

*Original Research Article*

# Ekphrasis in “The Disquieting Muses” : A Dialogue Between Poetry and Painting

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**Abstract:** The American Confessional poet Sylvia Plath(1932-1963) has created a series of poems based on well-known western paintings at the early ages of her writing. “The Disquieting Muses” is one of these ekphrastic poems, which depicts the non-communicative relationship between her and her natural mother. If we approach this poem from the perspective of inter-arts poetics, that is to say, to analyze the poem side by side with its painting copy, we can discover different approaches of dialogue between the poem and the painting. This paper is meant to explore unique charm and beauty in ekphrastic literature as well as to add new perspectives to the study of Plath’s poems.

**Keywords:** “The Disquieting Muses”; Sylvia Plath; Giorgio de Chirico; Ekphrasis; Dialogue

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## 1. Chapter One Introduction

Giorgio de Chirico (1888-1978) was a pioneer of modernist painting in the 20th century and one of the founders of the Metaphysical School. “The Disquieting Muses” (see picture 1), created in 1916, is one of his masterpieces and is often seen in major art exhibitions. The painting is set in the ancient Italian city of Ferrara. In the foreground, there are two characters, the goddess of tragedy Melpomene and the goddess of comedy, Thalia. They sit and stand, while toys are scattered around their feet. At the back right of the picture stands a statue of Apollo, the “leader” of the Muses. Chirico uses strong color contrasts and isolated shadows to complete the work. The empty scenes and non-narrative pictures give people an uneasy and unfamiliar feeling. Inspired by this painting, Plath wrote eponymous poem “The Disquieting Muses” in 1957. The poem does not copy paintings completely, but appropriate, adapt, and create paintings based on Plath’s life experience.



Picture 1: The Disquieting Muses, 1916

The term “Ekphrasis” has a long history and is derived from Greek (Εκφρασις). “Ek” means “out”, “φρασις” means “tell, speak”, so the original meaning of “ekphrasis” is “speak out, tell it.” It was originally a term in ancient Greek rhetoric, referring to the eloquent person uses lifelike language to describe events, scenes, characters, etc. Since the 1960s, the West society has entered the era of

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images, thus the “Ekphrasis” theory has continued to radiate new vitality in the modern context, and the three critics Murray Krieger, James A. W. Heffernan and W.J.T. Mitchell are representatives for the ekphrasis theory.

In short, “Ekphrasis” refers to the conversion between visual art and non-visual art. It is a kind of cross-art poetics. The most typical example is the reproduction of paintings, sculptures, photos, etc. in literature. In the following, we will analyze the conversion between poems and paintings by reading Plath’s poetry texts, so as to get a glimpse of the unique charm of “Ekphrasis”, which also provides a new perspective to appreciate Plath’s poetry.

## 2. Chapter Two Appropriation and Adaptation

The beginning of Plath’s poem is a daughter’s accusatory attitude towards her mother. The careless mother forgot to invite an aunt to attend the narrator’s baptism. This aunt, described as “disfigured” and “unsightly”, resembles the image of a witch and has a strong vengeance. With a feeling of grudge, she sent three women from the same camp to my crib, shaking the weird heads of “darning-eggs” all day long, which made people shudder. Comparing the poem with the painting copy, you can find that the poet creatively made several adaptations. The first is the background which was transferred from the empty Ferrara town to the crib in an ordinary family, focusing on specific family life; the second is the transformation of the identity of the three plaster statues in the painting, from a distant Greek mythical character into a fairy tale companion of the witch; third, the viewing perspective is switched from the original audience of the painting to the “I” in the poem. Lessing thought there are insurmountable boundaries between different arts. Plath seems to agree with this point. In her creation, she did not choose to copy Chirico’s paintings, but combined her own personal experience to select and adapt the elements in the paintings.

The second stanza recalled the scene where the mother told the daughter a story, but was told by four questions guided by “who”, “whose”, “whether”, and “whether” which revealed an atmosphere of suspicion and distrust. The poet doubts whether the heroes in the mother’s story exist, and whether the mother has seen them with her own eyes. If all the rescue stories her mother said were true, then why did the three women who her mother did not summon in her childhood still shook their heads by the baby’s bed every night, torturing the girl in all nightmare? The last sentence describes the facial details of three women: mouthless, eyeless, with stitched bald head. The facial features of the three women in Plath’s poem are basically consistent with the three stone statues of Muses in Chirico’s paintings. Plath tried to adopt the details of the stone statues in Chirico’s paintings to highlight the gloomy atmosphere of the poetry.

The third stanza turned to my father’s study. Plath’s father died when she was nine years old, bringing the poet a lifelong wound that was hard to heal. The hurricane shattered the “bubble” glass in her father’s study, symbolizing that her father could not give shelter to “me”. And the narrator’s mother still gave her and her brother cookies, taught them choir songs, trying to comfort them just because she thought that God was tantrums and was nothing terrible. Chirico’s painting background is a modern city, but the characters in the painting are Greek mythological figures assembled from classical elements. The fusion of modern and classical crosses the boundaries of time and space, giving people a sense of time and space disorder. The “I” in the poem has been troubled by mystical power (actually it refers to the depression which haunts Plath for years) since childhood, and belonged to two different worlds—darkness and sunlight, from the mother who could not be protected. The poet captures the strong contrasts in Chirico’s paintings, adapts his own life trauma, and weaves her own narrative.

Poetry and painting belong to two different kinds of art. After viewing the paintings, Plath did not reproduce the works in a literal way, but was inspired by them, selected the elements required for creation, and creatively appropriated and adapted them, so as to realize the creative adaptation of poems and paintings.

## 3. Chapter Three Narrative Impulse and Painting Skills

Excellent poets do not stop at the initial dialogue between poetry and painting. Plath also tries to learn the skills of painting art: Chirico’s paintings use shadow laying, color contrast, and change of perspective to create a sense of spanning time and space. Plath borrows these techniques from painting. The color emphasis and the contrast between light and dark, stimulated by the “narrative impulse” of the ekphrastic poem, realized the perfect transformation from painting to poetry.

The fourth stanza depicts a poor performance of the poet in the dance class. Plath gave the three women a new title: “my dismal-headed Godmothers”, because they appeared when the poet was baptized and have been growing up with the poet ever since. In Chirico’s painting, the two muse statues in the foreground cast two long shadows, while the Apollo statue at the rear right of the screen and the buildings on the left side of the screen are all in shadow. The empty background and large isolated shadows suggest a negative tone. Plath borrowed the contrast of light and dark in his painting to portray the psychology of the characters: the strong contrast between the glittering other girls and the awkward self in the shadows. The poet’s heart is more desperate, and the shadow she can’t get rid of grows bigger and bigger, until it completely covers her. In the end, the lights that symbolized hope were all extinguished, and the poet fell into a state of complete despair, which means she gave up struggling for survival and gave up to the overwhelming depression.

In the fifth stanza, the poet continues to talk about the failed piano lesson. After every teacher found out that she was not good at piano, her mother still insisted on letting her learn piano. Compared with paintings as a facsimile, Plath’s poems fill in the relationship between characters, their psychology, specific events, and the development process. They are more flesh-and-blood and full of dynamic. Is this because of Plath’s personal intention? Or is it the unique charm of Ekphrasis? Heffernan believes that “ekphrastic literature reveals again and again the narrative response to pictorial stasis, this storytelling impulse that the language by its very nature seems to release and stimulate.” (301) The rich material brought by the unique life experience, on the other hand, lies in the “narrative impulse” of the language itself. Bringing vitality to the still paintings is the unique charm and beauty of the ekphrastic poem.

The sixth stanza tells about the daughter’s dream. Her mother sitting in a green balloon with flowers and robin, floating towards me under the bluest sky, beautiful and bright. This is Plath’s ideal mother image. When her mother gave an order “come here!” , the beautiful scene before her disappeared like soap bubbles, leaving her alone to face my traveling companion. The colors of blue,

green, and flowers are used here, and the paintings are mainly black, gray, and orange. The common point of the two works is the combination of warm and cold tones, which forms the depth of the picture and extends the imagination of the viewer/reader. The poet learns the artist's performance skills and uses color contrast to achieve creative effects.

In the last stanza of the poem, Plath added more details of the muse statues in the painting, including their standing on a stone pedestal, blank facial features, shadows in the setting sun, etc. Chirico creates a sophisticated effect that spans time and space through the juxtaposition of classical elements and modern scenes. Plath's poems are inspired by the juxtaposition and contrast technique, depicting the poet's dark inner world and his mother's ideal world. The gap makes Plath even more depressed.

#### 4. Conclusion

The unique charm of ekphrastic literature does not lie in the realistic reproduction of visual art works, but in the tension brought about by the conversion between different arts. Painting is static, but the "narrative impulse" nature of language gives it a sense of movement. Plath misappropriated and adapted Chirico's paintings: borrowed the muse image formed by splicing stone pillars into poetry as a symbol of the source of misfortune in life; drawing on the color and shadow techniques of painting to develop the character's psychology and thematic ideas; moreover, Plath imitated the contrast between classical and modern painting, portrayed the juxtaposition of reality and dream, and revealed the incommunicable mother-daughter relationship. Plath used individual experience to fill the narrative gaps in the painting copy, and finally realized the organic connection between poetry and painting. The study of cross-art poetics conforms to the trend of the era of "image turn", provides a perspective of both literature and art for the interpretation of the text of "The Disquieting Muses", so as to explore its unique charm and beauty.

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