

1-1-2007

"The Pregnant Riddle": An Explication of "Metaphors" by Sylvia Plath

Jenna L. Keefe

College of DuPage, essai_keefe@cod.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai>

Recommended Citation

Keefe, Jenna L. (2007) ""The Pregnant Riddle": An Explication of "Metaphors" by Sylvia Plath," *ESSAI*: Vol. 5, Article 27.
Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol5/iss1/27>

This Selection is brought to you for free and open access by the College Publications at DigitalCommons@C.O.D.. It has been accepted for inclusion in ESSAI by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@C.O.D.. For more information, please contact koteles@cod.edu.

"The Pregnant Riddle": An Explication of "Metaphors" by Sylvia Plath

by Jenna L. Keefe

(English 1130)

I'm a riddle in nine syllables,	1
An elephant, a ponderous house,	2
A melon strolling on two tendrils.	3
O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers!	4
This loaf's big with its yeasty rising.	5
Money's new-minted in this fat purse.	6
I'm a mean, a stage, a cow in calf.	7
I've eaten a bag of green apples,	8
Boarded the train there's no getting off.	9

Sylvia Plath's "Metaphors" is about a woman feeling insignificant in the midst of a pregnancy. The first line gives an opening introduction to the poem that gives a clue to the overall meaning to the poem. The poem begins by stating to the reader that it is a riddle to be solved. A riddle is not easily figured out and it needs to be carefully considered to find its meaning. The nine syllables and nine lines of the poem signify the nine months of pregnancy. The poem proceeds to use rich metaphors to compare the narrator and different objects in order to make the reader see and feel the point more clearly.

In line two, the narrator states that she is an elephant and a ponderous house. This line expresses how the narrator feels about her pregnant body. Like the second line, a comical undertone underlays the third line. A melon walking around on its skinny tendrils puts a humorous image in one's mind. When looking at a pregnant woman, it is easy to see the resemblance. It seems that she is poking fun of the way she looks. However, "Beneath the humor of Plath's imagery, we discover very little real pleasure; [...] Indeed, in the last two lines even the humor vanishes, displaced by anxious awareness of remorseless fate" (Axelrod 145). Though the elephant, house, and melon seem to only signify the largeness of a pregnant woman, they have a much deeper meaning.

The narrator looks back in the fourth line, surveys her previous thoughts and summarizes them. The red fruit in line four returns the idea of a melon. A fruit is the result of reproduction and is the desired part of a plant. In farming, the plant is merely used to produce a fruit harvest. The plant's worth is in its fruit. By comparing herself to the plant, the narrator shows she is feeling deprived of worth; as if the baby inside is the true value, not the carrier. The next part of line four is the ivory. The ivory is directly connected with the notion of an elephant. An elephant is prized for its beautiful ivory tusks. Ivory is very much valued and esteemed. It is used for many worthy causes including art, the keys of pianos that make beautiful music, and various treasured ornaments. The poor elephant, however, is not so fortunate. It is killed and not used for any higher purposes such as art, music, or decoration. In fact the elephants killed for ivory they carry and are disgraced by being almost forced to extinction. This is a very strong metaphor. The narrator compares herself to the elephant because she is the carrier of the precious and prized ivory. She feels her fate (under appreciation) is like death. The third part of line four is the fine timbers which directly relates to the house mentioned in line two. The purpose of a house again fortifies this idea. It is the people dwelling within that are the value. The house merely protects and shelters them, just like a pregnant mother does for her unborn child.

The next line seems to show a rising loaf is like the child growing larger inside as time moves forward in an oven that houses it. However, line five could also be encouraging the dire thoughts of the fate of a mother by comparing them to this great rising loaf. The thoughts form and develop as the poem reads; like a loaf forms and develops under the influence of the yeast inside it.

This view is again shown in line six when she says, “Money’s new-minted in this fat purse” (Plath). The difference between a purse and money, besides the obvious material differences, is that money is charged with value and worth. It has meaning beyond itself. Whereas, a purse is only a container holding the valuable things inside. Lines four, five, and six show this idea growing, but it is risen, baked and ready to come out of the oven in the seventh line. It explicitly states she feels like the means to an end. She is the stage in which a play is performed and a cow in calf in this line. The play is praised, not the stage. And again, the calf is praised not the cow.

The final lines, the eighth and the ninth, seem to break away from the rest of the poem. The spotlight is no longer on the injustice of pregnancy, but more inwardly focused. An apple relates to the story of the fall in the Bible. Eve took a bite of an apple and was condemned from the presence of God the Father – said to be the worst fate a person can have. The narrator in this poem had eaten a whole bag of apples. What is worse is that the apples are green. They are not ripe. This signifies that she is not ready for this undertaking. When she made the decision to have sexual intercourse, whether pregnancy was intended or not, she accepted the fate of being the carrier of something precious, and she herself, becoming less significant. Another point that can be found in this line about apples is the fate of all women after the fall. Eve ate the apple and was cursed with the increased pain of childbirth. This pain may not mean only physical pain, but may also be the pain of feeling insignificant. Likewise, the narrator has eaten apples and is also cursed with the pain of child bearing and rearing. She expresses this deep sense of loss throughout the entire poem. The last line obviously shows that she is helpless. There is no way out for her. She must endure through the whole train ride until the end.

When reading and examining this poem, a look into the author’s life is helpful. For “Examining Plath’s life does, indeed, illuminate one’s understanding of her work, for much of the imagery and attitudes and events one finds in Plath’s poetry and fiction have their genesis in her life experience” (Barnard 13). She used her poetry to release feelings and emotions she was experiencing. Some say “the organic connection between herself and the text that would ‘speak of her’ was a crucial trope” (Axelrod 146). Therefore, Plath’s literature could not come to be without the life experiences she used in her work.

Many works of Plath’s include the central theme of motherhood, but when observing this writing, one must take a cautionary approach. As a mother, Plath loved her children and felt blessed being able to care for them (Wagner-Martin 101). However, some of her work shows words filled with contempt. A few other works of Plath’s similarly show this sad attitude; “Many of “Plath’s texts express feelings about marriage and babies that are as complex, mobile, and charged as the contrasting perspectives contained in her great work, ‘Three Women’” (Axelrod 146). Plath was in a difficult position being an aspiring young poet that wanted to show the world her writing. She wanted to leave her mark (Axelrod 147). However, being a mother would put a strain on the ability to concentrate on her work as a professional writer. In the book *Sylvia Plath: a Literary Life*, Wagner-Martin writes “Nothing is simple here: we have Plath’s comment in her college journal that ‘I do not primarily want to be a mother,’ and biographer Paul Alexand contends that Plath had aborted their first child, a few months after her marriage to Hughes.” When this information is seen, it is simple to see that Plath understood the toll motherhood would take on her writing and might have even taken measures to avoid having a child. Later, “Metaphors” was written in the year nineteen sixty which happens to be the same year in which her first child, Rebecca Hughes was born (Wagner-Martin ix). Chances are that Plath wrote “Metaphors” while she was pregnant with her first child. It is easy to imagine Plath having mixed feelings being a first time mother.

Plath's fears of how her creative work would suffer appear if she were to become a mother appear to have come true after she gave birth. She was no longer independent and free to write, but had to take care of the home and child while holding a job as a secretary to make money to help the family. As she was working as a mother, her husband's friends would come over and "As one of these friends, A. Alvarez, later observed, 'Sylvia seemed effaced, the poet taking a back seat to the young mother and housewife'" (Barnard 21). In fact, "Her duties as a mother, wife, and secretary left her little time to write, and the submissive conjugal role which she accepted contributed to a growing sense of personal unfulfillment" (Barnard 21). As we can see in "Metaphors" Plath struggled with the thoughts of becoming a mother and putting her professional creative work to the side. She knew that this child birthing and rearing could suffocate her ability to work creatively.

Plath creates the narrator to be deeply distressed. Robbed of her significance, she stands unhappy and frightened of what is to come. Nevertheless, she understands that she has done this to herself. She has become jaded. The poem reveals the attitude that many (but certainly not all) women may have about child birth. A woman steps down when she becomes with child. Becoming a mother is not only about having a child grow inside and be born; it is continued until the child is fully grown into a responsible adult. When a woman becomes a mother, she feels like she is no longer the important person. She gives up her freedom to be significant. She must humble herself to become lower and serve as the protector and care giver. Plath struggles with the notion that she must become the means to an end; the end being a fully grown child. She fights the position a woman is in when she becomes a mother. She fights the curse that she and Eve caused. She does not want to give up her importance to a child.

Works Cited

- Axelrod, Steven Gould. *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words*. Baltimore: The John's Hopkins University Press, 1990.
- Barnard, Caroline King. *Sylvia Plath*. Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1978.
- Plath, Sylvia. "Metaphors." *An Introduction to Literature*. Ed. Sylvan Barnet, William Burto, William E. Cain. New York: Pearson Longman, 2006. 745.
- Wagner-Martin, Linda. *Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life*. New York: St. Martin's Press, INC, 1999.