

**2006B Poem: “To Paint a Water Lily” (Ted Hughes)**

Prompt: Read the following poem carefully. Then write an essay discussing how the poet uses literary techniques to reveal the speaker’s attitudes toward nature and the artist’s task.

**To Paint a Water Lily by Ted Hughes**

A green level of lily leaves  
Roofs the pond’s chamber and paves  
The flies’ furious arena: study  
These, the two minds of this lady.  
First observe the air’s dragonfly  
That eats meat, that bullets by  
Or stands in space to take aim;  
Others as dangerous comb the hum  
Under the trees.  
There are battle-shouts  
And death-cries everywhere hereabouts  
But inaudible, so the eyes praise  
To see the colours of these flies  
Rainbow their arcs, spark, or settle  
Cooling like beads of molten metal  
Through the spectrum.  
Think what worse is the pond-bed’s matter of course;  
Prehistoric bedragoned times  
Crawl that darkness with Latin names,  
Have evolved no improvements there,  
Jaws for heads, the set stare,  
Ignorant of age as of hour—  
Now paint the long-necked lily-flower  
Which, deep in both worlds, can be still  
As a painting, trembling hardly at all  
Though the dragonfly alight,  
Whatever horror nudge her root.

The poet uses a few different literary devices to create tone and meaning for this poem. The poet’s speaker is describing this scene of a pond as busy, violent, and creepy. The speaker tasks a painter to paint a water-lily, growing still and steady amongst all this turmoil.

The poet uses an overarching simile to describe the world above the surface of the pond like a violent battle arena. “A green level of lily leaves/Roofs the pond’s chamber and paves/The flies’ furious arena” is a good example of this. The poet imagines that the constant action and predator/prey existence of creatures like the flies and dragonfly that he names is similar to that of a constant, raging, war. The poet also adds in a paradox to this observation as well to put it into better context in the readers minds. When looking at a pond, I would not think to call it a battlefield so the poet helps resolve our confusion by

adding this paradox: "There are battle-shouts/And death-cries everywhere hereabouts/ But inaudible, so the eyes praise/To see the colours of these flies." He tells us that there are battle-cries everywhere but they are silent, which doesn't make much literal sense but still helps us understand that this war is misunderstood most often when gazing on a pond and instead we see beautiful rainbows of bugs zipping around here and there.

Then the poet goes to describe the world beneath the surface of the pond. He uses some overstatement to describe that it is dark and timeless down there; the inhabitants strange-looking and un-evolved from prehistoric times. He also uses synecdoche when he says: "Jaws for heads." This is a useful tool to get us to picture a strange, jawlike head; but it is just a part of a whole because what he really means is that they just have a strange, toothy looking head.

All in all, the poet's purpose of writing this poem is to capture the chaos of the nature scene and then bring it back to the idea that a water-lily is unmarred and still throughout this all, but that a painter must have an understanding of the world surrounding the lily if he or she wishes to paint it. The poet uses personification at the end of the poem when describing the lily, saying: "Now paint the long-necked lily-flower/Which, deep in both worlds, can be still/As a painting, trembling hardly at all/Though the dragonfly alight,/Whatever horror nudge her root. By doing this, he gives more meaning to the lily as describing it as an unshaken, beautiful being, existing in a violent and chaotic world. The poet gives the painter all this information because he believes that in order to paint what seems like such a simple thing, you need to understand that every small pocket of life is a system, and every small thing has a story and context.