



# Metaphors

by Sylvia Plath

## Content Synopsis

“Metaphors,” an early poem by Sylvia Plath, dates back to 1959, one year before “Colossus,” the collection that established her as a serious new poet, was published. Like other early poems such as “Lorelei,” “Full Fathom Five,” or “Suicide off Egg Rock,” “Metaphors” impresses readers with its clever formal technique and precise use of language.

Take Plath’s choice of genre, for instance. “Metaphors” belongs to a type of poetry known as Riddle poems. Riddle poems, found in almost all cultures, are built on the fundamental referential power of language, or the power of a word, or groups of words to call into the listener’s mind, other related words, or concepts. Riddle poems achieve this transference of meaning through the creative use of rhetorical tropes such as metaphor, metonymy, simile, synecdoche, and precise, pithy, concrete imagery. Like Haiku and other short poetic forms, riddle poems aim to say more with less, ranging between 9 and 15 lines, each line usually no more than nine syllables, with an internal beat that functions as a rhyme when rhyme is absent, and plenty of assonance and alliteration. Here is an example from the “Red Book of Exeter,” an Anglo-Saxon anthology of riddles, over a thousand years old: “A wonder on the wave / Water became bone.” The answer to this riddle is, of course, “Ice on a lake or seashore.” Riddle poets build their riddles

around a unique, arresting, central image. They often extend or embellish this image by ascribing more elaborate and surprising attributes and associations to the subject of the riddle. The rule of a good riddle poem, however, requires that all images collectively should point only towards one correct answer, which is the subject of the riddle. The listener of the riddle, in turn, decodes these images and discovers the answer. The subject of riddle poems can be what we traditionally consider an abstract entity: an emotion such as “love” or “fear,” or a concrete object, such as a fruit, vegetable or animal.

“Metaphors” begins with Plath providing a metaphoric clue to the riddle’s answer: “I am a riddle in nine syllables” (1). This refers both to the syllabic form of this riddle poem as well as the first item in a list of clues that will help solve the riddle. “Nine” here refers to both the nine syllables that make up the first line, as well as the nine months of pregnancy. Right at the outset of the poem, Plath focuses on the physical changes brought about by pregnancy. By following Plath as she builds the riddle of pregnancy, we arrive at an understanding of Plath’s complex attitude towards the subject of pregnancy itself.

The speaker in the poem begins her discussion of being pregnant by describing herself as “an elephant,” and “a ponderous house” (2). While the image of an “elephant” refers to an obvious weight

gain as a condition of pregnancy, it also brings with it unflattering associations of slow and difficult gait, and an overall sense of a largeness that is somewhat distressing to the speaker, a normal experience for most pregnant women. An elephant is also a large object that you cannot ignore; it cannot be hidden or concealed, just as pregnancy cannot be hidden or concealed. The next image, however, is rather unique, and shows the tension between traditional wisdom and a rebellious psyche that animates much of Plath's poetry. The speaker who describes herself as an "elephant," also equates herself to a "ponderous house." Like "elephant," "ponderous" has unseemly connotations of corpulence, boredom and fatigue; like an elephant, a house cannot be concealed either. However, the noun it modifies is "house," a word that suddenly and surprisingly introduces a note of concern for the welfare of the child. The speaker sees herself as a shelter for the child growing inside her.

The speaker uses the image of "A melon strolling on two tendrils" (3), a comical, even ridiculous image, to describe the pregnancy that has deformed her body. Here again, we can see how this seemingly self-deprecating image of a woman reduced to her protruding stomach supported by fragile tendril-like legs contains within it a natural metaphor of fruition. The melon fruit is the most valuable part of the plant and a plant with no fruit is a useless, failed plant. The size and weight attributes introduced with "elephant" and "house," and here expanded in the contrasting image of a melon strolling on tendrils also draw our attention to the incongruous picture of a small woman trying to support a pregnant stomach that is too big for her slight frame.

The fourth line "O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers!" (4) consolidates in a simple list form the metaphoric fruits of labor described in the first three lines. Metaphors of pregnancy use the word "labor" to describe the final stage of pregnancy where the mother pushes the child out of her body.

Just as a child is the "fruit" of its mother's "labor," the "red fruit" in this line is the fruit of the melon, its most valuable part, and the "ivory" is the most valuable part of the elephant, and "fine timbers" stands for the "house" (2) that sheltered the child for nine months. By listing the most valuable part of a melon, an elephant, and a house, Plath moves away from metaphor to metonymy: naming a thing by describing with what it is most commonly associated. The speaker moves away from listing her personal experience of pregnancy—the swelling, the largeness, the deformity—to persuade us of the fruits of such a labor. With all the distresses named, pregnancy produces something valuable. Pregnancy confirms value to the mother.

In "This loaf is big with its yeasty rising" (5), the speaker once again takes up the motif of the process of confirming value to an object by transforming it, by helping it become its most useful self. A pregnant woman is a loaf of bread that is rising; unleavened bread is not a source of pleasure or value. The next line "Money's new-minted in this fat purse" (6) is the most concrete image of pregnancy as an economic role and destiny for women. The various images up to this point all suggested the body of the mother as a raw material that has the potential to produce something of great value: the child. In this metaphor of the mother and child, newly minted money in a fat purse, we find this economic relation in its most eloquent and surprising incarnation.

If the image of the "ponderous house" (2) suggests shelter it also reminds readers of the inevitable event of children leaving their parents' house. The birth of a child, its expulsion from the mother's body prefigures a greater leaving, that of children transitioning into adulthood and autonomy of their own. Thus the idea that the mother's body is a shelter for the child, a "house" (2), also introduces the idea of the lack of permanence associated with a house. Such a transitory experience is coded into the line "I am a means, a stage, a cow in calf" (7),

when the speaker presents herself as a threshold, a temporary stage, a liminal space for the child on its way to becoming a discrete self. The mother is a “means,” a path, a tool, a “stage” in the life cycle of the child, or a “stage” where the great drama of creation in being enacted. The metaphor of motherhood unites these two images with the concrete image of a “cow in calf.”

The metaphoric clues share in the folklore of pregnancy in the line “I’ve eaten a bag of green apples” (8). Here, the speaker refers to the strange cravings of pregnancy. “Apples” of course, have a poetic resonance all of their own, which might fit this poem as well. The human drama of birth and death in western theology starts with the fall of Adam and Eve after Eve eats the forbidden apple from the Tree of Knowledge. Certain theological traditions believe that God expelled Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden for fear that they might eat of the Tree of Life, the fruit of which confers immortality to those who partake of it. In blending associations of the forbidden fruit with procreation, Plath seems to be hinting at pregnancy and birth as the human way to achieve immortality.

If we sensed ambivalence in the speaker about the experience of her pregnancy thus far, the concluding line of the poem makes this tension powerfully audible. In “Boarded the train there’s no getting off” (9) the speaker concludes her discussion of pregnancy as a journey that once commenced could not be stopped. The tension between pleasure and pride in being a proud worker producing a valuable product, the child, and the complementary feeling of being trapped by the child growing within her is most palpable in this line.

### Formal Qualities

Plath was gifted in the craft of poetry and even in an early poem like “Metaphors,” there is evidence of great formal control. The poem is a controlled exercise in number 9, which is the number of months in the duration of a human pregnancy, and

the unifying theme of the poem. “Metaphors” is a riddle poem written in nine lines of nine syllables each. The first word of the poem “I” is the ninth letter of the alphabet, and the word “pregnancy” has nine letters. Each line is a metaphor for pregnancy, with pregnancy being the riddle, and its clues drawn from domains as different as nature, biology, architecture, economics, travel, and cooking. Plath’s early poems show her experimenting with irregular and esoteric rhyme schemes, but “Metaphors” has an internal rhythm rising out of assonance, an example of which is the repetition of the leisurely, long /i/ sound. Perhaps the most obvious clue to the riddle is “I’ve eaten a bag of green apples” (8), the word “green” conjuring up images of an unnatural gustatory preference, often associated with the strange food cravings of pregnancy.

“Metaphors” is an early example of what was to become Plath’s major achievement in her later, mature poems: finding her authentic voice, and to write, “What I really feel” (Kendall 9). In her journals, Plath admitted to feeling constrained and inhibited by the strict verse forms that she used for her compositions, and observed that “my main thing now is to start with real things: real emotions [. . .] and get into me, Ted, friends, mother and brother and father and family” (Kendall 9). As a contemporary reviewer remarked “I am struck, in reading a lot of her poems together, by her posture vis-à-vis her material which is one of considerable objectivity, even when the material is her childhood, her Muses, her pregnancy” (Wagner-Martin 31). “Metaphors,” with its artful control of the metaphoric structure, successfully combines technique with emotional complexity, private thoughts with public concerns, theme with form.

### Interpretations

In “Metaphors,” we see a poet trying to resolve conflicting emotions towards pregnancy and motherhood. Each metaphor evokes images that are self-deprecating, judgmental, and rebellious

all at the same time. The confusion within the speaker as to whether pregnancy is the natural fulfillment of her destiny as a woman is ultimately due to the received wisdom of the Fifties, which predicated a woman's success on how well she fit the conventional roles of a wife and mother. The most compelling oppositions in the poem are between what the speaker describes as her destiny to be "a means," "a stage" (7) for her child to come into being. The poem leaves us with a sense of helplessness on behalf of the speaker, who seems to perceive and articulate an authentic dissatisfaction with her ascribed role as a procreator, and yet, does not see any way out of it. When perceived in this light, the riddle and the answer to the riddle are more complicated than what the metaphors suggest; for the speaker, and perhaps for the poet as well, the riddle has no clear-cut answer.

### Historical Context

When asked if she addressed historical concerns in her poetry, Plath observed that "the issues of our time which preoccupy me at the moment are the incalculable genetic effects of fallout and a documentary on the terrifying, mad, omnipotent marriage of the big business and Military in America [. . .]. Does this influence the kind of poetry I write? Yes, but in a sidelong fashion" (Kendall 170). Plath has been linked with the confessional school of poetry of the late 50's. She has also been linked with such names as Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton, who wrote largely autobiographical poems, revealing personal details and building private symbols with a candidness that was in direct opposition to the "impersonality" theory of poetry that characterized much of the poetic output of the first half of the twentieth century. Images of the holocaust, of the Nazi death camps, the Napoleonic wars, the Pilgrim fathers and Ku Klux Klan figure in Plath's poems, but mainstream Plath criticism tends to agree that Plath used historical events

and details in a confessional manner for emotional effect, and not to engage with the issues of such events themselves. Plath herself commented that her "poems do not turn out to be about Hiroshima, but about a child forming itself finger by finger in the dark" (Kendall 170).

It is possible, however, to see that Plath dealt with history with a small "h," women's history, to be exact, in a manner that was shockingly unique for a "tranquil fifties" poet. "Metaphors," is a good example of such an engagement. Pregnancy was not a celebrated theme for poetry, specifically, the gross, unflattering portrayal of the woman's body, or the suggestion that pregnancy and motherhood deformed the female body. Perhaps equally shocking was the unspoken question in the poem: are pregnancy and motherhood a woman's destiny? Plath died before the very public social and cultural revolutions of the Sixties, but asking or hinting at such questions places Plath, a largely private poet, at the cusp of an era of noninvolvement ending and the birth of a new social order. The sense of being trapped in a destiny that is ineluctable, pregnancy and motherhood, the metaphor of being on a train of which there is no getting off (9) is the anguish of a poet, who sees an era ending, but does not see a new one beginning.

### Societal Context

Following on the heels of World War II, the Fifties saw the official inauguration of the Cold War between the Western bloc and the Soviet bloc with the invasion of South Korea by North Korea and the partition of Vietnam into two countries based on political ideology. In the U.S, the fifties was a decade of optimism and cheerful self-confidence, at least for mainstream America. After the Great Depression and World War II, Americans were largely in favor of settling down and stability, and this decade saw the "nuclear family" firmly entrenched in popular imagination as an economic and ideological unit.

In particular, American women, who were largely liberated from their domestic roles during the War years, found themselves pushed back to the traditional role of being a wife and mother, a subservient partner to the man, who was the head of the nuclear family. This was the “baby boom” generation. “Metaphors” highlights the thinly veiled dissatisfaction of a woman who cannot decide whether motherhood fulfills her destiny or merely entraps her. The metaphors in the poem capture a woman at a transitional moment in her life; she is on her way to becoming a mother. However, the images mix pleasure with anguish; a sense of doom reverberates in the last line: “Boarded the train there is no getting off” (9).

As with Emily Dickinson, another poet who was born ahead of her times, Plath too achieved critical and popular acclaim posthumously. Although she wrote serene and playful poems about her children and Nature, a large part of her woman-centered poems deals primarily with candid and largely pessimistic details of her personal life. Moreover, they deal with her relationship with a tyrannical and emotionally unavailable father, a placid bond with a traditional mother, her whirlwind courtship and marriage to the English poet Ted Hughes, her expatriate life in England, her bouts of depression and institutionalization, her anxieties over her creative power, the dissolution of her marriage, her husband’s adultery, and her suicide attempts. What Plath shares with her contemporaries in the confessional school of poetry of the fifties is her choice of this material for her poetry; but in her poems, she manages her autobiography with passion and detachment at the same time. In a decade that sought to restore “normalcy” in social and familial structures, with patriarchy and segregation taking their last gasps before the civil rights activism of the Sixties, Plath’s poems proved to be difficult fare for ordinary readers.

Thus, “Metaphors” engages with the social issues of the day in a “sidelong fashion” as Plath

herself remarked (Kendall 170). A riddle poem about pregnancy becomes a vehicle to raise questions about the identity of women itself.

### Religious Context

Sylvia Plath was born and brought up in the Unitarian faith, but she became interested in both Anglicanism as well as Judaism towards the end of her life. In her largely autobiographical novel “The Bell Jar,” Plath’s heroine Esther Greenwood speaks for Plath’s own religious beliefs when she expresses her disbelief in “life after death or the virgin birth or the Inquisition or the infallibility of that little monkey-faced Pope” (Kendall 115). If there is one recurring religious motif throughout Plath’s poem, it is the pitting of a specific theology against maternal love. In such poems as “Nick and the Candlestick,” we see a mother’s anguished concern for a child who is defenseless against the world with its numerous dangers, including “piranha/Religion” (Kendall 124).

“Metaphors” with its insistence on procreation and birth invests woman, mother, with the creative power of a God. By aligning herself to the natural cycle of creation, through such metaphors as “red fruit,” (4) and devoting a poem to the “riddle” of conception and birth, “Metaphors” appears to pose a challenge to organized theology. “Metaphors” does not provide us with a complete religious picture the way a later poem such as “Mary’s Song” does; the vision of creation it paints is fraught with anguish expressed in the metaphor of pregnancy as a journey, or “Boarded the train there’s no getting off” (9).

### Scientific & Technological Context

References to science and technology in Plath’s poetry are largely unflattering; in “Lady Lazarus,” for instance, the speaker offers her body to Nazi doctors/torturers as their “opus.” Plath also spoke out against nuclear fallout, and what she saw as the militarization of American culture in the 50s



with its nuclear deterrence program (see Historical Context above). “Metaphors” does not show much evidence of science or technology issues, though, as in all her poems, the precision of Plath’s metaphors point towards her keen powers of observation, and an empirical bend of mind. The “fine timbers” of the house (4), the melon supported by the fragile tendrils (3), and the loaf big with yeasty rising (5) are examples of domestic science, appropriate for the able housewife, perhaps the persona in the poem.

### Biographical Context

Sylvia Plath was born in Boston in 1932, the oldest child of Otto Plath, a German immigrant, who taught zoology and German at Boston University, and Aurelia Plath, an educated Austrian immigrant, who was content to be a homemaker. Plath’s father, who figures prominently in many of Plath’s poems, was a brilliant scholar and an unavailable father, while Plath’s bond with her mother seems to have been an unremarkable one, at least in her early years. When Plath was eight years old, Otto Plath died of an untreated gangrene of diabetic origin. Her mother undertook secretarial work to support the family while encouraging Sylvia to be an exceptional student.

Plath excelled in her studies and won a scholarship to the prestigious Smith College after graduating from Wellesley High School. She earned her master’s degree in English Literature from Cambridge University in England, which she attended on a Fulbright scholarship. Plath met the English poet Ted Hughes (who later became the poet laureate of England) at Cambridge and after a whirlwind romance married him.

After a brief stay in the U.S., the couple moved permanently back to Devon, England, in 1959, when “Metaphors” was written. Plath’s literary career had an early start with a prize-winning story, “Sunday at the Mintons” (1952) in the “Mademoiselle” fiction contest. While acting as a secretary to

her husband’s poetic work, Plath was determined to establish herself in a career of writing. “Metaphors” written in England in 1959 was probably composed at the outset of Plath’s first pregnancy; her daughter, Freida, was born in 1960, also the year that saw the publication of her first book of collected poems “The Colossus.” Many of the poems in “The Colossus” revolve around Plath’s characteristic concerns as a poet; a thematic preference for the inner lives of women, fear and paranoia of the external world, the horrifying lessons of history, men who control and manipulate women, doubts about self-worth, and above it all, the creative assertion of the self and the poet’s ego. Plath was an ambitious poet obsessed with perfecting her poetic voice.

“Metaphors” is a woman-centered poem that embodies Plath’s characteristic self-doubt. Questions about identity loom at the forefront of this poem where through a series of surprising metaphors, Plath persuades us to question the uses of pregnancy and motherhood for women, in their journey to define themselves. It is an unapologetic list of distresses and doubts commonly “felt” by most pregnant women, but rarely articulated, for fear of disturbing the sacred image of motherhood. A woman who complains about her pregnancy could not possibly be a reliable mother. That is what Plath’s speaker sets out to do in an almost playful fashion in this poem: casting herself in a comical light, calling herself an “elephant,” (2) “a melon,” (3) which hides her dissatisfaction at the distress caused to her body by the pregnancy.

Plath left her marriage with Ted Hughes in 1962, after discovering his affair with another woman. She wrote the most disturbing and brilliant poems in the last year of her life, often writing at night after her children were in bed. On February 11, 1963, in her thirtieth year, after making sure that her children would not be harmed, she turned on the gas in the kitchen oven, stuck her head inside, and killed herself.

It is a truism to say that writers plumb their lives for creative material. Plath did not conceal her private grief from her readers; however, she managed this grief without sentimentality and solipsism, but with an ear to the latent music of all scenes of melancholy. The formal control that animates “Metaphor” from its first word “I” to the last shocking image of a train-trap governs the best and most mature of Plath’s poems. We read them to learn how to ask questions of this monster, grief.

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### Discussion Questions

1. Identify the tenor and vehicle for all the metaphors in the poem. Map the exact attribute for each metaphor used by Plath in this poem.
2. What is the speaker's attitude towards her body in "Metaphors"?
3. What is the theme of "Metaphors"? Where in the poem did the theme become apparent to you?
4. Why do you think Plath titled this poem "Metaphors"?
5. What is the speaker's attitude towards pregnancy in this poem?
6. What is the tone of this poem? To whom do you think the poem is addressed?
7. Write five new metaphors for pregnancy in the manner of metaphors used by Plath.
8. Would you consider pregnancy and childbirth riddles? Why or why not? Why does Plath consider her pregnancy to be a riddle?
9. Compare "Metaphors" with "Barren." What inferences can you make about Plath's attitude towards motherhood as evidenced in these two poems?
10. What does "Boarded a train there's no getting off" mean in this poem?

### Essay Ideas

1. Would you consider "Metaphors" to be a woman-centered poem? Why? If not, why? Support your position with close reading and interpretation of the poem.
2. Identify the source and target domains used by Plath to create her metaphors for pregnancy. Now using the same domains, try creating your own metaphors for motherhood. Write these metaphors of motherhood out as complete statements and explain their meaning to us. Summarize the tonal quality of these metaphors and show us what your list of metaphors tells us about your attitude towards motherhood.
3. According to "Metaphors," is pregnancy and motherhood a choice for women? Are women free to choose or are they not free to choose? What does the poem seem to suggest on this issue? Support your answer with close reading and interpretation of the poem.
4. What does the poem "Metaphors" tell you about poetry as a form and its capabilities? Is "Metaphors" a good and able representative of the genre of poetry? If yes, why? If no, why? Support your position with well-argued reasons.
5. Rewrite "Metaphors" into a simile poem by changing each metaphor into a simile. Compare and contrast the metaphor version with the simile version. Which one is more poetic? Why?



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