Metaphors

SUMMARY

The speaker calls herself a mysterious puzzle made up of nine syllables (which corresponds to the number of syllables in each line of the poem as well as the number of lines in total), before going on to describe herself through a series of metaphors: she's an elephant, a dull and bulky house, a melon meandering about on two skinny vines. The speaker calls out to these objects—the redness of the melon's flesh, the elephant's ivory tusks, the wooden beams of the house. She's like a big loaf of bread whose yeast makes it grow ever larger. She's a bulging wallet that's filling up with newly printed money. She's an object through which something else is accomplished; the platform on which the performance takes place; a pregnant cow. She feels like she's gobbled up an entire sack of unripe apples, or that she's gotten on a train and there's no going back now.

THEMES

THE ANXIETY AND DISCOMFORT OF PREGNANCY

"Metaphors" is a poem about the weirdness and wonder of being pregnant. The speaker uses a series of inventive metaphors to describe her changing body, which has become huge and unwieldy. As the poem progresses, though, these relatively lighthearted concerns about looking like a "melon" give way to darker worries that the speaker is becoming a "means" to an end (i.e., a child) and that it's too late to do anything about it. With both humor and pathos, the poem illustrates not only how pregnancy has estranged the speaker from her body, but also how motherhood threatens her very sense of self.

The speaker uses a series of nine-syllable "riddles" (that is, metaphors) to depict her pregnant body. While some of these are humorous and others more disturbing, they all reflect how completely foreign her own body has become.

The speaker calls herself "an elephant," "a ponderous" (or bulky) "house," and a "melon strolling on two tendrils" (a tendril being a threadlike growth on a plant). All of these metaphors evoke the speaker's size and awkwardness as her pregnant body morphs into something unrecognizable. These almost cartoonish images also suggest how ludicrous the speaker feels having to walk around in this condition.

The speaker goes on to describe their pregnant form as a "loaf" of bread, "big with its yeasty rising," and a "fat purse" full of newly printed cash. While both of these metaphors continue to describe the speaker's physical state, they also start to hint at the speaker's deeper anxieties. After all, a loaf of bread is meant to be consumed when it's done rising, and the "fat purse" suggests that the speaker's body has become a kind of currency. In other words, the speaker is frightened of losing herself through the process of carrying a child and giving birth.

Indeed, the speaker's next few metaphors suggest that her anxiety is rooted in the fear of being a "means" to an end—that is, of losing her worth as an individual and her sense of selfhood in becoming a mother. The speaker is afraid of becoming nothing more than a "stage," or a platform, for the main event (i.e., the child she will give birth to). And the fact that the speaker relies on so many metaphors in the first place also suggests that she's losing touch with who she is.

The speaker goes on to say that she's "eaten a bag of green apples," which would certainly lead to an upset stomach and thus reflects how she's sick with worry. The green color suggests that these apples were unripe and thus signals the speaker's feelings of not being ready for parenthood, of having jumped in too soon.

The poem ends with the speaker saying she's "boarded the train there's no getting off." The speaker is anxious not just about the current state of her body, but also about becoming a *parent*. Pregnancy was never the end of the road here; motherhood, the speaker seems to realize, will change everything.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-9

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

I'm a riddle ...
... a ponderous house,

The poem begins with the speaker announcing that she is "a riddle in nine syllables." The nature of this "riddle" isn't immediately clear. In calling herself, a "riddle" in the first place, however, readers might get the sense that the speaker feels herself to be a bit of an enigma, a puzzle that needs to be solved. There's also something playful and amusing about calling herself a "riddle."

While readers don't know exactly what the "answer" to this riddle is yet, there's a major clue in this opening line: this riddle has "nine syllables," as does this first line (and, indeed, every line that follows). A quick glance at the entire poem also shows that it has nine lines total. The number nine, then, is clearly

important here.

The sounds of these lines, with their liquid /l/ and nasally /n/ consonance and clipped assonance, add intensity to the poem as well:

> I'm a riddle in nine syllables,

The jumble of sounds makes this first line a bit of a mouthful, again suggesting the speaker's discomfort as she struggles with a body that feels strangely new.

And in the next line, the speaker gives two more metaphors that act as clues about her state. She's an "elephant" and a "ponderous" (or big, bulky, and awkward) "house." What both of these images have in common is their massive size.

Readers might already guess at the solution to the puzzle here: what combines the number nine with feeling huge, as big as a house? Pregnancy!

The speaker is describing her changing body, which has become mysterious, riddle-like, to the speaker herself. The house metaphor suggests not only the uncomfortable clumsiness of trying to move around in a body that is suddenly so unfamiliar, but also the speaker's disorienting realization that her body is no longer hers alone: it "house[s]" another.

LINES 3-4

A melon strolling ...
... ivory, fine timbers!

In line 3, the speaker uses striking imagery to bring another metaphor to life: she's a "melon strolling on two tendrils."

This is, of course, a very funny image: a big, round fruit going for a leisurely walk on a couple of skinny, stringy legs. The crisp /t/ alliteration of "two tendrils" emphasizes the contrast between the delicacy of those "tendrils" and the bulkiness of the "melon" atop them, and it also might hint at the inevitable: the melon will fall and split open, revealing its "red fruit," just as the speaker will eventually be split open by the painful reality of childbirth. Still, the image is purposefully absurd: the speaker seems to be trying to make light of her situation with this colorful illustration of just how ridiculous her growing body feels.

The speaker then reframes these first three metaphors, using the device known as apostrophe to call out to them directly:

> O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers!

The intensely poetic "O" here heightens this moment, drawing attention to the subtle irony of the speaker's language. On the one hand, the music in this line suggests the speaker's condition is beautiful, that her pregnant form is something worth praising. In addition to that "O," note the striking assonance of "ivory" and fine" and the clear alliteration of "fruit" and "fine":

> O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers!

The line feels bold, deeply poetic. And yet, there's something alarming happening under the surface when readers consider what these individual metaphors have in common:

- The "red fruit" of this "melon" is meant to be eaten;
- Elephants are all too often killed for the valuable "ivory" of their tusks;
- And those "fine timbers"—a reference to the wood used to build that "ponderous house" from line 2—suggests that every part of the speaker is being commodified.

In other words, beneath the speaker's temporary physical condition is her creeping fear that motherhood is going to consume her and that her body is only valuable insofar as it can be *used*. She's a series of parts rather than a person.

LINES 5-6

This loaf's big ...
... this fat purse.

The next few metaphors build on the speaker's fear of being commodified or used for parts rather than valued as a human being.

The speaker first calls herself a loaf of bread that's getting bigger and bigger "with its yeasty rising." Pregnancy is often referred to as "having a bun in the oven," and the imagery of "rising" bread evokes the speaker's rapidly expanding belly. Also note that bread, like the "red fruit"/"melon" in the previous lines, is meant to be *consumed*. When the speaker is done "rising," she expects motherhood is going to metaphorically *devour* her.

Next, the speaker calls herself a "fat purse" that keeps printing new money. On the one hand, the image of an overstuffed purse again evokes the speaker's physical body, which keeps growing larger. But the metaphor also suggests that the speaker's body has become something designed to hold and protect something more valuable than itself. And, just as bread is made to be eaten, money is made to be spent. The speaker worries that after the baby is born, she, too, will be an "empty purse," no longer of any importance.

Notice how the thick alliteration and consonance here lend intensity to the line:

> Money's new-minted in this fat purse.

Those thin sounds seem to evoke the speaker talking through gritted teeth. Though the images themselves are imaginative, there is some very real anger or resentment bubbling to the poem's surface.

LINE 7

I'm a means, ... cow in calf.

With her next set of metaphors, the speaker makes the subtext of the poem clear: she's not just anxious because her body is becoming large and awkward, but because she feels like a "means" to an end. In other words, the speaker feels that her body is only valuable in that it serves the purpose of creating a child.

Likewise, a "stage" isn't valuable in and of itself; its worth resides in the performance that takes place on top of it. And the metaphor of the speaker as "a cow in calf" nods not just to the fact that the word "cow" is often used to demean women of a certain size, but also to the sense that the speaker feels like one of the most commodified domestic animals on the planet. The sharp alliteration of "cow in calf" adds a final flourish to this list, a harshness that suggests the speaker's distaste for her situation.

What these metaphors all have in common is the idea that through the process of pregnancy and giving birth, the speaker's body is becoming something that doesn't belong to her anymore. Instead, that body has become valuable only for what it can produce: a "stage" to stand on, a source of milk for her baby.

Notice the use of asyndeton here, which gives the line a quick, jabbing rhythm. Coordinating conjunctions ("*or* a cow in calf," for example) would have slowed things down, but asyndeton keeps things moving. It also creates the sense that this list could go on and on—that there are many things the speaker could compare her pregnant body to.

LINES 8-9

I've eaten a ...
... no getting off.

The speaker goes on to say that she's "eaten a bag of green apples." This metaphor suggests that the speaker got carried away somehow, that her current anxieties are the result of her having been greedy or overeager in her hunger. Perhaps this refers to lust or love, or perhaps she was simply enamored with the idea of having a family. Either way, she's now waking up to the reality of what becoming a mother will mean for her.

The "green" color of the apples also symbolizes her unreadiness for parenthood. These are *ripe* apples, but rather ones picked too early. The apples may even suggest sinfulness by subtly alluding to the biblical story of Adam and Eve:

- Eve infamously picks a fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, which results in human beings being banished from the paradisiacal Garden of Eden. (While this fruit is not actually called an apple in the Bible itself, it's often depicted as one.)
- Like Eve, the speaker may have reached for something she was not supposed to—or at least feels that she has.

The poem concludes with the speaker saying that she's:

> Boarded the train there's no getting off.

In other words, she's on the "train" to parenthood and can't deboard now; pregnancy leads to a baby, and there's no turning back.

Notice again the lack of coordinating conjunction between the previous line and this one. This asyndeton speeds the poem up and implies that the speaker's current predicament—being locked into a journey she has no chance of escaping—is a direct result of her having "eaten" the "apples." In other words, the speaker feels she is at least partially to blame for what's happening.

Also note the unconventional grammar of this last line, which is all crammed together without punctuation (normally there would be a conjunction or semi-colon between "Boarded the train" and "there's no getting off"). This again adds speed to the poem, adding to the sense that the speaker is rapidly approaching motherhood whether she likes it or not.

The metaphor of a train she can't "get[] off" of implies that motherhood is a journey that will never end; it also suggests that the speaker's body—and perhaps her entire life—is no longer under her control.

SYMBOLS

THE GREEN APPLES

The speaker says she has "eaten a bag of green apples" in line 8, which symbolizes her unreadiness to be a parent.

For one thing, the fact that she's gobbled up an entire *bag* of apples suggests that she's overdone things or gone too far in her hunger (which is perhaps a metaphor for lust or the desire for a family):

- Just as someone who's eaten a bunch of apples is likely to feel sick to their stomach afterward, the consequences of the speaker's actions (getting pregnant) are starting to catch up with her as she realizes that she's going to become a mother.

The fact that the apples are described specifically as "green" suggests that the speaker doesn't feel ready for such a responsibility just yet:

- The word "green" is often used to symbolize youth,

vitality, and immaturity, and this wouldn't be the only time Plath used "green" in her writing to signify naiveté:
    - For instance, in her poem "Jilted" she compares her "lean, unripened heart" to the "puny, green, and tart" plums that are not yet ripe for picking.
    - The young and, at first, naive protagonist of her famous novel *The Bell Jar* is also named Esther Greenwood.
- As such, it's probably safe to say that the apples in this poem aren't just a literally "green" variety; their "green[ness]" suggests the speaker's feelings of not being ready for the role of motherhood.

Finally, apples are often linked with the biblical story of Adam and Eve and the Fall of Man:

- Eve infamously ate fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, introducing sin into the world and casting the couple out of the Garden of Eden. (While the fruit is not called an apple in the Bible, it's very often depicted as one in popular culture).
- Eating a bag of apples might thus suggest that the speaker has in some way given into temptation and/or caused her own "fall"; she's cast herself out of the seeming paradise of independence and into the difficult "wasteland" of parenthood.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "I've eaten a bag of green apples,"

POETIC DEVICES

CONSONANCE

The poem uses consonance to create rhythm and intensity. Take the opening line, where the quick flurry of /l/ and /n/ sounds (not to mention the short /ih/ assonance in "riddle" and "syllables") turns this line about "a riddle" into a kind of tongue-twister:

> I'm a riddle in nine syllables,

Those same sounds then carry over into line 3, which also features crisp alliteration of the /t/ sound with "two tendrils":

> A melon strolling on two tendrils.

The poem's repetitive sounds just keep coming, quick and fast; these sounds seem to pile up (much like the speaker's metaphors!) so that the poem gains more intensity as it rolls along.

For another striking example, note the humming sounds of "Money's new-minted in" and "I'm a means." The consonance here makes it sound as though the speaker is talking through gritted teeth, implying her bitterness toward her new state.

The crisp alliteration of "cow in calf" has a similar effect, subtly suggesting the speaker's distaste for pregnancy and the way it threatens to rob her of autonomy and independence. The heavy, throaty /g/ sounds in "bag of green apples," meanwhile, helps to evoke the speaker's physical and mental discomfort.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "riddle in nine syllables"
- **Line 2:** "ponderous house"
- **Line 3:** "melon strolling on two tendrils"
- **Line 4:** "fruit," "fine"
- **Line 6:** "Money's new-minted in"
- **Line 7:** "I'm," "means," "cow," "calf"
- **Line 8:** "bag," "green"

ASSONANCE

The poem uses assonance much like consonance, adding intensity to its language and images. In fact, short /ih/ assonance overlaps with /l/ consonance in the first line ("riddle in" and "syllables"), adding to the line's tongue-twister effect.

Other moments of assonance include the long, drawling /i/ sounds of "ivory" and "fine timbers," which perhaps imbue this line with some archness—with the sense of the speaker playfully mocking the way her body has become as big as a house or an elephant.

The quick, short /ih/ sounds of "new-minted in this" make the phrase stand out more clearly to the reader, as do the /ah/ sounds of "calf" and "bag of green apples." In both cases, assonance helps to emphasize the imagery at hand, encouraging readers to linger on the speaker's discomfort with her situation.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "riddle in," "syllables"
- **Line 4:** "ivory," "fine"
- **Line 5:** "big with its"
- **Line 6:** "minted in this"
- **Line 7:** "calf"
- **Line 8:** "bag," "apples"

ALLITERATION

Like consonance and assonance, alliteration adds intensity to the poem and emphasizes the relationship between certain words or phrases. For example, the alliteration of "strolling on two tendrils" calls attention to this purposefully ridiculous

image, the daintiness of those flittering /t/ sounds contrasting with the awkwardness of a swollen "melon."

Later, the shared /m/ sounds in "Money's new-minted" and "means" add emphasis to the speaker's fear that her body has become a kind of currency ("Money") and a "means" to an end (the end being a child). The alliteration of "cow in a calf" has a similar effect, creating a sonic link between the speaker and her unborn baby. The sharpness of that opening sound also subtly evokes the speaker's discomfort and unease, as she worries about losing her sense of self in becoming a parent.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "strolling," "two tendrils"
- **Line 4:** "fruit," "fine"
- **Line 6:** "Money's," "minted"
- **Line 7:** "means," "cow," "calf"

METAPHOR

Just as the title suggests, the poem is made entirely of metaphors! More specifically, the poem is made up of a string of metaphors describing pregnancy.

On the one hand, this turns the poem into a riddle that's at once entertaining, intriguing, and disturbing. The fact that the speaker describes her condition using only metaphors also reflects her feeling of estrangement from her own body—the sense that her body has become something new and not entirely her own.

Even the first line, which announces that each line of the poem will read like "a riddle in nine syllables," is itself a metaphor: those "nine syllables" riddle reflect the fact that pregnancy lasts nine months (not coincidentally, there are also nine lines in the poem, each of which consists of nine syllables). Calling herself "a riddle" emphasizes the idea that the speaker is feeling at odds with her own identity, like a puzzle that needs to be solved. Pregnancy completely reshapes her body and her sense of self.

The speaker goes on to say she's "an elephant," a metaphor that reflects her growing physical size, and then "a ponderous house," which suggests not only the awkwardness of her size and shape but also the fact that she "house[s]" another being inside her. She's then a "melon strolling on two tendrils," an intentionally ridiculous and funny image that conveys how awkward the speaker feels—like a big, round ball getting around on two spindly legs.

The metaphors then start to hint at deeper anxieties about parenthood. She says in lines 5-6:

> This loaf's big with its yeasty rising.
> Money's new-minted in this fat purse.

The metaphors still apply to the speaker's physical condition: she's an ever-growing loaf of bread, a wallet stuffed to the brim with newly printed money. (The mention of a loaf of bread also evokes the common phrase "having a bun in the oven" used to describe pregnancy.)

But these metaphors are a little more complex. A loaf of bread, when done "rising," will be baked and then eaten, and a wallet full of cash will be opened and the money spent. The speaker is worried about being consumed by her new role as a mother and feels a bit like her body's being used for someone else's gain.

That feeling extends to the next lines as well: she's afraid of becoming nothing more than a "means" to an end or "stage" on which someone else's performance takes place. She fears that giving birth to a child will somehow demote her from human being to "cow"—an animal people use for its milk.

When she says she's "eaten a bag of green apples," this suggests that she's bitten off more than she can handle, gobbled something up too quickly; she feels uncomfortably full, and the greenness of those apples also suggests that they weren't ripe. In turn, the image suggests the speaker isn't ready to be a mother.

And yet, the final metaphor hammers home the fact that there's no turning back: the speaker compares her condition to already gotten the train that heads to parenthood. Motherhood is coming, whether she's ready or not.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-9

IMAGERY

The poem's many metaphors often overlap with the speaker's use of vivid imagery. All this imagery conveys just how uncomfortable, how ludicrously disproportionate, the speaker feels in her body.

Whereas "an elephant" or "a stage" are straightforward metaphors for the speaker's pregnant body, a "melon strolling on two tendrils" is a much more evocative depiction. The reader can picture it in their head: the idea of a big, round melon walking about on two spindly vines is cartoonishly funny. The image takes a dark turn, however, when the speaker addresses the "red fruit" of the melon, subtly evoking a future in which her own body is split open in giving birth. The mention of "ivory" and "fine timbers" also reduces the speaker's body to a series of commodities.

There's more imagery in the next lines as well, when the speaker calls herself a "yeasty" loaf of bread and a "fat purse" filled with newly printed money. Both metaphors convey the speaker's size and discomfort; she feels like she's bursting at the seams, getting larger and larger. These images also hint at

her fears about losing herself in motherhood—of being consumed or spent by her new role.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-6
- Line 8

END-STOPPED LINE

While many poems contain some mix of enjambed and end-stopped lines, this poem uses exclusively end-stopped lines. This gives the poem a steady, firm—and perhaps halting—rhythm.

This plodding movement, with clear pauses at the end of every single line, conveys the speaker's sense that her life has been irrevocably changed by pregnancy. That is, all those end-stops leave no room for arguing with her vivid metaphors that describe her new state.

End-stopping also means that each metaphor is neatly self-contained in its own line. Perhaps this suggests a sense of fragmentation—that the speaker is having trouble connecting her old self with her new one, the person she was before pregnancy with the person she'll be once she has a baby to take care of.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "syllables,"
- **Line 2:** "house,"
- **Line 3:** "tendrils."
- **Line 4:** "timbers!"
- **Line 5:** "rising."
- **Line 6:** "purse."
- **Line 7:** "calf."
- **Line 8:** "apples,"
- **Line 9:** "off."

ASYNDETON

The poem uses asyndeton throughout to create a quick, pressing rhythm that emphasizes the speaker's anxiety about her pregnancy. Take a look at the first four lines: despite consisting of multiple lists, there are coordinating conjunctions in sight:

> I'm a riddle in nine syllables,
> An elephant, a ponderous house,
> A melon strolling on two tendrils.
> O red, fruit, ivory, fine timbers!

The poem would sound rather different had the speaker *not* used asyndeton here, instead insterting words like "and" or "or":

> I'm a riddle in nine syllables,
> An elephant, a ponderous house,
> And a melon strolling on two tendrils.
> O red, fruit, ivory, and fine timbers!

Such conjunctions would make this list of metaphors feel exhaustive—as if these were the *only* comparisons that the speaker could make, rather than a handful of *many*. That is, asyndeton creates the sense of the list of metaphors potentially going on and on, in turn reflecting the speaker's anxiety about her slippery, shifting identity.

The same can be said for the asyndeton that appears later in the poem, when the speaker again lists out a bunch of comparisons for pregnancy without pausing for any conjunctions. Take line 7 as an example:

> I'm a means, a stage, a cow in calf.

Note how different the line would feel if it read "I'm a means, a stage, or a cow in calf." By creating balance between the three clauses of the sentence, the poem also suggests that the *individual* metaphors are not as important as what they *all* represent. That is, what these specific metaphors have in common say more about the speaker's fears than what each of them might suggest on their own.

Finally, in lines 8-9, asyndeton gives the poem's conclusion a hurried, almost lurching feel, as if the speaker is being pushed into motherhood too soon:

> I've eaten a bag of green apples,
> Boarded the train there's no getting off.

Inserting an "and" between "apples" and "Boarded" would slow the sequence down. The omission of any conjunction, by contrasts, shortens the distance between the speaker's action ("eat[ing] a bag of green apples"—or getting pregnant) and the consequences of that action (she's on a "train" she can't get off of; there's no going back now).

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Line 7
- Lines 8-9

PARALLELISM

The poem uses parallelism (and the more specific device anaphora) to create rhythm and momentum. In lines 1-3, for example, the repetition of "a/an" makes it feel as though the speaker's metaphors for pregnancy are piling up and up:

> I'm a riddle in nine syllables,

An elephant, a ponderous house,
A melon strolling on two tendrils.

Repetitive phrasing might subtly suggest the speaker's frantic feelings of not knowing quite who she is now that she's pregnant. The device also simply makes the poem feel more lyrical and *poetic*.

The parallelism/anaphora of line 7 has a similar effect, lending the poem a sense of speed:

I'm a means, a stage, a cow in calf.

Also note how each of the clauses here and above feature parallel grammatical structures, with the speaker saying "I'm a _____, a _____, a _____." Parallelism emphasizes that all these metaphors essentially mean the same thing. The device thus lends the poem a feeling of emphatic insistence, one that evokes the speaker's anxieties about her body and life being utterly, irrevocably transformed.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I'm a riddle"
- **Line 2:** "An elephant, a ponderous house"
- **Line 3:** "A melon"
- **Line 7:** "I'm a means, a stage, a cow"

VOCABULARY

Ponderous (Line 2) - Bulky, dull, or slow-moving.

Tendrils (Line 3) - Long, thin growths on a vining plant.

Strolling (Line 3) - To amble or walk slowly in order to take in one's surroundings.

Ivory (Line 4) - This is a reference to the hard, white material that makes up an elephant's tusks and is considered a valuable commodity.

Yeasty (Line 5) - This is a reference to the fact that yeast, a kind of fungus, is used to make bread rise.

New-minted (Line 6) - Money that's recently been printed.

Means (Line 7) - An object through which something is accomplished.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Metaphors" consists of a single nine-line stanza. Each line also consists of nine syllables—something the poem declares in its opening line.

Pregnancy, of course, is also nine months long! It's thus safe to say that Plath was making a very intentional and even playful choice with the poem's form. The poem subtly mimics the way that pregnancy molds the body into a new shape. Like the speaker's body, the poem is physically defined by what it's "pregnant" with—the meaning it's trying to convey.

METER

The poem does not use any traditional meter. That said, there is a clear structure here: each of the poem's nine lines consists of exactly nine syllables—the number of months in a pregnancy. The poem's form itself reflects its topic.

Within those nine-syllable lines, stresses vary and don't follow any regular pattern. This keeps the language feeling natural and organic rather than overly controlled.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem doesn't use a rhyme scheme. As with its lack of meter, this keeps the poem feeling casual, conversational, and unpredictable. A tidy rhyme scheme might have given the poem a sense of rigid order and control; the poem's *lack* of rhyme, by contrast, subtly reflects the speaker's struggle to make sense of her changing body and her shifting identity.

SPEAKER

The speaker of this poem is, first and foremost, pregnant! Her body is quickly changing, and she can't help but feel out of whack, as big and preposterous as a "melon strolling on two tendrils." She also seems to feel rather awed by what her body is capable of, by her own power to produce a new human being.

And yet, when she says, "O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers," there's a subtle sense of irony in addition to genuine reverence. She seems to feel that her body has somehow become a commodity, a material valuable only for what it will offer to *someone else* (i.e., her baby).

She's also clearly feeling a great deal of trepidation regarding her desire or ability to parent. She says she's "eaten a bag of green apples," a metaphor suggesting she's in over her head (with the "green[ness]" of the apples perhaps symbolizing her own immaturity). But the speaker also feels it's also too late to turn back now; "the train" has left the station.

Much of Plath's poetry is personal in nature, which has led readers to often take Plath herself as the speaker of her poems. Plath in fact did believe herself to be newly pregnant when she wrote "Metaphors," though it turned out to be a false alarm.

Whether readers interpret the speaker to be a representation of Plath or not, the speaker's anxieties definitely reflect the very real fears Plath had about giving birth and becoming a mother. Due to midcentury societal expectations around gender roles, Plath worried that motherhood would erase her identity and turn her into a "stage"—that is, a foundation for her

husband and children rather than a human being in her own right.

SETTING

There is no real setting for "Metaphors." Instead, the poem is made up entirely of figurative language describing the speaker's physical and emotional state. In other words, this poem doesn't take place out in the world, but rather within the speaker's own thoughts and emotions. For instance, the "train" that the speaker "boards" in the last line of the poem isn't a real train, but a metaphorical one.

The lack of a physical setting adds to the sense of disorientation that the speaker is experiencing. It's as if being pregnant has turned her world inside out: she is suddenly hyper-aware of her body's strange new shape and what that means for her future.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) published "Metaphors" in her 1960 collection *The Colossus and Other Poems*. This collection, the only volume of poetry Plath would publish in her lifetime, showcases many of the themes that would characterize the later, more famous poems in *Ariel*. These include the indifference and brutality of nature, the violence of patriarchy, romantic love and sexuality, and loneliness. Plath also wrote often about the relationship between parents and children (see: "Daddy," one of her most famous poems) and about her complicated feelings on motherhood (see: "Nick and the Candlestick" and "Morning Song").

As a student of literature at Smith College in Massachusetts and later at Newnham College at the University of Cambridge, Plath learned to experiment formally with her poems. Early literary influences included everything from the poems of Emily Dickinson to the novels of Fyodor Dostoyevsky. While at university, she also studied Modernists such as Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, W.H. Auden, and T.S. Eliot.

Around the same time that *The Colossus and Other Poems* was published, Plath and her fellow American poet Anne Sexton took a class taught by Robert Lowell, whose 1959 collection *Life Studies* would inspire Plath to dig deeper into the emotionally turbulent and sometimes autobiographical material that characterizes so much of her work. For this reason, Plath is often labeled a Confessionalist poet. That said, readers should avoid too closely conflating Plath with the voices that narrate her poems, as to read them as always interchangeable is to do a disservice to Plath's imaginative capacities.

While Plath saw only moderate success in her own lifetime, her death by suicide in 1963 struck a chord with readers, especially in the United States. Since then, her work—both that which was published in her lifetime and that which was released posthumously—has only continued to grow in popularity, making her one of the most influential American poets of the 21st century.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Metaphors" was written in March of 1959, when Plath believed herself to be pregnant. This turned out to be a false alarm (though Plath and her husband Ted Hughes would succeed later in the year, when Plath conceived her first child, Frieda). Still, the poem illustrates with biting clarity the anxieties around motherhood with which Plath struggled.

These anxieties were not hers alone. In both the United States, where Plath was from, and England, where Plath lived when she wrote this poem, 1950s society celebrated traditional, patriarchal values. Men were expected to work outside the home and provide for their families, while women were expected to set aside their own personal ambitions in favor of raising children and running the household.

There were very few models at the time of women successfully managing both a family *and* a career, an absence Plath explored in-depth in her groundbreaking novel *The Bell Jar*. Plath's own ambitiousness couldn't eradicate her fears that motherhood would consume her and that her life would amount to nothing more than a "stage" on which her husband and children's lives would take place, a dynamic she saw modeled to her by her own mother.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Plath's Life and Work — Learn more about the poet's biography via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/sylvia-plath)
- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to a reading of the poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VX1cWxoMMr4)
- Poems About Motherhood — The Poetry Foundation's collection of recent poems about pregnancy and motherhood. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/150160/poems-about-motherhood)
- Red Comet — Check out a review of this best-selling 2020 biography of Plath, hailed as "both a joyful affirmation for Plath fanatics and a legitimization of her legacy." (https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/books/story/2020-10-29/red-comet-definitive-sylvia-plath-biography-heather-clark)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER SYLVIA PLATH POEMS

- Ariel
- Daddy
- Fever 103°
- Lady Lazarus
- Mad Girl's Love Song
- Mirror
- Morning Song
- Nick and the Candlestick
- Poppies in October
- The Applicant
- The Arrival of the Bee Box
- The Moon and the Yew Tree

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