

Memory's Catalyst

My paper explores the connections between memory, nature and desire in Sappho's fr. 55, 94 and 96, with a specific focus on how nature acts as a catalyst for memory. Other scholars have examined the relationship between nature and desire, and between desire and memory; my paper completes that triangle by connecting nature and memory. By combining nature and desire with such great frequency, Sappho destroys the distinctions between the two, turning simile into synonymy (McEvelley 1973). The relationship between desire and memory is one of transposition, as old memories of missing friends are used to satisfy the listener's, and sometimes the speaker's, longing for their emotional presence (Burnett 1979). I argue that Sappho uses natural imagery to stimulate these memories and allow the reader to use the natural object to sate their desire for the departed friend's physical presence.

In fr. 94, Sappho combines nature and memory through the remembered scene filled with flowers, and only then moves on the memory of fulfilled desire. She first provides the tools which the listener will use to satisfy their longing – that is, the memory cues based on natural imagery – and then describes the memory which satisfied the listener long ago. By using nature's universal presence, she satisfies the physical longing the listener feels, and allows them to transpose old memories to make up for the emotional absence. Sappho uses a similar though slightly different tactic in fr. 96.

Fr. 55 shows what happens when the natural cues for memory are missing – the person is forgotten. Because the poem's subject did not have access to Pierian roses, she will not have any share of memory or desire. And though Sappho is referring to the person's lack of artistic skill, it is important to note that she uses an image from nature to convey that meaning. The potent power of natural metaphor allows someone to be forgotten or remembered, to satisfy their desire

or be left longing, and to embrace their memories or be abandoned by them.

Works Cited

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