The Munich Mannequins

SUMMARY

The speaker, out for a walk through Munich late at night, declares that standards of female "perfection" are dreadful because they are sterile. Perfection, as chilly as an icy breath, squashes down women's fertility.

In truth, the speaker continues, a woman's uterus is a place where life grows as strange and powerful as a yew tree or a many-headed beast, and where the tree of life branches out endlessly.

Women who do not have children, the speaker says, have their periods every month for no reason. The menstrual cycle, she feels, should support the loving act of childbirth.

And that loving act is also the ultimate sacrifice. To become a mother, the speaker says, is to give up on trying to live up to outside standards of perfection, becoming instead the center of a baby's world.

Mother and baby then form a little world together. Now, as the speaker watches, she sees smiling, beautiful women walking the street (though she feels that this beauty also smells a little fishy, like rotting eggs).

These women, more like dolls than real people, walk through Munich—a city the speaker sees as a dead place between Paris and Rome.

Despite their lavish fur coats, these women seem exposed. They appear to be nothing more than polished, elegant lollipops.

The speaker can't bear seeing them: they strike her as mindless. Meanwhile, it begins to snow, and the snow makes the city seem even darker.

There's nobody out in the street tonight. Inside the city's hotels, the speaker knows that men will be getting ready to start their days, putting their business shoes in the hall so the staff can polish them.

The city's windows strike the speaker as too cozy and homey: they have babyish lace curtains, or they're full of cutesy little cakes decorated with leaves.

Meanwhile, the citizens are deep asleep, full of complacent civic pride. Hung up, the city's telephones shine silently, with no voices speaking in them.

The falling snow has nothing to say.

THEMES

THE OBJECTIFICATION AND DEHUMANIZATION OF WOMEN

In "The Munich Mannequins," society's demand for feminine perfection destroys women's humanity. As the poem's speaker wanders around late one night in the German city of Munich, she's appalled by the sight of the "mannequins"—that is, pretty, skinny, doll-like women—walking the streets. The world's demand that these women stay impossibly ageless and slender, the speaker reflects, turns them into mindless commodities, there to be used and discarded by men. This poem suggests that a world that demands "perfection" from women can only be cruel, dehumanizing, and sterile.

The doll-like "mannequins" the speaker sees walking around the streets of Munich strike her as little more than walking corpses in a city-sized "morgue," people "without minds," drained of their "purpose." Doing all they can to abide by societal beauty standards, these women become mere decorative figures for expensive "furs" to hang on or consumable goods for men to devour like "lollies" (or lollipops). In the speaker's eyes, the unfortunate "mannequins" are also cut off from the very bodies they preserve so carefully: afraid to sacrifice their svelte figures to the power and transformation of motherhood, these women are coerced into giving up their true feminine power as well as their humanity. The shallow physical "perfection" the world expects from women, the poem suggests, is soul-destroying.

The poem also subtly suggests that women who reject mannequin-hood are oppressed and restricted too, just in different ways. Looking from the glamorous "mannequins" to the comfortable "domesticity" of the sleeping city, the speaker reflects on all the stolid tradition that forces women into limiting roles, even beyond repressive beauty standards. The "blood flood" of menstruation and the power of motherhood *also* doesn't fit into a sanitized, sexist picture of sweet, domestic maternity, decked out in cutesy "baby lace"!

Whatever choices women make, the poem hints, they're trapped in a world where sexist standards prevail and men call all the shots. Such a world robs them of both their specifically feminine power and their essential humanity.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-27

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MOTHERHOOD AND FEMININITY

To this poem's speaker, motherhood is the fullest expression of womanhood and female power. Only through the great physical and emotional "sacrifice" of motherhood, she feels, can women live their most complete lives. Restrictive societal ideas about feminine beauty and physical "perfection," the poem suggests, only get in the way of women's true power and fulfillment as mothers.

The speaker presents motherhood as an irreplaceable experience of both self-sacrifice and strength. To have children, she feels, is to contain life and death in one's own body: she imagines the "womb" as a place where the "tree of life" grows eternally and "yew trees" (traditional symbols of rebirth and resurrection) blow like hydras" (or many-headed monsters), a surreal image of mythic power, both creative and destructive.

In her eyes, the "blood flood" of childbirth is also "the flood of love," a "sacrifice" in which a mother gives up her old life to create a whole new world for her baby. In this world, mother and baby, "me and you," are the only thing that matters. And without this transformative experience, the speaker feels, women's bodies have "no purpose."

Societal standards of feminine "perfection" that demand youthful, unchanging bodies are, therefore, "terrible" because perfection "cannot have children." In other words, the speaker argues that women who are taught to see themselves only as decorative objects get cut off from their own bodies, their own fertility—and thus their own feminine fulfillment. To have children, after all, demands "sacrifice": pregnant women have to give up not just their bodies as they once knew them, but their *lives* as they once knew them, putting their new relationship with their babies first.

Societal ideals of physical perfection, in the speaker's opinion, get in the way of all that; women who are taught to worship the "idol" of the perfect body can't make this deep sacrifice—and lose out on their full womanhood as a consequence.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-9

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

Perfection is terrible, ...
... to no purpose.

This poem begins with a pronouncement. "Perfection," the speaker declares, "is terrible": sterile and "cold as snow breath," it "cannot have children." Personified as a woman, "perfection" here is not an aspirational figure; she's infertile and frigid. What's more, she begins to seem like a cruel goddess, holding other women back from an embrace of "life"—and especially the *new* lives of "children."

The specific *way* that perfection does this is through a restriction on "the womb": the uterus, that is. Normally, the speaker suggests, women's wombs are a place of fiery, bloody, sprouting energy—far from that chilly "snow breath." Take a look at the symbols, similes, and metaphors the speaker uses in this surreal picture of the wildness of the life inside women's bodies:

> Where **the yew trees blow like hydras**,
> The **tree of life** and the tree of life

Yew trees are a common symbol of both death and rebirth: evergreen, they're often planted in graveyards. What's more, the yew trees here are "like hydras"—mythical, many-headed monsters. Besides suggesting that the womb is a dangerous place as well as a nurturing one, the image might suggest the literal anatomy of a uterus, with its branching fallopian tubes. And the "tree of life"—an image so important the speaker needs to repeat it—suggests not just the eternal growth of life itself, but connectivity, family, and linked generations—as in "family tree."

Anything that "tamps" (or squashes down and represses) the power of such a "womb" must be terrible indeed! But icy perfection, the speaker says, has that power. Under its thrall, all those wild, lashing, fertile trees are left:

> **Unloosing their moons**, month after month, to no purpose.

Those "moons" are eggs—released every month, then washed away by the menstrual cycle. (And notice how the round assonant /oo/ of "unloosing their moons" evokes both the shape of the full moon and the shape of an egg.) Unfertilized, this speaker feels, those poor moons serve "no purpose."

This speaker, readers can already feel, has strong feelings about women's bodies and women's power. Pregnancy and childbirth, to her, are a rebuke to a kind of sterile "perfection" that has no room for such power. More than that, reproduction seems to strike her as an *ultimate* "purpose": a woman's connection to the "tree of life" itself. "The Munich Mannequins" will become a rebuke to all the false ideals that this speaker feels keep women from that connection.

LINES 6-9

The blood flood ...
... Me and you.

In the first stanzas, the speaker has rejected "perfection" in favor of a wild, dangerous, lively female fertility. Now, she explains what she sees in motherhood beyond pure power. Take a look at her metaphor in line 6:

The blood flood is the flood of love,

This "blood flood," like the moon and yew tree in the previous lines, feels like a mighty force of nature. Here, it appears to be the flow of blood that carries new life into the world—perhaps suggesting both menstruation and bleeding during childbirth.

This bloodletting, the speaker goes on, is "the absolute sacrifice." That image makes sense, not just because of the ancient ritual of spilling blood to propitiate the gods, but because *motherhood* is a sacrifice. Becoming a mother, to this speaker, means giving up one's old life to be born into a new role.

And giving up that old life also means giving up one's old "idols"—that is, all the false images one used to worship. Those "idols" must be replaced by a sense of "me and you": a mother and baby, the speaker suggests, become their own little world. What's more, it's a mother's responsibility to become a godlike, caring figure *for* her baby: there can be "no more idols but me," as the speaker puts it.

These first stanzas, then, lay out the speaker's passionate feelings about motherhood, femininity, and fertility. They even hint that she feels like motherhood is an *essential* part of being a woman, a necessary sacrifice that reconfigures the world.

Now, she'll explore exactly how these ideas relate to her rejection of chilly "perfection."

LINES 10-12

So, in their ...
... Paris and Rome,

In these lines, the "perfection" the speaker rejects at last takes on physical form. For that matter, so does the speaker: she's a woman out walking in the German city of "Munich," watching a series of "mannequins" stroll by.

Those "mannequins" aren't actual mannequins—not life-sized dolls for displaying clothes. But in the speaker's eyes, they might as well be. Rather, these are glamorous, rail-thin young women (perhaps models), who "lean" in the streets as if they can barely stand up under their own power.

The speaker thinks very little of them indeed. Listen to her anaphora here:

So, in their sulfur loveliness, in their smiles

That repeated "in their" gives these lines a sneering tone: it's as if the speaker is piling up examples of these women's empty beauty. It also suggests that the "mannequins" are *wearing* their "smiles" and their "loveliness" like disguises.

And that "sulfur loveliness" is distinctly fishy-sounding—or eggy-smelling. Often associated with hellfire, sulfur is a wildly flammable element that reeks of rotten eggs. Here, it might suggest both the women's bleach-blond beauty (since sulfur is a pale yellowish color) and the speaker's sense that there's something rotten going on here.

That feeling gets even clearer when the speaker calls Munich the "morgue between Paris and Rome"—a thoroughly unfriendly metaphor. The people of this city, in the speaker's eyes, might as well be the living dead. There's no "tree of life" sprouting here amid all this sulfurous glamor.

LINES 13-15

Naked and bald ...
... Intolerable, without minds.

As the speaker continues to look at the "mannequins" of Munich, she seems to feel a combination of pity, disgust, and terror. They might be glamorous, but they also strike her as "naked and bald in their furs": exposed and vulnerable as babies beneath their elegant clothing.

And perhaps they're vulnerable because they see themselves as *objects*. In the speaker's words, they're:

Orange lollies on silver sticks,

This metaphor at once suggests a childish sweetness (a "lolly" is a lollipop in British English), a pitiful stick-like thinness, and consumability. These poor lollies are just waiting to be gobbled up by some man. And once a lolly is eaten, its stick gets thrown away, no matter how silvery its beauty.

While the speaker might feel a flash of sadness for these childish women, she's also appalled by them, finding them "intolerable" and mindless, empty dolls who have devoted their lives to a narrow, sterile vision of female "perfection." There's an implicit contrast here between these women and women who become mothers. Bodies like "silver sticks" can't possibly hold all the fire and blood that the speaker imagines in a mother's "womb."

The "perfection" the speaker decries here, in other words, is a kind of narrow, ageless, rail-thin body standard for women—a look that refuses all feminine softness. But it's also a deadening mindlessness; the women who become perfect "mannequins" like these, the speaker seems to feel, lose not just their connection to the "tree of life," but their ability to think and live.

LINES 16-20

The snow drops ...
... will go tomorrow.

Appalled by the "mannequins," the speaker turns away from them to reflect on the rest of the "morgue"-like city around her. Snow is falling, dropping "pieces of darkness"—an image that suggests it's a cold, wintery night. "Nobody's about," the speaker observes; perhaps she feels the "mannequins" she's passed don't count.

But she can imagine what's going on inside the city's "hotels,"

out of sight. Listen to her synecdoche here:

> In the hotels
> **Hands will be opening doors** and setting
> Down shoes for a polish of carbon
> Into which broad toes will go tomorrow.

Those disembodied "hands" (and the "broad toes" that go with them) clearly belong to men: business travelers putting out their shoes in hotel halls for a coat of coal-black polish. These hands, readers might observe, don't do their dirty work themselves; some maid will come along and take care of their shoes for them.

This, of course, is the other side of the "mannequin" dilemma. Becoming perfect, stick-thin doll-people wasn't those women's own idea, these lines hint.

It's significant that the speaker depicts these businessmen as "hands," too. Hands are an old symbol of power and capability; the word "manipulate" comes from a root that *means* hands. The same world that reduces women to brittle, sterile, decorative objects puts all the power in these male "hands."

LINES 21-23

O the domesticity ...
... their bottomless Stolz.

From her vision of masterful male "hands" leaving others to do their work for them, the speaker broadens out to a wide view of the whole city of Munich. The problems she's describing, these lines suggest, aren't individual, but *societal*.

Listen to the scorn in her voice as she reports what she sees:

> **O the domesticity** of these windows,
> The **baby lace**, the green-leaved confectionery,
> The **thick Germans slumbering in their bottomless**
> **Stolz.**

From that mock-epic "O" to her portrait of "thick Germans" and their "bottomless Stolz" (or endless, pompous civic pride), the speaker is clearly disgusted by everything she sees. The city strikes her as restrictively conventional; those "slumbering" Germans have clearly never woken up enough even to question their usual way of doing things.

Note, too, the imagery the speaker uses to describe what she sees in the "windows" of Munich:

> The **baby lace**, the **green-leaved confectionery**,

In both of these instances, something vital and alive—a "baby" and its new life, the "green leave[s]" that might grow on that "tree of life"—has been transformed into something cutesy: lacy curtains, sweet little cakes. The assonance of "baby lace" and "green-leaved confectionery" even sounds like sickly-sweet baby talk.

A society that gives men all the power and robs women of their minds and their strength, the speaker suggests, turns all of life's bloody, visceral power into cloying, empty "perfection."

LINES 24-27

And the black ...
... has no voice.

In the midst of Munich's frozen, conventional repressiveness, the speaker sees one final image, like a vision from a nightmare: all the city's "black phones" hanging silent on their "hooks," "glittering." These "voiceless[]" phones seem to symbolize what the poor "mannequins" can't do: call out, speak in their own voices. But the lifeless "snow" of their false perfection, the speaker says, "has no voice."

Not just the "Munich Mannequins," and not just the contented "Germans," but the whole world seems trapped in an icy "slumber[]" here at the end of the poem. The speaker seems to feel that she's the only living person in Munich—the only one who can see what's being done to the "tree of life" by the city's sterile, smug, sexist perfection.

And perhaps it's that chilling feeling that brings the poem to a halt. This poem's free verse has so far been divided up into unrhymed couplets, with lines traveling in pairs like footsteps. Now, at the end of the poem, those footsteps stumble. From the truncated, one-word line "Glittering" to the final line, standing all alone without a partner, the form of these last stanzas suggest that the speaker feels utterly isolated and alienated in this "morgue" of a city.

SYMBOLS

SNOW

Snow, in this poem, symbolizes icy, deathly, sterile perfectionism.

Wintery snow often turns up in poetry as a symbol of death and endings. Here, the snow also suggests that the poor "mannequins" are rejecting life—including the new life of motherhood—altogether. By worshiping a narrow beauty standard above all else, the speaker suggests, these women cut themselves off from the warmth, red blood, and creativity of fertility. In the end, they lose even their "voice[s]" to the chill of lifeless perfection. (Perhaps the precise crystalline structure of snowflakes suggests such perfection, too.)

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Cold as snow breath"
- **Line 16:** "The snow drops its pieces of darkness,"

- **Line 27:** “The snow has no voice.”

TELEPHONES

The silent, "glittering" phones that appear toward the end of the poem symbolize the helpless muteness of women oppressed by a societal ideal of "perfection."

Hanging uselessly on their hooks, the poem's phones suggest that something about Munich, with its doll-like women and its infantilizing "baby lace," cuts off women's ability to speak: the "snow" that the speaker associates with chilly feminine "perfection" has "no voice," just as the phones "digest[] / Voicelessness." Of course, it's not just in Munich that this is a problem!

This poem itself might be read as the speaker's attempt to take one of those "glittering" phones off its hook and speak the truth about the ways in which women are beaten down by sexist standards.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 24-27:** “And the black phones on hooks / Glittering / Glittering and digesting / Voicelessness.”

YEW TREES

The yew trees that the speaker pictures rooted in women's wombs symbolize the cycle of life and death.

Evergreen yew trees are often planted in graveyards as symbols of hope and eternal life. But because they're so closely associated with those graveyards, they also symbolize death! In this poem, the "yew trees" take on both sides of this symbolism: planted in "the womb," these trees suggest both the creative and destructive power of female fertility. Making new life, after all, involves the "blood flood" of "sacrifice": women die to their old lives when they're reborn as mothers.

Yew trees were a favorite symbol of Plath's; they turn up in a similar role in a number of her poems.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** “Where the yew trees blow like hydras,”

POETIC DEVICES

SIMILE

The poem begins with two atmospheric, surreal similes, giving the reader a picture of both the world around the speaker and her inner life.

In the first stanza, the speaker says that "perfection" is "Cold as snow breath"—an image that might paint a few different pictures in the reader's mind at once:

- That "snow breath" could suggest the cloud of steam that breath makes in the air on a frosty day: an image of something warm and alive turning icy.
- It could also suggest the breath of the snow itself: a cold winter wind, or the chill in snowy air.
- Maybe this image even hints at the speaker's surroundings. Later on in the poem, she'll watch snow falling; the image might occur to her here because it's winter in Munich!

However one reads it, this simile suggests that perfection is a chilly, lifeless thing.

Then, in the second stanza, the speaker uses a surreal simile to describe what goes on inside a woman's "womb." It's a place, she says:

> Where the yew trees blow like hydras,

In this strange biological dreamscape, "yew trees"—a kind of evergreen tree often symbolically associated with death and rebirth—flail around like mythical "hydras," or many-headed monsters. There's nothing cozily maternal about this simile! The "womb," to this speaker, is a place of death and danger as much as life; it's full of strange mythic energy. Those women who pursue chilly, snowy "perfection," the speaker suggests, thus turn their backs on the fascinating, awe-inspiring powers inside them.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “Cold as snow breath”
- **Line 3:** “the yew trees blow like hydras”

METAPHOR

The poem's many metaphors help to evoke the speaker's complex feelings about femininity, motherhood, and fertility.

The poem's first line personifies perfection: it's "terrible," the speaker says, because "it cannot have children." By presenting perfection as a woman, the speaker points out the serious problem with treating women's bodies as idealized, fetishized, decorative objects: it means that women have to *become* perfection itself and lose themselves in the process.

Not only do women lose themselves to impossible standards of perfection, but they also lose their connection to the "tree of life" inside them—that is, to their own fertility. The speaker uses a series of metaphors drawn from nature to evoke the power of women's bodies:

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- The aforementioned "tree of life," an image of fertility and interconnected generations (think "family tree"!)
- A series of "unloo[sed ...] moons" that represent the monthly menstrual cycle
- And the "blood flood" that might suggest both menstruation and the "sacrific[ial]" bleeding of childbirth.

All of these images suggest that women's bodies are a force of nature—and that a lifeless ideal of feminine "perfection" cuts off all this power.

In fact, the speaker's later metaphors suggest, such perfection is out-and-out dehumanizing:

- When the speaker describes glamorous young women walking the streets of Munich as "mannequins," the word suggests that they've become lifeless dolls, mere hangers to display clothes upon.
- Inside all their lavish "furs," though, they seem to her "naked and bald"—exposed, vulnerable, and weak as babies.
- Worse, they've become *consumable*—"orange lollies" (or lollipops) on glamorous "silver sticks," waiting for a man to come along and gobble them up.

All these soulless, doll-like, dehumanized women, the speaker feels, make Munich into a "morgue": they might as well be walking corpses.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children."
- **Line 4:** "The tree of life and the tree of life"
- **Line 5:** "Unloosing their moons"
- **Lines 6-7:** "The blood flood is the flood of love, / The absolute sacrifice."
- **Line 11:** "These mannequins lean tonight"
- **Line 12:** "Munich, morgue between Paris and Rome,"
- **Line 13:** "Naked and bald in their furs,"
- **Line 14:** "Orange lollies on silver sticks,"

REPETITION

Strong repetitions underscore the speaker's views on power, fertility, and objectification.

One word, in particular, pops up repeatedly across the poem: "snow." It's *literally* snowing in the poem, but the word also symbolically suggests the chilly, wintery sterility of "perfection"—that is, the restrictive ideal of an eternally slender and youthful female body.

By contrast, take a look at the energetic repetitions the speaker uses to describe women's fertility in lines 4-5:

> The tree of life and the tree of life
> Unloosing their moons, month after month, to no purpose.

The intense diacope here suggests that, unlike icy perfection, feminine fertility is endlessly generative. "Month after month," women's bodies produce eggs (though they serve "no purpose" if they're never fertilized). And the "tree of life" that grows in them is so energetic and strong that the speaker needs to repeat its name twice.

There's a similar sense of feminine strength in the speaker's anadiplosis here:

> It means: no more idols but me,
> Me and you.

The repetition of "me" stresses the speaker's feeling that, when a woman has a baby, she becomes that baby's whole world—a world apart from all the absurdity of society's sexist ideals. But that world, the speaker observes, demands too much "sacrifice" from women who have been taught that their slender figures are their only "purpose."

Meanwhile, the poem's final lines use powerful repetitions to paint a sinister picture:

> And the black phones on hooks
> Glittering
> Glittering and digesting
> Voicelessness. The snow has no voice.

The epizeuxis on "glittering" here suggests a creepy, tense stillness: those phones just hang silently gleaming all night long. The polyptoton on "voicelessness" and "voice," meanwhile, stresses the helpless silence of both the city and the snow that falls on it—and, by extension, the "intolerable," mindless muteness of the "mannequins."

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "snow"
- **Line 4:** "The tree of life and the tree of life"
- **Line 5:** "month after month"
- **Lines 8-9:** "me, / Me"
- **Line 16:** "snow"
- **Line 25:** "Glittering"
- **Line 26:** "Glittering"
- **Line 27:** "Voicelessness," "snow," "voice"

IMAGERY

The poem's imagery paints a picture of a chilly, sterile, artificial world.

When the speaker observes young, glamorous women walking

the streets of Munich, they frighten and disgust her: their quest for physical perfection, she feels, has robbed them of their humanity. They might be wearing rich "furs," but inside them, they're "naked and bald," exposed and helpless as babies. Her image of them as "orange lollies on silver sticks" evokes a combination of sickly, childish sweetness and empty glamour. Even a "silver" lollipop stick, after all, gets thrown away once the candy is consumed.

These eerily soulless women, the speaker notes, live in a city of "baby lace" and "green-leaved confectionary"—both images that suggest a fakey, cutesy version of the intense female power the speaker values. That "green-leaved confectionary," in particular, paints a picture of living, growing things (like the "tree of life" that represents fertility up in line 4) transformed into dainty little treats, ready to be chewed up.

The poem's final, mysterious image suggests that all these constraints and restrictions create a sinister silence:

> And the black phones on hooks
> Glittering
> Glittering and digesting
> Voicelessness.

All those "glittering" phones, hanging silent all over the city, suggest a "voiceless" helplessness. No one, the speaker might feel, is talking out loud about what women are coerced to sacrifice in the name of "perfection."

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-14:** "Naked and bald in their furs, / Orange lollies on silver sticks,"
- **Line 22:** "The baby lace, the green-leaved confectionery,"
- **Lines 24-27:** "And the black phones on hooks / Glittering / Glittering and digesting / Voicelessness."

SYNECDOCHE

A moment of synecdoche hints at who really has the power in this poem's world.

In "hotels" all over Munich, the speaker reflects in lines 17-20:

> Hands will be opening doors and setting
> Down shoes for a polish of carbon
> Into which broad toes will go tomorrow.

Those disembodied "hands" clearly belong to men: business travelers leaving their work shoes out in the hall for a "polish," so they'll be ready to go in the morning. Note that they're letting other people, likely female maids, do their shoe-polishing for them! (The "broad toes" that will go back into those shoes in the morning also suggest large, strong, perhaps menacing male bodies.)

By depicting these men as "hands," the speaker suggests that men are the ones who have the power in this society: hands, after all, are an old symbol of strength and capability. With hands, one can manipulate the world.

The speaker's certainty that men's "hands will be opening doors" all over the city even as she speaks also reflects her grim awareness that she lives in a world dominated by men and male ideals. Women, this moment of synecdoche hints, aren't the only ones to blame for falling for a false, dehumanizing notion of "perfection."

Where Synecdoche appears in the poem:

- **Lines 18-20:** "Hands will be opening doors and setting / Down shoes for a polish of carbon / Into which broad toes will go tomorrow."

CAESURA

Caesurae help to pace the poem, slowing lines down and giving them a thoughtful, swinging rhythm.

For example, take a look at how caesura works in the first two lines:

> Perfection is terrible, || it cannot have children.
> Cold as snow breath, || it tamps the womb

Both of these lines pause in the same place, giving them a slow, one-two walking pace that mimics the speaker's own reflective walk. These mirrored pauses also draw attention to the parallelism here. The second half of each line begins with similar phrasing describing "perfection": "it cannot have" and "it tamps." All in all, these caesura thus help to suggest that the speaker is turning one subject over and over in her head as she walks.

Later, in line 12, a caesura prepares an unpleasant surprise:

> In Munich, || morgue between Paris and Rome,

The speaker could have phrased this basic idea in all sorts of different ways: "That morgue, Munich," or "Munich, the morgue," for instance. But by using a soft comma caesura here, then leaping directly to the word "morgue," the speaker springs that grim word on readers like a trap.

And in the poem's final line, a strong caesura creates a similar moment of drama:

> Voicelessness. || The snow has no voice.

The full stop in the middle of a line here gives the speaker's voice a flat, grim tone as she makes her final pronouncement: this voiceless, lifeless snow seems to reflect the predicament of the city's doll-like "mannequins."

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "terrible, it"
- **Line 2:** "breath, it"
- **Line 5:** "moons, month," "month, to"
- **Line 8:** "means: no"
- **Line 10:** "So, in," "loveliness, in"
- **Line 12:** "Munich, morgue"
- **Line 15:** "Intolerable, without"
- **Line 17:** "about. In"
- **Line 22:** "lace, the"
- **Line 27:** "Voicelessness. The"

ASSONANCE

Assonance gives this poem some chant-like music.

In lines 5-6, for instance, the speaker uses a mixture of /oo/ and /uh/ sounds:

> Unloosing their moons, month after month, to no purpose.
> The blood flood is the flood of love,

The /oo/ sound in line 5 feels as round as the very "moons" it describes. The /uh/ of "blood," "flood," and "love," meanwhile, creates a family resemblance between all those words, suggesting how closely a sacrificial torrent of "blood" and maternal, self-sacrificing "love" might be connected.

And listen to the speaker's assonance as she scornfully describes what she sees in the windows of Munich:

> O the domesticity of these windows,
> The baby lace, the green-leaved confectionery,

The grand /oh/ of "O the domesticity of these windows" draws attention to the sneering mock-grandeur of this line; the speaker clearly doesn't think much of what she sees in this great city. In part, that's because she feels everything here is rather weak and artificial—a feeling also reflected in her assonance. The long /ay/ of "baby lace" sounds like baby talk itself, and the /ee/ of "green-leaved confectionery" sounds sickly-sweet.

An insistent long /oh/ returns in the poem's final word on the failings of Munich (and the world in general): "The snow has no voice." That /oh/ sounds rather hollow and defeated: the speaker seems to have little hope that the "mannequins" of Munich can escape the demands of doll-like perfection.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "like hydras"
- **Line 4:** "life"
- **Line 5:** "Unloosing," "moons"
- **Line 6:** "blood flood," "flood," "love"
- **Line 8:** "means," "me"
- **Line 10:** "sulfur loveliness"
- **Line 13:** "bald"
- **Line 14:** "lollies," "silver sticks"
- **Line 17:** "Nobody's," "hotels"
- **Line 18:** "opening"
- **Line 20:** "toes," "go tomorrow"
- **Line 21:** "O," "domesticity," "windows"
- **Line 22:** "baby lace," "green-leaved confectionery"
- **Line 27:** "snow," "no"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration, like assonance, gives the poem music and emphasis.

For instance, the sibilant alliteration (and consonance and assonance) of "silver sticks" calls attention to this phrase, with that hissing perhaps evoking the speaker's disgust.

Listen, too, to the repeated /m/ sound in these important lines:

> It means: no more idols but me,
> Me and you.

All those /m/ sounds in a row (underscored by the /ee/ assonance of "means "and "me" and the epizeuxis on the word "me") demands that readers pay special attention to what the speaker is saying about what she sees as the necessary and glorious sacrifices of motherhood.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "terrible," "cannot"
- **Line 2:** "Cold," "tamps"
- **Line 3:** "like"
- **Line 4:** "life"
- **Line 5:** "moons," "month"
- **Line 8:** "means," "more," "me"
- **Line 10:** "So," "sulfur," "smiles"
- **Line 11:** "mannequins"
- **Line 12:** "Munich," "morgue"
- **Line 14:** "silver sticks"
- **Line 16:** "drops," "darkness"
- **Line 17:** "hotels"
- **Line 18:** "Hands"
- **Line 22:** "lace," "leaved"

ANAPHORA

Anaphora helps to give the speaker's tone its edge of disdain (and its hints of unease).

For example, take a look at how she uses the device to describe the sad "mannequins" who roam the streets of Munich:

So, in their sulfur loveliness, in their smiles
These mannequins lean tonight

This repetition makes the speaker sound outright disgusted, heaping up scornful description after scornful description. It's clear that the speaker thinks very little indeed of all that poisonous, egg-smelling "sulfur loveliness," no matter how it "smiles."

There's a similar passage of anaphora in the speaker's dismissive summation of Munich itself:

O the domesticity of these windows,
The baby lace, the green-leaved confectionery,
The thick Germans slumbering in their bottomless Stolz.
And the black phones on hooks

All of these bits of frilly "domesticity," the anaphora (and broader parallelism) here suggests, don't add up to much—certainly not to a real, living city. These similarly phrased descriptions make Munich sound like little more than a pile of cutesy decorations, their over-cozy laciness made eerie by all the "black phones" that hang silently nearby. In such a stifling, conservative environment, the speaker feels, "no voice" can break the silence to protest against how women are treated.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "it"
- **Line 2:** "it"
- **Line 10:** "in their," "in their"
- **Line 21:** "the"
- **Line 22:** "The," "the"
- **Line 23:** "The"
- **Line 24:** "the"

VOCABULARY

Tamps (Line 2) - Presses down, with connotations of squashing something or blocking it up.

Womb (Line 2) - The uterus.

Yew trees (Line 3) - A type of evergreen tree often associated with graveyards and mourning.

Hydras (Line 3) - The hydra was a mythological monster with many heads. Whenever one of its heads was cut off, it sprouted even more.

Unloosing their moons (Line 5) - In other words, menstruating.

Idols (Line 8) - Figures (often statues, but sometimes ideas or principles) worshiped as gods.

Sulfur (Line 10) - An element that smells strongly of rotten eggs. Sulfur is often associated with hellfire.

Mannequins (Line 11) - A mannequin may be both a life-sized doll used to display clothing or a living model. Here, Plath uses the word to describe pretty, brittle young women out walking at night: by slavishly following perfectionistic beauty standards, the poem suggests, they've become little more than living dolls.

Morgue (Line 12) - A cold storage room for dead bodies.

Lollies (Line 14) - The British term for lollipops.

A polish of carbon (Line 19) - In other words, a shoe-shine. The implication is that the shoes will be polished as black as coal (which is made from carbon).

Domesticity (Line 21) - Coziness, hominess.

Confectionery (Line 22) - Sweets, cakes.

Stolz (Line 23) - A German word meaning "pride"—here suggesting civic pride, a good opinion of one's own culture.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Munich Mannequins" is written in free verse, without a standard meter or rhyme scheme. But it does use a fairly regular shape. Nearly all of its 14 stanzas are two-line unrhymed couplets. The exception is the last stanza, which consists of a single line that stands alone.

These short stanzas lines evoke the speaker's thoughtful, measured walk through late-night Munich; it's as if each stanza is a pair of footsteps. When the poem reaches its final stand-alone line, it perhaps feels like the speaker has stopped in her tracks to listen to the silent snowfall.

METER

This free verse poem doesn't use a regular meter. Instead, it plays with rhythm through changing line lengths, caesurae, and enjambments, leading the reader through the poem at a reflective, stop-and-start pace.

For instance, look at what happens in lines 24-25:

And the black phones on hooks
Glittering

Here, the speaker gives the word "glittering" a line all to itself—the shortest line in the poem. This brings the poem to an abrupt halt, inviting speakers to spend a moment picturing all those sinister, gleaming phones waiting on their hooks.

RHYME SCHEME

This free verse poem doesn't use any rhyme scheme at all. Instead, the poem relies on repetitions, assonance, and

alliteration for its music.

For example, take a look at the diacope and assonance in lines 3-4:

> Where the yew **trees** blow **like** hydras,
> The **tree** of **life** and the **tree** of **life**

Here, the words "tree" and "life" echo over and over, suggesting an eternal process of creation. Meanwhile, the long /i/ assonance of "like," "hydras," and "life" creates musical continuity, weaving these lines together.

SPEAKER

This autobiographical poem, like much of Plath's work, depicts her own experience in her own voice. Intensely personal writing was a hallmark of the Confessionalist movement, of which Plath was one of the leading poets. The events this poem explores clearly draw on Plath's own life: she indeed traveled to Munich not long before her death in 1963, and she did indeed go for a long night walk while she was there.

The version of Plath who speaks in this poem feels that some of women's deepest power comes from their connection to their bodies—and especially from fertility and motherhood. She's appalled by the artificial standards of eternally youthful beauty that she sees the women around her aspiring to, feeling that it cuts them off from that power. She's also scornful of the buttoned-up, traditional, and sexist world that does its best to oppress women with these false ideals of "perfection."

It's worth noting that the views in this poem are only one facet of Plath's conflicted (and sometimes agonized) perspective on motherhood and femininity.

SETTING

"The Munich Mannequins" is set, as one might expect, in the German city of Munich, on a cold, snowy, wintery evening. As the speaker strolls through the city's dark streets, she feels the place might as well be a "morgue": its population of mindless "mannequins" and the cutesy "baby lace" that adorns its windows suggests it's a place that has lost its connection to the "tree of life"—that is, to everything that's natural, growing, and fertile. This fashionable but conservative city strikes the speaker as a temple to chilly, lifeless artifice.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) was a leading light of the Confessionalist poetry movement. Famous both for her intense, personal verse and her autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*, Plath spoke what had been unspeakable about womanhood in the first half of the 20th century.

Like many of the poems in Plath's famous collection *Ariel* (1965), "The Munich Mannequins" can be read as at least partly autobiographical. Unvarnished self-revelation was rare in English-language poetry at the time, as was poetry dealing frankly with pregnancy and childbirth. But as more and more writers adopted this revolutionary stance in their work during the 1950s and '60s, critics found a name for their movement: Confessionalism.

Confessionalist poets wanted to drop the barrier between themselves and "the speaker" of the poem and to examine aspects of life that a conformist post-war society deemed too indelicate to talk about. Robert Lowell's "Skunk Hour," W.D. Snodgrass's "Heart's Needle," and Anne Sexton's "The Double Image" are all good examples of Confessionalist poetry.

Inspired by these poets, Plath turned more and more to her own experiences of childhood, marriage, and motherhood in her poetry. "The Munich Mannequins" is one of the many poems in *Ariel* that deals with her complex (and sometimes conflicted) feelings about being a mother; "Morning Song" and "Nick and the Candlestick" are some others.

Sadly, by the time that *Ariel* was published, Plath had been dead for two years, having died by suicide on February 11, 1963.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Plath had a complicated relationship with motherhood, and her relationship with her own mother was often fraught. All around her, as she grew up, she saw women giving up careers and personal freedoms to become housewives whose lives revolved around their homes and children.

After World War II, this sacrifice was par for the course in American society: while some women were privileged enough to get an education, their male-dominated culture expected them to give up their careers and settle down to raise a family. Plath had dreamed of being a writer from a young age; she had no intention of giving up her own ambitions just to fulfill society's expectations.

But as she got older and fell in love (with fellow poet Ted Hughes), she found herself desiring the very things that represented a lack of freedom to her: marriage and children. Some of her more conflicted poems, like "Morning Song," reflect Plath's ambivalence about traditional motherhood. (And many of her late poems, written after her separation from Hughes, express mocking derision toward traditional marriage.) This emotional complexity caused her work to resonate strongly with second-wave feminists in the 1960s; women during this period saw their own experiences reflected in Plath's honest introspection.

This poem also reflects Plath's unease with the changing

beauty standards of the 1960s. During this era, extreme, boyish slimness became the fashion for women—to the extent that the most famous model of the period was known as "Twiggy." Such a standard was, then as now, unreachable for many; as this poem suggests, to Plath, twig-like slenderness also felt like a rejection of the roundness of pregnancy.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to the poem read out loud. (https://youtu.be/qx8bJoMrlcY)
- An Interview with Plath — Listen to Plath herself discussing her poetic career. (https://youtu.be/g2IMsVpRh5c)
- A Short Biography — Learn more about Plath's life and work at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/sylvia-plath)
- The Sylvia Plath Society — Visit the website of the Sylvia Plath Society to learn more about Plath's continued influence. (https://www.sylviaplathsociety.org/)
- A Celebration of Plath — Read an article in which contemporary artists reflect on what Plath means to them. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/feb/08/sylvia-plath-reflections-on-her-legacy)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER SYLVIA PLATH POEMS

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

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