

Write a critical analysis of Plath's "The Applicant", bearing in mind the voice of the speaker.

The Applicant hinges upon the central idea of how human relations are a cynical filling of a physical need, and how marriage is the last resort of crippled personalities, where women are no more than a set of appendages and functions. The Speaker addresses the readers directly, with the constant referral to 'you', making the poem even more disturbing with the realization that we too are the potential applicants, where the fragmentation of alienation of the applicant are also part of our world. The interrogative, formal tone begins the poem as an interview, "First, are you our sort of person?" where the applicant is harshly torn down as parts which characterize his self, as if he is a cog in a bureaucratized market place forced to engage in the exchange because of his own inadequacies. The language of market executives runs through the poem, with the repetition of the word 'proof', like the persuasive tone of one trying to promote a product incessantly, an echo ringing in the head, it is a necessity. At the end of the poem it even becomes a sharp command, with the removal of a question mark it becomes no more than a necessity, an order, we are forced into marriage as a necessary social institution to plaster our fractured souls.

The crippling inadequacies of the self are constant features of the poem, where people are no more than hollow, empty personalities. Thus the poem begins with the imagery of dehumanization, a synecdoche that reduces the body to mere cogs and functions. The applicant is questioned whether he has 'a glass eye, false teeth or a crutch', he is ineffectual and aimless, his basic functions to recognize, interpret or even digest are removed, he is but a jumbled heap of parts. There is nothing to sustain his whole, he has to be propped up like a puppet with a 'brace or hook', all these artificial materials remove a sense of humanity from his character, he is absent from flesh or even homogeneity in his parts, his basic functions are sterile. Even his sexual identity is questioned by the 'rubber breasts or rubber crotch', the flippant tone of the word 'rubber' sadistically pokes fun at his sterility and reduces sexual needs to a mere function which bears no real purpose either than for procreation in a mechanized world. Furthermore, the speaker does not differentiate between male and female, there is no actual difference in them underneath, they are both 'naked', a messy collection of fragmented parts. The sharp 'k' sound in 'stark naked' further emphasizes in harsh and cold tones the applicant's emptiness and lack of an identity, like the woman who is like 'paper', absent of a throbbing, living soul, white and barren. The repetition of the word 'Empty? Empty' further reinforces that fact, there is a kind of finality in it which marks the applicant and the woman herself, and furthermore the pre-note of repetition in 'No? No' gives us the feeling that the speaker already expected the answer and the statements before were merely rhetorical questions, meant to derogate and expose blatant the applicant's already present inadequacies. There is no soul to the applicant, his head is 'empty', absent of any mental substance, opinions or memories, and he is controlled by the insistent, repetitive voice of the speaker who exposes his inadequacies.

Furthermore, there is a sort of mechanic, robotic undertone in the poem, which lends the process of life and marriage a sort of forced, cold quality, and the feeling of isolation, or the removal of the warmth of human relations in the poem. The title itself, 'The Applicant', and its universality dissolves the person from any particular identity, and when we really examine the way the applicant himself is removed of any answer and charted through the process we start to doubt whether he was actually willing himself to actually follow through the process to marriage, or merely a cog in society, reacting and responding to the social code, removed of his opinions and self-pride. By interspersing the first person singular pronoun with the first-person pronoun we in the poem, the Speaker instinctively becomes a spokesman for a larger group or institution, who has a power over the applicant's decisions in work, marriage and life. These roles are constantly being forced over each generation, "We make new stock from the salt", referring to the continuous robotic cycle that never ceases. This is also

reflected in the disjointed structure of the poem and its quick, formal lines that gives the sense of a cycle, or a robotic process of interrogative questioning followed by the typical situation. The nakedness of both the applicant and the woman, 'stark naked' and 'naked' refer to the fact that both of them are blank slates for society to mold us into the roles we are filled into. Yet there is an uncanny tone in the way the Speaker orders the applicant to 'stop crying', when the Speaker 'fits him for his suit', almost represented the short moment of the man's resistance to conforming to society, which is quickly overcome by the fact that it is his 'last resort', it is the typical sequence in the robotic cycle of society,

In this mechanized society, then, the roles for both men and women are then laid out and clearly defined, and beyond that they have no other purpose. Although the both of them start off as naked and empty, a jumbled heap of parts, the man at least can hide behind his 'suit' that gives shape and an identity to him, the suit could represent perhaps the stereotypical power accorded to a male in our patriarchal society, or his working class job, the role he plays in a bureaucratic society. The suit is however, 'black and stiff', dull and forced, as if he is pushed into a dull and stale environment which he cannot thrive, or be flexible and have freedom in, working life constrains his true nature. However the woman can only gain an identity through marriage, it is only then that she can gain an exit from her forced isolation, the 'closet', and begin gaining an artificial value, in 'silver and gold'. She does not exist before it and dissolves back to nothingness after it. In the applicant himself at least there is an implication of the existence of a choice, a sense of parts and the final decision whether to 'marry it', that however fragmented he is, at least he marries the suit through his choice. The man however, is still alienated, he has freedom of choice only in comparison with the much more limited situation of the woman. In this sense his status as a worker in society is merely artificial, he is only trying to make up for his inadequacies, he finds no true meaning or purpose in his work. He himself is prone to disintegration and death, the 'fire and bombs through the roof', but the 'suit' and his status remains intact. The women, meanwhile, live out a hollow life in closets till the men come out and make their choice of them, but there is no real connection between any particular couple, the relationship is artificial because they are merely there to meet each other's needs, it is an exchange with the woman at the losing end. Plath thus engages in schizoid writing, a vision of human relations that is at odds with the actual reality.

In the poem job seeking is the central metaphor in the poem, with the idea of an exchange being made in a bureaucratized market place, where the woman is the commodity for sale. The tone of the speaker is one of a marketing salesman, with the repetitive 'waterproof, shatterproof, proof' like the production of the product, and the introduction of her qualities and her functions. The woman is there to 'fill' the man's inadequacies, whether or not it is against her will, she is a numb and lifeless 'doll', where the term 'doll' seems to bring to mind the connotations of a pretty, fragile object which is there for display and subjugated to her master's commands, 'and do whatever you tell it', the woman has no real will or standing of her own. The pentastichs of the eight stanza also have a mechanical and robotic structure, to the repetitive, 'talk, talk, talk' that almost turns the woman into a wound up doll, reduced to gossip and for the inadequacies of the man. The Speaker constantly goes into a feverish marketing pitch, with promises like "It is guaranteed" and "there is nothing wrong with it", as if the woman is a free and optional good with a brand of guaranteed satisfaction or any resistance from her. The woman is a 'poultice' for the man's 'hole', which could possibly mean a healing, or a medicine for his emotional needs or inadequacies, and also an 'image' for his eye, almost as if her physical qualities are just created solely for his sight and pleasure. In this the woman is reduced to merely put up qualities, her creation was made for the man and marriage is a necessity. The use of affectionate terms such as 'sweetie' and 'my boy' further transforms this into a sadistic irony, the Speaker bears no real affection for the woman or the man, and the treatment of them is cold and clinical, in the resolving of a business deal and forcing them into well-made roles in society. The use of the word 'it' instead of 'her' further reduces the woman into a mere automaton and commodity on sale for the man's satisfaction.

Thus in the poem the self is seen as trapped within the closed cycle of society. One moves- but only in a circle and continuously back to the same starting point. Rather than the self and the world, the world constrains and limits the individual to protocols and systems of behaviour, where the self is intimately and inextricably bound up with those of the world. People are merely trapped in their crippled bodies that are jumbled up heaps of fragmented parts, marriage is a forced and artificial institution, where women are commodities for the pleasure of men. There is no real meaning, or purpose to life in the cycle, and the roles of both parties will last with each succumbing generation.