

Two Sisters of Persephone

Two girls there are: within the house
One sits; the other, without.
Daylong a duet of shade and light
Plays between these.

In her dark wainscoted room
The first works problems on
A mathematical machine.
Dry ticks mark time

As she calculates each sum.
At this barren enterprise
Rat-shrewd go her squint eyes,
Root-pale her meager frame.

Bronzed as earth, the second lies,
Hearing ticks blown gold
Like pollen on bright air. Lulled
Near a bed of poppies,

She sees how their red silk flare
Of petaled blood
Burns open to the sun's blade.
On that green alter

Freely become sun's bride, the latter
Grows quick with seed.
Grass-couched in her labor's pride,
She bears a king. Turned bitter

And sallow as any lemon,
The other, wry virgin to the last,
Goes graveward with flesh laid waste,
Worm-husbanded, yet no woman.

Sylvia Plath (1956)

Comment [S(1): Allusion to the daughter of the harvest goddess, with the famous story where she must spend her life equally on Earth with her mother and in Hell with Hades (this is also a mythical explanation of the seasons)

Comment [S(2): Colon – places emphasis on the following phrase. With emphasis on “within”, it implies that the sisters are both united under one roof; the sisters are interconnected.

Comment [S(3): Short phrases places emphasis on each word and ‘without’ although seemingly applies to one sister, the word is standing on it’s own implies how both sisters may be lacking something.

Comment [S(4): Duet – sense of harmony. ‘Shade’ and ‘light’ suggest a Ying and Yang relationship, implying that there’s a sense of balance, where one sister relies on the other to become complete.

Comment [S(5): Sense of reliance as both sister are connected with this ‘duet’

Comment [S(6): When introduced, the first action of the first sister is work, implying that she’s mainly focused on tasks that occupy her. Contrasted with the action of the second sister.

Comment [S(7): Second sister ‘lies’, implying that she is relaxed and enjoying herself outdoors surrounded by nature

Comment [S(8): Light airiness in the second sister’s attitude, implying that she doesn’t take things seriously (the mention of ‘air’ in the following line supports this)

Comment [S(9): Gullible and easily deceived, which works well with her “airy” attitude mentioned earlier

Comment [S(10): Being the ‘sun’s bride’ speaks of the second sister’s achievements as she was able to wed the source of all energy on Earth

Comment [S(11): She goes through hardships, but she’s happy and takes pride in her work.

Comment [S(12): Enjambment – suggest that both sisters turned bitter. Perhaps Plath hints that both sisters have a resentful side, which makes the twos sisters more realistic

Comment [S(13): Two sisters may be symbolic for the choices that Plath made in her life:

- First sister is independent, yet looked down by society
- Second sister is seemingly happy and loved by everyone

 - Words associated with how both sisters interact with time:

- First sister has to work under time constraints ('ticks mark time' [line 8])
- Second sister listens to the 'ticks' with a light-hearted attitude

 - Words associated with darkness

- Used only with the first sister
- Implies how alone and abandoned by society she is

 - Words associated with light

- Used only with the second sister
- Implies how happy and bright her character is

 - Description of the first sister's actions and her tasks

- Gives a sense of order and independence
- Suggests how she's mainly confined indoors to work on a 'machine' [line 7]

 - Words associated with the first sister's fruitlessness

- Highlights the flaws in the first sister
- Shows society's view upon this independent woman

 - Description of the first sister's appearance

- Creates an image of a plagued, frail ('rat-shrewd' and 'merger frame') woman who is fatigued ('squint eyes')

 - Colors associated with the second sister

- Implies how vibrant and enjoyable her life is
- Contrasted with the dark and unexciting world of the first sister

 - Natural imagery

- Used only with the second sister
- Associates the second sister with the outdoors, as opposed to the first sister, who stays indoors working most of the time