Kindness

SUMMARY

A kindly woman, "Dame Kindness," is smoothly drifting around my home. She's such a nice person! Her rings' blue and red gemstones make cloudy reflections in the windows. I see her smile reflected in mirrors around the house.

Is there anything more raw and authentic than children's crying? The screams of rabbits may sound more intense, but they don't have human feeling behind them. Dame Kindness says that sugar can take care of any problem. It's something healing that everyone needs to consume; its crystals are like a medicinal paste to treat injuries.

Oh, how kindness helps put things in order! Any minute now, my Japanese silk garments might be hung up with clothespins, like panicked butterflies being stunned as they're pinned in place.

Now you bring me a steaming cup of tea. Pain and poetry are pouring out of me like an unstoppable spurt of blood. You give me my two children to hold like a pair of roses.

THEMES

DEEP LOVE VS. SHALLOW KINDNESS

Written just days before Sylvia Plath's death by suicide, "Kindness" depicts a haunted, agitated speaker and a kind figure who's caring for her. Personified as "Dame Kindness," this figure attempts to soothe or "cure" the speaker with saccharine comforts like "smiles" and "Sugar," but the speaker seems deeply skeptical of such offerings. All that feels "real" to the speaker are her two children, whose cries move her and whom she's handed like a pair of beautiful "roses." Though the speaker seems doubtful that anything can save her, the poem suggests that deep love, rather than superficial kindness, stands the best chance of outweighing despair.

The speaker (usually identified as Plath, but not specifically named or gendered in the poem itself) is extremely wary of the kindness she receives; she appreciates it to some extent but makes clear that it's hardly a "cure" for her agony. Rather than naming the person(s) showing kindness, the speaker portrays her as a cartoonish stock figure, "Dame Kindness." The speaker's exclamation that Kindness "is so nice!" has an edge of sarcasm, and she takes no comfort from this figure's "smiles."

The speaker is also skeptical of Kindness's claim that "Sugar can cure everything." The "Sugar" here might be literal (think sugar in soothing tea) but it's metaphorical as well: the speaker rejects saccharine sweetness and kindness as a remedy for serious pain. Even Kindness's "glid[ing]" movements suggest superficiality. While this figure may be well-intentioned in "picking up pieces" of the speaker's disorderly life (such as clothes around the house), the poem's tone makes clear that their superficial solutions aren't truly helping.

At the same time, the speaker portrays her love of her children—including her sensitivity to *their* pain—as a more authentic and meaningful bond than kindness. To the speaker, nothing "is so real as the cry of a child": the human "soul" behind children's pain seems to move her as nothing else does. In this way, it seems to keep her partly grounded and attached to others even amid her own tremendous suffering.

In the end, the poem juxtaposes this suffering—and the shallow "cure[s]" offered by Kindness—with a meaningful human connection, a "soul[ful]" bond that's potentially worth living for even if it's not a cure. Although the speaker indicates that there's "no stopping" her agony, she ends the poem with a moment of human connection: someone (perhaps "Kindness") hands the speaker "two children" that appear to be her own, ambiguously suggesting that the speaker may still be trying to hang on to life and love.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20

ART AND ANGUISH

The speaker of “Kindness” connects her poetry directly to her pain. "The blood jet is poetry, / There is no stopping it,” she says, meaning that her inner anguish (that “blood jet,” which may be a metaphor for suicidal depression) pours out of her unstoppably, generating powerful writing even as it creates a life-or-death emergency. She also implies that nothing will ease the suffering that's both killing her and fueling her creativity. In fact, this blood metaphor suggests that she's no more capable of healing than she is of suddenly quitting poetry. The poem thus imagines suffering and art as inseparable parts of a deadly, unstoppable process.

The speaker hints that she's dying of some incurable anguish—the same anguish that has inspired the poem:

- The figure of "Kindness" claims that "Sugar can cure everything" and that it acts as a "poultice," or a treatment for a wound or inflammation. It's implied, then, that the speaker is ill or hurt and this "kind[]" figure is trying to help her out.
- The speaker also ambiguously fears that her "silks"

could be "pinned any minute" like "butterflies." This image could refer to literal clothes, but it also seems to be a metaphor for her art or psyche: something beautiful and fragile that she fears will be stopped dead, as if "anesthetized."
- Finally, she describes herself as mortally (albeit metaphorically) wounded and links her wound with creative inspiration: "The blood jet is poetry."

This metaphor suggests that suffering and creativity are intertwined—and that an artist can lose control to the point where they're simply a vessel for both pain and art. The fact that "there is no stopping" the "blood jet [of] poetry" implies that this speaker is helplessly writing even as she's helplessly dying. She can't turn off her torment *nor* her inspiration because they're part of the *same process*.

Note, too, how this blood metaphor is sandwiched between two images of attempted comfort: "you" (which seems to refer to "Dame Kindness") brings the speaker a cup of tea, then hands her a pair of small children (presumably the speaker's own kids). The tea is clearly not enough to help her; more unsettlingly, it's implied that even her kids might not be enough to ease her suffering. On the other hand, the image of beautiful children ends the poem ("stop[s]" *this* piece of "poetry"), so the speaker may still hold out some faint hope that love, family, etc. can ease her psychological wound. Even if the speaker isn't definitively doomed, however, she's terrified by the sense that she's lost all control over her art and life.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 9-11
- Lines 14-20

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

Kindness glides about ...
... filling with smiles.

The poem's first stanza introduces both the speaker and a figure called "Dame Kindness," who is "glid[ing]" (moving smoothly and gracefully) around the speaker's "house." This Dame Kindness seems to be a personification of kindness itself, imagined as a well-off woman (notice those "rings" with "jewels") who is "nice" and full of "smiles." It's possible, however, that she's meant to represent a real person—perhaps a kindly relative, friend, or neighbor visiting the speaker's home.

Though the description of Kindness *seems* positive, it has a slightly mocking edge to it:

- The verb "glides" suggests a smooth, easy, even cheerful movement, which will soon contrast with the speaker's heavy thoughts and apparent stillness.
- "[S]he is so nice!" could be read as faint praise: perhaps her niceness is glib or shallow.
- Her "jewels" suggest a certain wealth and comfort—maybe it's *easy* for her to be nice, since her life isn't terribly hard. The way her jewels "smoke" (create cloudy reflections) "in the windows" also seems ominous, adding a hint of danger to this quiet domestic scene. (The speaker's perception of these jewels as "smok[y]" might reflect some deeper emotion smoldering inside herself, Kindness, or both. Notice, too, that blue and red are also colors associated with blood, as well as emergency sirens and the like.)
- Even Kindness's "smiles" are unsettling, since the speaker describes them "filling" her "mirrors"—symbolically suggesting that they're superficial.

Because "Kindness" was one of the last poems Plath ever wrote, it's impossible to know for sure whether "Dame Kindness" alludes to a real person. Plath's friend Jillian Becker, who took care of Plath and her kids not long before Plath died, may have been a partial inspiration (Becker said that she wore red and blue rings like those described here). Some critics have suggested that this figure might have been based on Plath's mother, with whom Plath had a close but troubled relationship.

These opening lines establish the form that will continue throughout the poem: five-line stanzas (cinquains) of free verse.

LINES 6-8

What is so ...
... has no soul.

Lines 6-8 mark an abrupt transition away from the description in the previous stanza. Seemingly out of nowhere, the speaker poses and then muses over a rhetorical question:

> What is so real as the cry of a child?
> A rabbit's cry may be wilder
> But it has no soul.

Because the speaker is at home and is later handed "two children" (presumably her own), this question is most likely prompted by the sound of one or both kids crying. If so, the speaker doesn't immediately respond *except* in her thoughts. She reflects that nothing on earth seems as "real" as children's crying—their expressions of pain and distress. The pain and distress of animals, particularly "rabbit[s]," can have a "wilder" and more alien sound, "but it has no soul": that is, it doesn't move people on a human level.

Basically, "the cry of a child" seems to bring the speaker back

down to earth and remind her what's important—which suggests that she may feel detached from reality in other ways. Notice, too, how the poem juxtaposes these lines about pain with the description of the smiling, gliding "Dame Kindness." The mention of "real" feeling might be intended to make Kindness look false or superficial by contrast.

(The mention of "a rabbit's cry" isn't as random as it seems. Both Plath and her estranged husband, Ted Hughes, had written previously about rabbits and rabbit-catching, often as a symbolic way of discussing their troubled relationship. For more on this allusion, see the Context section of this guide.)

LINES 9-11

Sugar can cure ...
... a little poultice.

In lines 9-11, the speaker relates (without directly quoting) something that "Kindness says." Dame Kindness's advice is a cross between home remedy and homespun wisdom:

> Sugar can cure everything [...]
> Sugar is a necessary fluid,
> Its crystals a little poultice.

Again, the poem's sparseness and the speaker's disjointed thoughts make these statements tricky to interpret:

- Is Kindness recommending sugar (or sugary "fluid[s]") as something to give the speaker's kids, in response to hearing "the cry of a child" somewhere in the house?
- Is Kindness offering sugar (e.g., in the "tea" mentioned later) as a "cure" for something that ails the speaker?
- Could she be doing both at once, as a visitor helping to care for both the speaker and her kids?

In the overall context of the poem, it seems that this advice should be read both metaphorically and ironically, even if Dame Kindness intended it straightforwardly. There are many problems, medical and otherwise, that sugar *can't* cure, and by the end of the poem, it's clear that the speaker is going through one such crisis.

Of course, "Sugar" could also be a metaphor for sweetness of temper or behavior—like the "Sweet[ness]" the Dame shows in line 13. But ultimately, the poem suggests that even this type of sweetness, or niceness, or kindness, isn't helpful in some situations. It may seem like a "poultice" (a medicinal paste) that can heal all wounds and cheer up anyone, but it has its limits. Like literal sugar, a saccharine attitude can even be cloying and unpleasant. In any case, whatever this speaker is suffering through, ordinary comforts can't solve it.

LINES 12-15

O kindness, kindness ...
... any minute, anesthetized.

Lines 12-15 continue the poem's pattern of jarring transitions. Suddenly, the speaker breaks out into an apostrophe:

> O kindness, kindness

Because "kindness" is lowercase here, it could refer to "Dame Kindness," the abstract virtue of kindness, or both. (Dame Kindness herself may be a personification of the virtue!) Ambiguously, the speaker describes this figure "picking up pieces"—pieces of what? The speaker might mean that the woman called Dame Kindness is picking up pieces of clothing or and/other objects scattered around the house. But the line could also imply that when your life seems scattered or broken, kindness helps you *metaphorically* pick up the pieces and move on.

The adverb "Sweetly" builds on the "Sugar" references in lines 9-11. The repetition of "kindness" (specifically an example of epizeuxis) as well as the dramatic "O," allows for a range of interpretations: the speaker's tone here could be grateful, anxious, mocking, or some combination of these. *Grateful* might seem most likely, except that in the following lines, the speaker doesn't sound very relaxed or relieved by all this kindness.

Lines 14-15 then contain perhaps the strangest metaphor in the poem, as the speaker compares her "Japanese silks" to "desperate butterflies" that are about to "be pinned any minuted" and "anesthetized." These "Japanese silks" might refer to kimonos, scarves, or some other kind of decorative item. It's hard to say for sure, but they seem to be among the "pieces" picked up in the previous line.

Here's one possible interpretation of this metaphor: Kindness, a woman helping around the house, is picking up discarded clothes (including "silks") and will soon hang them up with clothespins (or pin them in some other fashion). This "pinn[ing]" makes the speaker think of the way scientists and collectors pin butterfly specimens to display boards. In her morbid imagination, these silky butterflies are "desperate" with panic until they're "anesthetized"—deprived of all sensation—by the pin through their middle.

Why is the speaker making these surreal, eerie comparisons? Perhaps she's projecting a distressed mental state onto the domestic scene around her. Anxiety and/or pain may have made her feel fragile, like "silks" or "butterflies," and "desperate," like a captured insect. She may fear and/or wish for an "anesthe[sia]"-like release from pain, which she seems associated with the release of death. (Pinning a live butterfly would kill it, not just cut off its sensations.)

LINES 16-20

And here you ...
... children, two roses.

In lines 16-20, an ambiguous "you" (probably Dame Kindness) brings the speaker "a cup of tea" and her "two children." Maybe the tea and kids are both meant to comfort the speaker; maybe the tea is meant to comfort her while *she* comforts the *kids*. (Recall that at least one of them seemed to be "cry[ing]" earlier.)

This final stanza also contains a startling metaphor in the middle:

> The blood jet is poetry,
> There is no stopping it.

Since it occurs in the middle of a calm domestic scene (preceded by "a cup of tea" and followed by "two children"), this "blood jet" (or spurt of blood) is clearly figurative (the speaker isn't *actually* bleeding out as she takes her tea). Outwardly, the speaker is fine, but inwardly, she seems to be suffering from a psychological wound that's rapidly draining the life out of her.

At the same time, the wound seems to be producing a rush of "poetry," including this very poem. Her life force is intimately linked with her writing, and both are pouring out of her at an alarming rate. "There is no stopping it" suggests both that she's doomed to die and that she feels unstoppably creative, because her anguish is linked with her art. (Plath attempted suicide several times throughout her life, and died by suicide just days after writing this poem, so "The blood jet" is generally interpreted as a reference to psychological pain and self-harm.)

After this frightening image, the poem ends on what appears to be a less bleak note, as the speaker holds her two young "children" and compares them to "roses." Roses are traditional symbols of love and beauty, so perhaps the speaker is holding on to her kids in hopes that their love and beauty can still somehow save her. In any case, the love she shares with them seems more meaningful than the "kindness" of the woman described earlier.

Still, the previous lines seem to warn that nothing, not even parental love, can save her. The "two roses," like the "rabbit's cry" in line 7, also allude to a radio play by Plath's husband, who had recently left her for another woman. In the play, a husband rejects his bride in favor of his mistress, whom he gives two roses. In other words, the flowers in the poem carry strongly negative associations as well as positive ones. (For more on this allusion, see the Context section.)

SYMBOLS

SUGAR

For the poem's speaker, sugar symbolizes a superficial sweetness or kindness, a saccharine attitude that's supposed to provide comfort but doesn't really help matters.

The personified "Kindness" figure in the poem claims that "Sugar can cure everything." According to "Dame Kindness," sugar is, in fact, a "necessary" substance and a metaphorical "poultice," or medicinal paste for a sore or wound. Since "tea" is mentioned later (line 16), these lines might literally refer to a kindly woman who's adding sugar to tea and claiming that it'll make the speaker feel better. Symbolically, the sugar evokes Kindness's cloyingly sweet temperament, or her falsely saccharine view of life in general. (Remember that the speaker, closely based on Plath, is having a profound crisis and needs more serious help than tea and kindness can provide.)

If the sugar *is* being added to tea, it falls dramatically short in the final stanza: the sight of the "cup" only makes the speaker reflect on the uncontrollable pain that seems to be pouring out of her like a "blood jet" (line 18). The sugary-sweet nature of kindness—as opposed to deep love or a more meaningful intervention—is simply no match for whatever the speaker's going through.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-11:** "Sugar can cure everything, so Kindness says. / Sugar is a necessary fluid, / Its crystals a little poultice."

POETIC DEVICES

PERSONIFICATION

The poem personifies kindness as "Dame Kindness," a woman helping out around the speaker's house. Kindness is portrayed as extremely "nice," full of "smiles" and good cheer, "Sweetly picking up pieces"—perhaps literally meaning pieces of clothing or other items strewn around the house. Metaphorically, Kindness is trying to help put the pieces of the speaker's chaotic life in order.

This figure might be a stand-in for a particular "nice" person who was trying to help Plath at the time she wrote the poem. (Her mother and her friend Jillian Becker have been suggested as possible models for "Dame Kindness.") She could also stand for the friendly or familial kindness of anyone who tries to help someone through a difficult time.

But this personification isn't entirely positive. The poem's tone

and imagery make Kindness seem somewhat cloying and ineffective. For example, Kindness claims that "Sugar can cure everything" (line 9), perhaps in response to "the cry of a child" (line 6) or to the speaker's own distress. But while sugar might sometimes cheer up an unhappy kid, it's clearly no "cure" for whatever anguish the speaker's going through—for the "blood jet" of pain that's pouring out into her "poetry" (line 18). Thus, the personification suggests that kindness isn't always enough; it can be a poor, saccharine substitute for the genuine love and help a distressed person needs.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-5:** "Kindness glides about my house. / Dame Kindness, she is so nice! / The blue and red jewels of her rings smoke / In the windows, the mirrors / Are filling with smiles."
- **Lines 9-13:** "Sugar can cure everything, so Kindness says. / Sugar is a necessary fluid, / Its crystals a little poultice. / O kindness, kindness / Sweetly picking up pieces!"

CONSONANCE

Consonance adds a bit of expressive musicality to a poem whose tone is generally flat and grim. Often this consonance is built around crisp /k/ sounds, as in the word "kindness" itself or the alliterative phrase "can cure" in line 9. This sharpness perhaps evokes the speaker's brittleness or bitter feelings toward "Dame Kindness."

Consonance can bring the poem's images and metaphors to life as well. Take line 11:

> Its crystals a little poultice.

The combination of liquid /l/ sounds; sharp /k/, /t/, and /p/ sounds; and hissing /s/ sounds perhaps evokes the oozing, grainy nature of that "poultice" (a sort of soft, moist material typically applied to wounds).

The speaker combines sharp and smooth sounds throughout the poem, in fact, as readers can hear in lines 12-15:

> O kindness, kindness
> Sweetly picking up pieces!
> My Japanese silks, desperate butterflies,
> May be pinned any minute, anesthetized.

Much of the consonance here and elsewhere is more specifically sibilance, the repetition of /s/, /sh/, and /z/ sounds. Listen to how many of these occur in lines 9-15, for instance:

> Sugar can cure everything, so Kindness says.
> Sugar is a necessary fluid,
> Its crystals a little poultice.
> O kindness, kindness
> Sweetly picking up pieces!
> My Japanese silks, desperate butterflies,
> May be pinned any minute, anesthetized.

Depending on context, sibilance tends to sound either soothing and sweet or hissing and unsettling. Here, it's a bit of both! The sibilance (along with smooth /l/ and /n/ sounds) seems to reflect, on the one hand, Kindness's attempts to soothe the speaker, and on the other hand, the eerie undertones of the speaker's morbid thoughts. In that way, it reflects the poem's key juxtaposition between Kindness's positive attitude and the speaker's grim outlook. In the end, eeriness seems to have the upper hand, in part because the speaker controls the poem's perspective.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Kindness," "so nice"
- **Line 3:** "red," "rings"
- **Line 5:** "filling," "smiles"
- **Line 6:** "so real," "cry," "child"
- **Line 7:** "rabbit's cry," "wilder"
- **Line 8:** "soul"
- **Line 9:** "can cure," "so Kindness says"
- **Line 10:** "necessary"
- **Line 11:** "Its crystals," "little poultice"
- **Line 12:** "kindness, kindness"
- **Line 13:** "Sweetly picking up pieces"
- **Line 14:** "Japanese silks, desperate butterflies"
- **Line 15:** "pinned any minute, anesthetized"
- **Line 16:** "come," "cup"

ASSONANCE

Along with alliteration and consonance, the poem is full of assonance. The first stanza alone is brimming with it:

> Kindness glides about my house.
> Dame Kindness, she is so nice!
> The blue and red jewels of her rings smoke
> In the windows, the mirrors
> Are filling with smiles.

More even than alliteration, assonance adds musicality and vibrancy to a poem that is *tonally* quite flat and grim. There's a liveliness to these sounds—"Kindness glides," "about"/"house," "blue"/"jewels," etc.—that contrasts with, and may even suggest an inner struggle against, the poem's images of death and doom.

In fact, the poem's assonance is much too heavy to be accidental or incidental; it's an important feature of Plath's signature style. Although she mostly moved away from end

rhyme and meter toward the end of her brief career, she continued to use lots of assonance and internal rhyme, making her surreal, often shocking images that much more vivid. For example, these devices boldly emphasize the disturbing imagery of lines 14-15:

> My Japanese silks, desperate butterflies,
> May be pinned any minute, anesthetized.

"Anesthetized" seems to form a partial rhyme with both "desperate" *and* "butterflies"; the /eh/ vowel sound also appears in "any." Meanwhile, /in/ sounds link "pinned and "minute." This intense lyricism helps show that, whatever the speaker's crisis, she's still pouring out powerful "poetry" (line 18).

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Kindness glides," "about," "my," "house"
- **Line 2:** "Kindness," "nice"
- **Line 3:** "blue," "jewels," "rings," "smoke"
- **Line 4:** "In," "windows"
- **Line 5:** "filling with"
- **Line 6:** "cry," "child"
- **Line 7:** "cry," "wilder"
- **Line 9:** "Sugar," "cure"
- **Line 11:** "Its crystals," "little"
- **Line 13:** "Sweetly," "pieces"
- **Line 14:** "desperate"
- **Line 15:** "pinned," "any," "minute," "anesthetized"
- **Line 16:** "come," "cup," "tea"
- **Line 17:** "Wreathed," "steam"

REPETITION

The poem repeats a number of thematically important words, including the word in the title: "Kindness."

Counting the title, "Kindness" (or "kindness") appears six times in the poem, all within the first 12 lines. Line 12 even uses the word twice in a row, an example of epizeuxis: "O kindness, kindness." This heavy repetition starts to seem excessive, reinforcing the poem's portrayal of kindness as something potentially cloying and overbearing. The reader starts to get wary of the word, just as the speaker seems to be wary of Dame Kindness. (The repeated emphasis on her "kindness," "nice[ness]," "Sweet[ness]," etc. also starts to seem mocking.)

There are other forms of repetition throughout the poem as well. The word "cry," for example, appears twice in lines 6-7, an example of diacope:

> What is so real as the cry of a child?
> A rabbit's cry may be wilder

This sets up a contrast between human and animal distress (the "cry of a child" vs. a "rabbit's cry") and establishes distress as a major element of the poem in general.

"Sugar" appears at the beginning of both lines 9 and 10 (an example of anaphora), followed by references to sugar "crystals" and "Sweet[ness]" in lines 11 and 13. As with "kindness," all the sugar references start to seem like a little much—appropriately enough, since the sugar here symbolizes a cloying, saccharine form of kindness.

Finally, line 20 repeats "two" in a pair of parallel phrases: "You hand me two children, two roses." This parallel structure indicates that the children are being metaphorically *compared* to roses; the speaker isn't being handed kids and flowers at the same time.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Kindness"
- **Line 2:** "Kindness"
- **Line 6:** "cry"
- **Line 7:** "cry"
- **Line 9:** "Sugar," "Kindness"
- **Line 10:** "Sugar"
- **Line 12:** "kindness, kindness"
- **Line 20:** "two," "two"

METAPHOR

The poem contains a number of vivid, semi-surreal metaphors, which help illustrate the speaker's agitated mental state and perhaps her altered perceptions of reality.

For example, this curious image in lines 3-4 contains a metaphor:

> The blue and red jewels of her rings smoke
> In the windows [...]

These jewels can't literally be giving off smoke, so the speaker probably means that they create hazy reflections in the windows. The odd verb choice adds a certain tension to the scene—a sense of smoldering emotion or potential danger in this environment.

Later, the speaker, quoting Dame Kindness, calls sugar "a necessary fluid, // its crystals a little poultice." Sugar isn't a fluid, though it can be dissolved *in* fluids, so Kindness may be talking about a beverage with sugar added (such as the "tea" mentioned in line 16). The metaphorical comparison to a poultice—a soft medicinal paste made of herbs and the like—implies that sugar has healing properties, which will help "cure" (line 9) whatever ails the speaker.

The metaphor in line 14 compares the speaker's "Japanese silks" (perhaps a reference to the speaker's kimono-like robes) to "desperate butterflies" that "May be pinned any minute,

anesthetized." Perhaps Kindness is picking up stray clothing and hanging it up with clothespins. Whatever is happening on the literal level, the speaker imagines a "desperat[ion]" that's abruptly "anesthetized," a panicky sensation followed by the loss of all sensation. This morbid image seems to reflect her own anxiety; like a caught butterfly, she may feel trapped in this setting (or in her life), desperate for some form of escape.

The metaphor in lines 18-19 is even more macabre: "The blood jet is poetry, / There is no stopping it." The speaker doesn't seem to be outwardly bleeding (otherwise why would anyone calmly bring her tea and hand her children?); rather, she appears to be suffering from a terrible *psychological* wound. According to the speaker, this metaphorical wound produces an unstoppable "blood jet" that's like "poetry," or that *results* in poetry. Basically, she's in some kind of incurable pain, which she can't control any more than she can stop writing. (Notice that, like the anesthesia image, this one also involves a rapid loss of consciousness, with the implication that the speaker may be dying or desperate for her pain to end.)

Finally, the poem's "you" hands her "two children," which she compares to "two roses" (line 20). Conventionally, roses symbolize beauty and love, so the poem may be struggling to end on a note of faint optimism. (However, Plath borrowed the "two roses" image from a play by her estranged husband, Ted Hughes, in which an unhappy husband gives two roses to his mistress. This allusion could be read in all sorts of ways; for example, seeing her children might make this speaker feel loved and valued, or the children might remind her of the domestic turmoil that has made this "house" so gloomy.)

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "The blue and red jewels of her rings smoke / In the windows,"
- **Lines 10-11:** "Sugar is a necessary fluid, / Its crystals a little poultice."
- **Lines 12-13:** "O kindness, kindness / Sweetly picking up pieces!"
- **Lines 14-15:** "My Japanese silks, desperate butterflies, / May be pinned any minute, anesthetized."
- **Lines 18-19:** "The blood jet is poetry, / There is no stopping it."
- **Line 20:** "You hand me two children, two roses."

APOSTROPHE

In lines 12-13, the speaker addresses "kindness" through apostrophe:

> O kindness, kindness
> Sweetly picking up pieces!

Notice that "kindness" is set in lowercase here, as opposed to the capitalized "Kindness" of earlier lines. It's thus unclear whether the speaker is still addressing the personified Dame Kindness (or whatever real person she's supposed to represent), the abstract virtue of kindness, or both at once.

It's also unclear whether this direct address continues with the "you" of the final stanza. If so, the apostrophe marks the point where the earlier, third-person references to Kindness transition into the later, second-person references. Another (less likely) possibility is that "you" refers to a different person entirely.

Regardless, the speaker declares—with an archaic, poetic "O" and dramatic exclamation point—that kindness "Sweetly pick[s] up pieces!" This could mean that the woman called Dame Kindness is picking up pieces of clothes or clutter around the house. More figuratively, it could mean that human kindness helps "pick[] up [the] pieces" of a broken life and set them in order. Or, once again, it could mean both! The tone of the exclamation could be read as either genuine (the speaker is truly grateful) or somewhat ironic (notice the ominous image of "desperate butterflies" in the following lines, which hints that "kindness" can feel oppressive).

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Lines 12-13:** "O kindness, kindness / Sweetly picking up pieces!"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The poem contains a single rhetorical question, in line 6. It's followed by an additional thought on the same subject:

> What is so real as the cry of a child?
> A rabbit's cry may be wilder
> But it has no soul.

The question doesn't seem prompted by anything in the previous stanza. Either the speaker's thoughts are simply disjointed or the speaker has heard a child crying (line 20 confirms that her young children are in the house). Either way, her rhetorical question frames a child's cry as particularly "real," implying that other things around her seem less real or unreal. By contrasting a child's cry with a "rabbit's," which sounds "wild[er]" but "soul[less]," she suggests that the distress of human beings—especially very young human beings—moves people more than any animal's distress ever could. It seems to ground us in "real[ity]," perhaps preventing us from becoming too detached, deluded, or self-centered.

At first, the speaker seems to be posing this rhetorical question to herself, as if grounding *herself* in reality. However, the last stanza addresses an unspecified "you"—maybe Dame Kindness or the children's other parent—so it's possible that the question is directed at this other person, as if to remind *them* what's really important.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "What is so real as the cry of a child?"

JUXTAPOSITION

The poem juxtaposes the kind words and actions of Dame Kindness (as well as the "you" of the last stanza, if this is a different person) with the disturbing thoughts of the speaker. If all this kindness is meant to cheer the speaker up, the speaker's thoughts suggest it's not exactly working.

Dame Kindness, a personification of kindness itself, is portrayed as a "nice" woman (perhaps an older "Dame") who "glid[es]" around the speaker's home. She seems wealthy and comfortable, as evidenced by the "jewels" she's wearing, and she's all "smiles"—though the speaker notes that these smiles fill "the mirrors," as if to imply that they're a superficial image she's maintaining. She's helping the speaker to some extent, "Sweetly picking up pieces" of clothing or other discarded items around the house, but she doesn't seem to recognize or acknowledge the depth of the speaker's misery. She optimistically advises that "Sugar can cure everything" —maybe in reference to the "cry of a child" in line 6, or maybe in reference to the speaker's own problems. But neither sugar in a literal sense nor the sugary-sweet optimism of Dame Kindness seems able to fix what's wrong in this home.

The speaker, for her part, seems preoccupied with disturbing reflections. The "child's cry" makes her think of a "rabbit's" scream of pain, and her "Japanese silks" (dressing gowns left lying around?) make her think of "desperate butterflies" about to be "pinned" or killed. She suggests that she's pouring out anguished poetry like "blood" from some inner wound.

The contrast between Kindness's cheerful temperament and the speaker's morbid thoughts intensifies the poem's ominous atmosphere. It adds dramatic irony to Kindness's assumption that she knows how to "cure everything"; she doesn't even seem aware that the speaker is facing a true emergency (a metaphorical "blood jet" that can't be "stopp[ed]").

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20

ALLITERATION

Alliteration serves the same purpose as consonance in this poem, lending its language moments of musicality and emphasis. Some examples of alliteration include "red"/"rings" (line 3), "cure"/"Kindness" (line 9), the idiomatic phrase "picking up pieces" (line 13), and "come"/"cup" (line 16).

As noted in this guide's discussion of consonance, these repetitive sounds can both call readers' attention to and evoke the images being described. That guttural, growling /r/ of "red"/"rings," for example, might subtly add to the sense that the speaker resents "Dame Kindness," while the pops of plosive /p/ sounds in "picking up pieces" perhaps calls to mind the various "pieces" being described.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "red," "rings"
- **Line 9:** "can cure," "so," "Kindness," "says"
- **Line 11:** "crystals"
- **Line 12:** "kindness, kindness"
- **Line 13:** "picking," "pieces"
- **Line 16:** "come," "cup"

VOCABULARY

Dame Kindness (Lines 1-2, Line 9) - A personification of kindness, imagined as a smiling woman eager to help and comfort. Plath's portrayal of Kindness may have been based on her friend Jillian Becker, who helped care for Plath and her children shortly before Plath's death.

Smoke (Lines 3-4) - Here, a verb meaning "to create cloudy images" (i.e., cloudy reflections "In the windows").

Rabbit's cry (Lines 7-8) - A rabbit's outcry of pain, fear, hunger, or similar distress. (Possibly an allusion to imagery from the work of Plath's husband, poet Ted Hughes.)

Poultice (Lines 10-11) - A mass or paste of herbs or similar ingredients, applied medicinally to sores or wounds.

Anesthetized (Lines 14-15) - Treated with an anesthetic; made to lose consciousness or feeling (as in the case of a patient drugged prior to surgery). Here, the word is part of a complex metaphor and seems to imply something like "killed" or "emptied of vitality," since butterfly specimens are usually pinned when already dead.

Japanese silks (Lines 14-15) - An apparent reference to silk kimonos (dressing gowns of Japanese origin) or similar garments.

Pinned (Lines 14-15) - This word has an apparent double meaning. Literally, it might suggest that the "Japanese silks" are to be hung up with clothespins. Metaphorically, it evokes dead butterflies pinned in place (for display or study) by a scientist or collector.

Blood jet (Lines 18-19) - A spurt of blood from a wound. Here, part of a metaphor in which the poet-speaker describes her poetry as the product of a *psychological* wound, or an uncontrollable outpouring of pain.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Kindness" consists of four cinquains, or stanzas of five lines apiece. It's a free verse poem, so it has no meter or rhyme scheme. (It does contain a few sporadic, mostly imperfect rhymes; for example, "tea" in line 16 rhymes with "poetry" in line 18.)

The line lengths are slightly erratic, ranging from three to eleven syllables, and the transitions between sentences and stanzas are often jarring. For example, the rhetorical question at the start of the second stanza ("What is so real as the cry of a child?") doesn't seem prompted by anything in the first. The alarming "blood jet" metaphor in lines 18-19 seems to come out of nowhere.

The stanza length, then, is the only formal element imposing any order or logic on the poem. The speaker's thoughts are erratic, morbid, surreal, haunted by images of panic and distress ("A rabbit's cry," "desperate butterflies," etc.)—in other words, the speaker barely seems to be holding herself together. Just as Dame Kindness is "picking up pieces" (of clothing? clutter?) around the speaker's house, the reader is forced to assemble the poem's strange fragments into some sort of coherent whole. But this struggle to achieve coherence ties in with the poem's themes. After all, the speaker links "poetry" with uncontrollable pain (lines 18-19), the kind that can leave sufferers panicked and disoriented.

METER

As a free verse poem, "Kindness" has no consistent meter. (It doesn't have a rhyme scheme, either, though it does include scattered, partial rhymes; see the Rhyme Scheme section for more). Its stanzas are all the same length—five lines apiece—but the lines never settle into a regular rhythm.

The lack of meter helps convey the speaker's psychological state, which reads as disjointed and quietly distressed. A smooth, regular rhythm wouldn't match this erratic flow of thought. The poem's consistent cinquains suggest that the speaker is trying to put her thoughts in *some* kind of order, but ultimately, the "blood jet" of her "poetry" (lines 18-19) is too wild to be controlled by something as strict as meter.

RHYME SCHEME

"Kindness" is basically a free verse poem, meaning that it has no regular meter or rhyme scheme. However, a few partial or perfect end rhymes are sprinkled unpredictably throughout the poem.

Notice, for example, how "child" (line 6) rhymes with the stressed syllable in "wilder" (line 7), while "soul" (line 8) rhymes with the stressed syllable in "poultice" (line 11). More subtly, the unstressed second syllable in "poultice" rhymes with the unstressed second syllable of "kindness" in the following line. "Butterflies" (line 14) makes for an imperfect rhyme with "anesthetized" (line 15), and "tea" (line 16) makes for a perfect rhyme with "poetry" (line 18).

These scattered fragments of rhyme may reflect the speaker's scattered, agitated mental state, her sense that her life is in disordered "pieces" (line 13). They might also reflect the speaker's claim that her poetry is wild and uncontrolled, like a "blood jet" (line 18)—or, rather, that the "blood" from her inner, psychological wound is what's producing her poems. Such poetry isn't likely to cohere into a tidy musical structure, but it seems to create moments of erratic, unexpected musicality. It may even be that "poetry" (one half of the poem's only perfect rhyme) is one of the few things holding her troubled mind together.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Kindness" makes a number of cryptic, ambiguous statements, so it's difficult at first to understand who she is and what she's going through. Probably the clearest evidence comes in lines 18-19: "The blood jet is poetry / There is no stopping it." This speaker seems to be a poet who's going through an acute crisis or suffering from a deep psychological wound (there's no evidence that she's *literally* bleeding). The "blood jet" metaphor implies that her pain and her creativity are closely linked and impossible to control. Her pain is pouring out in her poems, including "Kindness" itself.

Readers have generally assumed, then, that the speaker is the poet, Sylvia Plath. Plath wrote "Kindness" less than two weeks before she tragically took her own life, and the poem's details map closely onto her circumstances during this time. She was a young mother of two kids, recently separated from her husband, the poet Ted Hughes. As an American who had moved to England, she was isolated from family, leaving only friends to help care for her and her kids during a difficult winter in which she struggled with depression. One of those friends, Jillian Becker, is thought to be a model for "Dame Kindness." During this period of upheaval, Plath was writing poetry at a furious pace, including many of the poems for which she has become famous. Because these poems drew heavily on Plath's real experiences, including family conflicts and previous suicide attempts, they came to be associated with the movement known as Confessional poetry.

At the very least, then, the speaker of "Kindness" is *inspired* by Plath's real experiences. The speaker is sharing "[her] house" (line 1) with "two children" (line 20), at least one of whom seems to be "cry[ing]" (line 6). A kindly, smiling figure, personified as "Dame Kindness" (line 2), seems to be helping around the home: bringing her (and/or her children) drinks with "Sugar" (lines 9-10), "picking up pieces" of clothing or other

clutter (line 13), and so on. The speaker is suffering from some unstated illness or pain, and Kindness is offering sugar as a "cure" (line 9). All these details provide a basic context for the speaker's reflections, which are fragmentary and disjointed in a way that suggests mental distress.

SETTING

The poem is set in the speaker's "house" (line 1), where a figure called "Dame Kindness" seems to be visiting and helping out. The speaker doesn't describe this setting in depth, but it unsurprisingly contains "windows" (which are reflecting Kindness's rings, suggesting that it may be nighttime), as well as "mirrors" (lines 4-5), "Japanese silks" (line 14), and "tea" (line 16). The Japanese silks may refer to kimonos or dressing gowns—probably the "pieces" (of clothing) that are lying around, and that Kindness is "Sweetly picking up" (line 13). In other words, this house seems messy.

The house also contains "two children": the speaker's kids. At least one of these children is "cry[ing]," as line 6 indicates ("What is so real as the cry of a child?"). The speaker herself appears to be in a morbid or depressed state, comparing the silk garments to "desperate butterflies" (line 14) and her own poetry to a "blood jet" (line 18). It's not clear whether the "you" who brings the tea is Dame Kindness (suddenly referred to in the second rather than the third person) or a separate figure, such as the other parent of the two kids. Regardless, this is a home in moderate to serious disarray, a gloomy place where Kindness is trying—with little success—to lift the speaker's spirits.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) was a leading light of the Confessionalist poetry movement. Famous both for her intense, personal verse and her autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*, Plath spoke what had been unspeakable about womanhood, mental illness, and other subjects in the first half of the 20th century.

Like many of the poems in Plath's collection *Ariel* (1965), "Kindness" can be read as autobiographical. Unvarnished self-revelation was rare in English-language poetry at the time. As more and more writers adopted this revolutionary stance in their work during the 1950s and '60s, critics found a name for their movement: Confessionalism.

Confessionalist poets wanted to drop the barrier between themselves and "the speaker" of the poem and to examine aspects of life that a conformist post-war society deemed too indelicate to talk about. Robert Lowell's "Skunk Hour," W.D. Snodgrass's "Heart's Needle," and Anne Sexton's "The Double Image" are all good examples of Confessionalist poetry. Inspired by these poets, Plath began writing more and more about personal subjects, including her experiences of motherhood, family conflict, and mental illness. "Kindness" is one of many poems in *Ariel* that deals with mental distress, as well as Plath's complex feelings about parenthood. Its morbid "blood jet" image has some echoes in a famous *Ariel* poem, "Cut."

Plath wrote "Kindness" on February 1, 1963, just 10 days before her death by suicide. At this time, she was recently separated from her husband, fellow poet Ted Hughes, and taking care of two young children as a single mother. Though Hughes visited periodically, she was generally isolated, overwhelmed, and depressed throughout a cold English winter. During her last months, she received some help and companionship from her friend Jillian Becker, who is thought to be one of the models for "Dame Kindness" in the poem. Critics have suggested that "Dame Kindness" may also be a veiled portrait of Plath's mother, Aurelia, with whom she had a troubled relationship. The "you" in the final stanza could be Kindness but has also been interpreted as Hughes—that is, the other parent of the speaker's children. Both the "rabbit's cry" (line 7) and the "two roses" (line 20) are images pointedly borrowed from Hughes's radio play *Difficulties of a Bridegroom*, which had aired the previous month and seems to comment on the two poets' marital problems. (Plath had also written a poem called "The Rabbit Catcher," which alludes to their breakup in ominous terms.)

Despite all this personal upheaval, Plath wrote at a furious pace in 1962-'63, producing most of the poems that later cemented her literary reputation. The "blood jet [of] poetry" in "Kindness" may refer to her astonishing outpouring of creativity during this time. The posthumous publication of *Ariel* brought her lasting fame as a poet.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

From adolescence onward, Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) suffered from recurring bouts of suicidal depression. Mental health treatments during this era were often crude and ineffective, and some of the treatments she received, including poorly administered electroconvulsive therapy, worsened her suffering. Much of her most famous work, including her novel *The Bell Jar*, details her struggles with mental instability and the questionable medical practices of the time. In the same vein, "Kindness" portrays the morbid imaginings of a woman whom others seem to be trying to "cure."

Plath's writing is also considered a landmark in the history of feminist literature; she died just on the cusp of what became known as second-wave feminism. Following World War II (during which women often worked outside the home while men served in the military), women across Western society

faced pressure to return to the home and fulfill their supposedly natural roles as wives and mothers. As a writer and academic, Plath found many of these stereotyped expectations oppressive.

Many women during this period felt profound unhappiness at their lack of autonomy, described by feminist writer Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) as "the problem that has no name." Though Plath experienced career success as a writer, the social pressure she faced to fulfill the roles of wife and mother, as well as the double standards surrounding the behavior expected of husbands and wives, may have exacerbated her mental illness. Thus, much of Plath's writing, including "Kindness," involves troubled domestic settings and a complicated experience of motherhood and femininity.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poet's Life — Read about Plath's life and work via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/sylvia-plath)
- Plath on Living and Parenting Abroad — Listen to a 1962 interview in which Plath explains why she and Ted Hughes chose to live and raise children in England. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GQim9x2KnVo)
- "The Blood Jet Is Poetry" — Read a 1965 Time magazine review, titled after a line from "Kindness," that helped shape Plath's posthumous reputation. (http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,942057-1,00.html)
- Jillian Becker on Plath's Last Days — Jillian Becker, thought to be the model for "Dame Kindness" in "Kindness," recalls taking care of Plath shortly before the poet's death. [Content Warning: depression, suicide] (https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-21336933)
- Confessional Poetry — Read Poetry Foundation's introduction to Confessionalism, the literary movement with which Plath's work is often associated. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/151109/an-introduction-to-confessional-poetry)
- "Difficulties of a Bridegroom" — More information on one of the inspirations for "Kindness": a radio play written by Plath's estranged husband, Ted Hughes. (https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/tight-wires-between-us-on-difficulties-of-a-bridegroom-by-ted-hughes/)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER SYLVIA PLATH POEMS

- Ariel
- Daddy
- Fever 103°
- Lady Lazarus
- Mad Girl's Love Song
- Metaphors
- Mirror
- Morning Song
- Nick and the Candlestick
- Poppies in October
- Sheep in Fog
- The Applicant
- The Arrival of the Bee Box
- The Moon and the Yew Tree
- The Munich Mannequins
- Words
- You're

HOW TO CITE

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CHICAGO MANUAL

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