

The Disquieting Muses

Sylvia Plath (1957)

Mother, mother, what illbred° aunt
Or what disfigured° and unsightly°
Cousin did you so unwisely° keep
Unasked to my christening,° that she
Sent these ladies in her stead
With heads like darning-eggs° to nod
And nod° and nod at foot and head
And at the left side of my crib?

*schlechterzogen
entstellt; unansehnlich
unklug
Taufe*

*Stopfzi
nicken*

Mother, who made to order stories
Of Mixie Blackshort the heroic bear,
Mother, whose witches always, always,
Got baked into gingerbread,° I wonder
Whether you saw them, whether you said
Words to rid° me of those three ladies
Nodding by night around my bed,
Mouthless, eyeless, with stitched° bald° head.

Lebkuchen

befreien

genäht, -stickt; kahl

In the hurricane, when father's twelve
Study windows bellied in°
Like bubbles about to break, you fed
My brother and me cookies and Ovaltine
And helped the two of us to choir:°
"Thor° is angry: boom boom boom!
Thor is angry: we don't care!"
But those ladies broke the panes.

nach innen gebläht

*im Chor singen
germ. Gott des Donners*

When on tiptoe the schoolgirls danced,
Blinking° flashlights like fireflies
And singing the glowworm song, I could
Not lift a foot in the twinkle-dress°
But, heavy-footed, stood aside
In the shadow cast by° my dismal°-headed
Godmothers, and you cried and cried:
And the shadow stretched, the lights went out.

blinzeln; Leuchtkäfer

Glitzerkostüm

besetzt von; trostlos

Mother, you sent me to piano lessons
And praised my arabesques° and trills°
Although each teacher found my touch
Oddly wooden° in spite of scales°
And the hours of practicing, my ear
Tone-deaf° and yes, unteachable.
I learned, I learned, I learned elsewhere,
From muses unhired° by you, dear mother,

Verzierungen einer Melodie

seltsam hölzern, Tonleiter

ohne musikalisches Gehör

nicht angestellt

I woke one day to see you, mother,
Floating above me in bluest air
On a green balloon bright with a million
Flowers and bluebirds° that never were
Never, never, found anywhere.
But the little planet bobbed away°
Like a soap-bubble as you called: Come here!
And I faced my traveling companions.

kleiner amer. Vogel

plötzlich wegtauchen

Day now, night now, at head, side, feet,
They stand their vigil° in gowns° of stone,
Faces blank as the day I was born,
Their shadows long in the setting sun
That never brightens or goes down.
And this is the kingdom you bore me to,
Mother, mother. But no frown° of mine
Will betray the company I keep.

Nachtwache, (Abend)kleid

Stirnrunzeln

The Disquieting Muses

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Study questions

1. What is a muse?
2. Make a list of all terms which refer to the 'Disquieting Muses'.
3. The mother has a different set of supernatural characters which form a contrast to the muses. Make a list of these as well.
4. Give a brief summary of each stanza.
 - The first stanza refers to a fairy tale. Which one is it?
 - In the third stanza, does Thor break the windows?
 - There is a lot of light imagery in the fourth stanza; identify one example and explain its importance.
 - In the fifth stanza, how accurately do you think does 'unteachable' describe the narrative instance?
 - Why does she protect her "travelling companions"?
 - Identify a simile (an explicit comparison) in the poem.
5. Compare the imagery used in "The Disquieting Muses" to the imagery used in "Initiation"? Are there any similarities?
6. How does Plath use language to infer the malevolence of her muses?

What is a muse?

A person or spirit that gives a writer, painter, musician, etc. ideas and the desire to create things

(in ancient Greek and Roman stories) one of the nine goddesses who encouraged poetry, music and other branches of art and literature

Short Analysis

Plath again finds inspiration and structure in fairy tales for her poem "The Disquieting Muses". The stock fairy tale goes like this. The parents invite everyone to the baby girl's christening, accidentally forgetting the old, ornery, most powerful fairy. The nefarious fairy puts an evil spell on the girl as retribution. The girl must confront and battle the spell for the rest of her life, until she is released by her prince. Plath asks her mother what relative she kept from her christening, what evil did she try to spare her daughter? She accuses her of living in a superreality, the world of fairy tales where "witches always, always / Got baked into gingerbread" (C. 58). Critics contend that "the next three verses develop the theme of the mother's refusal to accept ugliness and unhappiness and her attempts to hide herself and her daughter from such things" (Bassnett 75). These muses, like the Greek Fates, follow in Plath's shadow every day of her life. They shroud her in stoicism and steal her joy. At a childhood party, she does "not lift a foot in the twinkle-dress / But, heavyfooted, stood aside / in the shadow cast by my dismal-headed / Godmothers" (Plath C. 59). Through the course of the poem and her life, Plath begins to associate with the muses, nearly becoming one of them. She stays with them, abandoning her mother's way of approaching reality. She stares resolutely at her mother, ending her part of life in a fairy tale world. Though the muses may burden her, she declares that "no frown of mine / Will betray the company I keep" (C. 60).

The Disquieting Muses (1918)

'Le muse inquietanti' by Giorgio de Chirico (1888-1978)



Giorgio de Chirico (1888-1978)

Major Italian painter, who founded the metaphysical school. He was born in Volos, Greece, the son of an Italian engineer. He studied art in Athens and in Munich, where he was strongly influenced by the allegorical works of the 19th-century Swiss painter Arnold Böcklin. In Turin and Florence and in Paris, where he settled in 1911, he painted deserted cityscapes, such as *Enigma of an Autumn Night* (1910) and *Mystery and Melancholy of a Street* (1914). These early metaphysical works, through sharp contrasts of light and shadow and exaggerated perspective, evoke a haunting, ominous dream world. From 1915 to 1925 de Chirico painted bizarre, faceless mannequins and juxtaposed wildly unrelated objects in his still lifes, a technique adopted by the surrealists. From 1924 to 1930 de Chirico gave enormous impetus to the surrealist movement and influenced such surrealists as Yves Tanguy and Salvador Dalí. By the mid-1930s he had turned to an outworn academic style and chose to become a fashionable portraitist.

Sleeping Beauty

There once lived a King and Queen who were very sorrowful because they had no children. When at last, after long waiting, a daughter was born, the King showed his delight by giving a christening feast. He invited all the fairies in the land to become the little princess's godmothers, hoping that each would bestow a gift upon her.

After the christening all the guests returned to the palace, where a grand feast was prepared. Before each fairy was placed a splendid cover, with a spoon and knife and fork of pure gold studded with diamonds and rubies. As they were all sitting down at the table a very old fairy came into the hall. She had not been invited, because for more than fifty years she had not been heard of. The old fairy thought herself slighted, and muttered some angry threats that were overheard by one of the young fairies who chanced to sit beside her.

Thinking that some harm might be done to the pretty babe, the young fairy hid herself behind the curtains in the hall. She did this so all the others might speak their wishes for the child first. Then, if any evil gift were bestowed upon the child, she might be able to counteract it.

Then came the turn of the old fairy. Shaking her head spitefully, she uttered the wish that when the baby grew up she might prick her finger with a spindle and die of the wound. Just then the young fairy appeared from behind the curtains, and said in a cheerful tone, "Your Majesties may comfort yourselves; the princess shall not die. I have not the power to change entirely the ill-fortune just wished her by my ancient sister. The princess must indeed pierce her finger with a spindle, though she will not die, but sink instead into a deep sleep that will last a hundred years. At the end of that time a King's son shall come to awaken her."

Years passed, and when she was just fifteen years of age, while wandering the castle she came to a room at the top of the tower, where she found a very old woman. "What are you doing, my good woman?" asked the princess. "I'm spinning, my pretty child," was the answer. "Ah, how charming! How do you do it? Let me try." She had no sooner taken the spindle than she pierced her finger with the point. She fell to the floor. There she lay, as beautiful as an angel, with the color still lingering in her lips and cheeks, but her eyes were tightly closed.

She slept for a hundred years.

At last a prince came to the chamber, where he saw the fairest sight he had ever beheld. The princess looked as if she had just closed her eyes. Trembling and filled with admiration, the prince approached the bed and knelt beside it. Some say he kissed her, but none saw it. Be that as it may, the princess awakened immediately. Looking at him tenderly, she said, in a soft and drowsy voice, "Is that you my prince? I have waited for you a very long time."

And all the kingdom rejoiced in the happiness of the couple.