Sow

SUMMARY

It's a mystery how our neighbor was able to raise such an enormous female pig. Whatever clever trick he used, he concealed it just as he concealed the pig herself—keeping her away from prying eyes and local livestock competitions.

But one evening, in response to our curiosity, he showed us by lantern light around his series of barns, leading us to the sunken door of the pigsty so we could gawk at the sow.

This sow looked nothing like a china piggybank, the kind painted with flowers and with a slot for frugal kids to drop coins into.

Nor did it resemble a stupid, easy-to-mock pig who will soon be slaughtered, cooked golden-brown, and garnished with parsley.

It didn't even resemble one of the normal farmyard sows—muddy, coarse, eating weeds and thistles while nosing around, milky and bloated and on the go, surrounded by a litter of dainty-footed piglets squealing against her body and stopping to nurse at her pink teats.

No, this hulking giant of a pig wallowed on her belly in dark muck, dreaming with her swollen, wrinkly, filmy eyelids shut.

This old great-grandma must have been having a riveting dream about life as a pig in ancient times. Awed, we imagined a knight in helmet and armor, defeated in a tree grove, fallen off his horse and torn to pieces by a bristly male pig—one extraordinary enough for the sow to mate with.

But just then, our neighbor whistled at her and cheerfully punched her barrel-like body in the neck. The sow woke from her dream of the castle-like tree grove, letting it fall away like mud flakes, grunting and heaving herself up in the fiery lantern-light.

Her imposing body was as ravenous as the legendary hog whose appetite made normal pig-slops look like a fast—who, accepting no limits, devoured all the oceans and trembling continents as if eating from a trough.

THEMES

THE POWER OF ANIMALS AND NATURE

The speaker of "Sow" marvels at their neighbor's female pig, an enormous creature wallowing in its pigsty. Over the course of the poem, the speaker "gape[s]" in wonder at the animal's bulk and appetite, reaching for a series of elaborate comparisons in the process. Ultimately, the sow seems to defy all description: even while slowly waking up in its pen, she seems as vast and indomitable as the earth itself. In general, the poem celebrates the glorious power of animals and nature—something it suggests humans can only partly tame, and which leaves us breathlessly searching for adequate language to capture it.

The poem's descriptions stress the pig's tremendous size and power. The speaker repeatedly describes the sow as "great," "vast," "monument[al]," and so on. Her eyes are covered with "Fat," her neck resembles a "barrel," and she's even more impressive than the "common barnyard sows," who are themselves "Bloat[ed]" and "hulk[ing]." She's a creature of huge appetites, too. The speaker compares her to a mythical "hog" who "stomach[s] no constraints" (i.e., whose appetite knows no bounds) and ends up swallowing the entire world.

Indeed, throughout the poem, the sow exceeds human expectations for—and representations of—pigs. She even seems to strain the speaker's capacity for hyperbolic descriptions and comparisons. The speaker emphasizes that this sow looks nothing like a china piggy bank, the kind of "dolt[ish]" pig humans make fun of or eat for dinner, or even her fellow "barnyard sows." She's in a class by herself, comparable only to creatures of legend.

While "marvel[ing]" at her, the speaker imagines the sow relishing a triumphant dream. In this dream scenario, the "Boar" who wins her as a mate must prove himself "fabulous enough" to deserve her. The sow is so exceptional, it seems, that she tests the limits of her male counterparts, even fictional ones. In the end, there seems to be "no constraint" on her power or appetites: she seems capable of dominating the entire world.

There's a wrinkle, however: this pig is in a pen, owned by a farmer who treats her with casual "jocular[ity]" (or humor). Thus, the poem might be read as a warning to humans: even our most domesticated animals hold a savage power we ignore or mock at our own risk. After all, the sow's dream involves a boar (male pig) ripping a human warrior to "shred[s]." Deep down, she sees herself as a proud, ferocious, wild animal, not as docile livestock. Though she wakes into a world where she's held captive, the poem suggests that she has not accepted this "constraint." Humans would be wise to respect, not underestimate, her "monument[al]" might—and the same goes for nature in general.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-45

VISION, IMAGINATION, AND MYTH

The speaker of "Sow" presents the titular animal in grand, hyperbolic, even mythical terms. They emphasize the air of secrecy and mystery that surrounds the pig and liken her to legendary beasts and monsters. They even claim that she stars in fabulous adventures within her own dreams. The speaker's extraordinary descriptions suggest that even something as humble and dirty as a pig can transcend the mundane—and become the stuff of visionary poetry or timeless myth. But because the sow is still, in the end, a barnyard animal, the poem also illustrates how myths require imaginative *humans* to construct them.

The poem initially frames the pig as a kind of local legend. The speaker marvels that only "God knows how" their neighbor "managed to breed" her; she's the product of some "shrewd secret" he's managed to keep from the community. Though he hides his incredible pig from the "public stare," he entertains the speaker's curiosity and allows them to gawk at her. From the start, then, the sow is presented as a fascinating, improbable, and mysterious beast.

The speaker then repeatedly illustrates the sow's spectacular size by comparing her to legendary or mythic creatures. For example, the sow rests within a "Maze of barns": a likely allusion to the Minotaur of Greek myth, a monster who lives at the center of a labyrinth. Later, the speaker calls the sow a "vast / Brobdingnag bulk." This phrase alludes to Jonathan Swift's satire *Gulliver's Travels*, in which the fictional land of Brobdingnag is populated by giants. The speaker also describes the sow as "A monument / Prodigious in gluttonies" (i.e., a gigantic figure of formidable appetite) and compares her to "that hog" who swallowed the seas and continents. This comparison might refer to a boar or pig from ancient myth (there are many!), or one of the speaker's own invention. Regardless, it invokes some sort of fantastical, frightening, larger-than-life creature existing within the bounds of everyday life.

According to the speaker, the sow even dreams of *herself* as a mythic beast. In other words, she's a legend in her own mind—just as she is in the speaker's mind. The speaker declares that the sleeping pig must be "engross[ed]" by a "vision of ancient hoghood": specifically, must be dreaming of a "Boar" who has conquered a human "knight" on her behalf. Even as she sleeps in filth, then, she supposedly imagines herself as the heroine of a "legend." Though this legend dissolves when she awakes, the speaker immediately compares her to an even more "monument[al]" figure. Both in dream and in fact, she's phenomenally impressive, seeming to transcend the filthy "sty" around her.

At the same time, there's a sense in which she's just a pig! Only *human creativity* exalts her into something more. It's clearly the speaker, "marvel[ing]" at the sow, who comes up with the "vision of ancient hoghood." (It's extremely unlikely that a sow's dream would really feature a "knight," for example.) And the speaker's awed attitude contrasts with that of the farmer, who's proud of his "great sow" but "whistle[s]" at her and "thwack[s]" her just as he would any other pig. Ultimately, then, the poem becomes a showcase for the poet's own imagination. Where another observer might simply see a humble, dirty animal, the poet-speaker envisions the pig as the stuff of dreams and nightmares.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-10
- Lines 23-45

FEMALE POWER, SUBJUGATION, AND REVOLT

The pig in "Sow" is a symbol of exceptional female power, the kind Plath often depicted in her poetry. In the speaker's telling, she resembles an earthly goddess or proud matriarch, regally "loung[ing]" in her sty. Yet she's also held captive by a male farmer who treats her, condescendingly, as a mere possession. In addition to marveling at an example of female power, then, the poem also depicts a world that holds such power in check—for a time, anyway. In the end, the sow seems capable of shaking the earth, suggesting that the farmer's control over her—or any limits men place on female independence—may be illusory.

The poem casts the sow as a striking representative of female strength and vitality. The speaker admiringly calls her a "great grandam": a regal, matriarchal figure. She's not flanked by "a litter" of babies or turned into a "crackling" meal—not forced to sacrifice herself to motherhood and others' needs. Nor is she delicate, like a "china" piggybank, or unintelligent, like the "dolt[ish]" pigs humans might "heckl[e]." She's powerful, independent, and has dreams of her own. She's a sexual figure as well: she envisions herself (according to the poet, anyway) as the ultimate catch. Only the most "fabulous" boar is worthy of her when she's in "heat."

Yet the sow's strength and vitality are, for now at least, under male control. The sow is kept by the farmer, a man. She's hidden away, bred as “His,” and gawked at by humans. Her power seems to have been domesticated and locked away. Her confinement isn't pretty, either. She sleeps on a "bed[]" of black muck, and the farmer can "whistle[]" at and "thwack[]" her at any time—not to mention kill her! She has no freedom of movement or control over her body, and her dignity is constantly undermined.

The poem's ending, then, seems to imagine female rebellion against male "constraint." The sow represents a kind of femininity that's unwilling to remain docile and domestic. The

phrase "Prodigious in gluttonies" suggests that the sow is insatiable in pursuing her own appetites; she won't let others restrict them. And her appetites are limitless. She won't be satisfied with "kitchen slops" (perhaps like feminist women who have refused confinement to the "kitchen" or home). However confined she is for now, she has power enough to "swill" the whole globe—to make the world her own. In this way, the sow resembles other Plath heroines (such as the famous "Lady Lazarus") who burst out in revolt against male oppression.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-6
- Lines 11-45

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

God knows how ...
... and pig show.

"Sow" is a poem about just what it sounds like: an adult female pig. Lines 1-6 frame this sow as a formidable and mysterious creature. She belongs to the speaker's "neighbor," a farmer, and is a source of local amazement: "God knows how [he] managed to bread / His great sow," the speaker marvels.

The word "great" here primarily means *large*, but in the context of the poem as a whole, it could refer to a more intangible kind of greatness as well. The plural speaker ("our") doesn't identify themselves, but clearly represents two or more people who live near the farmer. (The poem was inspired by a real-life visit Plath and her husband, fellow writer Ted Hughes, took to a farm in rural England.)

Whatever method the farmer used to breed such a large animal, he keeps it a "shrewd secret." In fact, he won't show either the method *or* the pig to most of his neighbors. He keeps the sow "impounded," or locked away, "from public stare, / Prize ribbon and pig show." That is, he keeps her hidden from curious onlookers and won't enter her in any local livestock competitions (the kind where a pig might win a prize). It seems this animal attracts so much fascination and speculation that she's taken on the quality of a divine mystery: only "God" seems to know the full truth about her.

These opening stanzas establish the poem's form: tercets (three-line stanzas) with occasional rhyme (including slant rhymes, such as "breed"/"hid" and "sow"/"show") but no consistent rhyme scheme or meter. The poem seems a little resistant, in fact, to strict formal rules—like a pig that's not quite happy in its pen.

The lines are densely packed with alliteration ("sow"/"secret"/"same"/"sow"/"stare"; "public"/"Prize"/"pig"), as well as assonance and internal rhyme ("how"/"sow," "same way," "sow"/"impounded," "ribbon"/"pig"). These sound effects give the language a slow, weighty, robust quality that fits the poem's subject.

LINES 7-10

But one dusk ...
... gape at it:

In lines 7-10, the speaker gets a rare opportunity to see the mysterious sow. It's not clear exactly how they manage this; they simply state that one evening, near "dusk," their "questions" about the pig "commended [them] to a tour" of the farm. Somehow, their curious questions—which might have been unusually informed, perceptive, etc.—placed them in the farmer's good graces, as if *commending* them or proving them worthy.

Once the farmer agrees to show them his famous pig, he leads them "Through his lantern-lit / Maze of barns." This curious description suggests that the farmer owns multiple barns arranged in a complex formation. It might also subtly allude to the most famous "Maze" of all time: the Labyrinth where the Minotaur lived, according to Greek mythology. The Minotaur was a man-eating monster with the head and tail of a bull and the body of a man. He was shut up in the center of the Labyrinth of Crete so that he couldn't wreak havoc (though he was sent human sacrifices to devour). If the poem is alluding to this myth, it's implying that the creature at the end of this "Maze" is powerful and dangerous.

The farmer leads the speaker to the "lintel," or top beam, of a pigsty "door" that's partly "sunk" into the earth. (Most likely, the lintel is low enough for them to lean on or peer over.) When the speaker finally sees the sow, they "gape at it" in amazement: apparently, the pig is as terrific as advertised.

LINES 11-16

This was no ...
... a parsley halo;

Lines 11-16 describe, in detail, what the sow *doesn't* look like. This is a way of building anticipation—enhancing the sow's mystery—before the speaker describes what she *does* look like. This description won't arrive until halfway through the poem!

For now, the speaker defines the sow in contrast to other kinds of pigs, both real and artificial. For example, the sow does *not* resemble a porcelain piggybank: a "china suckling" painted with flowers ("rose[s]" and "larkspur[]") and equipped with a "slot" for frugal kids ("thrift children") to drop "penn[ies]" into. In other words, the sow isn't small and cute and dainty like this old-fashioned item.

Nor is the sow stupid and easy for humans to ridicule: a "dolt pig ripe for heckling." Evidently, she looks intelligent and at least somewhat dignified. More importantly, she isn't "About to be"

cooked for dinner—"Glorified for prime flesh and golden crackling" (turned into a prime, crispy, golden cut of pork) and garnished with a "parsley halo." Thanks to her incredible size—and/or intangible "great[ness]"—she's been spared from slaughter and allowed to live to a ripe old age.

Notice how the word "Glorified" and the metaphorical "halo" of parsley have religious connotations. The poem is subtly comparing a slaughtered pig to a *martyr*, a saintlike creature sacrificed for some greater good. Even the word "golden" takes on a virtuous tone here (think of a phrase like *heart of gold*). But in this context, the religious language sounds jesting and ironic—after all, no pig wants to be sacrificed for humans' pleasure!

In fact, the poet seems to imply that the "great sow" has been clever enough to *avoid* this fate, unlike her "dolt[ish]" companions. Against the odds, she has lived for herself rather than giving up her life to serve others' needs. This is the poem's first hint that the sow symbolizes a kind of fierce independence.

LINES 17-23

Nor even one ...
... the pink teats.

Lines 17-23 continue to explain what the sow *isn't* like. The speaker has already established that she isn't delicate, cute, stupid, or doomed for the slaughterhouse. Now, the speaker adds that she isn't like "one of the common barnyard sows," either. For example, she doesn't look "Mire-smirched" (mud-stained) and "blowzy" (coarse, messy, or ruddy). She doesn't go "snout-cruis[ing]"—rooting around in the earth—for unappetizing plants, such as "thistle and knotweed." Presumably, she looks a little cleaner and acts a little more dignified; perhaps the farmer even feeds her a special diet.

The term "blowzy" is most commonly applied to human women, so it's a hint that Plath isn't just characterizing pigs; she's writing symbolically or allegorically about femininity. The speaker pointedly emphasizes—with the help of alliteration, assonance, and consonance—that the great sow isn't nursing a "litter" of babies:

> Bloat tun of milk
> On the move, hedged by a litter of feat-foot ninnies
> Shrilling her hulk
> To halt for a swig at the pink teats.

Look at all those /m/, /h/, /f/, /t/, /k/, and short /i/ sounds! Even in a poem full of lavish sound effects, this passage stands out. It sounds almost over-the-top, perhaps because it's describing a stressful, overwhelming experience. The speaker depicts the pig version of motherhood in very unflattering terms: the mother pig is reduced to a "Bloat tun" (giant container) of "milk," surrounded by babies fighting to nurse (take a "swig") at her "teats." The piglets don't even sound especially cute: they're described as "Shrill[]," mindless "ninnies" crowding around on their little trotters.

Symbolically, all this might translate to an unflattering depiction of motherhood in general. The speaker seems to view nursing and child-rearing as thankless activities, involving a lot of dirt, noise, exhaustion, and self-sacrifice. Like the "golden" pig on the dinner table (lines 14-16), the nursing sows seem mainly to be vessels for others' consumption and pleasure. When addressing their own needs, they're forced to settle for odds and ends—thistles and weeds.

Once again, the "great sow" has avoided this fate. She's sacrificed herself to no one. She may not be entirely free on this farm, but she's gained a measure of independence. It's implied that the speaker admires these qualities, which set her apart from her "common" sisters.

LINES 23-29

No. This vast ...
... The great grandam!—

After seven and a half stanzas of buildup, lines 23-29 finally begin describing the "Sow" herself. She is emphatically not dainty and delicate, or maternal and self-sacrificing, or dead on a dinner plate. (For further emphasis, the speaker adds, "No.") Instead, she's huge and independent and completely at ease. She looks like a sleeping giant, as the speaker suggests through an allusion:

> [...] No. This vast
> Brobdingnag bulk
> Of a sow lounged belly-bedded on that black compost,
> Fat-rutted eyes
> Dream-filmed.

In Jonathan Swift's 18th-century satirical novel *Gulliver's Travels*, the land of Brobdingnag is populated by giant people and animals. That's right: this reference is a hyperbolic way of saying the sow is enormous. Her "vast [...] bulk" is "loung[ing]," asleep, on a bed of "black compost." (There may be an echo here of Walt Whitman's 1855 poem "The Sleepers," which describes "the vast dusk bulk" of a whale.) The sow is lying on her "belly," and her eyes are "Fat-rutted," or covered by swollen, wrinkled lids—which are also "Dream-filmed," or filmy with sleep.

The word "Dream" spurs the speaker to imagine what the sow is dreaming about. The speaker decides that this very old pig—this "great grandam"—must be having a "vision of ancient hoghood." In other words, she must be dreaming of the pig version of olden times! The speaker suggests that this dream completely captivates, or "wholly engross[es]," the sow.

It's significant that the sow has a mind of her own—including dreams of her own. The speaker portrays her as not only more

independent but also more imaginative than the pigs around her. Though she's survived to old age, the speaker senses that she may not be content with her life on the farm; in fact, she may be wistfully imagining another kind of life altogether. (The poet, Plath, might even see the sow as a reflection of her own psyche—after all, poets thrive on "Dream[s]" and "vision[s].")

LINES 29-33

our marvel blazoned ...
... that sow's heat.

Lines 29-33 imagine the dream the sow is having. As the speaker admires the sow, their "marvel" seems to project the dream vision before their eyes, as if "blazon[ing]" it or displaying it clearly. (The archaic word "blazon" relates to antique coats of arms—the kind aristocratic families have—so it fits the "ancient" world the speaker is describing.)

The dream features a medieval "knight," who is "Helmed" (helmeted) and wearing a "cuirass" (a type of old-fashioned body armor). This human knight has just lost a battle in a tree "grove"; he's been "Unhorsed" (knocked off his horse) and "shredded" (torn to bits) by the winner in "combat." And who is the winner? A "gristly-bristled / Boar"—a rough-and-tough male pig! This boar is "fabulous enough" (impressive enough) "to straddle that sow's heat": in his moment of victory, he's proved himself worthy of mating with her.

Notice that this is both a sexual fantasy and a kind of revenge fantasy against humans. The sow (according to the speaker) dreams of a time before wild pigs were domesticated. Back then, they were capable of outmatching humans and shredding them to pieces (as wild boar species still are today!). Deep down, the dream implies, the modern-day sow resents her confinement to a "sty." She dreams of tapping into that ancestral power and turning the tables on humans. She may even resent the farmer, her captor, enough to want to tear him apart. And while it's the male pig, not her, who slays the knight in her dream, she dreams of uniting (mating) with him, as if claiming his power for herself.

Once again, the speaker is projecting this whole fantasy onto the sow. It's impossible to know what the sow is really dreaming about, if anything! But for the speaker, she seems to represent a trapped and thwarted female figure—one who nevertheless dreams of power and freedom.

LINES 34-39

But our farmer ...
... light to shape

Lines 34-39 interrupt the dream vision, returning the narration to reality and the present.

As the sow lies asleep, supposedly dreaming of "ancient hoghood," the farmer who owns her "whistle[s]" at her and "thwack[s]" her with his "fist." He hits her in the "nape" (back) of the neck, which is shaped like a "barrel" (or else her whole body is shaped like a barrel). He's not angry as he hits her, but rather amused and playful, or "jocular." Unlike the defeated knight in the dream vision, this male human is cheerfully condescending and casually in control. (If the poem is read in a feminist light, his whistling and punching might be seen as symbolic of other kinds of male harassment or abuse.)

Having been punched awake, the sow heaves herself up "Slowly, grunt on grunt." (The word "hove" here is an old-fashioned variant of "heaved.") As she staggers to her feet "in the flickering light" of the barn, the "green-copse-castled" world of her dream falls away. (The word "copse," like "grove" in line 31, refers to a stand of trees; metaphorically, these surrounding trees resemble a proud "castle" in which pigs, not humans, reign supreme!) As the dream dissolves, the "legend" it conjured up seems to "drop" off the sow like flakes of "dried mud." She's back to her ordinary farmyard reality.

Notice how enjambment breaks up phrases and slows down the action here, illustrating the sow's slow movements:

> And the green-copse-castled
> Pig hove, letting legend like dried mud drop,
> Slowly, grunt
> On grunt, up in the flickering light to shape [...]

The enjambment after "shape" then creates a moment of grammatical suspense. What is the sow going to look like—what form or shape will she take—when she rises in her full glory? The final two stanzas will answer that question.

LINES 40-45

A monument ...
... every earthquaking continent.

The sow has just stood up in her pen, allowing the speaker a glimpse of her full, enormous "shape." Lines 40-45 describe her striking appearance in hyperbolic tones:

> A monument
> Prodigious in gluttonies as that hog whose want
> Made lean Lent
> Of kitchen slops and, stomaching no constraint,
> Proceeded to swill
> The seven troughed seas and every earthquaking continent.

The sow looks "monumental[ly]" huge; she's a creature of enormous appetites (she's "Prodigious in gluttonies"). In fact, she's as hungry as a legendary "hog" whose "want" of food "Made lean Lent / of kitchen slops"—that is, made ordinary pig food seem like no food at all. (Lent is a fasting season in the Christian tradition.)

It's not clear which hog the speaker's simile is alluding

to—there are many pigs and boars in ancient myth—or whether Plath is inventing a legend of her own. Nevertheless, the speaker claims that this mythical hog would "stomach[] no constraint": accept no limits on its appetite. Having finished its "slops," it went on to devour the entire world—all the "seas" and "earthquaking continent[s]"—as if drinking pig "swill" from a barnyard "trough[]"!

By drawing this comparison, the speaker suggests that the sow's own appetite is limitless. As she rises in her pen, she looks both physically impressive and ferociously hungry. If the sow is a symbol of power—particularly female power—that has been confined and "constrain[ed]," this closing simile suggests that power can't be repressed forever. The sow has "want[s]" and needs that her fenced-in life can't satisfy. Her dissatisfaction with "kitchen slops" might even represent female dissatisfaction with the traditional domestic sphere (being confined to the home, kitchen, etc.). Her dream about the knight (lines 29-33) hints that her desires involve escape, sexual pleasure, and/or vengeance against the male forces that have held her back. Regardless, she *has* dreams—which might translate to plans or aspirations in a human context. Symbolically, her hunger is the hunger of ambition. She's locked away for now, but she's capable of rocking the whole world, like an "earthquak[e]."

SYMBOLS

THE SOW

The sow in "Sow" is a complex symbol of female power and strength. The poem as a whole seems to show how such power can be both confined and limitless.

On the one hand, the sow is a barnyard animal living an unglamorous life. She's penned in by a pigsty, and she sleeps on a bed of mud. She's been bred by a male farmer who considers her "His great sow," and who treats his possession with "jocular" abuse and condescension. (He cheerfully "thwack[s]" her with his "fist" to wake her up.) Precisely because the farmer knows she's special, he locks her out of sight (beyond the "public stare") and won't even let her compete in "pig show[s]." In all these ways, the sow might symbolize the position of women in a male-dominated society: confined, controlled, mistreated, and disrespected from birth. Under such a system, "great[ness]" may be punished with additional exploitation and control.

On the other hand, the speaker manages to get a glimpse of how "marvel[ous]" the sow is and suggests that she "Dream[s]" of freedom, dignity, and a kind of revenge. (However, the speaker imagines a male "Boar" enacting that revenge, complicating the poem's feminist symbolism.) The sow has not given up her body to satisfy others' needs; she's not surrounded by a "litter" of children or destined for the farmer's dinner table. In other words, her greatness has nothing to do with motherhood or self-sacrifice—traditional expectations for women in Plath's day. On the contrary, she's presented as a creature of large appetites and sexual power, attuned to her own needs and disdainful of "constraint." She seems to be an old pig—a "great grandam"—yet she still looks voracious enough to swallow the world. Symbolically, her hunger may represent limitless, though so far thwarted, ambition (as in the phrase *hungry for success*).

As a writer whose work became increasingly feminist, Plath seems to identify with the sow's plight and power. Arguably, she turns the animal into an allegory for her own frustration and ambition.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-45

POETIC DEVICES

METAPHOR

The poem's bold, colorful metaphors and similes bring the "Sow" and her surroundings to vivid life.

For example, the phrase "Maze of barns" (line 9) suggests that the sow lives on a rather large farm, one with a complex series of structures and outbuildings. The reference to a "parsley halo" (line 16)—the sprinkling of herbs that garnishes a cooked pig—casts slaughtered livestock as martyrs of a sort. The "Sow" of the poem has evidently avoided this fate; she has lived for herself rather than being sacrificed to others.

Later, the speaker compares the typical "barnyard sow[]" to a "Bloat tun of milk," meaning that adult female pigs are milky-white, bloated, and shaped like a barrel or *tun*. They find food by going on a metaphorical "snout-cruise," or sniffing along the ground. They are often "hedged," or surrounded, by piglets ("a litter of ninnies"). These offbeat metaphors have the effect of defamiliarizing a familiar animal, reminding the reader how comically awkward-looking pigs are.

Toward the end of the poem, metaphors and similes cast the main "Sow" as a sort of mythic creature. When she wakes from her dreams, the "legend" of past glory seems to fall off her like flakes of "mud." Sure, this simile means she's returning to her normal, humble life as a pig, but it also invests her with a lingering aura of the legendary. And as she rises from the mud, she looks anything but normal. The speaker compares her to "that hog"—some creature of myth or legend—who can't "stomach[]" (accept) any limits on its appetite, and "Proceed[s]" to "swill" the whole world. (In other words, devour the "seas" and "continent[s]" as if they were scraps of pig feed.) Both in her dreams and in reality, then, this sow is a force to be

reckoned with.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "Maze of barns"
- **Line 16:** "In a parsley halo;"
- **Line 19:** "on her snout-cruise"
- **Line 20:** "Bloat tun of milk"
- **Line 21:** "hedged by a litter"
- **Line 29:** "our marvel blazoned a knight,"
- **Line 37:** "letting legend like dried mud drop,"
- **Lines 39-45:** "to shape / A monument / Prodigious in gluttonies as that hog whose want / Made lean Lent / Of kitchen slops and, stomaching no constraint, / Proceeded to swill / The seven troughed seas and every earthquaking continent."

ASSONANCE

Nearly every stanza of "Sow" is loaded with assonance, which—together with alliteration—makes the poem's language sound as dense and heavy as the sow herself. Assonance also makes the poem fun to say out loud. ("Sow" is a poem about large appetites, and its sound seems to reflect the poet's own appetite for extravagant language.)

Much of the assonance (and internal rhyme) plays off the /ow/ sound in the word "sow." Look at lines 1-2, for example:

> God knows **how** our neighbor managed to breed
> His great **sow**:

Other examples appear in lines 5 ("**sow**—impo**u**nded"), lines 17-18 ("**sow**s [...] bl**ow**zy"), and line 25 ("**sow** l**ou**nged"). These repetitions of, and near-rhymes with, "sow" not only center the reader's focus on the pig but also enlarge her presence in the poem, so to speak. On the level of both sound and imagery, she commands constant attention!

Assonance also fills the poem with the kind of blunt, coarse sounds typically associated with pigs. Take the short /ah/ vowels in "thwacked the barrel nape," for instance. "Thwacked" is an onomatopeia word—one that perfectly captures the sound of a fist hitting pig flesh. The follow-up assonance gives it a little extra punch. Or consider the dull, short /u/ sounds in lines 37-39:

> [...] like dried m**u**d drop,
> Slowly, gr**u**nt
> On gr**u**nt, **u**p in the flickering light [...]

Combined with "mud" and "up," the repetition of "grunt"—another onomatopoeia word—makes this whole passage sound like a series of grunting noises!

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "how"
- **Line 2:** "sow"
- **Line 4:** "same way"
- **Line 5:** "sow," "impounded"
- **Line 6:** "ribbon," "pig"
- **Line 7:** "one dusk," "questions commended"
- **Line 13:** "thrift children," "pig"
- **Line 17:** "sows"
- **Line 18:** "blowzy"
- **Line 21:** "litter," "ninnies"
- **Line 22:** "Shrilling"
- **Line 23:** "swig," "pink," "vast"
- **Line 24:** "Brobdingnag"
- **Line 25:** "sow lounged," "belly-bedded," "that black"
- **Line 26:** "Fat"
- **Line 32:** "grisly-bristled"
- **Line 33:** "fabulous," "straddle"
- **Line 34:** "whistled"
- **Line 35:** "fist," "thwacked," "barrel"
- **Line 36:** "castled"
- **Line 37:** "letting legend," "like dried," "mud"
- **Line 38:** "grunt"
- **Line 39:** "grunt," "up"
- **Line 41:** "hog," "want"
- **Line 43:** "slops"
- **Line 44:** "Proceeded"
- **Line 45:** "seas"

ALLITERATION

The poem is filled with alliteration from start to finish. Together with frequent assonance, this effect makes the language sound weighty and dense—just like the animal it's describing!

Listen to all the /s/ and /p/ words in the second stanza, for example:

> In the **s**ame way
> He kept the **s**ow—impounded from **p**ublic **s**tare,
> **P**rize ribbon and **p**ig show.

Or the emphatic /b/ words in lines 23-25:

> [...] This vast
> **B**robdingnag **b**ulk
> Of a sow lounged **b**elly-**b**edded on that **b**lack
> compost,

Notice that each passage is chock-full of assonance, too ("same way," "sow"/"impounded," "ribbon"/"pig," "sow lounged," "belly-bedded," "that black"). These lines are almost tongue-twisters; they demand to be read slowly. The language sounds as bulky and cumbersome as the sow.

Alliteration can have other effects, too. The way it strongly emphasizes a phrase like "great grandam" (line 29) makes the language sound imposing and grand. The alliteration in "dried mud drop"—two /dr/ syllables separated by one non-/dr/ syllable—mimics the rhythmic drip-drop of "mud" falling off a pig. Similarly, the soft, repeated /f/ and /t/ sounds in "feat-foot" (line 21) seem to mimic the thing the speaker's describing: baby pig feet that trot neatly along ("feat" is an old-fashioned synonym for "neat" or "nimble").

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "knows," "neighbor"
- **Line 3:** "his," "he," "hid"
- **Line 4:** "same"
- **Line 5:** "sow," "public," "stare"
- **Line 6:** "Prize," "pig"
- **Line 7:** "questions," "commended"
- **Line 8:** "lantern-lit"
- **Line 9:** "lintel," "sunk sty"
- **Line 11:** "suckling"
- **Line 12:** "slot"
- **Line 18:** "Mire-smirched"
- **Line 19:** "Maunching"
- **Line 20:** "milk"
- **Line 21:** "move," "feat-foot"
- **Line 22:** "hulk"
- **Line 23:** "halt"
- **Line 24:** "Brobdingnag bulk"
- **Line 25:** "belly-bedded," "black"
- **Line 27:** "hoghood"
- **Line 28:** "wholly"
- **Line 29:** "great grandam"
- **Line 32:** "By," "bristled"
- **Line 33:** "Boar," "straddle," "sow's"
- **Line 36:** "copse-castled"
- **Line 37:** "letting legend," "dried," "drop"
- **Line 41:** "hog whose"
- **Line 42:** "lean Lent"
- **Line 43:** "kitchen," "slops," "stomaching," "constraint"
- **Line 44:** "swill"
- **Line 45:** "seven," "seas"

HYPERBOLE

Over the course of the poem, the speaker describes the sow in increasingly hyperbolic terms. This pig appears to be a local legend, and in the speaker's estimation, she lives up to the hype.

The speaker claims, for example, that the sow is not only big and fat but a "vast / Brobdingnag bulk"—that is, she's comparable to the giants who live in the land of Brobdingnag in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). This obviously exaggerated claim leaves the sow's actual size to the reader's imagination, where she can take on mythical proportions.

Less exaggerated, but still possibly overblown, is the reference to the pig's "barrel nape" (line 35). The "nape" is the back of the neck, so this phrase means either that the sow's body or her neck alone is as big as a barrel. The former claim might be justified, but the latter would clearly be hyperbolic.

At the end of the poem, hyperbole runs rampant. The speaker's simile compares the sow to some mythical "hog"—the exact allusion isn't specified—who "swill[s]" down the entire globe to feed its limitless appetite. Of course, the sow can't literally be *this* hungry! But the exaggerated claim makes her a more symbolic figure: a captive creature who nevertheless refuses to be "constrain[ed]," and aims to satisfy her needs and desires no matter what.

Where Hyperbole appears in the poem:

- **Lines 23-25:** "This vast / Brobdingnag bulk / Of a sow"
- **Line 35:** "thwacked the barrel nape,"
- **Lines 39-45:** "to shape / A monument / Prodigious in gluttonies as that hog whose want / Made lean Lent / Of kitchen slops and, stomaching no constraint, / Proceeded to swill / The seven troughed seas and every earthquaking continent."

ALLUSION

"Sow" contains one clear allusion and several other apparent references to other pieces of literature.

In lines 23-24, the speaker mentions the sow's "vast / Brobdingnag bulk," alluding to Jonathan Swift's satire *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). In Swift's novel, the land of Brobdingnag is filled with human giants and other oversized creatures—so Plath's allusion simply indicates that the sow is huge!

Lines 8-9 may contain a subtler allusion, as the speaker is led through a "Maze of barns" to see the sow. This description calls attention to itself, since barns aren't usually arranged in a maze formation. The metaphorical "Maze" here may be a subtle reference to the Labyrinth of Greek myth: an intricate, walled structure built to hold the monster known as the Minotaur. If so, the allusion would again suggest that the sow is large, freakish, powerful, and so on.

Lines 29-33 describe a "Boar" who kills a medieval human "knight," while lines 41-45 describe a mythical "hog" who devours the whole world. While the poem doesn't identify the sources of these tales, Plath seems to be gesturing toward one or more of the pigs and wild boars that populate Arthurian legend, Greek myth, and other mythologies. These vague allusions suggest that the sow—while seemingly a trapped, powerless animal—has in some sense inherited the power of her legendary ancestors. She's a force to be reckoned with, even if her human owner doesn't know it.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-9:** "Through his lantern-lit / Maze of barns"
- **Lines 23-24:** "This vast / Brobdingnag bulk"
- **Lines 29-33:** "our marvel blazoned a knight, / Helmed, in cuirass, / Unhorsed and shredded in the grove of combat / By a grisly-bristled / Boar, fabulous enough to straddle that sow's heat."
- **Lines 41-45:** "that hog whose want / Made lean Lent / Of kitchen slops and, stomaching no constraint, / Proceeded to swill / The seven troughed seas and every earthquaking continent."

VOCABULARY

Sow (Line 2, Line 33) - An adult female pig.

Impounded (Line 5) - Fenced off or locked away; confined.

Commended (Line 7) - Presented someone as worthy of something. Here used metaphorically: the speaker's "questions" about the pig cause the farmer to deem them worthy of a private "tour."

Lintel (Line 9) - The top beam of a doorway.

Sty (Line 9) - Pigpen.

Rose-and-larkspurred (Line 11) - Painted with flowers (roses and *larkspur*, a purple flower), as some old-fashioned china piggybanks were.

Suckling (Line 11) - A baby pig (one who's still nursing).

Thrift (Lines 12-13) - Here used as an adjective meaning thrifty or frugal.

Dolt (Line 13) - Doltish; unintelligent; stupid.

Heckling (Line 13) - Jeering or making fun of.

Glorified (Lines 14-15) - Here a euphemism for being cooked (made into a glorious meal).

Prime flesh (Line 15) - Top-quality meat (here, pig meat).

Parsley halo (Lines 15-16) - Refers to a parsley garnish for cooked meat (such as roast pork).

Mire-smirched (Line 18) - Mud-stained.

Blowzy (Line 18) - Sloppy, coarse, etc. (often applied to women).

Maunching (Line 19) - A variant of "munching."

Thistle and knotweed (Line 19) - Types of weed or flowering plant.

Snout-cruise (Line 19) - A metaphorical description of the way pigs root for food (i.e., sniff and dig in the earth with their snouts).

Tun (Line 20) - A cask or barrel. "Bloat tun of milk" is a metaphor for the sows' bloated bodies, which are full of "milk" for nursing their piglets.

Hedged (Line 21) - Surrounded.

Litter (Line 21) - An animal's group of babies or young children.

Feat-foot ninnies (Line 21) - A slightly harsh description of the pigs' babies. "Feat-foot" means "nimble-footed," while "ninnies" means "fools."

Shrilling (Line 22) - Shrieking; making loud, high-pitched noises. "Shrilling her hulk" suggests that the piglets are shrieking around their mother's body.

Teats (Line 23) - Nipples (from which the piglets are "swig[ging]," or drinking, their mother's milk).

Brobdingnag (Lines 23-24) - An allusion to Jonathan Swift's satire *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), in which the land of Brobdingnag is populated by giants. In this context, the word just means "enormous."

Belly-bedded (Line 25) - An invented adjective meaning "lying on one's stomach."

Fat-rutted (Lines 26-27) - "Rutted" means "grooved" or "creased," so this invented adjective suggests that the sleeping sow's eyelids are fat, swollen, and wrinkly.

Dream-filmed (Lines 26-27) - Indicates that the closed eyes of the sleeping sow are filmy and moist.

Grandam (Line 29) - A grandmother; an old woman (or female animal, as here).

Blazoned (Line 29) - Here, a metaphorical verb meaning "conjured up as if before our eyes." (A blazon is a description of an antique coat of arms, and the verb *blazon* usually means to describe or display such a design.)

Helmed (Lines 29-30) - Wearing a helmet.

Cuirass (Lines 29-30) - An old-fashioned piece of body armor consisting of a breastplate and backplate.

Unhorsed (Line 31) - Knocked off one's horse.

Grove of combat (Line 31) - A group of trees where a battle has taken place (here, a battle between a "Boar" and a "knight").

Grisly-bristled (Lines 32-33) - An invented adjective suggesting that the boar looks rough, tough, and frightening. *Grisly* means gruesome or scary, and *bristles* are stiff animal hairs.

Heat (Line 33) - A female animal "in heat" is one who is ready to mate (i.e., in the receptive phase of her sexual cycle).

Jocular (Line 35) - Amused, cheerful, playful. (Here referring to the attitude with which the farmer strikes the sow.)

Barrel nape (Line 35) - The "nape" is the back of the neck, so the metaphor "barrel nape" could mean either that the sow's neck or her entire upper body resembles a barrel.

Green-copse-castled (Lines 36-37) - A "copse" is a group or grove of trees. Here, the metaphor "green-copse-castled"

means that the grove of trees (in the sow's dream) surrounds her like a tall green castle.

Hove (Lines 36-37) - Old-fashioned variant of "heaved." (Here, the sow is heaving herself to her feet.)

Legend (Line 37) - An ancient story or myth. Here refers specifically to the legend in the sow's dream (the one about the boar and the knight).

Prodigious (Lines 40-41) - Of great size or quantity.

Gluttonies (Lines 40-41) - "Gluttony" is voracious eating, so "gluttonies" would be multiple displays of this behavior.

That hog (Line 41) - Plath doesn't specify her allusion here, so "that hog" might refer to a creature of her own invention, or to one of various mythological boars, hogs, and pigs.

Lean Lent (Lines 42-43) - In Christian tradition, Lent is a season of fasting and renunciation. Here, the speaker indicates that the hog's voracious appetite made ordinary "kitchen slops" (the kind farmers feed to pigs) look like no food at all.

Slops (Lines 42-43) - Food scraps fed to pigs and other farm animals.

Constraint (Line 43) - Limitation or restriction.

Swill (Lines 44-45) - As a verb, "swill" means to gulp down greedily. (As a noun, it refers to food scraps mixed with water and fed to pigs.)

Troughed (Line 45) - A *trough* is the container farm animals drink out of, so "seven troughed seas" metaphorically suggests that the world's sea beds are giant troughs!

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem consists of fifteen tercets (three-line stanzas). In most, though not all, of these tercets, the first and third lines rhyme. Some of the rhymes are exact; others are slant or imperfect. In many cases, the middle line of one stanza will rhyme with the first and/or third lines of the next. The middle line of each stanza is always either significantly shorter or significantly longer than the first and third lines. Though powerfully rhythmic, the poem never follows a regular meter.

The result is a form that has some consistent elements, but remains volatile rather than settled or rigid. Through its shifting rhymes and rhythms, the poem rebels against formal constraints, just as the sow seems to resist "constraint[s]" on her body and appetites (line 43). The tercets and (occasionally) interlocking rhyme scheme are reminiscent of terza rima, the form that Dante Alighieri (c. 1265-1321) famously used in his *Divine Comedy*. Modern poets sometimes adapt this form when evoking a "hellish" mood or setting, since the first part of Dante's epic takes place in hell. It's possible that Plath is aiming for a similar effect; like Dante's speaker, hers is being guided on a tour, and the "flickering light" of the barn's lantern-fire might be compared to hellfire. Dante's hell is full of monstrous creatures, and Plath presents the "Sow" as gigantic, freakishly powerful, etc. Still, if the form here is a Dante allusion, it's a playful one—after all, Plath's speaker seems *drawn* to the sow rather than frightened or repelled by her.

METER

"Sow" has no regular meter. It's more or less written in free verse, though it often rhymes. It has the same number of lines in each stanza (three), and the middle line of each stanza is always either longer or shorter than the other two, so the poem has elements of formal regularity. But the language never settles into a consistent rhythm.

The result is a poem that sounds unsettling and unpredictable, like the experience of going to see the giant sow. Plath's forceful, dramatic language is reined in, to some extent, by the tercet structure, just as the sow is confined by her pen. But it seems to push back against any other structure, pattern, or scheme.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem contains rhyme but doesn't follow a consistent rhyme scheme. Some of its rhymes are exact (e.g., "tour"/"door"), while others are slant or imperfect (e.g., "breed"/"hid" and "halo"/"blowzy"). In some cases, the middle line of one stanza rhymes with the first and/or third lines of the next (for example, "sow" in line 2 slant-rhymes with "show" in line 6, and "suckling" in line 11 slant-rhymes with "heckling" and "crackling" in lines 13 and 15).

This approach to rhyme makes the poem musically pleasurable, but never predictable. Like the "Sow" of the title—whom the speaker suggests will "stomach[] no constraint"—the poem's language resists the formal constraints of meter and strict rhyme.

SPEAKER

The poem has a first-person plural speaker: an unnamed "us" visiting a farmer's "barnyard" and "marvel[ing]" at his largest sow. It's not clear why the farmer—who normally hides the sow from the "public stare"—lets the speaker see her, but something about their "questions" convinces him to give them a private tour. Perhaps their questions convey a depth of knowledge or a degree of curiosity he can't resist. When they see the sow, they're not disappointed; they "gape" in wonder, and their imaginations go into overdrive. They even imagine the pig's dreams in detail!

The poem was inspired by a September 1956 visit to a farm near Heptonstall, England. Plath and her husband Ted Hughes (who grew up in the area) visited a local farmer, who indeed showed them around his barns and gave them a look at his

prize sow. Plath and Hughes wrote separate (and very different) poems about the visit; Hughes's "View of a Pig" is grimmer and describes a dead animal rather than a live one.

SETTING

The poem's setting is a farm or "barnyard," one that contains multiple barns arranged in a sort of "Maze." Inside one of these barns is a "[pig]sty," where the farmer's prize "Sow" lies on a bed of "black compost."

The setting was inspired by a real-life farm near Heptonstall, England, which Plath and her husband, fellow poet Ted Hughes, visited on September 7, 1956. According to scholar Nancy D. Hargrove:

> [A]s a result of their expression of great interest, the farmer had allowed them to see "His great sow" which was ordinarily kept from public view. The sheer size and weight of the animal so impressed them that each wrote a poem based upon it [...]

Plath's poem turns this ordinary setting into a dramatic, almost mythical scene. The "flickering light" of lanterns creates an eerie, intense nighttime atmosphere. Given the pig's exceptional size, the "Maze of barns" seems to allude to the labyrinth that housed the Minotaur (a monster from Greek myth).

The speaker also conjures up a wholly imaginary setting, which supposedly appears in the sow's dreams: an ancient tree "grove" where a "Boar" defeats a human "knight" in combat. This vivid dream-scene adds to the aura of "legend" (line 37) surrounding the sow, while suggesting that she dreams of a more "fabulous" life than her humble sty provides.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) was a leading light of the Confessionalist poetry movement. Famous both for her intense, personal verse and her autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*, Plath spoke what had been unspeakable about womanhood, mental illness, and other subjects in the first half of the 20th century. Unvarnished self-revelation was rare in English-language poetry at the time. As more and more writers adopted this revolutionary stance in their work during the 1950s and '60s, critics found a name for their movement: Confessionalism.

"Sow" is one of Plath's earlier poems, however, written before the Confessionalist movement blossomed. Plath finished it in early 1957, following a real-life barnyard visit (on a farm near Heptonstall, England) that also inspired her husband Ted Hughes's poem "View of a Pig." "Sow" appears in *The Colossus* (1960), the only collection Plath published in her lifetime. Though not as deeply personal or outwardly defiant as some of her later work, it takes up feminist themes, as it describes an extraordinary female creature kept in undignified confinement. Its closing vision of the sow's formidable power might be compared to the endings of "Lady Lazarus" or "Stings."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

From adolescence onward, Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) suffered from recurring bouts of suicidal depression. Mental health treatments during this era were often crude and ineffective, and some of the treatments she received, including poorly administered electroconvulsive therapy, worsened her suffering. Much of her most famous work, including her novel *The Bell Jar*, details her struggles with mental instability and the questionable medical practices of the time.

Plath's writing is also considered a landmark in the history of feminist literature; she died just on the cusp of what became known as second-wave feminism. Following World War II (during which women often worked outside the home while men served in the military), women across Western society faced pressure to return to the home and fulfill their supposedly natural roles as wives and mothers. As a writer and academic, Plath found these stereotyped expectations oppressive.

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

In its symbolic way, "Sow" seems to bristle at the "constraint[s]" placed on women in Plath's era. The poet seems to identify with the "monument[al]" pig, who, unlike the "common barnyard sows," has not sacrificed her body to motherhood or to other creatures' exploitation or consumption.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Confessional Poetry — Read about the literary movement with which Plath's work became associated. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/151109/an-introduction-to-confessional-poetry)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to Sylvia Plath reading "Sow."

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RYQ232ahwws)

- The Poet's Life — Read a short biography of Plath at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/sylvia-plath)
- Plath on Becoming a Writer — Listen to a 1962 interview with Plath. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gbNcRhxfF-A)
- Hughes's Pig Poem — Read Ted Hughes's "View of a Pig," written after the same barnyard visit that inspired Plath's "Sow." (https://www.everseradio.com/view-of-a-pig-by-ted-hughes/)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER SYLVIA PLATH POEMS

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

HOW TO CITE

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