

Words



SUMMARY

The speaker compares words to axes. After an ax cuts into a tree, the wood reverberates, and the echoes of this ringing wood travel far and wide. They travel away from the spot the ax struck like galloping horses.

The tree's sap comes brimming to the surface of the wood much like tears well up in a person's eyes, or in the way that the water in a pond tries to return to its calm, perfectly reflective state after being disrupted by a rock that falls into it and swirls the waters around.

The speaker re-imagines this rock as a colorless skull being picked clean by underwater plants. The speaker then says that after much time has passed, they come across the words they initially compared to axes out on the road.

These words now seem withered, and though the speaker once compared them to horses, they now appear to be horses with no riders, trotting along tirelessly, even relentlessly. In the meantime, the speaker says, the depths of the pond reflect the inflexible stars above, stars that rule over the speaker's fate.

pain and also might again speak to words' power to hurt—to draw sap-like tears from those who read them.

Yet though the writer may feel power and control while *writing*, their words can't be contained after being *written*. After these ax-like words strike, a chorus of "Echoes travel[s] / Off from the center like horses." That is, words swiftly travel away from the writer. And that aforementioned "sap" becomes like "water" in a pond trying to calm itself after a falling rock has disturbed it—another image that suggests the writer grappling to re-establish control, to make those words turn back into a "mirror" after being disrupted (this "mirror" might further speak to the way that poetry reflects truth back to the world).

The speaker goes on to re-imagine the "rock" dropped into the water as a "white skull / eaten by weedy greens." This image again suggests that the speaker's anxiety about their words existing without them: the living (represented by those "weedy greens") will hungrily devour the speaker's words even as the speaker themselves is forgotten. It's also possible to read these lines as illustrating the way that these words may continue to *nourish* the living after the speaker's death.

However readers take these images, it's clear that the speaker's words have taken on a life of their own. Returning to the metaphor of words as galloping horses, the speaker envisions encountering them years later "dry and riderless," with "indefatigable hoof-taps"—still tirelessly trotting along.

That the "horses" are no longer controlled by riders implies that they've freed themselves of the speaker's intentions, while the word "dry" suggests that they've shaken off all the "sap" and "water" from earlier in the poem. The word "dry" might also suggest that these words are lacking in humanity, perhaps, and somehow wild and mechanical at once. In any case, it's as if the speaker sees no trace of themselves in the poems they've written; the writer has been erased, even as their words live on.

The speaker ends with the image of "fixed stars" being reflected "[f]rom the bottom of the pool." This echoes the earlier image of the submerged skull, suggesting that the speaker doesn't have control over their own life. Instead, that life is "Govern[ed]" by the cosmos, something mysterious and out of reach. Thus even as the speaker's *words* are free, the speaker *themselves* is not.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20



THEMES



THE POWER AND LIMITS OF WRITING

"Words" is about language itself. Comparing words to axes whose strokes echo far and wide, the poem highlights the sense of power and control the speaker feels when writing. At the same time, the poem implies that this feeling of mastery is short-lived: once words are written and sent out into the world, they stop belonging to the writer. Instead, they're like "riderless" horses galloping along "the road" while the writer themselves remains trapped, "govern[ed]" by forces outside of their command. The poem thus suggests that writing provides only the temporary illusion of control, as the speaker writes things that ultimately become freer than the speaker themselves ever can.

The poem begins by comparing "Words" to "Axes," a [metaphor](#) highlighting the power of language. Just as axes cut down trees so that their wood can be made into something else, the speaker can transform raw experience into art by writing about it. The ax metaphor also implies words' ability to *hurt*; words can *cut*—those who read them and, perhaps, those who write them.

The speaker also suggests that writing can be cathartic, describing "sap" that "wells like tears" after this ax-stroke. This image evokes the way writers may wring art out of their own



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

Axes ...
... *the wood rings,*

The poem's title, "Words," announces its subject right away: language. Readers can take the speaker to be a writer and perhaps Plath herself, though it isn't essential to do so; the important thing is the speaker's relationship to language.

The poem itself begins with a [metaphor](#), describing "[w]ords" as:

Axes
After whose stroke the wood rings,

While Plath could have chosen to describe "[w]ords" as just about anything, she chose axes—tools used for chopping down trees or splitting wood. The metaphor has a couple of different implications:

- Axes are sharp and dangerous, perhaps suggesting the potential words have to hurt (to *cut*) their subject.
- But axes are also powerful tools that can turn trees into lumber, which can then be used to construct just about anything. In this way, words might be seen as filled with great creative potential—as agents of meaning-making and change.

Note the [pun](#) of "wood rings" here as well:

- "Rings" most obviously refers to the reverberating sound of the ax thwacking into the tree trunk (especially since the following line describes the "echoes" of this sound). But this word also plays on the fact that trees *literally* have rings—lines inside their trunks that reflect how old they are.
- In a way, then, words, like axes, have the ability to *reveal* what is normally *hidden* from view—to cut into the heart of things.

However readers specifically interpret these lines, there's no denying that the speaker links writing with a sense of power and control.

LINES 3-5

And the echoes! ...
... *center like horses.*

The speaker goes on to describe the "echoes" the reverberate after that those [metaphorical](#) axes (i.e., words) cut into "the wood." These echoes rush off away "from the center"—the place where the cut was made—"like horses."

The exclamation point following the first "echoes" in line 3 suggests the thrill the speaker/writer feels when they write and perhaps the sheer delight of seeing one's words ring out far and wide. And note how the [anadiplosis](#) of these lines evokes the very "echoes" the speaker is describing, with the word "echoes" repeating itself across lines 3 and 4:

And the echoes!
Echoes traveling

This [repetition](#) adds a sense of momentum to the poem, suggesting the way words pick up resonance as they speed away from the speaker/writer and "travel" off into the world.

These "echoes" *themselves* might [symbolize](#) some very different ideas, however:

- On the one hand, the word "echoes" emphasizes the power of language: a writer's words may reverberate far from their source, spreading the writer's messages, beliefs, and so forth.
- On the other hand, the fact that these "echoes" are "traveling / Off from the center" might *also* suggest that they're getting farther and farther away from conveying what the writer *intended*. In this way, "echoes" might symbolize the *failure* of words to express the "center," or the essential thing that the writer was trying to express.

Likewise, the [simile](#) comparing these "echoes" to running "horses" is rather ambiguous. Horses are powerful creatures often domesticated for use by human beings for various uses—war, farming, traveling, communication, sport, and even art (for example, dressage, an art form in which riders and their horses perform beautiful and elegant exercises which show off the rider's mastery of their horse). This perhaps suggests that words, like horses, can be *used* by people to various ends—be they violent, constructive, communicative, or expressive.

Yet the fact that these horse-like words are "traveling / Off from the center" might *also* imply that as they get farther away from the person writing them, said person loses *control* over the words—the words take on a life, and perhaps a wildness, of their own. This speaks to the contradictory nature of language; for a writer, it is both a powerful tool *and* one that might wrangle free from the writer's control.

LINES 6-11

The sap ...
... *drops and turns,*

The speaker returns to the tree: having been struck by those word-axes, the tree's "sap" (the sugary liquid inside plants and trees) "Wells like tears."

This [metaphor/simile](#) (the "sap" is metaphorical, but comparing

the "sap" to "tears" is a simile) implies that the person affected by words (whether it's the person *reading* them the person *writing* them) is moved to feel emotions that normally exist below the surface. Apparently, those ax-like words are able to cut or penetrate deep into people.

- This image might also reflect the idea that writers may mine their own pain/tears in the *process* of writing—the way that writers pour themselves into their work. (Such an idea would also make the loss of *control* over that work all the more strange and painful.)

The image of welling sap/tears then becomes water in a pond or lake (or any still body of water) trying to calm itself—to again become a smooth, still "mirror," a reflective surface—after that surface has been disrupted by a falling rock. There are a few different ways to interpret the [imagery](#) of the "rock" falling into the water and the water trying to "re-establish its mirror":

- The speaker might be describing the way that a person moved to "tears" by words will try to recover their *composure*, pretending all is well on the surface even as the "rock" (or words) stirs up their emotions below.
- The speaker might also be saying the writer themselves is moved by the words as they write them, and needs to "re-establish" control over their emotions in order to maintain a calm, neutrally "reflective" state of mind so that they can write.
- Finally, this image speaks to the idea that poetry/literature can hold a *mirror* up to the world—that it can reflect the truth of things.

In any case, what's clear is that words have the ability to stir up the deep feelings that normally reside under the surface.

But this is perhaps all words are capable of doing. The pond will inevitably return to its naturally placid state as soon as the "rock" settles and the ripples die away. In this way, the pond's "mirror" might be a [symbol](#) of stasis—though whether this stasis is one of steadfastness or stagnancy is hard to say. That is, the stillness of the pond might represent the writer's ability to turn even the most thorny of personal experiences into fodder for something greater than themselves; alternatively, it might suggest the inability of words to enact any real change.

LINES 12-13

*A white skull, ...
... by weedy greens.*

In lines 12-13, the speaker describes the "rock [...] drop[ped]" into the pond as:

A white skull,

Eaten by weedy greens.

Like just about everything in this poem, this [imagery](#) is open to interpretation!

- The "white skull" might suggest that words, once they've cut/penetrated the person who is reading or writing them, lose their power and "die," so to speak.
- Then again, the fact that the "skull" is being devoured by the grasses that live at the bottom of the pond might suggest that the words provide a kind of *sustenance*—that even though their effect might not be seen on the surface for very long, they continue to offer *nourishment* to the person reading them.
- Alternatively, the "skull" might represent the writer *themselves*, whose words live on long after they have died. This might be taken as a good thing—the writer's work nourishing new life—or as a creepy, invasive thing, the living greedily feasting upon the writer in both life and death.
 - Given the historical context of this poem (Plath died by suicide days after writing it), it's possible that she's musing on how her poetry will be received in her absence.

The intense /ee/ [assonance](#) in "Eaten by weedy greens" draws attention to the second half of this imagery, perhaps suggesting the importance of the process in which the "skull" is consumed by, and therefore transformed into, the "greens."

And in fact, the skull may be understood to represent more of a [symbolic](#) death than a literal one. Since death is often used to symbolize transformation and new beginnings, the "skull" may very well suggest the way a writer might turn something sad or difficult into something beautiful and meaningful through the act of writing.

LINES 14-17

*Years later I ...
... The indefatigable hoof-taps.*

"Years later," the speaker says, they come across the words they once wrote "on the road." This is not a *literal* road, but a [metaphorical](#) one—perhaps the "path" of life itself.

Earlier in the poem, the speaker compared words to horses galloping away "from the center"—from their place of origin. Now, those horses are "dry and riderless." Being "riderless" implies that the words are no longer steered by the writer's intentions; they've grown wild, taken on a life of their own.

The word "dry," meanwhile, might mean that these words have lost their meaning or purpose. Now, the image might suggest, these words are just the "echoes" that were set in motion long ago. Perhaps the speaker/writer no longer relates to them at

all; they've lost their power to draw "sap"/"tears."

The speaker also describes the sound of their "hoof-taps" as "indefatigable," or tireless and relentless. This might suggest how determined the speaker was when they wrote these words that now won't die. Yet "indefatigable" might also suggest that there's something joyless and even robotic about the way these words carry on and on.

The word "encounter" also suggests the unexpected nature of the speaker coming across these words "[y]ears later," perhaps implying that the accidental recovery of these words is what instigated this rumination on the nature of language in the first place. The word "encounter" implies that this meeting is difficult or challenging in some way—as if the speaker is perhaps being reminded of a past version of themselves they do not wish to remember: a self who was overly ambitious, perhaps, or who simply didn't know what the speaker knows now.

LINES 18-20

While...

... Govern a life.

In the final three lines of the poem, the speaker returns to the pond/lake [metaphor](#) from the second stanza. "While" the speaker's words have carried on without them like riderless horses, they themselves seem to be at "the bottom of the pool," where they're "[g]overn[ed]" (or ruled) by "fixed stars." In other words, the speaker feels stuck—trapped or controlled by outside forces. The speaker's "riderless" words are thus freer, in a way, than the speaker is themselves.

These final lines most likely [allude](#) to astrology and the tarot, two things in which Plath was interested and well-versed. Taking the speaker as Plath herself allows for some interesting interpretations here:

- Plath's astrological sign was Scorpio, a water sign. This might be what she's talking about with the idea of a "life" lived "From the bottom of the pool," a place of deeply felt emotion and intuition.
- Scorpio is also a "fixed" sign, which means that those born under it are particularly stubborn and determined, not easily changed (if you believe in astrology, that is!). This echoes the "indefatigable" quality of the speaker's words, which reverberate across time and space. It might also suggest that part of the speaker's anxiety around language comes from the fact that—powerful as it is—it cannot really *change* the speaker themselves.
- Scorpio is also associated with the Death card in tarot, a card that [symbolizes](#) *transformation* rather than literal death. In this way, the poem might be alluding to major changes in the poet's own life at the time, as Plath had just gone through a rocky break-up with husband Ted Hughes and was

contemplating what the next stage of her life would look like.

Then again, it's hard not to take the "bottom of the pool" and Scorpio's associations with death more literally, considering Plath wrote this poem only 10 days before her suicide. The poem, like Plath herself, is nothing if not ambivalent! Rather than settling on one, singular interpretation, readers might experience its contradictory implications as a testament of the power and limitations of language, something that both fascinates and frustrates the speaker.



SYMBOLS



ECHOES

In the poem, echoes [symbolize](#) the way that words (and their impact) may travel far and wide. Just as a single sound can produce echoes that carry into the distance, a single word can resonate across time and space. In this way, words take on a life of their own, outliving the person who put them down on paper.

At the same time, echoes might be seen to symbolize the *failure* of words: while echoes may ring out into the distance, they are, at the end of the day, only *echoes*. And when the speaker says that these echoes "travel[] / Off from the center," this perhaps suggests that something "cent[ral]," or essential, to the speaker is being *lost* in translation.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-5:** "And the echoes! / Echoes traveling / Off from the center like horses."



THE WATER/MIRROR

In the second stanza, the "mirror" of the water's surface might [symbolize](#) a kind of stasis or neutrality—a state that the writer's words disrupt.

In the first stanza, the speaker compares words to axes whose sharp edges cause "sap" to well up to the surface of the wood "like tears." This image speaks to words' ability to stir up emotions.

The speaker compares this phenomenon to "water" that's been disturbed by a "rock" falling into it. Just as the rock stirs the waters, words agitate the writer's or reader's feelings (or both!). The speaker then says that the water tries to "re-establish its mirror," suggesting that the person impacted by these words is going to very quickly attempt to return to a place of calm and control—a place of reflecting the world rather than being stirred up by it.

This suggests a contradiction: although words are

"indefatigable" (i.e., they are tireless and their impact can be felt for a long time after they've been written/read), in another sense their impact is quite *temporary*. They may stir up emotions for a few brief moments, but ultimately those emotions even out. This hints at the speaker's feelings of being stuck, as words can't really *change* their life, only very briefly make hidden things visible.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-9:** "like the / Water striving / To re-establish its mirror"



THE SKULL AND GREENS

In the third stanza, the speaker introduces the image of a "white skull" being feasted on "by weedy greens."

This image is open to a few different [symbolic](#) interpretations. On the one hand, it might symbolize the way that a writer's words sustain others long after the writer themselves has died:

- The skull, in this reading, represents the dead speaker/writer. The fact that "weedy greens"—something still alive—are *feeding* on the skull implies the power of words to outlive the people who write them.
- This image also suggests that words *extend* the life of the writer, who's able to nourish others with their words long after they themselves have ceased to exist. In this reading, the writer's words—and thus a piece of the writer themselves—live on after death.

On the other hand, the "weedy greens" might be seen as greedy readers who devour the writer's life force in their hunger for more and more writing. In this less positive reading, the image might represent the way readers pick a writer dry, gobbling up every trace of their life in an attempt to get more "words" from them.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 12-13:** "A white skull, / Eaten by weedy greens."



POETIC DEVICES

ENJAMBMENT

The poem uses a mix of [enjambement](#) and [end-stopped](#) lines to vary its tone and pacing. In the first stanza, for instance, there are two enjambed lines and three end-stopped lines:

Axes
After whose stroke the wood rings,

And the echoes!
Echoes **traveling**
Off from the center like horses.

The poem's initial, one-word line is enjambed, giving this opening a swiftness befitting the [metaphor](#) of words as sharp, cutting objects. Visually, the first line seems almost to have been hacked off and separated from the following line, again suggesting the power words have to arrange reality. The next two lines are then end-stopped, adding emphasis to the sound of the metaphorical ringing and echoing of these words. Altogether, the mix of enjambed and end-stopped lines illustrates the command and control a writer has when wielding language.

By contrast, the second stanza uses *only* enjambed lines:

The sap
Wells like tears, like the
Water striving
To re-establish its mirror
Over the rock

These enjambments draw attention to the fluid way "sap" wells to the surface of the cut tree (and how tears well up in the reader/writer). It also might evoke the swift, hurried movement of that water as it tries to right itself after being disrupted by a falling rock.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Axes / After"
- **Lines 4-5:** "traveling / Off"
- **Lines 6-7:** "sap / Wells"
- **Lines 7-8:** "the / Water"
- **Lines 8-9:** "striving / To"
- **Lines 9-10:** "mirror / Over"
- **Lines 10-11:** "rock / That"
- **Lines 14-15:** "I / Encounter"
- **Lines 18-19:** "While / From"
- **Lines 19-20:** "stars / Govern"

SIMILE

The poem uses several [similes](#). The first is in lines 4-5, when the speaker describes the effect of words as:

Echoes traveling
Off from the center like horses.

This is a complex comparison. On the one hand, horses are powerful creatures often associated with human conquest and communication. For this reason, the horse-like echoes might be seen to represent the way that words can carry forth human meaning, "traveling" out into the world with the writer's

intentions on their backs. This interpretation speaks to the *control* the writer has when wielding words, just as someone riding a horse exerts control over a huge and powerful animal.

At the same time, however, these horse-like echoes are described as moving "Off from the center," suggesting, perhaps, that something is *lost* in the act of wrestling experience into language. That is, the writer's intentions are only the point of origin, whereas the words themselves take on a life of their own that extends far beyond that of their creator.

The third stanza then contains two similes, one after the other:

The sap
Wells like tears, like the
Water striving
To re-establish its mirror

In this comparison, the sap (the sugary liquid that courses through plants) of the [metaphorical](#) axed tree comes to the surface "like tears." This simile suggests that words have the power to hurt and provoke, to bring to the surface emotions that normally reside deep inside people.

The poem quickly follows this first simile with a second one: just as words bring these emotions to the surface, the person experiencing said emotions will try to cover them up or soothe themselves into being calm. This action resembles the way water attempts "to re-establish its mirror"—its smooth, reflective surface—after being disrupted by a falling rock.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "Echoes traveling / Off from the center like horses."
- **Lines 6-11:** "The sap / Wells like tears, like the / Water striving / To re-establish its mirror / Over the rock / That drops and turns,"

IMAGERY

The poem is driven by striking [imagery](#), much of which is part of its many compelling [metaphors](#) and [similes](#).

From the very first line, the speaker describes language in a way that makes it more visceral to the reader, something that can be seen, heard, and felt. Words are like axes thwacking into wood, the "ringing" sound/vibrations they create echoing outward like galloping horses. Through this imagery, the poem paints language as a powerful tool with almost immeasurable consequences.

The speaker goes on to say that "sap / Wells like tears" after this ax-strike, evoking the way that words slice into people just as axes slice into trees, drawing forth buried pain and emotion. The speaker stays with this watery imagery, depicting a pond/lake/still body of water that gets disturbed by a falling rock. That water quickly "striv[es] / To re-establish its mirror"—to

return to its reflective state, to calm the ripples caused by "the rock / That drops and turns." The pond and the rock are both figurative; this easy-to-imagine scene might represent the way that a person, after being affected by words, tries to regain their composure.

This image might also suggest that, like a rock dropped into a pond, the effect that words have is only a *temporary* one. That rock stirs up the waters but then sinks to the bottom, where it gets "Eaten" by underwater grasses. The imagery of the "skull" at the bottom of the pond being devoured by "greens" can be interpreted in different ways, however:

- On the one hand, it might suggest that language isn't as powerful as the writer thinks: words, no matter how cutting and disruptive, eventually sink and "die," and the surface of things again becomes smooth and reflective.
- On the other hand, the "skull" might represent the writer of the words, who, even after they have died, sustains (or is cruelly consumed by) the interior life of the pond with their creation.

Likewise, the imagery in the final stanza is clear and compelling yet far from simple:

- The speaker describes the words they once wrote, words they haven't seen in "years," as "dry and riderless" with "indefatigable hoof-taps." This echoes the imagery in stanza 1 of words echoing far off "like horses."
- But now the power of these echoes seems completely removed from the speaker themselves; they are "riderless [horses]," no longer being guided by the speaker's intentions. They might be wild, serving their own unknowable purposes, or they might be seen as rather robotic—having lost their purpose altogether but still carrying on mechanically.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Axes / After whose stroke the wood rings,"
- **Lines 6-13:** "The sap / Wells like tears, like the / Water striving / To re-establish its mirror / Over the rock / That drops and turns, / A white skull, / Eaten by weedy greens."
- **Lines 16-17:** "Words dry and riderless, / The indefatigable hoof-taps."

METAPHOR

Much of the poem relies on [metaphor](#). All this [figurative language](#) is open to multiple interpretations—a fact that speaks to the power of language and to the poems' very idea that

words may take on a life outside of a writer's intentions.

For example, the first line immediately uses the metaphor of "Axes" to depict the power of words themselves:

Axes
After whose stroke the wood rings,

The metaphor of an ax striking a tree suggests that words have the power to cut deep. This metaphor suggests that words can be violent, that they can injure and maim. At the same time, however, this metaphor might suggest the writer's positive creative potential: one must cut down a tree in order to build something out of its wood. Those ax-like words, then, might be seen as powerful tools of creation/construction *and* of pain/destruction.

The speaker describes the effect of these words as "echoes" that carry into the distance, far beyond the control of the person who wrote them. As a metaphor, the word "echoes" implies both the reach and longevity of words—their ability to carry far into the distance—and also the way that words over time move away from the writer's intentions, perhaps failing to convey what the writer was trying to communicate (they are "echoes" of something rather than the thing itself).

In the second stanza, the poem returns to the metaphor of the cut tree when the speaker says that "sap / Wells." After being struck by an ax, sap (the liquid that flows through a tree, nourishing it) comes to the tree's surface. The speaker uses a [simile](#) to compare this process to the way tears spring to the eyes when someone is hurt or moved, suggesting that words have the power to summon emotion.

But though words may bring emotions to the surface, the speaker uses a metaphor of a pond to illustrate the way in which such disruptions are only temporary. The speaker says that the pond tries:

To re-establish its mirror
Over the rock
That drops and turns,

That is, words are like "rock[s]" thrown into a pond: they stir things up and cause little ripples to spread out (much like the "echoes" from the first stanza), but ultimately the surface of the pond returns to its still, reflective state. In this way, the poem suggests that the effect of words isn't permanent; the pond hasn't really changed in any significant way.

In the final stanza, the speaker returns to the "Echoes" from the first stanza, and to the simile comparing them to "traveling [...] horses." The writers' words continue to exist but they're now "dry and riderless," perhaps suggesting that they are far removed from the writer's intentions. Though the speaker's words live on, they aren't really the *speaker's* anymore.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 6-11
- Lines 16-17
- Lines 18-19

ASSONANCE

[Assonance](#) adds to the poem's rhythm and musicality. In the opening lines, for example, notice the shared /ah/ sounds of "Axes" and "after." This assonance starts things off on an intense, emphatic note that perhaps evokes the power of those ax-like words.

In the second stanza, the open /aw/ sounds of "rock" and "drops" might bring to mind the plopping sound of a rock falling into still water. Some of the poem's most striking assonance, however, comes in line 13, where the insistent long /ee/ sounds of "Eaten by weedy greens" adds intensity to this important [imagery](#). However one chooses to interpret this passage, one can sense how important this moment is because of the prominent assonance.

Finally, in line 16, long /i/ assonance links "dry" with "riderless." This calls readers' attention to the image at hand, while also perhaps suggesting a connection between the words being "dry" (dull, lacking vitality, mechanical) and their being "riderless" (that is, divorced from the writer's intentions/control).

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Axes"
- **Line 2:** "After"
- **Line 10:** "rock"
- **Line 11:** "drops"
- **Line 13:** "Eaten," "weedy," "greens"
- **Line 16:** "dry," "riderless"

REPETITION

The poem uses a couple of different kinds of [repetition](#). In lines 3-4, for example, note the use of [anadiplosis](#):

And the echoes!
Echoes traveling

The repetition of the word "echoes" here adds rhythm and momentum to the poem while also enacting the very thing it's describing: the "echoing," or repeating, of words. In this way, the poem not only describes the effect that words have but actually brings that effect to life on the page.

The poem turns to repetition again in lines 7-8 as it introduces two [similes](#):

The sap
Wells like tears, like the
Water striving

There's no conjunction between these similes either, an example of the poetic device called [asyndeton](#). As a result, the similes seem to pile up on top of each other, the speaker quickly jumping from one evocative image to the next.

On the one hand, this might suggest the speaker's sense of fluid mastery while writing. And yet, there's perhaps also something a little overwhelming and maybe even frustrating here. It's as though the speaker must keep making *comparisons*, reaching for better and better ways to describe an idea rather than being able to express it directly.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "And the echoes! / Echoes traveling"
- **Lines 7-8:** "Wells like tears, like the / Water"



VOCABULARY

Sap (Lines 6-7) - A watery, sugary fluid that flows through a plant.

Re-establish (Lines 8-9) - To form or put in place once again.

Encounter (Lines 14-15) - Meet or confront.

Hoof-taps (Line 17) - The sound the horses hooves make on the road.

Indefatigable (Line 17) - Tireless or unrelenting.

Govern (Lines 19-20) - Rule or control.

Fixed stars (Lines 19-20) - Refers to stars that are so far away their position in relation to other stars appears permanent. Also likely a reference to astrology (i.e., the position of the stars when the speaker was born).



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Words" is made up of four quintains, or five-line stanzas. It doesn't have a traditional form such as a [sonnet](#) or a [villanelle](#), but these short, terse stanzas and almost splintered lines (some only containing a word or two) are pretty characteristic of Plath's later poetry. The consistent stanza length evokes the sense of control that the speaker so desires, while the clipped, frequently [enjambéd](#) lines create a sense of fragmentation—of that control splintering and breaking. All in all, the form creates a sense of someone trying to control something that, in fact, feels completely out of their control.

METER

The poem is written in [free verse](#) and therefore doesn't follow a set [meter](#).

While this is often the case in contemporary poetry, it's worth noting that even by contemporary standards, this poem is chiseled down to an almost skeletal sparseness! And the *absence* of meter adds to the poem's clipped, truncated feel. For instance, the first line feels hacked off not only because of its brevity but also because the word "Axes" is made up of a **stressed** syllable followed by an **unstressed** syllable. Emphasis lands on the first half of the word and then falls away. Without a steady meter, readers are kept on edge, unsure of where the poem will go next. This, in turn, might subtly evoke the speaker's anxiety.

RHYME SCHEME

Just as the poem avoids conventional [meter](#), it also steers away from using a traditional [rhyme scheme](#). While there are a couple of near [end rhymes](#) at the beginning of the poem ("rings," "traveling," and "striving" in lines 2, 4, and 8), overall the poem refuses outright musicality. Instead, the lack of rhyme seems to suggest the speaker's practical, craftsman-like relationship to language; words aren't strung together simply because they sound beautiful together but are chosen painstakingly one by one, an effort that feels especially obvious in lines where there are only one or two words.



SPEAKER

The speaker of "Words" is, most likely, a writer—someone who works with language. It's fair (though not necessary) to take the speaker as Plath herself talking specifically about her relationship to her own poetry.

The speaker is also someone whose life feels out of their control. They view their destiny as "Govern[ed]" by the cosmos (those "fixed stars"). Perhaps it's *because* their life feels ruled by outside forces that the speaker has such an intense relationship to words: language is something the speaker is able to exert control over, to bend and shape to their will—at least, momentarily. Yet the speaker also recognizes that this powerful tool has its limits: the words the speaker writes ultimately run "[o]ff from the center"—that is, away from the speaker themselves, and end up "riderless."

Of course, it's difficult to talk about the speaker of this particular poem without considering Plath's own mental state at the time she wrote it. The poet took her life 10 days after writing "Words," and it's fair to interpret the struggles of the speaker as reflecting issues Plath herself was grappling with in the days leading up to her death.



SETTING

Like much of Plath's poetry, the setting of "Words" is an internal one. Rather than looking out at the world and describing literal things and places, the speaker is expressing *inner* thoughts and emotions through vivid [imagery](#).

Those "Axes" aren't real axes, but rather a [metaphor](#) for words themselves; likewise, the "Water striving / To re-establish its mirror" is not an actual pond, but a metaphor for (depending on one's interpretation) the speaker or the reader of the speaker's words.

Even when the speaker says they "later [...] / Encounter[ed]" the words they wrote "on the road," they aren't describing a *physical* road but a figurative one—perhaps the highway of one's life, so to speak.

The "fixed stars" that "Govern a life" are also more figurative than literal; the speaker is most likely referring to astrology, to the idea that one's person is largely determined by the stars one was born under.

important not to read Plath's speakers as mere projections of herself; to do so undermines the complexity of the voices in her poems, which can be interpreted in often conflicting ways.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Plath 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 many of her last poems, including "Words," attest to her state of mind, Plath was also fighting hard to get her depression under control; in the final days of her life, Plath was open with her doctor and her therapist about her struggles and had been prescribed an anti-depressant.

Readers can see Plath's contradictory desire for both life and death in the different published versions of *Ariel*. While Hughes's 1965 arrangement of the *Ariel* poems ended with the more emotionally resigned outlook of "Words," Plath had intended for the manuscript to end with the more hopeful (though still ambivalent) "[Wintering](#)." As [Frieda Hughes wrote](#) in the forward to the Restored Edition of *Ariel*:

[Plath] had described her *Ariel* manuscript as beginning with the word 'Love' and ending with the word 'Spring', and it was clearly geared to cover the ground from just before the breakup of [Plath's and Hughes'] marriage to the resolution of a new life, with all the agonies and furies in between.

In other words, even as Plath was struggling against the depression that would eventually overcome her, she was working towards and dreaming of the future, and her poetry from this time deftly captures these opposing states of mind.

It's also important to note that although Plath's work is too often read almost exclusively through the lens of her suicide, the death suggested by the "white skull" in this poem doesn't have to be interpreted literally. Plath was interested in astrology and tarot, which the "fixed stars" of the final stanza might [allude](#) to.

Plath's specific "sun sign" was Scorpio, a "fixed" sign. In astrology, "fixed" signs are signs that are determined and immovable. The Scorpio sign is also associated with death, and with the Death card in tarot. In both cases, death isn't meant to be taken literally but is rather a [symbol](#) for transformation and rebirth, for unconscious influences, and for the unknown. All of these were important aspects of Plath's work, and an understanding of these influences enriches the poem.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Sylvia Plath wrote "Words" on February 1, 1963—just 10 days before her death by suicide at the age of 30. Before her death, Plath had completed writing and arranging a new manuscript of poems entitled *Ariel*. She didn't include "Words" in this manuscript; her husband, the English poet Ted Hughes, added it in later, while also changing the order of Plath's manuscript before publishing it in 1965. While Plath's earlier poems brought her a moderate amount of recognition, it was the posthumous publication of *Ariel*—not to mention the sensationalization of her death and marriage—that catapulted Plath into a household name.

The [imagery](#), themes, and voice of "Words" echo many of the poems included in Plath's original manuscript. Of these, Plath's daughter, poet Frieda Hughes, [has said](#): "They had an urgency, freedom, and force that was quite new in her work [...] They are poems of an otherworldly, menacing landscape." They tackle such subjects as death and rebirth, gender roles, power, and oppression.

Plath's later poetry was also influenced by the American poet Robert Lowell, whose 1959 collection *Life Studies* featured deeply emotional and at times culturally taboo subject matter (a good deal of which was autobiographical in nature). Likewise, Plath was influenced by (and in turn influenced) her fellow American poet Anne Sexton, who was grappling with similarly autobiographical (and taboo) material.

It's for this reason that Plath is often considered, along with Lowell and Sexton, a [Confessionalist](#) poet. That being said, it's



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Plath's Life and Work](#) — A biography of the poet and

additional poems via the Poetry Foundation.

(<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/sylvia-plath>)

- [A Reading of the Poem](#) – Listen to "Words" read aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gpzBiXDUA_E)
- [The Poet's Voice](#) – Get a sense of Plath's own reading voice in this recording of her reading from Galway Kinnell's poem, "Flower Herding Pictures On Mount Monadnock." (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fM4ie9IQOyY>)
- [Foreword to Ariel](#) – Check out the foreword to the Restored Edition of Ariel, written by the poet's daughter, Frieda Hughes. (<https://www.bl.uk/20th-century-literature/articles/foreword-to-ariel-the-restored-edition>)

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](#)



HOW TO CITE

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CHICAGO MANUAL

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