Sample Student In-class Analyses Oct.5

**Analysis of “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers”**

Adrienne Rich’s poem “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers” is a relatively short, but powerful poem that conveys its message of marital discord and unhappiness mainly through the use of imagery. It describes Aunt Jennifer and the tigers she knits, and it can be inferred throughout the poem that her marriage to her husband, referred to only as “Uncle,” was not a happy one.

The poem’s first stanza mentions only the tigers Aunt Jennifer knits, not Aunt Jennifer herself. It describes them as majestic creatures: “Bright topaz denizens of a world of green” (line 2). Her tigers are unafraid of “the men beneath the tree,” and the use of the word “chivalry” (4) implies honesty and fearlessness, alluding to the knights of the Middle Ages. The mood of the first stanza is uplifting and positive, which contrast directly with the mood of the second.

In the second stanza, the focus shifts from the tigers to Aunt Jennifer herself, and the tone of the poem becomes darker and depressing. First, her “fingers fluttering through her wool / Find the ivory needle hard to pull” 95) implies that she is old and frail, which, though a contrast with the “bright” tigers, is not bad in itself. However, what lends an ominous note to the stanza is the next two lines, which state that “the massive weight” of her wedding ring “sits heavily” (7-8) upon her hand. This can be interpreted in two different ways, neither positive: that her husband is dead, and she is crushed by the fact, or that the ring, representing her marriage, symbolizes unhappiness—she no longer loves the man she is with. Words such as “fluttering,” “massive,’ and “heavily” (5-8) and the choice of “wedding band” instead of “wedding ring” contribute to the feeling of a weak Aunt Jennifer overwhelmed by her marriage.

This theme is continued and confirmed in the last stanza, which states that “her terrified hands will lie / still ringed by ordeals she was mastered by” (9-10). The use if the word “ringed” refers directly to her marriage, and the idea that she was “mastered by [it]” suggests her succumbing to her husband’s dominance. Her husband, “Uncle,” was controlling and perhaps violent: he put her through ordeals to the extent that her hands will be “terrified” (9) even when she is dead.

However, Aunt Jennifer’s life was not completely controlled by her husband. Her escape lay in her knitting of tigers—creating a world where perhaps she could be free, with being “mastered.” The last two lines of the poem state that “[t]he tigers. . .that she made / Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid” (l. 12), directly referring to the first stanza. To end the poem on a positive note infers that while Aunt Jennifer did not enjoy her marital life, she was still happy with her creations. Her tigers were an escape from the real world into, perhaps, one that was more real to her.

**Poetic Analysis of “At the Un-National Monument Along the Canadian Border”**

In “At the Un-National Monument Along the Canadian Border,” William Stafford skillfully demonstrates how a short poem can convey many layers of meaning, and can carry weight and impact far beyond its simple appearance on the page. In this poem of just ten lines, Stafford tackles not one, but three substantial themes: war, peace, and friendship. Recognizing that these are closely related even linked and inseparable, the poet uses a sophisticated irony to compress them into one. The human tendency to glorify war is silently acknowledged but shown to be folly. Nationalism may teach us to cheer the victory at battle, but one cannot read “the battle did not happen” or “no people were killed” without being genuinely relieved. The physical setting of the poem, established by the title, takes peace, or rather the absence of war, and positions it along the Canada-US border.

The longest undefended border on Earth, for those of us in these two nations at least, is definitely taken for granted. We don’t always appreciate its monumental nature, but that just supports Stafford’s assertion that it is “hallowed by neglect and an air so tame / that people celebrate it by forgetting its name.”

Stafford uses images of war to describe peace and this juxtaposition of concepts enables to reader to truly visualize the “heroic” nature of peace where normally one would see nothing at all, or would not be moved to look for anything. It is the absence of conflict that this poem celebrates, but normally the absence of something is very difficult to grasp and to appreciate. Here, however, we actually see the battle that “did not happen,” and we are relieved that the “soldier did not die.” Unusually, we can see, and feel, and respect that the sky can be, and is in fact, heroic.

In the first stanza there are images of (anti-) conflict juxtaposed with images of nature (“grass joined hands” and the heroic sky). Here the message is that conflict, at least on the scale of human wars, is in contrast to nature. In the second stanza, these images continue but become more animated, more alive. The birds unfold their wings (alluding to openness, friendship) and their flight is silent and peaceful (as contrasted in ellipsis to the din of bullets’ flight).

In human history, there is much celebration of victory at battle. It is in our nature to applaud success and to deplore failure, but it is especially rare to stop and to appreciate the quiet, the mundane, the non-event. In the final three lines of this poem, Stafford helps us to do this by presenting vivid images of life both as natural (birds in flight) and as the best in human nature (“No people killed—or were killed—on this ground.”) This place of nothingness, before unseen, is now clearly seen and appreciated as something rare and precious. The non-event is a major event. The reader at this point sees what was previously taken for granted as something worthy of acknowledgement and may even be moved to feel a bit of guilt, or at least to ask whether something should not be done. This question is answered in the final lines. We do not think of this place because no one was killed there. This is a good thing. That it is neglected may be the greatest monument of all.

**Analysis of “Hawk Roosting”**

Ted Hughes’s “Hawk Roosting” is about knowing one’s place in the world. The hawk is doing exactly what it was built to do, as acknowledged in the lines “It took the whole of Creation / To produce my foot, my each feather / Now I hold Creation in my foot (lines 10-12). The hawk has come out of creation formed to do what it does, and now holds its own destiny in its talons.

Because the hawk is fulfilling its purpose, it has no remorse. When the hawk sleeps, he doesn’t dream but rather “rehearse[s] perfect kills and eat” (4). He is not having nightmares reliving murders but fantasizing about his next target. To give strength to the idea of a remorseless killer, Hughes does not include even the slightest hint of sadness or remorse. The hawk relishes his role as the decided of fates, the Valkyrie of the avian world, where he says, “My manners are tearing off heads--/ the allotment of death” 16-17).

The hawk is focused solely on the control of his world. When the hawk states “I kill where I please because it is all mine” (14), he is clearly exhibiting ownership of the forest even though, realistically, he has no recognized authority to do so. He seems to believe he is even in control of the earth itself, saying that the “earth’s face [is] upward for [his]inspection” (8). The term “inspection” calls to mind authority: teachers inspect your work; your sergeant inspects your bed; your parents inspect your room.

All of the images in the poem are natural. Never is anything compared to something from the human world. The image of “rough bark” (9) is decidedly natural and uncomplicated.

The final lines of the poem effectively summarize the theme: “No arguments assert my rights:/ The sun is behind me./ Nothing has changed since I began./ My eye has permitted no change. / I am going to keep things like this” ((20-24). The hawk is saying that he needs no permission because nature, as represented by the sun, has given him the ultimate right. He believes that nothing has changed because he, the ruler of the land, has not allowed it. The final line reinforces the theme of the poem: the hawk is ultimately pleased with his world. He is doing exactly what he wishes, and what he wishes is just what nature intended for him to do. The hawk is, by following his nature, satisfied.