Sheep in Fog

SUMMARY

The speaker describes a landscape that disappears into the mist. Other people, or maybe even the stars themselves, look down on the speaker with pity. The speaker feels like they've failed everyone.

A train goes by, exhaling smoke. A horse, whose coat is the color of corroded metal, moves slowly, the clomp of its hooves ringing out like the mournful chimes of a bell.

The day just keeps getting gloomier and gloomier, like a flower that's been left to wither.

The speaker feels a stillness deep in their very bones, while distant, unreachable fields are making their heart melt.

These feelings might kill the speaker, granting them access to a heaven where there are no stars and no God, the dark waters of death and oblivion.

THEMES

HOPELESSNESS, DISAPPOINTMENT, AND DESPAIR

"Sheep in Fog" describes a crushing sense of insignificance and the despair that results from feeling unimportant or unseen. The speaker feels they've failed to live up to their potential, falling short of other people's expectations for them and maybe even their own destiny. Their life seems to have gone stagnant, and they can't see their way out of the present, unbearable moment they're in. The poem offers no relief or silver lining for the pain that the speaker is experiencing; it suggests that despair and disappointment are like a thick "fog" that's almost impossible to see beyond.

The poem begins with the speaker admitting that they feel more or less like a failure. "People or stars" are "disappoint[ed]" in them, suggesting that the speaker has let down those around them and even fate itself (represented here by those "stars"). The speaker feels about as ordinary and confused as a "sheep" wandering around in a misty landscape.

The "slow[ness]" of the horse the speaker is riding (which might also be a metaphorical reference to a passing train) further suggests that the speaker has fallen behind. They're not where they expected to be by this point in their life, it seems, and it's too late to turn things around; this horse is "the colour of rust," already old and falling apart, and the sounds of its clomping "[h]ooves" are like "dolorous" (or mournful) "bells." This might subtly evoke the sad chime of a funeral service, suggesting that the only place the speaker is moving towards now is death.

Projecting these feelings of insignificance and hopelessness onto the landscape, the speaker says that "the morning has been blackening," or growing ever darker, and decaying as if it were "a flower left out." This flower might also refer to the speaker themselves; either way, this grim imagery implies that the speaker's future, which had once seemed bright and promising, is now wilted and without color, growing less hopeful by the hour.

The poem offers no solace in the end, suggesting instead that one of the most difficult parts of the speaker's hopelessness is not being able to see beyond it. The "hills" around the speaker "step off into whiteness"; there's no seeing where they lead and the speaker thus has nowhere to go. They feel a terrible "stillness" deep in their very "bones," a kind of stagnancy that sounds a lot like death.

Meanwhile, distant fields "melt" the speaker's "heart"—an ambiguous metaphor that might reflect how the sight of far of fields hurts (or simply rouses intense emotions in) the speaker because the speaker can't reach them. Such feelings may very well "let [the speaker] through to a heaven" that is strangely empty, "starless and fatherless." In other words, they could kill the speaker, pushing them through the fog into the oblivion of death—which the speaker perhaps calls "heaven" only because it offers an escape from the endless despair and expectations of life.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-15

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINE 1

The hills step off into whiteness.

The poem's title, "Sheep in Fog," sets the scene: readers might picture the speaker looking out on a misty landscape filled with sheep. Though these sheep don't actually appear in the poem itself, their mention in the title might suggest a few things about the speaker's state of mind:

- Sheep have fluffy, white coats and tend to stick together in herds. Add fog to the mix, and you'd have a hard time telling individual sheep apart. Perhaps, then, the poem's title reflects the speaker's own feelings of ordinariness. That is, maybe they feel like they're nothing more than an unexceptional "sheep" obscured by fog. (Note that people also use the word "sheep" to refer to people who mindlessly

follow the crowd or conform to social norms.)
- The mention of "fog" might also suggest that the speaker feels lost and confused.
- Even before the poem begins, then, readers might sense the speaker's anxiety about failing to stand out from the crowd and/or to find their way.

The poem itself then begins with the speaker describing "hills" that "step off into whiteness." The speaker is personifying the "hills" by granting them the ability to wander off "into whiteness"—a dense patch of fog that the speaker can't see beyond.

LINES 2-3

People or stars ...
... I disappoint them.

The next two lines further suggest that the speaker's life has gotten off track somehow. "People or stars" look at the speaker with sadness and disappointment.

The speaker is vague about the exact nature of this disappointment, however; it's not clear what the speaker was supposed to have done. In fact, the speaker doesn't seem to even be sure who or what they've failed! It's either other "people or" the personified "stars," which likely symbolize the speaker's destiny/the fate laid out for them by the cosmos.

It's also not clear if this failure is real or simply the speaker projecting their own insecurities onto the landscape. That is, are other "people" and/or the "stars" *actually* feeling let down by the speaker, or is this just the speaker's anxiety talking? The poem is ambiguous, and the important thing is how the speaker feels about themselves at this moment: lost, alone, and far from where they thought they'd be at this point in life.

By now readers can see that the poem uses tercets (three-line stanzas) but doesn't follow any regular meter or rhyme scheme. This free verse allows the speaker to communicate in a way that feels natural and intimate. At the same time, breaking up the poem's relatively short sentences intro tercets drags things out, making the poem appear longer.

Listen to the enjambment at the end of line 2 as well:

> People or stars
> Regard me sadly, I disappoint them.

The speaker breaks a single clause across two lines, effectively dragging the reader down the page. The caesura after "sadly," meanwhile, slows things. The lack of any conjunction here (no "because," for example) also lends the poem an air of resignation.

Finally, note the sibilance throughout this first stanza:

> The hills step off into whiteness.
> People or stars
> Regard me sadly, I disappoint them.

All those soft /s/ sounds cast a whispery hush over the poem.

LINES 4-7

The train leaves ...
... Hooves, dolorous bells—

In the second stanza, the speaker describes a "train" cutting through the foggy landscape, leaving "a line of breath" in its wake. In granting the train the ability to breathe, the speaker is personifying it (much like the hills from stanza 1). Perhaps the speaker even feels like the train, like those people and stars from stanza 1, is sighing in "disappoint[ment]." The image of "a line of breath" might also make readers think of the way breath fogs up on a cold day. (In her introduction to this poem, Plath wrote that "Sheep in Fog" is set in December.)

The speaker then directly addresses a "slow / Horse the colour of rust" (that "O slow / Horse" is an example of the device known as apostrophe). There are several ways readers might interpret this passage:

- The rusty color of the horse might indicate that the animal is actually a metaphor for the passing "train." That is, the speaker is envision the train itself as a kind of rusty, mechanical horse.
- It's also possible that the speaker is literally riding a horse through this landscape. The fact that the horse is "the colour of rust" suggests not just that its coat is reddish-brown, but also that the animal itself is old and creaky.
- In either reading, the horse also symbolizes the speaker themselves: the *speaker* feels slow and rusty, perhaps as though deteriorating from disuse.

The speaker goes on to describe the sound of the horse's clomping hooves, which they metaphorically compare to "dolorous" (or sorrowful) "bells." This is a subtle example of pathetic fallacy, the speaker ascribing human emotion to inanimate objects. The metaphor might also make readers think of funeral tolling: the slow ringing of church bells to mark someone's death. (Recall the famous line from John Donne's "No Man Is an Island" meditation: "[...] never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee.")

The speaker is clearly feeling pretty hopeless. Perhaps they feel left behind, like they're stuck riding this slow, rusty horse while others rush past them on the train. And each clomp of that horse's hooves is just another reminder that the speaker has missed their shot; that they might as well be dead.

The sonic devices in this passage add to its somber, solemn tone. For example, the liquid /l/ alliteration of "leaves a line" and breathy /h/ of "Horse" and "Hooves" intensify the poem's

language, while continued sibilance evokes the quiet, still atmosphere. There's also the long, round /oh/ and open /uh/ assonance and guttural /r/ consonance:

> O slow
> Horse the colour of rust,
> Hooves, dolorous bells—

Altogether, these sounds slow the poem down, bringing the horse's plodding movements to life.

LINES 8-10

All morning the ...
... flower left out.

The speaker describes their surroundings once again. "All morning the / Morning has been blackening," the speaker says. Morning symbolizes new beginnings, the promise of a new day. The fact that this morning is "blackening"—growing darker—thus represents the dimming of the speaker's hope and potential.

The diacope here (the repetition of "morning") also conveys a sense of stagnancy and doom; things are just getting worse and worse (and morning can only "blacken" for so long; eventually, it will be night). The consonance and assonance of "morning" and "blackening" make the poem's language sound heavy and monotonous. Meanwhile, the /b/ alliteration in "been blackening" is blunt and forceful, suggesting the intensity of the speaker's growing despair.

Once again, the speaker uses enjambment to drag the poem out, filling it with white spaces that perhaps evoke the "fog" of this landscape. The enjambment across lines 8 and 9 delays the action of the sentence: the subject and verb don't arrive until after the line break:

> All morning the
> Morning has been blackening,

Readers aren't sure what comes after that "the"; the sentence is left hanging in midair, and readers must step across the unknown "whiteness" just as those "hills" from line 1 "step off into whiteness."

Finally, in line 10, the speaker metaphorically compares that "blackening" morning to a "flower" that's been "left out." Flowers, like mornings, symbolize hope and renewal (given that they bloom in the spring, a season of rebirth). But this flower's potential has been wasted; it's been picked and then abandoned, left to wilt and die. Again, readers can guess that the flower is meant to represent the speaker themselves.

LINES 11-15

My bones hold ...
... a dark water.

The speaker describes themselves directly for the first time in the poem, saying, "My bones hold a stillness." This surreal image again suggests a sense of stagnancy: the speaker feels stuck, rooted in place by their very bones. Perhaps the speaker also feels there is nowhere left for them to *go*.

The speaker then says, "the far / Fields melt my heart," which is an ambiguous metaphor:

- On the one hand, the metaphor of a heart being melted implies that the speaker's heart was previously *frozen*. Perhaps, then, the sight of these far-off fields conjures up a flood of emotion that might bring the speaker some *relief* from this terrible "stillness."
- But the speaker also says that these fields "threaten" to "let" the speaker "through to a heaven"—in other words, that they threaten to lead the speaker to their *death*. Maybe that's because staring out at distant fields only reminds the speaker that they're stuck, that it's too late, and that there's no hope. The only relief from this fog of despair is the deeper darkness of death.

The speaker's vision of "a heaven" in the next lines is not necessarily comforting:

- For one thing, it's "starless." The speaker is playing on the idea of "the heavens" often being a metaphor for the night sky, but in *this* heaven there are no lights to pierce the darkness. It's a blank, empty space.
- Also recall that stars symbolize fate or destiny (think of the phrase "written in the stars"), and that the speaker felt judged by stars earlier in the poem. Perhaps in this version of heaven, then, the speaker would be *free* from the pressures of destiny; there'd be no fate they'd have to live up to.
- This "heaven" is also "fatherless." Plath's own father died when she was a young girl, and she had a famously complicated relationship with his memory. A "fatherless" heaven might represent a place free from the weight of her issues with her family. At the same time, it suggests that this heaven has no God. It's a place where the speaker is utterly alone.

Finally, the speaker compares death to "a dark water." This is perhaps a subtle allusion to the mythical river Lethe. According to Greek myth, Lethe was one of the five rivers that flowed through the land of the dead. Its waters caused forgetfulness and oblivion. The speaker might be saying that in this "dark water" of death, they'd be oblivious to everything—including their own despair.

SYMBOLS

STARS

The stars in this poem symbolize the speaker's destiny.

This is often the case in literature: think of Shakespeare's famous star-crossed lovers (or even the young adult novel *The Fault in Our Stars*, whose title is another allusion to Shakespeare!).

When the speaker says that the "stars / Regard me sadly," this suggests that the whole universe, even fate itself, looks down on the speaker with pity and disappointment. This is because the speaker hasn't lived up to their destiny; they've failed to accomplish the very things they were put on this earth to do.

At the end of the poem, the speaker says that their overwhelming feelings of despair put them in danger of entering "a heaven" that is both "[s]tarless and fatherless, a dark water." The *absence* of stars in this scenario suggests that in death, there is no destiny—and therefore no feelings of failure.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "People or stars / Regard me sadly, I disappoint them."
- **Lines 13-15:** "They threaten / To let me through to a heaven / Starless and fatherless, a dark water."

MORNING

Morning is usually a symbol of new beginnings, fresh starts, and potential. As the sun rises on a new day, people may be filled with a sense of thrilling hopefulness. Yet the morning of "Sheep in Fog" is just getting darker and darker; the speaker says that "all morning," the "morning" itself has been "blackening." This darkening morning represents the dimming of the speaker's hopes, the sun setting on their potential. They're quickly running out of time to make good on the promise of the new day, and soon it will be too late.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-9:** "All morning the / Morning has been blackening,"

THE FLOWER

Flowers, much like the morning, usually symbolize potential, vitality, beauty, and so forth. They bloom in spring, a season itself symbolically linked with freshness and rebirth. That the flower in this poem has been "left out" thus represents the loss of the speaker's hopes and potential. The speaker's youth, beauty, and talent have been abandoned or forgotten, left to wilt in the cold rather than tended to.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "A flower left out."

WHITENESS/FOG

The "whiteness" of line 1 isn't just a description of the foggy landscape; it also symbolizes the speaker's feelings of obscurity, confusion, and invisibility.

The speaker portrays the "hills" not as stationary objects shrouded by mist, but as personified entities that "step off" into the bleary distance. And in the seemingly disappearing "hills," the speaker catches sight of their own disappearing self—a self who is unable to see the future clearly and who is likewise unseen by those around them.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "The hills step off into whiteness."

THE SLOW HORSE

The "slow / Horse" of stanza 2 might be an actual horse that the speaker is riding, or it might be a metaphor for the passing train. Either way, it also symbolizes the speaker themselves and their anxiety/despair about their pace in life. That is, the speaker feels like they haven't lived up to their own potential, and have failed to meet the world's expectations for them. They're moving along the path of life too slowly. The fact that the horse is "the colour of rust" further suggests the speaker's own feelings of decay/growing stiff and stale from disuse (perhaps because they haven't used their talents enough).

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-7:** "O slow / Horse the colour of rust, / Hooves, dolorous bells—"

POETIC DEVICES

IMAGERY

The poem uses evocative and sometimes ambiguous imagery to illustrate the speaker's confusion and pain. In the first line, for instance, the speaker says that the "hills step off into whiteness." This visual of a landscape shrouded in mist reflects the speaker's own sense of being lost and alone, overcome by an oppressive "fog" of despair. The speaker is subtly

personifying the hills here as well, treating them as though they're taking a dangerous "step" into the unknown.

In the second stanza, the speaker describes a passing "train," saying that it "leaves a line of breath" as it cuts across the landscape. While the speaker never says what season the poem takes place in, this imagery might call to mind the way that one's breath looks in the cold, thereby casting a chill over the poem. The train, like the hills in the first stanza, also seems alive here, like a presence sighing past the speaker (perhaps in another gesture of "disappointment").

The speaker then switches gears, describing a "slow / Horse the colour of rust." This might refer to a literal horse (one that, presumably, the speaker is riding) or it might be a metaphor for the train. Either way, it seems to symbolize the speaker's own life, which feels to them like a creaky, plodding animal.

What's clear, above all, from this imagery is that the speaker feels as if they've fallen behind, that they've missed the "train" and are instead proceeding at an almost crawl, their horse practically "rust[ing]" beneath them as they go. They even describe the "[h]ooves" of this horse as "dolorous bells," sonic imagery that might make readers think of the mournful tolling of funeral bells. Perhaps the speaker fears moving so slowly that they'll die before they reach their goal—or perhaps they feel like they're already dead.

The speaker goes on to say that "the / [m]orning has been blackening" (or getting darker and gloomier), like "a flower left out." The world around the speaker seems as dark and dismal as their own mind. Like the horse, this flower symbolizes the speaker themselves: though once chosen—"picked" like a pretty flower—the speaker has since been forgotten, left to wilt and decay. Also note that both the morning and flowers usually suggest positive things like hope, renewal, youth, and vitality. The fact that these things are "blackening" and wilting thus implies that the speaker feels no hope. For the speaker, the future seems to have already withered on the vine.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "The hills step off into whiteness."
- **Lines 4-9:** "The train leaves a line of breath. / O slow / Horse the colour of rust, / Hooves, dolorous bells— / All morning the / Morning has been blackening,"
- **Line 10:** "A flower left out."

PERSONIFICATION

The speaker personifies the landscape throughout the poem. This adds to the sense that the speaker can't escape the darkness of their mind (since their despair is reflected by their soundings) nor the judgment of the world.

The first example of personification comes in line 1, when the speaker says that the "hills step off into whiteness." The speaker is metaphorically describing the way that the hills appear shrouded in dense, white fog. But by personifying the hills—granting them the ability to "step"—the speaker brings the landscape to life, making it a vivid presence in the poem that readers will likely suspect represents the speaker's *own* feelings. That is, the fact that the "hills" are moving through the fog seems to reflect the speaker's own fear of "step[ping] off into whiteness"—of disappearing, being consumed by their own despair, and maybe even stepping off a metaphorical cliff to their doom.

The speaker also says that "stars" look down on them "sadly" and are "disappoint[ed]" by what they see. Stars are often a comforting presence in literature, a source of light and loveliness watching over the earth. They also traditionally represent fate or destiny. Their judgmental or pitying attitude here thus again reflects the depth of the speaker's despair; this is a person who feels like they've let down destiny itself.

The speaker also subtly personifies the sound of the horse's hooves, calling those metaphorical "bells" "dolorous," or mournful, and says that distant fields "threaten." Personification makes the whole world seem dismal and dangerous, leaving the speaker with nowhere to go.

Finally, the speaker personifies the train in line 4, saying that it "leaves a line of breath"—a metaphor for the steam it releases while moving past. Again, personification brings the world around the speaker to life. That "line of breath" might imply that the train is moving more quickly than the speaker on their "slow / Horse the colour of rust." The speaker feels like they're being left behind.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "The hills step off into whiteness."
- **Lines 2-3:** "stars / Regard me sadly, I disappoint them."
- **Line 4:** "The train leaves a line of breath."
- **Line 7:** "dolorous bells—"
- **Lines 11-13:** "My bones hold a stillness, the far / Fields melt my heart. / They threaten"

METAPHOR

Nearly the entire poem can be read metaphorically, each element here standing in for something more than itself. These metaphors (many of which overlap with the previously discussed personification) help to illustrate the speaker's pain and suffering.

In the second stanza, for example, the speaker addresses the horse they're (presumably) riding, calling it "slow" and comparing the sound of its hooves to mournful "bells." This horse might be read as a metaphor for the passing train (which is perhaps like a rusty, metal horse), or it may be a *literal* horse whose "slow" and "dolorous" gait symbolizes the speaker's feelings of stagnation, of falling behind in life.

While it's possible that the speaker isn't actually comparing the

horse's hooves to "dolorous bells" (and is instead simply pointing out another nearby sound), it certainly seems like the poem is turning to another metaphor here. Those sad bells might call to mind the ringing of church bells during a funeral service, adding to the poem's dark, dreary atmosphere.

In the next metaphor, the speaker compares the "blackening morning" to a "flower left out": a plucked flower that's since been abandoned, left to wilt and rot. Morning typically symbolizes youth, rebirth, and new beginnings, while flowers represent beauty. This metaphor, then, suggests that something once beautiful and promising has grown withered. Again, readers probably get the sense that the speaker is really talking about themselves here.

In lines 11-12, the speaker says that "the far / [f]ields melt [their] heart," indicating that something about the obscured horizon sets their emotions loose. But this flood of emotion isn't freeing or welcome; on the contrary, the speaker says it "threaten[s]" to sweep over them, leading them to a "heaven" that the speaker metaphorically calls "a dark water." The speaker is talking about the oblivion of death here—perhaps starless in the sense that there is no destiny in death, and perhaps fatherless in the sense that there is no God, either.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Lines 4-9
- Line 10
- Lines 11-15

DIACOPE

The diacope in lines 8-9 emphasizes the speaker's growing sense of dread and despair. The speaker says:

> All morning the
> Morning has been blackening,

The repetition of "morning" draws attention to a word that's usually associated with new beginnings, youth, and vitality. Here, however, that fresh morning is "blackening"—growing darker and darker. Perhaps a storm is rolling in, or perhaps the speaker is referencing the inevitable passage of time (which would darken the morning by turning it into night). Either way, readers get the sense that the speaker feels hopeless—like any promise or potential they once held is quickly slipping through their fingers.

The repetition of "morning" also lends rhythm to the poem, subtly evoking the "dolorous" (or sorrowful) hoofbeats of the "slow / [h]orse" the speaker is riding. The word "morning" itself might even make readers think of "mourning"—of grief and sorrow.

Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-9:** "All morning the / Morning has been blackening,"

ENJAMBMENT

The poem uses a mix of enjambed and end-stopped lines to evoke both the plodding rhythm of the speaker's "slow / [h]orse" as well as the feeling of not being able to see clearly in the fog.

Throughout the first four stanzas, the poem follows a pretty specific pattern in terms of enjambment: the first and third line of every stanza is end-stopped, while the middle line is enjambed. Take a look at the first stanza, for example:

> The hills step off into whiteness.
> People or stars
> Regard me sadly, I disappoint them.

On the one hand, the stanza is a kind of end-stop sandwich, lending the poem a flat, "slow" pace. While steady enjambment would create forward momentum, this mixture means that the poem stops and starts, just like the clopping "[h]ooves" of the "[h]orse" the speaker rides.

That middle line also adds a beat of anticipation and uncertainty. There's no clear link between the first line of the poem and the second; the reader can't know how "People or stars" connect to the "hills step[ping] off into whiteness" until they move on to the next line. At that point, readers can see that the speaker somehow connects the obscured landscape to their own sense of failure.

The enjambed middle lines of each stanza also *visually* evoke the way the "[f]og" (both literal and metaphorical) seems to press in around the speaker, obstructing their ability to see past their own misery. Lines 5 ("O slow") and 8 ("All morning the"), for example, seem to just break off in midair, as if the rest of the line has "step[ped] off into whiteness."

In the final stanza, the poem breaks the pattern it has established, having two enjambed lines instead of one:

> They threaten
> To let me through to a heaven
> Starless and fatherless, a dark water.

In this case, the extra enjambment seems to evoke the slipperiness of the speaker's despair, which is so powerful it "threaten[s]" to drown the speaker.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "stars / Regard"

- **Lines 5-6:** “slow / Horse”
- **Lines 8-9:** “the / Morning”
- **Lines 11-12:** “far / Fields”
- **Lines 13-14:** “threaten / To”
- **Lines 14-15:** “heaven / Starless”

SIBILANCE

Sibilance helps to evoke the silence of the landscape, which in turn reflects the speaker's feelings of "stillness" and stagnation.

The first stanza, in particular, has lots of sibilance:

> The hills step off into whiteness.
> People or stars
> Regard me sadly, I disappoint them.

These soft /s/ sounds add a hush over the poem, subtly evoking the speaker's isolation. Everything is quiet here, perhaps because the "fog" of their feelings muffles the sounds they might otherwise be able to hear. This sibilance also might evoke a "hissing" sound one might associate with disdain, reflecting the fact that the speaker feels judged by those "[p]eople or stars."

In lines 5-7, sibilance overlaps with lolling /l/ consonance and round /o/ assonance:

> O slow
> Horse the colour of rust,
> Hooves, dolorous bells—

These thick, rich sounds draw out the passage, evoking the horse's lethargic pace; it's as though the line itself is moving through molasses. Together, these sounds also come across as rather serious and somber, mimicking the "dolorous" (or mournful) sound of the "[h]ooves" striking the ground like "bells." There's something almost funereal about this procession, as if the speaker is marching toward their own death.

In the final line of the poem, sibilance pops up again. Here, the hiss of "Starless and fatherless" suggests the uninterrupted silence of death.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “step,” “whiteness”
- **Line 2:** “stars”
- **Line 3:** “sadly,” “disappoint”
- **Line 5:** “slow”
- **Line 6:** “Horse,” “rust”
- **Line 7:** “dolorous”
- **Line 15:** “Starless,” “fatherless”

ALLITERATION

Alliteration adds musicality and emphasis to certain moments in the poem. In line 4, for example, the speaker says that the passing "train leaves a line of breath." The alliteration places emphasis on the way the train's passage seems to linger in the air, as if to remind the speaker that they have been left behind.

At the beginning of lines 6 and 7, /h/ alliteration connects "Horse" and "Hooves," perhaps highlighting what is most important about this real or metaphorical "[h]orse" in terms of this particular poem—its sad, "slow" motion (that is, the movement of its hooves).

In line 9, the plosive /b/ sounds in "been blackening" have a heavy, pounding feel, evoking the weight of the speaker's growing despair. And in lines 11-12, the muffled /f/ sounds in "far / Fields" subtly suggest just how far away these fields are from the speaker, their presence indistinct through the fog of the speaker's misery.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “stars”
- **Line 3:** “sadly”
- **Line 4:** “leaves,” “line”
- **Line 6:** “Horse”
- **Line 7:** “Hooves”
- **Line 9:** “been,” “blackening”
- **Line 11:** “far”
- **Line 12:** “Fields”

ASSONANCE

Like alliteration, assonance adds rhythm and intensity to the poem. In the first stanza, for example, the combined /ar/ assonance and consonance of " stars / Regard" highlights the idea that the heavens are looking down on the speaker and judging them.

In line 5, the long, drawn-out /oh/ sounds in "O slow" mimic the lethargic gait of the speaker's horse, while the /ow/ sounds of "flower" and "out" simply draw attention to this sad image of a flower being plucked and abandoned. All this assonance also lends the language a sense of music and momentum, a gentle lyricism that adds to the poem's surreal, wistful tone.

Likewise, in lines 13-14, insistent short /eh/ sounds in "threaten," "let," and "heaven" add some sonic intensity to this passage, perhaps evoking the way that the speaker's despair threatens to carry them away. This intensity only deepens in the final line:

> Starless and fatherless, a dark water.

The intensely similar sounds of this final line make it ring out in the reader's ear, driving home the speaker's distress.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "stars"
- **Line 3:** "Regard"
- **Line 5:** "O," "slow"
- **Line 6:** "Horse," "colour," "rust"
- **Line 7:** "dolorous"
- **Line 10:** "flower," "out"
- **Line 11:** "bones," "hold," "far"
- **Line 12:** "heart"
- **Line 13:** "threaten"
- **Line 14:** "let," "heaven"
- **Line 15:** "Starless," "fatherless," "dark"

ASYNDETON

The poem's use of asyndeton adds to its gentle, somber tone. Listen to line 3, for example, which features a comma splice between two clauses:

> Regard me sadly, I disappoint them.

The caesura in the middle of this line adds a sense of drama and resignation to the speaker's final pronouncement: that other people and even the "stars" above are disappointed in them. The lack of any conjunction between these phrases adds to that resigned feel, as though the speaker can't muster the energy to elaborate.

There's more asyndeton (and caesura, for that matter) in the speaker's description of the "slow / Horse" they ride through this dreary landscape:

> Horse the colour of rust,
> Hooves, dolorous bells—

Once again, the lack of conjunctions makes the speaker sound resigned and mournful. They don't spell out connections between various parts of this description; the asyndeton here and elsewhere thus adds to the poem's sense of fragmentation, in turn evoking the way that the speaker feels confused and out of sorts.

Finally, the asyndeton in lines 11-12 emphasizes the relationship between the speaker's sense of stagnation and the intense emotion that they feel trying to catch sight of the obscured horizon. The speaker says,

> My bones hold a stillness, the far
> Fields melt my heart.

On the surface, it would seem that the use of a coordinating conjunction (an "and") between these two clauses wouldn't change the poem's meaning (though, of course, it would slow the poem down a bit). Yet the lack of any coordinating conjunction again illustrates the disjointed way that the speaker is experiencing things. Asyndeton eliminates any hierarchy between this "stillness" and melting; the speaker is both stiff *and* volatile at the same time.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "Regard me sadly, I disappoint them."
- **Lines 5-7:** "O slow / Horse the colour of rust, / Hooves, dolorous bells—"
- **Lines 11-12:** "My bones hold a stillness, the far / Fields melt my heart."

VOCABULARY

Regard (Line 3) - Look at or think about something.

O (Lines 5-6) - An expression of pain or grief as well as a direct address of the real or figurative "Horse."

Colour (Line 6) - The British spelling of "color."

Dolorous (Line 7) - Sorrowful.

Blackening (Lines 8-9) - Becoming dark and gloomy.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Sheep in Fog" is a free verse poem whose 15 lines are arranged in five tercets (three-line stanzas). These short stanzas draw out the poem, in doing so perhaps evoking the "slow," plodding gait of the horse/train pictured. Whereas a single stanza might have lent the poem a sense of speed and urgency, adding regular stanza breaks—and thus more white space to the page—suggests the speaker's own stagnation, their inability to shake the metaphorical "stillness" from their "bones."

The uniformity of these tercets might also subtly evoke the titular sheep, which all look the same from afar (especially through "fog"). Each stanza is likewise the same length, and they all might seem identical, form-wise, when viewed from a distance.

Plath used tercets in many of her later poems (including "Ariel," "Fever 103," and "Lady Lazarus"). The number three shows up in Plath's work in other ways as well, such as the number of voices in her dramatic poem "Three Women." There are many potential reasons why Plath might have been drawn to this form towards the end of her life. In this poem in particular, with its reference to the "stars" (which commonly symbolize destiny) in the first stanza and its suggestion of death at the end, it's possible Plath was thinking of the three Fates from Greek mythology. The Fates were in charge of each person's

destiny, represented by a thread: one spun this thread of life, another measured it, and the third cut it.

METER

As is typical of Plath's poetry, and of contemporary poetry more generally, "Sheep in Fog" is a free verse poem and thus has no meter.

Free verse had become the norm by the time Plath began writing. Here, the lack of meter keeps the poem's language sounding natural, allowing the reader to feel as if they're getting a peek into the speaker's mind. Instead of strict meter, Plath here relies on strong, propulsive imagery and lots of short, jagged lines to evoke the speaker's raw feelings of despair.

RHYME SCHEME

As a free verse poem, "Sheep in Fog" doesn't use a rhyme scheme. While rhyme might have made the poem more musical, the lack of rhyme allows the poem to feel more true to the speaker's experience. The speaker's feelings of stagnation aren't beautiful; they're unbearable. By eschewing rhyme, the poem is able to be as spare and precise as possible, cutting right to the heart of the speaker's overwhelming sense of despair.

SPEAKER

Readers never learn anything about the speaker of this poem apart from the fact that this person feels deeply lost and alone. Like the titular sheep wandering around in a dense fog, the speaker seems to have meandered off the path laid out for them by other "people" or by the "stars" of destiny, and they can't seem to get back on track. They feel stuck, stagnant, and like they will never find a way out of the obscuring "fog" of despair.

Plath wrote this poem a few weeks before her death by suicide. While readers shouldn't take all of Plath's speakers as direct stand-ins for the poet herself, it's hard not to see Plath's own struggles reflected in the speaker's pain. Like the speaker, Plath felt stuck at the time she wrote this poem; her marriage had failed, the winter was bleak, and though she was writing the poems that would make her famous after her death, her career was not taking off in the way she had hoped.

SETTING

The poem takes place on a foggy day. There are "hills" that seem to "step off into whiteness" (i.e., they're consumed by fog). There's also a "train" emitting smoke, which the speaker compares to "a line of breath" in the cold. It's "morning," and there are "fields" in the distance.

Plath actually wrote an introduction for this poem in which she said, "In this poem, the speaker's horse is proceeding at a slow, cold walk down a hill of macadam to the stable at the bottom. It is December. It is foggy. In the fog there are sheep." Yet the poem itself is much less straightforward.

It isn't clear, for example, whether the "slow / Horse" is meant to be a literal horse, a metaphor for the train, or even a metaphor for the speaker's own body. Likewise, the poem's title is "Sheep in Fog," yet the poem doesn't ever mention sheep at all. These sheep might be a literal part of the landscape, or they might be a metaphor for the speaker's feelings of being ordinary or indistinguishable from those around her.

Part of what makes the poem's setting so powerful is the fact that it is difficult to tell whether descriptions are meant to be taken literally or not. The landscape seems at once real and like a reflection of the speaker's inner world. The speaker seems physically surrounded by their misery, unable to distract themselves from the intense feelings that "threaten" to overwhelm them.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

The American poet Sylvia Plath wrote "Sheep in Fog" in December of 1962, though she revised it dramatically in January of 1963. There's no way to know if she meant to continue working on the poem, as she died by suicide only a few weeks later. The revised version of the poem is much bleaker than the first draft, which originally concluded with the following lines:

> Patriarchs till now immobile
> In heavenly wools
> Row off as stones or clouds with the faces of babies

The revised ending, however, reflects some common motifs in Plath's work: an absent father figure (the subject of her poem "Daddy"), rigid "stars" (representing one's destiny), and a sinister fate involving "dark water." In fact, this poem bears a strong resemblance to Plath's "Words," which was written only a few weeks later and which also ends with the speaker envisioning themselves "at the bottom of a pool."

"Sheep in Fog" might also be considered a sister poem to "Ariel," as both were partly inspired by Plath's time taking horseback riding lessons. Plath wrote in her introduction to "Ariel" that this was the name of a horse she was "especially fond of," and she also described the speaker of "Sheep in Fog" as riding a horse in December fog.

Like many of the poems that Plath wrote in the last five months of her life, "Sheep in Fog" features distinctive, hallucinogenic imagery that may have been a result of her writing habits at this time. She wrote 26 of the poems that would eventually make up

Ariel and Other Poems in frantic bursts, often during the night or early morning when she was unable to sleep. It was a period of isolation for Plath, who was still living in England after her separation from her husband, the English poet Ted Hughes. She was left to look after her two children (who were often sick) in a house without a telephone, whose pipes had frozen during one of the coldest winters in a century. The feelings of stagnancy and despair expressed in this poem, then, seem to reflect what Plath was experiencing in her own life.

This intensity of subject matter and autobiographical nature of the poem makes it an example of confessional poetry, a mode of poetry with which Plath is often associated.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Plath was born in 1932. The U.S. of the midcentury, and particularly suburbia, where Plath was raised, was typically a place of stifling social expectations. Women were under extraordinary strain to look and act a certain way, to keep themselves sexually "pure" for marriage, and to set aside their own needs and desires in the service of creating the perfect domestic life promised to men in the wake of World War II.

Plath also struggled with mental illness throughout her life, and in the months leading up to her suicide was in the middle of a particularly bad depressive episode. While Plath had performed exceptionally in school and was already gaining recognition as a serious writer by the age of 30, she undoubtedly saw the implosion of her marriage to poet Ted Hughes as a failure. In the wake of their separation, she struggled to maintain a balance between writing and caring for her two young children. Plath had exacting expectations for herself that were reinforced not only by society, but also by her mother. Considering this context, the poem seems to demonstrate the suffocating impact of social, cultural, and familial expectations.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poet's Life and Legacy — A biography of Plath from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/sylvia-plath)
- The Poem Read Aloud — Listen to a recording of the poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=844d4RLMBOQ)
- Plath's Horseback Riding Lessons — A blogpost from Gail Crowther, a researcher who specializes in Plath, about the farm that partially inspired both "Sheep in Fog" and "Ariel." (https://sylviaplathinfo.blogspot.com/2019/10/the-site-of-sylvia-plaths-ariel.html)
- "Crash Course" Introduction to Plath's Work — Author John Green talks about Plath's work for his web series, Crash Course Literature. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iJn0ZPd6mYo)
- A Glimpse at Plath's Revision Process — An auction listing for draft revisions of "Sheep in Fog," which discusses the significance of being able to peek into the poet's revision process at this pivotal point in her life. (https://www.bonhams.com/auctions/20923/lot/373/)

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
- The Applicant
- The Arrival of the Bee Box
- The Moon and the Yew Tree
- Words

HOW TO CITE

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