

## The Beautiful Mundane: Plath's Object Transformations

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Sylvia Plath's ability to re-see quotidian objects as creations of newness and beauty is so revolutionary that it continues enrapturing audiences today. Throughout history, the retinal pleasure of objects' minutiae has lured humans into a figurative trap of looking. Plath delves into our collective fascination of "looking," and offers entry points into her own prosaic visuals through poetry. Reading Plath informed me how I could begin accessing my own psychological entry into what I refer to as "the beautiful mundane." I relish her visual ignition launched by words and sensual effects—familiar, simple objects—all freshly envisioned through her eyes and transposed to language.

I found Plath's visual desire levitating off the page when I discovered her work during my mid-teens. Her texts were a refuge for me, and her transformation of objects into extraordinary, though accessible entities made an impact. During that time I was simultaneously reading the nineteenth-century French author Stendhal alongside Plath's *Collected Poems*, and I noticed a serrated intersection. While Plath introduced me to the world's rational, elemental splendor of "things," Stendhal posed an interesting injunction that beautiful objects (of art) induce powerful responses from viewers (Stendhal 89). I found Plath's objects transcending into a category of arresting beauty, surpassing Stendhal's objets d'art. Concurrently, I noticed that Plath may have subconsciously obeyed Stendhal's fidelity to beauty. I mused whether or not she had been exposed to Stendhal's theory. Even as Plath and Stendhal's disparate texts seem untethered to each other, both authors suggest that visual sensory overload is transferred through objects and the language that shapes them.

Like Plath, I, too, was attracted to natural, accessible objects' magnetic qualities that enriched my awareness. The alchemy of ordinary objects held high court in my imagination, tantamount to the visual intensity of great Western art which also entranced Stendhal. Yet I found myself equally drawn into Plath's realm of ordinary objects' pleasing allure: beauty in its own right.

Plath's texts often disclose objects' different, though ordinary, beauty. Plath also adeptly captures pedestrian items of the world and presents them with an unexpected grandeur as she names, discerns, and enlivens her subjects with new, inventive possibilities. Reading Plath's

"Candles" and "Poppies in July" changed my perception towards common place objects. I felt a new capacity for imagination. Within Plath's *Collected Poems*, I sensed that Plath not only beautifies things, but also animates them. Consider Plath's spider, a "spry black deus/Ex machina" in her eponymously titled poem "Spider" (Plath 48). The modest spider, by its own agency, is re-seen and interpreted as the classical god out of a machine. Plath's ordinary objects rise to higher echelons of energy and importance. Inversely, I've noticed that Plath's subjects metamorphose under the speaker's personal control, observable in the poem "Soliloquy of the Solipsist." The speaker declares, "I hold absolute power" (37) and "All your beauty, all your wit, is a gift, my dear/From me" (38). Plath suggests that beauty can be found within average, normative objects which are often overlooked, yet commit feats of creative transformation which rival any classically beautiful object found within Stendhal's museum visits.

Plath presents objects and natural environments as equally appealing masterpieces. I began seeing beauty's reigning simplicity through Plath's eyes. Perhaps Stendhal's theory intersects with Plath's sensibility. Subjects in her poetry possess an unsettling and artful beauty, observable in "Winter Landscape, with Rooks" as the sun, with its terrible beauty, gazes : "The austere sun descends above the fen,/an orange cyclops-eye, scorning to look/longer on this landscape of chagrin" (21).

I soon began giving myself permission to lean into my own deeply physiological responses to everyday objects through a Plathian lens. To be dazzled in the pre-morning light of a "quartz-clear dawn" ("Southern Sunrise"), or during a walk on the moors ("Wuthering Heights") is occasion for raw, physical and emotional responses no longer incarcerated in museums, nor is beauty a privileged visage. Beauty comes to us freely through those common objects we notice in the world, noticeable in Plath's poem "Mushrooms," where striking visuals come to life and gain agency at pleasingly alarming rates: "Our kind multiplies:/We shall by morning/Inherit the earth" (139-140). The beautiful mundane is art in itself, found in the unassuming spaces of a rectory garden ("Dialogue Between Ghost and Priest") or a baby's nursery ("Nick and the Candlestick.") Plath's poems occupy the spaces of humbleness and beauty and merge them together. The viewer now is re-privileged to "see" objects in a way he or she might ordinarily overlook. Plath's act of seeing and imaginatively shaping the object through language transcends it into a realm of fierce beauty that is both uncanny and unnerving. Perhaps Plath intertextually dovetails with Stendhal: their viewers become seized by untraditional beauty,

and experience physical and psychological connections.

Plath knew that poetry and its visual content was not merely the sum of its meaning; its underlying message delivers a rupturing of aesthetics, transposing a commonly beautiful image into a pleasurable sensation. If objects hold a forthright beauty, within literature or other mediums, then objects possess the ability to produce a physiological, heightened visual response in the viewer. This experience places a new significance to the age-old question: can literature's aesthetics, whether simple or complex, be essential to the human experience of visual pleasure?

Perhaps Plath sensed that objects of beauty embody a higher function, inspiring our thoughts, visions, pleasures and attitudes toward ideals of creation, feeling, and thinking. Beauty, with all its manifold definitions in literature and beyond, maintains its own inalienable forces. Objects, common or extraordinary, affect us, yet beauty holds its own sense of purpose, a catalyst of intensity to stir the senses, with a primary function that serves as a component of the observer's visual enjoyment and abandon. Beauty's ordinary elegance or humble simplicity has inexplicable powers to move us, physiologically alter our feelings, and carry us toward the limitless fringe of introspection and creativity. Here, Plath's innovation is conceptualized and birthed, and imagination takes the reign. However, Plath understood beauty and anchored herself in the world through that truth—the experiential, visual pleasure. I am indebted to Plath's discovery because beauty, situated in homely objects or great works of art, provides us with peak mind/body experiences.

Plath perhaps knew this truth, and through her poetry I instinctively began sensing her work's larger mission—ordinary objects' native state of beauty—and the act of "seeing." Plath fixated on objects and environments either "seen" or overlooked in the eyes of others. Her poetry makes a platform for her voice and gives value to her inner observations. Through her voice and observations, Plath distinctly transfers the undercurrents of human experience.

Works Cited

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Stendhal, Henri-Marie. *Histoire de la Peinture en Italie*. Paris: M. Lévy Frères, 1868. Print.