achilles's shield to have been like. His description should not, therefore, identify typically with Homer's as described in *The Iliad*. Structurally, Auden's poem has eight stanzas of which four have seven lines while the other four have eight lines. In this poem, readers are given a detailed description of Achilles's shield as observed and described by Achilles's own mother Thetis, a sea-goddess at whose request Hephaestus made her son Achilles, the Greek hero of the Trojan wars, an armour and a shield. An aptly dexterous maker of shields of gods, Hephaestus engraves many images on the shield which make it superior to any other known shield. In the poem, Thetis watches the shield while Hephaestus is engraving the images:

She looked over his shoulder
For vines and olive trees,
Marble well-governed cities

And ships upon untamed seas,
But there on the shining metal
His hands had put instead
An artificial wilderness

And a sky like lead (Mendelson 596).

War, suffering and misery throb throughout the poem. The second stanza is a description of an image of barrenness and lack of shelter soldiers would experience. The ghostly image of war looms large:

A plain without a feature, bare and brown,
No blade of grass, no sign of neighborhood,
Nothing to eat and nowhere to sit down,
Yet, congregated on its blankness, stood
An unintelligible multitude,
A million eyes, a million boots in line,

Without expression, waiting for a sign (Mendelson 596).

The third stanza opens with the line “She looked over his shoulder” which reminds readers that the descriptions given are those of Achilles’s mother rather than the poet’s. In this third stanza, religion and religious rituals, “ritual pieties”, “flower-garlanded heifers”, “[l]ibation and sacrifices”, are described. In place of the altar, however, Thetis noticed that “[b]arbed wire” stretched and men were gathered in large masses where they suffered greatly from the blazing heat of the sun. The poem reflects on the recoiling role of religion and the domination of politicians over men of religion. Warriors on the battlefield were not provided with the weapons or food needed and, thus, “[w]hat their foes like to do was done”. War ruins everything:

... a bird

Flew up to safety from his well-aimed stone:
That girls are raped, that two boys knife a third,
Were axioms to him, who'd never heard
Of any world where promises were kept,

Or one could weep because another wept (Mendelson 596).

The poem is satirical of all those who mobilise soldiers and march them off in large masses to battlefields to kill or be

killed whether these be politicians or men of religion. That a great shield does not really mean a noble warrior is one of the ideas suggested by the poem. This poem was published in 1952 when the world was still suffering from the aftermaths of the six-year WWII that ended on 2nd September 1945 and during what is politically known as the Cold War, between the United States and the Soviet Union and the allies of each. That was a time at which a third world war seemed forthcoming. The poem is, thus, a scathing criticism of the inhumanity and savagery of war.

Auden's 'Musée des Beaux Arts', published in 1939, is inspired by the Dutch artist Pieter Brueghel's painting *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (1558). In Brueghel's artwork, in a museum in Brussels, Belgium, Icarus's drowning is represented as a mere, incidental occurrence unworthy of attention. Simply told, the Greek myth has it that Icarus and his father Daedalus were imprisoned in a labyrinth on the island of Crete by King Minos of Athens. The father, a dexterous craftsman who had built the King the labyrinth in which to imprison the monster Minotaur, manages to hunt birds to keep himself and his son alive. With birds' wings, Daedalus made himself and his son wings to escape beyond the walls of the labyrinth. With wax, the father fixed the feathers to the wings. Before flying, the father, aware of his son's love of the sky, warned Icarus of flying close to the sun. Both fly. The father successfully lands on the other side of the walls of the labyrinth but Icarus, an aspirer for the celestial world, flies higher and higher, the wax on the wings melts and the boy falls into the sea and drowns.



Bruegel's painting shown above captures that very moment of Icarus's falling into the sea, and the drowning of the boy. It shows how no one heeds another's or others' disasters even though such disasters are happening nearby since others do not really care. The painting struck a sensitive chord in Auden who responded to it. Auden's universalising of the work's message gives the work new dimensions viewers of the painting would mostly stand short of. Such ingenuity of the poet makes poetry and art integral and interrelated and, more importantly, interdependent. The poem opens with the poet's meditating on human beings who have accepted human suffering and misery to be part of human life:

About suffering they were never wrong,
The old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position (Mendelson 179).

People have, thus, come to accept suffering as part of their everyday lives. The poet gives evidence of people's insensitiveness by describing how people in the picture are totally indifferent to and unthoughtful about the drowning of the boy even though it is happening before their eyes. Prior to describing the casualty taking place, the poet describes how everything around the drowning boy

looks quite ordinary. To the poet, what sounds more striking than the Icarus's drowning is the dullness and the irresponsiveness of people to a disaster that is taking place while they do not even try to help:

... how it takes place

While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking
dully along;

How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting

For the miraculous birth, there always must be

Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating

On a pond at the edge of the wood (Mendelson 179).

Embedded within the outer frame of Auden's recounting of the tragic drowning of Icarus in 'Musée de Beaux Art' is a reference to another Breughel's painting.



Critics believe the following stanza to be inspired by Breughel's famous painting *The Massacre of the Innocents* alluded to at the end of the poem's first stanza:

They never forgot

That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course

Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot

Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree (Mendelson 179).

It is worth noting that while Icarus is hardly represented in Brueghel's painting *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, he is remarkably focused on in Auden's poem. The contradiction is only ostensible as each of the artist and the poet chooses to convey his message differently. That Brueghel's Icarus is hardly seen in the painting is deliberately done by the artist to expose people's inadvertence to the drowning boy and, in a larger sense, to anyone's adversity. The poet, however, chose to take the diminutive figure of drowning Icarus to his focal interest. In the second half of his poem, Auden is concerned with the boy's tragedy of unheeded drowning.

Icarus is only one example of those who suffer and die without being paid the least attention by those who are closest to them. The little figure of drowning Icarus is therefore meant to show how insignificant he is to others in the picture. In its turn, childhood innocence is seen as being sacrificed by such negligence. The boy's two "white" legs appear on the surface of the green seawater in which he fell. Many people are out at sea or nearby: the ploughman, the captain of the ship and the shepherd, but they are all negligent of the falling and the drowning of the boy. The painting is actually full of details that represent actions: the ship runs its usual course, the ploughman, who might have seen and heard Icarus's splash into water, carries on with land digging. In his turn, the captain of the ship, the crew as well as the passengers, might have seen and/or heard Icarus falling from the sky. Even the shepherd, who is probably the closest to drowning Icarus, is uncaring. No action at all is taken to rescue the drowning boy who must have been seen and heard. The poem is a condemnation of man's indifference to man's suffering:

In Breughel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone

As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green Water, and the expansive delicate ship that must have seen Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky, Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on (Mendelson 179).

If works of art have the ability to preserve figures and freeze actions as they are depicted, preserving the figure of Icarus in the painting above means inevitable death of the boy since his head and the upper part of the body are submerged into water. The stillness of the action in the painting is, “disrupted by the various movements that splice through the work’s final stanza – namely, ‘a boy falling out of the sky’, ‘the white legs disappearing into the green/ Water’ and the ship which ‘[h]ad somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on’” (Keohane). The poem is exposing of the deteriorating state of humanity and it is a testimony of condemnation against the deplorable state of human indifference to the suffering experienced by fellow human beings.

From mythologising to universalising is what Auden endeavoured to achieve in this poem. Choosing a child to be the victim of human indifference, in the painting and the poem, should not escape readers’ attention. Furthermore, the artist’s and the poet’s choice of the mythical figure of Icarus show that indifference to human misery and suffering is old as human existence itself. Using the Petrarchan form of the sonnet can be supporting in this respect since this form of the sonnet is older than the Shakespearean and the Spenserian ones. Indeed, art and poetry can play a seriously orienting role, namely that of a witness. Both the painting and the poem bear witness against the inhuman passivity of those in the painting. The painting and the poem make it clear that Icarus’s death can largely be blamed on those represented in both works who did not even try to help. The idea of passive, indifferent humans attending the situation is, thus, inculcated by both the painting and the poem.

This is actually not the only case in which poetry passes its judgment and finds someone or some people guilty. Robert

Browning's ekphrastic poem 'My Last Duchess' practices a similar function. The Duke stands mesmerised before his dead wife's portrait and reminisces how disrespectful of his family's name the Duchess was. The poem is full of implicit accusations directed against the Duchess:



... she liked whate'er

She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
Sir, 'twas all one!

...

...

...

She thanked men—good; but thanked
Somehow...I know not how...as if she ranked
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
With anybody's gift (Milford 54).

By the time readers reach the Duke's confession that, "I gave commands" readers, like the Duke's own entourage and companions, are struck with awe. When the Duke said this, "all smiles stopped together" (Milford 54). By the time Browning's 'My Last Duchess' comes to a close, readers of the poem get almost determined that the Duke is involved in the murder of the Duchess by giving direct orders to his men that she must be killed. Thus, while readers of Auden's poem tend to see passive viewers of

the calamity as guilty, readers of Browning's 'My Last Duchess' tend to conclude that the Duke is an accomplice in the murdering of the Duchess. This shows the poetic authority of passing judgments.

The American poet William Carlos Williams (1883-1963), whose name is often associated with Modernism and Imagism, is well known for his ekphrasing. In his turn, Williams ekphrased on Breughel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* in his poem with the same title. The poem has often been cited as exemplary of Imagist poetry. It first appeared in Williams's collection of poems *Pictures from Brueghel and Other Poem*, published in 1962. Williams's ekphrasing is, however, remarkably different from Auden's since it sounds more like that of a detached reporter's telling of his readers tersely and succinctly about what he sees. It is more like a direct, matter-of-fact reporting of what is being observed than a true reflection of a poet that is supposed to strike something in the reader. The poet tells the audience, from the very beginning, that he is not expressing his own point of view or giving his readers his own vision of the incident, rather, he is just interpreting and conveying in words what Breughel depicted in paints and colours. This is particularly applicable to the first four of the poem's seven tercets. Surprisingly, in the last three stanzas, the poet blames the boy's drowning on the sun that melted the wax fixing the wings:

According to Brueghel
when Icarus fell
it was spring
a farmer was ploughing
his field
the whole pageantry
of the year was
awake tingling
near
the edge of the sea
concerned
with itself

sweating in the sun
that melted
the wings' wax
unsignificantly
off the coast
there was
a splash quite unnoticed
this was

Icarus drowning (Williams 4)

The poem is remarkably direct in the way it gives an account of what is happening in the painting. The terse, short lines of the poem and the brevity of words in the lines help show the poet as a disinterested reporter of the event. More importantly, the open end of the poem must pose the question of whether the poem has really come to a close.

It is worth noting that the last stanza of the poem asserts that the splash of Icarus's falling into the sea was "quite unnoticed". This reveals a sharp contrast between the ways Auden and Williams evaluate the drowning of Icarus. While Auden finds that those in the picture are to blame, Williams, on the other hand, clears them of the accusation of being looked at as accomplices in the boy's drowning. According to Williams's poem, the "sweltering sun melted Icarus's wax wings, causing him to fall from the sky and drown, unnoticed by his surroundings" (Siddiquezm).

The date of publishing Auden's poem can be considered crucial in determining the poet's viewing of the incident. Auden's was published in 1939 the year in which WWII broke out. To Auden suffering looked an inevitable result of those who do not care about the fates of the innocent. Williams's poem was published in 1962. By the time readers reach the end of Williams's poem, they are expected to pose the question of whether the poet's account of the painting has really come to a close or whether the poet still has something to say. It is true that paucity of punctuation characterises Williams's poetry in general, but the fact that the

poem ends without a full stop can mean that the poet's message is not completed.

In 1965, the American poet Adrienne Rich (1929-2012) published her poem 'Mourning Picture' inspired by Edwin Romanzo Elmer's (1850-1923) painting *Mourning Picture* (1890).



Elmer's work of art can speak volumes of an aura of mourning with death being lurking and symbolised in a number of ways. One way death is suggested is through the black clothes the parents are wearing. In addition, the girl's hat seems to be sinking in the grass while the girl's eyes look upward at heaven. The girl's white face is suggestive of death. Heaven itself occupies almost half the picture. The girl's innocence is symbolised by the lamb and the kitten. Indeed, everything in the picture seems significantly suggestive of death and, therefore, mourning. Even the wicker pram, i.e. four-wheeled carriage, on which the small doll is located is suggestive of motion and, therefore, departure. The father and the daughter are grimly looking westward, as if expecting something gruesome and awful to arrive. In its turn, the setting of the sun represents the end of the day which can also suggest the end of life itself as in W. Shakespeare's 'Sonnet 73':

In me thou see'st the twilight of such day

As after sunset fadeth in the west,
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death's second self, that seals up all in rest (Duncan-Jones 256).

The speaker in the Rich's 'The Mourning Picture' is Effie, the nine-year-old girl, herself. It is a tribute to the poem that it gives a voice to the dead girl. This makes the poem more empathetic. Subtly, the poet avoids mentioning the words die and death even though readers of the poem are sure that death is ubiquitous and quite close to the girl, "my father and mother darkly sit there, in black clothes". Probably it is the death of the parents' only daughter, that silenced them and kept them awe-struck as they are represented in the picture:

Under the dull green of the lilacs, out in the light
carving each spoke of the pram, the turned porch-pillars,
under high early-summer clouds,
I am Effie, visible and invisible,
remembering and remembered (Rich 188).

Rich is well-known for her keen interest in words. In her poem 'Diving into the Wreck', the speaker claims, "I came to explore the wreck / The words are purposes./ The words are maps" (Rich 372). Significantly, the speaker in the poem uses the words "out" and "under" repeatedly in the second half of the poem as opposed to "my", "my father and mother", and "our" that seem to dominate the first half. The words "out" and "under" can simply suggest that life is a short game and anyone who loses gets "out" and is buried "underground". Grass covers dead bodies as grass itself tells us in Carl Sandburg's 'Grass':

Pile the bodies high at Austerlitz and Waterloo.
Shovel them under and let me work –

I am the grass; I cover all (Evans 9).

Philip Larkin's 'An Arundel Tomb' is another famous example of ekphrasis. The stone effigy of an earl and a countess lying supine beside each other in a church instigate the poet to write in response. The two figures of the effigy are believed to be

Richard FitzAlan and his second wife Eleanor of Lancaster who died in the 1370s. The earl is holding the countess's hand.



Larkin's poem was written in 1956 but it was published in Larkin's most notable volume of verse *The Whitsun Weddings* in 1964. The poem consists of seven stanzas each of which has six lines. Throughout the poem, the poet tries to evaluate love between the two figures of the sculpture. The poet reveals an ambivalent attitude towards love as represented by the artwork. The two figures in effigy form are holding each other's hand. They seem to have stood the test of time despite time's attempts of wearing them out. It is true that time has blurred their faces but their intertwining hands assert that their love can still endure time, even though the poet has some doubts about it. The poet admires the way the effigy, "[r]igidly .../ Persisted, linked, through lengths and breadths / Of time" (Faber 38). Still, the fact that the earl and the countess lie fixed on their backs arouses the poet's idea of whether this can show real love:

Side by side, their faces blurred,
The earl and countess lie in stone,
Their proper habits vaguely shown
As jointed armour, stiffened pleat,

And that faint hint of the absurd—

The little dogs under their feet (Faber 37).

In his later volumes of verse, Larkin got bolder in expressing his views on love and sometimes even wrote over explicitly about physical love and sexuality, as he did in ‘Annus Mirabilis’, published in *High Windows* (1974) for instance. ‘An Arundel Tomb’ ends with one of Larkin’s most quoted lines, “What will survive of us is love” (Faber 39).

Sylvia Plath’s ‘The Disquieting Muses’ and Anne Sexton’s ‘A Starry Night’, are two of the best-known ekphrastic poems of the twentieth century. These two poems are different from all others discussed in this paper because both Plath and Sexton suffered greatly from psychological disorder and finally each committed suicide. Death wishes can be inferred throughout both poems. To start with, Plath’s poem ‘The Disquieting Muses’ is inspired by the Italian painter Giorgio De Chirico’s (1888-1978) painting with the same title, *Le Muse inquietanti* (1917). The poem comprises seven stanzas each of which has eight lines. The painting reminded Plath of how as a child she would be visited by three featureless, sinister figures, almost typically like those represented in the painting below. Such figures would come to her bed at night and keep nodding their heads that are “like darning-eggs”, sewing tools. The figures are mouthless and eyeless.



With its cubic shapes, circles, squares, triangles, straight and broken lines, the painting is worth considering. The lines stretching and vanishing downwards before two of the figures can symbolise life and death. Strikingly, a dark figure is waiting half way, which, if applied to Plath's own case, can suggest death that stands half way even before the stretching, longwise lines disappear. The way before these two figures stretches in lane-like paths that go up and then endlessly disappear down. Far away in the background certain buildings, that seem to be sinking deep below the path, appear by halves. Light in the painting, weak as it is, comes from one angle. The third figure in the poem stands gruesomely and solely on the right hand side of the picture in complete darkness as if it were death lurking to take someone's soul. The painting must have spurred and outpoured the poet's thoughts of fear.

The plainness of the muses in the painting contradicts sharply with the idea of inspiration that is conventionally associated with such mythical figures. The painting, however, struck a sensitive chord in Plath. It provoked her emotions of past memories of panicking figures that disquieted her childhood bedtime. It seems the poet thought she had overcome her memories of such three mysterious figures that surrounded her bed at night turning her nights into fearful encounters with such three metamorphosed figures. To the poet's great shock such latent, subconscious fears were renewed by a painting. The painting aroused Plath's childhood hidden fears, "heads like darning-eggs to nod/ And nod and nod at foot and head/ And at the left side of my crib?" (Hughes 73).

Plath's muses were sources of endless fear but not of inspiration or creativity but Chirico's painting crystalised the poet's fear into words. The poem can arouse readers' fears of potential muses being nearby any of them. Such Muses would loom large above the speaker's bed when she slept turning her bedtime into nightmares. Such three "witches" are comparable to the three witches in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. This is supported by Plath's

numerous images. In so doing, the poet asserts that such an experience was by no means imaginary. The niceties and nuances of the situation are vividly described. This indicates that these memories have never been forgotten even though the poet thought such memories ended with childhood.

The poet's re-experiencing of such a childhood experience is enhanced by the poet's adroit manipulation of language, the employing of colours, the choice of words and the apparently random lengths of lines. Even the apparent simplicity of the poem is only deceptive as everything in the poem is subtly manipulated. The child's sense of deprivation resulting from her mother's absence and the mother-daughter lack of communication and of the child's being denied the kindness of motherhood can be inferred from the repeated use of prefixes in such words as "disquieting", "disfigured", "unsightly", "unwisely", "unmasked" and "illbred" in the first four lines of the poem. This is further supported by words, such as "eyeless" and "mouthless" that have suffixes denoting absence and negation. In between such prefixes and suffixes, the helpless child can be seen stuck and suffering from insecurity. The poem abounds with words and phrases that connote fear. Such are words as "gowns of stone", "heavy-footed", "blank faces", "stitched bald head", "tone-deaf" and "shadow". The "setting sun" mentioned in the last stanza of the poem can refer symbolically to the girl's sense of forthcoming death. Throughout the poem, the child keeps calling and addressing her mother but the latter is absent and this adds to the child's fears. Furthermore, references to edible objects, such as "cookies", "gingerbread" and "Ovaltine" support the idea that the "crib" child must have feared being devoured by such "witches", even though they were mouthless.

Interestingly, the poem and the painting seem to complement each other despite the fact that Chirico painted *Le Muse inquietanti* about forty years before Plath wrote her poem. The poet's description of such disfigured entities makes them almost observable to the reader. Boundaries between the real and

the imaginary blur and the poet successfully creates a surreal state fit for that depicted in Chirico's painting. The shadows of two of the figures stretch diagonally and endlessly in the painting, which the poet could have interpreted as symbolising eventual domination over the poet's life. The rusty, pale reddish, yellowish and dark colours of the painting must have added to the poet's gloomy interpreting of the poem's revelations.

In 2013, the Canadian-American poet Mark Strand (1934–2014) published his poem entitled 'The Disquieting Muses' inspired by Chirico's same painting. The trimmed pentameter lines and the compact rhyme of the poem reveal a poet in great control of the lines. Of the poem's three-line stanzas, only the last one has four lines. The three-line stanzas follow the same rhyme scheme aba; the last stanza abab. Strand's control of language, however, may contradict with the state of psychic disorder such figures can cause, which Plath captures successfully through her distinguished manipulation of language. To Strand, what characterises *The Disquieting Muses* most are boredom and despair. The line, "Boredom sets in first, and then despair" is used as a refrain in the poem.

Anne Sexton's notable poem 'The Starry Night' was first published in the poet's *All My Pretty Ones* (1962). The poem was inspired by Vincent van Gogh's (1853-1890) painting with the same title. Gogh painted his *The Starry Night* in 1889. It may be interesting here to mention that many critics assert that *The Starry Night* is Van Gogh's own visual representation of and response to the American poet Walt Whitman's (1819-1892) notable poem 'Song of Myself' (ir.uiowa). It is true that Gogh admired Whitman's poetry greatly. He once said, "[Whitman] sees in the future, and even in the present, a world of healthy, carnal love, strong and frank- of friendship- of work- under the great starlit vault of heaven a something of which after all one can only call God- and eternity in its place above this world (Eiss 439).

Anne Sexton's poem was first published in 1961. The painting, with its dominating blue colour, depicts a sky whirling

with tumultuous motion and disturbance. The stars are exploding; it is as if the world is ending. The poet expresses a clear death wish in the three stanzas of the poem. “Oh starry starry night! This is how/ I want to die” functions as a refrain in this short poem. Further, the poet observes the whirling of the sky to be serpent-like.



The painting shows how all celestial bodies explode and merge into one another. The title of the painting, the same of the poem, is illusive. One expects the painting to represent a peaceful night. The tumultuous motion of the sky is apocalyptic in the sense that it represents the end of the world. That the painting depicts an apocalyptic moment can be supported by Gogh’s words about religion quoted by Sexton as the epigraph to her poem. The epigraph reads, “*That does not keep me from having a terrible need of—shall I say the word—religion. Then I go out at night to paint the stars. Vincent Van Gogh in a letter to his brother*”. In the painting, the earth is almost totally gone. One black tree, however, is seen in the foreground. To sexton, the painting crystalises her death wish. Sexton’s responds to the painting in a free-verse poem:

*The town does not exist
except where one black-haired tree slips
up like a drowned woman into the hot sky.
The town is silent. The night boils with eleven stars.*

*Oh starry starry night! This is how
I want to die.
It moves. They are all alive.
Even the moon bulges in its orange irons
to push children, like a god, from its eye.
The old unseen serpent swallows up the stars.
Oh starry starry night! This is how
I want to die:
into that rushing beast of the night,
sucked up by that great dragon, to split
from my life with no flag,
no belly,
no cry. (Kumin 53)*

Sexton's poem responds clearly to the painting. Motion in the sky takes the shape of a serpent, in the second stanza, and turns into a "rushing beast" a "great dragon" in the third one. Despite the fact that the poem is short, the poet does not miss the chance of using the refrain, "*Oh starry starry night! This is how / I want to die*" to assert her preoccupying and obsessive death wish. It is worth noting that both the painter and the poet committed suicide. Gogh shot himself in the stomach in 1890 and Sexton took her life in 1974 by carbon monoxide poisoning emitted by her car after drinking heavily and locking herself in the garage.

This paper has explored the ekphrastic experience in English poetry from the late 1930s to the mid-1960s. The paper examined the different sides of such an experience through investigating a number of poems by male as well as female poets. Suffering, grief and death wishes are among the most important features that characterise the ekphrastic poems analysed. One notable feature in most of the works of art this paper discussed is that, more than any other colour, the colour blue seems to attract poets and evoke their emotions of grief and thoughts about death. The paper discussed ekphrastic poems written about a variety of works of art including real and imaginary works, paintings and sculptures.

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