Mad Girl's Love Song

SUMMARY

I close my eyes and it's like the whole world suddenly dies. When I open my eyes up again, the world comes back to life. (I wonder if I imagined your existence.)

The stars dance away from me in pairs, their blue and red colors fading, as instead a random and capricious darkness hurdles forward. I close my eyes and it's like the whole world suddenly dies.

I had a dream that you cast a spell to sleep with me, and that you drove me totally crazy and love struck with your songs and kisses. (I wonder if I imagined your existence.)

God is falling down from Heaven, and all the fires in Hell are going out. Both angels and demons are leaving. I close my eyes it's like the whole world suddenly dies.

I hoped you'd come back to me like you told me you would, but instead I'm getting older and I can't even remember your name. (I wonder if I imagined your existence.)

I'd have been better off loving a mythical creature like the thunderbird instead of you; at least in the springtime those birds come soaring back once more. I close my eyes and it's like the whole world suddenly dies. (I wonder if I imagined your existence.)

THEMES

ISOLATION AND DENIAL

The poem's speaker is clearly heartbroken, and seems to alternate between isolation and denial in order to cope with her pain. She repeatedly disengages from the reality of her life, shutting her eyes and denying the existence of her lover over and over again. None of this, however, is successful in assuaging the speaker's heartbreak. Instead, the poem seems to suggest that escapism, through isolation and denial, only *heightens* the speaker's loneliness and despair.

The poem has two repeating lines that highlight this idea. The first—"I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead"—might be taken as the speaker closing her eyes in order to escape into her mind instead of dealing with the rest of the world. When she then opens her eyes and is once again confronted with that world, she tries to deny that her lover ever existed: "I think I made you up inside my head." And, as that doesn't help, she then closes her eyes again and continues this cycle of isolation to denial to isolation.

Each attempt to escape the despair of her life is met with a threatening darkness, and it seems to get progressively harder for the speaker to return to the world of light and life as the poem goes on. First she actively shuts her eyes; but in the next stanza she's presented as a passive bystander as the "stars go waltzing out"—in other words, as the stars, which represent light and hope, dance off in pairs and leave the lonely speaker behind. In their place an "arbitrary blackness" rushes forward with the intensity of galloping horses. While "arbitrary" can mean "random," a secondary meaning is "oppressive" or "tyrannical." That an oppressive "blackness" is "galloping in" hints at the speaker's feelings of hopelessness and helplessness, her sudden inability to push this darkness from her mind.

And things seem to only get worse from there. After reminiscing about the way her lover drove the speaker "quite insane," she envisions an apocalyptic scene steeped in religious imagery. The speaker narrates a destruction of both heaven *and* hell: God falls "from the sky," but the flames of "hell's fires" are also dying out. Angels ("seraphim") and demons ("Satan's men") alike are fleeing. The speaker seems to be imagining herself trapped in an afterlife bleaker than hell itself: one of nothingness. With both heaven and hell empty, she's left with only darkness of her own mind. Her escapism has worked, but too well; what began as a way to forget her heartbreak has instead perpetuated a trap of terrifying isolation.

When the speaker isn't lost in the blackness of her mind, she denies the very existence of her lover. Her first description of their relationship opens with "I dreamed," which seems to suggest the speaker second-guessing her memory. What's more, the speaker insists she was "bewitched into bed" and "kissed" into insanity, as if she's blaming the lover for tricking her into being intimate and thereby rejecting the reality of their love.

Again, though, this doesn't seem to help the speaker, who returns to the refrain of having made her beloved up in her head. It's as if she's trying to *convince* herself this lover never existed in order to erase the very real existence of her pain. Seemingly unable to make herself believe her lover never existed, she next attempts to forget her lover. When she says, "I grow old and I forget your name," it suggests her seeking to make that true.

However, her final revelation on what *she* should have done ("I should have loved a thunderbird instead") reveals her turning the blame onto herself. Taken alongside her endless cycle of disengagement, this turn inward suggests that her coping mechanisms of isolation and denial have not proven effective in alleviating her heartbreak. Instead, they have had the reverse

effect of only driving her deeper inward into her sadness and despair.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-19

LOVE, MADNESS, AND DISILLUSIONMENT

"Mad Girl's Love Song" is no ordinary ode to lost love. For one thing, it's unclear whether the speaker's lover ever existed, or if she "made [this lover] up inside [her] head." Perhaps this line refers to the lover failing to live up to the speaker's *idea* of that lover; in either case, love in the poem is clearly associated with madness—in the sense that being in love can feel like a form of insanity, and that disillusionment following her lover's abandonment makes the speaker doubt her grip on reality. Her understanding of life and love seem to have been shattered by her lover leaving, and the poem can thus be considered a description of a descent into madness prompted by heartbreak.

Even as the speaker mourns her lost love, the poem questions the reality of this love in the first place. For instance, the speaker says she "dreamed" her lover "bewitched" her "into bed." The use of the word "dreamed" suggests that the speaker is questioning her own memories; it's not clear whether this relationship ever actually occurred.

The events described *within* the speaker's dream then further suggest a certain sense of narratorial unreliability, starting with the lover "bewitch[ing] the speaker and ending with the lover "kiss[ing] [her] quite insane." This indicates the speaker's belief that this love was not true, and instead was merely an illusion. That is, none of these emotions were real; instead love is presented as a kind of temporary spell or enchantment—or, indeed, a temporary insanity.

The speaker also says she "fancied" her lover would return as promised. While fancy can mean *to desire*, it can also mean *to imagine*, again blurring the line between reality and dreams in the poem. This also suggests that, in abandoning the speaker, the lover broke her trust and her belief in the validity of their relationship.

So confused and hurt is the speaker that she envisions God falling from heaven and the fires of hell being snuffed out. This suggests an utter loss of faith in the order of world, in traditional teachings about good and evil. Finally, the speaker "grows old" and forgets her lover's name, suggesting a total disengagement with her life—an impassible rupture between who she was before and after this heartbreak.

It's important to note that who the speaker addresses in the poem might not be a lover at all. Some readers have taken the "lover" to be representative of Plath's father, or even the idea of hope in general. What's more important is that whatever or whoever abandoned the speaker has upended not only the speaker's idea of love, but of life itself as she's forced to question her own interpretation of reality.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-19

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

I shut my ...
... inside my head.)

The first line of the poem—"I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead"—will be repeated throughout as a sort of refrain. It's an evocative opening, to say the least, as referencing death in the first line of a poem with "Love Song" in the title immediately signals that this won't be a typical ode to a lover.

Indeed, the poem begins on a solipsistic note. Solipsism is the philosophical idea that the only thing that a person can know for sure exists is *themselves*. When the speaker says the rest of the world dies as soon as she shuts her eyes—that is, that everything else ceases to exist—she's immediately suggesting her tenuous hold on reality, the notion that she isn't so sure that *anything* apart from herself is actually real. This also implies the speaker's intense feelings of isolation.

The troubling image of "the world drop[ping] dead" when the speaker closes her eyes is then heightened by the poetic devices in this line. The alliteration and consonance of "drops dead" has a weighty feel to it, evoking the thud of something falling to the ground.

The assonance in the long /i/ sounds of "I" and "my eyes" also adds a sense of rhythmic inevitability to the line, these initial words smoothly flowing into one another as if mimicking the pull of sleepiness or heaviness on the speaker's eyelids. Maybe this signals that the speaker *wants* to shut out the world, that she views death as a kind of *relief* because it's too painful to go on existing without her lover.

The lull of this smoothness, however, is quickly countered by the switch in assonance to short /i/ sounds in the very next line:

> I lift my lids and all is born again.

The sharp, short /i/ sounds are fitting for a line that describes the speaker's temporary escape from the isolation of her closed eyes and have everything "born again," snapped back to reality, as it were.

The broader meaning here is ambiguous, but perhaps it suggests a momentary willingness to engage with the world. That is, if closing her eyes results in the speaker's total isolation

or death, then opening them suggests a rebirth, an openness toward other people and life in general. In other words, maybe at first the speaker tries to shut out the world to avoid her pain, but then opens her eyes and tries to confront it.

And yet the speaker, having opened her eyes, now wonders if she simply imagined this vague "you" to whom the poem is addressed—suggesting a quick return to the isolation and confusion of the first line. Who is this "you"? It's not clear yet, and in fact never will be in the poem. Maybe it's an ex-lover, or maybe it's something more metaphorical—the speaker's creativity or talent is one reading, as is this "you" representing God.

What *is* clear is that the speaker is struggling. Opening her eyes is perhaps an attempt to face the world, yet the line "I think I made you up inside my head" might suggest the speaker's denial, her refusal to accept the reality of her pain. Alternatively, maybe stating that she "made ... up" this "you" implies that this love was indeed never real, that the speaker *is* in fact confronting the truth that she has been alone all along.

The parentheses enclosing this phrase, meanwhile, highlight the intimate nature of this poem, as if the reader is being shown a peek into the speaker's mind.

LINES 4-6

The stars go ...
... world drops dead.

The fourth and fifth lines rely on personification to help the reader understand the speaker's state of mind. A "waltz" is a kind of ballroom dance with a specific cadence. The speaker watches as the stars depart by dancing away in a flurry of color, which might represent a fun and high-spirited life passing by the speaker. The speaker is then greeted instead by a blackness that gallops, or hurtles, towards her.

Both these events—the dancing of the stars, the galloping of the blackness—seem to happen *to* the speaker. The speaker thus seems to feel helpless and overwhelmed, out of control. The speaker's lack of agency is further reflected by the description of this blackness as "arbitrary," a word that can mean random or nonsensical, but also tyrannical—like an "arbitrary ruling" by a king.

If this blackness is thought of as representing isolation and sadness or depression, then its arbitrariness suggests that it has no direct *cause*; rather, it simply gallops in when it wants to, without the speaker's input or prompting. The other definition of "arbitrary" further suggests that this darkness is forceful and cruel, and again something beyond the speaker's control. It is something that overtakes the speaker, rushing into the space left behind as the stars—with their light and joy—depart.

The second stanza features a flurry of consonance, particularly of hard /g/, /b/, and /d/ sounds. The abundance of these hammering sounds, plus the sharp /k/ in "blackness," introduces a sense of chaos or loudness into the poem, perhaps indicative of the speaker's intruding thoughts:

> The stars go waltzing out in blue and red,
> And arbitrary blackness gallops in:
> I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.

Ending on the refrain, "I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead," introduces a way to orient the reader. It's as though each alternate ending encapsulates the previous two lines, showcasing whether the speaker is trapped in isolation ("I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead"), or denial ("I think I made you up inside my head").

Sylvia Plath helped popularize something known as confessional poetry: poetry that favored highly personal and intimate thoughts, often ruminating on mental illness and death. Plath also died by suicide at the age of 30. These facts make it hard to separate the poet from her poetry, and this stanza in particular can seem to suggest a death by suicide. What sticks out in that regard is her description of "the stars" specifically being "blue and red." In *The Bell Jar*, her novel based on real events (including her suicide attempt six months after this poem was written), the main character reveals that "red and blue lights began to flash before my eyes" immediately after an overdose on sleeping pills. Whether or not this line is meant to intimate suicide in the poem, the speaker's descent into despair is clear in this stanza.

LINES 7-9

I dreamed that ...
... inside my head.)

In the poem's third stanza the speaker talks directly to the "you" introduced in line 3—that is, to the person the speaker thinks she may have "made up insider [her] head." This "you" cannot respond, and in fact might not even exist, making this address a form of apostrophe.

Using apostrophe helps focus the attention on the speaker herself, rather than the subject. Even in this stanza, where the speaker is ostensibly recalling memories, no details emerge about her lover. Instead, with an absent and unknown "you," the reader is forced to concentrate on what *is* present. In this poem, it's the speaker and the depths of her emotion, what the "you" caused her to feel.

The stanza then revolves around how the speaker's former lover her drove her to madness. Being in love *can* feel like you're going a little loopy—losing track of time, doing and saying things that you thought you never would. The speaker connects these feelings to the supernatural, suggesting that being in love is like being put under a spell; the speaker isn't merely taken to bed, she's "bewitched," meaning the "you" put a spell on the speaker in order to become intimate.

She says her lover also "sung" her "moon-struck"—a phrase that generally refers to not being able to think clearly due to love. The moon is often associated with the occult and the supernatural, adding to the sense of unreality of these lines. Lastly, the speaker was "kissed ... quite insane." Kisses from the "you," in other words, caused the speaker to lose her mind.

These statements might be considered hyperbolic and melodramatic, not to be taken literally. Even so, the language here showcases how the "you" makes the speaker feel—namely, used, tricked, and out of her mind.

Adding yet another layer to this sense of unreality, the speaker says she only "dreamed" that her lover did these things. What follows thus could be taken as actual memories *or* in fact just a dream. The only thing that is clear is that nothing is clear; nothing is simple or straightforward about the speaker's retelling of this love story.

The speaker's passion, confusion, and intensity is mirrored by the sounds of the stanza itself, with its frequent alliteration, consonance, and assonance. Note the smooth assonance of the /oo/, /uh/, /ee/, and short and long /i/ sounds that flow throughout the entire stanza:

> I dreamed that you bewitched me into bed
> And sung me moon-struck, kissed me quite insane.
> (I think I made you up inside my head.)

This assonance is broken up by a mixture of plosive consonance (/d/, /b/) and humming /m/ and /n/ sounds. Sibilance and consonance of the sharp /k/ sound also burst through line 8, adding a thread of bitterness, as if the speaker is spitting out her words:

> I dreamed that you bewitched me into bed
> And sung me moon-struck, kissed me quite insane.

The intensity of all these different sounds suggests both the speaker's passion and unstable state of mind. The da DUM of the iambic pentameter then creates an almost sing-song rhythm, interrupted by the spondee in line 8—resulting in three stressed beats in a row that suggest a burst of energy as the speaker recalls being "moon-struck" and "kissed" by her lover:

> I dreamed | that you | bewitched | me in | to bed
> And sung | me moon- | struck, kissed | me quite |
> insane.

The final line of this stanza is also, of course, repeated from line 3. This repetition suggests the speaker's return to a state of denial, or an attempt at denial, as she tries to negate the lover's existence.

LINES 10-12

God topples from ...
... world drops dead.

The next stanza dives into fantastical, religious imagery. Line 10 seemingly details the destruction of both heaven and hell as "God topples from the sky"—from heaven—and "hell's fires fade." Line 11 then furthers this dismantling of the afterlife by having the *inhabitants* of heaven ("seraphim," meaning the highest angelic beings) and hell ("Satan's men," or demons) evacuate.

The complete obliteration described by the speaker in these few lines could indicate a few things—one being the speaker's loss of faith. The despair felt by the speaker as she's unable to navigate or cope with this heartbreak may have led to her disillusionment not just with love, but with God, faith, and so forth. This destruction might also indicate the depths of isolation and bleakness felt by the speaker in her attempts to shut out the world. She may have burrowed so deep into herself, it feels as if nothing exists: no heaven, no hell, no reality at all.

Plath notably abandons iambic pentameter in this stanza, with lines 10 and 11 each losing a syllable. (Most of the lines in the poem have 10 syllables, in keeping with the conventions of iambic pentameter, while these two lines have 9 each.) These lines might be scanned as:

> God top- | ples from | the sky, | hell's fires | fade:
> Exit | sera | phim and | Satan's | men:

The breakdown in steady meter might reflect the crumbling of the speaker's faith in the meaning and order of the world. The fantastical and strange imagery is further enhanced by the rich poetic sound devices at play, especially the sibilance:

> God topples from the sky, hell's fires fade:
> Exit seraphim and Satan's men:

The hissing and buzzing of the repeated /s/ and /z/ sounds (the /z/ sound is similar but different, but is often considered a form of sibilance) is reminiscent of a snake or serpent, which itself is symbolically tied to Satan. In Abrahamic religious traditions, notably in the story of Adam and Eve, the serpent is said to symbolize deceit as well as sometimes Satan himself.

Finally, this stanza ending in a repetition of the line "I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead" can be read as an increasingly dark descent into the speaker's isolation.

LINES 13-15

I fancied you'd ...
... inside my head.)

In line 13 the speaker returns to her obsessive thoughts

regarding her lover, the "you" addressed throughout the poem. It's revealed the "you" once said they would return, and that the speaker believed they would be true to their word. It's this line that could be the crux of the poem, as it possibly spells out the source of the speaker's heartbreak: the failure of the lover to "return the way you said"—that is, the speaker's lover has broken a promise, and in doing so perhaps made the speaker question the reality of their love in the first place.

The speaker seems to be trying a new tactic in this stanza, almost as if the complete denial (telling herself "I think I made you up inside my head") isn't working. Now, it seems the speaker is going to attempt to forget the "you" completely. With "I grow old and I forget your name," it's as if the speaker is commanding herself to make what she says true, that even though she believed he or she would "return the way [he or she] said," she will move on, "grow old," and "forget [the lover's] name."

Forgetting the lover, however, also hints back to the solipsism present throughout the poem (again, this refers to the philosophical belief that nothing can be sure to exist except yourself and your own mind). This could be suggesting the further deterioration of the speaker's mind and the speaker's further descent into extreme isolation. That is, perhaps the speaker's heartbreak is so great, her trust so broken, that she begins to doubt any and everything that exists outside of herself.

This stanza, with the reveal of the lover's failed return and the passing of time, has a deeper sense of sadness than the rest of the poem. This tone is helped by the softer sounds in the back and forth of the /f/ alliteration and the consonance of the guttural /r/ and woeful /w/ sound:

> I fancied you'd return the way you said,
> But I grow old and I forget your name.

There's an air of resignation to this stanza that will continue through the end of the poem. Whereas the earlier parts of the poem suggested drama and intensity—the galloping of the "arbitrary blackness" into the speaker's mind; being "sung ... moon-struck" and "kissed ... quite insane"; God falling from the sky—the speaker now moves towards forgetting, erasing all memory, and pain, caused by the lover.

LINES 16-19

> *I should have ...*
> *... inside my head.)*

In the final stanza, the speaker reckons with what she thinks she *should* have done instead of fall in love with this "you": she should "have loved a thunderbird instead." The thunderbird—a mythological bird who, as the name suggests, brings thunder and lightning—adds to the ambiguity surrounding the lover's identity and actual existence.

If the speaker is bringing up a mythological creature as an alternative, does that mean the "you" is also not real? Is this "you" not a romantic lover at all, but an idea, a goal, a belief about the world in general? Or does the speaker mean to say that it would be better to love something imaginary than to put her faith in a living, breathing person, because she believes people will always let her down? Loving something imaginary would save the speaker from heartbreak, because the lover wouldn't exist, wouldn't be able to "bewitch" her "into bed" and kiss her "quite insane."

As such, it seems likely the speaker is sinking into disillusionment. Saying she should have loved this mythological creature, rather another real person, suggests that she believes *any* sort of relationship would have had this same ending, that all love will eventually end in abandonment or heartbreak.

It's notable that the spring mentions "spring" here. Spring as a season is associated with growth and rebirth, and this is when the speaker says the thunderbird is known to return in full force—to "roar back." This suggests that it is currently winter, which is associated with death. The thunderbird thus might represent a form of hope for renewal for the speaker, whereas her actual beloved leaves the speaker desolate and stuck.

It's also worth noting that her bitterness or anger doesn't manifest *toward* the "you," the speaker's beloved. Instead, the speaker is blaming herself for believing in love at all by naming what she "should have loved" before once again "shut[ting] [her] eyes" and closing herself off from the world.

The poem's final couplet is then made up of the two lines that have repeated throughout the poem:

> I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.
> (I think I made you up inside my head.)

This has an eerie quality to it. Seeing these two refrains pushed together hints at the speaker finally giving up, seemingly caught in her endless cycle of heartbroken grief. The ending result is open to interpretation, as is the poem itself, but suggests a defeatist attitude: the speaker believes she's failed at coping with her heartbreak. She wasn't able to forget the "you," nor could she effectively deny the lover's existence. She wasn't able to escape her pain, and isolation only trapped her within the madness of her own mind.

SYMBOLS

LIGHT AND DARKNESS

Broadly speaking, light in the poem symbolizes life, hope, joy, and connection, while darkness represents the opposite: despair, isolation, and even death.

Darkness is first alluded to in the poem's first line, as the

speaker shuts her eyes—her eyelids literally blocking light from her vision. The "world drops dead" when the speaker does this, implying her intense isolation and sadness and immediately associating darkness in the poem with death itself. By contrast, once the speaker opens her eyes and lets light back into her vision, "all is born again"—the world returns. Light is thus associated with rebirth ("born again"), implying a sense of hope and opportunity for the future.

Such hope is short-lived, however. In the next stanza, the "stars" (which, of course, fill the night sky with light) are "waltzing out in blue and red." Colors, too, are tied to various wavelengths of light. As such, the speaker is watching light—with its promise of life and joy—dance away right in front of her. (The waltz is also notably a partner dance, suggesting that the speaker can't join in on this starry exit because she is utterly alone.)

Next, in the stars' place "arbitrary blackness gallops in." Arbitrary can mean both random and tyrannical, and the use of the word here thus gives the sense of the speaker's powerlessness to stop this darkness. It rushes forward, filling the space left by the stars, and implies that the speaker is being overtaken by her heartache.

Subtler nods to light also appear in the poem. For example, the speaker says "hell's fires fade" in line 10. While this might sound like a good thing—hell is associated with endless suffering and torment, so its fires being snuffed out seems positive—that's not necessarily the case here. The fact that these fires go out reflects the speaker completely losing her grip on reality; the world is all out of whack, with even hell itself lacking the very thing that makes it, well, hell. Depression is also associated not just with despair, but with a sort of emotional numbness; the fact that hell is no longer blazing thus might imply the speaker's further descent into her mental illness.

Finally, the mention of the "thunderbird" in the poem's final stanza evokes light once again. This is a mythological bird that, as the name suggests, creates thunder and lightning. The speaker thus wishes she had fallen in love with something associated with light and vibrancy—a being that returns in the "spring," a season also associated with life and rebirth. Instead, "the world drops dead" once more, as the speaker shuts her eyes and allows darkness to again overtake her vision.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead; / I lift my lids and all is born again."
- **Lines 4-5:** "The stars go waltzing out in blue and red, / And arbitrary blackness gallops in:"
- **Line 10:** "hell's fires fade"
- **Line 12:** "I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead."
- **Line 16:** "I should have loved a thunderbird instead;"
- **Line 18:** "I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Plath uses alliteration throughout the poem, often in groups of twos. For example, there is clear alliteration of this type in one of the poem's two refrains:

> I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.

The alliteration places extra emphasis on a line that is *already* emphasized through its repeated use, highlighting the importance of the ending words "drops dead."

These monosyllabic (that is, one-syllable) words, with their repeated /d/ sound, seem to mimic what's being said. Read aloud, there's both an immediacy and heaviness in their sound, much like what dropping dead would feel and look like in real life. Aided by their shared first consonant, the phrase is at once memorable and familiar, sticking out both visually and sonically.

Another alliterative word pairing comes directly on the heels of "drops dead," with:

> I lift my lids and all is born again.

As with the previous pair, the /l/ sound repeated in "lift" and "lids" helps to mimic the action and sentiment being described. The lilting sounds have a delicate and airy feeling, akin to eyelids fluttering open.

The alliteration is strongest in the poem's third stanza, as the speaker essentially describes feeling tricked and driven mad by her lover:

> I dreamed that you bewitched me into bed
> And sung me moon-struck, kissed me quite insane.

The heavy /b/ sounds here connect "bewitched" and "bed," emphasizing how the speaker's intimacy with her beloved was built on a lie, on a spell or trickery. The interplay of hissing sibilance with the harsh /k/ sounds then make it feel as though the speaker is bitterly spitting out the next line as she describes the way her lover made her "insane."

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "drops," "dead"
- **Line 2:** "lift," "lids"
- **Line 6:** "drops," "dead"
- **Line 7:** "bewitched," "bed"
- **Line 8:** "sung," "me," "moon," "struck," "kissed," "quite"
- **Line 10:** "fires," "fade"
- **Line 11:** "seraphim," "Satan's"
- **Line 12:** "drops," "dead"

- **Line 18:** "drops," "dead"

APOSTROPHE

The poem uses apostrophe throughout, as the speaker repeatedly addresses a vague "you" who has caused her confusion and pain. This is implied to be a lover who abandoned the speaker, but could also be taken more metaphorically; for example, some critics have interpreted the poem as being addressed to the Plath's own creativity, her abilities a writer—which perhaps she believes have abandoned her or may never have existed at all.

Regardless, the speaker turns to this "you" again and again. The "you" cannot respond, and, again, might not even be real; the speaker repeats the line "I think I made you up inside my head" four times in the poem. In other words, the speaker is saying, "Maybe I imagined this person, but maybe I didn't."

While the narrator continues to address this "you," their unknown identity and lack of presence frees the reader to focus closely the narrator—her ideas, thoughts, and motives—instead. In this way, Plath pushes the reader to consider the effect of love lost and hope on a woman. Instead of a normal "love song," she reveals the narrator's futile attempts to reconcile her heartbreak and anguish with the reality of life.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "(I think I made you up inside my head.)"
- **Lines 7-9:** "I dreamed that you bewitched me into bed / And sung me moon-struck, kissed me quite insane. / (I think I made you up inside my head.)"
- **Lines 13-15:** "I fancied you'd return the way you said, / But I grow old and I forget your name. / (I think I made you up inside my head.)"
- **Line 19:** "(I think I made you up inside my head.)"

ASSONANCE

Assonance occurs frequently in the poem, from the opening line. Note the long /i/ sounds in "I shut my eyes," immediately imbuing the poem with a sense of dreamy lyricism. The repeated long /i/ sound is almost hypnotic, but not necessarily soothing.

This initial assonance (which recurs throughout the poem, since this line is repeated four times) then contrasts with the short /i/ sounds of "lift my lids" in the very next line. Already the speaker seems to be teetering between two states, between shutting out the world and letting it in, and this confusion is reflected by the contrast between the drowsy long /i/ and peppier short /i/ vowels in these phrases.

Arguably the strongest assonance appears in the third stanza, however, which not coincidentally is also the site of the poem's strongest consonance. This stanza describes the way the speaker was driven mad by her lover and how she feels essentially hoodwinked into trusting this person. Fittingly, these lines feature a rush of shared sounds to convey the intensity of the speaker's emotions; it's as if the volume has been cranked up on this "love song." Note the long /ee/, /oo/, short and long /i/, /uh/, and long /ay/ sounds that weave through nearly every single word:

> I dreamed that you bewitched me into bed
> And sung me moon-struck, kissed me quite insane.(I think I made you up inside my head.)

The back-and-forth between all these sounds further suggests a dizziness the speaker feels in recalling and then questioning her memories.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I," "my," "eyes," "dead"
- **Line 2:** "lift," "my," "lids," "is," "again"
- **Line 3:** "I," "I," "inside," "my," "head"
- **Line 4:** "stars," "waltzing," "in," "red"
- **Line 5:** "arbitrary," "blackness," "gallops," "in"
- **Line 6:** "I," "my," "eyes," "all," "dead"
- **Line 7:** "dreamed," "you," "bewitched," "me," "into," "bed"
- **Line 8:** "sung," "me," "moon," "struck," "kissed," "me," "quite," "insane"
- **Line 9:** "I," "think," "I," "made," "you," "inside," "my," "head"
- **Line 10:** "God," "topples," "sky," "fires," "fade"
- **Line 11:** "Exit," "seraphim," "Satan's," "men"
- **Line 12:** "I," "my," "eyes," "dead"
- **Line 13:** "said"
- **Line 14:** "name"
- **Line 15:** "I," "I," "made," "inside," "my," "head"
- **Line 16:** "loved," "thunderbird," "instead"
- **Line 17:** "comes," "again"
- **Line 18:** "I," "shut," "my," "eyes," "dead"
- **Line 19:** "I," "I," "inside," "my," "head"

CONSONANCE

Plath uses consonance to both create an unsettling mood and link various words and phrases together. The third stanza perhaps showcases this best. Note how the repeated /d/ sound in "dreamed" is echoed in both "bewitched" and "bed" in line 7, continuing into lines 8 and 9 with "and," "kissed," "made," "inside," and "head":

> I dreamed that you bewitched me into bed
> And sung me moon-struck, kissed me quite insane.
> (I think I made you up inside my head.)

This creates a subtle link between these words, which not only adds to the poem's rhythm—the heavy /d/ sounds like a

recurrent drumbeat throughout the lines—but also highlights the main actions of the speaker and lover: the speaker *dreamed*, thinks she *made* the lover up *inside* her *head*, while the lover *bewitched* her into *bed and kissed* her.

In that same stanza there are also many /t/, /b/, /s/, /m/, /k/, and /n/ sounds. As noted in our discussion of the poem's use of assonance and consonance, this flurry of sonic repetition heightens the poem's intensity as the speaker describes her memories with the possible lover. The shift into harsh /k/ sounds in line 8 is particularly striking, and complicates what could be taken as fond recollections; the sharpness of this sound brings a fierceness to the line, suggesting an underlying anger or bitterness:

> And sung me moon-struck, kissed me quite insane.

Combined with the hissing sibilance of this line, the tone is one of simmering bitterness, as if the speaker is spitting these words out in anger and heartbreak.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Line 3
- Line 4
- Line 5
- Line 6
- Line 7
- Line 8
- Line 9
- Line 10
- Line 11
- Line 12
- Line 13
- Line 14
- Line 15
- Line 16
- Line 17
- Line 18
- Line 19

END-STOPPED LINE

The poem is almost entirely end-stopped, allowing for a pause at the end of nearly every line. This suggests that the speaker is someone who is trying to follow the rules and to contain her overwhelming emotions. The end-stopped lines created a somber outward steadiness despite the chaos the speaker is feeling, perhaps mimicking the speaker's own state of mind; she's able to look normal and sane to the world while battling madness and heartache.

There is one line that might be considered enjambed rather than end-stopped. Although line 7 seems like a complete phrase...

> I dreamed that you bewitched me into bed

...there is no ending punctuation, and thus no pause, at its end; the following line also needs line 7 in order to make sense:

> And sung me moon-struck, kissed me quite insane.

The enjambment of line 7 thus speeds up this moment. It brings a manic-like energy that helps to mimic the state of the speaker's mind as she remembers how her lover essentially tricked her into falling in love and becoming intimate.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "dead;"
- **Line 2:** "again."
- **Line 3:** "head.)"
- **Line 4:** "red,"
- **Line 5:** "in:"
- **Line 6:** "dead."
- **Line 8:** "insane."
- **Line 9:** "head.)"
- **Line 10:** "fade:"
- **Line 11:** "men:"
- **Line 12:** "dead."
- **Line 13:** "said,"
- **Line 14:** "name."
- **Line 15:** "head.)"
- **Line 16:** "instead;"
- **Line 17:** "again."
- **Line 18:** "dead."
- **Line 19:** "head.)"

PERSONIFICATION

Personification happens a few times in the poem, first appearing in one of the poem's two repeated refrains:

> I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.

The "world" cannot literally drop dead, but Plath describes it as doing so in order to emphasize the enormity of the speaker's pain. So great is the speaker's despair, so intense her sense of isolation, that when she closes her eyes, it's as if everything apart from herself has disappeared entirely. In giving the world the human ability to "drop dread," Plath presents the world as yet another entity that has abandoned the speaker.

The other two instances of personification appear in the following stanza:

> The stars go waltzing out in blue and red,
> And arbitrary blackness gallops in:

"Waltzing" refers to a kind of ballroom dance, while "gallop" is usually used in relation to the movement of a horse (so this isn't really personification, but is still a metaphorical way to describe the movement of this "blackness"). Stars, of course, can't dance and more than "blackness" can run. This evocative language helps to establish *how* the stars were replaced by darkness, in a way that helps the reader understand the speaker. Waltzing is done as a pair, and is often considered a romantic dance. A gallop, on the other hand, evokes an intense, even violent, sprint. The speaker sees a colorful, paired life spinning away from her; in the space the stars leave behind, darkness surges in. In both instances, these things are happening *to* the speaker, and which underscores the speaker's sense of helplessness under the weight of her emotions.

Finally, ascribing human characteristics to non-human things adds yet another fantastical element to the poem, thus working to foster further doubt in the speaker's reliability and sanity.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "all the ," "world drops dead"
- **Line 4:** "The stars go waltzing out in blue and red"
- **Line 5:** "arbitrary blackness gallops in"
- **Line 6:** "all the ," "world drops dead"
- **Line 12:** "all the world drops dead"
- **Line 18:** "all the world drops dead"

SIBILANCE

The clearest use of sibilance is in line 8:

> And sung me moon-struck, kissed me quite insane.

The /s/ sound here adds a hushed quality to this line that suggests a whisper—but this is in no way soothing; rather, the repetition of the /s/ sound is more akin to hypnosis, reflecting speaker's description of being put under a spell by her lover. The sibilance here also contrasts sharply with the hard /k/ sound consonance of this line. Together, the two sounds might also evoke a bitter tone, as if the speaker is spitting out her words through gritted teeth.

Another effective instance occurs in lines 10 and 11:

> God topples from the sky, hell's fires fade:
> Exit seraphim and Satan's men:

Here, both /s/ and /z/ sounds (the latter of which is often considered a form of sibilance) infuse the line. The /z/ creates an unnerving buzz, like the world itself is shaking. Meanwhile, the hissing of the /s/ sound is reminiscent of a snake, a creature that has been long-identified with Satan, temptation, and evildoing in religious traditions. Most notably, the story of Adam and Eve features a serpent who tempts Eve to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. The use of sibilance here thus adds a sinister quality to these lines.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "sung," "struck," "kissed," "insane"
- **Line 10:** "topples," "sky," "hell's," "fires"
- **Line 11:** "Exit," "seraphim," "Satan's"

VOCABULARY

Mad () - The "Mad" that appears in the poem's title doesn't mean "angry." Or, perhaps, rather than *just* meaning angry, "Mad" is also used in this poem to mean "insane" or "crazy."

Waltzing (Line 4) - A waltz is a specific type of ballroom dance, the steps of which follow a ONE two three, ONE two three beat.

Arbitrary (Line 5) - Arbitrary can mean "random," but also has a secondary definition meaning "oppressive" or "tyrannical."

Moon-struck (Line 8) - Often used to describe apparently "crazy" behavior due to the feeling of being in love, but can also just imply mental instability or being lost in a fantasy.

Seraphim (Line 11) - Plural of seraph, the highest order of angelic being. In other words, "angels."

Fancied (Line 13) - Liked, desired.

Thunderbird (Line 16) - A powerful mythological bird that creates lighting and thunder.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

Mad Girl's Love song is a villanelle. Like all villanelles, it has 19 lines divided into five tercets (stanzas consisting of three lines), with the sixth and final stanza being a quatrain (meaning it's made up of four lines). The first and third lines of the first stanza are refrains, which repeat throughout the poem, and alternate to end the following stanzas. The final quatrain then ends with *both* repeating lines.

It's not as confusing as it might seem; if readers think of each line of the poem as corresponding to a letter of the alphabet, the pattern looks like this, with the "A" and "C" lines representing the refrains that repeat throughout the poem:

A "I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead."
B
C (I think I made you up inside my head.)"
D
E
A "I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead."

F
G
C (I think I made you up inside my head.)"
H
I
A "I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead."
J
K
C (I think I made you up inside my head.)"
L
M
A "I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead."
C (I think I made you up inside my head.)"

The repeated refrains help to orient the reader and speaker, as each tercet seems to function as a representation of the speaker's alternating coping mechanisms. That is, what might be interpreted as the speaker's *denial* plays out in the tercets ending with "I think I made you up inside my head," while the other refrain—"I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead"—portrays the speaker *isolating* herself, descending into the darkness of her mind. Both of these states portray a form of madness.

The repetition inherent to villanelles further lends itself to this subject matter, as readers get the sense the speaker is caught in an incessant, mental loop of her own making; both ways of coping with her heartbreak fail, yet the speaker can find nowhere else to turn. At the end of the poem, when the two repeating phrases meet with no lines in between them, it's as if the speaker's two states—denial and utter despair—tragically collapse into each other.

METER

Like many (but not all) villanelles, *Mad Girl's Love Song* is written in iambic pentameter. This means there are five feet per line, with each foot made up of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable, resulting in a da-DUM pattern. Iambic pentameter is a familiar and rhythmic meter, and Plath skillfully places the stressed beats in patterns that emphasize the forcefulness of a certain words.

Take the first line of the poem:

> I shut | my eyes | and all | the world | drops dead;

The meter of the poem naturally emphasizes "shut" and "dead." There's also an extra stress on "drops," however, making the final foot of this line a spondee. (The second foot, "my eyes," can also be read as a spondee as well; scansion is not an exact science.) The next two lines are more regular iambic pentameter:

> I lift | my lids | and all | is born | again.
> (I think | I made | you up | inside | my head.)

There are many variations throughout the poem, however, that prevent it from becoming overly rigid and predictable. Plath sometimes even breaks the strict form of iambic pentameter altogether, as she does in the first two lines of the fourth stanza. These lines can be read in a few different ways depending on whether or not the reader takes "fires" as having one syllable or two, but perhaps are best scanned as follows:

> God topples from the sky, hell's fires fade:
> Exit seraphim and Satan's men:

The first problem here lies in the number of syllables. While most other lines neatly conform to 10 syllables, these two lines contain just 9 each (10 if readers take "fires" as having 2 syllables, though we'd argue that feels a bit forced). Scansion can be subjective, and can become more confusing over time as pronunciation changes. What is clear, though, is that the poem has no clear meter here; the regularity of iambic pentameter is totally upended, perhaps reflecting the way that the speaker's world, or sense of order itself, is destroyed here. God falls from Heaven, and the fires in hell burn out; the world is topsy turvy, and the poem's meter here is appropriately unpredictable.

RHYME SCHEME

Like all villanelles, "Mad Girl's Love Song" uses the rhyme scheme ABA for each of its tercets, and then uses ABAA for the final quatrain.

This repetitive, circular rhyme scheme is a fitting choice to showcase the speaker's obsessive thinking and alternating coping mechanisms. The speaker swings between reality and dreams, between feelings of utter despair and denial, and the poem's rhyme scheme reflects this seemingly endless cycle.

Plath mostly uses perfect rhymes for the A sequence, found in the first and third lines of each stanza, as well as the very last line: "dead," "head," "red," "bed," said," and "instead." The one exception is in the fourth stanza, the first line of which ends with "fade." This switch from perfect rhyme to a slant rhyme creates an unsettling feeling that reflects the stanza's content, which describes God falling from heaven and the fires of hell going out; the whole world is a mess, and thus it makes sense that the speaker's rhyme scheme takes a hit here too. (Not coincidentally, this stanza also breaks with the poem's meter.)

By contrast, most of the B rhymes, or each middle line in the stanza, are slant rhymes throughout the whole poem. The B rhymes are as follows: "again," "in," "insane," "men," and "name." Some of these are true rhymes—"again" and "men"—while the others are slant rhymes created through consonance of the /n/ sound. Together, this creates a more diverse and discordant soundscape throughout the poem, which is emblematic of the speaker's tumultuous mental state.

SPEAKER

The title tells readers that the speaker of the poem is a "mad"—or mentally unstable—"girl," reciting a strange "love song." This girl is clearly heartbroken—so distraught by her abandonment, in fact, that she is losing her grip on reality and becoming overwhelmed by feelings of despair and general disillusionment.

It's tempting to take Sylvia Plath herself as the speaker of the poem. The distance between poet and speaker is often blurry, and this instance, especially so. Known as a leading figure in confessional poetry, Plath wrote plainly and intimately from her personal life experience. Also a lifelong diarist and letter writer, Plath left an abundance of documentation detailing her life and work. In a letter to her mother a few days after this particular poem was written, Plath, apparently trying to ease her mother's worries, wrote about Myron (Mike) Lutz, a boy she had been seeing, and "Mad Girl's Love Song":

> my poem is not indicative of any misunderstanding with myron, but merely is an expansion of the thought that we were destined never to get together again.

In her journal a few years later, she wrote:

> I wrote mad girl's love song once in a mad mood like this when Mike didn't come and didn't come, and every time I am dressed in black, white and red: violent, fierce colors.

Real emotion and pain come through this poem, and, in addition to a clear longing for an absent lover, there's an underlying sense of loneliness and desperation at the poem's core. These emotional extremes are something for which Plath was known for, as was her obsession with death. Plath's father died when she was only eight years old. To her, this early loss felt like an abandonment, and might have contributed to the underlying feeling of abandonment and disillusionment that the speaker appears to feel in this poem.

SETTING

The setting for Mad Girl Love's song is never explicitly stated, but readers can think of it as the landscape of the speaker's own mind. The speaker tells the reader about her dreams and thoughts, and indeed the poem's entire world seems to exist only inside the speaker's head. She can't even be sure that the lover she longs for ever existed at all or simply was a figment of her imagination, and existence *itself* ceases to be when the speaker shuts her eyes.

As a reader, the speaker sets up this mental landscape through subtle connections. The first two lines have her shutting her eyes and then lifting them open again. Therefore, it makes contextual sense that when "the stars go waltzing out" in the next stanza, the speaker is again *shutting* her eyes—closing out the light offered by the stars. This is corroborated when the reader arrives at the sixth line, where the first line is repeated.

The fantastical imagery ("God topples from the sky" and the rest of the 10th and 11th lines) highlights the fact that readers aren't in a real space, but an imagined or metaphorical one. All of this contributes to the hazy, nightmarish mood of the poem. The lack of a concrete setting or other details leaves readers trapped with the speaker in her own mind.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Sylvia Plath wrote this poem, according to her own calendar, on February 21, 1953. It was published in the August 1953 edition of the magazine *Mademoiselle*, in which Plath was awarded a coveted guest editor spot during the month of June that same year.

August of 1953 was also Plath's first documented suicide attempt. After taking an overdose of sleeping pills, she crawled under her house, where she remained for two days before being found. A massive search went on during the two days she was missing, with newspapers around the country reporting each update on her search. The *Boston Evening American* reprinted *Mad Girl's Love Song* (with permission from *Mademoiselle*) at least three times in their articles on Plath's disappearance. It was plainly used as evidence of Plath's instability, with one of the *Boston Evening American* articles bearing the headline "Police, Kin Fear Smith Girl Suicide" with "Pens Mad Girl Poem" as a subheading. Plath based her novel, *The Bell Jar*, on these events. In a biographical note at the end of the 1971 edition, "Mad Girl's Love Song" was reprinted.

Religion, madness, disillusionment, and death are all themes seen in "Mad Girl's Love Song" that appeared throughout Plath's later work. The villanelle form seen here, however, seems to be limited to her days at Smith College. According to a letter Plath wrote to her mother on February 21, 1953:

> to make myself feel better I wrote two villanelles today and yesterday: a rigid French verse form I've never tried before, where the first and third line have to be repeated as refrains. They took my mind off my helpless misery and made me feel a good deal better ... Oh hell. Life is so difficult and tedious I could cry. But I won't: I'll just keep writing villanelles.

The villanelle, with a history rooted in songs from rural Italy and

Spain, became the poetic form it is today in France sometime between the 16th and 18th centuries. It has flourished in the English language, however, and villanelles in English far outnumber their French counterparts. Dylan Thomas, the Welsh poet admired by Plath, wrote what is now possibly the most recognizable villanelle in 1951: Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night.

Plath also wrote that this poem was a favorite of hers, although it was conspicuously absent from the posthumous (and Pulitzer Prize winning) *Collected Poems*, edited by her husband, Ted Hughes. Hughes and Plath were separated at the time of Plath's death, and letters later surfaced detailing his physical abuse. A note on a typescript copy of "Mad Girl's Love Song" contains the note: "this one had the honor of being inspired by one myron lotz," with speculation that Lotz's inspiration caused Hughes's omission.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

While no outright historical events are referenced in this poem, Plath's depiction of madness, disillusionment, and personal heartbreak in "Mad Girl's Love Song" could be seen as a radical departure from poetry—especially poetry considered acceptable by women—being written at the time. The style of her poetry, especially in her later years, was eventually known as confessional poetry.

While Plath didn't create this style, she's considered a leading figure in its development and popularization. Her fierce and ambitious nature caused her to prioritize academia and her writing career when women were instructed to be docile homemakers, and was frank and unapologetic about her needs and desires before the Sexual Revolution hit. The groundbreaking work of feminist philosophy by Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, would be published in the United States later that year, in June of 1953 (originally published in France in 1949). It was only seven years before this poem was written, in 1946, that Harvard opened its doors to women. Yale College, although it admitted women into its graduate programs in 1892, wouldn't become co-ed until 1968, fifteen years after this poem was written. Her own brand of rebel and revolutionary, Plath catapulted the interior lives of women into the literary conversation.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Original Printing — See"Mad Girl's Love Song" as it first appeared in the August 1953 issue of Mademoiselle. (https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/sylvia-plaths-mad-girls-love-song-from-mademoiselle)
- Plath's Disappearance — The Boston Evening American on Plath's disappearance and feared suicide, followed by the reprinting of "Mad Girl's Love Song." (http://www.sylviaplath.info/documents/Boston_Evening_American_26AUG1953_FinalEdition.pdf)
- An Interview With Plath — A 1962 interview on how Plath started writing poetry. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g2IMsVpRh5c)
- "Sylvia" Trailer — Watch the trailer for the 2003 film on Sylvia Plath, starring Gwyneth Paltrow. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j9S60Cn8la4)
- TED-Ed Talk — Listen to a TED-Ed talk by Iseult Gillespie on the importance of Sylvia Plath. (https://www.ted.com/talks/iseult_gillespie_why_should_you_read_sylvia_plath?utm_campai

LITCHARTS ON OTHER SYLVIA PLATH POEMS

- Daddy
- Fever 103°
- Lady Lazarus
- The Applicant
- The Arrival of the Bee Box

HOW TO CITE

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