The Moon and the Yew Tree

SUMMARY

This is the light inside my head. It is not a warm light, and it comes from the planet itself. The trees I see inside my mind are black and the light inside my mind is blue in color. When I walk across the lawn my feet bend the blades of grass, which makes it seem like they're praying to me. It's like I'm God and they're laying their sorrows at my feet, poking at my ankles and quietly affirming their lowliness. Foggy, ghostly vapors fill up this place, which is cut off from my house by a row of graves. I just cannot see anything beyond this.

The moon isn't some kind of opening that you can walk through. Its face is as pale as a clenched hand and obviously distressed. Its gravity creates the tides, the water trailing after it like the memory of some horrible crime. The moon doesn't speak, but its mouth is open wide in an image of total despair. This is where I live. Two times every Sunday, church bells ring out and abruptly shatter the silence—they are like eight huge tongues declaring the Resurrection of Jesus. They solemnly sound out their own names.

The yew tree grows towards the sky, in a shape suggestive of Gothic architecture. My eyes follow where it seems to be pointing and arrive at the moon. The moon bore me, but my mother isn't kind and gentle like the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus. Instead, the moon's blue clothes are filled with small bats and owls. I would very much like to believe in gentleness and love—I would very much like to believe in the statue of Mary, softened by candlelight, bending over and casting its gentle gaze on me specifically.

But I am too far gone. The clouds above are blocking out the stars. They are blue and inspire a sense of spiritual awe and mystery. The spirits inside the church are blue too. They hang above the hard, unwelcoming church benches as if they were already dead, their hands and faces rigid with belief. But the moon is blind to all of this. She is hairless and untamed. And the yew tree gives off only darkness—darkness and silence.

THEMES

RELIGION, NATURE, AND DEATH

"The Moon and the Yew Tree" is an ambiguous poem open to many interpretations, but a clear sense of disillusionment with religion runs throughout. The speaker seems to be looking out on an eerie night landscape and searching for some kind of meaning or comfort, as is promised by the church. Yet where the speaker longs for some sense of reassurance or warmth, she only sees an existence governed by an indifferent natural world and the inevitability of death.

The speaker clearly feels alone and hopeless as she struggles to see beyond the immediacy of death, which surrounds her. Nature itself seems to be filled with references to death. The "griefs" of the grasses, the "spiritous mists," and the "black trees" all present nature as far from comfortable or comforting to the speaker. Instead it seems lifeless, cold, and dark. Even more pressing is the "row of headstones" that blocks the speaker's path back to her house. She "simply cannot see where there is to get to." The speaker's vision—her way forward—is blocked by death.

The speaker then mentions church bells and the Resurrection (when God raised Jesus from the dead), perhaps signifying the potential of religion to offer some solace in the face of all this death and grief. Yet that these church bells "startle the sky" suggests a sort of shocking violence to their ringing, which is further described as being done "soberly"—without great joy or vivacity. And though the speaker wants to believe in "tenderness" and the "mild eyes" of the Virgin Mary—which suggests that she wants to believe that religion can ease her suffering—the speaker also says that she "has fallen a long way." This perhaps signifies how distant the speaker has grown from the church, and/or how she feels unworthy of such tenderness. In other words, she doesn't believe the church can help her.

Indeed, she then envisions that the saints in the church are "all blue." The color blue (which has been associated with coldness throughout the poem, and which also is traditionally associated with the Virgin Mary) implies that these saints are not filled with passion and vigor but rather are lifeless, stern, and without warmth. The same can be said of the "cold" church pews. Both the saints and physical structure of the church are thus linked to the "light of the mind," which is also "cold" and "blue." While the imagery is again ambiguous, this implies that religion offers no balm for the speaker's internal despair; instead, it is a continuation or reflection of it.

The speaker further describes the hands and faces of the saints as "stiff with holiness." This perhaps suggests that the saints themselves have always been a sort of dead relic. It also might suggest the speaker's belief that intense worship drains people of their warmth and vitality. Either way, the image indicates that she finds neither comfort nor meaning in religion.

Having not found comfort in religion (either because she is too "fallen" to be saved or because it offered a hollow promise of comfort in the first place), the poem ends with a return to nature and thoughts of death. The speaker turns away from the image of the saints in favor of the moon, who "sees nothing" of the saints' devotion. In other words, the moon—part of the natural world—is indifferent to the lives of people; its cycles

stop for no one. For the speaker, there is thus no comfort to be found anywhere. There is only nature and its brutal cycles; only the "blackness and silence" of the yew tree.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-28

THE NATURE OF DESPAIR

The poem begins with a peek into the speaker's internal world, which is cold and dark. Her descriptions of the natural world then seem to be an extension of her own mood, making it unclear where one ends and the other begins. The merging of these two worlds—internal and external—illustrates how despair and/or mental illness can shape and color people's perception of the world around them.

The speaker of the poem is clearly suffering. She is alone, unable to access comfort from nature, religion, or her family. She describes "the trees of the mind" as black, and the "light of the mind" as "blue." Trees are usually associated with life, and light with truth, warmth, and knowledge. In presenting her "mind" trees as black and the light as blue, the speaker reveals how her despair has seemingly recolored the world itself.

She goes on to describe a cemetery, in which "Fumy, spiritous mists" live. This seems to indicate that the speaker feels haunted by death. She finds no comfort in nature, which "unloads" its grief on her as if she were God. She identifies with God not because she feels powerful but because she feels utterly *alone*, as if there is no one for her to turn to for guidance or comfort. Additionally, she finds no comfort in the "cold pews" of the church, nor in the equally cold relationship she has with her mother, who "is not sweet." Her mother is in fact "the moon"—"wild" and blind to the speaker's suffering. Their relationship is one of distance.

The speaker continues to describe the landscape in ways that reveal her own suffering, so that the poem itself becomes a sort of map of her despair. The ambiguity of the speaker's location—i.e., is she looking out on the cemetery from her home, imagining things? Or is she actually physically *in* the cemetery?—underlines her struggle. It seems she cannot differentiate between what is in her *mind* and what is in the *real world*.

This speaks to the fogginess of despair as well as her inability to break free from this cycle: her despair colors the world, and this dismal world then prompts her despair. For example, she personifies the moon, describing it as "terribly upset" and then saying that it is "quiet with the O-gape of complete despair." She is projecting her own feelings onto the moon, but it feels as if it is the moon itself which prompts this feeling of hopelessness.

The speaker finally claims that the "message of the yew tree is blackness—blackness and silence." This interpretation of the yew tree as a message which affirms her despair is a testament to how deeply her perceptions have colored the world around her. There is essentially no divide between internal and external at this point—the speaker is seeing her own mood reflected back to her. This underlines the cyclic nature of despair, a feedback loop that traps people in a state of hopelessness.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-3
- Lines 5-7
- Lines 8-11
- Lines 15-18
- Line 22
- Lines 27-28

MOTHERHOOD AND FEMININITY

The moon often represents femininity in literature, and the same is true in this poem. However, the moon of "The Moon and the Yew Tree" is not a traditional, nurturing femininity but rather one characterized by coldness and emotional distance. The speaker longs for a tender maternal presence, but at the same time she identifies with the cold and wild moon. The poem thus presents a complicated relationship to stereotypical expectations of femininity.

The speaker's desire for a "mild" femininity is at odds with her experience of motherhood and/or being mothered. She imagines the statue of Mary, the mother of Jesus, as being "gentled by candles," which suggests the speaker's own desire for warmth and sympathy. She "longs for tenderness," perhaps from her mother, or perhaps feels she herself is lacking in tenderness.

But the speaker has no gentle "Mary." She says that her own mother is the moon, and that the moon "is no door." This image seems to suggest the speaker doesn't find motherhood inviting. She doesn't see it as something she can pass through but instead as something characterized by pain and isolation.

The moon's "blue garments," meanwhile, allude to the blue robes artists have typically depicted the Virgin Mary wearing. This image of perfect motherhood, however, is subverted by the "small bats and owls" associated with the moon. This is a harsh, carnivorous femininity. It "drags the sea after it like a dark crime," insinuating that it is not an innocent femininity but one that is capable of real harm.

Despite her longing for a mother like Mary, or perhaps for the ability to be more gentle and nurturing as a mother herself, the speaker also doesn't seem to believe in that this ideal maternal figure actually exists. The moon may not be "sweet like Mary," but Mary is, after all, only an "effigy." She is a statue.

The speaker also insists that she has "fallen a long way," perhaps

indicating that she herself cannot live up to the standard of motherhood imposed on her (or which she imposes on herself). The speaker finally describes the moon as "bald and wild." These are not descriptions of a tame, gentle femininity. Instead the speaker comes to associate motherhood with the natural world, which is perhaps a step towards accepting its complicated nature.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 8-11
- Lines 16-21
- Lines 22-23
- Line 27

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

This is the ...
... of their humility.

The poem opens with what is most likely an allusion to the Bible: "When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.'" (John 8:12) The speaker introduces the poem as a kind of counterpoint to "the light of life," instead saying that what is to follow is "the light of the mind."

She goes on to describe this light as "cold and planetary," and then paints a stark, icy scene: black trees, blue light, grief-stricken grasses. There is a shortness to her descriptions; the statements are not long and winding but terse, to-the-point. In fact, the sentences in this stanza never stretch across more than two lines, and that lack of elaboration, along with the descriptions of coldness and grief, help set the tone of the poem.

It becomes clear pretty quickly that the speaker has a fraught relationship with religion. Aside from the opening allusion, she also compares herself to God and the grasses to those who would worship and pray to God. More than anything, this image illustrates the speaker's feeling that there is no one above her that she can turn to—she likely compares herself to God not because she feels powerful or adored but because she feels utterly alone, as if there is nowhere she can unload her own griefs.

Lines 3-4 ("The grasses unload ... humility") contain a great deal of consonance that affects the tone of the passage. The repetition of /g/ sounds in particular with "grasses," "griefs," and "God" creates a kind of guttural, lump-stuck-in-throat kind of feeling which evokes the speaker's own grief.

LINES 5-7

Fumy, spiritous mists ...
... to get to.

From her descriptions of "Fumy, spiritous mists" and a "row of headstones," it becomes clear that "this place" the speaker is describing is a graveyard. Surrounded as she is by death and darkness, the speaker "simply cannot see where there is to get to." This is suggestive of both her inability to imagine the future and also an inability to believe in anything she can't see. It implies that she has no belief in religion's promises of an afterlife, and it also speaks to her inability to see beyond her present circumstances.

The speaker actually describes relatively little in these lines—mists, a row of headstones, and an inability to see beyond the present—yet so much of the speaker's despair is revealed here. The mists gesture toward a feeling of being haunted, implying that the speaker feels the presence of death all around her.

The sibilance of these lines evokes their content, the many /s/ sounds creating a hushed, whispering tone:

> Fumy, spiritous mists inhabit this place
> Separated from my house by a row of headstones.
> I simply cannot see ...

From a more scientific point of view, those mists are linked to the eponymous yew tree, as yew trees are known to emit vapors which can cause hallucinations. This bit of context again emphasizes the speaker's disbelief in an afterlife—she understands her feeling of being haunted to be psychological rather than spiritual, and she is most likely aware that the mists are a natural phenomenon rather than a supernatural one.

This knowledge, however, only contributes to her feeling that there is nowhere "to get to." The place she is describing is "separated from [her] house by a row of headstones." But so is she—she feels entirely cut off from any sense of comfort or connection that a house might represent.

LINES 8-11

The moon is ...
... I live here.

Following her previous statement of not being able to see "where there is to get to" the speaker turns her attention to the moon, claiming that it "is no door." In other words, it also offers her no future—she cannot escape through it.

This metaphor is confusing without understanding what the moon itself represents in the poem.The moon is part of the natural world, and its mention here thus might suggest that nature offers no solace for the speaker. Later the speaker will call it her mother, and thus it might also represent femininity and motherhood in general—implying that such pursuits won't

heal the speaker's despair. Instead, they become associated with anger and violence.

Indeed, the speaker goes on to personify the moon as a "white" and "terribly upset" face. This is the most obvious example in the poem of the natural world being a kind of mirror in which the speaker sees her own despair reflected. Indeed, the speaker claims to live inside the moon's "quiet O-gape ... of despair." There is some ambiguity as to whether the moon is *reflecting* the speaker's suffering or whether in fact the moon is at least somewhat to *blame* for her suffering—an ambiguity that deepens as the poem progresses and the moon takes on many symbolic resonances.

By personifying the moon, Plath turns the natural world into more than just a landscape. Nature isn't just background but is rather playing out its own dramas, the moon dragging the sea behind it "like a dark crime" (a poetic way of talking about the fact that the moon's gravitational pull influences the tides). This image is not one of innocence; the moon's despair seems to go hand-in-hand with its capacity for violence.

The undertone of violence is also present in the simile "white as a knuckle." A knuckle whitens when a hand is balled into a tight fist: a gesture of rage and restrained violence (or the violence of not being able to express one's rage). The consonance of /t/ sounds in these lines (such as in "terribly upset") also contributes a grating quality that evokes an exhausted frustration.

LINES 12-14

Twice on Sunday, ...
... out their names.

There is a continued use of consonance (the repetition of /t/ sounds) in this passage, as well as sibilance—"Twice," "Sunday," "startle," "sky," etc. This mixture of /s/ and /t/ sounds echoes the disruptive bells which "startle the sky." There is a sense of the peace being shattered by the church's reminder to gather and pray, emphasizing the speaker's fraught relationship with the church. For her it isn't something comforting and reassuring, but rather cold and distant.

Personification occurs again in the passage as well. This time it is the church bells that are personified as "Eight great tongues" which "soberly bong out their names." There is a subtle sense of irony here, as the mechanical and "sober" (or serious, stern) ringing of the bells represents the rigidity of religious tradition, its self-seriousness, its pompousness. "Great" as this tradition may be, it seems the speaker would prefer the silence of despair to the interruption of the bells, which loudly "affirm" something in which she cannot and does not believe.

"The Resurrection" and the bells ringing "Twice on Sunday" both allude to Easter Sunday, to the Christian celebration of Jesus rising from the dead, a belief which again relates to the idea of an afterlife. The loudness and self-importance of the bells is an abrupt juxtaposition to the "quiet" moon and the "humble," "murmuring" grasses, showing the stark difference between the natural world and the one created by human beings.

LINES 15-18

The yew tree ...
... bats and owls.

The third stanza again begins with several short statements. When the speaker says that "The yew tree points up," the verb "points" could be a mere description of the tree's shape or it could imply that the tree is intentionally directing the speaker's attention to the moon, thus again personifying the natural world.

The tree's shape is then described as "Gothic," an adjective that does a lot of work. On the one hand, it refers to a kind of architecture characterized by dramatic height and pointed arches. This reference again turns nature into a kind of mirror of the human world, as it describes something natural with a term referencing something human-made.

It also emphasizes the yew tree's association with death, hinting that the poem perhaps belongs to a tradition of Gothic literature which uses desolate, remote settings and macabre events to explore themes of dread, violence, the uncanny, etc. Lastly, because the term "Gothic" also refers to the Germanic people who overthrew the order of the Roman Empire in the 5th century, it further intensifies the tension between the natural world and a religious one.

Because the yew tree appears to direct the speaker's attention to the moon, there is a sense that the moon holds the answer to whatever it is the speaker is looking for. Upon "find[ing] the moon," the speaker declares that it is her mother. There is repetition—specifically anadiplosis—linking lines 16 and 17:

> The eyes lift after it and find the moon.
> The moon is my mother.

This repetition allows the reader to follow the speaker's logic as she moves from the literal ("The eyes lift after it and find the moon.") to the metaphorical ("The moon is my mother.").

The speaker then again personifies nature, comparing the moon to the Virgin Mary (another allusion to Christianity). This comparison allows the poem to continue juxtaposing religion with the natural world. While Mary is "sweet," the moon "unloose[s] small bats and owls." The "blue garments" may be an allusion to classical depictions of Mary, in which she is robed in blue, but the moon has less in common with that pure, nurturing saint than she does Artemis—goddess of the hunt, wilderness, fertility, and wild animals, who in Greek mythology is associated with the moon. Dueling depictions of femininity and motherhood are suddenly at play.

LINES 19-21

How I would ...
... its mild eyes.

The passage beginning with "How I would like to believe ..." comprises the longest sentence in the poem, a sentence that stretches across three lines. While most of the sentences in the poem are short, direct, and stripped of any elaboration, these three lines employ a longer, more elaborate syntax. This is notable because it coincides with the speaker's vulnerable expression of desire: she really wants "to believe in tenderness."

In picturing the warm candlelight and the gentle eyes of the statue of Mary, the speaker imagines a scenario in which she doesn't feel so alone, a scenario in which she is loved and a gentle attention rests on her "in particular." The speaker longs for the softness and sweetness promised to her by archetypes of motherhood and femininity. She wants to receive that nurturing attention; she wants to feel capable of it herself too.

The language in this passage echoes the sentiments it expresses. There is an earnestness to the speaker's yearning which is indicated by the word "How"—a word which gestures to an unspoken "much." Assonance created by a repetition of soft /eh/ sounds and a myriad of consonant words ("tenderness," "face," "effigy," "gentled," "candles," and "bending") combine in these lines to create a soft, gentle rhythm. There is a musicality to this part of the poem which is absent elsewhere. This musicality speaks to the archetype of the pleasant, tender, nurturing mother as well as to the speaker's very real longing for that archetype to manifest in her own life. It throws the coldness of the speaker's actual circumstances into sharp relief.

It's also worth noting that while the speaker longs for the archetype of Mary, the closest she can come to imagining such perfection is through the statue (the "effigy") that represents her. This to say, the speaker seems to understand that only a *statue* is capable of perfection. Real, flesh-and-blood women are much more complicated.

LINES 22-26

I have fallen ...
... stiff with holiness.

The speaker claims to "have fallen a long way," indicating that she has fallen short of the ideal of motherhood and femininity represented by Mary. Additionally, this image also speaks to the distance between the speaker and the moon, her self-proclaimed mother.

Clouds "flower / Blue and mystical over the face of the stars," an image which again emphasizes the speaker's sense of isolation. She's so far gone as to be invisible to those heavenly bodies up above, indicating that her fall is not only a failure to live up to the ideals of motherhood, but is a fall from the grace of God promised by religion.

Yet, there is a beauty to this image of the clouds obscuring the heavens, and again there is the sense that however unhappy the speaker may be, she prefers the truth of her misery to the empty promises of religion.

The speaker also pictures the saints in the church as "all blue" and "floating ... over the cold pews." This might be a reference to stained glass images or statues of saints that adorn the inside of the church, or a more figurative way of talking about devout church-goers. These saints are the same cold blue color as the "light" in the speaker's mind; a blue body also evokes death.

The speaker might be alluding to the fact that such statues and art are as dead and cold as the religion they represents, or perhaps that the supposed holy figures of the church are not connected with any warmth in the real world. Indeed, they are described as "stiff with holiness," as if devotion to religion has led to *rigor mortis*. The pews, too, are cold rather than comfortable and inviting. Altogether, religion hardly seems to offer the speaker any sense of vivacity or warmth.

Like lines 19-21 ("How I would like ... mild eyes.") in the previous stanza, the description of the saints spans three lines which comprise a single sentence. This time, however, there is no longing on the part of the speaker. She feels removed from the fate of the saints just as she is removed from the face of the stars and the face of the effigy of Mary. Her isolation is more profound than ever, but she doesn't seem to feel it as much. The repetition of the word "blue" in this stanza perhaps speaks to this growing coldness in the speaker—this absence of desire.

LINES 27-28

The moon sees ...
... — blackness and silence.

Finally, the speaker turns her attention back to the natural world. The moon, she claims, "sees nothing" of the saints' devotion, and nothing of her own lack of devotion. To the moon, it's all the same. Nature is indifferent to the lives of human beings. This compounds the speaker's isolation; if the moon, her mother, does not see her, who will?

The speaker also recognizes in the moon her own indifference to tradition, her own "baldness" (i.e., ugliness; conventions of femininity would certainly not celebrate baldness) and "wildness" (whereas those same conventions of femininity would insist on modesty and obedience). The speaker isn't exactly celebrating this bucking of convention; there is real sorrow in her identification with the moon. But there is also relief–the speaker isn't measuring herself against some impossible womanly standard, but rather seeing herself as a part of nature, as belonging to its brutal cycles, its violence, and its indifference.

Finally, the speaker claims that the "message of the yew tree is ... blackness and silence." It's worth noting that this final line is by far the longest line in the poem. In claiming that the yew tree

represents "blackness and silence," the speaker is essentially saying that she believes only in the inevitability of death. The epizeuxis of "blackness" emphasizes its hold on the speaker. It is a bleak ending to a poem which doesn't so much confront despair as detail what it feels like to be consumed by it.

SYMBOLS

BLUE

The color blue does a lot of work in this poem. It is at once symbolic of coldness, darkness, mystery, and death.

In the second line the speaker describes the "light of the mind" as "blue." This paints a picture of someone who does not see the world in a warm light. Blue is often associated with sadness or melancholy, and this seems to be true for the speaker, who is surrounded by images of death and grief.

In the third stanza, the speaker claims the moon is her mother, and describes her "blue garments" which "unloose small bats and owls." The "blue garments" may be a reference to traditional depictions of the Virgin Mary, in which she is seen wearing blue robes. But unlike the Virgin Mary, the *moon's* robes unleash carnivorous, nocturnal animals. Bats themselves are often associated with death and darkness; owls too are associated with the night, the moon, mystery, magic, and ancient wisdom. Because of these associations, the moon is not just "not sweet like Mary"—the moon is unlike Mary in every possible way. The moon is part of the mystery of the natural world, and there is nothing terribly comforting about her. *Her* blueness is the opposite of the "effigy, gentled by candles."

In the final stanza, the speaker claims to "have fallen a long way" and then describes the clouds as "flowering / Blue and mystical over the face of the stars." Here, blue represents mystery. It obscures the stars, an image which speaks again to the speaker's inability to see "where there is to get to." Then the speaker pictures the saints as "all blue," "floating ... over the cold pews." This image is an eerie one, ghostly and suggestive of death, and underlines the speaker's belief that religion can offer no comfort.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "blue"
- **Line 18:** "blue"
- **Line 23:** "Blue"
- **Line 24:** "blue"

THE MOON

The moon in this poem is a symbol both for nature and its brutal cycles, as well as for femininity and motherhood (which themselves are associated with nature's harshness in the poem).

The speaker's first mention of the moon is to claim that it "is no door." This speaks to the speaker's feeling that the moon can offer her no escape from her despair, that it only reflects back her feelings of hopelessness. It also paints the speaker's mother, or her relationship to motherhood, as something uninviting. Additionally, it implies that nature and motherhood are not metaphors but their own entities; the speaker wants to observe them for what they are, not for what she's been told to see in them by tradition and religion.

The moon then becomes a counterpoint for religion when the speaker contrasts the moon with the Virgin Mary. The moon is brutal: the image of her garments setting loose carnivorous animals brings to mind Artemis, the Greek goddess associated with the moon and hunting. The moon is representative not of a "sweet" femininity, the femininity of the church, but a wild, ancient, and powerful femininity.

However, the speaker is still ambivalent about her relationship to the moon. While there is something celebratory in her description of the moon as "bald and wild," there is something pained in her assertion that "The moon sees nothing of this"—*this* being the speaker's pain and disillusionment as much as anything else. The speaker both longs for and refuses the archetypes she's been given for femininity and motherhood. For this reason, the moon is a rich and complex symbol.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-11:** "The moon is no door. It is a face in its own right, / White as a knuckle and terribly upset. / It drags the sea after it like a dark crime; it is quiet / With the O-gape of complete despair."
- **Lines 16-18:** "The eyes lift after it and find the moon. / The moon is my mother. She is not sweet like Mary. / Her blue garments unloose small bats and owls."
- **Line 27:** "The moon sees nothing of this. She is bald and wild."

THE YEW TREE

While the yew tree is only mentioned by name twice in the poem, its presence is strong throughout. The yew tree can be read as being symbolic of death.

Yews have been strongly associated with death for many hundreds—even thousands—of years. They are found throughout church cemeteries all across Europe, and are the longest-living tree in Europe. While many of them have been planted in church cemeteries over the past few hundred years, there are a handful that are much older than that, so old that they most likely predate the churches themselves.

This context helps establish the speaker's relationship to the

yew tree. Not only is the yew symbolic of death, but it seems to imply that the natural cycle of life and death is more ancient, mysterious, and lasting than anything the church has to offer. The beliefs and rituals of human beings feels fleeting and insignificant in relation to the yew tree, which may live to be thousands of years old.

Early in the poem, the speaker describes "Fumy, spiritous mists" in the church graveyard. This, too, is a subtle reference to the yew tree, which is actually known to produce a kind of vapor which can cause hallucinations. This might suggest that death provokes people into believing things that aren't really true. Furthermore, the yew tree is highly toxic—another reason it has come to be associated with death. When the yew "points up" at the moon in the third stanza, the speaker's eyes find the moon. This seems to imply that in the face of death, the speaker seeks comfort—turning to the moon/her mother.

Finally, the yew tree is also often associated with eternity and everlasting life, due to its proximity to churches and also because of its longevity. The speaker, however, rejects the more religious associations of the tree, instead deciding that its "message" is of "blackness and silence." This speaks to her belief that there is no everlasting life, that there is nothing beyond death, that death itself comprises eternity.

It's worth noting that some critics have further associated the tree with Plath's father, Otto Plath. This is not abundantly clear in the poem itself, but another possible interpretation that would then link this male figure with darkness and death.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "Fumy, spiritous mists inhabit this place / Separated from my house by a row of headstones."
- **Line 15:** "The yew tree points up. It has a Gothic shape."
- **Line 28:** "And the message of the yew tree is blackness — blackness and silence."

MARY

In this poem, Mary, mother of Jesus and the most venerated of the saints, is symbolic of a traditional, religious ideal of motherhood. This ideal motherhood is "sweet," "gentle", "tender," "mild," and attentive. It is also impossible to live up to.

The speaker describes having "fallen a long way," a statement which seems to imply that she is unable to occupy the pedestal of this ideal motherhood. The "effigy" of Mary—that is, the statue of Mary to which the saints direct their prayers—subtly emphasizes the impossibility of such perfection. The statue is perfect because it isn't alive, isn't capable of making mistakes.

Ironically, even Mary, who is meant to symbolize this perfect mother, is inherently contradictory. According to the Bible, Mary conceived Jesus by way of the Holy Spirit, and therefore gave birth to a child while remaining a virgin. She is an impossible role model because no woman can occupy both roles at once.

Perhaps it is the impossibility of Mary which allows the speaker to turn away from this ideal motherhood and turn instead to the moon. Where Mary and the other saints are "stiff with holiness" (in other words—in their perfection they are lifeless), the moon is "bald and wild." While the speaker may not find nature any more comforting than religion, she can at least see herself reflected there.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 17:** "Mary"
- **Lines 19-21:** "tenderness —— / The face of the effigy, gentled by candles, / Bending, on me in particular, its mild eyes."
- **Lines 24-26:** "Inside the church, the saints will all be blue, / Floating on their delicate feet over the cold pews, / Their hands and faces stiff with holiness."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

"The Moon and the Yew Tree" contains several allusions to the Christian religion, and more specifically to Catholicism. In fact the very first line may be a reference to a Bible verse: in John 8:12, Jesus says "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." The speaker contrasts the "light of life" with the "light of the mind," which is dark and lonely and without comfort.

In the following stanza, the speaker describes the church bells as "tongues affirming the Resurrection," which is an allusion to the Christian belief that three days after Jesus died, God brought him back to life. This seems to imply that the bells—ringing "Twice on Sunday"—are announcing that it is Easter Sunday, the day on which Christians celebrate the resurrection of Jesus.

In the third stanza, there are several allusions to the Virgin Mary and Catholicism. According to the Christian religion, Mary was the mother of Jesus, and Catholics in particular venerate her as highest of the saints. "The effigy" refers to the statues of Mary to which Catholics may direct their prayers. The moon's "blue garments" are also an allusion to Mary, as she is traditionally depicted by artists as wearing blue robes.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "This is the light of the mind"
- **Line 12:** "Twice on Sunday, the bells"
- **Line 13:** "the Resurrection"

- **Line 17:** "Mary"
- **Line 18:** "blue garments"
- **Line 20:** "the effigy"
- **Line 24:** "Inside the church, the saints will all be blue,"

IMAGERY

Like most of Plath's poetry, this poem utilizes a great deal of imagery. In fact there are very few lines in the poem which do *not* include some kind of sensory description. Mostly the poem uses visual imagery; in particular, Plath uses color (primarily black and blue) to paint a cold, dark, comfortless scene.

The warmest, most gentle image in the poem is one which the speaker wants to believe in, but doesn't: "The face of the effigy, gentled by candles / Bending, on me in particular, its mild eyes." This image speaks to the speaker's desire to be seen and cared for, to feel special and chosen. It is in direct contrast with the poem's other images, which mostly reveal the speaker's despair and disillusionment with religion.

Feelings—such as the speaker's fixation on death—are given shape by way of images, such as the speaker being "separated from [her] house by a row of headstones." This image is both literal—there are headstones in between the speaker's house and the place she is describing—and also figurative, implying that the speaker is surrounded by death, cut off from her home because of it, her vision blocked by its imminence.

The relationship between the literal and the figurative becomes especially important at the end of the poem, when the speaker claims the "message" of the yew tree is "blackness—blackness and silence." "Blackness and silence" reads like an image—one can picture this nothingness by closing one's eyes—but it is also the complete *absence* of image. Either way you look at it, the poem seems to imply, the inevitability of death removes any possibility of meaning.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Line 3
- Line 4
- Line 5
- Line 6
- Lines 8-9
- Lines 10-11
- Lines 12-13
- Line 14
- Lines 15-16
- Line 18
- Lines 20-21
- Lines 22-26
- Line 27
- Line 28

SIMILE

The poem contains two similes. In the first stanza the speaker says "The grasses unload their griefs on my feet as if I were God." The image of grieving grasses is a projection of the speaker's own grief; her personification of the grass further illustrates her loneliness and desire for connection.

The personification, however, doesn't comfort her but rather makes her feel even more alone, "as if [she] were God." The speaker imagines herself to be like God because she herself has no one to whom she can turn, no one or nothing that can comfort her. She imagines herself instead as the recipient of all this grief in the world. There is no power or joy in this comparison, just a terrible sense of isolation.

The second simile occurs in the second stanza, when the speaker describes the moon as "a face" dragging "the sea after it like a dark crime." In this simile, the speaker treats the relationship between the moon and the sea, which is often portrayed romantically, as something awful and violent. The simile seems to imply that the moon despairs in part because it feels guilty of having committed some crime.

This perhaps illuminates the speaker's own relationship to motherhood and despair; does she blame her mother for her suffering? Or does she herself feel like an inadequate mother, and therefore is "quiet / With the O-gape of complete despair"?

In both cases, the similes in this poem seem less to be about the thing they are describing, and more about revealing the speaker's relationship to grief and despair. The speaker feels alone, responsible in some impossible way, caught in a perpetual cycle of suffering and guilt.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "The grasses unload their griefs on my feet as if I were God"
- **Line 10:** "It drags the sea after it like a dark crime"

METAPHOR

The poem is overflowing with figurative language but there are two metaphors especially central to its meaning.

In line 1, "This is the light of the mind," is, as discussed earlier, an allusion to a verse from the Bible in which Jesus says, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." The speaker directly contrasts a belief in religion with a belief only in her own mind and what she is able to perceive of the natural world. Her description of the natural world becomes metaphorical because she is saying that what she can see *is* "the light of the mind." In other words, for her, there is nothing beyond what she

is able to perceive with her own senses.

The second central metaphor is that of the moon being the speaker's mother. The speaker personifies the moon and then projects her feelings toward her mother/motherhood onto the moon. "The moon is my mother" is a nuanced metaphor because it both seems to imply that the speaker is comparing her actual mother to the moon—with its coldness, distance, and wildness being the opposite of Mary, for whom she at first seems to yearn.

But it also feels like the speaker is saying that the moon is who she chooses to imitate, that the moon is her model for how to behave. In short, the speaker finds herself guided by nature rather than by the conventions of religion.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 3-4
- Line 5
- Lines 8-9
- Line 10
- Lines 10-11
- Lines 12-14
- Lines 17-18
- Lines 22-23
- Lines 24-27

SIBILANCE

In the context of this poem, the use of sibilance has a hushed and somewhat menacing resonance. For instance, towards the end of the first stanza there is a smattering of /s/ sounds which emphasizes the speaker's feelings of being surrounded by death. While the "Fumy, spiritous mists" she describes are references to the vapors which come off of yew trees, they *feel* ghostly because of their proximity to the headstones. The sibilance helps usher in that feeling of being haunted.

In the second stanza, sibilance is again present in the line:

> Twice on Sunday, the bells startle the sky—

Here, the sibilance helps to create the feeling of being startled by a sudden sound. The use of the word "startle" indicates a shattering of the otherwise peaceful quiet.

Finally, in the last stanza, there is an abundance of sibilance as the speaker relates the scene inside the church, which she is imagining, and nature's response, which is to be completely indifferent to the lives of people. While the passage indicates the speaker's sense of desolation, the sibilance, along with a few other rhythmic devices, gives the passage a kind of hushed, pleasing cadence when read aloud. This seems to suggest that while the speaker finds nothing to comfort her or make her feel less alone, she does seem to see some kind of beauty and wonder in all this brutality—as if truth itself (or being true to oneself) is better than false, empty promises.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "spiritous," "mists," "this," "place"
- **Line 6:** "Separated," "house," "headstones"
- **Line 7:** "simply," "see"
- **Line 12:** "Twice," "Sunday," "startle," "sky"
- **Line 23:** "mystical," "face," "stars"
- **Line 24:** "Inside," "saints"
- **Line 26:** "faces," "stiff," "holiness"
- **Line 27:** "sees," "this"
- **Line 28:** "message," "blackness," "blackness," "silence"

ASSONANCE

Compared to many of Plath's poems, "The Moon and the Yew Tree" is somewhat subdued. There is a matter-of-fact-ness to the way lines are delivered, and this matter-of-fact-ness is reflected in the poem's lack of ornamentation. The lack of ornamentation and the flatly delivered lines help establish the speaker's feelings of hopelessness.

That being said, there are moments of sonic play throughout the poem, including a few instances of assonance. It's hard to say exactly what these moments bring to the poem, other than some degree of cadence. For instance, in the first stanza there is an assonance of /ee/ sounds in "griefs" and "feet" and of short /i/ sounds in "spiritous," "mists," "inhabit," and "this." The short /i/ sounds are further resonant with each other due to the presence of sibilance and consonance in that line. Compared to the rest of the stanza, there is a lot happening sonically in that one line. It draws attention to itself and also forces the reader to slow down and enunciate each of the words in a way that evokes a person treading carefully through a cemetery at night.

Later in the poem, assonance creates relationships between pairs of words. In the second stanza, "eight" and "great" are assonant as well as consonant, and the rhyme almost mimics the notion of the bells ringing "Twice on Sunday." Later, in the third stanza, the assonance of /oo/ sounds between "blue" and "unloose" create a relationship between those words which causes emphasis to fall on either side of the word "garments," as if it's the color itself which is responsible for unloosing the bats and owls.

Finally, in the last stanza, the assonance between "blue" and "pews" creates a rhyme which again creates an emphasis on the relationship between those words, as if perhaps it is the false promises of religion which cause suffering rather than the indifference of nature.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "light," "mind"

- **Line 3:** “griefs,” “feet”
- **Line 5:** “spiritous,” “mists,” “inhabit,” “this”
- **Line 8:** “right”
- **Line 9:** “White”
- **Line 13:** “Eight,” “great”
- **Line 18:** “blue,” “unloose”
- **Line 20:** “effigy,” “gentled”
- **Line 21:** “Bending,” “mild eyes”
- **Line 22:** “fallen,” “long,” “Clouds,” “flowering”
- **Line 24:** “blue”
- **Line 25:** “pews”
- **Line 26:** “stiff with”

CONSONANCE

Plath relies a great deal on consonance to create a sense of intensity in the poem. It's notable that the consonance is accompanied by only the occasional occurrence of assonance or rhyme—more assonance and rhyme might have added more intensity to the poem, but also might have made it more dynamic. The poem as it is has a kind of static quality to it; the speaker is trapped in a state of isolation and despair. She can see no way out. The heavy consonance mirrors the heavy mood of the speaker. She experiences no real relief from this heaviness.

The consonance also acts as a kind of glue, sticking together groups of related words. In the first stanza, "black" and "blue" are related because they are both colors, both associated with night, and together suggestive of a bruise—i.e., of violence and suffering.

At the beginning of the second stanza, the /t/ sounds in "right," "White," "terribly," and "upset" are evocative of the tightly and violently contained feelings of a clenched fist. Later, in the third stanza, there is a string of /m/ sounds as the speaker claims the moon is her mother:

> The moon is my mother. She is not sweet like Mary.

/M/ sounds have a muffled quality to them due to the way the mouth closes around the letter when one pronounces it, forcing the sound inward rather than out. While /m/ assonance can be quite pleasing and gentle-sounding, it's notable that in this poem that pleasantness and gentleness is suspect. The speaker distrusts the archetype of the tender mother, no matter how appealing it may be.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “light,” “cold,” “planetary”
- **Line 2:** “black,” “light,” “blue”
- **Line 3:** “grasses,” “griefs,” “God”
- **Line 4:** “Prickling,” “ankles,” “murmuring,” “humility”
- **Line 5:** “Fumy,” “spiritous,” “mists,” “this,” “place”
- **Line 6:** “Separated,” “my,” “house,” “headstones”
- **Line 7:** “simply,” “see”
- **Line 8:** “It,” “its,” “right”
- **Line 9:** “White,” “knuckle,” “terribly,” “upset”
- **Line 10:** “It,” “after,” “dark,” “crime,” “it,” “quiet”
- **Line 11:** “complete”
- **Line 12:** “Twice,” “Sunday,” “bells,” “startle,” “sky”
- **Line 13:** “Eight,” “great,” “tongues”
- **Line 14:** “soberly,” “bong”
- **Line 15:** “points,” “up,” “shape”
- **Line 16:** “lift,” “after,” “find”
- **Line 17:** “moon,” “my,” “mother,” “Mary”
- **Line 18:** “blue,” “garments,” “unloose,” “small,” “bats,” “owls”
- **Line 19:** “believe,” “tenderness”
- **Line 20:** “face,” “effigy,” “gentled,” “candles”
- **Line 21:** “Bending,” “me,” “mild”
- **Line 22:** “fallen,” “long,” “Clouds,” “flowering”
- **Line 23:** “Blue,” “mystical,” “face,” “stars”
- **Line 24:** “Inside,” “saints,” “will,” “all,” “be,” “blue”
- **Line 25:** “Floating,” “delicate,” “feet,” “cold”
- **Line 26:** “faces,” “stiff,” “holiness”
- **Line 27:** “sees,” “this,” “bald,” “wild”
- **Line 28:** “message,” “blackness,” “blackness,” “silence”

ALLITERATION

As discussed in the entry for consonance, alliteration contributes an intensity to the poem and places an emphasis on particular words. In fact, if one were to read only the highlighted, alliterative words of the poem, one would come away with a pretty good sense of the poem's core themes!

With alliteration, the degree to which words are emphasized depends largely on how close together the alliterative words occur, and the number of alliterative words in a passage. For example, in line six ("Separated from ... headstones."), there is some emphasis on "house" and "headstones" due to the alliteration of /h/ sounds, but because the words are spaced out and there are only two instances, it is not an overwhelming emphasis:

> Separated from my house by a row of headstones.

By contrast, in line 12 the alliteration is a little more intense because there are three words beginning with an /s/ sound, and because the words are closer together:

> Twice on Sunday, the bells startle the sky ——

It is also more intense because the /s/ sounds are occurring through consonance as well ("Twice"), and because the /s/ sound is simply louder than the /h/ sounds from earlier.

In the final stanza, there are a number of words beginning with the /f/ sound—six in all: "fallen," "flowering," "face," "Floating," and "feet," "faces." However, they are spaced out over the course of the entire stanza, lessening their intensity. There is also alliteration from the repetition of /b/ sounds, and while there are less instances of /b/ alliteration, they are more noticeable because they are clustered together. This heavy sound draws attention to the intensity of the poem's final "blackness."

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "black," "blue"
- **Line 3:** "grasses," "griefs," "God"
- **Line 5:** "spiritous"
- **Line 6:** "Separated," "house," "headstones"
- **Line 7:** "simply," "see"
- **Line 10:** "crime," "quiet"
- **Line 11:** "complete"
- **Line 12:** "Sunday," "startle," "sky"
- **Line 16:** "moon"
- **Line 17:** "moon," "my," "mother," "Mary"
- **Line 21:** "me," "mild"
- **Line 22:** "fallen," "flowering"
- **Line 23:** "face"
- **Line 24:** "be," "blue"
- **Line 25:** "Floating," "feet"
- **Line 26:** "faces"
- **Line 27:** "bald"
- **Line 28:** "blackness," "blackness"

REPETITION

There is a kind of cool logic to this poem. The speaker is looking for truth even if the truth is unpleasant. The progression of her thoughts is methodical and easy to follow, in part because of the speaker's use of repetition.

In particular, the use of anadiplosis reflects the speaker's careful logic, each thought directly leading to the next. In the third stanza, the speaker describes the yew tree, which appears to "point up" at the moon. So, logically, she looks to the moon:

> The eyes lift after it and find the moon.
> The moon is my mother.

The use of anadiplosis continues the feeling of this cool, careful logic as the speaker transitions into metaphor. "The eyes lift after it and find the moon" is literal; "The moon is my mother" is metaphorical. However, the reader is not lost in this transition because the speaker's thoughts move in such a logical progression. Even when the speaker is dealing in metaphors, she sounds matter-of-fact.

At the end of the poem, epizeuxis is used to extend an idea to its logical next step. The speaker is essentially saying that the yew tree represents only death, and as such, it has no message—death is just death. The repetition of "blackness" serves to emphasize the point the speaker is making. In the end, "blackness and silence" exists on the other side of the em dash from "the message of the yew tree," suggesting that any story one can tell about what lies beyond death must be told by the living, and as such, is inherently false. In other words, the dead don't speak.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "light," "of the mind"
- **Line 2:** "of the mind," "light"
- **Line 16:** "the moon"
- **Line 17:** "The moon"
- **Line 28:** "blackness," "blackness"

PERSONIFICATION

"The Moon and the Yew Tree" is filled with personification. The speaker projects her despair and loneliness onto nature so fully that it seems the natural world itself is provoking these feelings. The grasses brings her their griefs; the moon is a white face gaping in despair; the bells are "eight great tongues" that "startle the sky." Personification gives nature an agency even as the speaker believes there is no meaning in any of it. The yew tree "points up" at the moon as if implying the speaker will find an answer by looking at the moon.

She does, and finds that the moon is her mother, that the moon's "garments unloose small bats and owls." The moon and the small animals that hunt at night are not just related; one is responsible for the other. There is a sense of cause and consequence. But because the speaker's relationship to what she is seeing is cyclical, it is unclear what is cause and what is consequence (i.e., she is suffering and projects her suffering onto what she sees, and then takes the fact that she sees suffering everywhere as proof that nature is brutal).

The use of personification reflects the trap that the speaker is in. She is looking around her trying to find some proof that she is wrong, that there is something besides suffering and death, but her pain turns even the natural world into a source of suffering. While the moon literally "sees nothing" because it is not alive, the speaker experiences that lack of being seen as further proof that she is utterly alone. And because she has associated the moon with her mother, the moon's indifference feels like a continuation of that maternal neglect, further hurting the speaker.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "The grasses unload their griefs on my feet as if I were God, / Prickling my ankles and murmuring of their humility."

- **Lines 8-11:** "It is a face in its own right, / White as a knuckle and terribly upset. / It drags the sea after it like a dark crime; it is quiet / With the O-gape of complete despair."
- **Lines 12-14:** "the bells startle the sky —— / Eight great tongues affirming the Resurrection. / At the end, they soberly bong out their names."
- **Line 15:** "The yew tree points up."
- **Lines 17-18:** "The moon is my mother. She is not sweet like Mary. / Her blue garments unloose small bats and owls."
- **Line 27:** "The moon sees nothing of this. She is bald and wild."

ENJAMBMENT

Only a handful lines in this poem are enjambed. Most are end-stopped. Those lines that are enjambed are most often done so in a way that feels natural, assisting comprehension rather than complicating it. There are no real surprises in terms of the enjambment; this, combined with the straightforwardness of the syntax, lends itself to the rather cold, matter-of-fact tone of the poem.

Line 5 notably spills into line 6, the enjambment here connecting this "place" to the idea of separation. That is, there is no pause, no moment in which the speaker perhaps could escape "this place" and return to her "house." Later, in line 22, the enjambment seems to reflect the action of the "Clouds," which are "flowering" across the line break, blocking it much like they block out the "face of the stars."

The fact that enjambment is deployed so sparingly in this poem goes back to the fact that the speaker's thoughts follow such a logical progression. She isn't thinking in fragments but in full sentences. She isn't skipping from one association to another but carefully considering a scene and its implications. She is suffering, yes, but she is also extremely methodical in articulating that suffering.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "place / Separated"
- **Lines 10-11:** "quiet / With"
- **Lines 22-23:** "flowering / Blue"

END-STOPPED LINE

Most of the lines in this poem are end-stopped. Additionally, the poem is made up entirely of complete sentences. Both of these things, and also the longer line lengths, contribute to the poem feeling more prose-like. The thoughts expressed are clear and concise. The prevalence of end-stopped lines gives the poem a flatness which contributes to the reader's sense of the speaker's despair. There is a finality to lines like, "I simply cannot see where there is to get to." Their simplicity speaks to the difficulty of expression when one is suffering.

The start of the third stanza is a great example of this. The first four lines are all end-stopped with periods, and are comprised of six short, simple sentences:

> The yew tree points up. It has a Gothic shape.
> The eyes lift after it and find the moon.
> The moon is my mother. She is not sweet like Mary.
> Her blue garments unloose small bats and owls.

There is almost a dullness to the language. The speaker doesn't sound fanciful or passionate or even upset; she just sounds as though she is relating the most straightforward facts.

The speaker then seems to succumb to despair by the end of the poem, which for her means short, flat statements such as "The moon sees nothing of this. She is bald and wild." She seems to see no point in elaborating.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "planetary."
- **Line 2:** "blue."
- **Line 3:** "God,"
- **Line 4:** "humility."
- **Line 6:** "headstones."
- **Line 7:** "to."
- **Line 8:** "right,"
- **Line 9:** "upset."
- **Line 11:** "here."
- **Line 12:** "sky ——"
- **Line 13:** "Resurrection."
- **Line 14:** "names."
- **Line 15:** "shape."
- **Line 16:** "moon."
- **Line 17:** "Mary."
- **Line 18:** "owls."
- **Line 19:** "tenderness ——"
- **Line 20:** "candles,"
- **Line 21:** "eyes."
- **Line 23:** "stars."
- **Line 24:** "blue,"
- **Line 25:** "pews,"
- **Line 26:** "holiness."
- **Line 27:** "wild."
- **Line 28:** "silence."

CAESURA

About half the instances of caesura in the poem are due to the soft pause of a comma, and the other half are due to the completion of a thought—the hard stop of a period. The caesura caused by a comma feels different from the caesura caused by a period. Namely, the caesura caused by a period

puts even more emphasis on the word before the period. Take for example the first two lines of the poem:

> This is the light of the mind, cold and planetary.
> The trees of the mind are black. The light is blue.

There is much more of an emphasis on "black" than there is "mind," even though they both result in a caesura. The hard stop of the period after "black" gives it a similar weight as a word that comes at the end of a line.

In the third stanza, the piling up of end-stopped lines is assisted by the use of caesura—the hard pauses of periods give the first few lines a kind of stunted, flat feel:

> The yew tree points up. It has a Gothic shape.
> The eyes lift after it and find the moon.
> The moon is my mother. She is not sweet like Mary.

In contrast, the last few lines of the stanza ("How I would like...its mild eyes") unfold with more feeling, due to the commas lines and softer caesura—the use of commas rather than periods. The speaker's desire is more expansive, less matter-of-fact, than her observations.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "mind, cold"
- **Line 2:** "black. The"
- **Line 5:** "Fumy, spiritous"
- **Line 8:** "door. It"
- **Line 10:** "crime; it"
- **Line 11:** "despair. I"
- **Line 12:** "Sunday, the"
- **Line 14:** "end, they"
- **Line 15:** "up. It"
- **Line 17:** "mother. She"
- **Line 20:** "effigy, gentled"
- **Line 21:** "particular, its"
- **Line 22:** "way. Clouds"
- **Line 24:** "church, the"
- **Line 27:** "this. She"
- **Line 28:** "blackness — blackness"

VOCABULARY

Planetary (Line 1) - Of, or relating to, planets (or more specifically, Earth). In this context, the word indicates that "the light of the mind" isn't coming from God or religion but from the natural world itself.

Humility (Line 4) - Freedom from pride or arrogance; lowliness; modesty.

Fumy (Line 5) - The adjective form of the noun "fume," which is an irritating or offensive smoke or vapor. The phrase "in a fume" refers to someone who is in a state of excited irritation or anger. Thus, a "fumy" mist might be a mist that is agitating the speaker, or it might be a mist that is itself agitated (or both).

Spiritous (Line 5) - *Spiritous* has several meanings that could apply here. It can refer to something that is immaterial or ethereal, something that is of the nature of "spirit." It can also be another way of saying "high-spirited." Or, in its archaic usage, it can mean "pure" or "refined."

Headstones (Line 6) - A stone placed at the head of a grave, used to memorialize the person who has died. Gravestones.

O-gape (Line 11) - To "gape" is to stare with one's mouth wide open. The "O" is just a way of visualizing the open mouth of "despair" through language. Plath uses the combination of a word ("gape") and a visualization of the word ("O") to turn the idea into a more visceral image.

The Resurrection (Line 13) - This is an allusion to the Christian belief that God resurrected (or brought back to life) Jesus three days after his cruxifixction and death.

Bong (Line 14) - In this case, a verb meaning to emit a low-pitched, resonant sound.

Yew tree (Line 15, Line 28) - A kind of coniferous tree. It is highly toxic and known for its longevity, some of them being at least 2,000 years old. Yew trees are commonly found in churchyards across Britain, Ireland, and France. Many of them were intentionally planted in churchyards, while others are assumed to predate the churches. For this reason, and because of their toxicity and lifespan, yew trees have been heavily associated with both death and eternity.

Gothic (Line 15) - The word has a few different resonances here. The first, most literal usage has to do with architecture, as the word here is describing a "shape." Gothic architecture is characterized by height, pointed arches, ribbed vaulting, and flying buttresses. It is dramatic and intricate. Many cathedrals and churches in the Middle Ages were built in the Gothic style. The word can also refer to the Goths, a Germanic people that invaded the Roman empire in the 3rd and 5th centuries. (Note that Gothic architecture has nothing to do with the Goths; Gothic architecture originated in France during the 12th century and spread throughout Europe from there.)Lastly, the word also calls to mind Gothic literature, which pairs desolate, remote settings with elements of the macabre or the uncanny to incite a sense of dread, fear, and/or mystery.

Mary (Line 17) - The mother of Jesus. According to the Christian religion, Mary conceived Jesus by way of the Holy Spirit, therefore remaining a virgin despite her pregnancy. Many branches of Christianity, Catholicism in particular, venerate Mary, treating her as the most virtuous of all the saints and praying to statues of her.

Effigy (Line 20) - A representation of a specific person in the

form of a sculpture or model of some kind. The effigy in this poem is of Mary, mother of Jesus.

Mystical (Line 23) - Inspiring spiritual mystery, awe, and fascination. May also refer to mysticism, which is the belief that direct knowledge of or communion with spiritual truth or ultimate reality can be reached through individual intuition, contemplation, and self-surrender.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Moon and the Yew Tree" is a free verse poem, so it does not adhere to any strict meter or rhyme scheme. The lines are relatively long, each line consisting of at least 10 syllables.

However, even though it is in free verse, there is a sense of restraint and order. It is broken into four septets (seven-line stanzas). The restraint largely comes from the syntax, which is mostly straightforward and clipped, as well as the shortness of sentences—the longest of which spans three lines, though most of them are shorter than that.

METER

"The Moon and the Yew Tree" is written in free verse, so it employs no set meter. This overall lack of meter gives the poem a more prosaic feel, contributing to the feeling of flatness which emphasizes the speaker's despair.

There are two metered moments in the poem, however, both of which happen in the final stanza as the speaker is describing the cold, stiff quality of the worshipping saints. Both of these moments employ iambic pentameter, meaning there are five poetic feet, each with a da DUM rhythm, in the line. Here is line 24:

> In**side** | the **church,** | the **saints** | will **all** | be **blue,**

And line 26:

> Their **hands** | and **fa-** | ces **stiff** | with **ho-** | liness.

While the use of iambic pentameter gives the line a lilting, pleasing cadence, there is an irony to this beauty as it is describing something the speaker sees as empty and futile. It's as if she is saying sure, religious traditions are aesthetically pleasing, but in the end, they won't save you.

RHYME SCHEME

While there is no set rhyme scheme at play in "The Moon and the Yew Tree," there are several moments of rhyme throughout the poem. Often these rhymes are not true rhymes but the effect of assonance and/or consonance at the end of a line or within a line, such as "upset"/"quiet" or "despair"/"here" in the second stanza. This allows for a subtle relationship between the words that sound similar, so that, for instance, when one reads "I live here" it is quite clear that "here" is referring to a state of "despair."

This happens again in lines 26 and 27 ("Their hands ... bald and wild.") with the assonance and consonance/sibilance between "holiness" and "this." Again, because of the resonance in sound, it is clear that "this" is referring to the "holiness" of the saints.

In the final stanza, the rhyme between "blue" and "pews" is noticeable, and reflects the kind of rigidity the speaker is describing. As meter is also employed in lines 24 ("Inside the ... blue,") and 26 ("Their hands ... holiness."), there is a noticeable musicality to the moments in which the speaker last describes the church. It gestures to the speaker's belief in the hypocrisy of religion, which is beautiful and comforting on the surface, yet ultimately meaningless.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "The Moon and the Yew Tree" is someone who is clearly suffering from a sense of despair and looking for some form of comfort. She "cannot see where there is to get to," an admission which reveals her lack of belief in the promises of religion, and also to her inability to see a way out of her suffering. She looks to nature for answers as well, but discovers that "the moon is no door"—in other words, that it will not provide relief for her suffering; it simply reflects her own despair.

The speaker is also someone who struggles with her relationship to motherhood. The poem seems to indicate that the speaker has a troubled relationship with her mother as well, who is likened to the moon: cold, distant, and indifferent. However, it also seems that the speaker herself identifies with the "bald and wild" moon; she "would like to believe in tenderness," but instead she believes in a "message" of "blackness and silence"—in other words, the voice of her despair.

SETTING

The setting for "The Moon and the Yew Tree" is a church graveyard at night. The graveyard is separated from the speaker's house "by a row of headstones," and it is filled with "spiritous mists" and grieving grasses. The speaker goes back and forth between describing aspects of the church—its bells "on Sunday," the effigy of Mary, the saints in their "stiff" traditions—and the natural world, particularly the eponymous moon and yew tree.

There is no real divide between the speaker's state of mind and the external, physical world to which the speaker reacts. In other words, the speaker is in a state of despair, and this

despair is only intensified by the fact that she is surrounded quite literally by death—the people buried beneath headstones. The juxtaposition between religion and the natural world occurs because that is what is immediately available to the speaker in her despair. She reaches for what she can see: the church, the graveyard, the moon, and the tree.

For that reason, even the most metaphorical statements can be understood in a very literal way as well. For instance, the speaker says she "cannot see where there is to get to." Metaphorically this refers to her inability to see beyond her suffering, and also to her disbelief in an afterlife. But it also just literally means that she is outside in the darkness, and can't see beyond a certain point.

Similarly, at the end of the poem, the "message of the yew tree," which is "blackness and silence," reads metaphorically: the blackness and silence is representative of her disbelief in an afterlife, and to her total succumbing to despair. But in a literal sense, she is only describing her environment: the night is dark and silent. And when read literally, the tone becomes a little ironic—the yew tree contains no "message" at all.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"The Moon and the Yew Tree" was posthumously published on August 3, 1963 in *The New Yorker*, six months after Plath's death. It was part of her collection *Ariel*, which also went on to be published after her death.

As opposed to *The Colossus*, her first collection of poems, *Ariel* was highly personal, informed by Plath's own increasingly complicated relationship to marriage, motherhood, family, and gender expectations, as well her lifelong struggle with mental illness. The poems she wrote late in her career—the ones that would go on to comprise *Ariel*—were characterized by an insistence on puncturing the happy facade of domestic life. She was able to turn seemingly mundane everyday moments into highly charged, psychologically intense confrontations with her own darkest impulses.

While the cynicism and brutality of her poems have long divided critics, most at least agree that few other poets have revealed such depth of emotion or written with such imaginative force.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Plath wrote "The Moon and the Yew Tree" in October of 1961, in response to a writing exercise given to her by her husband, poet Ted Hughes (as noted in "The Collected Poems of Sylvia Plath"). The yew tree in the poem was inspired by a real yew which existed in the churchyard west of the Plaths' house in Devon, England, which Plath could see from her bedroom window. The poem was written on the night of a full moon, in the early hours before dawn. Indeed, many of the poems from *Ariel*—especially the later ones, after Plath's separation from Ted Hughes—were written in the "blue" hours of the morning, before her two children, Frieda and Nicholas, awoke.

"The Moon and the Yew Tree" is often interpreted autobiographically; many interpretations treat the moon as directly symbolic of Plath's mother, Aurelia, and the yew tree as symbolic of her father, Otto. It is true that Plath had a complicated relationship with both of her parents which likely informed this poem as it did many others.

Plath was also a new mother at the time this poem was written; she had given birth to her daughter, Frieda, the previous year, and had suffered a miscarriage earlier in 1961. She had long been concerned about how having children would affect her creative life and her career, concerns that she explored extensively in her novel, *The Bell Jar*.

Plath herself spoke about "The Moon and the Yew Tree" in an interview for BBC radio. She described her attempt to "put into a poem ... things, familiar, useful and worthy things," including "once ... a yew tree ... It stood squarely in the middle of my poem, manipulating its dark shades, the voices in the churchyard, the clouds, the birds, the tender melancholy with which I contemplated it—everything! I couldn't subdue it."

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poetry of Sylvia Plath — A short video introduction to Sylvia Plath's work by author John Green via CrashCourse. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iJn0ZPd6mYo)
- Poetry and Feminism — A map of resources for tracing the evolution of feminism through poetry. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/146073/poetry-and-feminism)
- ASL Translation of "The Moon and the Yew Tree" — The poem translated into American Sign Language by Crom Saunders. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-3xQxErMCYc)
- Beneath the Yew Tree's Shade — A little background on the significance of yew trees in the form of an excerpt from a book by Thomas Lacquer. (https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2015/10/31/beneath-the-yew-trees-shade/)
- A Reading of the Poem — A reading of "The Moon and the Yew Tree" produced by the BBC, originally broadcast in September 1962 as part of their New Poetry series. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GNhzsoFOw14)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER SYLVIA PLATH POEMS

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

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Mottram, Darla. "*The Moon and the Yew Tree*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 7 Jan 2020. Web. 29 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Mottram, Darla. "*The Moon and the Yew Tree*." LitCharts LLC, January 7, 2020. Retrieved April 29, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/sylvia-plath/the-moon-and-the-yew-tree.