Student Poetic Analysis—Fall 2012.

*All analyses follow the structure indicated in class. They are (for the most part) clearly written but include detailed and well-developed paragraphs in which statements are supported by textual references.*

Poetic Analysis for “**Packing for the Future: Instructions**,” by Lorna Crozier

In “Packing for the Future: Instructions”, Lorna Crozier addresses the subject of uncertainty through the extended metaphor of an unknown journey. Although it is to be expected to struggle with difficulties along a journey, the traveller is assumed to have prepared by packing strategically; yet this poem adds a twist by making it not a physical journey but a journey through time. The future may even change our desires and needs. Regardless, we all need to find comfort, to face new situations, and enjoy the trip wherever it takes us. Crozier cleverly chooses to use the second person voice and considers all potential dangers and opportunities the future offers. Evidently, the poem’s title itself highlights the poem’s use of concrete details as “instructions”, hinting at the techniques used in the poem such as profound imagery, repetition, and use of diction.

With the future full of uncertainty, Crozier uses imagery to emphasize the importance of packing familiar items to find comfort. The first instruction is to “take the thickest socks” (line 1), suggesting that it is necessary to be prepared seeing that many potential threats exist like extremely cold weather. The necessity of socks is exaggerated as they are described as though having the same force gravity possesses in supposedly “hold[ing] you / to the earth” (9, 10). Furthermore, this image appeals to the readers’ pathos with a deeper personal meaning as readers are urged to remember receiving a pair of socks “hand-knit by your mother” (13). The peace and tranquility of this memory is particularly present in describing the mother’s relaxed state when knitting in her “sleep” (14). A sense of belonging is also formed when family – the mother - is mentioned. Similarly, readers are encouraged to “take the dream / you’ve been having since / you were a child” (31, 32, 33) keeping her sense of identity. Crozier therefore assumes that comfort is found in acknowledging past experiences or characteristics representing the past.

Just as a set of instructions would have a repetitive structure, Crozier imposes repetition throughout the poem to imitate the format of a step-by-step guide. Specifically, anaphora is prominent in stanzas two and seven as the speaker speculates what “there may be” (4, 5, 6, 28, 29, 30) or, in other words, what you might expect of the future. In fact, the unknown destination may be near “water” (4), “stones” (5) or “high places” (6), representing a body of water, mountains, or the sky, respectively. The repetitive use of other phrases of advice is also used to inform the readers on what will go in the luggage. Sentimental materialistic goods with a legacy are encouraged to be packed (kept close to heart), but Crozier brings attention to“[leaving] room for another language” (27). In other words, change from the readers’ own repetitive lives is anticipated.

Moreover, Crozier uses abstract words to convey ideas, using ambiguous portrayals of items to allow the readers to personally relate to the poem. For instance, you are instructed to take something “you cannot leave” (18, 19), which could be virtually anything and would be different for every reader. In stanza 5, other examples of these very common items each reader has encountered are found, including a key, a photograph, or ball of string.

In Lorna Crozier’s highly interactive poem, “Packing for the Future: Instructions,” the narrator engages the readers’ attention by bringing light to the expectations of the unknown future. By using a caring tone and diction, generalized imagery of common objects, and repetition of commands, the readers are sure to take this poem to heart as if the poet were talking individually to them like an overprotective mother.

Poetic analysis of “**Death of a Naturalist**”

Seamus Heaney in “Death of a Naturalist” explores his childhood relationship with nature. He personifies his childhood memories of the flax-dam, uses irony to establish his boyish innocence, and finally shifts the poem to reflect his conflicting treatment of the natural world. Capturing both his awe and repulsion with the flax-dam, Heaney’s poem appeals to our common childhood experiences with nature.

The poem begins with vivid personification of the flax dam. “Heavy headed / Flax… weighted down by huge sods” rots in the “punishing sun” (lines 2-3). Heaney’s world is one in which actors in nature engage in direct relationships—the sun punishes the flax, which is already “heavy headed” from carrying the sod’s weight. Implicitly, the fertility of nature is also emphasized. The flax is so ripe and the sun is so radiant that it is a punishment to receive more sunlight. In the fifth line, personified blue bottle flies weave “a strong gauze of sound around the smell” (6). The flax dam is a place of overwhelming life—one where even the flies must contain the pond by weaving a “gauze of sound” around its smell. Thus, Heaney uses personification to emphasize the relationship between actors in the natural world and establish the fertility of the flax dam.

“Death of a Naturalist” refers to Heaney’s own shifting treatment of nature; however, by the first stanza it is clear that Heaney is no naturalist. His personified view of nature is neither scientific nor detached. Lines 16/17 emphasize this when he learns the relationship between what he personifies as the “daddy frog” and “mammy frog” and their frogspawn from Miss Walls. Of course, amphibians do not pair up as mates, or raise their offspring together, and the child’s juvenile understanding of nature enforces the poem’s title. The naturalist in the young speaker could not die because it never existed . In the last lines of the first stanza, he recounts: “You could tell the weather by frogs too / For they were yellow in the sun and brown / In rain.” (19-21) Here, Heaney emphasizes the childlike perspective in the poem by mimicking the language of a child. By adding redundant words like “too” to the end of the first line and simplifying the relationship between the sun and rain and the frogs’ yellow or brown colour, Heaney emphasizes the child’s innocent conception of nature.

Heaney’s shifting view of nature is created in a deliberate structural separation in the poem. “Death of a Naturalist” is divided into two stanzas. The first portrays his idyllic childhood view of nature; the second contrasts that view by telling of his revulsion with the pond. Heaney begins this transition as if he was telling a story: “Then one hot day…” (22). Now when he comes across the pond the “angry frogs” have “invaded the flax dam,” the reader is immediately aware of a shift in the child’s perspective. He describes the pond as alive with coarse croaking he has never heard. What he personified as “daddy frogs” in the first stanza are now obscene “slime kings” with “loose necks [pulsing] like snails” (28). Thus, it the second stanza the flax-dam shifts from being an idyllic place to one that’s overbearing and repugnant. “Death of a Naturalist” connects with a reader’s own childhood memories of nature. By portraying nature as an idyllic subject of fascination in the first stanza, and then contrasting it with his sense of repulsion in the second, Heaney captures the conflicting treatment of nature that is common in childhood.

Seamus Heaney’s “Death of a Naturalist” connects with our common memories from childhood: times when we were fascinated by the natural world, and times when that same world was repulsive and overwhelming. Through personification, irony, and a deliberate poetic shift, Heaney explores how our treatment of nature changes in childhood. The result is a rich and powerful poem that goes beyond just frogs and flax.

Analysis of “**Icarus**”

In his poem “Icarus,” Don McKay reexamines the flight and death of Icarus. He does not use the subject to create moral commentary from the people who ignore Icarus’s death. Instead, he focuses on Icarus as an unapologetic individual. Icarus’s flight and death are a part of who he is, just as birds fly and artists produce art. McKay suggests that there is nothing wrong with trying and failing and that no apology is needed for it. In reality, it is essential that he does not apologize.

McKay’s poem has an underlying sense of youthful rebellion to it. He mentions that Icarus would not be “touring high schools to tell student bodies not to do what he has done” (McKay lines 3-4), thus making the connection to people who have been in drunk driving accidents and other things of that ilk. The point is that Icarus should not serve as a cautionary. He should not observe the “golden mean,” and instead should aspire to an extreme. McKay also writes that Icarus “shucks the sweet lift from the drag” (12-13). Icarus’s flight is an allegory for something basic and essential, namely a farmer shucking corn from chaff. His sense of rebellion is something equally important. McKay also uses the hockey player Doug Harvey as an allegory for Icarus (20). Following this, Icarus knows exactly what he is doing; he is an expert at it.

McKay also uses metaphors to illustrate how natural Icarus’s fall is. In fact, he “sheds feathers like a lover shedding clothes” (23-24). Icarus’s fall is like the act of making love. It is natural, and it is necessary for life to continue. The idea of a lover also implies youth and breaking the rules. It is not girlfriend, or a wife. Two lovers are full of passion, energy, and desire, and they are potentially illicit. The very nature of the flight and fall of Icarus is one of youth and of breaking the rules. McKay also compares Icarus’s flight to that of a Tundra Swan and a Kingfisher (24-26), again implying that what he is doing is natural, that it is a part of him.

The final stanza of the poem serves as a sort of epilogue. The climax has been reached and passed, and Icarus has drowned. And yet “Icarus is thinking tremolo and backflip” (31). McKay’s poem ends with Icarus not only alive, but planning out what he will do next time. In the first stanza he writes that “this is his practice and his prayer” (9). For Icarus his fall is both performance and religious. He rehearses as any actor would and tries to top himself with each attempt. Icarus chooses to live fast and die young, to come close to divinity and fail spectacularly. He continues to do this every time, and thus people will always remember him.

Don McKay writes Icarus as a champion of the human spirit. Through allegory, metaphor, and a narrative structure he portrays Icarus as an artist. He is unwilling to apologize for his craft because it is an essential part of meaningfully human life.