

Dear Poets,

Today's teaching takeaway examines Sylvia Plath's "Fever 103" (*Ariel*, 1965), mercury our enjambment.

Fever 103

Pure? What does it mean?
The tongues of hell
Are dull, dull as the triple

Tongues of dull, fat Cerberus
Who wheezes at the gate. Incapable
Of licking clean

The aguey tendon, the sin, the sin.
The tinder cries.
The indelible smell

Of a snuffed candle!
Love, love, the low smokes roll
From me like Isadora's scarves, I'm in a fright

One scarf will catch and anchor in the wheel,
Such yellow sullen smokes
Make their own element. They will not rise,

But trundle round the globe
Choking the aged and the meek,
The weak

Hothouse baby in its crib,
The ghastly orchid
Hanging its hanging garden in the air,

Devilish leopard!
Radiation turned it white
And killed it in an hour.

Greasing the bodies of adulterers
Like Hiroshima ash and eating in.
The sin. The sin.

Darling, all night
I have been flickering, off, on, off, on.
The sheets grow heavy as a lecher's kiss.

Three days. Three nights.
Lemon water, chicken
Water, water make me retch.

I am too pure for you or anyone.
Your body
Hurts me as the world hurts God. I am a lantern——

My head a moon
Of Japanese paper, my gold beaten skin
Infinitely delicate and infinitely expensive.

Does not my heat astound you. And my light.
All by myself I am a huge camellia
Glowing and coming and going, flush on flush.

I think I am going up,
I think I may rise——
The beads of hot metal fly, and I love, I

Am a pure acetylene
Virgin
Attended by roses,

By kisses, by cherubim,
By whatever these pink things mean.
Not you, nor him

Nor him, nor him
(My selves dissolving, old whore petticoats)——
To Paradise.

How It's Put Together

I'm captivated by the poem's softer alliterative sparks. Some of Plath's words keep their own sonic company:

Hothouse

Cerberus

Others stroll the neighborhood in pairs:

yellow sullen

trundle round

Hiroshima ash

selves dissolving

Alliteration at Van Allen Belt heights stunts a poem's beauty. On the other hand, no alliteration is like opening a pretzel stand in the middle of a salt shortage. Most of "Fever 103" finds its alliterative comfort zone through subtle concealment. Close listening uncovers the trinkets, as in:

I am a huge camellia / Glowing

Plath's vowels likewise pair off:

Of a snuffed

gate. Incapable

Devilish leopard!

Twice, they triple step:

in its crib

killed it in

This string of five O's—short contrasted with long—owes its real-estate to the letter L:

Love, love, the low smokes roll

Taking its cue from “Isadora’s scarves,” Plath’s enjambment billows. Confession: it wasn’t until 2016 that I gave credence to the visual nuances between enjambed and end-stopped. One of my USM colleagues, Todd Osborne, paid considerable attention to these qualities, his enjambment comments shedding the line-break light.

The dismount/landing aspect of end-stopped, coupled with the flow of enjambment, opens our options for embracing the poetic line á la stop-start or towrope.

The following diagram shows “Fever 103’s” enjambment and letter-level happenings:

Pure? What does it mean?
 The tongues of hell [two/three-jamb’d]
 Are dull, dull as the triple [stanza-jamb’d]

Tongues of dull, fat Cerberus [one/two-jamb’d]
 Who wheezes at the gate. Incapable [two/three-jamb’d]
 Of licking clean [stanza-jamb’d]

The aguey tendon, the sin, the sin.
 The tinder cries.
 The indelible smell [stanza-jamb’d]

Of a snuffed candle!
 Love, love, the low smokes roll [two/three-jamb’d]
 From me like Isadora’s scarves, I’m in a fright [stanza-jamb’d]

One scarf will catch and anchor in the wheel,
 Such yellow sullen smokes [two/three-jamb’d]
 Make their own element. They will not rise,

But trundle round the globe [one/two-jamb’d]
 Choking the aged and the meek,
 The weak [stanza-jamb’d]

Hothouse baby in its crib,
 The ghastly orchid [two/three-jamb’d]
 Hanging its hanging garden in the air,

Devilish leopard!
 Radiation turned it white [two/three-jamb’d]
 And killed it in an hour.

Greasing the bodies of adulterers
Like Hiroshima ash and eating in.
The sin. The sin.

[one/two-jamb'd]

Darling, all night
I have been flickering, off, on, off, on.
The sheets grow heavy as a lecher's kiss.

[one/two-jamb'd]

Three days. Three nights.
Lemon water, chicken
Water, water make me retch.

[two/three-jamb'd]

I am too pure for you or anyone.
Your body
Hurts me as the world hurts God. I am a lantern——

[two/three-jamb'd]

My head a moon
Of Japanese paper, my gold beaten skin
Infinitely delicate and infinitely expensive.

[one/two-jamb'd]

[two/three-jamb'd]

Does not my heat astound you. And my light.
All by myself I am a huge camellia
Glowing and coming and going, flush on flush.

[two/three-jamb'd]

I think I am going up,
I think I may rise——
The beads of hot metal fly, and I love, I

[stanza-jamb'd]

Am a pure acetylene
Virgin
Attended by roses,

[one/two-jamb'd]

[two/three-jamb'd]

By kisses, by cherubim,
By whatever these pink things mean.
Not you, nor him

[stanza-jamb'd]

Nor him, nor him
(My selves dissolving, old whore petticoats)——
To Paradise.

A Closer Look at the Lines

Pure? What does it mean?
The tongues of hell
Are dull, dull as the triple

One-word question, followed by another question.
The underworld with its body parts.
Repetition that bridges to

Tongues of dull, fat Cerberus
Who wheezes at the gate. Incapable
Of licking clean

mythological creature,
its breathing described, its
tongues

The aguey tendon, the sin, the sin.
The tinder cries.
The indelible smell

failing a task; repetition.
Note the letter & iamb relationship: *tendon/tinder*.
Pivot to the sense of smell.

Of a snuffed candle!
Love, love, the low smokes roll
From me like Isadora's scarves, I'm in a fright

The odor! (heat-related)
Repetition, smoke ties in with *candle*.
Simile, image, celebrity (Isadora Duncan).

One scarf will catch and anchor in the wheel,
Such yellow sullen smokes
Make their own element. They will not rise,

Reference to how Isadora Duncan died.
Return of *smokes* with two modifiers,
exploration of smokes. What they fail to do.

But trundle round the globe
Choking the aged and the meek,
The weak

Instead of rising, they accomplish something else.
Continuation of their task,
rhyming of *meek/weak*.

Hothouse baby in its crib,
The ghastly orchid
Hanging its hanging garden in the air,

Image (heat).
Image with adjectival assist.
The orchid carries out its task.

Devilish leopard!
Radiation turned it white
And killed it in an hour.

Adjective + animal (devil = hell = heat).
Heat intensification.
The time it takes for heat to kill the orchid.

Greasing the bodies of adulterers
Like Hiroshima ash and eating in.
The sin. The sin.

Sensual act performed on sinners.
Simile tied to atomic atrocity.
Rhyme, repetition (echoes Ln 7).

Darling, all night
I have been flickering, off, on, off, on.
The sheets grow heavy as a lecher's kiss.

Shift to term of endearment and measure of time.
Flickering = heat. Repetition.
Simile.

Three days. Three nights.
Lemon water, chicken
Water, water make me retch.

Measurements of time.
Fever remedies.
Remedy repetition, end result.

I am too pure for you or anyone.
Your body
Hurts me as the world hurts God. I am a lantern——

Return of poem's first word. Definitive statement.
Darling's body.
Pain, world against God. Speaker as heat.

My head a moon
Of Japanese paper, my gold beaten skin
Infinitely delicate and infinitely expensive.

Speaker's head as the sun's opposite.
Hiroshima link, twice-modified noun.
Repetition, notions of the pristine.

Does not my heat astound you. And my light.
All by myself I am a huge camellia
Glowing and coming and going, flush on flush.

Queries re: radiance.
Solo act allows for becoming a tea plant.
Radiance, motion, repetition.

I think I am going up,
I think I may rise——
The beads of hot metal fly, and I love, I

Ascension.
Repetition, ascension.
Heat, repetition.

Am a pure acetylene
Virgin
Attended by roses,

Purity revisit, extreme-heat word.
One-word line, rhyme semblance to *pure*.
The floral, carrying out its job, as do the

By kisses, by cherubim,
By whatever these pink things mean.
Not you, nor him

kisses and cherubim.
Color query.
Negation of Darling and another male.

Nor him, nor him
(My selves dissolving, old whore petticoats)——
To Paradise.

And another, another.
Multiple melting, two noun modifications.
Destination attained.

Try This

Counter to Plath, write a poem about the coldest day you can recall.

How did your body endure? Other than a snuffed candle (Plath's image is untouchable!) what did your breath resemble?

Incorporate repetition, a mythological being, and at least two doubly modified nouns.

Address and negate the beloved.

As a tribute to Isadora Duncan, try using two of these ballet terms in your poem. An online French-to-English dictionary puts their sounds in your ear—

ballonné: to bounce (with a closing action of the working leg)

croisée: crossed

échappé: escaping or slipping movement

en croix: in the shape of a cross (the step should be done to the front, side and then back)

fouetté: whipped; a term applied to a whipping movement

glissade: glide

jeté: throwing step

pas de chat: cat's-step

relevé: raised

sur le cou-de-pied: on the neck of the foot

tour en l'air: turn in the air

Happy Poeming,

Jon

Ballet sources:

<https://www.city-academy.com/news/a-guide-to-ballet-glossary/>

<https://ballethub.com/>