Edge

SUMMARY

The woman has reached a state of perfection (death). Her corpse is smiling as if proud of its achievement.

Her flowing robe makes her look as if she was fated to die, like a character in Greek tragedy.

Her naked feet look as though they're glad their long journey is finished.

Two dead children are curled up like white snakes at her breasts, whose milk has now dried up.

She's absorbed her children back into herself, the way a rose folds up its petals when a garden grows stiff with cold, and lovely scents emerge from deep within the flowers at night.

The moon has no reason to grieve as she looks down like a face covered in bone.

She's seen this kind of event many times. She drags the darkness like a crackling fabric.

THEMES

DEATH AND SUICIDE

"Edge" is the last known poem written by Sylvia Plath before she took her own life at age 30. It depicts an eerie scene in which a dead woman lies with a dead child at each breast. Though the woman resembles a character from ancient Greek tragedy, the poem portrays her apparent suicide as a choice, a relief, and even (to her) an "accomplishment." At the same time, however, it leaves the children's deaths disturbingly ambiguous and hints at other possible factors in the woman's act, such as exhaustion and the world's indifference. Overall, the poem treats suicide as commonplace and perhaps even natural, but at the same time chillingly mysterious. Outwardly serene but subtly conflicted, it illustrates the kind of dark experiences, impulses, and circumstances that might drive someone over the "Edge."

The poem depicts a scene with three dead bodies, yet initially frames it as a scene of serenity and relief. The speaker claims (or the woman herself believes) that she "is perfected" in the act of dying. She "wears the smile of accomplishment," as if proud to have reached the end. The word "accomplishment" also hints that she may have killed herself and/or her children deliberately. Her "bare / Feet seem to be saying: / We have come so far, it is over," suggesting that what's "over" is a long and difficult journey. This journey might be literal or metaphorical; it could be life itself, or a series of challenges preceding death. Regardless, her body seems physically relieved to be done with its trials.

The poem also frames the children's deaths, to some degree, in serene and gentle terms. The speaker claims that the woman "has folded / Them back into her body as petals / Of a rose close" at night or in cold weather. This language makes the gesture sound protective and natural; if the woman has killed her children, it's implied that she may have done so out of some protective maternal instinct.

The speaker's description takes on increasingly disturbing overtones, however, suggesting that some deep conflict or suffering caused these deaths. The speaker claims that "The illusion of a Greek necessity / Flows in the scrolls of her toga," for example, seemingly linking the woman to ancient Greek tragedies involving death and fate (e.g., deaths caused by the gods). She also describes "Each dead child" as "coiled" like "a white serpent" at its mother's breast. This allusion to Shakespeare's Cleopatra (who kills herself with a venomous snake that bites her breast) hints that the woman may have felt deeply conflicted by motherhood, or even that motherhood may have partly caused her death. The woman's breasts are described as "empty" because she has died, but this image also suggests that she may have had nothing left to give *before* death. In other words, she might have been ill or exhausted.

The poem's image of a moon coldly looking on further hints that the world's indifference may have partly spurred the woman's suicide. The poem ends with a morbid observation: "[The moon's] blacks crackle and drag." Symbolically, this may suggest that the woman died in a psychological atmosphere of morbid depression. (Note that ancient cultures traditionally associated the moon with "lunacy," or severe mental health issues.)

Thus, while the speaker denies that there is anything "sad about" the scene, the reader is invited to feel differently. What may look commonplace to the moon (nature) seems to be a tragedy from a human standpoint, even if the woman felt some relief or "accomplishment" at the end.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20

THE TRIALS OF WOMANHOOD AND MOTHERHOOD

"Edge" claims that the dead woman "is perfected," ironically highlighting the standards of a male-dominated world that finds all *living* women flawed in some way. The poem also seems to allude to classical and Shakespearean heroines who killed themselves or their children. Indirectly, then, the poem

comments on womanhood and motherhood, portraying them as sources of intense pressure and conflict. Even the feminized "moon," or nature, is thoroughly "used to" tragedy. Though the poem gestures toward redeeming aspects such as maternal love, it depicts the basic experience of motherhood and femininity as exhaustingly, if not fatally, difficult.

The description of the "perfected" woman, who seems to have "accomplished" suicide, reflects the extraordinary challenges of being a *living* woman or mother. The claim that "The woman is perfected" seems to critique the misogynistic idea that the only perfect woman is a dead woman. It might also advance the feminist idea that women are held to impossible, punishing standards—standards that they can literally die trying to fulfill.

The use of "perfected" rather than "perfect" also implicitly compares the woman to a work of art, a beautiful object, or something else acted *upon*. She may have perfected *herself* (had some agency) before dying, but she may also have been affected by forces beyond her control. By extension, the poem may be suggesting that women in general struggle to gain agency and are often treated as objects in a society stacked against them.

Indeed, the poem implies that the dead woman experienced an intense personal ordeal. The speaker mentions "The illusion of a Greek necessity," invoking the kind of unavoidable, tragic fate often depicted in ancient Greek myth and drama. Some critics read the poem as specifically alluding to the Greek myth of Medea, a scorned woman who kills her two children as revenge for her husband's unfaithfulness. The Medea allusion would imply that the woman in the poem was angry, hurt, etc.—as Plath famously was when her husband, Ted Hughes, left her and their two kids for another woman. (Some biographers read the poem as implying that Plath contemplated killing her own children, though Plath in fact took pains to ensure their survival.)

The poem also alludes to Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, whose tragic heroine kills herself by applying a poisonous snake (which she calls "my baby") to her breast. Since Cleopatra commits suicide under duress, it's implied that the woman in Plath's poem was also facing severe pressures, perhaps due to motherhood. (Again, Plath herself faced such pressures as a newly single mother, including major mental health struggles.)

Literary and biographical echoes aside, the poem's basic narrative points to a terrible family crisis. A mother and her two kids have all died together following some ordeal that's finally "over."

The poem closes by suggesting that such tragedies are all too common, especially for women. It compares the mother and her children to a rose (a traditional feminine symbol) folding up when a "garden / Stiffens," presumably due to the cold of night or winter. In other words, it seems to depict female suffering as part of the natural order of things. The poem also portrays the moon—a symbol of femininity and/or nature itself—as a female figure watching the death scene without surprise or emotion. The speaker insists that "The moon has nothing to be sad about," and that "She is used to this sort of thing." From the perspective of feminized nature, or the larger universe, the pain and death of human women is too commonplace to grieve over.

"Edge" has prompted much speculation about its relationship to Plath's own death; some critics have even treated it as a suicide note. However, it's not a literal depiction of her personal actions, and its complex images and references make it a far-reaching depiction of female suffering in a hostile world.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

The woman is ...
... smile of accomplishment,

"Edge" begins with a simple yet cryptic statement: "The woman is perfected." The next two lines add a little more context: the woman is "dead," and "smil[ing]" as if her death is an "accomplishment." The poem seems to be equating perfection with death, at least in her case. But why? And who or what has "perfected" her—that is, killed her?

Her "smile of accomplishment" hints that she was responsible for her own death: in other words, she died by suicide. (Because "Edge" was the last poem Sylvia Plath wrote before her own suicide, this is the most common interpretation of the line. The woman is often assumed to be a reflection of the poet, although not all critics agree, since she is also a dramatic character, complete with "toga.")

She seems relieved or fulfilled now that she has "accomplish[ed]" death, which she may have seen as a way of "perfect[ing]" herself. It's unclear, however, whether the equation of death and perfection is hers, the speaker's, or both. The line might be loaded with grim irony; for example, it might be critiquing a world that holds women to impossible standards, and so drives some women to eliminate their supposed flaws by destroying themselves. (The poem has often received this kind of feminist reading.)

"Edge" is written in free verse, but this opening couplet contains a light rhyme on "perfected" and "dead," reinforcing the supposed link between death and perfection. The stark enjambment after "dead" not only creates this rhyme but places extra emphasis on the word, as if to stress the finality of death.

LINES 4-5

The illusion of ...
... of her toga,

Lines 4-5 pack metaphor and allusion into one dense, complex image. Describing the dead woman, the speaker states:

> The illusion of a Greek necessity
> Flows in the scrolls of her toga,

It seems that the woman is literally wearing a toga, unless this is a fancy way of describing a more modern-style robe. Togas are flowing, robe-like garments historically associated with ancient Rome. Similar-looking wraps and robes, such as the himation and chlamys, were common in ancient Greece. In the popular imagination, these different garments are often conflated and generically referred to as "togas." Thus, the speaker here is saying that the dead woman is dressed like a figure from ancient Greece.

More specifically, the speaker is comparing her to a tragic figure from ancient Greek myth or drama. Characters in these tragedies often died untimely deaths due to the will of the gods. The woman's "Flow[ing]" toga, then, makes her look as though she's suffered a tragic fate—died out of "Greek necessity," as if swept up in a *flow* of events she can't control.

But wait! The toga creates only the "illusion of a Greek necessity": in other words, she may actually have died by choice. The statement is ambiguous and raises questions about the reasons for her apparent suicide—or suicide in general. Did this death have to happen? Did she want it to happen? Does anyone ever truly want to die, or are all suicides victims of their circumstances?

The "scrolls" of the toga refer to the loops and rolls of the flowing garment. This image also invokes the kind of parchment "scrolls" that older cultures used to write on. In other words, it further links the woman in the poem with literature, including myths and plays. If the woman is meant to represent Plath (as many readers have assumed), the image might also hint at her vocation as a writer.

LINES 6-8

Her bare ...
... it is over.

Lines 6-8 focus on, and personify, the dead woman's feet, which are apparently protruding from her "toga." According to the speaker, "Her bare // Feet seem to be saying: / We have come so far, it is over."

This imaginative description might suggest that her feet look worn, as if they'd walked a long way. Or perhaps the image of a dead person's bare feet simply brings to mind the journey of life, which has now come to an end. Either way, the image implies that this particular woman has had a hard journey. She has "come so far," and now "it"—her life, and whatever ordeal she faced—is finally "over."

Notice that the speaker uses the pronoun "We" here instead of "I." This is the first, subtle introduction of the other characters in the poem: the woman's two children. As later lines indicate, they've been with her on her journey (whether literal, metaphorical, or both) and are now dead as well. The struggle of life "is over" for all three of them, though it's never made clear what exactly that struggle was or why it has ended this way.

Enjambment leaves "bare" hanging at the end of a stanza, making the word itself look a bit isolated and vulnerable, like the woman herself. Assonance ("Feet seem") and sibilance ("seem"/"saying") add a gentle musicality to this peaceful, yet haunting image.

LINES 9-11

Each dead child ...
... milk, now empty.

Lines 9-11 mark the first explicit introduction of the woman's children (though the word "We" in line 8 hinted at their presence). The speaker describes them with a striking mix of metaphor and allusion:

> Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,
> One at each little
> Pitcher of milk, now empty.

The two young children are compared to "white serpent[s]," or white snakes, because they are pale in death and curled up ("coiled") at their mother's breasts. Her breasts themselves are compared to "little / Pitcher[s] of milk, now empty," referring to the fact that she had once nursed her children. Her breast milk has now dried up, either because she is dead or because she had stopped lactating before death. (She may have been ill in some way, or she may have already weaned her kids; in other words, they might no longer be infants.)

Metaphorically, the image suggests that she has nothing left to give her children: she is exhausted and done with motherhood. It might even imply that she's responsible for their deaths in some way—that she was no longer willing or able to sustain them and so cut their lives short.

But there's enormous ambiguity here, for two reasons:

- It's never fully clear how or why the mother *or* her children died. There are hints that the mother has committed suicide, but whether she also deliberately killed her kids, or whether they died due to her inability to nourish them (or from some other cause), is uncertain.
- The "serpent" image *also* suggests that the children killed *her* in some way—that the pressures of

> motherhood drained her and drove her over the "Edge" into death. Again, the situation is never spelled out, but some sort of intense family conflict is implied.

Additionally, these lines allude to at least one, and possibly two, famous tragic plays. The serpent image alludes to William Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* (c. 1607), in which the heartbroken heroine, Cleopatra, kills herself to avoid humiliation at the hands of a conquering army. She does this by allowing a poisonous snake—which she compares to a nursing baby—to bite her breast.

Many critics argue that Plath is also alluding to Euripides's *Medea* (c. 431 BCE), an ancient Greek tragedy. The title character of *Medea* takes revenge on her husband, who has deserted her, by killing their two children (and his new wife). Because Plath's own husband left her for another woman and left her to raise their two young children more or less alone, critics have argued that she was dramatizing her own circumstances in "Edge," her last poem before her suicide.

This biographical interpretation is impossible to verify, and Plath's actual family narrative differs from that of the family in "Edge." (She did not harm her children, and they lived to adulthood.) Clearly, however, the allusions cast the poem's characters as tragic figures who have died in a dramatic ordeal.

LINES 12-16

She has folded ...
... the night flower.

Lines 12-16 present an extended simile. The speaker compares the dead mother, hugging her dead children close, to a flower closing.

This image suggests a kind of maternal protectiveness, even in death. The mother has gathered her children to her like a "rose"—a traditional feminine symbol—defensively folding up its petals. (A "garden" might "Stiffen[]" during colder "night[time]" or winter weather, which causes some flowers to close their petals as a survival strategy. Flowers that don't survive the cold can close up permanently.)

Yet the image also depicts a strange reversal of motherhood: the children came out of the mother's body, and now she has metaphorically "folded / Them back into her body." Again, some critics have suggested the mother has killed her own children—taken them out of the world she brought them into. The word "bleed" (an unusual verb to attach to "odors") might hint at some underlying violence in the scene.

Notice that these lines are highly lyrical, full of alliteration ("back"/"body"), assonance ("bleed"/"sweet"/"deep," "odors"/"throat"), and internal rhyme ("rose close"). This lovely musicality matches the "sweet[ness]" of the garden being described, and makes the troubling image of the mother and kids seem sweeter as well.

In fact, the simile makes this triple death scene—which might normally be horrifying—sound like part of a natural and even beautiful process. But the rosy description of something awful might itself be intended to disturb the reader.

LINES 17-20

The moon has ...
... crackle and drag.

Lines 17-20 shift to a description of "The moon," imagined as an anthropomorphic figure "Staring" down from above. In the process, the poem seems to adopt a broader, cosmic perspective. The moon seems to represent nature, or the universe, calmly observing human tragedy:

> The moon has nothing to be sad about,
> Staring from her hood of bone.
> She is used to this sort of thing.
> Her blacks crackle and drag.

As a witness to everything on earth, the poem implies, the moon understands how common human tragedies are. ("She is used to this sort of thing.") As a feminine symbol—here referred to by female pronouns—the moon might also understand the kind of suffering that commonly afflicts women in particular. (For example, suffering related to motherhood.) But just because the moon, according to the speaker, "has nothing to be sad about" doesn't mean the reader has to agree! The stoicism of these lines ironically highlights how tragic the deaths really are. The moon can look down coldly at a dead mother and children, but most human beings can't be so detached.

In fact, this moon seems to be an eerie, Gothic sort of character. The speaker describes her as a face peering out from a "hood of bone" (i.e., a bare, white crescent). She seems to "drag" the nighttime "black[ness]" along with her like some sort of "crackl[ing]" fabric. All in all, she resembles a frightening witch or even an avatar of death itself. After the "sweet[ly]" musical lines about roses and gardens, the poem ends with abrasive /k/ consonance ("blacks crackle") and short /a/ assonance ("blacks crackle"/"drag"). It's an intentional "drag" of an ending—a downbeat conclusion to a death-haunted poem.

SYMBOLS

THE MOON

The moon is a complex symbol in "Edge" and in Sylvia Plath's poetry more generally. It's traditionally a symbol of femininity and motherhood, both of which are important themes in this poem about a mother who's died along with—or killed—her children. It also often appears as a

symbol of both fertility (because it follows a monthly cycle, like female fertility) and barrenness or childlessness (because it's a barren rock); Plath used it as a symbol of the latter in her poems "Childless Woman" and "The Munich Mannequins," both written weeks or months before "Edge."

The moon here is also a symbol of nature or the wider universe, which seems to be watching the human tragedy with jaded detachment:

> The moon has nothing to be sad about,
> Staring from her hood of bone.
> She is used to this sort of thing.
> Her blacks crackle and drag.

Notice that the moon is specifically feminized as "She." Her "hood of bone" and "blacks" that "crackle of drag" suggest a caped, Gothic figure—something like a witch dragging the "cape" of the night sky behind her. So this moon also seems associated with darkness, death (skeletal "bone"), and perhaps the psychological "drag" of melancholy or despair.

Similar associations also occur in an earlier Plath poem, "The Moon and the Yew Tree," which "Edge" seems to echo:

> The moon is no door. It is a face in its own right,
> White as a knuckle and terribly upset.
> It drags the sea after it like a dark crime; it is quiet
> With the O-gape of complete despair. I live here. [...]
> The moon is my mother. She is not sweet like Mary.
> Her blue garments unloose small bats and owls.
> How I would like to believe in tenderness [...]

Here, too, the moon is a staring face, "drag[ging]" darkness along with it. It's linked with motherhood; in fact, this speaker claims, "The moon is my mother." Yet it represents a universe, or natural world, that's not traditionally maternal and "tender[]" but instead cold, ominous, and indifferent. The moon in "Edge" is so similar that it may be a deliberately callback to the earlier poem.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 17-20:** "The moon has nothing to be sad about, / Staring from her hood of bone. / She is used to this sort of thing. / Her blacks crackle and drag."

POETIC DEVICES

METAPHOR

Sylvia Plath was a master of metaphor (in fact, she wrote a well-known poem called "Metaphors"), and "Edge" displays her flair for intense figurative language. Lines 4-5, for example, combine metaphor and allusion in a dense, complex statement:

> The illusion of a Greek necessity
> Flows in the scrolls of her toga,

The "toga" the woman is wearing appears to be literal (though it could be a fancy description of a more modern type of robe). A toga is a loose, flowing garment that was commonly worn in ancient Greece and Rome. Here, its loops and folds are compared to "scrolls" (rolled or spiral shapes), a word that invokes the old-fashioned parchment scrolls that were once used as writing paper. (If this woman is supposed to be a version of Plath, this word might point toward her vocation as a writer.) The woman's "Flow[ing]" toga makes her look like a tragic heroine from ancient "Greek" drama, in which fate, or "necessity," often dictated characters' deaths.

Lines 9-10 compare the children at the woman's breasts to "serpents," because of the way they're curled up, or "coiled" (and also as an allusion to Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, whose heroine holds a snake to her breast to kill herself). Her breasts are compared to "little / Pitchers of milk, now empty," meaning that she was nursing her children, but her milk has dried up now that she and they have died.

Notice that these metaphors seem to clash slightly, because snakes aren't mammals and don't nurse! But Plath often squashed unlikely metaphors and images together for the sake of dreamlike intensity. Notice how the image immediately changes again in the simile spanning lines 12-16: suddenly, the "serpent[s]" are petals of a rose, which is closing up in the nighttime.

Two more figurative phrases appear in the final lines, as part of an anthropomorphic description of the moon. The speaker imagines this moon as a woman looking out from beneath a "hood of bone": a metaphorical description of a bone-white lunar crescent. "Her blacks crackle and drag" seems to compare the night sky to a crackling cape, or similar garment, that the moon is dragging in her wake.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "Her dead / Body wears the smile of accomplishment,"
- **Lines 4-5:** "The illusion of a Greek necessity / Flows in the scrolls of her toga,"
- **Lines 9-11:** "Each dead child coiled, a white serpent, / One at each little / Pitcher of milk, now empty."
- **Lines 12-13:** "She has folded / Them back into her body"
- **Lines 18-20:** "Staring from her hood of bone. / She is used to this sort of thing. / Her blacks crackle and drag."

ASSONANCE

The poem is full of assonance and internal rhyme, which add a

rich musicality to its free verse. Listen to the long /oh/ sounds in line 5, for example:

> Flows in the scrolls of her toga,

The vowels themselves seem to flow rhythmically through the line (which has a dactylic beat: "Flows in the scrolls of her toga").

The /oh/ and /ee/ vowels in lines 14-16 are especially prominent:

> [...] Of a rose close when the garden
> Stiffens and odors bleed
> From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower.

These lush, sweet sounds (including the internal rhyme of "rose close") evoke the "sweet[ness]" of the flowers in the simile. The combination of sonic and imagistic beauty offers a moment of pleasure amid the somberness of "Edge"—as if the poet, in her final poem, is showing off her musical gifts one last time.

The poem ends on a more cacophonous note, however. The closing line combines short /a/ assonance with /r/ and /k/ consonance to create a heavy, abrasive sound:

> Her blacks crackle and drag.

The syllables themselves seem to "crackle" harshly and "drag" sadly along. These unpleasant sounds match the eerie image of a moon dragging blackness in its wake.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "perfected"
- **Line 2:** "dead"
- **Line 5:** "Flows," "scrolls," "toga"
- **Line 7:** "Feet seem," "be"
- **Line 10:** "little"
- **Line 11:** "Pitcher," "milk"
- **Line 14:** "rose close"
- **Line 15:** "odors," "bleed"
- **Line 16:** "sweet," "deep," "throats"
- **Line 20:** "blacks crackle," "drag"

PERSONIFICATION

The poem's descriptions of the woman's bare feet and the moon "Staring" above her use personification and anthropomorphism. In lines 6-8, the feet are described as if they could talk:

> Her bare
> Feet seem to be saying:
> We have come so far, it is over.

Of course, the speaker isn't literally attributing this sentiment to the feet. This is a commentary on how the dead woman looks: exhausted, relieved, etc. It involves synecdoche, in that her worn-looking feet stand in for her exhausted body as a whole.

Later, in lines 17-20, the moon is fully anthropomorphized—that is, described as a human-like character in "her" own right:

> The moon has nothing to be sad about,
> Staring from her hood of bone.
> She is used to this sort of thing.
> Her blacks crackle and drag.

Through this device, the speaker (somewhat paradoxically) puts a human face on the world's indifference to human suffering. By envisioning the moon—a symbol of nature or the universe—as a sort of witchy character observing the corpses with jaded detachment, the poem suggests that human tragedies are small and commonplace in the cosmic scheme of things. At the same time, the tone here may be bitterly ironic: that is, the poet may think these deaths *are* "sad" and *do* merit the kind of grief nature won't show.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-8:** "Her bare / Feet seem to be saying: / We have come so far, it is over."
- **Lines 17-20:** "The moon has nothing to be sad about, / Staring from her hood of bone. / She is used to this sort of thing. / Her blacks crackle and drag."

ENJAMBMENT

The majority of the poem's lines are enjambed. Combined with the poem's calm tone, this effect makes the lines seem to flow gently from one into the next. Take lines 4 and 5, for example, in which the enjambment actually emphasizes the word "Flows":

> The illusion of a Greek necessity
> Flows in the scrolls of her toga,

Notice that this enjambment links not only two lines but two stanzas. (The same is true of all but one enjambment in the poem.) Again, the effect is of a slow and gentle flow from one couplet to the next. This particular enjambment also emphasizes the word "necessity," which falls just before the line break. This is an important word in the poem, as it raises the question of whether fate (necessity) or choice caused the woman's death.

Enjambment highlights other significant words, too. In lines 1-2, for example, it breaks up the phrase "dead / Body," emphasizing the finality of death and drawing attention to the

light rhyme between "perfected" and "dead" in the first couplet. In line 15, enjambment stresses "bleed" (which falls just before the line break), hinting at an undercurrent of violence in the poem's ambiguous scenario.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "dead / Body"
- **Lines 4-5:** "necessity / Flows"
- **Lines 6-7:** "bare / Feet"
- **Lines 10-11:** "little / Pitcher"
- **Lines 12-13:** "folded / Them"
- **Lines 13-14:** "petals / Of"
- **Lines 14-15:** "garden / Stiffens"
- **Lines 15-16:** "bleed / From"

ALLUSION

"Edge" includes allusions to ancient Greek tragedy and Shakespearean tragedy. These highlight the dramatic, somber nature of the scene the poem describes. The plays in question involve untimely deaths linked to familial or romantic conflicts, hinting at the backstory behind the ambiguous deaths in "Edge."

The clearest allusion is to William Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* (c. 1607). The tragic heroine of this play, the Egyptian queen Cleopatra, commits suicide by allowing an asp (venomous snake) to bite her breast. She does so because her lover, Marc Antony, has died and because she is about to be captured and publicly humiliated by the conquering Roman army. Basically, she kills herself out of grief and a desire to avoid humiliation. Lines 9-11 of "Edge" allude to her death by "serpent":

> Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,
> One at each little
> Pitcher of milk, now empty.

Many critics have also read the two "dead child[ren]," along with the "illusion of a Greek necessity" (line 4), as an allusion to the Greek myth of Medea, particularly the version portrayed in Euripides's play *Medea* (431 BCE). In the play, Medea feels scorned and enraged after her husband, Jason, leaves her for another woman. As revenge, she kills their two children as well as Jason's new wife. The chorus declares that the tragedy was the will of the gods (hence a "necessity").

These literary references, then, suggest that the dead woman in the poem is similar to Cleopatra and Medea: she is humiliated, abandoned, etc., yet determined to die with tragic grandeur. Most critics have assumed that this scenario is meant to reflect Plath's own circumstances at the time of her death. Her husband, the poet Ted Hughes, had deserted her for another woman, leaving her to care for their two young children as a single mother. These events triggered (or at least worsened) a mental health crisis that culminated in her suicide.

Finally, the poem's lunar imagery (lines 17-20) seems to call back to earlier Sylvia Plath poems, including "The Moon and the Yew Tree," "Childless Woman," and "The Munich Mannequins." (See the Symbols and Context sections for more.)

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "The illusion of a Greek necessity / Flows in the scrolls of her toga,"
- **Lines 9-11:** "Each dead child coiled, a white serpent, / One at each little / Pitcher of milk, now empty."
- **Lines 17-20:** "The moon has nothing to be sad about, / Staring from her hood of bone. / She is used to this sort of thing. / Her blacks crackle and drag."

VOCABULARY

Perfected (Line 1) - Brought to a state of perfection; made free from flaws. (An archaic definition of "perfected" is "completed.")

Greek necessity (Line 4) - An allusion to ancient Greek myths and tragedies involving misfortunes dictated by fate or the gods.

Toga (Line 5) - A loose, flowing garment popularly associated with ancient Greek and Roman cultures.

Scrolls (Line 5) - Spiral shapes; rolls or whorls (here referring to the flowing folds of the toga). "Scrolls" can also refer to rolls of paper for writing on, so they may be meant to link the woman with the poet/writer herself.

Serpent (Line 9) - A snake.

Stiffens (Lines 14-15) - Refers to flowers growing stiff in the cold "night" weather (see line 16). Part of a simile that evokes the stiffening of the body after death (rigor mortis).

Her blacks (Line 20) - An apparent reference to the night sky, which the moon metaphorically "drags" like a "crackl[ing]" black cape.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Edge" consists of 10 non-rhyming couplets. These two-line stanzas vary in their rhythm and syllable count; the poem is written in free verse rather than regular meter.

Most of Plath's final poems (those dated to late 1962 and early 1963) use a similar combination of irregular line lengths and consistent line count per stanza. Some, like "Edge," use couplets (including "The Munich Mannequins" and "Totem," both of which were also written in early 1963). This combination

evokes a mixture of freedom and control, or wildness and moderation. Those qualities, in turn, seem to reflect the psychology of Plath and her various poetic personas.

In "Edge" specifically, the question of free will versus fate ("necessity," line 4) hangs over the poem's dramatic situation. Did this woman deliberately kill herself and/or her children? Was she driven to those actions? The tension between free verse and fixed couplets reflects this ambiguity on the formal level.

METER

"Edge" is a free verse poem, so it has no meter.

Sylvia Plath gravitated toward free (or freer) verse over the course of her career. This is the last poem she wrote in her life, so it reflects the later style she had adopted.

In this context, the free verse might also mirror the easing of tension that has taken place in death. The language still sounds very controlled (for example, by the enjambment that reins in a number of lines), but it seems to have let go of any consistent scheme or rules, much as "The woman" has let go of the demands of life.

RHYME SCHEME

As a free verse poem, "Edge" has no rhyme scheme. It flows simply and organically, without the complications of a strict poetic form, making it a good vehicle for the speaker's calm, matter-of-fact tone. However, it uses plenty of assonance, which adds a more subdued musicality to the lines.

The first couplet does contain something close to a rhyme pair: "perfected"/"dead." True, this is a *light rhyme* (an unstressed syllable rhymed with a stressed one), so it's not as prominent as a normal end rhyme. However, the sound connection draws a subtle, ironic link between death and perfection, as though the two things were one and the same.

SPEAKER

The poem is narrated by a third-person speaker. Though seemingly detached and neutral voice, the speaker injects commentary and interpretation. It's unclear how closely the speaker's perspective reflects that of the woman in the poem, or that of Plath herself.

Take the opening claim that "The woman is perfected," for example. Is this the speaker's judgement, the judgement of the dead woman, or both? Does the poet share this view of death? What about the description of death, or suicide, as an "accomplishment"? These questions don't have definitive answers; in that way, they reflect the unanswerable questions surrounding death and suicide themselves. It may be that the woman considered death a kind of "perfect[ion]" that her flawed, living self could never "accomplish[]." If so, Plath may not agree or want the reader to agree; the poet and/or the speaker may intend the statement ironically.

Later, the speaker's description of the moon seems to project human feelings onto that inanimate celestial object:

> The moon has nothing to be sad about,
> Staring from her hood of bone.
> She is used to this sort of thing.

Once again, it's not clear whether these jaded feelings belong to the speaker, the poet, the woman who's just died, or some combination of the three. It's also unclear whether the reader is meant to share them. Maybe the speaker (or poet) really believes that there's nothing tragic about these individual deaths in the grand scheme of things. Then again, maybe these lines are a bitterly ironic commentary on the universe's indifference toward human suffering. The ambiguity surrounding these questions is part of what gives the poem its haunting power.

SETTING

"Edge" has no clear setting besides the nighttime. The woman and her children may be outside as the "moon" looks on, but even that is not certain. (The moon could be shining through a window, for example.) The "toga" is a garment associated with ancient Rome, but there's not enough evidence to establish that the setting here is meant to be historical. The flower and garden imagery of lines 12-16 ("She has folded [...] night flower.") is figurative, not part of the woman and children's literal environment.

The ambiguity of the setting adds to the mystery and eeriness of the scene. All the reader knows about this place is that it's moonlit, and that three characters are dead in it. Where those three have "come" from, where they are, and why they've died are equally unknowable—just as death itself is ultimately unknowable. In a sense, the poem seems to take place at the "Edge" between life and death, as implied by the title.

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 in the first half of the 20th century.

Like many of the poems in Plath's famous collection *Ariel* (1965), "Edge" can be read as at least partly autobiographical. Unvarnished self-revelation was rare in English-language

poetry at the time, as was poetry dealing frankly with motherhood and femininity. But 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.

"Edge" is thought to be the last poem Plath ever completed. (However, she wrote another poem, "Balloons," on the same day: February 5, 1963. This poem also involves children—more explicitly *her* children—and a sense of finality and defeat.) Some readers, assuming the dead "woman" in the poem is supposed to be Plath, have interpreted "Edge" as a literary suicide note. However, critical opinions differ sharply on this point. Likewise, some readers have interpreted the poem's "dead child[ren]" as a sign that Plath, in the depths of depression, contemplated infanticide. (The first draft of "Edge" contains the crossed-out line, "She is taking them with her.") Again, however, this reading is controversial. Broadly, the poem reflects a sense of finality and resignation at a time when Plath was suffering a mental health crisis.

Plath took her own life in the early hours of February 11, 1963, after taking steps to ensure the safety of her young children, Frieda and Nicholas. Two years later, "Edge" appeared as the final poem in *Ariel*—though this ordering was chosen by her estranged husband, poet Ted Hughes.

The "moon" in "Edge"—a feminine symbol variously associated with motherhood or childlessness, fertility or infertility—resembles those in Plath's poems "The Moon and the Yew Tree," "Childless Woman," and "The Munich Mannequins." In fact, nighttime and dawn imagery pervades many of the *Ariel* poems, as Plath generally wrote them in the early morning, before her children awoke.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Plath had a complicated relationship with motherhood, and her relationship with her own mother was often fraught. All around her, as she grew up, she saw women giving up careers and personal freedoms to become housewives whose lives revolved around their homes and children.

After World War II, this sacrifice was par for the course in American society: while some women were privileged enough to get an education, their male-dominated culture expected them to give up their careers and settle down to raise a family. Plath had dreamed of being a writer from a young age; she had no intention of giving up her own ambitions just to fulfill society's expectations.

But as she got older and fell in love (with fellow poet Ted Hughes), she found herself desiring the very things that represented a lack of freedom to her: marriage and children. Some of her more conflicted poems, like "Morning Song" and "Edge," reflect Plath's ambivalence about traditional motherhood. This emotional complexity caused her work to resonate strongly with second-wave feminists in the 1960s; women during this period saw their own experiences reflected in Plath's honest introspection.

Throughout her adolescence and adulthood, Plath struggled with what is now called bipolar disorder, and she had attempted suicide at least once before taking her life in 1963. The mental health treatments of her era were often crude and dangerous to the patient. Plath's experience with such treatments was so traumatic that she is now believed to have committed suicide in part to avoid commitment to a mental hospital. Her personal ordeal seems to have inspired "Edge," in which a dead woman finds peace after her difficult journey "is over."

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a reading of "Edge." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0URz4DZj678)
- Plath's Final Letters — A portrait of Plath's final years as revealed through her letters. (CW: abuse, suicide.) (https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/new-volume-sylvia-plaths-last-letters-paints-visceral-portrait-her-marriage-final-years-180970671/)
- Plath's Life and Work — Read a biography of the poet at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/sylvia-plath)
- The Confessional Poets — An introduction to the "Confessonal" movement with which critics have often linked Plath's work. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/151109/an-introduction-to-confessional-poetry)
- An Interview with Plath — Listen to a 1962 interview with the poet. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g2lMsVpRh5c)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER SYLVIA PLATH POEMS

- Ariel
- Cut
- Daddy
- Fever 103°
- Kindness
- Lady Lazarus
- Mad Girl's Love Song

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