

The Applicant Sylvia Plath Analysis

The Applicant

BY SYLVIA PLATH

First, are you our sort of a person?
Do you wear
A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch,
A brace or a hook,
Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch,

Stitches to show something's missing? No, no? Then
How can we give you a thing?
Stop crying.
Open your hand.
Empty? Empty. Here is a hand

To fill it and willing
To bring teacups and roll away headaches
And do whatever you tell it.
Will you marry it?
It is guaranteed

To thumb shut your eyes at the end
And dissolve of sorrow.
We make new stock from the salt.
I notice you are stark naked.
How about this suit——

Black and stiff, but not a bad fit.
Will you marry it?
It is waterproof, shatterproof, proof
Against fire and bombs through the roof.
Believe me, they'll bury you in it.

Now your head, excuse me, is empty.
I have the ticket for that.
Come here, sweetie, out of the closet.
Well, what do you think of *that*?
Naked as paper to start

But in twenty-five years she'll be silver,
In fifty, gold.
A living doll, everywhere you look.
It can sew, it can cook,
It can talk, talk, talk.

It works, there is nothing wrong with it.
You have a hole, it's a poultice.
You have an eye, it's an image.
My boy, it's your last resort.
Will you marry it, marry it, marry it.

The applicant Sylvia Plath analysis reveals the intricate layers of emotion and societal critique embedded within her poetry. Plath, a prominent figure in 20th-century literature, often explored themes of identity, gender roles, and the pressures of societal expectations. "The Applicant," one of her notable works, serves as a poignant commentary on the nature of relationships and the commodification of human emotions. This analysis delves into the poem's structure, themes, and Plath's use of language, providing a comprehensive understanding of her intentions and the implications of her work.

Overview of "The Applicant"

"The Applicant" was written in 1962 and is part of Plath's posthumously published collection, *Ariel*. The poem is characterized by its sharp, satirical tone, reflecting Plath's critical view of traditional gender roles and the expectations placed upon women in society.

Structure and Form

1. Stanza Breakdown: The poem consists of several stanzas that employ an interrogative structure, mimicking a job interview. This format serves to

underscore the transactional nature of relationships that Plath critiques.

2. Rhyme and Rhythm: Plath uses a mix of free verse and structured rhyme, creating a disjointed feeling that mirrors the emotional turmoil experienced by the speaker. The rhythm enhances the satirical tone and emphasizes the absurdity of the societal norms being critiqued.

3. Voice and Tone: The voice in "The Applicant" is both authoritative and mocking, as the speaker addresses an unseen "you," representing a prospective partner. This creates a distance between the speaker and the subject, allowing for a more objective critique of societal expectations.

Thematic Analysis

Plath's poem encompasses several key themes that reveal her complex views on relationships, identity, and societal expectations.

1. The Nature of Relationships

- Transactional Dynamics: The poem presents relationships as transactions, where the applicant must 'qualify' for partnership through various attributes and possessions. This commodification of love reflects a broader societal trend where personal value is tied to material goods.
- Gender Roles: Plath critiques the traditional roles assigned to men and women. The poem suggests that women are expected to conform to certain standards to be deemed desirable, while men are positioned as gatekeepers of those standards.

2. Identity and Self-Perception

- Objectification: The speaker's inquiry into the suitability of the applicant underscores a sense of objectification, where personal worth is reduced to a set of qualifications. This resonates with Plath's own struggles with identity, particularly as a woman writer in a male-dominated field.
- Desire for Acceptance: The pressure to conform to societal expectations manifests in the applicant's desire for approval. This theme is reflective of Plath's own life experiences, where she grappled with her identity as both a poet and a woman.

3. The Absurdity of Societal Norms

- Satirical Commentary: Plath's use of satire in the poem highlights the absurdity of societal norms surrounding love and relationships. The exaggerated qualifications for an applicant underscore the unrealistic standards imposed by society.

- Isolation and Alienation: The poem evokes a sense of alienation, as the speaker navigates a world where personal connections are mediated by superficial qualifications. This reflects Plath's own feelings of isolation, both in her personal life and within the literary community.

Language and Imagery

Plath's use of language in "The Applicant" is deliberate and multifaceted, employing a range of literary devices to convey her message.

1. Diction and Tone

- Colloquial Language: The use of everyday language contributes to the poem's accessibility, allowing readers to engage with its themes on a personal level. This choice of diction contrasts sharply with the serious undertones of the subject matter.
- Irony: Plath employs irony throughout the poem, enhancing the satirical tone. The serious questioning of the applicant's qualifications is juxtaposed with the absurdity of the criteria being considered, creating a powerful critique of societal norms.

2. Symbolism and Metaphor

- The Suit and the Application: The suit symbolizes conformity and the societal expectation to present oneself in a particular way. The application process serves as a metaphor for the broader societal expectations surrounding relationships and personal worth.
- Imagery of Objects: Plath's imagery often draws on everyday objects to emphasize the materialistic nature of relationships. References to items like "a job" or "a doll" serve to reinforce the notion that personal worth is tied to external possessions rather than intrinsic qualities.

Reception and Legacy

"The Applicant" has garnered significant attention from scholars and readers alike, often cited as a crucial work in feminist literary studies.

1. Feminist Interpretations

- Critique of Patriarchy: Feminist interpretations of the poem highlight Plath's critique of patriarchal structures that dictate women's roles in

society. The poem serves as a call to recognize and challenge these norms.

- Empowerment through Critique: By exposing the absurdity of societal standards, Plath empowers readers to question and redefine their own identities and relationships.

2. Influence on Contemporary Poetry

- Legacy of Authenticity: Plath's willingness to address uncomfortable truths about identity and relationships has paved the way for future generations of poets. Her work encourages authenticity and vulnerability in exploring personal and societal issues.
- Continued Relevance: The themes of "The Applicant," particularly regarding gender roles and societal expectations, remain relevant today, resonating with contemporary discussions around identity, feminism, and the nature of relationships.

Conclusion

The analysis of the applicant Sylvia Plath reveals a deeply layered poem that challenges societal norms surrounding relationships and identity. Through her masterful use of structure, language, and thematic exploration, Plath critiques the commodification of love and the pressures placed on individuals, particularly women, to conform to unrealistic standards. The poem serves as both a reflection of Plath's personal struggles and a broader commentary on the societal constructs that define relationships. As such, "The Applicant" remains a poignant and relevant work, inviting readers to reflect on their own identities and the nature of their connections with others.

Frequently Asked Questions

What are the main themes explored in Sylvia Plath's poem 'The Applicant'?

The main themes in 'The Applicant' include identity, gender roles, societal expectations, and the commodification of relationships. Plath critiques the way women are often perceived as products to be evaluated and 'sold' in the context of marriage.

How does Sylvia Plath use symbolism in 'The Applicant'?

Plath employs symbolism through the metaphor of the 'applicant' to represent women seeking validation in a patriarchal society. The various items listed

in the poem symbolize the qualities and attributes that women are expected to possess to be deemed desirable.

What is the tone of 'The Applicant' and how does it contribute to the poem's message?

The tone of 'The Applicant' is both sarcastic and critical. This tone highlights the absurdity of societal expectations regarding marriage and femininity, emphasizing the dehumanization of women as they are reduced to mere qualifications in a job application.

In what ways does 'The Applicant' reflect Sylvia Plath's personal experiences?

The poem reflects Plath's personal struggles with identity and societal pressures, particularly regarding her roles as a woman and a wife. Her own experiences with marriage and motherhood inform the critical perspective she adopts in the poem.

What literary devices does Sylvia Plath utilize in 'The Applicant'?

Plath uses various literary devices including irony, repetition, and enjambment. Irony is prominent in the contrast between the serious tone of a job application and the trivialization of women's roles, while repetition emphasizes the relentless nature of societal demands.

How does the structure of 'The Applicant' enhance its meaning?

The poem's structure, with its rigid format and question-and-answer style, mirrors the mechanical and transactional nature of the marriage process. This structure reinforces the idea that personal relationships are treated like formal applications, stripping them of emotional depth.

What is the significance of the ending of 'The Applicant'?

The ending of 'The Applicant' leaves the reader with a sense of emptiness and resignation, highlighting the futility of trying to meet societal expectations. It serves as a powerful commentary on the challenges women face in conforming to prescribed roles.

How does 'The Applicant' compare to other works by Sylvia Plath?

Like many of Plath's works, 'The Applicant' addresses themes of identity and societal pressure. It shares similarities with her other poems, such as 'Lady Lazarus' and 'Daddy,' in its exploration of personal trauma and the struggle

for autonomy within oppressive frameworks.

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Explore a detailed analysis of Sylvia Plath's poem "The Applicant." Discover how Plath critiques societal expectations and gender roles. Learn more!

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