You're

SUMMARY

You're like a clown, preferring to be upside down with your feet pointing up toward the sky. Your skull is bare and white as the moon, and you breathe through gills, as fish do. You seem to be giving a sensible thumbs-down to the kind of extinction the dodo-bird suffered. You're like a spool for your own umbilical cord, and you comb through the darkness surrounding you, like an owl does. You're as silent as a root vegetable throughout my pregnancy (from July 4th through April Fools' Day), my unborn baby growing like a rising loaf of bread.

You're as mysterious and formless as mist, and you're awaited like a piece of mail. You seem more distant than the country of Australia. You're hunched like the Greek god Atlas, who carried the world on his back; you're a little shrimp-like creature who seems to have come to us from far away. You're as tightly folded as a flower bud, and you seem as comfortable as a small fish in a pickle jar. You're like a basket of eels, always riggling around. You kick inside me, restless as a Mexican jumping bean. You seem just perfect, like a correctly solved math problem. You're as full of possibility as an empty chalkboard, but you already have your own identity.

THEMES

THE MYSTERY AND WONDER OF PREGNANCY AND NEW LIFE

The speaker of "You're" is a pregnant mother talking directly to her unborn child. Through a series of affectionate and often fantastical similes and metaphors, the speaker captures the incredible novelty and strangeness of the new life growing inside her. The baby seems both snugly “at home” in the speaker’s body and impossibly distant and unknowable—a figure ultimately independent of the speaker herself. In the end, this unknowability is what the poem celebrates most: for all the speaker may try to pin down this elusive presence in her belly, her baby represents a “clean slate” who will have to define themselves in the world.

The speaker compares her unborn baby to a dizzying variety of creatures and objects, suggesting that this new human is both mysterious and full of possibility. For example, she compares the child to everything from a clown, to a fish, to turnip, to the god Atlas, tasked with holding up the world in Greek myth. She even likens the baby to inanimate and abstract things (the moon, mail, math, etc.). The baby seems silly and helpless but also enigmatic and strangely powerful. This wide range of comparisons also underscores the fact that the baby could turn out in all sorts of ways. No one knows its true nature yet—just that it's alive (unlike the "dodo[]"), growing (like a "loaf" of bread), and soon to arrive (like "mail").

Sprinkled into the affectionate language are a few details that convey unease: for example, the fetus is "Mute" (or unable to speak) and shrouded in "dark," like "owls." Its mysteriousness and inability to communicate seem to make the speaker both anxious and excited; the phrase "Jumpy as a Mexican bean" might even hint at the speaker's own eager nervousness. And though the baby is "Snug" and "at home" within her, it also seems "Farther off than Australia"—a remote, alien presence. The comparison "Vague as fog" drives home the idea that, despite being “[w]rapped up” in the speaker’s body, the baby is unknowable for now.

Yet, while all this possibility might be a bit unsettling, the speaker ultimately celebrates her baby's life as something radically new. She sees the child's undefined identity as something joyful and worthy of praise. The baby is a "clean slate," still unaffected by the world, but already has its "own face," meaning an individuality no one else can dictate.

The very structure of "You're" helps convey the anxiety, excitement, and unpredictability of bringing a new life into the world. The poem is framed as a series of possible responses to the prompt "You're," but by the final line, it can only describe the baby as a blank "slate." In other words, it has to admit that only the baby can say who they truly "are"—there are some things a poem can't do!

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-18

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

Clownlike, happiest on ...
... like a fish.

The speaker of "You're" is a pregnant mom affectionately describing her unborn baby. The title seems to start a sentence or pose a riddle: "You're"—what? Each of the sentence fragments in the poem provides a possible answer, an attempt to describe this brand-new person through figurative language.

In these first two and a half lines, the speaker reels off two similes and a metaphor. The first simile compares the baby to an acrobatic "Clown[]" who is "happiest" in a tumbling position: "on your hands, / Feet to the stars." This is an imaginative description of the head-down, feet-up position babies often

take in the womb (especially in the later stages of pregnancy). The second simile, "Gilled like a fish," refers to throat structures called gill arches that human embryos acquire during their development in the womb. In fish, similar structures develop into gills; in humans, they develop into parts of the jaw, larynx, and ear. In between these two similes, the metaphor "moon-skulled" compares the baby's pale, bare, still-developing skull to a pale, bare (perhaps not quite full) moon.

Here and throughout the poem, then, the speaker reaches for vivid, imaginative comparisons to evoke the strange new life growing inside her. These opening lines also establish the poem's lack of a meter, and it has no rhyme scheme, either; it's written in free verse. (However, each stanza consists of nine lines of roughly even length, mirroring the nine months of a typical pregnancy.) Already, readers can hear the ear-pleasing sound effects that will continue throughout this playful poem: alliteration ("happiest"/"hands"), consonance ("moon-skulled"/"Gilled"), and assonance ("Gilled"/"fish").

LINES 3-6

A common-sense ...
... as owls do.

Lines 3-6 provide more fun, imaginative descriptions of the speaker's baby.

According to the speaker, her baby is "A common-sense / Thumbs-down on the dodo's mode" (lines 3-4). Here, "the dodo's mode" is an indirect way of saying "extinction," since the dodo bird is a famous example of an extinct animal. Because the baby's existence proves that the human species (including the speaker and her partner) continues to survive and reproduce, it seems to reject—give a metaphorical "Thumbs-down" to—extinction. (Of course, no species *wants* to go extinct, but popular myth once claimed that dodos were too dim-witted to survive!) In addition, "Thumbs-down" seems to refer back to the earlier detail (lines 1-2) about the baby being positioned with hands down and feet up.

Lines 5 and 6 offer two more vivid similes about the baby's appearance in the womb. The speaker says that her child is "Wrapped up in yourself like a spool," meaning that it's surrounded by the umbilical cord, placenta, and uterine lining. (The cord itself doesn't literally wind around a fetus unless something goes wrong in the pregnancy.) Meanwhile, the baby is "Trawling your dark as owls do": that is, dragging darkness in its wake, like a "trawl" or fishing net. Basically, it's shrouded by gloom in the womb.

This eerie image may suggest that the mother is feeling a bit of anxiety about pregnancy—about this mysterious new life she's bringing into the world. Similarly, the allusion to the dodo's extinction might suggest that creating new life is always, in some sense, an attempt to defeat the power of death.

Like the rest of the poem, these lines contain playful, potentially kid-pleasing sound effects, including the assonance and internal rhyme of "dodo's mode" and the /wl/ consonance in "Trawling and owls."

LINES 7-9

Mute as a ...
... my little loaf.

Although the reader may already have guessed the poem's subject in lines 1-6, lines 7-9 provide the first truly clear evidence that "You're" is about the speaker's unborn baby.

According to the speaker, the "you" of the poem is "Mute as a turnip" during the nine months stretching from "the Fourth / of July" through "All Fools' Day," or April 1. Not coincidentally, nine months is the duration of a typical pregnancy (and April 1 did turn out to be the birthdate of Plath's daughter). Throughout this time, the baby is "Mute": unable to use its voice. The speaker then invokes the baby through a direct, mock-grandiose apostrophe:

> O high-riser, my little loaf.

For many readers, this bread metaphor will bring to mind a popular expression for a baby in the womb: "a bun in the oven."

Why does "You're" treat its subject matter in such an indirect fashion? For one thing, this approach makes the poem fun to puzzle out, like a riddle for kids. Another possible reason is that, in Plath's time, the realities of pregnancy and childbirth were often viewed (by the male-dominated literary establishment) as indelicate or taboo subjects in poetry. Like Plath's earlier poem "Metaphors," which is also about her first pregnancy, "You're" conveys some of these realities vividly without the kind of frank language that would rile up critics. (Other Plath poems, however, contain language and subjects that were highly provocative, so her approach varied from poem to poem.)

As always, there's plenty of lively sound-play in these lines, including the alliteration of "Fourth" and "Fools'" and the assonance of "O"/"loaf" and "high-riser." There's also a fun tonal contrast between the lofty, poetic "O"—an archaic version of "Oh," typically used to invoke someone or something grand—and the humble term of endearment "my little loaf." To a certain extent, this mother might see her baby as grand and awe-inspiring; but she recognizes that it's tiny and cute, too!

LINES 10-12

Vague as fog ...
... our traveled prawn.

The similes and metaphors in lines 10-12 emphasize the way this baby seems like a mysterious arrival from a far-off place. Obviously, the speaker knows where babies really come from, but to her and her partner, it *feels* as if their child has traveled into their lives from some distant realm. They're eagerly awaiting its birth, but they don't quite know what to expect.

That's why the speaker suggests that her baby is both "Vague as fog and looked for like mail" (line 10), and why, even as it grows in her belly, it seems "Farther off than Australia" (line 11). That's also why she calls it a "traveled prawn" (line 11)—a prawn being a shrimp-like creature that's small and curled up, like a fetus.

Even the allusion to "Bent-backed Atlas" in the same line contains a hint of remoteness. In Greek mythology, Atlas was a defeated god condemned to carry the heavens on his shoulders (though he's often depicted carrying the globe instead). He was sent to the western end of the earth to perform this task, so he, too, could be described as a faraway presence. However, "Bent-backed Atlas" mainly suggests that the baby is hunched up in the womb, much as Atlas hunches over while carrying his burden.

Once again, these lines are a feast of sound effects: alliteration ("fog"/"for"/"Farther"; "looked"/"like"; "Bent-backed"), assonance ("Bent-backed Atlas")/"traveled"), consonance ("Vague"/"fog"), and partial rhyme ("mail"/"Australia"). Though the poem is written in free verse, these playful effects give it a lively, Mother Goose-like sound that fits its subject.

LINES 13-16

Snug as a ...
... a Mexican bean.

Lines 13-16 offer a series of similes (and one metaphor) emphasizing the baby's snug containment within its mother's womb.

The delightfully assonant phrase "Snug as a bud" (line 13) compares the baby to the tightly folded, embryonic blossom of a flower. The buds of plants are often covered by protective scales, much as the baby—a human embryo or fetus—is protected by the womb. In general, a "bud" is a common metaphor for anything in its youthful or early stages.

The baby is also "at home / Like a sprat in a pickle jug" (line 14): that is, as comfortable as a small herring-like fish swimming around in a container full of brine. It's not exactly common to keep fish in pickle containers—which are more often *jars* than *jugs*—so this image seems chosen mostly for the lively sound of its words. (Notice the internal rhyme between "Snug" and "jug," for example.) As improbable as the image may be, it's meant to evoke the baby floating comfortably in its sac of amniotic fluid (a kind of protective bubble within the womb).

After two previous images of sea life ("prawn" and "sprat") comes a third: "A creel of eels, all ripples" (line 15). A *creel* is a basket used by fishermen, so it could be used to store eels—but how is a baby like a basket full of these long, slippery creatures? Answer: it moves around a lot! Babies are notorious for shifting and kicking in their mothers' wombs; the speaker's baby must be so active that it feels like it's wriggling all over the place.

That's also why the speaker calls her baby "Jumpy as a Mexican bean" (line 16): a reference to the famous *Mexican jumping beans* that hop around when they're held in the hand. (They're actually seed pods inhabited by moth larvae that react to heat.) This baby feels jumpy in the womb—and the speaker herself may be correspondingly jumpy, or nervous, about this strange and restless presence inside her.

LINES 17-18

Right, like a ...
... own face on.

Lines 17-18 end the poem on a note of affection and optimism. After a series of colorful, offbeat, sometimes unsettling comparisons, the speaker calls her baby:

> Right, like a well-done sum.
> A clean slate, with your own face on.

The simile "Right, like a well-done sum" expresses parental pride, since it suggests that this baby is as perfect as a correctly solved math problem. It's just "right," and the people responsible for it should be satisfied with their work.

The metaphor of a "clean slate," meanwhile, implies that this baby is a fresh start in human form, like a tablet that hasn't been written on yet. This common metaphor can also express the view that a baby is born without any "built-in" knowledge or personality traits. (For more context, see the Allusions and Symbols sections of this guide.) Still, the mother/speaker adds that the baby has its "own face on," suggesting that it *does* already have an identity of its own, independent of its parents or anyone else.

There's a subtle link between the images in these two lines. In an older era of technology, math students often did their "sum[s]," or arithmetic problems, on slate tablets. In a slightly paradoxical way, then, these closing lines suggest that the baby is *both* the successful product of its parents *and* a completely new person ("clean slate"), capable of asserting and discovering its own identity. The speaker takes pride in, but doesn't expect to define, her child. In fact, this ending might imply that "You're" itself can't define its subject any further.

SYMBOLS

THE CLEAN SLATE

At the poem's end, the speaker calls her baby a "clean slate" while also acknowledging that it has its "own face" (its own identity independent of her). This "clean slate" symbolizes the child's endless potential *and* its individuality—its ability to define itself, rather than being defined by its parents or the world.

The phrase "clean slate" traces all the way back to ancient

Greek philosophers such as Aristotle, who debated whether newborn babies were totally empty of knowledge, like a writing surface that hasn't been written on yet. In other words, they debated whether the human mind is formed by nature (innate qualities) or nurture (learning and experience). Here, the speaker implies that it's a bit of both.

Because a "slate" is a writing surface, the symbolism here also relates specifically to writing and poetry. The baby in "You're" is based on Plath's daughter, Frieda, whose parents were both poets. Not coincidentally, the phrase "clean slate" imagines this new life in writerly terms: as a fresh start or blank page, unmarked by the experience of the two people who made it. Coming at the end of the poem, the phrase also seems to admit the poet's limits when it comes to describing a brand-new person. A parent can write *about* their child, but not *for* their child; the child has to experience life for themselves and discover their own voice.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 18:** "A clean slate, with your own face on."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

"You're" uses frequent alliteration and consonance as part of its generally playful approach to language. Although the poem can't literally be read (yet) by the child it addresses, its comical style and musical sound seem designed to tease, please, and entertain. The poet may well have hoped her child would enjoy reading it once they grew a little older.

The first stanza, for example, contains alliterative pairs like "happiest" and "hands" (line 1), "stars" and "moon-skulled" (line 2), "Thumbs-down" and "dodo" (line 4), and "Fourth" and "Fools'" (lines 7-8), as well as the endearing, alliterative phrase "little loaf" (line 9). The interwoven /f/ and /l/ sounds in lines 10-11 ("fog"/"for"/"Farther" and "looked"/"like," plus "mail" and "Australia") create a mild tongue-twister in the second stanza, while "Bent-backed" and "bud" fill lines 12-13 with boldly bursting /b/ sounds.

Combined with the consonance in "dodo's mode," "Trawling [...] owls," and other phrases—as well as the assonance that chimes throughout the poem—all this alliteration makes the poem delightful to read aloud. Though "You're" doesn't follow a meter or rhyme scheme, its lively, repeating sounds are reminiscent of nursery rhymes. This style, of course, fits the poem's subject: an unborn baby already loved by its mother.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "happiest," "hands"
- **Line 2:** "stars," "skulled"
- **Line 4:** "down," "dodo's"
- **Line 7:** "Fourth"
- **Line 8:** "Fools'"
- **Line 9:** "little loaf"
- **Line 10:** "fog," "looked," "for," "like"
- **Line 11:** "Farther"
- **Line 12:** "Bent-backed"
- **Line 13:** "bud"

ASSONANCE

Like alliteration and consonance, assonance features heavily in the poem, contributing to its playful, musical sound.

Readers can hear assonance clearly in phrases such as "Gilled like a fish" (line 3), "dodo's mode" (line 4), "high-riser" (line 9), "Bent-backed Atlas" (line 12), "Snug as a bud" (line 13), and "creel of eels" (line 15). This last example could also be classified as an imperfect internal rhyme (and part of "dodo's" rhymes with "mode" as well). Assonance continues right through the end of the poem: the last two syllables of line 17 ("done" and "sum") nearly rhyme, while "slate" and "face" in line 18 share an /ay/ sound.

Again, while "You're" doesn't have a meter or rhyme scheme, all these chiming vowels give it a slight nursery-rhyme quality. The poem is addressed to someone who couldn't read it at the time it was written, but Plath may well have hoped her child, and other children, would appreciate it after a certain age. (Of course, the poem holds more sophisticated pleasures for adults as well!)

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "Gilled," "fish"
- **Line 4:** "dodo's mode"
- **Line 9:** "O," "high-riser, my," "loaf"
- **Line 12:** "Bent-backed Atlas," "traveled"
- **Line 13:** "Snug," "bud"
- **Line 14:** "jug"
- **Line 15:** "creel," "eels"
- **Line 17:** "well-done sum"
- **Line 18:** "slate," "face"

PARALLELISM

Every sentence (or, rather, sentence fragment) in the poem is set in parallel. That's because each represents a different way of finishing the title: "You're." The title could be read as having an ellipsis after it, or a blank to be filled in, as though the poem is asking (and venturing answers to) the question, "You're what?"

Put another way, every sentence fragment can be read as if it starts with "You're": *You're clownlike*, *You're a common-sense*

thumbs-down on the dodo's mode, *You're wrapped up in yourself*, etc. All these comparisons are the speaker's way of describing something unseen, rapidly changing, and so far basically unknowable: the baby growing inside her.

In some respects, all the descriptions are true, but in other respects, all are inadequate, because the baby will have to find and assert its own identity. That's why the series of parallel statements ends with the admission that the baby is "A clean slate, with your own face on": a brand-new individual who can't be defined by its parents, or by any poetic language.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-18

METAPHOR

The poem uses a series of playful metaphors (as well as similes) to describe the speaker's unborn baby.

For example, the adjective "moon-skulled" (line 2) compares the baby's bald, pale, round skull to the moon. Since the skull is still developing, this image may also evoke a moon that isn't quite full.

"A common-sense / Thumbs-down on the dodo's mode" (lines 3-4) playfully suggests that the baby—or its species, including its parents, who have just reproduced—has sensibly decided to survive rather than go extinct. (Dodo birds were wiped out around the end of the 1600s, and popular legend holds that they were dim-witted—that is, lacking in common sense.)

In line 9, "high-riser, my little loaf" plays on a popular metaphor for a baby in the womb: "a bun in the oven." Here, the growing infant is compared to a "high-ris[ing]" loaf of bread.

"Bent-backed Atlas" (line 12) alludes to the ancient Greek god named Atlas, who is often depicted as hunched over while holding up the Earth or sky. This metaphor evokes the baby's curled-up posture in the womb—and may imply that it carries a whole world of potential, carries the weight of expectations, and so on. In the same line, "traveled prawn" describes a small, shrimp-like creature that seems to have come to its parents from some far-off region. (A fetus *does* look a bit like a prawn during the early stages of its development!) Notice that "traveled" echoes the same general idea as "looked for like mail" (line 11) and "Farther off than Australia" (line 12); basically, the baby resembles a gift from somewhere mysterious and remote.

Following the sea life theme (also echoed by "sprat" in line 14), line 15 compares the baby to "A creel of eels, all ripples." This seems like one of the weirder images in the poem—does a baby really resemble a basket full of writhing, snaky fish?—until you realize that it's describing the baby's *movements*. As it moves around in its mom's belly, it feels as restless and "rippl[ing]" as eels!

Finally, line 18 compares the baby to "A clean slate": a tablet that hasn't yet been written on. In other words, it's new and fresh; its personality hasn't been formed yet, and its story hasn't yet been written. This conventional metaphor might have held special significance for a writer like Plath, for whom a blank slate or page represented endless possibilities. (For more on the history and symbolism behind this metaphor, see the Symbols section of this guide.)

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "moon-skulled"
- **Lines 3-4:** "A common-sense / Thumbs-down on the dodo's mode."
- **Line 9:** "O high-riser, my little loaf."
- **Line 12:** "Bent-backed Atlas, our traveled prawn."
- **Line 15:** "A creel of eels, all ripples."
- **Line 18:** "A clean slate,"

SIMILE

Most of the poem consists of similes, which compare the speaker's unborn baby to various people, animals, plants, and things.

Lines 1-2 compare the baby to a "Clown[]" doing a handstand: "happiest on your hands, / Feet to the stars." This image evokes the typical position of a fetus in the womb during the last stage of pregnancy: head down, feet up. (Babies shift in the womb throughout pregnancy, so this mother may be at an earlier stage and describing the position in which her baby seems "happiest.") The phrase "Feet to the stars" takes a bit of poetic license—obviously, this baby can't see the stars yet!—while also setting up another astronomical image, "moon-skulled," in the same line.

"Gilled like a fish" (line 3) takes a little license, too, though again, it's based on anatomical reality. Babies don't literally breathe through gills in the womb, but they do, at a certain stage of their development, develop folded throat structures that later turn into parts of the jaw and ear. (In fish, the same structures develop into gills.)

"Wrapped up in yourself like a spool" (line 5) compares the baby surrounded by its umbilical cord to a spool surrounded by thread. (In reality, babies aren't *wrapped* in their umbilical cords unless something has gone dangerously wrong in the pregnancy.)

According to the speaker, the baby is also "Trawling [its] dark as owls do" (line 6). Owls hunt at night, so perhaps the speaker is referring to the way that the baby gets nourishment from its mother in the darkness of the womb. The word "trawling" can also be used in reference to fishing: to "trawl" is to drag a net through water behind a boat. This simile thus again builds on the idea of the unborn baby as an aquatic creature floating in the womb (the speaker will also compare the baby to a "prawn" and "eels" in the next stanza). These eerie, inhuman

comparisons might suggest some unease on the speaker's part, as she feels distinctly different from her child.

Indeed, the baby seems "Mute as a turnip" (line 7), "Vague as fog and looked for like mail" (line 10), and "Farther off than Australia" (line 11). All these similes emphasize the air of mystery surrounding the baby. It seems to have come into its parents' lives from some far-off region, but it's silent and concealed in the womb, so they can't know yet how it will turn out. All they can do is eagerly anticipate its arrival and give shape to its "Vague[ness]" in their imaginations.

The homespun similes in lines 13-14 emphasize that the baby is happy and comfortable in its womb: "Snug as a bud" (tightly folded as a young flower blossom) and "at home / Like a sprat in a pickle jug." (A "sprat" is a small fish capable of swimming and surviving in a jug full of brine. This image once again calls to mind the cushion of liquid, or amniotic fluid, that surrounds a baby in utero.)

Line 16 compares the restlessly kicking fetus to a "Mexican [jumping] bean": a type of seed pod, found in Mexico, that moves around in warm temperatures due to the moth larva inside it. Finally, line 17 declares that the baby is just "Right, like a well-done sum." To its proud parents, it seems as perfect as the correct answer to a math problem!

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Line 3
- Lines 5-8
- Lines 10-11
- Lines 13-14
- Lines 16-17

APOSTROPHE

All of "You're" is an example of apostrophe, since the poem is addressed to someone who can't literally respond (the speaker's unborn baby). Line 9 makes this device especially clear:

> O high-riser, my little loaf.

Here, the poet addresses the baby with the interjection "O"—an archaic, poetic way of invoking someone through apostrophe. This particular effect is often found in poetic odes, such as Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," which begins "O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being."

In Plath's poem, this effect is poignant because she's addressing a loved one who could *someday* read and respond to her words. The grandiose, poetic "O" also makes for a funny tonal contrast with the homespun phrase "my little loaf" in the same line.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "O high-riser, my little loaf."

END-STOPPED LINE

Nearly all of the poem's lines are end-stopped by punctuation—mainly periods. This effect gives the lines a somewhat choppy rhythm, especially in the second stanza, where eight out of nine lines end with a period.

One reason the poet might have chosen this style is that the poem is addressed to a baby, so even though the addressee can't literally read it, long, complex sentences wouldn't fit the subject matter well. Another possible reason is that each of the poem's sentence fragments offers a different completion of the phrase begun in the title: "You're." In other words, each is a way of characterizing this unborn baby. Since an unborn baby is in many ways hard to describe (nobody's "met" it yet), the choppy sentence fragments are like a series of provisional ideas tossed out one after the other. It's as if the speaker is riffing or spitballing, straining to describe this "Vague" (line 10), mysterious, yet very active presence inside her.

The one deviation from this pattern in the second stanza also seems significant. As the exception to the rule, the enjambed line 13 sticks out and seems to emphasize the phrase "at home":

> Snug as a bud and at home
> Like a sprat in a pickle jug.

Perhaps this detail is a way of suggesting that, whatever else this baby is, it's home.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "hands,"
- **Line 2:** "moon-skulled,"
- **Line 4:** "mode."
- **Line 5:** "spool,"
- **Line 6:** "do."
- **Line 8:** "Day,"
- **Line 9:** "loaf."
- **Line 10:** "mail."
- **Line 11:** "Australia."
- **Line 12:** "prawn."
- **Line 14:** "jug."
- **Line 15:** "ripples."
- **Line 16:** "bean."
- **Line 17:** "sum."
- **Line 18:** "on."

ALLUSION

The poem makes several allusions, including a historical allusion

to the dodo bird and a reference to Atlas, a god in Greek mythology.

In calling her baby "A common-sense / Thumbs-down on the dodo's mode" (lines 3-4), the speaker implies that, as a new human life, the baby is rejecting or thwarting the extinction of its species. The dodo was a bird native to the island of Mauritius in the Indian Ocean; due to human hunting and interference with its habitat, it went extinct around the end of the 17th century.

Next, the phrase "O high-riser, my little loaf" (line 9) alludes to a proverbial metaphor for a baby in the womb: "a bun in the oven."

In line 12, "Bent-backed Atlas" invokes the Greek god Atlas, one of the Titans who lost a war against the Olympian gods. After being defeated, Atlas was forced to hold up the sky for all eternity (although later depictions often show him holding up the globe). The speaker compares her baby, curled up in the womb, to Atlas hunched over under the weight of his burden. The image might suggest that the baby is going to have to carry the weighty expectations of the world one day. Atlas was also sent off to the western edge of the earth, so this allusion may also be another way of suggesting that the baby seems to come from a faraway place.

At the end of the poem, the phrase "clean slate" (line 18) alludes to the ancient philosophical concept by the same name (Latin: *tabula rasa*). Aristotle and other philosophers debated whether the human mind, at birth, was like a completely blank writing surface or whether it already contained some knowledge. The speaker of the poem suggests that her baby is, in fact, a blank slate—unformed and full of potential—but also that it already has its own identity (its "own face"). For more on this allusion, see the Symbols section of this guide.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "A common-sense / Thumbs-down on the dodo's mode."
- **Line 9:** "O high-riser, my little loaf."
- **Line 12:** "Bent-backed Atlas,"
- **Line 18:** "A clean slate, with your own face on."

VOCABULARY

Moon-skulled (Line 2) - Having a skull as bare and white as the moon (a reference to the still-developing skull of a fetus).

Gilled (Line 3) - Having small slits, called gills, in one's body. Fish breathe through gills; human fetuses don't have actual gills, though they do have openings in the pharynx (pharyngeal slits) that later develop into the jaw and inner ear.

Dodo's mode (Lines 3-4) - A playful way of saying "extinction." Dodos were a species of flightless bird that lived on the island of Mauritius and became extinct toward the end of the 1600s. As the product of two humans who have reproduced, this baby seems to reject extinction—to give it a thumbs down.

Trawling (Line 6) - Dragging (as fishermen drag a fishing net). A metaphor suggesting that the fetus is draped in darkness.

All Fools' Day (Lines 7-8) - A holiday falling on April 1 and celebrated with tricks and pranks. Also known as April Fools' Day. (Here, April 1 is the baby's due date.)

High-riser (Line 9) - Here used as a term of endearment for the baby, suggesting that it's "ris[ing]" like a "loaf" of bread in the oven—that is, growing inside the womb.

Atlas (Line 12) - In Greek mythology, Atlas is a god condemned to carry the heavens on his shoulders. In modern depictions, he is usually carrying the Earth. The speaker compares his "Bent-backed" posture to the curled-up position of the baby in the womb.

Traveled (Line 12) - Well-traveled or come from far away. Here, the word suggests that the baby seems to have come into its parents' lives from some remote place.

Prawn (Line 12) - A small, shrimp-like crustacean. Here, another metaphor for the baby in the womb (which, in the early stages of development, does look a bit shrimp-like!).

Sprat (Lines 13-14) - A small, grayish-silver fish.

Creel (Line 15) - A basket used to carry freshly caught fish.

Mexican bean (Line 16) - A reference to the Mexican jumping bean, a seed pod native to Mexico, typically inhabited by a moth larva that causes it to move or "jump."

Sum (Line 17) - An addition problem, or any simple arithmetic problem.

Clean slate (Line 18) - A blackboard or slate tablet with no markings on it. The phrase alludes to a metaphor from ancient Greek philosophy, comparing the mind at birth to a "clean slate" (Latin: *tabula rasa*) without innate characteristics.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"You're" consists of two stanzas of nine lines each. The lines don't follow a meter or rhyme scheme (the poem is written in free verse), but they're of roughly equal length, ranging from six to eight syllables apiece. Formally, then, each stanza of this poem about pregnancy mimics the *duration* of an average pregnancy: nine months!

Although the poem is generally unrhymed, it features a couple of slant or near-exact rhymes toward the end; in particular, "prawn" (line 12) makes a close rhyme with "on" (line 18), the poem's final word. This effect strengthens the sense of closure at the end, perhaps evoking the completion of a pregnancy. (For

more, see the Rhyme section of this guide.)

Overall, the form here is noticeable but not especially rigid, as if the poet is wary of being too strict with the poem. (Similarly, this speaker might hope to set limits for their child but avoid being too strict with them, so as to let them develop their own identity—symbolized by "your own face" in line 18.) One could say that, like a baby in its womb, the poem is contained within its form but never shaped by it in a predictable way.

METER

As a free verse poem, "You're" has no regular meter. However, all of its lines contain six to eight syllables, and most contain either three or four strong stresses.

Take lines 1-3, for example:

> Clownlike, happiest on your hands,
> Feet to the stars, and moon-skulled,
> Gilled like a fish. A common-sense

This consistency helps the poem's language feel playful and controlled but ever overly strict or rigid. The stanzas might even formally mimic the average length of a pregnancy: just as pregnancy is divided into nine months of roughly equal length, these stanzas are divided into nine *lines* of roughly equal length. At the same time, the freedom of the verse *within* that form ties in with the poem's themes: the unpredictability of how the baby will turn out, the shapeless ("fog"-like) nature of the baby in its parents' imagination, and so on.

RHYME SCHEME

"You're" is a free verse poem, so it has no rhyme scheme. However, it does include a bit of slant rhyme toward the end: "home" (line 13) rhymes loosely with "sum" (line 17), while "prawn" (line 12) rhymes pretty closely with the poem's final word, "on" (line 18). One could argue for even more distant rhymes in this stanza, too: "mail" (line 10) rhymes imperfectly with "Australia" (line 11), while "bean" shares its final consonant with "prawn" and "on."

In other words, a touch of rhyme, or traditional poetic form, creeps in as the poem approaches its conclusion—perhaps evoking the baby that's slowly taking form as its mom's pregnancy advances toward completion. (Remember, the nine-line stanzas already evoke the nine months of pregnancy.) The closest thing to a full rhyme occurs in the poem's final word—part of the phrase "with your own face on"—so perhaps this detail, especially, hints at the completion of pregnancy and the independence of baby from mother.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is a pregnant mother addressing her unborn child. Her tone is a mix of affection, wonder, and pride, with a trace of anxiety here and there.

This complex tone comes through in her similes and metaphors: for example, she teasingly compares her child to a "Clown[]," "turnip," "loaf" of bread, "Mexican [jumping] bean," etc. But she also addresses the baby with a lofty "O" and compares them to the Greek god "Atlas," conveying wonder and awe. The phrase "Right, like a well-done sum" conveys maternal pride in the seemingly perfect little human she's making. Meanwhile, the Gothic image "Trawling your dark as owls do" suggests that the mystery surrounding her unborn child (who are they? how will they turn out?) strikes her as slightly eerie, too.

In general, then, the speaker is a typical "expecting" parent: proud, anxious, and excited to meet the child that's on its way. Plath wrote this poem in 1960, the year she gave birth to her first child, Frieda—who was, in fact, born on April 1 ("All Fools' Day," line 8).

SETTING

The main setting of the poem is in utero! The poem's speaker is a mother (based on Plath herself) comparing the baby she's pregnant with (based on her first child, Frieda) to a variety of creatures, plants, and objects. These colorful comparisons evoke the physical environment of the womb, with its "dark," "Snug" atmosphere (lines 6 and 13); baby positioned head down ("Feet to the stars," line 2); and umbilical cord (for which the baby serves as the "spool," line 5). The one geographical reference in the poem—"Australia" (line 11)—is part of a simile suggesting that the baby seems remote; in other words, it's just an example of a far-off place, not a clue as to the speaker's whereabouts.

The poem also has a temporal setting: the nine months "from the Fourth / Of July to All Fools' Day" (lines 7-8). This period matches the nine months of Plath's pregnancy with her daughter, Frieda—who was, in fact, born on "All Fools' Day," or April 1.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Sylvia Plath wrote "You're" in early 1960, a few months before the birth of her and Ted Hughes's first child, Frieda Hughes. The poem was published in *Harper's* magazine in 1961 but didn't appear in book form until the publication of Plath's *Ariel* in 1965. By that time, Plath had been dead for two years, having died by suicide in her home on February 11, 1963. The poem's theme of motherhood appears throughout *Ariel*, including in the well-known poems "Morning Song" and "Nick and the Candlestick." (Her second child, Nicholas—a.k.a. "Nick"—was born in 1962.) Another early Plath poem,

"Metaphors," also describes her first pregnancy an indirect, riddling fashion.

Like most of the *Ariel* poems, "You're" can be read as autobiographical. It even accurately predicts the birthdate of Plath's daughter: "All Fools' Day," or April 1. This kind of directly autobiographical material was rare in English-language poetry at the time, as was poetry dealing frankly with pregnancy and childbirth. Critics began to call this revolutionary style of writing, which emerged in the 1950s and '60s, 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. "You're" is just one of her honest, intimate poems about the joys and anxieties of becoming a mother.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Plath had a complicated relationship to motherhood, and her relationship with her own mother was often contentious. 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, including "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.

"You're" is a sunnier, less ambivalent poem, written while Plath's first child was on the way and her marriage remained intact. Its overall tone is hopeful, with its "you[]" (the baby) representing a "clean slate" of possibility. Still, its eerie references to "owls" and "eels" channel some anxiety as well, and its frank, funny descriptions of a fetus mark Plath's willingness to tackle subjects once considered indelicate or taboo.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poet's Life — Read a biography of Plath at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/sylvia-plath)
- The Poet on Her Influences — Listen to excerpts of interviews with Plath about her early life and literary influences. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gbNcRhxfF-A)
- The Baby in the Womb — Check out a WebMD slideshow of fetal development—a useful illustration of some of the metaphors in "You're"! (https://www.webmd.com/baby/ss/slideshow-fetal-development)
- Meet Frieda Hughes — The website of Frieda Hughes, Plath's daughter, to whom "You're" is addressed. (https://www.friedahughes.com/)
- Plath and the "Confessionals" — Learn more about the mid-20th-century "Confessional" movement, into which Plath's work is often grouped. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/151109/an-introduction-to-confessional-poetry)
- Frieda Hughes Reads — Watch Frieda Hughes, daughter of Plath and Ted Hughes, read a poem about her parents. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4QFcu0K6UYY)

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

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