Ariel

SUMMARY

The speaker declares that everything is still and dark until a vast, hazy landscape of distant rocky hills appears.

The speaker talks to her horse, calling her a fierce and divine lioness and marveling at the way their two bodies work together, becoming one.

The ploughed fields rush past the speaker and her horse as they ride on. The brown curve of the earth mirrors the horse's neck, which the speaker feels she can't catch up with.

Wild blackberries capture the speaker's attention, as if they're throwing out hooks to catch her.

Their sweet, dark juice fills the speaker's mouth and reminds her of blood. She notices shadows.

Some new force intervenes and carries the speaker onwards, taking over every bit of her—from her legs to her hair to the skin that peels from the bottoms of her feet.

The speaker feels naked as Lady Godiva, stripping off unnecessary parts of herself like clothing. She casts aside lifeless hands and useless restrictions.

Liberated, she begins to evaporate like bubbles, until she becomes one with a field of wheat and the glitter of the ocean.

The cries of a child fade away inside a far-off wall. The speaker becomes a swift arrow, or dew evaporating into the air, united with a natural energy that throws her into the heart of the fiery red morning sun.

THEMES

LIBERATION AND TRANSCENDENCE

The speaker of "Ariel" describes an early morning horse ride. While the speaker's journey begins as a highly physical experience, it gradually becomes less sensory and more spiritual—or even supernatural. Over the course of her ride, the speaker sheds all that holds her back and begins to feel that she's one with the exuberant natural force that she sees in the landscape and the horse. The title's allusion to the air-spirit Ariel, a character in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* who is released from servitude at the end of the play, only strengthens the speaker's point: fully and freely giving in to one's natural impulses is a transformative, liberating, and joyful experience.

The speaker initially experiences her morning ride in her body, connecting to the scene through physical experience. Grounding herself in this way prepares her to feel a deeper connection with the world around her. The speaker refers to horseback riding as "a pivot of heels and knees," highlighting the bodily movements of both herself and the horse. She then mentions "[t]he brown arc" of the horse's "neck," and notes that she "cannot catch" it any more than she can catch the landscape that the horse is "sister" to. At first, she's enjoying her physical experience, but she's still a little outside it. In other words, the powerful force that pervades the natural world is one step ahead of her, leading her on. When the speaker stops to taste berries, she becomes somewhat grounded, imagining that the berries have "blood" like her and feeling the thorns as "hooks" that anchor her to the physical world.

As the speaker continues her journey, her physical connection to her environment develops into a spiritual bond, and she becomes one with the impulses that drive her. When the speaker stops to eat berries, "something else / Hauls [her] through air." As she experiences physical connection through the berries, some deeper natural urge *takes hold of* the speaker's body, carrying with it every bit of her, from her "hair" to the skin that "flakes from [her] heels."

The speaker describes this process as "unpeeling," and likens herself to Lady Godiva, who is known for riding naked on horseback. As the force of the natural world sweeps her up, the speaker discards the dead weight that burdens her: "dead hands, dead stringencies." "Hands" suggests the body and the physical world, while "stringencies" are the rigid guidelines that no longer restrain the speaker. She even lets go of the burdens of parenthood or of painful childhood memories as "The child's cry / Melts in the wall."

As she rides on in the grip of this strange force, the speaker becomes less and less material, "foam[ing] to wheat, a glitter of seas" and resembling "the dew" that will evaporate under the morning sun. In other words, the speaker transcends her physical form and grows much closer to the natural force that compels her, becoming "one with the drive" forward, towards the horizon, that has been guiding her this whole time.

Shedding her restrictions and giving into natural impulses brings the speaker strength, freedom, and excitement—though these are not without their dangers. But in the end, this transcendent experience is deeply worthwhile. While the horse ride began with "Stasis in darkness"—a complete lack of light or movement—the speaker transforms into "the drive" towards the morning sun, gaining agency and awareness. Once the transformation is complete, the speaker likens herself to a fierce, piercing "arrow," taking on the strength and velocity of the natural force that drives her.

At the same time, the speaker hints that this is a dangerous process, referring to dew as "suicidal" as it flies into the fiery sun, the "cauldron of morning." The reader gets the sense that

this kind of liberation brings with it the threat of destruction. Still, the surrounding references ("drive," "arrow," etc.) suggest that this process is exciting and empowering, albeit dangerous. In other words, the speaker's horse ride illustrates the ecstatic transcendence that occurs when people cast aside their physical, human restrictions are cast aside and allow their uninhibited instincts to take over.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-31

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

Stasis in darkness. ...
... tor and distances.

Before the poem even begins, the allusions in its title hint at a story of wild, transcendent freedom. Most famously, "Ariel" is the exuberant air-spirit from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. But "Ariel" is also a Hebrew word meaning "lion of God"—and was the name of Sylvia Plath's horse! All these allusions prepare readers for what's to come: this will be a poem about a horseback ride that carries the speaker from physical pleasure to spiritual transcendence.

When the poem opens, the speaker is surrounded by the darkness of the early morning. Her first glimpses of the landscape around her reveal a "substanceless blue / Pour of tor and distances." The craggy "tor[s]" (or rocky hills) seem to have become misty and immaterial, able to "pour" out in front of her. The imagery here suggests a blurry, dreamlike scene, and gives the impression that the speaker and the horse have moved from "stasis" to a rapid gallop.

But how do readers know the speaker is riding a horse? The short answer is that, at first, they don't! The speaker will only hint that she's on horseback over the course of the poem. Here at the beginning, it almost seems as if the speaker has been swept up on a gust of air—a true "Ariel." First appearing here as a kind of elemental spirit, the speaker's horse will come to symbolize the huge power of instinct and the natural world, a power that will eventually make rider, horse, and landscape into one being.

The poem opens with a series of sentence fragments. These short, broken lines create a sense of urgency, as if the speaker can't arrange her glimpses of the landscape into complete thoughts. And take a look at the enjambment here:

> Then the substanceless blue
> Pour of tor and distances.

That seamless movement between "blue" and "Pour" mimics the overwhelming rush of images that the speaker describes.

But the first and last lines of this opening stanza are end-stopped, accentuating the natural pause at the end of a line. These end-stopped lines slow the reader down, allowing the imagery to sink in. And because the end-stopped lines create a pause after both "darkness" and "distances," they accentuate the slant rhyme between the two words—and draw attention to an internal rhyme between "darkness" and "substanceless." Another internal rhyme in "Pour of tor" similarly mirrors the speaker's sense that the landscape is rushing past her in an overwhelming torrent.

LINES 4-6

God's lioness, ...
... heels and knees!—

The speaker's attention shifts from the landscape to her horse, which she addresses as "God's lioness." The speaker marvels at the harmonious movements of their two bodies, which work in unison, as if becoming "one."

She describes their shared movement as a "Pivot of heels and knees," a grounded and physical image. Assonance calls further attention to these "heels and knees," reinforcing the idea that the speaker's and horse's bodies are moving as one.

The speaker's description of her horse as "God's lioness" imbues it with spiritual force—an impression deepened by her allusion to another meaning of the word "Ariel." Not just a character in Shakespeare, "Ariel" is also a traditional Hebrew name for Jerusalem, and it's usually translated as "lion of God." If the horse is an "Ariel" in this sense, it's not just an elemental spirit, but a mighty spiritual force tied to ideas of the Promised Land, rebirth, and homecoming.

Note, though, that this speaker's Ariel is a not a "lion" of God, but a "lioness." Here, the poem hints that speaker and horse are united not just in bodily freedom, but in a powerful femininity.

Again, the speaker's fragmented sentences reflect her breathless wonder at the wild ride she and her "Ariel" are sharing:

> God's lioness,
> How one we grow,
> Pivot of heels and knees!— [...]

The speaker here strings three sentence fragments together with asyndeton. Without any conjunctions to show how these ideas related to each other, each line comes across as a separate exclamation, evoking the speaker's wonder and the horse's speedy gallop. It seems that the speaker can hardly get out one thought or observation before another one arises. Together, she and her horse make one exhilarated creature.

LINES 6-9

The furrow ...
... I cannot catch,

As speaker and horse gallop on, the speaker notes that the ploughed farmland they're traveling over resembles the horse's neck: the "furrows," the rows of turned dirt, are curved and brown. This physical similarity suggests a deeper connection between the horse and the landscape. In fact, the speaker calls them "sister to" one another. This metaphor suggests a similar natural strength and power courses through both the horse and the landscape. When the speaker notes that she "cannot catch" the horse's neck, she implies that she has difficulty keeping up with the landscape as well. Both the animal and the land are faster and more powerful than she is, overwhelming her.

In fact, the speaker does not pass by the landscape when she rides on: it "passes" *her* by. In other words, the landscape—not the speaker or the horse—is active here. It seems that the natural world (or some mysterious force within it) propels the ride. This force leads the speaker onwards, but she cannot yet grasp it. In order to do so, she'll have to sink deeper into her physical experience—and then break out of it altogether into a transcendent spirituality.

This passage uses three enjambed lines in a row, quickening the poem's pace. The enjambment is broken only with the revelation that the speaker "cannot catch" up with the horse's neck. Such an uneven, choppy stream of images allows the reader's experience to mirror the speaker's: everything unfolds so quickly that the images feel breathless and disorienting, difficult to keep up with.

This passage also evokes the speaker's experience with dense sound play, including sibilant /s/ sounds and consonant /p/, /t/, /n/, /r/, and /k/ sounds:

> Splits and passes, sister to
> The brown arc
> Of the neck I cannot catch,

The hiss of repeating sibilant /s/ sounds creates a rushing effect, like the wind whipping past horse and rider as they go. And harder consonant sounds mimic the steady beat of hooves on the earth.

LINES 10-14

Nigger-eye ...
... Shadows.

The speaker stops her ride for a moment, distracted by a cluster of dark blackberries. Here again, natural forces overpower her. She doesn't voluntarily stop in front of the berries; instead, they take hold of her with grasping "Hooks."

The speaker vividly describes her experience of eating the berries, playing on the audience's sense of sight ("dark"), taste ("sweet"), and touch ("hooks"). The berries are so alive that they squirt dark "blood" as she chews them. The imagery here suggests that the speaker is getting lost in the sensuous pleasure of eating.

The speaker pays special attention to the berries' darkness: their juice is "black," they evoke "shadows," and the "hooks" they send out are "dark." The word "dark" hearkens back to the poem's very first line: "Stasis in darkness." This polyptoton suggests a connection between these moments: in both cases, the speaker is still and surrounded by darkness.

This darkness, hanging over the first half of the poem, prepares the speaker for a transformation. Darkness, in this poem, is associated with the material world and the body, the juice of blackberries and the awe-inspiring landscape before sunrise. The speaker's sensuous appreciation of the landscape, her horse, and the berries connects her to this darkness, and thus to some mysterious power deep down in the body. But the metaphors that the speaker uses to describe the berries—their thorns as "Hooks," their juice as "blood"—suggest that the physical world isn't just delicious, but violent.

In the poem's next lines, the rich, dangerous darkness of the physical world is going to crack wide open, flinging the speaker into a very different experience.

Here, it's worth pausing for a moment to comment on Plath's use of a racist slur in these lines. The n-word has been an offensive and violent term since long before this poem was written, and its appearance here reveals Plath's own racial biases as a white woman. Her use of this word is a stain on the poem.

LINES 15-18

Something else ...
... from my heels.

While the speaker is transfixed by the sensuous appeal of the berries, "Something else" enters her: a mysterious power takes hold of her entire body, top to bottom:

> Something else
> Hauls me through air—
> Thighs, hair;
> Flakes from my heels.

The asyndeton here suggests that this list could go on indefinitely: the speaker is truly caught up whole by this strange force. And the combination of caesura and end-stopped lines create pauses before and after each part of the speaker's body, as if she has begun to break up into distinct elements. "Flakes" fall from her "heels" as "Something else" sweeps her up.

The reference to the speaker's "heels" echoes the "pivot of heels and knees" earlier in the poem, when she feels herself

becoming "one" with her horse. Now, her body seems to be dissolving altogether. The force that sweeps her up seems to have moved her through purely physical pleasures into spiritual transcendence—a real out-of-body experience.

Whatever has grabbed ahold of the speaker is only called "Something else." Its namelessness gives it more power, suggesting that there's no way to describe a force this mighty in mere words.

This passage's sounds reflect the speaker's transcendent experience. A perfect end rhyme (rare in this poem) between "air" and "hair" reflects the speaker's increasing unity with the mysterious force. And the assonant long /i/ sound in "thighs" and "my" hint at the speaker's transformation into an active "I." As she sheds her physical restrictions, she gains power and agency, becoming an empowered, first-person figure. In fact, the word "I" will appear for the first time in the very next stanza.

LINES 19-21

White ...
... hands, dead stringencies.

Swept up by a powerful, mysterious force, the speaker's body no longer roots her in the landscape. As she's carried away from the everyday material world, the speaker is able to shed "dead," unnecessary limitations. For the first time, she becomes an "I," an active force: "Godiva, I unpeel."

That "unpeel" conjures images of skinned fruit—images which, translated to the human body, sound pretty gory. While the speaker's "unpeeling" is clearly a positive process, there's a hint here that it's dangerous, too. But perhaps the danger was in having a peel on in the first place! The speaker could have simply said that she "peels." But her addition of "un-" suggests she's "undoing" something—removing a skin that she didn't put on herself.

As the speaker "unpeels," she removes "Dead hands, dead stringencies." Those "dead hands" echo the "flakes" of skin that fall from the speaker's heels in the previous stanza: she's losing piles of useless flesh as she transforms. As the asyndeton here suggests, those "stringencies," or rigid restrictions, are dead meat, too. As the speaker transcends her physical body, she's also transcending societal expectations, moving away from the limitations of her ordinary life and into something wilder and freer. The assonant long /i/ sounds in "White / Godiva, I unpeel" emphasize how this transformation makes the speaker into an "I," an active force.

Her allusion to Lady Godiva, the medieval noblewoman who was said to have ridden naked through town to protest her husband's oppressive taxation, does something similar. As the speaker strips off her "dead" physical form, "unpeeling" until she's spiritually naked and free, she becomes a strangely powerful and independent force. And she's not just *any* Godiva, but a "White / Godiva." This whiteness plays into the poem's light symbolism, suggesting spiritual insight and rebirth—in contrast with the darkness of the physical world the speaker is transcending.

LINES 22-25

And now I ...
... in the wall.

Now that the speaker has transcended her physical form, she seems to evaporate into the landscape. Enjambment, asyndeton, and assonance suggest her lightness and speed as she dematerializes:

> And now I
> Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas.

These flowing, linked images of natural beauty mirror the speaker's transcendence. As she's carried away by the mysterious "something else," she seamlessly *becomes* the landscape: light as foam, changeable as the "glitter" of light on water. The assonant long /ee/ sound that links the "wheat" and the "seas" suggests that this landscape has an internal unity: all of its parts are connected to each other in one continuous billow of joyful motion.

As the speaker lifts off into transcendence, she leaves something surprising behind: "The child's cry." The reader might well be confused when this "child" appears, as there's been no mention of any child before, let alone "The child." But the speaker doesn't pause to explain: she just leaves the crying child behind, letting it "[Melt] in the wall." Perhaps this is a metaphor for shedding the burdens of parenthood: just one more "dead stringency" for the speaker to bury in a "wall."

LINES 26-31

And I ...
... cauldron of morning.

At the end of the poem, the speaker's transformation is complete. As she escapes the bounds of her physical body and finds a transcendent connection with the landscape around her, she becomes one with the natural power she felt in the horse and the countryside. She soars onward, becoming an "arrow" and the "dew." Shooting skyward, she "flies / Suicidal" into the heart of "the red / Eye, the cauldron of morning": the sun itself.

This imagery doesn't just suggest liberated transcendence, but danger and destruction. The arrow is a weapon; the dew is "Suicidal"; the sun is both a menacing red eye and a "cauldron," a crucible that might melt the speaker down altogether. Leaving behind the "dead stringencies" of the everyday world to become an elemental "Ariel" isn't just a matter of freedom and joy: if you're going to risk leaving behind your body, the speaker hints, you might never come back.

But the intense, exuberant language here makes the risk seem

worth it. Take a look at the speaker's assonance in the final lines:

> And I
> Am the arrow,
> The dew that flies
> Suicidal, at one with the drive
> Into the red
> Eye, the cauldron of morning.

That long /i/ assonance from earlier in the poem returns in force here. As the speaker loses herself, evaporating like dew, she paradoxically becomes an even stronger "I"—one that can even match the mighty "Eye" of the sun. At one with the force of nature, surrendering her separate self as easily as the naturally "suicidal" "dew" does, she becomes a bigger "I," an "I" that is part of everything around it.

"Ariel," in the end, is a poem about a surrender that leads to a victory. The speaker lets go of her "dead hands, dead stringencies" to merge first with the physical world, and then with a transcendent spiritual power. Her small, separate, social self "dies"—but she touches the sun.

SYMBOLS

THE HORSE

The horse in this poem symbolizes the natural impulses that take hold of the speaker. The horse initially *leads* the speaker, who is in awe of its speed and power as they begin to "grow" into "one." But by the time the poem closes, the speaker has become "one with the drive" that the horse embodies. The fact that the speaker never directly *tells* the reader she's riding a horse emphasizes the horse's unearthliness, making it feel almost as if the speaker is riding the elements themselves.

The speaker claims that the horse is "sister to" the landscape, emphasizing the spiritual connection that all natural things share. But the horse also seems to be a supernatural force, not just an earthly one. She's named "Ariel," which is the name of a liberated air-spirit in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The speaker also calls her "God's lioness," a translation of "Ariel" from Hebrew. These allusions highlight the horse's almost magical power.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "God's lioness"
- **Line 5:** "How one we grow,"
- **Lines 8-9:** "The brown arc / Of the neck"

DARKNESS AND LIGHT

Darkness in this poem symbolizes the limitations of the physical world (including its lack of insight), while light represents the ecstatic freedom of spirituality. The speaker begins her ride enveloped in darkness and sunk in the sensory experience of eating dark blackberries. Gradually, she transcends physical burdens and restrictions, becoming a liberated "White / Godiva" who rides towards the brilliant sun, the "cauldron of morning."

The speaker uses the n-word when describing the berries that entice her, comparing them to the eye of a Black person. Her use of a racist slur associates Blackness with physicality and the senses—especially when the speaker uses whiteness to signify transcendence and enlightenment. In fact, the speaker gains power by *prevailing* over darkness and becoming "White." As such, the darkness and light symbolism reinforces racist tropes and power dynamics—an unfortunately common feature of Plath's poetry, and one which can also be seen in poems like "The Arrival of the Bee Box," written just a few weeks before "Ariel."

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Stasis in darkness."
- **Lines 10-14:** "Nigger-eye / Berries cast dark / Hooks— / Black sweet blood mouthfuls, / Shadows"
- **Lines 19-20:** "White / Godiva"
- **Lines 30-31:** "the red / Eye, the cauldron of morning"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

This poem contains several allusions, including a few before the poem even begins! The title, "Ariel," makes a literary, religious, and autobiographical reference all at once.

For starters, Plath herself owned a horse named Ariel. In fact, when Plath wrote this poem, poetry-writing and horseback riding were her two morning rituals. The allusion to her own horse might help clued-in readers to figure out what's happening here; after all, the speaker never directly tells readers that this is a poem about a horseback ride. Some readers might also interpret the speaker's ecstatic, volatile transformation as a metaphor for the process of writing poetry.

But of course, Plath probably didn't expect readers to know the name of her horse. The name "Ariel" also alludes to something that readers are more likely to be familiar with: Shakespeare's great late play, *The Tempest*. In this play, the magician Prospero finds an air-spirit named Ariel imprisoned in a tree by an evil witch. Prospero releases Ariel on the condition that Ariel serve him for a year before going free (though as it happens, Prospero is reluctant to keep his promise at first, wanting to

cling to Ariel's magic powers for his own purposes).

The poem's allusion to the play thus suggests both the liberated freedom of the air-spirit and the speaker's "imprisonment" in daily life and the material world at the beginning of the poem.

Finally, "Ariel" is a Hebrew name for Jerusalem—a name that literally translates to "Lion of God." The speaker reinforces this allusion when she refers to the horse as "God's lioness." This allusion plays up the horse's might and spiritual power, while subtly linking these qualities with femininity.

The poem's final allusion appears when the speaker refers to herself as "White / Godiva. As the legend has it, Lady Godiva, a medieval noblewoman, repeatedly begged her husband to lift the oppressive taxes that he had imposed on his struggling people. He finally agreed to do so, but only if she rode through town on horseback—naked. After ordering everyone to stay inside and close their windows, Lady Godiva took her husband up on his offer.

This allusion resonates with the strength, power, and potential danger that the speaker feels when she sheds her physical limitations: much like Lady Godiva, she removes her "outer layers" to stand up for what she truly feels.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "God's lioness"
- **Lines 19-20:** "White / Godiva, I unpeel—"

ASSONANCE

Assonance grabs the audience's attention and highlights important moments. It also creates a feeling of unity that mirrors the shared current running through the horse, the speaker, and the landscape.

For example, the speaker describes her body moving in unison with the horse's as a "Pivot of heels and knees." The musicality of that long repeated /e/ sound reinforces the harmony between the speaker and the horse, and the harmony the speaker feels with her own body.

Later, in the poem's final liberated moments, long /oo/ and /i/ sounds reflect the speaker's transformation:

> And I
> Am the arrow,
> The dew that flies
> Suicidal, at one with the drive
> Into the red
> Eye [...]

These rich sounds weave these lines together, reflecting the speaker's feeling that she's totally at one with the world around her. That stress on the long /i/ also draws attention to the speaker's "I"—the self she's shedding as she takes off like the "dew."

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "Pour," "tor"
- **Line 6:** "heels," "knees"
- **Line 7:** "Splits," "sister"
- **Line 9:** "cannot," "catch"
- **Line 13:** "Black"
- **Line 14:** "Shadows"
- **Line 19:** "White"
- **Line 20:** "Godiva," "I"
- **Line 22:** "I"
- **Line 23:** "wheat," "seas"
- **Line 24:** "child's," "cry"
- **Line 26:** "I"
- **Line 28:** "dew," "flies"
- **Line 29:** "Suicidal," "drive"
- **Line 31:** "Eye"

ASYNDETON

Asyndeton helps to create this poem's unconventional structure and sound. Because it replaces conjunctions (connective words like "but" or "and") with commas, asyndeton speeds the poem up, mirroring the speed and wildness of the speaker's ride.

In this poem, asyndeton often suggests a relationship between different images, without revealing exactly what that relationship is. Sometimes the suggestion is that the linked phrases are synonyms, as in "the red / Eye, the cauldron of morning." In this instance, both images describe the sun.

But in other places, it's harder to see the relationship between the images asyndeton strings together. Take, for instance, "Black sweet blood mouthfuls, / Shadows." The addition of "Shadows" reinforces the darkness of the berries, but it is otherwise difficult to pinpoint the relationship between shadow and berry. Perhaps the berries produce the shadows; perhaps they remind the speaker of shadows; perhaps the speaker has moved on to another idea entirely. In these moments, asyndeton creates a barrage of vivid and disorienting images, one right after the other. This startling speed evokes the speaker's wild horseback ride—and her sense that she's dissolving into the world, becoming one with a unified, transcendent being.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "How one we grow, / Pivot of heels and knees!"
- **Lines 9-11:** "I cannot catch, / Nigger-eye / Berries"
- **Lines 13-14:** "blood mouthfuls, / Shadows"
- **Lines 17-18:** "Thighs, hair; / Flakes"
- **Line 21:** "Dead hands, dead stringencies"

- **Line 23:** "Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas"
- **Lines 27-28:** "the arrow, / The dew"
- **Lines 30-31:** "the red / Eye, the cauldron"

CONSONANCE

Consonance does a lot of the same work as assonance. Both devices:

- Draw attention to important moments;
- Reinforce the harmony between the speaker, her horse, and the landscape, united by the natural force that compels them;
- Musically reflect the dark, ecstatic beauty of the speaker's ride.

Consonance also plays a big role in shaping the poem's mood. For example, the speaker says that the berries along the path "cast dark / Hooks— / Black sweet blood mouthfuls." The repeated hard /k/ sound here mimics those sharp "Hooks"—and the dangerous intensity of the speaker's "mouthful" of blackberries.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "substanceless," "blue"
- **Line 5:** "How," "we," "grow"
- **Line 7:** "Splits," "passes," "sister"
- **Line 8:** "arc"
- **Line 9:** "neck," "cannot," "catch"
- **Line 10:** "Nigger-eye"
- **Line 11:** "Berries," "cast," "dark"
- **Line 12:** "Hooks"
- **Line 13:** "Black," "blood"
- **Line 14:** "Shadows"
- **Line 16:** "Hauls"
- **Line 18:** "Flakes," "heels"
- **Line 21:** "Dead," "hands," "dead"
- **Line 23:** "wheat," "glitter"
- **Line 25:** "Melts," "wall"
- **Line 29:** "drive"
- **Line 30:** "red"
- **Line 31:** "cauldron," "morning"

END-STOPPED LINE

Just over half of this poem's lines are end-stopped. These end-stopped lines enhance the pauses that come at line breaks, giving readers opportunities to slow down and let the poem's events sink in. On the other hand, many of the end-stops here are commas and em-dashes, connective punctuation marks that actually speed the reader along.

The speaker's description of the wild blackberries uses all of these effects:

> Berries cast dark
> Hooks—
> Black sweet blood mouthfuls,
> Shadows.

The em-dash after "Hooks" signals that the sentence continues across the stanza break, creating anticipation and encouraging readers to hurry on. But then, a gentler comma after "mouthfuls" slows the pace a little, and the lines come to a natural stillness with the period after "Shadows." In fact, those "Shadows" get a full end-stopped line to themselves, suggesting their mysterious depth. It's as if the speaker herself is slowing down as she gets lost for a moment in the darkness of the berries.

End-stops can also draw attention to the words at the end of lines. For instance, here's a look at the poem's opening lines:

> Stasis in darkness.
> Then the substanceless blue
> Pour of tor and distances.

The pauses after "darkness" and "distances" call attention to the awesome but indistinct sweep of the early morning landscape.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "darkness."
- **Line 3:** "distances."
- **Line 4:** "lioness,"
- **Line 5:** "grow,"
- **Line 9:** "catch,"
- **Line 12:** "Hooks—"
- **Line 13:** "mouthfuls,"
- **Line 14:** "Shadows."
- **Line 16:** "air—"
- **Line 17:** "hair;"
- **Line 18:** "heels."
- **Line 20:** "unpeel—"
- **Line 21:** "stringencies."
- **Line 23:** "seas."
- **Line 25:** "wall."
- **Line 27:** "arrow,"
- **Line 31:** "morning."

ENJAMBMENT

This poem's enjambments create a choppy and abrupt flow of images and ideas, mimicking the speaker's ever-changing, unpredictable experience on her morning ride. Swift enjambments can also surprise the reader with unexpected transitions between lines.

Here's one example:

The child's cry
Melts in the wall.

The line "the child's cry" marks the first (and only) appearance of "the child." Readers haven't heard a thing about any "child" before now. But almost before the reader has time to be confused, the speaker's enjambment carries readers away from the "child": its "cry / Melts" as soon as it appears.

The last word of an enjambed line also gets a little extra emphasis, hanging out there in empty space. Enjambment can thus highlight important images and ideas. For instance, the words "Something else" linger at the end of both a line and a stanza, stressing the mystery of the nameless force that sweeps the reader up.

Enjambment also helps the poem's rhythm to mirror the events it describes. Take a look at the poem's final lines, which are all enjambed:

The dew that flies
Suicidal, at one with the drive
Into the red
Eye, the cauldron of morning.

Here, lines flow as seamlessly into each other as the "dew" flies into the "red / Eye" of the sun.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "blue / Pour"
- **Lines 6-7:** "furrow / Splits"
- **Lines 7-8:** "to / The"
- **Lines 8-9:** "arc / Of"
- **Lines 10-11:** "Nigger-eye / Berries"
- **Lines 11-12:** "dark / Hooks"
- **Lines 15-16:** "else / Hauls"
- **Lines 19-20:** "White / Godiva"
- **Lines 22-23:** "I / Foam"
- **Lines 24-25:** "cry / Melts"
- **Lines 26-27:** "I / Am"
- **Lines 28-29:** "flies / Suicidal"
- **Lines 29-30:** "drive / Into"
- **Lines 30-31:** "red / Eye"

IMAGERY

This poem's rich imagery immerses readers in the speaker's transcendent morning ride.

At first, images evoke the speaker's physical experience of the ride. For example, the speaker describes the landscape as "the substanceless blue / Pour of tor and distances." This image presents the landscape as vast and ungraspably powerful, as if it transcends the "substance" of the physical world. But it also grounds the speaker in a concrete, imaginable landscape: a rocky British countryside in the cool darkness of the early morning.

The speaker is constantly changing throughout her journey, and imagery allows readers to track her transformation. As she releases the burdens of her daily life, her imagery transforms the physical into the spiritual. For instance, the description of the berries' juice as "Black sweet blood mouthfuls" emphasizes the grounded, sensuous, bodily act of eating. But when the speaker "unpeel[s]" a few lines later, she's dematerializing, becoming as light as "Foam" or the "glitter of seas."

Imagery also evokes the speaker's harmony with her horse and the landscape. When, at the beginning of the poem, she exclaims, "Pivot of heels and knees!", her bodily imagery helps readers to see her body moving in tandem with the horse's. A moment later, the speaker compares the curve of the horse's neck to the brown curve of the ploughed land they ride over: the land is "sister to / The brown arc / Of the neck I cannot catch." She might not be able to "catch" that neck yet, but she's well on her way.

While the poem's images are often vivid, sensuous, and beautiful, they're also sometimes dangerous. Images of "Dead hands," the fiery "cauldron of morning," and "dark / Hooks" give the poem a violent undertone, suggesting that the price of the speaker's transcendence is the risk of utter destruction.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-3
- Line 6
- Lines 6-9
- Lines 10-14
- Lines 17-18
- Lines 20-21
- Lines 22-23
- Lines 24-25
- Lines 27-28
- Lines 29-31

METAPHOR

This poem is packed with metaphors. In fact, the horse ride as a whole can be read as an extended metaphor for the transformation that occurs when people fully and freely follow their natural impulses. The speaker develops this overarching metaphor through a series of smaller metaphors.

For instance, when the speaker calls her horse"God's lioness," she emphasizes the spiritual power and strength of the horse and the natural world in general. The speaker admires this power, but can't quite "catch" it at this stage: she's still grounded in the physical, sensory world. Or, as she puts it, "Berries cast dark / Hooks" into her, earthing her.

While these earthy "Hooks" might slow her down, they also seem to play a mysterious part in her liberation. Not long after

she pauses to devour the "Black sweet blood mouthfuls" of the berries, she's caught up by a force that unites her with the landscape: she "Foam[s] to wheat, a glitter of seas." This metaphor suggests that the speaker is getting *lighter*, melding with the landscape around her as a "Foam" or a mere "glitter" of light. As the poem closes, the speaker is "the arrow, / The dew that flies": a figure of swift, fleeting energy, liberated from the confines of her everyday life. She rises into "the red / Eye, the cauldron of morning," a metaphor for the sun that casts it both as an all-seeing god and a crucible in which she'll be melted down for good.

The poem's series of metaphors shapes the audience's understanding of the horse ride, evoking the full-body transcendence the speaker reaches as she relaxes into her instinctive urges.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "the substanceless blue / Pour of tor and distances"
- **Line 4:** "God's lioness"
- **Line 5:** "one we grow"
- **Lines 7-8:** "sister to / The brown arc"
- **Lines 10-14:** "Nigger-eye / Berries cast dark / Hooks— / Black sweet blood mouthfuls, / Shadows."
- **Lines 19-21:** "White / Godiva, I unpeel— / Dead hands, dead stringencies"
- **Lines 22-23:** "I / Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas"
- **Lines 24-25:** "The child's cry / Melts in the wall"
- **Lines 26-29:** "I / Am the arrow, / The dew that flies / Suicidal"
- **Lines 29-31:** "the drive / Into the red / Eye, the cauldron of morning"

REPETITION

The poem strategically repeats a few key words over and over, drawing attention to the speaker's transformation: a word that appears at the beginning of the poem might mean something very different when it reappears toward the end.

For instance, polyptoton on words related to darkness connects the first line ("Stasis in darkness") to the speaker's blackberry feast in line 11 ("Berries cast dark / Hooks—"). This repetition means darkness looms over this first stage of the poem, and helps to develop darkness as a symbol for the limitations of the physical, sensory world—especially as it will be compared to light, a a symbol for spiritual enlightenment, later in the poem.

Later, the diacope of "dead" in the phrase "Dead hands, dead stringencies" reinforces the uselessness of the "dead weight" the speaker sheds. This repetition suggests that the speaker's physical form has started to hold her back, and she must move through a sensory experience of the world into a spiritual one to find the transcendence she craves.

In fact, the remaining examples of repetition reinforce the contrast between the speaker's physical and spiritual experiences. First, here's a look at the two instances of "heels" within the poem:

> Pivot of heels and knees! [...]
>
> Hauls me through air—
> Thighs, hair;
> Flakes from my heels.

The speaker starts the poem immersed in physical movement. Later, though, some other force sweeps up every bit of her, including her heels, which are already beginning to "flake" away. This repetition tracks the speaker's developing out-of-body experience.

The speaker also repeats the word "eye"—first when describing the berries that entice her, and then when describing the morning sun as the "red / Eye." In the first instance, the speaker compares the berries to the eyes of a Black person to emphasize their darkness, but later, the "eye" becomes a symbol of light. The repetition of "eye" helps the audience recognize the speaker's newfound agency (and spiritual power, given the poem's darkness/light symbolism).

The poem's final repetition might be the most telling. At the beginning of the journey, the speaker describes herself and the horse "grow[ing]" into "one." However, by the end of the poem, she is "one with the drive" towards the sun. In other words, she has fully connected with the force that runs through the natural world (represented by the horse) and has taken on its power. Now *she* rides onwards, rather than attempting to keep up with the horse.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "dark"
- **Line 5:** "one"
- **Line 6:** "heels"
- **Line 10:** "eye"
- **Line 11:** "dark"
- **Line 18:** "heels"
- **Line 21:** "Dead," "dead"
- **Line 29:** "one"
- **Line 31:** "Eye"

VOCABULARY

Stasis (Line 1) - Stillness, unchangingness.

Substanceless (Lines 2-3) - Intangible or immaterial; not solid.

Tor (Line 3) - A colloquial British word for a craggy hill or peak.

Furrow (Lines 6-7) - A long groove in the earth—especially a ridge in a ploughed field.

Nigger-eye (Lines 10-12) - Dark in appearance; the berries are the same color as a Black person's eyes. Plath's use of a racist slur here betrays her own biases as a white woman.

Godiva (Lines 19-20) - Lady Godiva, a famous medieval noblewoman, wife of the Earl of Mercia. As legend has it, she rode naked on horseback through Coventry in order to force her husband to lift his oppressive taxes.

Unpeel (Lines 19-20) - Take off an outer layer or covering.

Stringencies (Line 21) - Oppressive restrictions.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Ariel" is a free verse poem, meaning that it doesn't use any specific rhyme scheme or meter. The poem's wild shape reflects the speaker's experience. The flow of her ideas here seems to be governed by impulse and creativity, rather than logic or reason (even if both kinds of force might actually have been involved in Plath's writing!).

The poem starts out with a series of ten tercets—stanzas containing three lines each. These three-line stanzas ground the poem a little, providing some relief from its unpredictability. However, this pattern breaks in the final stanza, which uses only one line.

This sudden change from the established form calls attention to the poem's conclusion—a conclusion that suggests both a gloriously violent ending and a new beginning. The final short, shocking stanza mirrors the speaker's own experience: it's as if she's shed so many burdens that she's almost evaporating into the sun, the brilliant, dangerous "cauldron of morning."

METER

This poem is written in free verse, which means it doesn't use a consistent meter. Instead, the poem's rhythms are constantly changing. Uneven line lengths and a combination of end-stopped and enjambed lines vary the poem's rhythm, mirroring the speaker's ever-evolving transformation as she goes for a wild early-morning horseback ride.

Overall, short lines and connective punctuation (like commas and dashes) make this poem feel fast-paced and energetic. The poem's speedy rhythms present the reader with a rapid, almost overwhelming stream of images and events. It's as if the audience can't catch up with the speaker any more than the speaker can "catch" the "neck" of the horse she rides. The poem's strange, impressionistic rhythms reflect the wild energy of the speaker's ride, and help readers to feel the speaker's joyful, dangerous abandon.

RHYME SCHEME

While "Ariel" doesn't follow a rigid rhyme scheme, it uses plenty of rhyme! True rhymes, slant rhymes, and internal rhymes weave through the poem, making surprising connections across stanzas and reflecting the speaker's transformation.

For instance, look at the way rhymes and slant rhymes move through lines 14-18:

> Black sweet blood mouthfuls,
> Shadows.
> Something else
> Hauls me through *air*—
> Thighs, *hair*;
> Flakes from my heels.

Here, a perfect rhyme connects the "air" and the speaker's "hair," reflecting her sense that she's becoming one with the world around her. Meanwhile, a slant rhyme between "else" and "heels" creates a feeling of connection across differences. These sounds gesture at the strange transformation the speaker undergoes as she gets caught up in the "drive" of her ride; here, she's about to shake off the restrictions of her daily life, and her rhymes reflect her in-between state.

Back in line 3, the internal rhyme of "Pour of tor and distances" evokes the unified sweep of the landscape that the speaker will eventually merge with. Here, "pour" and "tor" make surprising bedfellows: "pour" is a liquid word to hitch to the stony, craggy "tor"! But the rocky, hilly landscape will indeed become a kind of liquid as the poem goes on, a substance that the speaker can immerse herself in and become one with.

Overall, then, patterns of rhyme and near-rhyme evoke the poem's biggest feeling: an exhilarating, dangerous oneness with nature.

SPEAKER

The speaker of this poem uses a first-person point of view, allowing the audience to see her horseback ride through her eyes.

When the ride begins, the speaker seems awestruck, enraptured with the strength and power of both the horse and the landscape. Her experience of the ride gradually becomes less sensory and more spiritual as the energy that courses through the natural world takes hold in her. The speaker undergoes a transformation that leaves her feeling liberated and empowered.

The speaker doesn't reveal much biographical information about herself, and never explicitly states her gender. However, her comparison of herself to "Godiva" (the legendary medieval woman who famously rode naked through town to protest her

husband's unfair tax policy), and her sense that the horse she bonds so closely with is a "lioness" and a "sister," hint that she's a woman. What's more, Sylvia Plath herself had a horse named Ariel, and was known for writing radically autobiographical poetry. For all these reasons, we're referring to the speaker as "her" in this guide.

If this speaker is indeed a woman, the horse ride might be taken as a metaphor for the freedom, power, and risk that come with casting off the burden of sexist gender roles. Still, since the speaker is never truly gendered here, it might be fair to say that gender itself is one of the "dead stringencies" she casts off over the transformative course of her ride.

SETTING

References to a "tor" (a colloquial British word for a hill or rocky outcropping) and to the "furrow" of ploughed farmlands suggest that this poem takes place in the British countryside.

At the beginning of the poem, it's so early in the morning that it's still dark out, and the speaker is overwhelmed by her surroundings, describing a torrential "Pour of tor and distances." But as she rides out on horseback, she begins to ground herself in the natural world, bonding with the horse she rides and eating "Black sweet blood mouthfuls" of wild blackberries. At last, the speaker even *becomes* the landscape, proclaiming "And now I / Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas." The landscape's grand beauty transforms the speaker, liberating and empowering her. At the end of the poem, she's even ready to fly into the sun.

As the speaker rides through this wild, beautiful landscape, she becomes almost one with it, emphasizing the transcendent and transformative power of the natural world.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

The American poet Sylvia Plath wrote "Ariel" in the fall of 1962, and published it in a collection of the same name. She died in February 1963, shortly after completing the *Ariel* manuscript. This collection, with its themes of liberation, gender, death, and rebirth, would make Plath famous after her death. But its legacy has gotten entangled with Plath's personal struggles, including her mental illness and the breakdown of her marriage to fellow poet Ted Hughes.

The poems Plath wrote for *Ariel* echo her earlier work in their thematic concerns, natural imagery, and use of black/white symbolism. For instance, "Ariel" echoes a lot of imagery from Plath's 1960 poem "Blackberrying." And Plath's famous novel, *The Bell Jar*, is a clear precursor of this poem's feminist themes.

Immersed in literature since her childhood, Plath had many poetic influences. However, her longtime affinity for Shakespeare's *The Tempest*—and especially the character of Ariel, the imprisoned air-spirit—has the most obvious and prominent influence here. Plath returned to *The Tempest* for inspiration many times over the course of her career; for instance, her poem "Full Fathom Five" quotes the play. Some of her other major influences were Dylan Thomas ("Fern Hill"), William Blake ("The Garden of Love"), and Robert Lowell ("Waking in the Blue").

Since her death, Plath has become one of the most beloved, respected, and influential poets of the 20th century.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Ariel" was written during the early 1960s, a period characterized by change and instability. In fact, the Cuban Missile Crisis was taking place while "Ariel" was written, and the fear and volatility of that near-disaster resonates with this poem's images of destruction. Those images might also speak to Plath's personal struggles. The poem was written on Plath's final birthday, her 30th. Struggling with a painful marriage and long-term depression, she would commit suicide that same year.

"Ariel" also reflects the feminist movement of the 1960s. In these years, Second Wave Feminism was beginning to crystallize as women reacted against an oppressive return to traditional family values in the post-WWII 1950s. Plath's reference to Lady Godiva, who stands up for her beliefs against her husband's wishes, captures the growing feminist spirit of the time.

However, the poem's themes of liberation and empowerment are at odds with Plath's use of a racist slur in this poem. The Civil Rights movement was well underway when "Ariel" was written, and Plath was very politically engaged. However, her poetry frequently featured racist and anti-Semitic tropes and fetishization. Her shortsightedness reflects a wider white blindness to Black realities in the 1960s.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Life and Legend of Lady Godiva — Learn more about Lady Godiva, whose mythology "Ariel" references. (http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/anglo_saxons/godiva_01.shtml)
- Sylvia Plath Reads "Ariel" — Listen to the author read the poem aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w_iu-uT67aE&ab_channel=TudorCiurea)
- The Life (and Afterlives) of Sylvia Plath — Read a detailed overview of the Plath's life, including a discussion of her career and legacy. (https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/

10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-37855)

- Plath's Manuscript — Take a look at Plath's manuscript of "Ariel," which she gave to her friend and editor Al Alvarez. (https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/sylvia-plaths-ariel-dedicated-to-al-alvarez)
- Plath On Air — Listen to a 1962 interview with the author from the British Council. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g2IMsVpRh5c&ab_channel=nagusd)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER SYLVIA PLATH POEMS

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

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