

Her Kind



SUMMARY

I have gone out into the world, a witch controlled by an evil spirit, lurking in the dark, more courageous at night; plotting some wickedness, I have flown wildly over the ordinary houses, from lit building to lit building: a solitary creature, with twelve fingers, not in my right mind. Such a woman is somehow not quite a woman. I have been that type of woman.

I have discovered the cozy caves in the woods, stocked them with frying pans, statues, shelves, closets, luxurious fabrics, countless wares; I have cooked dinners for the little dragons and fairies: complaining, re-ordering the disordered. Such a woman gets misinterpreted. I have been that type of woman.

I have been carried in your wagon, driver; I have waved my naked arms at villages as we passed them, committing to memory the last sunlit paths I'd ever see. I've been a survivor who still feels the place where your fires burned my leg and where my ribs split as your execution wheels rolled. Such a woman is unrepentant and unembarrassed to die. I have been that type of woman.

expected course and becoming a wife and mother, she goes to “the warm caves in the woods” to set up house, perhaps signaling that she’s chosen her own independent way of life. A skilled forest witch, she has her own possessions and her own strange community among “the worms and the elves.”

- Finally, the speaker imagines defiantly dying “unashamed” as a witch burned at the stake: rejected and punished for refusing to play by patriarchy’s rules, but uncompromising.

In all of these instances, the speaker notes, women who step out of their prescribed roles end up isolated and ostracized:

- The flying witch’s adventurousness—her desire to be independent and do her own thing—makes the world read her as “evil” and “possessed”: a woman who wants to be free must be “out of [her] mind.”
- The woman in the second stanza also seems isolated; perhaps she chose the woods because she wanted to, but perhaps she chose them because they were the only place she could be free. “Misunderstood” for her unconventional home, the speaker’s resistance to a standard domestic life sets her apart.
- The woman in the final stanza, meanwhile, is literally executed for being different. The poem makes it clear that women who reject patriarchal standards are often punished: whether the flames are literal or metaphorical, independent women tend to get “burnt.”

Yet even after being judged and punished, all of these women remain “unashamed.” These “kind[s]” of women are united by the way they reject patriarchal ideas about what a woman should be. Repeating the words “I have been her kind,” the speaker proclaims her solidarity with other women who have refused to accept roles that were only ever meant to diminish them.

In this way, the poem might suggest that being an outcast [paradoxically](#) means being part of a whole community of *other* outcasts. These women are bonded both by their rejection of certain beliefs and by the way they’ve been treated. The poem’s skilled, self-sufficient witches (and the final stanza’s possible [allusion](#) to Joan of Arc, who famously stood her ground despite knowing she’d be burned for her beliefs) suggest that, while women might be cast out and mistreated for rejecting patriarchal restrictions, they’ll also find themselves in excellent (and powerful) company.



THEMES



WOMANHOOD, OPPRESSION, AND SOLIDARITY

The speaker of “Her Kind” inhabits a variety of personas that fly in the face of stereotypical femininity, and in doing so rejects societal expectations that women be beautiful, nurturing, and obedient. For the speaker, being a woman who chooses independence over dependence, self-reliance over family ties, and death over capitulation means being seen as a dangerous outlier—a “witch” who must be ostracized. But far from isolating the speaker, her independence offers her an empowering solidarity with other non-traditional women: as an outlier, she’s not alone, but “one of her kind.”

In each stanza of the poem, the speaker explores the different ways that patriarchy stuffs women into little boxes—boxes that the speaker refuses to be confined in:

- In the first stanza, the speaker says she is a witch out for a midnight flight—a “lonely” adventure that makes her feel “braver.” Where traditionally women are expected to exist primarily inside the “plain houses” of domestic life, the speaker instead pictures flying around outside, unconfined by walls.
- Next, the speaker imagines an untraditional experience of homemaking. Rather than taking the

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-21

**LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS****LINES 1-2**

*I have gone ...
... braver at night;*

"Her Kind" leaps right into action: its speaker describes having "gone out, a possessed witch," hovering in the "black air" of the night. The witch, in this poem, is a [symbol](#) of untraditional womanhood. By describing herself as a "possessed witch," the speaker paints a picture of a world in which only a woman "possessed" by an evil spirit would think to leave her house alone at night. The image of the witch instantly suggests both the outsider status of the speaker and the empowerment this speaker finds in stepping outside of what's expected of her.

The poem uses [consonance](#) to evoke the sharpened awareness this "possessed witch" might feel being out at night alone:

I have gone out, a possessed witch,
haunting the black air, braver at night;

The /t/ sounds are crisp and clear, suggesting that the speaker feels more vitally alive (and "braver") out here on her own than she did staying at home.

While in many cases women might be cautious about going outside alone at night, in this case, it is the speaker who is "haunting the black air." She isn't the one being haunted; she isn't scared. She is moving through the world with confidence and a sense of power. That this makes her a "witch" suggests that she's living in a pretty repressive society.

LINES 3-5

*dreaming evil, I ...
... out of mind.*

Continuing to elaborate on her witchy persona, the speaker describes herself as "dreaming evil." The word "dreaming" is delightfully ambiguous: is she imagining the awful things that might happen to her under cover of darkness, or is she devising wickedness of her own?

That ambiguity again points in two directions:

- The speaker is a "witch" because she is transgressing patriarchal boundaries, doing as she pleases, stepping outside of the role assigned to her. And since she's transgressing, she's in danger of having "evil" done to her.
- At the same time, as she describes her witchy

adventures, she gets to feel what it's like to have true (and dangerous) power!

She describes doing her "hitch / over the plain houses," [imagery](#) which suggests a wild, jerky broomstick flight over a bland, ordinary village. Those "plain houses" could be those of a medieval village, but they might also evoke the identical box houses of 1950s suburbia. The [diacope](#) on "light by light," evoking an endless series of lit windows flashing past below, similarly suggests repetitive sameness.

And that's kind of the point! For women, this poem will suggest, not a lot has changed in between the middle ages and the poet's own Cold War-era United States. A woman who is seen as different is still often hated and feared.

At the end of this stanza, the speaker calls herself a "lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind"—an [allusion](#) to the old idea that witches were marked by extra fingers or other physical abnormalities. But it's unclear whether she really is so very strange and lonely, or if she only seems that way to the people in those rows of houses below.

LINES 6-7

*A woman like ...
... been her kind.*

At the end of the first stanza, the speaker says of the persona she's just described, "A woman like that is not a woman, quite." In other words, a woman who seeks independence, who goes looking for fulfillment outside of the home, who rejects the limited roles offered to her by a patriarchal society—such a woman exists outside the perimeters of what a woman is allowed to be. There's something wrong with her; she must be mad, or simply unwomanly.

The speaker then ends the stanza with what will become the poem's [refrain](#): "I have been her kind." Here, it becomes clear that the speaker was never really claiming to have been an actual witch, but using the witch as a [symbol](#) for a certain "kind" of femininity.

By saying that she has "been her kind," the speaker is offering a hand to other women who relate to being seen as mad, wild, or evil for wanting more than the restrictive, one-dimensional lives they've been allowed in a patriarchal society. There is a sense that, in claiming solidarity with witchy women, the speaker is not just *admitting* to being different, but *proud* to be different: she wants to be seen for who she really is.

LINES 8-12

*I have found ...
... rearranging the disaligned.*

In the second stanza, the speaker shifts gears, saying that she has "found the warm caves in the woods" and "filled them with [...] innumerable goods." This is a different kind of witchy

persona: rather than flying around the night sky performing witchcraft, this version of the speaker is on the ground, making a home for herself. But the [anaphora](#) here, in which the speaker repeats "I have" at the beginning of every new stanza, suggests that all the different versions of womanhood she examines here are related—and that she relates to them all.

In some ways, this new figure calls to mind the story of Snow White, the lovely princess who selflessly cared for seven dwarves. But while the woman in the poem might be a homemaker, she has a pretty unconventional version of homemaking.

The caves, for one thing, seem both cozy and strange. They're "warm"—a bit of [imagery](#) that suggests a roaring fire and snug blankets—and have all the "skillets" and "closets" one might associate with a housewife's cottage. But they're also full of peculiar "carvings" and rich "silks," which suggest luxury and sensuality. This might be a vision of domesticity, but it's a domesticity of the speaker's own choosing, not a picture of a model home.

And listen to the [consonance](#) in these lines:

filled them with skillets, carvings, shelves,
closets, silks, innumerable goods;

All those long, repeated /l/ sounds feel sensuous and delicious. This witchy woman luxuriates in her home; it is hers, and hers alone.

But she also has her own strange community here: she hosts "suppers" in her cave for "the worms and the elves" (or the dragons and faeries). Here, the scene becomes mythological, fantastical—and the witchy persona seems to be at home among magical creatures. It's as if she, as an independent woman, is just as supernatural as any elf.

There's a little ambiguity here: it's unclear if this woman pleased to be making dinner, not for a husband and children, but for a community of magical creatures. She's always "whining" and "rearranging" her space, talking to "worms" instead of people. But as in the first stanza, perhaps some of these judgments come from outside. There's a sense here that women who choose to exist outside of certain prescribed ideas of femininity are subject to intense (and ungenerous) scrutiny.

But while she may be seen by others as "whining" and pointlessly "rearranging," she also has the power to reorder her surroundings. She isn't stuck with the way things are. She has the ability to choose what her life will look like.

LINES 13-14

*A woman like ...
... been her kind.*

Once again, through the poem's [refrain](#), the speaker proclaims her solidarity with other women who have been labeled,

scrutinized, cast out for being different.

At the end of the second stanza, the speaker makes a pronouncement on the kind of woman who (like this persona in her "warm caves") sets up an independent home, saying, "A woman like that is misunderstood." In other words, the world just doesn't know what to do with a woman who wants to set the terms of her own life.

The [parallelism](#) connecting line 13 ("A woman like that is misunderstood") to line 6 in the previous stanza ("A woman like that is not a woman, quite") emphasizes that the speaker is describing not so much a specific woman as a specific "kind" of woman: "A woman like that." Their circumstances might change, but these women all share a quality of independence, doing what they want instead of what they're supposed to do.

By saying "I have been her kind," the speaker stands with this kind of isolated woman—and suggests, in doing so, that isolated women actually share their own [paradoxical](#) kind of community. If the "witches" of the world reach out to each other, they'll find they're not alone after all.

It's worth noting, too, that the speaker says "I have been her kind," not "I am her kind." This would seem to suggest the speaker has been through all of this before and has survived it. She is offering other women a way to survive as well.

LINES 15-17

*I have ridden ...
... bright routes, survivor*

The third stanza again begins with [anaphora](#), repeating the words "I have" to prepare the reader to meet a new witchy persona: this time, a witch on her way to a cruel death, burned at the stake. All that refusal to play by rules has finally caught up with her, and now the outside world is taking its revenge.

This final persona seems to be both powerless and powerful.

- On the one hand, she is being passively driven past the "villages," and she describes her arms as "nude," [imagery](#) that suggests she's been captured and stripped, made totally vulnerable.
- At the same time, she is "wav[ing]" cheerfully at the villages, and she describes herself as a "survivor." In this way, the poem doesn't paint her as a victim so much as a strong figure who cannot be easily destroyed. Despite what's been done to her, she still has a clear sense of who she is.

The medieval setting of this stanza, with its "cart" and its "villages," draws attention to the ways that women have been historically punished and killed for being different. This could very well be the same woman that appeared in the first two stanzas, or a contemporary woman in a [metaphorical](#) setting; either way, the speaker is describing a woman who refuses to be compliant, who refuses to be somebody else's idea of who

she should be.

Listen to the hard /d/ and /r/ [consonance](#) in these lines:

I have ridden in your cart, driver,
waved my nude arms at villages going by,
learning the last bright routes, survivor

These sounds give the stanza a bumpy, rugged texture that reflects the difficulty of this final witch's path. But there's also a strange beauty in this scene: as she learns the "last bright routes," memorizing the final sunlit paths she'll ever see, she seems more uplifted than terrified.

LINES 18-21

*where your flames ...
... been her kind.*

The poem reaches its dramatic climax when the speaker again subtly [alludes](#) to Joan of Arc and Saint Catherine. Rather grimly, those allusions appear in the methods by which these women were executed: Joan of Arc was burned at the stake, and St. Catherine was broken on a spiked wheel. Seen as heretics in their time, both of these women were later sainted for the very actions that got them killed.

These bloody allusions emphasize the way women have long been violently punished for stepping outside the boundaries of traditional femininity. They also suggest that the speaker is willing to risk such punishments for the sake of living freely: she'll undergo these tortures "unashamed."

In fact, the speaker's use of the present tense here suggests that she feels as if she's already experienced a lot of these punishments [metaphorically](#):

where your flames still bite my thigh
and my ribs crack where your wheels wind.

While women in medieval times were burnt and tortured, contemporary women feel the "bite" of the flames in metaphorical ways, like the suspicion and cruelty of their communities (and, alas, sometimes still in more literal ways, too).

Regardless of whether the flames are literal or metaphorical, the speaker is gesturing to a long history of patriarchal societies using violence to make women comply. And though she feels the weight of that history, she refuses to capitulate.

The poem ends with a defiant bang. "A woman like that is not ashamed to die," the speaker proclaims. The "kind" of woman the speaker has been describing all through this poem is one who cannot be cowed by threats. She knows who she is and she won't be shamed into renouncing it, nor will she renounce other women like her.

The third [repetition](#) of the [refrain](#) "I have been her kind" almost

feels like an invocation, as if the speaker is calling on these "kind[s]" of women to form a sisterhood. She is saying that women like the ones in this poem don't need to feel alone and rejected. There are others like them, and there is power in solidarity.



SYMBOLS



WITCHES

The poem's witches [symbolize](#) untraditional femininity. Witches were historically imagined as an archetype of the dark side of womanhood, the opposite of everything women were supposed to be: ugly instead of beautiful, solitary instead of family-oriented, malicious instead of sweet. In more recent years, women have claimed the witch for their own: witches are now often imagined more as independent, powerful women, not sinister hags.

While this poem's witches are skillful and strong, they're also "lonely," "misunderstood," and subjected to violence from society at large. But even if the wider world rejects the kind of femininity that witches symbolize, adopting a witchy way of being allows the speaker to find strong bonds of sisterhood and solidarity among other unconventional women.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "I have gone out, a possessed witch, / haunting the black air, braver at night; "
- **Lines 3-5:** "dreaming evil, I have done my hitch / over the plain houses, light by light: / lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind."
- **Lines 15-19:** "I have ridden in your cart, driver, / waved my nude arms at villages going by, / learning the last bright routes, survivor / where your flames still bite my thigh / and my ribs crack where your wheels wind. "



POETIC DEVICES

REPETITION

The poem's [repetitions](#) help to give the speaker's voice its stirring, emphatic tone.

Perhaps the most noticeable repetition in the poem is its [refrain](#): "I have been her kind." The use of a refrain in this poem is particularly fitting because it was a device commonly used in the Middle Ages, when poems were often sung and accompanied by music. The refrain thus fits right in with this poem's medieval [allusions](#), from witch-burnings to "elves" to torture wheels.

The refrain also draws attention to the poem's theme of solidarity among unconventional women. Each stanza details

the outsider status of a particular "kind" of woman and ends by returning to the same proclamation of sisterhood. Rather than allowing themselves to be cast out and forgotten, this refrain suggests, women who don't fit into patriarchy's exacting expectations can instead form a bond with each other and find strength in their refusal to play along.

The refrain thus makes this poem into an anthem of sorts: it suggests that at least part of the poem's purpose is to uplift and inspire other atypical women.

But other kinds of repetition play a role here, too. One is [diacope](#), which appears in line 4:

over the plain houses, light by light:

The repetition of "light" here evokes the countless, identical illuminated windows of the "plain houses" the speaker flies over—a sameness from which the speaker wishes to be free.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I have"
- **Line 3:** "I have"
- **Line 4:** "light by light"
- **Line 6:** "A woman like that is," "woman"
- **Line 7:** "I have been her kind."
- **Line 8:** "I have"
- **Line 13:** "A woman like that is"
- **Line 14:** "I have been her kind."
- **Line 15:** "I have"
- **Line 20:** "A woman like that is"
- **Line 21:** "I have been her kind."

IMAGERY

The poem uses [imagery](#) to paint vivid scenes of what it might look like for a woman to exist outside the restrictions of patriarchy.

In the first stanza, for example, the speaker describes a witch flying around at night, "haunting the black air." That deep dark "black air" stands in contrast with the illuminated "plain houses" below, reminding readers of what this witch is rejecting: the role of the dutiful homemaker, wife, and mother. Instead of the domesticity of those houses, she embraces the freedom and danger of the night.

But that wild nighttime freedom isn't everything an outcast woman can hope for. There's also a strange domesticity available in the "warm caves in the woods," where the speaker imagines setting up an unlikely household among the "worms and the elves." The warmth of those caves suggests that the witch has made a cozy home in a place that other people would see as wild and forbidding—an image of forging one's own path in unusual circumstances.

In the final stanza, meanwhile, imagery helps to evoke the

terrible consequences of being an unconventional woman in an oppressive world. The speaker's "nude arms" waving as she's driven past the villages in a cart suggest that she's been stripped naked, exposed, and shamed. And the "last bright routes" she notices suggest that she's well aware she's about to die: it's the final time she'll see these roads in daylight.

The poem's moments of imagery thus help the reader to see and feel what this "kind" of woman experiences: from liberation to independence to punishment.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "haunting the black air"
- **Line 4:** "over the plain houses"
- **Line 8:** "the warm caves in the woods"
- **Line 16:** "waved my nude arms at villages going by"
- **Line 17:** "the last bright routes"

CONSONANCE

[Consonance](#) gives this poem's language energy, intensity, and music.

For instance, take a look at some of the /t/, /n/, and /l/ consonance in the first stanza:

haunting the black air, braver at night;
dreaming evil, I have done my hitch
over the plain houses, light by light:
lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind.

Here, the /t/ consonance gives the first few lines a sharpness that evokes the witch's experience of being out at night: the intensity and heightened alertness one feels when one is alone in the darkness. In contrast, there is something gentler and more muted about the /n/ and /l/ consonance which takes over towards the end of the stanza. The muffled /n/ sound and the soft, lilting /l/ sound suggest the loneliness of being seen as crazy when really one is just trying to be true to oneself.

The second stanza, meanwhile, uses consonant sounds to evoke the warm, inviting clutter of the caves, suggesting that a woman doesn't need to have a traditional family dynamic in order to live a comfortable, pleasurable life:

I have found the warm caves in the woods,
filled them with skillets, carvings, shelves,
closets, silks, innumerable goods;

The movement between sounds here makes these "innumerable goods" sound downright delicious: this woman's well-stocked house sounds luxurious and cozy, not at all what one might expect from a "cave[] in the woods."

In the last stanza, consonance plays a grimmer role:

and my ribs crack where your wheels wind.

Here, the /r/ sounds in "ribs" and "crack," combined with the [onomatopoeia](#) of the word "crack," provokes a visceral reaction in the reader: one can almost hear the bones breaking.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "gone," "out"
- **Line 2:** "haunting," "night"
- **Line 3:** "evil," "done"
- **Line 4:** "plain," "light," "light"
- **Line 5:** "lonely," "thing," "twelve," "fingered," "out," "mind"
- **Line 6:** "woman," "that," "not," "woman," "quite"
- **Line 7:** "been," "kind"
- **Line 8:** "warm," "caves," "woods"
- **Line 9:** "filled," "them," "skillets," "carvings," "shelves"
- **Line 10:** "closets," "silks," "innumerable," "goods"
- **Line 11:** "suppers," "worms," "elves"
- **Line 12:** "whining," "rearranging," "disaligned"
- **Line 13:** "woman," "misunderstood"
- **Line 14:** "been," "kind"
- **Line 15:** "have," "ridden," "cart," "driver"
- **Line 16:** "waved," "arms," "villages"
- **Line 17:** "learning," "last," "bright," "routes," "survivor"
- **Line 18:** "flames," "still," "bite"
- **Line 19:** "ribs," "crack," "where," "wind"
- **Line 20:** "woman," "not"
- **Line 21:** "been," "kind"

ASSONANCE

Like [consonance](#), [assonance](#) helps elevate the poem, giving it musicality and intensity. In the first stanza, for instance, the assonant /ee/ sounds in "dreaming evil" gives the phrase an almost playful vibe, inviting the reader to cast a skeptical eye on what might be considered "evil" behavior in a patriarchal society. In other words, is it "evil" for a woman to be out at night, to prefer her own company to that of the people in the "plain houses" below?

And in the second stanza, a short /ih/ sound links the "skillets" and "silks" that "fill[]" the speaker's strangely cozy cave in the woods, evoking how well-stocked all those many "shelves" must be.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "dreaming," "evil"
- **Line 5:** "thing," "fingered"
- **Line 9:** "filled," "skillets"
- **Line 10:** "silks"
- **Line 11:** "fixed"
- **Line 12:** "whining," "disaligned"
- **Line 13:** "misunderstood"

- **Line 17:** "bright"
- **Line 18:** "bite," "thigh"
- **Line 19:** "wind"
- **Line 20:** "die"
- **Line 21:** "kind"

ALLITERATION

Just like [consonance](#) and [assonance](#), [alliteration](#) contributes to the musicality and the meaning of the poem.

In the first stanza, for instance, the /b/ alliteration in "black" and "braver" suggests a relationship between the "black[ness]" of the night and the "brave[ry]" it inspires. In other words, the speaker imagines that under the cover of darkness, she might be able to be her true self.

Meanwhile, in the third stanza, the /w/ alliteration in "where your wheels wind" slows down the line and evokes the prolonged agony of the medieval form of execution these words describe.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "black," "braver"
- **Line 3:** "dreaming," "done"
- **Line 8:** "warm," "caves," "woods"
- **Line 9:** "carvings"
- **Line 10:** "closets"
- **Line 11:** "worms"
- **Line 12:** "whining"
- **Line 13:** "woman"
- **Line 17:** "learning," "last"
- **Line 18:** "where"
- **Line 19:** "where," "wheels," "wind"
- **Line 20:** "woman"

ALLUSION

The poem's [allusions](#) to the medieval world (and especially medieval beliefs about witchcraft) help to create its ominous, haunted atmosphere—and to suggest that things really haven't changed that much for unconventional women over the centuries.

For instance, the image of the "possessed witch" out on a strange, herky-jerky flight over the neighborhood alludes to old beliefs about witches—for instance, that they might be "twelve-fingered," distinguished by extra digits or other deformities. The idea that witches would be somehow be physically marked this way underlines the speaker's sense of alienation: being an unusual woman, then as now, seems to mean feeling as if you're set apart from the world around you, branded. In fact, such witchy women are fit only to hang out with the "worms and the elves"—the dragons and the fairies—as if they were themselves a kind of mythological creature.

Both of these references suggest a superstitious cultural fear of strange women. That fear comes to a head in the poem's third stanza, in which this speaker imagines being burnt at the stake and broken on a spiked wheel. This moment alludes to the horrific practice of witch-burnings and medieval tortures in general, but it might also be read as a specific allusion to Joan of Arc:

- A 15th-century French peasant-turned-warrior who led an army against the English, Joan of Arc was finally burned at the stake, convicted of heresy for claiming that she was guided by the voice of God.
- The subtle allusion to her here points to the idea that women of "her kind" are indeed "survivors": although Joan of Arc was put to death for standing her ground, her legacy has survived, and she's now honored as a literal saint.
- Once vilified and later sainted, what really makes Joan of Arc the subject of so much fascination centuries after her death isn't just the fact that she was a peasant girl who claimed to hear angels speaking to her, who led an army and who was killed for her beliefs. It's that she was all of these conflicting, contradictory things, that she was "unashamed to die," and that even now, it is impossible to put her in a box. In this way, the allusion valorizes women who step outside the bounds of patriarchy.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "dreaming evil, I have done my hitch / over the plain houses, light by light"
- **Line 5:** "lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind. "
- **Line 11:** "the worms and the elves"
- **Lines 15-20:** "I have ridden in your cart, driver, / waved my nude arms at villages going by, / learning the last bright routes, survivor / where your flames still bite my thigh / and my ribs crack where your wheels wind. / A woman like that is not ashamed to die. "

PARALLELISM

The poem uses [parallelism](#) to create emphasis.

By [repeating](#) the words "I have" at the beginning of each stanza (a specific kind of parallelism is known as [anaphora](#)), the speaker draws attention to the idea that she has been the "kind" of woman that she is describing. Like these women, she has done things that could be seen as weird, crazy, or "misunderstood"—and has felt like a defiantly witchy outcast because of it.

The [refrain](#) at the end of each stanza ("I have been her kind") is also parallelism. By ending each stanza on the same sentiment, the poem makes its central concern very clear. This is a poem

about solidarity between unconventional women—the women described in the parallel sentence structures leading up to the last line of every stanza. "A woman like that" is "not a woman," or is "misunderstood," or is "not ashamed to die." The parallelism here makes it clear that all of these women *share* something—they're *all* a version of "a woman like that."

There is also parallelism in lines 18-19:

where your flames still bite my thigh
and my ribs crack where your wheels wind.

The repeated grammatical structure draws attention to the protracted torture that this "survivor" undergoes at the hands of a patriarchal society.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I have"
- **Line 3:** "I have"
- **Line 6:** "A woman like that is," "not a woman, quite."
- **Line 7:** "I have been her kind."
- **Line 8:** "I have"
- **Line 13:** "A woman like that is," "misunderstood."
- **Line 14:** "I have been her kind."
- **Line 15:** "I have"
- **Lines 18-19:** "where your flames still bite my thigh / and my ribs crack where your wheels wind. "
- **Lines 20-21:** "A woman like that is not ashamed to die. / I have been her kind."



VOCABULARY

Possessed (Line 1) - Controlled by an evil spirit or demon.

Done my hitch (Lines 3-4) - Made an angular, perhaps jerky flight.

Twelve-fingered (Line 5) - This refers to the fact that, historically, witches were often said to have strange features like extra fingers or superfluous nipples.

Innumerable (Line 10) - Countless.

The worms and the elves (Line 11) - Here, "worms" refers not to bugs, but to a type of dragon—accompanied by "elves," or fairies.

Disaligned (Line 12) - Arranged incorrectly, out of order.

Where your wheels wind (Line 19) - A reference to an ancient execution device, a spiked wheel used to break people's bones.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

This poem about wild, rebellious women is appropriately untraditional: it doesn't use a standard form like the [sonnet](#) or the [villanelle](#). Instead, it uses a form of the poet's own invention: three seven-line stanzas (also known as septets).

And perhaps those numbers are meaningful: both the number three and the number seven have magical associations in folklore, and three in particular calls to mind the three "weird sisters" from [Macbeth](#), some of the most famous witches in all of English literature. Since the speaker imagines herself as three different witchy figures in this poem, that subtle numerical [allusion](#) doesn't seem totally accidental!

METER

This is a poem about being untraditional and free, so it makes sense that the poem doesn't tie itself down to any particular [meter](#). The poem's metrical freedom echoes the freedom this speaker desires for herself and women like her: the freedom to be a complex, sometimes contradictory human being, rather than fitting into a fixed idea of what a woman should be.

And the poem does have its own strong rhythms, even if they don't fit into a regular pattern. For instance, every stanza ends with the same [refrain](#), and almost every word of it is stressed:

I have been her kind.

Those strong stresses make the refrain sound powerful, bold, and insistent.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem's [rhyme scheme](#) runs like this:

ABABCBC

Notice that while the A and B rhymes change with each stanza, the C rhyme remains consistent throughout the poem, in part because the last line of each stanza is a repeated [refrain](#): "I have been her kind." That consistency draws special attention to the speaker's sense of solidarity with other strange women like her.

This rhyme scheme makes the poem feel regular and structured even as it defies conventions of form and [meter](#). Like the homemaker in the second stanza who "rearrang[es] the disaligned," this poem abides by its own sense of order. The rhyme scheme suggests that the speaker here has a meticulous method of her own, guided by her own sense of what is important.



SPEAKER

The speaker of "Her Kind" is, first and foremost, a woman.

More importantly, she is a woman who identifies with the independence of witches, and who keenly feels their suffering. She knows that women who live according to their own rules tend to be "misunderstood" and even punished.

The voice in this poem is rather slippery: it's as if the speaker passes in and out of the personas she describes. All of the poem's different characters share a desire for freedom, and live outside the domestic realm women have traditionally been forced to inhabit. The "possessed witch" "go[es] out [...] over the plain houses" rather than staying within them; the homemaker arranges her goods in "the warm caves in the woods" rather than in a more conventional setting; and the medieval "survivor" gets burned at the stake outside the "villages" rather than living compliantly within them.

The speaker relates to being all these "kind[s]" of women—unafraid to exist outside the bounds society creates for her, no matter what freedom will cost.



SETTING

This poem's setting seems, at first, to be a medieval world of strange "woods," close-knit "villages," and bloody violence. But in many ways, it could also be the contemporary world.

In the first stanza, for instance, the speaker describes being a witch flying "over the plain houses." Those "plain houses" could be the cottages of a medieval village—but they might also suggest the identical box houses of a conventional suburban neighborhood.

Similarly, the second stanza's woodland "caves," where a strange woman makes dinner for "the worms and the elves" (that is, dragons and fairies) sound like something right out of an old tapestry. But this setting could also be read [metaphorically](#) as an image of leaving suburban expectations behind to live an unconventional life far from others.

And in the final stanza, in which villagers burn a woman at the stake and break her bones on a wheel, certainly suggests a medieval execution. But it also hints at the way that modern women are punished for defying patriarchal expectations.

The poem's setting thus makes some sharp points about contemporary society—which, in this speaker's eyes, is just as close-minded and clannish as any superstitious medieval village.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Anne Sexton (1928-1974) wrote "Her Kind" early on in her career; it appeared in her first collection, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960). The title of the collection [alludes](#) to an infamous psychiatric hospital in London, and many of the

poems in the collection detail Sexton's experience of being institutionalized.

Though Sexton didn't consider herself a [Confessional](#) poet, her intimate, transgressive work often gets categorized with the work of other poets linked to that movement—like W.D. Snodgrass, Robert Lowell, [Sylvia Plath](#), and John Berryman. These poets tried to reveal the hidden, imperfect, and even taboo parts of their lives and psyches that had been previously swept under the rug. Sexton, for instance, wrote plainly and unapologetically about mental illness, menstruation, masturbation, abortion, extramarital affairs, sexual abuse, and drug addiction.

Contemporary critics often found fault with Sexton for the so-called self-indulgence of her work. Yet the very qualities that critics scorned made her immensely popular among a general readership increasingly drawn to poetry that railed against the compulsory politeness, fake happiness, and rigid social norms of the post-war 1950s.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Sexton was first encouraged to write poetry by her psychiatrist, Dr. Martin Orne. In writing, she discovered a sense of purpose that being a suburban Boston housewife and mother hadn't afforded her—and found almost immediate success. It was only ten years after she began writing poetry that she won the 1967 Pulitzer Prize for her book *Live or Die*.

"Her Kind" was clearly an important poem for Sexton: she was known for always reading it first whenever she gave readings in public. The poem's themes foreshadow the second wave of feminism in the United States, in which women began to push back against traditional sexist boundaries. "Her Kind" is one of Sexton's most enduring works, speaking to the concerns of her time as well as expressing solidarity with women throughout history who have rejected restrictive gender roles. The poem also underlines what a complicated figure Sexton herself was. While she wrote rebellious poems that criticized patriarchal oppression, she herself continued to live as a wealthy suburban housewife until her death in 1974.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Witches and Feminism](#) — Read a New York times article on the resurgence of witches in the public consciousness, and the witch as a feminist symbol. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/11/style/pam-grossman-witch-feminism.html>)
- [A Short Biography](#) — Read a biography of Sexton from the Poetry Foundation, and find links to more of her work. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/anne-sexton>)
- [The Poem Aloud](#) — Listen to a 1966 recording of Anne Sexton reading "Her Kind." (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=btz8RZHSQ2Q>)
- [An Introduction to Anne Sexton](#) — Watch a USA Poetry documentary on Anne Sexton, in which she talks about getting started as a poet and reads from her work. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ONlpxRPFv3k&t=7s>)
- [Sexton's Life](#) — Read an article by Linda Sexton, Anne Sexton's daughter, that paints a complex and intimate portrait of the poet. (<https://lindagrays Sexton.com/1991/08/a-daughters-story-i-knew-her-best/>)



HOW TO CITE

MLA

Mottram, Darla. "Her Kind." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 23 Feb 2020. Web. 26 May 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Mottram, Darla. "Her Kind." LitCharts LLC, February 23, 2020. Retrieved May 26, 2021. <https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/anne-sexton/her-kind>.