Two Sisters of Persephone

Two girls there are: within the house
One sits; the other, without.
Daylong a duet of shade and light
Plays between these.

In her dark wainscoted room
The first works problems on
A mathematical machine.
Dry ticks mark time

As she calculates each sum.
At this barren enterprise
Rat-shrewd go her squint eyes,
Root-pale her meager frame.

Bronzed as earth, the second lies
Hearing ticks blown gold
Like pollen on bright air.
Lulled near a bed of poppies.

She sees how their red silk flare
Of petalèd blood
Burns open to the sun’s blade.
On that green alter

Freely become sun’s bride, the latter
Grows quick with seed.
Grass-couched in her labor’s pride,
She bears a king, turned bitter.

And yellow as any lemon,
The other, wry virgin to the last,
Goes graveward with flesh laid waste,
Worm-husbanded, yet no woman.

Sylvia Plath (1956)
Words associated with how both sisters interact with time:
- First sister has to work under time constraints (‘ticks mark time’ [line 8])
- Second sister listens to the ‘ticks’ with a light-hearted attitude

Words associated with darkness
- Used only with the first sister
- Implies how alone and abandoned by society she is

Words associated with light
- Used only with the second sister
- Implies how happy and bright her character is

Description of the first sister’s actions and her tasks
- Gives a sense of order and independence
- Suggests how she’s mainly confined indoors to work on a ‘machine’ [line 7]

Words associated with the first sister’s fruitlessness
- Highlights the flaws in the first sister
- Shows society’s view upon this independent woman

Description of the first sister’s appearance
- Creates an image of a plagued, frail (‘rat-shrewd’ and ‘merger frame’) women who is fatigued (‘squint eyes’)

Colors associated with the second sister
- Implies how vibrant and enjoyable her life is
- Contrasted with the dark and unexciting world of the first sister

Natural imagery
- Used only with the second sister
- Associates the second sister with the outdoors, as opposed to the first sister, who stays indoors working most of the time