Nick and the Candlestick

SUMMARY

The speaker feels like a miner, guided by a dying flame whose light is blue. The cave she moves about drips with water that deposits minerals, slowly forming tapered structures that hang from its ceiling. They remind the speaker of a candle dripping wax.

They also remind her of tears seeping out of an inactive womb within the earth. Bats soar through the cave's air, which envelopes the speaker.

She is wrapped tattered swaths of fabric in the chilly and deathlike atmosphere. An ominous sensation lingers, clinging to the speaker as a plum's flesh clings to its pit.

The speaker describes the cave as old and filled with echoes. The tapered structures that hang from it look like icicles made of calcium. The cave is so frigid and ghostly that even the newts it houses are white, their color as pure as a clergyman.

The cave is also home to fish, which are shockingly cold—frozen into sheets of ice.

Those sheets of ice are sharp and cutting, like knives used for some depraved purpose. The fish suck life out of the speaker's toes as if they are piranhas receiving the Eucharist—the body and blood of Christ—for the first time.

The candle whose flame had been dying out takes a big sip of oxygen, regaining its height and enlivening its yellow flames.

The speaker tenderly addresses her child, asking him how he came to be in such a place. She addresses him again as an "embryo."

The speaker commends her son for remaining nicely folded within her throughout the pregnancy, even while he was sleeping. His blood is clean and pure, and he is the precious gem to her miner.

The speaker assures her child that, while pain pervades the world he is born into, that pain is not caused by or directed at him.

She then refers to him as her "love," telling her son that she has made their cave more hospitable by draping its walls with roses and cozy rugs.

The ornamentation is all that remains of a simpler, more romantic time. The speaker's son brings her such great fulfillment that she would be content if the world came to an end, the stars falling from the sky.

The speaker wouldn't care if toxic atoms of mercury dribbled into the world's reservoirs, which she finds disagreeable anyways.

The speaker believes that her son is the only real, reliable force, and other forces jealously depend on him. To put it differently, her universe revolves around him. In summation, the speaker's son is her savior—baby Jesus in the manger.

THEMES

THE CHALLENGES OF MOTHERHOOD

Guided by candlelight, the poem's speaker approaches her infant son's bedroom and nurses him. She compares this experience to a miner searching through a cave. In doing so, the speaker suggests that nourishing this new life depletes her and generates fear. Caring for her son diminishes the speaker's resources, leaving her feeling worn out and estranged from her own body. The poem thus implies that, although it is expected to be a woman's greatest joy, motherhood also brings about great challenges.

Throughout the poem, the speaker compares herself to "a miner" tossed into the dark, unfamiliar cave that is new motherhood. The light that guides her "burns blue," indicating that its flame is dying out. In other words, as the speaker gets deeper into motherhood, her resources diminish until she has next-to-nothing left.

The speaker also says she is wrapped in "raggy shawls" that fail to keep her warm. As the speaker's tools grow sparse, her ability to care for herself decays along with them. Moreover, the speaker does not actively nourish her child. Rather, the life-giving force wells up involuntarily, like "tears." Milk is drained from her as if she were a pagan sacrifice: "A piranha / Religion, drinking / Its first communion out of my live toes." This comparison again signals that child rearing exhausts her resources, as if they are hemorrhaging out of her.

The speaker also casts her physical self as a vessel or an offering rather than a living being. Indeed, with new motherhood comes a newly empty womb, and now that the speaker's does not carry a child, it is overcome with "dead boredom." The speaker refers to her body as a "cave" and an "echoer," indicating a vast, empty space. In this way, motherhood has transformed her body from a place of vitality into one of desolation. A shell of her former self, the speaker cannot imagine how her inhospitable womb once nurtured her child, asking him, "how did you get here?"

As the speaker mourns her body, her mortality becomes increasingly apparent—just one of the many fears that motherhood gives rise to. The speaker twice calls her newly empty womb "old," suggesting that, now that she is done bearing children, she feels closer to death. In fact, the speaker

repeatedly describes the "cave"—that is, new motherhood, including her new body—as "cold" and "white." These are the most prominent characteristics of a corpse. As such, the speaker fixates on her own physical deterioration, implying that her womb's bleak, lifeless state increases her awareness of her own mortality.

Furthermore, mining is a perilous line of work, known for its high rates of workplace injury and death. Therefore, the speaker's decision to liken this profession to motherhood signals that being a new mother is fearsome. Additionally, the speaker must grope around in the dark, unaware where (and whether) she will find success. Briefly referring to her struggles more directly, the speaker informs her son that "The blood blooms clean / In you, ruby. / The pain / You wake to is not yours." These assurances imply that the speaker is concerned about possibly imbuing her child with the troubles that she faces, be they genetic or environmental.

As such, the speaker projects fear about her parenting abilities. Therefore, the speaker's experience of early motherhood is treacherous, as fear and exhaustion act as additional burdens that she must carry. In this way, she provides a radically authentic account of motherhood by disclosing the many unsettling challenges that come with it.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-30

FINDING FULFILLMENT IN MOTHERHOOD

The tenor of the speaker's narration shifts dramatically as she turns to address her son, and their relationship alleviates many of the parenting difficulties laid out in the poem's first half. The poem implies that her child has the potential to resolve external concerns that weigh heavily on her, offering salvation. Thus, while being a new mother proves taxing, the speaker finds unparalleled fulfillment in her child himself.

The speaker's son reinvigorates her, easing the burdens of parenting. Initially, the flame that guides the speaker "burns blue," suggesting that it is dying out. However, when the speaker turns towards her son, it burns with greater intensity, regaining its height and yellow glow. In this way, the speaker's son revives her faculties and illuminates her path forward through this new phase of her life.

The speaker also refers to her son as "ruby," suggesting that he is the precious material that motivates her to explore the cave. As the cave comes to represent new motherhood, this moniker supports the idea that the speaker's son is a beacon that leads her through this uncharted territory, making it more manageable.

Further, while addressing her son, the speaker uses terms related to gestation, emphasizing their deep, carnal bond. For example, she calls him "embryo" and commends him for maintaining a "crossed position" within her during pregnancy. As such, the speaker's womb is presented as a nurturing home to new life, in contrast to the dead, desolate landscape described earlier.

Similarly, the speaker says, "Love, love, / I have hung our cave with roses, / With soft rugs." She refers to these furnishings as "Victoriana," gesturing to some romantic former time. In this way, the birth of the speaker's son leads her to dramatically soften the setting, while grim, lifeless images subside. Therefore, the speaker's relationship with her child gives her new life and purpose, guiding her through the dark, difficult terrain of new motherhood.

Additionally, the speaker's son presents her with the opportunity to reconcile with the external forces that haunt her, ultimately becoming her savior. The speaker says to her son, "The blood blooms clean in you," presumably referring to him sustaining the speaker's bloodline. The term "clean" implies hope that he will carry on a newly purified pedigree—one lacking the limitations that the speaker is beholden to.

In addition to genetic disadvantages, the speaker is hopeful that the *environmental* stresses she faces will also be laid to rest with this new generation. She remarks, "The pain / you wake to is not yours." In other words, the speaker is optimistic about the possibility that her son will not absorb the psychic hardships that she experiences.

In the end, the speaker takes such solace in her son that if the world were to end, she would be content. Expressing acceptance of even the darkest corners of the universe, she exclaims, "Let the stars plummet … Let the mercuric / Atoms that cripple drip." In the poem's final lines it becomes clear that the speaker's son is a messianic, Christlike figure to her. He is "the one" stable force that she can rely on—so much so that her world seems to revolve around (or "lean on") him. Indeed, she likens her child to Jesus, calling him "the baby in the barn." As such, the speaker sees in her son the potential for salvation, which brings her unique comfort in a troublesome world—much like the relief he provides from the burdens of motherhood, discussed above. Therefore, the speaker finds unparalleled fulfillment in her son, elevating the mutual nourishment that motherhood provides.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 20-42

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

I am a ...
... its dead boredom.

Before "Nick and the Candlestick" even begins, its title creates expectations about the poem's content. In particular, the title's rhyme and imagery alludes to the classic nursery rhyme "Jack Be Nimble":

> Jack be nimble.
> Jack be quick.
> Jack jump over the candlestick.

As a result, it would be reasonable to expect that the verse that follows is lighthearted and suitable for children. In reality, its elaborate metaphors are often difficult to decipher, while its language skews dark and gloomy. This becomes clear within the poem's first few lines, which describe a miner searching an eerie cave by dying candlelight. This initial passage thus introduces tension between the poem's nursery rhyme connotations and its sinister mood, which will reflect the speaker's personal ambivalence towards motherhood.

These lines also establish the poem's central conceit—the speaker compares her experience of motherhood to a miner traversing a cave. By pointing out her dying candle, the speaker suggests that her resources are running thin, the cave is dim, and she struggles to navigate it. Furthermore, mining is known as a dangerous line of work, with the goal of extracting some valuable material. These underlying connotations implicitly begin to shape the poem's meaning.

The simple and language and sentence structure in the poem's opening line also make its meaning clear. These direct statements of fact establish the speaker's authority and credibility before launching the reader into a series of complex metaphors.

Lines 2-5 continue to characterize the cave. From its roof hangs stalactites—tapered structures created by trickling water, which deposits minerals slowly over time. These might be symbolic of the speaker's breasts filled with milk to nurse her child. Yet the speaker calls the drippings "tears," suggesting sadness, and the cave becomes "the earthen womb."

This metaphor signals that the poem is concerned with motherhood and that the cave represents the speaker's body—insinuations that will become clearer later. Moreover, line 5 indicates that the cave is inactive through the use of pathetic fallacy, as it experiences "dead boredom." This form of personification portrays the cave as a living thing—albeit one that is nearly bored to death—and can be interpreted as a commentary on the speaker's newly-empty womb.

As the poem opens, its meter features a high concentration of stressed syllables, giving it force. However, this gives way to a more iambic (unstressed-stressed) meter with isolated stresses that mimick dripping water. Assonance and consonance exaggerate the rhythm by calling additional attention to syllables that receive metrical stress:

> I am a miner. The light burns blue.
> Waxy stalactites
> Drip and thicken, tears

Assonance and consonance continue throughout this passage, creating slant and internal rhymes among "womb," "from," and "boredom." These clusters of repeating sounds draw the audience in and bridge abrupt, enjambed line breaks.

LINES 6-9

Black bat airs ...
... me like plums.

The speaker takes in her surroundings, using another series of metaphors to describe the cave. As such, this passage adds depth to the poem's setting and develops the miner/cave conceit established in line 1.

First, the speaker refers to the cave's draft as "black bat airs." Bats are commonly associated with caves, but the speaker emphasizes their dark color, suggesting a dim and gloomy atmosphere. This atmosphere envelops the speaker, wrapping her like "raggy shawls."

The enjambment after line 6 creates an appropriate sort of wrapping effect, as it causes the reader's gaze to quickly weave from to the end of one line to the beginning of the next:

> Black bat airs
> Wrap me ...

As this line phrase moves down the page, it carries the somber ambiance into the next stanza. It therefore subtly mirrors the action it describes, wrapping the poem itself in darkness.

Although the speaker's use of asyndeton does not specify the exact relationship between the "airs" and "shawls," shawls are pieces of fabric that usually wrap around someone's shoulders, indicating that the speaker compares the airs to shawls. The descriptor "raggy" signifies that the fabric is old and worn-down. Further, shawls are often used to wrap up babies—a hint that the speaker is really commenting on motherhood. Therefore, the "raggy shawls" can be seen as a signal that motherhood leaves the speaker feeling exhausted, worn out, raggedy.

The metaphor continues as the speaker equates the "airs" and "shawls" with "cold homicides." "Homicide" is a technical term for "murder" with a clinical, detached feel, consistent with the

adjective "cold." This metaphor calls attention to the cave's bitter temperature—it is clearly not safe or hospitable and instead seems ghostly.

Again, by linking them with commas, asyndeton suggests a relationship among these images, most likely that they are all meant to describe the same idea—that is, the cave's atmosphere:

> Wrap me, raggy shawls,
> Cold homicides.

Plus, asyndeton results in parataxis, setting these images of "bat airs," shawls, and murders side-by-side. However, it also creates intrigue, as their connection is never stated outright.

What follows is the poem's only simile, meaning it marks the only time that the speaker actually explains how she arrives at a comparison—even if that comparison itself might be confusing:

> They weld to me like plums.

The simile is neatly contained within one line by an end-stop and its syntax is straightforward, projecting force and certainty. The speaker explains that the dreary air is fused to her tightly and strongly, as if she and the air are welded together. The air's lingering attachment reminds her of plums, whose flesh clings to their pits. The dense, hard pit and natural imagery resonates with earlier characterizations of the cave.

This passage contains a chaotic combination of short lines, enjambment, end-stops, and caesura, resulting in a choppy feel. However, its high concentration of consonance and assonance slow things down:

> Black bat airs
> Wrap me, raggy shawls,

Furthermore, as a result of asyndeton, clunky conjunctions are unnecessary. Instead, commas sustain the rhythm's momentum, allowing it to flow.

LINES 10-13

Old cave of ...
... Those holy Joes.

The speaker's abundant use of metaphors continues into stanza 3, which reinforces earlier descriptions of the cave as cold, unwelcoming, and full of death. There is a great deal of rhyme in this section, especially relative to the rest of the poem, where perfect rhymes are infrequent. In particular, line 10 contains both internal and end rhymes with lines 8-9, creating continuity and sonic interest:

> Cold homicides.
> They weld to me like plums.

> Old cave of calcium

Furthermore, line 13 contains an internal rhyme—"Those holy Joes"—as well as assonant long /o/ sounds that appear earlier in this passage. Consonance is also very prominent:

> Old cave of calcium
> Icicles, old echoer.
> Even the newts are white,

These lines are highly musical, echoing with repeating sounds like the cave it describes. This musicality contrasts with its dark imagery—and example of juxtaposition that reflects the speaker's conflicting feelings about motherhood.

Also note the repetition of "old." As the cave comes to represent the speaker's body, this prominent descriptor suggests that motherhood wears the speaker out and/or reminds her of her own mortality. Similarly, the enjambment that falls at the end of line 10 draws attention to "calcium," forming subtle connotations with milk and breastfeeding:

> Old cave of calcium
> Icicles, old echoer.

This echoes the earlier imagery of the "Waxy stalactites" that "Drip," which again might be symbolic of the speaker's breasts swollen with milk. Furthermore, this moment creates an element of surprise, as "calcium" seems to be a central *noun*, but actually *describes* "icicles." As such, the enjambment creates a double meaning and keeps readers alert. Meanwhile, the image of icicles recalls the "cold homicides" earlier and maintains awareness of the cave's icy, inhospitable environment.

Lines 12-13 ("Even the newts ... Joes.") then represent the beginning of a sort of interjection. The speaker's cool, detached tone suddenly falls away as she expresses amazement about just how icy the cave is. The end-stops and line breaks coincide, creating natural pauses that mimic everyday speech. This sudden flood of personal emotion drives home just how deathlike and desolate the cave is—even the speaker is surprised!

When the speaker calls the newts "holy Joes," she introduces religious themes into the poem (which will reappear later). A holy Joe is a somewhat derogatory term for a clergyman that implies a self-righteous attitude. Her portrayals of religion—and in particular, Christianity—will slowly become more positive as she considers the benefits of motherhood.

LINES 14-19

And the fish, ...
... my live toes.

The speaker's interjection continues over the next several lines, expanding on the cave's icy, aquatic environment. The

repetition (technically epizeuxis) of "the fish, the fish" maintains the poem's conversational tone, especially as the speaker cuts herself off to exclaim, "Christ!" Like "holy Joes," this reference to Christianity has an element of sacrilege that will come into play later in this passage.

Once again, the speaker expresses awe at just how cold and ghostly the cave is, suggesting that its environment is intense and difficult to adjust to. By calling the fish "panes" of ice—rather than, say, sheets or slabs—she creates subtle associations with torment and discomfort through its homonym, "pains." Indeed, she then mentions "a vice of knives," again conjuring pain and violence. A "vice" (usually spelled "vise" in American English) is a clamping tool used to hold objects in place. The phrase "vise grip" refers to an extremely tight, firm hold on something. As such, a "vice of knives" suggests some painful imagery indeed, and may suggest the specific pain of contractions and giving birth. Further, "vice" invokes the idea of immorality, which is consistent with the religious language that surrounds it. The speaker continues:

> A piranha
> Religion, drinking
> Its first communion out of my live toes.

A piranha is a kind of fish known for its sharp teeth, which tear into its prey, sustaining the speaker's dark portrayal of religion. By describing her blood being drained ritualistically, the speaker indicates that the cave exhausts her resources. This metaphor suggests that nurturing a child is draining and requires great sacrifice. Moreover, the "first communion" is a rite of passage, signifying a key moment in the progression of someone's life. Meanwhile, "drinking" pairs with earlier terminology such as "calcium" to imply that the speaker is breastfeeding her son. Nursing is often physically painful for women, which is perhaps alluded to by the reference to the "piranha."

This passage has an overarching iambic (unstressed-stressed) meter, set in motion by the epizeuxis "the fish, the fish":

> And the fish, the fish—
> Christ! They are panes of ice,
> A vice of knives,

Sibilance and (slant) rhymes exaggerate the rhythm by called additional attention to stressed syllables (all of which contain a sibilant /s/, /sh/, or /z/ sound). Similarly, end-stops accentuate the final stresses in each line.

The end-stops that conclude lines 15-16 result from asyndeton. The exclusion of conjunctions allows momentum to build, as connecting words like "and" or "as" would slow down the poem. All these devices contribute to a very fast-paced rhythm, creating a chaotic mood that suits the graphic imagery at hand. Line 19 ("Its first communion ...") is then considerably longer than the preceding lines, so it appears drawn out. As the poem loses speed, it mirrors the resources slowly being drained from the speaker's body.

LINES 20-22

The candle ...
... Its yellows hearten.

The speaker briefly directs the reader's attention back towards the candle that guides her. The candle first appears in the poem's opening line, where it is pictured dying out. Here, on the other hand, it "recovers," growing bright and tall. As the candle once implied the speaker's lack of guidance and diminishing resources, it now indicates that she is reinvigorated. As the coming lines will show, it is at this moment—as the candle grows—that the speaker turns to her son.

The candle can be seen as a symbol for the speaker's son, who provides her with clarity and brings brightness into her life. The personification of the candle supports the idea that the candle symbolizes the speaker's son. More specifically, the verb "gulp" describes the action of vigorously ingesting something and once again implies that the speaker is nursing her son. Plus, to "hearten" means to gain strength, which a baby does when feeding. In fact, in a 1962 interview, Plath said this image inspired the poem:

> A mother nurses her baby son by candlelight and finds in him a beauty which, while it may not ward off the world's ill, does redeem her share of it.

As the speaker gives over her resources to her son, she receives direction and positivity. This contrasts with earlier metaphors in the poem—including the initial image of the candlestick—that portray motherhood as depleting. Fittingly, consonant /l/ sounds create a gentle atmosphere:

> The candle
> Gulps and recovers its small altitude,
> Its yellows hearten.

This passage marks a turning point in the poem—as the speaker interacts with her son, the mood grows more positive and imagery more hopeful.

LINES 23-26

O love, how ...
... Your crossed position.

The speaker begins to address her son directly, introducing apostrophe into the poem. This puts the reader in Nick's place, creating intimacy between the speaker and the reader. Plus, it draws a direct correlation between the speaker's interaction with her son and the noticeably brighter language and softer

atmosphere that takes over the poem at this point.

That atmosphere is created through the gentleness of the speaker's language. The anaphora of "O" produces assonance, along with repeated /eh/ and /ee/ sounds. At the same time, the sibilance and consonance of /h/ and /m/ sounds produce euphony:

> O love, how did you get here?
> O embryo
> Remembering, even in sleep,
> Your crossed position.

Moreover, the line breaks fall at natural pauses, maintaining a smooth and pleasant flow.

Significantly, this passage confirms that the poem explores the speaker's experience of motherhood and therefore clarifies earlier metaphors. The speaker expresses wonder at her son's ability to develop in the cave, asking "how did you get here?" She goes on to call him "embryo" and praise his "crossed [fetal] position," referencing gestation. As such, "here" denotes both the cave and the speaker's womb, suggesting that they are one and the same. The miner/cave conceit that begins in the poem's very first line now comes into focus—the speaker struggles to navigate her new body, including its empty womb. She feels estranged from her physical form, as if she is a miner searching a cold, desolate cave.

Finally, the "crossed position" that the speaker's son assumes in the womb once again recalls religious imagery. In the Christian tradition, Jesus is often depicted being crucified—that is, dying on a cross. This nod to the Bible resonates with earlier terminology such as "holy Joes" and "first communion." However, in this instance, Christianity is invoked in a much more positive and celebratory context. This foreshadows a later comparison to Jesus and keeps biblical references fresh in the reader's mind.

LINES 27-30

> *The blood blooms ...*
> *... is not yours.*

Over the course of the next several lines, the speaker assures her son that he is capable of leading a happy life. First, she tells him, "the blood blooms clean / In you." Earlier, in lines 17-19, a piranha is pictured drinking the speaker's blood from her toes, amidst a series of graphic and violent metaphors. As discussed above, this image presents motherhood as a challenging, painful sacrifice that depletes her resources. Here, however, the blood becomes a source of hope.

"Bloom" denotes growth and the flourishing of new life, while "clean" indicates that her blood has been rid of impurities—the genetic and familial hardships that she has faced. In both cases, blood can be seen as a symbol of the physical resources that the speaker has channeled into her child. But this latter appearance of blood in the poem provides a more favorable view of the sacrifices she has made. In particular, caring for her son gives the speaker hope that he will have a better life, bringing out an optimism that was noticeably absent earlier.

This passage features positive counterparts to a few other dark metaphors introduced in the poem's first half. In particular, she calls her son "ruby," implying that he is the gem she has been searching for in this cave all along. Throughout the poem, the speaker compares her experience of motherhood to navigating a gloomy, unfamiliar cave as a miner. Here, the speaker's son becomes her reward.

She goes on to reassure him that "the pain / [he wakes] to is not [his]." The speaker addresses the wickedness that pervades the cave (suggesting that the cave can also be interpreted as a symbol for the speaker's home and marriage), where Nick "wakes." Like her message about "the blood," this statement pledges that the speaker's son is not beholden to the darkness that haunts her, relieving *him* of *her* burdens. Worth noting here is that Plath's tumultuous marriage to Ted Hughes was unraveling by the time she wrote this poem, and this is may be the source of the "pain" that surrounds her child.

This passage contains a great deal of consonance and assonance:

> The blood blooms clean
> In you, ruby.
> The pain
> You wake to is not yours.

These gentle sounds create an atmopshere of tenderness and care.

LINES 31-34

> *Love, love, ...*
> *... last of Victoriana.*

After reassuring her child that the demons that haunt her are not his to bear, the speaker attempts to make the environment more hospitable. As she lovingly endeavors to comfort her child, he clearly inspires a sense of purpose and motivation that was absent in the speaker earlier in the poem.

Rather than an "old echoer" and "earthen womb," the setting now becomes "our cave." This suggests that the cave represents the home that the speaker shares with her child (in addition to being a symbol for her body, as discussed above). As such, the speaker's journey through the cave in the poem's first half can be interpreted as her approaching the nursery where her sleeping son lies—perhaps noticing the chaos that motherhood has brought to her home or some preexisting ills.

But that environment softens as the speaker drapes the cave in "roses" and "soft rugs." The juxtaposition between these two

portrayals of the cave indicates that the speaker's child is a source of tenderness and beauty in their home. Roses bring life where there was previously death, and rugs bring warmth where there was previously ice.

These new furnishings are "the last of Victoriana"—the last surviving remnants of a better, more romantic time. "Victoriana" is a reference to the Victorian period, which took place during Queen Victoria's rule in the United Kingdom and ended in 1901. The period saw the growth of the middle class, and the references to "soft rugs" suggests a prior time of elegance and sumptuousness. The Victorian era was also defined by strict gender roles and the relegation of women to domestic duties, however. Perhaps the speaker is saying that these touches of beauty—the flowers, rugs, and tenderness of her care—are her last attempt at fulfilling the role expected of her.

These items can also be interpreted as relics of a brighter time in the household. This image also signals that the speaker gives her son all that she has left. But instead of grim symptoms of exhaustion, the speaker's sacrifices are presented in a positive and productive light—they add to the cave, rather than take from the speaker. Thus, as the speaker considers her son, the negative impacts of motherhood melt away and its benefits come to the fore.

The repetition of "love," another example of epizeuxis, plays up the speaker's affection for her child, especially as these terms of endearment stand alone as the opening line of stanza 11. They also establish assonance of the short /uh/ sounds, which is picked up in "hung" and "rugs," accentuating the meter:

> Love, love,
> I have hung our cave with roses,
> With soft rugs—
> The last of Victoriana.

Each of these lines is end-stopped, emphasizing natural pauses and introducing regularity, both of which allow the poem to move along quite smoothly. Plus, asyndeton replaces a conjunction with a comma after "roses," maintaining momentum and flow. It also produces anaphora through the repetition of "with," increasing the musicality of this passage. Subtle end rhymes—"have" with "cave" and "love" with "hung" and "rug"—have a similar effect, creating a sense of harmony that reflects the comfort of "our cave."

LINES 35-39

> *Let the stars ...*
> *... the terrible well,*

The speaker briefly turns away from her son to address the heavens. She says that if the world comes to an end—if "the stars" and "the mercuric atoms" fall—she will be content. This cosmic imagery recalls classic lullabies and children's books, such as "Goodnight Moon" and "Twinkle Twinkle, Little Star." However, the language that the speaker uses to characterize the stars' descent is decidedly bleak and fatalistic, reinforcing the tension between light and dark that pervades the poem.

For example, in place of an innocuous term like "fall," the speaker chooses "plummet," which indicates a forceful, high-velocity descent. "Drip" operates on the other extreme, denoting a sad, meager dribble. Plus the stars' destination is "dark" and "terrible." This destination could be a black hole or a vast vacuum in space, but these details evoke the cave as it was portrayed earlier. In fact, the speaker uses "drip" in line 3 when describing the water that trickles from its roof. The reprise of this imagery signals acceptance of motherhood's difficulties—upon considering her son, the speaker essentially says, "let it be" of the cave's negative features.

These lines feature several important stylistic effects. In particular, two instances of enjambment fall on "stars / Plummet" and "drip / Into." These line breaks cause the reader's gaze to mimic the heavens' descent, quickly skipping down the page from the end of one line to the beginning of the next. Furthermore, consonant /t/, /k/, /p/, and growling /r/ sounds imbue the lines with a sense of harshness and sharpness. Here is a closer look at lines 37-39:

> Let the mercuric
> Atoms that cripple drip
> Into the terrible well,

The resulting cacophony amplifies the dark atmosphere. Meanwhile, slant rhymes among "cripple," "terrible," and "well" call readers' attention to these dark images.

Finally, the repetition of "Let the" creates anaphora, which is highlighted by their position at the beginning of the lines in which they appear. Anaphora provides structure and emphasis, allowing momentum to build and propelling the reader towards the poem's conclusion. Anaphora also suggests a relationship between the two statements that make up this passage. Further, asyndeton links them with a comma, placing them side-by-side as coequal. Indeed, these declarations carry the same sentiment—if the heavens were to come crashing down, the speaker would be content.

LINES 40-42

> *You are the ...*
> *... in the barn.*

In the poem's final stanza, the speaker uses two metaphors to emphasize her son's role as the most important figure in her life. First, she calls him "the one / Solid the spaces lean on, envious." Directly before this comparison, the speaker mentions "stars" and "mercuric atoms," implying that by "spaces," she means outer space. The speaker therefore paints her son as the center of the universe, around which all other

forces revolve. This metaphor thus illustrates the extent to which the speaker's reality is consumed by Nick—he is her guiding force, all that she relies on.

This interpretation is supported by the double meaning that results from the enjambment at the end of line 40. Taken alone, this line reads, "You are the one." Calling someone "the one" typically expresses a belief that they are perfectly suited for you—the *only* person for you—and that being so, you have stopped looking for anyone else. As such, the speaker indicates that her son is her sole focus and source of fulfillment.

The speaker uses personification in the form of pathetic fallacy when she refers to "the spaces" as "envious." In doing so, she suggests that the universe is emotionally invested in the poem's events, raising its stakes. Further, the speaker's son is depicted as so powerful and dependable that all other cosmic forces long to be like him.

In the poem's final line, the speaker alludes to the story of Christ's birth, putting her son in Jesus's place as she calls him "the baby in the barn." In the Christian tradition, Jesus is considered the Messiah, who has the power to save his people from sin and guarantee their place in heaven. Therefore, the speaker insinuates that Nick is her savior—the most important figure in her life, who can liberate her from her demons if she submits herself to him. This portrayal of religion contrasts with the image of the "first communion" in line 19, in which the speaker's sacrifice is seen as depleting. Here, on the other hand, it provides her with hope and clarity.

This metaphor essentially restates the message of the metaphor that precedes it in more straightforward terms—both present the speaker's son as a celestial being with unparalleled power. Indeed, the repetition of "You are the" creates an equivalency between the two statements. This anaphora, highlighted by its placement at the beginnings of lines 40-41, gives the poem's final stanza structure and creates drama and momentum as the poem draws to a close. Plus, it gives the speaker's statements emphasis and authority. By repeating her point in different terms—here, as with the "let the" statements above—the speaker projects certainty and credibility. The poem's final statement also uses simple syntax and an end-stop contains it neatly within one line, increasing its force and leaving the reader with a strong impression of the speaker's love for her son.

This excerpt also features an abundance of sound play. Note the presence of sibilance, assonance, and consonance in the poem's final two lines:

> Solid the spaces lean on, envious.
> You are the baby in the barn.

These repeating sounds attract the reader's attention at the poem's conclusion, increasing its impact and memorability.

SYMBOLS

THE CAVE

The cave is symbolic on two levels—it represents both the speaker's home and her body/womb. The cave is first introduced as an "earthen womb" that the speaker moves about, guided only by a dying light. This description suggests that she has trouble navigating her post-birth body. Shortly thereafter it is called an "old cave of calcium / icicles, old echoer." The cave's coldness, emptiness, and age indicate that the speaker's womb is no longer habitable or nourishing. Indeed, the life that is inside her "cave"—fish and newts—is icy and white, signaling that it has died. The stalactites that hang from the cave are bored "waxy ... tears" in addition to "calcium / icicles." They can be seen as her nutrient-rich breast milk or her life-giving forces more broadly, which are passive and hardened.

Later, the setting becomes "our cave" as the speaker lovingly turns to her son. She explains that she has made their home more comfortable by covering it in flowers and rugs. This is an attempt to offset "the pain" that pervades the environment that he is born into. As such, the cave's cold, ghostly atmosphere described earlier can also be interpreted as the bitterness of the world outside the womb.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-3:** "I am a miner. The light burns blue. / Waxy stalactites / Drip and thicken, tears"
- **Line 4:** "The earthen womb"
- **Lines 5-6:** "Exudes from its dead boredom. / Black bat airs"
- **Line 7:** "Wrap me,"
- **Lines 10-11:** "Old cave of calcium / Icicles, old echoer"
- **Line 12:** "Even the newts are white,"
- **Line 32:** "our cave"

THE CANDLE

The candle that guides the speaker symbolizes the positive aspects of motherhood, particularly the promise for redemption and reconciliation that new life offers. It might also thus be thought of as representing the speaker's son himself, given that the child is what seems to make the travails of motherhood worth it.

At first, its "light burns blue" and the speaker's path forward is uncertain. Ill-equipped with only a dying light and tattered rags, she struggles to adjust to new motherhood. However, when the speaker turns to her son, the candle's flame gets a reinvigorating breath of oxygen, growing bigger and burning brighter. Further, the speaker is hopeful that the familial

challenges she has faced could end with her son. She is assured that her bloodline becomes "clean" in him and "the pain" that fills their environment will not be his burden. In this way, he is quite literally her "light at the end of the tunnel"—a potential resolution to her struggles and a blessing that makes her parenting journey worthwhile. As her beacon, he provides clarity, guidance, and motivation.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "The light"
- **Line 20:** "The candle"

BLOOD

Blood appears twice within the poem as a symbol of the speaker's life force and resources, which she channels into nurturing her son. At first the speaker describes fish sucking blood from her toes ritualistically:

> A piranha
> Religion, drinking
> Its first communion out of my live toes.

Here, motherhood seems to physically drain the speaker, leaving her feeling depleted. Indeed, surrounding this image are descriptions of a cold, desolate cave.

However, shortly thereafter the speaker remarks to her son, "The blood blooms clean / In you, ruby." In other words, by giving herself over to her son, the speaker gains hope that his life will be better than hers; that her blood will be purified within her child. Thus, the development of this symbol supports the speaker's central message that although motherhood may be grueling, it also promises fulfillment.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 19:** "first communion"
- **Line 27:** "The blood"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

This poem contains a few allusions, the first of which appears in its title. "Nick and the Candlestick" recalls the nursery rhyme "Jack Be Nimble":

> Jack be nimble.
> Jack be quick.
> Jack jump over the candlestick.

In this verse, the Jack character has been replaced with Nick—a shortened form of Nicholas, the name of Plath's son. Nick rhymes with "candlestick," strengthening its association with classic nursery rhymes. As such, readers naturally come to expect lighthearted verse. However, they are soon confronted with "tears" and "cold homicides."

Still, the poem contains a great deal of assonance and consonance, producing both perfect and slant rhymes. The resulting tension between the poem's musicality and dark imagery reflects the speaker's ambivalence about motherhood—it wears her thin like "raggy shawls," but her son is her "love" and her "ruby." This contrast is an example of juxtaposition, discussed in greater detail in its own entry in this guide.

The poem's final line also contains an allusion—in this case, to the nativity of Jesus, or the story of Christ's birth in the Bible's New Testament. By referring to her son as "the baby in the barn," the speaker implies that he is Christlike. What exactly the speaker means by this can be inferred using clues offered earlier, particularly in lines 27-30:

> The blood blooms clean
> In you, ruby.
> The pain
> You wake to is not yours.

This passage suggests that the speaker's son is not plagued by the inherited or environmental demons that haunt her. In the Christian tradition, Jesus is a figure of forgiveness and salvation from sin. Likening her son to Christ, the speaker finds in him renewed clarity, purpose, and hope for a better life.

This allusion also provides a resolution to an earlier reference to Christianity, in which a piranha sucks the speaker's blood as if she is "its first communion." This image emphasizes all the sacrifices that motherhood requires. But at the poem's conclusion, her sacrifices are met with the ultimate reward—her son.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 17-19:** "A piranha / Religion, drinking / Its first communion out of my live toes."
- **Line 20:** "The candle"
- **Line 42:** "You are the baby in the barn."

APOSTROPHE

In line 23, the speaker turns towards her child, asking him, "O love, how did you get here?" The speaker addresses her son directly for the remainder of the poem, an example of apostrophe.

This poetic device serves several functions. First, it confirms that motherhood is the poem's subject—a fact that was *implied* earlier but never stated outright. Furthermore, the speaker's

use of apostrophe coincides with a shift from descriptions of a cold, death-filled cave to expressions of love and hopefulness.

As the poem brightens when the speaker turns to her son, it becomes clear that he is the source of her newfound joy and optimism. Indeed, apostrophe allows the speaker to express the full extent of her feelings about motherhood, because she is able to direct them at their origin (that is, her child). Stanza 11 is a strong example of this effect:

> Love, love,
> I have hung our cave with roses,
> With soft rugs—

Finally, apostrophe builds intimacy between the speaker and the audience because it puts the reader in Nick's place. The enigmatic, highly metaphorical language that characterizes the poem's first half could leave readers feeling lost or disconnected from its speaker and subject matter. Apostrophe gives the speaker's monologue a concrete object and encourages displays of warmth, restoring trust and kinship with the audience.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Lines 23-42:** "O love, how did you get here? / O embryo / Remembering, even in sleep, / Your crossed position. / The blood blooms clean / In you, ruby. / The pain / You wake to is not yours. / Love, love, / I have hung our cave with roses, / With soft rugs— / The last of Victoriana. / Let the stars / Plummet to their dark address, / Let the mercuric / Atoms that cripple drip / Into the terrible well, / You are the one / Solid the spaces lean on, envious. / You are the baby in the barn."

ASSONANCE

Assonance plays a key role in the sound of the poem. Alongside consonance, it creates clusters of repeating sounds, often resulting in internal rhyme, as in line 13:

> Those holy Joes,

As such, assonance contributes to the poem's overall musicality, which compliments its nursery rhyme overtones. At the same time, this melodious quality contrasts with dark imagery to express the speaker's ambivalence about motherhood. Notice, for example, the slant rhymes created by repeating long /i/ sounds in lines 15-16:

> Christ! they are panes of ice,
> A vice of knives,

In this passage, the words that rhyme evoke violence, feeding the subtle tension between light and dark that develops as the speaker considers the impacts of motherhood. In many ways, assonance actually helps the audience navigate the poem's turbulent highs and lows. First, it creates sonic interest, slowing readers down and calling for a closer examination of the text—which is beneficial given its dense metaphors and fast pace. Further, repeating sounds establish continuity and therefore allow the poem to flow over abrupt line breaks, stanza breaks, and the occasional caesura. In this way, assonance provides reprieve from the poem's choppy, chaotic cadence.

For another example of this, look to lines 27-30:

> The blood blooms clean
> In you, ruby.
> The pain
> You wake to is not yours.

The /oo/ and /ay/ sounds, combined the clear alliteration and consonance, binds these two stanzas together, lending the lines a gentle rhythm and feel that reflects the speaker's tenderness as she speaks to her son.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Waxy stalactites"
- **Line 3:** "Drip," "thicken"
- **Lines 4-5:** "womb / Exudes"
- **Line 6:** "Black bat"
- **Line 7:** "Wrap," "me," "raggy"
- **Line 9:** "plums"
- **Line 10:** "Old," "calcium"
- **Line 11:** "old echoer"
- **Line 13:** "Those holy Joes"
- **Line 15:** "Christ," "ice"
- **Line 16:** "vice," "knives"
- **Line 19:** "my live"
- **Line 23:** "O"
- **Line 24:** "O embryo"
- **Line 25:** "even," "sleep"
- **Line 27:** "blooms," "clean"
- **Line 28:** "you," "ruby"
- **Line 29:** "pain"
- **Line 30:** "You," "wake"
- **Line 31:** "Love," "love"
- **Line 32:** "hung"
- **Line 33:** "rugs"
- **Line 34:** "Victoriana"
- **Line 35:** "stars"
- **Line 36:** "dark"
- **Lines 38-39:** "cripple drip / Into"
- **Line 39:** "terrible"

ASYNDETON

"Nick and the Candlestick" contains few conjunctions—words that connect phrases—resulting in many instances of asyndeton. In this poem, asyndeton primarily functions to maintain a fast-paced rhythm and high energy. By substituting commas for conjunctions, asyndeton places distinct images side-by-side so that one flows swiftly into the next. At times, this effect can be overwhelming and disorienting—like the speaker's experience of motherhood. For example, consider lines 15-18 and what they might sound like with conjunctions such as "like and "and":

> Christ! They are panes of ice,
> A vice of knives,
> A piranha
> Religion, drinking

Furthermore, asyndeton gives rise to parataxis, which essentially means that it creates short, simple phrases that appear alongside one another, but their relationship is not made clear. Of course, this can increase the poem's ambiguity, as in lines 6-8:

> Black bat airs
> Wrap me, raggy shawls,
> Cold homicides.

It is unclear if the "black bat airs," "raggy shawls," and "cold homicides" are different ways of saying the same thing, or if the speaker is comparing them to one another, or if there is a particular hierarchy or sequence to this list.

However, asyndeton and parataxis can also suggest a correlation between two distinct clauses that might otherwise seem unrelated. This is the case in lines 20-22:

> The candle
> Gulps and recovers its small altitude,
> Its yellows hearten.

Here, a comma signals that the candle's flame burns brighter *as a result* of an increase in oxygen.

Lastly, asyndeton both creates and amplifies repetition, contributing to the poem's musicality. Here's a look at this effect in lines 32-33:

> I have hung our cave with roses,
> With soft rugs—

The omission of conjunctions leads to "with" appearing twice in close succession. In line 7, asyndeton places two phrases with repeating sounds side-by-side—"wrap me, raggy." By decreasing the distance between them, asyndeton calls attention to their repetition.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-5:** "Drip and thicken, tears / The earthen womb / Exudes from its dead boredom."
- **Lines 7-8:** "Wrap me, raggy shawls, / Cold homicides"
- **Lines 10-11:** "Old cave of calcium / Icicles, old echoer."
- **Lines 15-18:** "they are panes of ice, / A vice of knives, / A piranha / Religion"
- **Lines 21-22:** "Gulps and recovers its small altitude, / Its yellows hearten"
- **Lines 32-33:** "I have hung our cave with roses, / With soft rugs"

CONSONANCE

Consonance is present throughout the poem in a number of forms, including sibilance, euphony (sounds that pleasantly flow together), and alliteration (sounds that repeat in words' first letters or stressed syllables). Consonance often appears alongside assonance and these related devices serve many of the same functions. For starters, concentrated groups of repeating sounds draw interest, which encourages a slower, more attentive reading. Here's a look at lines 10-11, where recurring sounds produce an echoing effect that mimics the cave described:

> Old cave of calcium
> Icicles, old echoer.

The density of repeating sounds creates a tongue twister of sorts, requiring a close reading. This passage can be considered an example of cacophony, as gentle /l/, /oh/, and /s/ sounds flow nicely together, but clash with hard /k/ sounds. In this way, consonance helps to shape the poem's mood by introducing sonic tension. Elsewhere, it has the opposite effect, softening the atmosphere, as in lines 23-25:

> O love, how did you get here?
> O embryo
> Remembering, even in sleep,

In this case, mellow /l/, /m/, and /b/ sounds produce euphony as the speaker turns to her son, reflecting the peace and beauty she finds in him. In general, assonance and consonance give the poem a musical quality, feeding into its nursery rhyme overtones. In fact, they often create rhymes like "Nick and the Candlestick," and "panes of ice, a vice" (lines 15-16). Slant and internal rhymes also appear frequently, such as in lines 8-10:

> Cold homicides.
> They weld to me like plums.

Old cave of calcium

Here and elsewhere, the jaunty, folk song sensibility that rhymes bring about conflicts with bleak imagery. This contrast mirrors the speaker's own ambivalence about motherhood. At the same time, assonance and consonance create sonic unity across chaotic line and stanza breaks. As this poem has a generally choppy cadence and frequently pivots from one image to the next without warning, chains of similar sounds promote a smoother flow and unified feel.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "burns blue"
- **Line 2:** "Waxy stalactites"
- **Line 3:** "thicken"
- **Line 5:** "Exudes," "dead boredom"
- **Line 6:** "Black bat"
- **Line 9:** "weld," "like," "plums"
- **Line 10:** "Old," "cave," "calcium"
- **Line 11:** "Icicles," "old echoer"
- **Line 12:** "Even," "newts," "white"
- **Line 13:** "Those," "Joes"
- **Line 15:** "Christ," "ice"
- **Line 16:** "vice"
- **Line 18:** "drinking"
- **Line 19:** "communion"
- **Line 20:** "candle"
- **Line 21:** "Gulps," "recovers," "small altitude"
- **Line 22:** "yellows"
- **Line 23:** "love," "how," "here"
- **Line 24:** "embryo"
- **Line 25:** "Remembering," "sleep"
- **Line 26:** "crossed position"
- **Line 27:** "blood blooms clean"
- **Line 28:** "ruby"
- **Line 32:** "roses"
- **Line 33:** "rugs"
- **Line 34:** "last"
- **Line 35:** "Let," "stars"
- **Line 36:** "Plummet," "dark address"
- **Line 37:** "Let," "mercuric"
- **Line 38:** "cripple drip"
- **Line 39:** "terrible well"
- **Line 41:** "Solid," "spaces," "lean," "on," "envious"
- **Line 42:** "baby," "barn"

END-STOPPED LINE

A majority of the lines in "Nick and the Candlestick" are end-stopped. Generally speaking, end-stops exaggerate the pauses that result from line and stanza breaks. Therefore, one might assume that the abundance of end-stopped lines slows the speaker's cadence—and this is sometimes true. However, many lines end in commas and dashes, which don't interfere with the poem's fast pace and high energy. Instead, they encourage the audience to read on, especially in cases of asyndeton, where commas replace conjunctions to maintain rhythmic momentum. Lines 14-17 demonstrate this effect:

> And the fish, the fish—
> Christ! They are panes of ice,
> A vice of knives,
> A piranha

End-stops literally punctuate the rhythm, giving it a percussive feel and creating a sense of regularity, which allows momentum to build. Of course, sometimes end-stops do result in longer pauses, as in lines 8-11:

> Cold homicides.
> They weld to me like plums.
> Old cave of calcium
> Icicles, old echoer.

As these two excerpts show, end-stops steer the rhythm to various effects. These constant variations create interest and keep readers engaged. Furthermore, end punctuation often projects certainty, increasing the speaker's authority. Line 1 takes this approach:

> I am a miner. The light burns blue.

Here, the speaker uses an end-stop to establish credibility at the poem's outset, which is crucial given the obscure metaphors that follow. In fact, end-stops help readers navigate the poem's dense language by breaking it up into smaller units and providing structure. As a result, individual images are easier to discern and the poem is more digestible overall.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** " blue."
- **Line 5:** "boredom."
- **Line 7:** "shawls,"
- **Line 8:** "homicides."
- **Line 9:** "plums."
- **Line 11:** "echoer."
- **Line 12:** "white,"
- **Line 13:** "Joes."
- **Line 14:** "fish—"
- **Line 15:** "ice,"
- **Line 16:** "knives,"
- **Line 19:** "toes."
- **Line 21:** "altitude,"
- **Line 22:** "hearten."
- **Line 23:** "here?"
- **Line 25:** "sleep,"

- **Line 26:** "position."
- **Line 28:** "ruby."
- **Line 30:** "yours."
- **Line 31:** "love,"
- **Line 32:** "roses,"
- **Line 33:** "rugs—"
- **Line 34:** "Victoriana."
- **Line 36:** "address,"
- **Line 39:** "well,"
- **Line 41:** "envious."
- **Line 42:** "barn."

ENJAMBMENT

"Nick and the Candlestick" contains a number of enjambed lines, which abruptly break in the middle of sentences and clauses. Enjambment accelerates the poem's pace by creating anticipation, thus encouraging the reader to go on. Lines 35 and 37 have such an effect:

> Let the stars
>
> Let the mercuric

Here, the speaker appeals to the entire universe. But line breaks occur in the middle of her bold, sweeping proclamations. Enjambment therefore generates suspense, which boosts the rhythm's speed and momentum, driving towards the poem's conclusion.

Enjambment also creates unnatural line breaks that can contribute to a turbulent rhythm that starts and stops suddenly, as in lines 17-18:

> A piranha
> Religion, drinking

Furthermore, enjambment gives rise to double meanings. For example, line 40 reads, "You are the one." Taken on its own, this line suggests that the speaker's son is the center of her world—her one and only. However, she goes onto say that is "the one / Solid the spaces lean on," Indicating that the whole universe revolves around him. Enjambment therefore stresses the great extent to which the speaker's reality hinges on her son. Furthermore, this line break suspends the word "one" out in space, subtly imitating its meaning. The same might be said for the line breaks that occur on "stars / Plummet" and "drip / Into," as they cause the reader's gaze to drift down the page.

The speaker repeatedly breaks lines after words that seem to be nouns, but are really part of larger noun phrases. This is the case for both "the one / Solid" and "A piranha / Religion," mentioned earlier. Another example appears in lines 10-11, which read "Old cave of calcium / Icicles." In these instances, enjambment highlights important characteristics of the main nouns—e.g., the icicles are made of one particular mineral, calcium, strengthening connotations with milk. This effect also carries an element of surprise, as the reader thinks that the cave is made of "calcium," but it is really made of "calcium / Icicles." In addition to adding depth of meaning, such dual readings ensure that the audience is paying close attention.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "stalactites / Drip"
- **Lines 3-4:** " tears / The"
- **Lines 4-5:** "womb / Exudes"
- **Lines 6-7:** "airs / Wrap"
- **Lines 10-11:** "calcium / Icicles"
- **Lines 17-18:** "piranha / Religion"
- **Lines 18-19:** "drinking / Its"
- **Lines 20-21:** "candle / Gulps"
- **Lines 24-25:** "embryo / Remembering"
- **Lines 27-28:** "clean / In"
- **Lines 29-30:** "pain / You"
- **Lines 35-36:** "stars / Plummet"
- **Lines 37-38:** "mercuric / Atoms"
- **Lines 38-39:** "drip / Into"
- **Lines 40-41:** "one / Solid"

JUXTAPOSITION

Juxtaposition is a key poetic device within "Nick and the Candlestick," as the speaker explores the positive and negative sides of motherhood. The poem's structure creates a clear contrast—it begins in a dark, cavernous cave, described in lines 2-5:

> Waxy stalactites
> Drip and thicken, tears
> The earthen womb
> Exudes from its dead boredom.

The language here is noticeably gloomy, with descriptors like "waxy" and "dead" evoking a corpse. The dreary, ghostly atmosphere persists throughout the poem's first seven stanzas. The speaker tells of "knives" and "cold homicides," exclaiming, "Even the newts are white" to suggest lifelessness.

However, halfway through the poem, the speaker turns to her child and the environment softens. At this point, it becomes clear that the poem is about motherhood, tying in earlier references to a "womb," "calcium," blood, and various forms of life. The next seven stanzas are considerably brighter. For example, in lines 31-33 the speaker says the following to her son:

> Love, love,
> I have hung our cave with roses,

With soft rugs—

This passage contrasts with previous descriptions of the cave as cold and unable to sustain life. In fact, many of the disturbing images conjured in the poem's first half have a more positive counterpart in its second. For instance, piranha drinks the speaker's blood, which later "blooms clean in [the speaker's son]." Furthermore, the piranha was said to be "drinking / Its first communion," referencing a Christian rite of passage. The speaker's use of religious imagery takes a brighter turn in the final line, which refers to Nick as "the baby in the barn," painting him as a christlike savior figure. Plus, the speaker finds the "ruby" to her miner, the dying candle that guides her "recovers its small attitude," and she embraces the "drip" that first appears in line 3.

These parallels between the poem's first and second half create a dramatic transition from dark to light, suggesting that the speaker's struggles with motherhood find a resolution in the fulfillment that her son provides. Still, their juxtaposition makes the dark moments appear darker, and the bright moments brighter. In this way, it underscores the speaker's suggestion that motherhood provokes a range of experiences and emotions that cannot be neatly fitted into "good" or "bad."

Two additional examples of juxtaposition appear again and again, highlighting the speaker's ambivalence. First, images of life contrast with those of death. In the first several stanzas, the speaker describes the cave—which comes to represent her womb—in terms that indicate death and decay (as discussed above). However, the speaker later references gestation, with statements like "O embryo," "your crossed [fetal] position," and "the blood blooms clean in you." Giving birth leaves the speaker feeling empty or "used up" and reminds her of her own mortality. At the same time, she glorifies the promise of new life by likening her son to Jesus, for example.

There is also a subtle, ever-present tension between the poem's nursery rhyme connotations and its fatalistic language. More specifically, the poem's title alludes to the classic folk song "Jack Be Nimble," while abundant sound play gives it a melodious feel. Here's a look at the penultimate stanza:

Let the mercuric
Atoms that cripple drip
Into the terrible well,

Notice the sonic similarity between "mercuric," "cripple," "drip," and "terrible." Each contains assonant and consonant sounds that appear elsewhere in the stanza. The resulting musicality is at odds with its doomsday tenor, as the speaker essentially dares the world to end. Again, this juxtaposition reflects an overarching disparity between the highs and lows of motherhood.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-42

METAPHOR

"Nick and the Candlestick" is teeming with figurative language, which has the potential to be overwhelming and difficult to decipher. However, its metaphors can be broken up into two categories:

1. A conceit—or a lengthy, elaborate metaphor—in which the speaker compares herself to a miner searching a cave. All metaphors that describe the cave and its contents are thus components of this wider conceit.
2. Two successive metaphors that depict the speaker's son as a celestial being.

The poem's very first line introduces the cave/miner conceit:

I am a miner. The light burns blue.

As the candlestick that guides her is dying out, the speaker immediately establishes that the cave is dim and difficult to navigate. As such, she highlights the hazards that come with this line of work. The following lines describe the cave using additional metaphors. For instance, stalactites are called "calcium / Icicles" and "tears / The earthen womb / Exudes from its dead boredom." "Calcium" and "womb" hint that the speaker is really explaining what it is like to nurture a child. The cave appears desolate and inhospitable—the speaker calls its air "cold homicides" and the creatures it contains are cold and ghostly. As if shocked by its harsh atmosphere, she exclaims, "Even the newts are white … And the fish, the fish— / Christ! they are panes of ice." In lines 23-24, the conceit's meaning clarifies when the speaker begins to address her son:

O love, how did you get here?
O embryo

The speaker expresses wonder at her son's ability to survive in the cave. As such, the cave comes to represent the speaker's womb, or perhaps her body as a life-giving force more broadly. Indeed, "drinking …out of my live toes" and "the candle / gulps"—in combination with earlier references to dripping water and calcium—insinuate that she is breastfeeding. The cave might also be seen as the environment that the speaker's child is born into. She mentions "the pain [he wakes] to" and attempts to bring warmth and life into their shared surroundings "with roses" and "soft rugs." These moments indicate that, while motherhood may leave her feeling exhausted and estranged from her body, it also provides motivation and hope for a better future.

The second set of metaphors appears in the poem's final stanza:

> You are the one
> Solid the spaces lean on, envious.
> You are the baby in the barn.

These comparisons represent the speaker's son as a powerful heavenly force and should be considered in the context of the galactic imagery that precedes them. In lines 35-36, the speaker essentially declares that if the universe were to come crashing down, she would be perfectly content. When the speaker calls her son "the one / Solid the spaces lean on," she signifies that he is the one stable, guiding force in her life, and the rest of the universe might as well fall away. This line can also be interpreted to mean that her son is the center of the universe—as in, the speaker's life revolves around him.

The metaphor that follows makes the same assertion in a more straightforward sense. The speaker alludes to the story of Christ's birth in the Bible's New Testament when she refers to him as "the baby in the barn." Nick therefore becomes Jesus, her leader and savior, who alone has the power to deliver mankind from sin and secure her place in heaven. The repetition of "you are the" indicates that this second metaphor runs parallel to the first. Thus, as the poem draws to a close, the speaker ensures that readers are left with a strong image of Nick as her guiding light.

Rather than overtly stating what motherhood has been like for her, the speaker uses strong images to evoke those feelings within readers. In fact, the dense metaphors create a sense of kinship between the reader and the speaker because while their air of intrigue and mystery draws interest, it can also be disorienting. In this regard, the reader has something in common with the speaker, who often feels under-resourced and overwhelmed.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I am a miner"
- **Lines 3-5:** "tears / The earthen womb / Exudes from its dead boredom"
- **Lines 6-8:** "Black bat airs / Wrap me, raggy shawls, / Cold homicides"
- **Lines 10-11:** "calcium / Icicles"
- **Line 13:** "Those holy Joes"
- **Lines 15-19:** "they are panes of ice, / A vice of knives, / A piranha / Religion, drinking / Its first communion out of my live toes"
- **Lines 40-41:** "You are the one / Solid the spaces lean on, envious"
- **Line 42:** "You are the baby in the barn"

PERSONIFICATION

This poem contains a few brief examples of personification, which create vivid, memorable imagery. The first appears in lines 3-5:

> ... tears
> The earthen womb
> Exudes from its dead boredom.

In this passage, the speaker uses "dead boredom" to indicate that the cave is inactive and/or disinterested. This is therefore a pathetic fallacy, as the speaker assigns the cave an emotion. By bringing the cave to life, the speaker nods its symbolism, as it comes to represent the speaker's womb.

Similarly, in lines 20-21, the dying candle that guides the speaker "gulps and recovers its small altitude." The candle can be interpreted as a symbol for the speaker's son, who provides critical guidance and clarity. Fittingly, the speaker turns to him as "its yellows hearten." Furthermore, the verb "gulp" is commonly associated with the action of swallowing something vehemently. As such, it works in conjunction with earlier references to "calcium" and "drinking" to insinuate that the speaker is feeding her son. The final example of personification occurs directly before the poem's conclusion:

> You are the one
> Solid the spaces lean on, envious.

This is another pathetic fallacy, as the speaker describes "spaces" as "envious." In doing so, she emphasizes her son's uniqueness—the spaces long to be dependable, but they need Nick's support, as he is the *only* solid. Descriptions of "stars" and "mercuric / Atoms" suggest that "the spaces" is outer space, or the entire universe. As such, its envy indicates that he is supremely powerful. Plus, the pathetic fallacy suggests that the vast universe is invested in the outcome of the poem's events, heightening its stakes.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-5:** "tears / The earthen womb / Exudes from its dead boredom"
- **Lines 20-21:** "The candle / Gulps"
- **Line 41:** "the spaces lean on, envious"

REPETITION

Many forms of repetition pervade "Nick and the Candlestick." On its most basic level, repetition creates sonic interest through recurring sounds and rhythms. Take lines 10-11:

> Old cave of calcium
> Icicles, old echoer.

Various forms of repetition echo throughout this passage,

imitating the cave they describe and drawing the reader's attention. "Old" appears twice in close succession, an example of diacope. Its long /oh/ and /l/ sounds are picked up elsewhere in the stanza, producing assonance and consonance, respectively.

Diacope reappears alongside epizeuxis in lines 31-33:

> Love, love,
> I have hung our cave with roses,
> With soft rugs—

The repetition of "with" eliminates the need for a conjunction, creating asyndeton and maintaining a fast-paced rhythm. Meanwhile, "love, love" emphasizes the speaker's affection for her son and introduces the assonant /uh/ sound, which also occurs in "hung" and "rugs."

In lines 15-18, note the parallel sentence structure among "panes of ice" and "vice of knives" plus the anaphora of "A":

> ...They are panes of ice,
> A vice of knives,
> A piranha

The repetition here allows rhythmic momentum to build up and up as the speaker insinuates the pain of motherhood. Repetition creates emphasis, allowing the speaker to hammer home the difficulties she's facing.

In its final lines, repetition in the form of anaphora again causes mounting momentum. The last four clauses begin, "Let the stars ... Let the mercuric ... You are the one ... You are the baby." As each of these clauses also begins a new line, the poem's structure calls attention to its use of anaphora. The repetition also suggests a *relationship* between clauses that begin with the same phrase, which seem to state the same point in different terms. Here is a look at lines 35-39:

> Let the stars
> Plummet to their dark address,
> Let the mercuric
> Atoms that cripple drip
> Into the terrible well,

In both instances, the speaker essentially dares the universe to come crashing down, and anaphora highlights the similarity of these declarations. The final stanza attributes the speaker's contentment with the world coming to end to her son:

> You are the one
> Solid the spaces lean on, envious.
> You are the baby in the barn.

These two statements again carry a similar message—the speaker's son is the center of her universe. The anaphora that appears in these passages creates emphasis, projecting certitude and increasing the speaker's authority.

Finally, the dense clusters of repeating rhythms, sounds, and sentence structures that this poem features give it a musical quality. That musicality feeds into its nursery rhyme overtones, which conflict with its dark imagery. Their tension reflects the highs and lows that the speaker experiences as well as her ambivalence about motherhood.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-11:** "Old cave of calcium / Icicles, old echoer"
- **Line 14:** "the fish, the fish"
- **Lines 15-17:** "panes of ice, / A vice of knives, / A piranha "
- **Lines 23-24:** "O love, how did you get here? / O embryo"
- **Line 31:** "Love, love,"
- **Lines 32-33:** "with roses, / With soft rugs"
- **Line 35:** "Let the"
- **Line 37:** "Let the"
- **Line 40:** "You are the"
- **Line 42:** "You are the"

SIMILE

While this poem is dense with metaphorical language, it contains only one simile, which appears in line 9:

> They weld to me like plums.

This comparison indicates that the speaker sees a similarity between the "airs" and plums because of the way that the airs stick or "weld to [her]." To weld two items means to heat their surfaces until their metals begin to melt, at which point they are pressed together. As they cool, they become fused together, forming a strong bond. The speaker therefore indicates that the cave's cold, dark atmosphere is always with her—they are closely connected. Further, plums are a stone fruit, meaning that they contain hard, dense pits surrounded by flesh. This pit/flesh relationship mimics that between the atmosphere and the speaker—its darkness strikes at her core and clings to her tightly.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "They weld to me like plums"

VOCABULARY

Stalactites (Line 2) - Icicle-like formations that hang from the ceilings of caves, created by dripping water that deposits minerals slowly over time.

Earthen (Line 4) - Made from or relating to earth.

Raggy (Line 7) - Another word for "ragged," meaning tattered or worn-down.

Homicides (Line 8) - A technical (law enforcement) term for "murders."

Weld (Line 9) - Fuse metal surfaces by heating them to their melting point and pressing them together, then allowing them to cool. This process results in very strong bonds, indicating that the dark feelings that the speaker experiences cling to her tightly and indefinitely, like a plum's flesh gripping its pit.

Holy Joes (Line 13) - A casual way of saying "clergymen," or (Christian) religious leaders such as a priests and ministers. This term is also used in a derogatory manner to describe people who carry themselves as if they are morally superior to others.

First communion (Line 19) - A Christian ceremony in which someone receives the Eucharist (also known as Holy Communion and the Lord's Supper) for the first time. The Eucharist is consecrated bread and wine, said to represent the body and blood of Jesus Christ, respectively. The First Communion is widely considered an important ceremony and rite of passage among Christians. You can learn more about its history here.

Altitude (Line 21) - Height relative to a baseline reference point, usually sea level or ground level.

Hearten (Line 22) - To give someone—or in this case, something—"heart," meaning confidence and encouragement. More simply, to cheer someone up.

Embryo (Line 24) - A fertilized egg that is in its early stages of development, particularly in the process of maturing from a zygote into a fetus.

Victoriana (Line 34) - Items surviving from the Victorian era, the period lasting from 1837 to 1901 during which Queen Victoria presided over the United Kingdom.

Mercuric (Line 37) - Relating to the element mercury.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

This poem does not adhere to any traditional formal structure. However, each of its 14 stanzas contains three lines (tercets) and those lines are quite short.

The poem can be seen as consisting of two halves—stanzas 1-7 describe the cave that the speaker moves about, while stanzas 8-14 address the speaker's child. Further, the poem's first half emphasizes the difficulties of motherhood, while the second celebrates its rewards (namely, the speaker's son). This structure gives equal attention to the positive and negative aspects of parenting, which makes their juxtaposition more apparent and suggests that motherhood is never *all* good or *all* bad. Rather, they are two sides of the same coin, so to speak—one always comes with the other.

Due to the short length of its lines, the poem also appears long and narrow on the page, akin to a tunnel that runs through a cave. The high frequency of line breaks creates a fast-paced, choppy cadence. The resulting chaotic atmosphere reflects the speaker's distress as well as the tension between motherhood's positive and negative effects.

METER

This is a free verse poem and thus does not follow a consistent meter. Instead, its rhythm is erratic, changing frequently. In general, the lines are quite short and often enjambed, which results in a choppy cadence that starts and stops suddenly. Enjambment also creates anticipation, quickening the rhythm by encouraging the audience to read on. In a way, this reflects the speaker's actions themselves. She likens herself to a "miner" moving through a cave, and the poem's unpredictable rhythm evokes the dark twists and turns of such a journey.

RHYME SCHEME

As the poem is written in free verse, it does not have any set rhyme scheme. In fact, it makes minimal use of true rhymes. However, much of the poem's stylistic impact stems from its play with sound—primarily through assonance and consonance, which often create slant rhymes (for more on this, head to the Poetic Devices section of this guide). These lend the poem a sense of musicality while keeping it unpredictable and loose.

Interestingly, the poem's title does rhyme—"Nick and the Candlestick." The title also alludes to a classic nursery rhyme, "Jack Be Nimble," which goes:

> Jack be nimble,
> Jack be quick,
> Jack jump over
> The candlestick.

As such, the title sets the reader up for a charming, jaunty verse, but what follows is much darker. Indeed, the poem's general musicality is at odds with its bleak and graphic imagery. This juxtaposition embodies the disparity between the expectation that motherhood is an innate, deeply fulfilling skill and the speaker's far more complicated experience.

SPEAKER

The speaker reveals very little information about herself over the course of the poem. The reader learns that she has recently given birth to a child named Nick, per the poem's title. The speaker is often interpreted to be a persona of Plath's, as her son, Nicholas, was born shortly before the poem was written. Taking this information together, one can infer that the speaker

is female.

Plath's work tends to be autobiographical, and given the poem's title, it's reasonable to conclude that the speaker is close to Plath. However, the speaker communicates her experience of motherhood through imagery and metaphor, rather than referring to specific events. As such, the poem stands on its own as an expression of motherhood's complex, taxing, and gratifying nature. Analysis need not rely on Plath's biography.

Instead, the speaker can be seen as new mother who struggles to navigate a now-unfamiliar body and changing home life. She walks through her home and experiences her physical form as if she is a miner scouring a dark cave. She is left feeling exhausted and disoriented. However, just when her inner resources seem to wear critically thin, the speaker turns to her son, who fills her with renewed hope and purpose.

SETTING

The poem begins in a cold, dark cave. The light that guides the speaker through the cave is dying, suggesting that the setting is disorienting and difficult to traverse. She describes the cave as empty and deathlike with phrases such as "old echoer" and "cold homicides." There are subtle hints that the poem takes place in the speaker's womb or some external place where she feeds and looks after her child. For instance, the speaker calls the cave's stalactites "calcium icicles"—picking out a mineral associated with milk—and "tears / The earthen womb exudes."

These references come into focus about halfway through the poem, when the speaker addresses her child as an "embryo" and asks "how did you get here?" Thus, the cave might be interpreted as the speaker's womb. The speaker jumps around in time—from life with a new child to pregnancy and back again. That being said, the poem primarily takes place *after* her son's birth, as the speaker's womb is unfamiliar, empty, and calcified. Plus, she calls him a "baby" and speaks of "the pain you wake to."

The cave can also be seen as the home that the speaker shares with her child—"our cave." As the speaker welcomes her son, the atmosphere softens to include "roses" and "soft rugs." The speaker weaves through the cave as she walks down the hallways of her home, approaching her child's nursery for feeding time. Although the audience's understanding of the setting changes throughout the poem, all possible locales are encompassed by the overarching symbol of the cave. Its trajectory is consistent with the poem's movement from a dark, wearisome portrayal of motherhood to one filled with love and promise.

Further, the gradual unveiling of the setting puts the reader in the place of the speaker; the reader is "kept in the dark", unaware of the poem's true setting and subject for some time—much like the speaker, who feels disoriented and depleted until she finds guidance and clarity in her son.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Plath wrote "Nick and the Candlestick" in the fall of 1962 shortly after the birth of her son, Nicholas. This was a highly productive period for Plath, who experienced a surge of creative energy in the months leading up to her death by suicide in February of 1963. It was during this time that Plath wrote many of the poems that would appear alongside "Nick and the Candlestick" in *Ariel*—her 1965 posthumous collection, which brought the late poet considerable fame.

Plath's late poems in particular are known for their fast pace and high energy, often pivoting from one strong image to another without warning. While this effect can be jarring, *Ariel* features an incisive, commanding voice whose authority and organic cadence steers readers through the text. In addition to "Nick and the Candlestick," "Lady Lazarus" is a strong example of these qualities. Both contain tercets, or three-line stanzas, which appear throughout the collection. "Nick and the Candlestick" contains several other hallmarks of Plath's writing, including a penchant for natural imagery (e.g. "earthen womb," "the fish") and references to nursery rhymes. Its thematic concerns—parent-child relationships, motherhood—are picked up in such poems as "Daddy" and "Morning Song."

Furthermore, this poem showcases Plath's exploration of the confessional mode, inspired by such poets as Robert Lowell ("Waking in the Blue") and Anne Sexton ("Her Kind"). Confessionalism—sometimes considered a movement and other times considered a style—is commonly known as "poetry of the 'I'." Confessional poetry features highly personal subject matter, including traumas and psychological afflictions, which were formerly masked by vague, flowery, and metaphorical language—when present in literature at all. Confessional poets, on the other hand, write openly about the darkness that haunts them, using specifics, naming names, and employing the rhythms of everyday speech. Sharon Olds is often cited as carrying on this tradition, with a particular nod to Plath in her poems about motherhood. In one such work simply titled "Son," the speaker addresses her sleeping child, much like the speaker in "Nick in the Candlestick."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The years after World War II (1939-1945) saw a renewed focus on family life as a source of security. As men returned home from war, birthrates ballooned during a "baby boom" that persisted into the 1960s. Mass media and popular culture of the day promoted an idealized family life that featured traditional gender roles and numerous children. Accordingly, women were defined in relation to their husbands and children—that is, as wives and mothers first. Women were also expected to find great joy and fulfillment in domestic life,

supporting a long-held belief that a woman's primary purpose is reproduction.

"Nick and the Candlestick" can be seen as resisting or complicating such romanticized portrayals of motherhood. This poem celebrates the wonder, hope, and beauty that mothers experience regarding their children. But it also acknowledges the difficulties of motherhood—the exhaustion, a body that now feels empty and used-up, etc. Plath herself was dealing with a turbulent home life and a new relationship to parenting. Shortly before "Nick and the Candlestick" was written, Plath split with her husband, poet Ted Hughes, leaving her to care for their two children in their Devon, England home. This poem openly addresses her 9-month-old son, Nicholas, as well as her ambivalence about motherhood, chronicled in her letters from the period.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Plath's Life Story — A detailed biography of the author, including a discussion of Ariel's composition and Plath's legacy. (https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-37855)
- The Poetry of Sylvia Plath: Crash Course Literature — A concise, accessible introduction to Plath's poetry with graphics and animations, narrated by author John Green. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iJn0ZPd6mYo)
- A Conversation With the Author — A 1962 interview with Plath from the British Council. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ePbVT4nNc9I)
- An Introduction to Confessional Poetry — An overview of the confessional mode, including its stylistic features, reception, and legacy. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/151109/an-introduction-to-confessional-poetry)
- Plath Reads "Nick and the Candlestick" — Listen to the author read the poem aloud. This version is slightly different from that which appears in Ariel. In particular, Plath recites several additional stanzas that were later cut from the end of the poem. Plus, the "stalactites" of line 2 are "stalagmites" here. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yHJsJBm413U)
- Enquiry: A Woman's Place — A mid-sixties video on women's attitudes towards marriage, child rearing, and more. The segment was filmed in the UK, where Plath liv ed for much of her life, including the period in which this poem was written. (https://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/enquiry--a-womans-place/zrmx92p)
- Enquiry: A Woman's Place — A mid-sixties video on women's attitudes towards marriage, childrearing, and more. The segment was filmed in the UK, where Plath lived when "Nick and the Candlestick" was written. (https://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/enquiry--a-womans-place/zrmx92p)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER SYLVIA PLATH POEMS

- Daddy
- Fever 103°
- Lady Lazarus
- Mad Girl's Love Song
- The Applicant
- The Arrival of the Bee Box
- The Moon and the Yew Tree

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