Tulips

SUMMARY

The red of these tulips seems too loud and intense for this quiet, wintry setting. Look at how blank and serene things are here, as if covered in snow. I'm learning how to be serene; I'm staying as still as the light bathing these blank walls, this hospital bed, my own hands. I'm anonymous; I don't have any connection to the tulips' explosive red color. I've surrendered control of my clothing and identity to the nursing staff, surrendered my past to the specialist who gives me anesthesia, and surrendered my body to the doctors who operate on me.

These hospital workers have placed my head between a white pillow and bedsheet, like an eye between two pale eyelids fixed wide open. Like the helpless pupil of an eye (or a dim-witted student), my head has no choice but to process whatever it's exposed to. Nurses come and go and don't cause me any problems. Wearing white caps, they look like seagulls flying by. They all do manual tasks and look identical, so I have no idea how many of them work here.

They take care of my body as gently as flowing water smooths small stones in its path. They bring me injections that make me numb and drowsy. Now that I've lost my normal life, I'm sick of everything that was weighing me down: my black leather travel bag like a container for medications; my husband and child, who are smiling in a photo by my hospital bed. Their smiles seem to snag me like hooks.

I've let so much go; I'm like a thirty-year-old freighter ship that's empty of everything but my name and address, which I'm holding onto tightly. The hospital staff has washed me clean of everything I cared about. Naked and afraid on the green gurney with plastic pillows, I left behind my personal items—tea service, dressers full of linen, books—and slipped out of consciousness as if going underwater. Now, for the first time, I feel as pure as a nun.

I never asked for any get-well flowers; I just wanted to lie back, palms up, and feel nothing at all. You have no idea how liberating this experience is. The sense of calm is stunning, and all it asks in return is a name tag and a few other small items. This calm is what dying people experience in the end; I picture them swallowing it like a wafer in the Catholic rite of Communion.

The tulips are too red, anyway—so red, they hurt. I thought I could hear them breathing through their white wrapping paper, like some terrible baby in swaddling clothes. Their redness matches and seems to interact with the redness of my surgical scar. They're complex: even though they seem to drift on the air, they feel heavy to me, their red tongue-like petals weighing on my mind like a bunch of lead weights on my shoulders.

I felt alone before, but now I feel as if the tulips are watching me. Their heads turn toward me, and toward the window where the sunlight gradually strengthens and fades each day. I feel silly and lacking in depth, like a shadow-thin paper doll, positioned between the sun's "eye" and the flowers' "eyes." I seem to have no identity; I've been wanting to get rid of my identity. The lively flowers seem to steal the air I breathe.

Before I got the tulips, the air here was pretty peaceful: I'd inhale and exhale it without any problems. But these red flowers seem to disrupt it loudly. The air seems to swirl around them like a river current swirling around a rusty underwater engine. They pull all my focus, whereas before I was playfully, peacefully unfocused.

The hospital walls, too, seem to be warmed by the red flowers. These tulips should be caged like savage beasts; their petals seem to widen like the jaws of some big African wildcat. I feel my heart beating—expanding and closing like a bowl full of red flowers—because it loves my body so much. I taste my own tears, which are salty as the sea, and seem to come from a place as distant as my return to full health.

THEMES

HEALTH AND LIFE VS. SICKNESS AND DEATH

The speaker of "Tulips" is a hospital patient contemplating some get-well flowers she's received. Though she never reveals why she was hospitalized, she seems to be slowly recovering, almost in spite of herself. As she describes her enjoyment of the blank, quiet hospital setting, it becomes clear that part of her has *resisted* the journey back toward health and normal life. Part of her may even have wanted to deteriorate and die. Through the speaker's descriptions, the poem contrasts the peacefulness of sickness/death with the pain and commotion of normal, healthy life. Though the speaker seems to prefer the former at first, she grudgingly accepts the latter in the end. Life may be painful, the poem suggests, but the will to survive is strong.

The speaker presents sickness and death as blissfully simple and restful, a kind of welcome numbness. She marvels at how "pure" and "nun"-like she feels in the hospital, for example, suggesting that life outside the hospital is messy and impure. She also says that she "wanted to efface [her]self," suggesting a wish to *erase* herself—to leave the complexities of her identity and the world behind. And she welcomes the "numbness" and "sleep" the nurses bring with their drug-filled "needles"—implying an attraction to the pain-free restfulness of

death. Moreover, she praises the "peacefulness" of the hospital environment and imagines "the dead" blissfully accepting it like a holy "Communion tablet." Death, here, is a blessing, a release from the noise of life.

Indeed, the speaker suggests that regular life, by contrast, is often violent, unpredictable, and painful. The tulips the speaker has received strike her as unwelcome "explosions," disrupting her peace. Their vibrancy reminds her of life itself; their "loud" redness evokes pain and seems to "correspond[]" with the speaker's own "wound." The speaker resents even having to perceive life through her senses: to "take everything in" rather than shut everything out.

Though journeying back toward health means leaving her peace and quiet behind, the speaker starts to do so in the end, suggesting how strong life's pull is despite the pain it brings. The speaker becomes keenly "aware of [her] heart," which seems to be its own kind of "bloom[ing]" bouquet. The way she perceives it as beating "out of sheer love of me" suggests that she's re-learning how to love her body and her life. She "taste[s]" salty water—that is, tears—which signal some combination of sadness, relief, and joy. That these tears "come[] from a country far away as health" suggest that health itself feels distant, but no longer completely out of reach.

Meanwhile, the fact that the tulips spur all this emotion and resemble "dangerous animals" indicates just how powerful these tastes or glimpses of life are. Ultimately, the speaker's heart just keeps beating no matter what; her body wants to live.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-63

SOLITUDE AND FREEDOM VS. ATTACHMENT AND COMMITMENT

Throughout "Tulips," the speaker weighs the peace of solitude *inside* the hospital against the complexities of love and attachment *outside*. Part of her wants to stay in her current environment, where she's isolated and basically anonymous, without work to do or people to take care of. It's not that the speaker doesn't care about her outside relationships and commitments; instead, the poem acknowledges that such bonds can become a burden. To this speaker, it seems, they've become *so* burdensome that even a hospital stay feels like a healthy and restorative release from the needs of those around her.

To some degree, the speaker clearly relishes the solitude, freedom, and relative anonymity her hospital stay provides. She declares that "I am nobody" with a certain joy and pride, associating her anonymity with "peacefulness." She adds that she's "sick of baggage"—her past, her relationships, etc.—now that she's "lost [her]self." She's wary even of her closest bonds; for example, she sees the smiles of her "husband and child" in "the family photo" as bothersome "hooks" holding her back. Her insistence that "I didn't want any [get-well] flowers" suggests that, on some level, she hoped to reject the bonds of love and affection in general. This rejection felt like a powerful kind of liberation.

The tulips disturb her, then, in part because the gift reminds her that she isn't *really* alone and free; she has a life and obligations waiting for her outside the hospital. She complains that the flowers "weigh me down" like "sinkers round my neck"; they feel like the personal "baggage" she had the illusion of leaving behind. They disturb her "calm" and pull her "attention," which was "happy / Playing and resting without committing itself." In other words, they disrupt her Zen-like, zoned-out state—and represent the *commitments* she can't escape forever.

Though the ending points a path toward recovery, the poem never really resolves the speaker's ambivalence about solitude and attachment. Instead, the tulips "concentrate" that ambivalence into a powerful symbol of life. On the one hand, she comes to associate these red blooms with her "sheer love" of herself—that is, her renewed will to live, a commitment that opens the way toward others. On the other hand, the flowers continue to strike her as "dangerous." Compared with her radically simplified world inside the hospital, the world outside—the place the flowers come from and are inviting her back to—involves far more risks, complications, and obligations. And so, while they're undoubtedly intended as a get-well message, the tulips reflect her mixed feelings about getting well anytime soon!

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 3-7
- Lines 18-35
- Line 43
- Line 48
- Lines 55-63

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

The tulips are ...
... bed, these hands.

Lines 1-4 introduce the poem's central image—"The tulips"—before shifting to a description of the speaker's setting and mental state.

In line 1, the speaker describes "the tulips" as "too excitable" for their "winter" surroundings. Right away, it's clear that this is a personification; tulips can't *literally* be excitable (high-strung) in the way humans can. As the poem goes on, it becomes clear that this description is also metaphorical: the red color of the

tulips is as vivid and attention-grabbing as high emotion. (It's possible, too, that the speaker is projecting her own emotions onto the tulips.)

This abrupt opening line leaves out a great deal of context: what tulips is the speaker looking at? Where did they come from? Where is "here"?

The following lines start to offer partial answers to these questions. The speaker is in "bed," surrounded by "white walls" and other "white" objects, "lying by myself quietly" and savoring the "peacefulness" of her environment. By the end of the stanza, which refers to "nurses" and "surgeons," it's clear that this environment is a hospital where the speaker is a patient.

Presumably, then, the tulips are a bouquet of get-well flowers sent by someone the speaker knows. (The poem never does reveal who sent them, so they're not defined by a particular relationship; rather, their significance lies in reminding the speaker that she *has* relationships and a life outside the hospital walls.)

Mentioning the tulips before explaining the setting might seem backwards, but it has at least two effects:

- First, it signals to the reader that the speaker's thoughts are somewhat meandering and may not always arrive in a "logical" order.
- Second, it places strong narrative emphasis on the tulips, which won't reappear until line 29 but which will become the main focal point, as well as the key symbol, of "Tulips."

Finally, these opening lines establish the poem's form. It's written in free verse and broken into fairly long, prose-like lines. Though the lines don't rhyme or stick to a steady meter, they're grouped into consistent seven-line stanzas (called *septets*), suggesting that the speaker is trying to arrange her wandering thoughts in *some* kind of order. Parallel phrasing ("**how** white [...] **how** quiet, **how** snowed-in," "**these** white walls, **this** bed, **these** hands"), repetition of important words ("white," "quiet"/"quietly," "lying"/"lies"), and strong alliteration and assonance (e.g., "l**e**arning"/"l**y**ing"/"l**ie**s") give these lines about "peacefulness" a steady, calming sound.

LINES 5-7

I am nobody; ...
... body to surgeons.

In lines 5-7, the speaker describes herself as anonymous within the hospital setting. She claims that "I am nobody" (a possible allusion to "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" by Emily Dickinson) and somewhat cryptically adds that "I have nothing to do with explosions." These "explosions" might refer metaphorically to the startling red color of the tulips, to the volatile world outside the "quiet" hospital (line 2), or both. She imagines herself as having left her old life behind once she became a patient (lines 6-7):

> I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses
> And my history to the anesthetist and my body to surgeons.

Already, it's clear that the speaker is quite *happy* with this anonymity. She relishes the "peacefulness" of the hospital, and that includes the peace that comes with letting her old identity go. She wants "nothing to do" with the kind of jarring, volatile life the tulips represent. Whatever surgical procedure(s) she's had are either finished or are no longer upsetting to her; she just wants to keep resting here. Her claim that she's given up "[her] history to the anesthetist" refers to the way anesthesia makes you temporarily lose consciousness, including memory. But it also suggests that she wants to cut ties with her past for good and to live in a permanently passive, *metaphorically* anesthetized state.

In other words, these lines set up a juxtaposition between the speaker's life *in* the hospital and the speaker's life *before* the hospital—and imply that she now prefers the former to the latter. The parallel phrasing of lines 6-7 ("I have given **my** name **and my** day clothes [...] **and my** history [...] **and my** body") sounds calm, controlled, and logical, as if the speaker has assigned everything to its proper place before beginning her new life.

LINES 8-10

They have propped ...
... take everything in.

Lines 8-10 build on the idea of passivity introduced in the previous stanza. The speaker imagines herself as a passive witness to her environment, helplessly absorbing "everything" around her. Through simile and metaphor, she compares her entire head to a single, always-open eye:

> They have propped my head between the pillow and the sheet-cuff
> Like an eye between two white lids that will not shut.
> Stupid pupil, it has to take everything in.

Notice that the hospital staff "[has] propped [her] head" for her; she hasn't positioned herself. (Presumably, the recovery from surgery has limited her capacities, but she also seems to have willingly given up some agency to the people taking care of her.) Positioned between the white pillow and the white sheet on her hospital bed, her head (she imagines) looks "Like an eye between two white lids that will not shut." As she looks around, she just "take[s] everything in" because she "has" to; like an eye with "lids that will not shut," she can't even control or shut off her perceptions. (In her post-surgery state, she might be too zoned out to think clearly or manage her focus.)

She punningly compares herself to a "Stupid pupil"—meaning either *helpless center of an eyeball* or *ignorant student*. Either way, with no ability to filter anything, she just absorbs whatever sensations and information she's exposed to.

As in the first stanza, the tone and rhythm of the language remain fairly flat, mirroring the speaker's numb, zoned-out, passive state. However, alliteration, assonance, and consonance continue to add some musical spice: consider the /p/ sounds in "propped" and "pillow"; the /l/ sounds in "Like" and "lids"; the long /i/ sounds in "Like," "eye," and "white"; and the long /u/, short /i/, and /p/ sounds in "Stupid pupil."

LINES 11-14

The nurses pass ...
... many there are.

Lines 11-14 shift to a description of the nurses in the hospital. These are among the main sights the speaker sees as she lies in bed, "tak[ing] everything in" (line 10).

According to the speaker, these nurses are "no trouble"; they're part of the serene peacefulness of the hospital atmosphere. In another imaginative simile, the speaker compares them to "gulls [that] pass inland": their "white caps" remind her of white seagulls, and they're constantly breezing by as if crossing the sky of a peaceful beach.

Like a flock of birds, they seem indistinguishable to the speaker: "one just the same as another, / So it is impossible to tell how many there are." Unlike birds, they're constantly "Doing things with their hands"—but their tasks are beyond the speaker's expertise, so she just refers to them vaguely as "things." Like the speaker herself, these nurses seem anonymous; it's as if the hospital is a place where the normal rules of human identity don't apply.

Notice how the repetition (more specifically diacope) of "pass" evokes the repetitive movement of the nurses:

> The nurses pass and pass, they are no trouble,
> They pass the way gulls pass inland in their white caps [...]

By the fourth repetition, the word sounds lullingly familiar, like the identical-looking nurses hurrying past.

LINES 15-17

My body is ...
... bring me sleep.

Building on the description of the nurses in the previous stanza, lines 15-17 describe how the nurses interact with the speaker. Through a combined metaphor and simile, the speaker suggests that they take very gentle care of her:

> My body is a pebble to them, they tend it as water
> Tends to the pebbles it must run over, smoothing them gently.

This comparison highlights not only the nurses' gentleness but also the speaker's passivity. Recovering from surgery, she feels as inert and helpless as a "pebble," a small stone being shaped by natural forces. Once again, the repetition of words—here, "pebble"/"pebbles" and "tend"/"Tends"—creates a lulling rhythm that matches the poem's peaceful imagery.

Stones conventionally symbolize lack of feeling, and in fact, this "pebble"-like speaker is happily numb. The nurses, she says, "bring me numbness in their bright needles, they bring me sleep." It's clear that the speaker welcomes both the anesthetizing drugs and the unconsciousness of sleep; notice that she calls the needles "bright" rather than unpleasant, scary, etc. She doesn't *want* to feel anything—or even to be awake if she can help it! Increasingly, it seems that the speaker views the hospital as a sanctuary, a restful retreat from the demands of her busy life.

LINES 18-21

Now I have ...
... little smiling hooks.

Lines 18-21 contain the poem's first expression of strong emotion. "Now [that] I have lost myself," the speaker declares, "I am sick of baggage." In other words, having transitioned into the life of a hospital patient—through a process that's both disorienting and freeing—she feels unhappy with her life before hospitalization and all the emotional baggage that came with it. She wants to let her old life go and stay "lost" in this peaceful setting.

She even resents the few personal possessions she's brought with her into the hospital:

> My patent leather overnight case like a black pillbox,
> My husband and child smiling out of the family photo;
> Their smiles catch onto my skin, little smiling hooks.

Her overnight case is literal "baggage," and it reminds her unpleasantly of a "black pillbox" (i.e., a container for medications). Meanwhile, the "family photo," meant to serve as a heartwarming reminder of her life outside the hospital, instead strikes her as frustrating and irritating. In a harsh metaphor, she compares the smiles of her "husband and child" to "little [...] hooks" that dig into her and hold her back. For the moment, at least, they're reminders of her attachment to a world she wants to be free of.

Notice how, in these last two lines, the unnecessary repetition of "smiling"/"smiles"/"smiling" itself starts to sound cloying and irritating. The sharp /k/ consonance in "catch," "skin," and "hooks" sounds prickly and rough, slowing the flow of the sentence and mimicking the "hooks" being described.

LINES 22-24

I have let ...
... my loving associations.

Lines 22-24 introduce a new metaphor, as the speaker compares herself to "a thirty-year-old cargo boat." A cargo boat is a ship built to carry freight. The speaker, at age thirty, feels she has "let things slip"—that is, shed a lot of the *emotional* and *psychological* freight she was carrying. As she said in the previous stanza, she's "sick of" these kinds of "baggage." She hasn't completely cut ties with her past—she's still "stubbornly hanging on to [her] name and address"—but as she lies dazed in the hospital after anesthesia and surgery, she largely feels disconnected from her old identity.

Continuing the metaphor, she says that the hospital staff has "swabbed me clear of my loving associations." The word "swabbed" here is basically a pun, suggesting two different kinds of swabbing. Health care workers clean patients' bodies with "swabs" of cotton and similar materials; naval crews "swab," or mop, the decks of ships. So the speaker, cleaned and tended to by nurses, feels like a "cargo boat" that's been freshly mopped. In the process, she feels as if her "loving associations"—her bonds and relationships outside the hospital—have been washed away.

Notice that these lines, along with the previous stanza, create some ambiguity around the speaker's agency in this process. Has she *let* her old life slip away (because she's "sick of baggage"), or have the hospital staff, through the disorienting procedures they've performed on her, *taken* it away? Even the speaker may not know for sure; she didn't ask to get sick and hospitalized, of course, and she can't fully control what the doctors and nurses do. But now that she's in this setting, she seems to welcome the escape from the burdens of normal life.

LINES 25-28

Scared and bare ...
... been so pure.

Lines 25-28 flash back to the speaker's hospitalization, the day when she transitioned from normal life to life as a patient. Initially, this transition was upsetting; she felt "Scared and bare" (frightened and exposed) on the gurney, or "green plastic-pillowed trolley," they used to wheel her off. The following lines suggest that she may have been wheeled into an ambulance from her home:

> I watched my teaset, my bureaus of linen, my books
> Sink out of sight, and the water went over my head.

However, it's possible that she was just *envisioning* her home as she was wheeled off into surgery. Either way, the furniture and possessions that represent her normal life—"my teaset, my bureaus of linen, my books"—seemed to "Sink" underwater as she went through this transition. She herself seemed to drown ("the water went over my head") as she lost consciousness.

As upsetting as this experience was, though, she now imagines it as a sort of baptism, a symbolic rite of passage into a simpler, purer life. The speaker proudly claims that "I am a nun now, I have never been so pure"—as if the trip to the hospital were a spiritual retreat into a convent. After all, the hospital stay seems to have left her in a spiritual or meditative state: as she said in the first stanza, "I am learning peacefulness."

The asyndeton in line 26—that is, the omission of "and" in "my teaset, my bureaus of linen, my books"—makes this brief list of possessions more concise and rhythmic. The rhythm even sounds wave-like, mimicking "the water" that goes "over [the speaker's] head" in the next line. The heavy alliteration in this passage reinforces the lines' strong rhythm: notice the repeated consonants in "plastic-pillowed," "trolley"/"teaset," "bureaus"/"books," "Sink"/"sight," and "nun now"/"never."

LINES 29-31

I didn't want ...
... idea how free——

In lines 29-31, the tulips make their first (brief) appearance since the poem's opening line. The hospitalized speaker protests that she "didn't want any flowers" from loved ones. Instead,

> [...] I only wanted
> To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty.

This could be a description of prolonged, peaceful meditation, but it could also be a description of death. The ambiguity is deliberate: did this speaker just want an escape from her regular life, or did she want to die? Either way, the get-well flowers seem to threaten her dream of peaceful "empt[iness]," perhaps because they're a reminder of her life outside the hospital.

The speaker views this emptiness as a kind of liberation: "How free it is, you have no idea how free," she marvels. (This is the speaker's only direct address to an outside "you"—the reader—aside from line 2, in which she says, "Look how white everything is." Although it's not a very prominent device, the second-person address frames the poem as some kind of letter or communication from the hospital.) Thus, the get-well flowers seem to threaten not only the speaker's peace and quiet but her freedom—because, to her, these things are one and the same. The diacope of "free" conveys the way she revels in this freedom; she's practically boasting.

LINES 32-35

The peacefulness is ...
... a Communion tablet.

In lines 32-35, the speaker continues to marvel at the

"empt[iness]" and "free[dom]" of her life in the hospital. To her, it's an incredible gift that comes at little cost:

> The peacefulness is so big it dazes you,
> And it asks nothing, a name tag, a few trinkets.

The "name tag" and "trinkets" are an ID badge and other small items assigned to her by the hospital. In return for dealing with these things, the speaker suggests, patients get to experience an amazing "peacefulness." To her, the tradeoff is clearly worth it.

Going a step further, she compares this peacefulness to the serenity of the dead. She pictures dying people absorbing it into their bodies—"Shutting their mouths on it, like a Communion tablet." This simile alludes to the Catholic rite of Communion, in which believers symbolically become one with Christ by consuming a wafer ("tablet") and wine. To the speaker, then, there's something holy about the peacefulness of the hospital. It already made her feel as "pure" as "a nun" (line 28); now she compares it to undergoing a sacred ritual or even ascending to heaven. Just as at the beginning of the stanza, there's the unsettling implication that, in longing for this peace, the speaker may actually have wanted to die. Whether or not she feels that way now, she still feels deeply drawn to quiet solitude.

LINES 36-39

> *The tulips are ...*
> *... wound, it corresponds.*

In lines 36-39, the tulips come back with a vengeance! From here, they continue to dominate "Tulips" until its last few lines. They become both the central image and the central symbol of the poem—the object of the speaker's obsessive focus.

After a stanza about the incredible "peacefulness" of the hospital, the tulips appear as a jarring disturbance:

> The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me.
> Even through the gift paper I could hear them
> breathe
> Lightly, through their white swaddlings, like an awful
> baby.

To the speaker, the flowers are so alarmingly "red" that "they hurt," and so vividly alive that they seem human. Combining simile with disturbing personification, she imagines them as "an awful baby" that she can "hear [...] breathe" through its "swaddlings." In reality, the "swaddlings" (clothes used to wrap a baby) are the "gift paper" around the bouquet; this paper may be crinkling in the breeze, making a sound like soft breathing. The sound seems to haunt her and interfere with her solitude. (Some critics have speculated that this ghostly imagery was inspired by a miscarriage Plath had not long before she wrote the poem; Plath was also raising a baby daughter at this time.)

The flowers are also a painful reminder of the surgery she's undergone: "Their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds." The "wound" here is most likely a surgical scar (though the speaker might also be metaphorically, psychologically wounded). The vivid red of the tulips evokes blood, strong emotion, and the "hurt" of being alive—in contrast with the peaceful, neutral, numbing whiteness of the surrounding hospital.

LINES 40-42

> *They are subtle: ...*
> *... round my neck.*

Lines 40-42 expand on the speaker's complaint about the tulips. Paradoxically, the flowers strike her as lighter than air and very heavy at the same time: "They are subtle: they seem to float, though they weigh me down." This might imply that their flourishing vitality, which seems to lift them up, depresses her (weighs her down psychologically) in her weakened state. She adds that "their sudden tongues and their color" trouble her, and that they even seem to physically drag her down, like "A dozen red lead sinkers round my neck."

Both the tulips' resemblance to "tongues" and their blood-red "color" make them look almost disturbingly animate and alive. They "Upset[]" the speaker because they interfere with her trance-like or death-like state, reminding her that she, too, is alive—and has a painful "wound" that's as red as they are (line 39). As a result, they strike her as more a burden than a gift.

Alliteration ("subtle"/"seem," "red"/"round"), assonance ("float, though," "Upsetting"/"sudden tongues"/"color"/"dozen," "red lead"/"neck"), and internal rhyme ("they weigh," "red lead") are especially dense in these lines. This density suits the speaker's metaphor: it seems to weigh down the lines themselves, slowing the pace of the language.

LINES 43-48

> *Nobody watched me ...*
> *... to efface myself.*

Lines 43-48 describe the speaker's sense of being "watched" by the tulips. This may be a kind of paranoid fantasy, but it also illustrates how the arrival of the tulips—clearly a gift from a friend or loved one—has threatened her sense of solitude. Before, she felt alone and free in the hospital; now, her eye is drawn to a constant reminder of her life and relationships outside the hospital. Just as the poem earlier juxtaposed her pre-hospital life with her life as a hospital patient, it now contrasts her serenity *before* the tulips' arrival with her disquiet *since* their arrival.

In her uneasy state, the speaker interprets the flowers' turning toward the sunlight—a natural movement called heliotropism—as a turning toward *her*:

> The tulips turn to me, and the window behind me
> Where once a day the light slowly widens and slowly thins
> And I see myself, flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow
> Between the eye of the sun and the eyes of the tulips
> [...]

In fact, she imagines herself watched not only by "the eyes of the tulips" but also by "the eye of the sun." She personifies both sun and flowers and feels caught between both—perhaps a sign that she feels trapped in a more general way. Compared with their tremendous vitality, she feels vulnerable and insignificant, like a shadow or paper doll: "flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow."

Building on this metaphor, she claims that she has "no face"—no meaningful identity—and that she has "wanted to efface [her]self," meaning diminish herself even further or disappear completely. Again, there's the suggestion that she may have been wrestling with suicidal thoughts, or at least a feeling of profound detachment from her own life. Surrounded by the "eyes" of sun and tulips, she feels like the center of attention; yet she also feels unimportant and "ridiculous," as if she's *unworthy* of attention.

Once again, the repetition of key words—including "watched," "me," "slowly," and "eye"/"eyes," plus "face" and the second syllable of "efface"—underscores the repetitiveness of the speaker's hospital routine. Day after day, she feels the same unease.

LINES 49-52

> *The vivid tulips ...*
> *... a loud noise.*

Lines 49-52 portray the tulips as dominating the speaker's environment. The speaker describes them almost as a competitive threat, a rival life form taking over the room: "The vivid tulips eat my oxygen." She claims that their very presence has disturbed the "calm" of the air, which she imagined (in another personification) as "Coming and going, breath by breath, without any fuss." The tulips' color is so loud, their presence so unignorable, that they seem to have "filled [the air] up like a loud noise."

These hyperbolic descriptions capture the speaker's attitude toward the tulips, which aren't literally stealing her air supply but which seem to disturb or threaten her on another level. Because they're reminders of blood, pain, and life outside the hospital, they seem to shatter her numb, post-surgery "peacefulness"—as well as her illusion of total isolation from the world.

Notice that both line 49 ("The viv- | id tu- | lips eat | my ox- | ygen") and line 50 ("Be**fore** | they **came** | the **air** | was **calm** | e**nough**") conform to the "da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM" rhythm of iambic pentameter (more on this in the Meter section of this guide). Though "Tulips" is a free verse poem, it returns occasionally to this classic metrical pattern, as if the speaker's swirling thoughts were seeking some kind of stability.

LINES 53-56

> *Now the air ...*
> *... without committing itself.*

The description of the tulips in lines 53-56 ("Now the air [...] committing itself") recalls lines 40-42, which compared them to heavy "lead sinkers." Now the speaker compares them to something "sunken": a "rust-red engine" in a "river." According to the speaker's simile, the tulips disrupt the air in the same way the sunken object disrupts the water:

> Now the air snags and eddies round them the way a river
> Snags and eddies round a sunken rust-red engine.

"The air" might refer to drafts from the window behind her, swaying the tulips as she watches. Just as the tulips seem to attract the air currents, they seem to "concentrate" the speaker's "attention," which was previously "happy / Playing and resting without committing itself." Before the bouquet arrived, the speaker was in a blissfully unfocused, almost meditative state; now she's fixated specifically on the flowers. Once again, they strike her as heavy, in a reflection of her own heavy mood.

Alliteration ("**r**ound"/"**r**iver"/"**r**ound"/"**r**ust-**r**ed") and assonance ("**e**ddies"/"**e**ddies"/"rust-r**e**d **e**ngine," "s**u**nken"/"r**u**st-red," "s**u**nken"/"eng**i**ne") slow down the language of lines 53-53, mimicking the way the flowers themselves seem to "snag[]" and slow down the air. Again, this effect is similar to lines 40-42 ("they weigh me down [...] round my neck"), in which the same poetic devices made the language sound dense and "weigh[ty]."

LINES 57-61

> *The walls, also, ...*
> *... love of me.*

Lines 57-61 continue describing the tulips' effect on their surroundings, including the speaker. Their blazing red color seems to warm the bare hospital walls; or, rather, "The walls, also, seem to be warming themselves" around the tulips' blaze. This "also" may suggest that the tulips have made the speaker feel *emotionally* warmer, despite her initial distaste for them.

At the same time, the speaker still associates the tulips with danger:

> The tulips should be behind bars like dangerous animals;
> They are opening like the mouth of some great African cat [...]

This isn't the first time she's imagined the flowers as mouths of a sort; earlier, she seemed to hear them "breathe" and "talk[]" (lines 37 and 39), and referred to "their sudden tongues" (line 41). Now, however, rather than personifying them, she compares them to an *animal* mouth—the jaws of "some great African cat" (a lion, leopard, etc.). In the end, they seem to symbolize a wild vitality, a force that she can't tame or control.

But this force seems to be present *within* her, too. No sooner has she compared the tulip blooms to a wild animal than she imagines her own heart as a "bowl of red blooms":

> And I am aware of my heart: it opens and closes
> Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me.

Once again, this metaphor links the tulips with the speaker's emotional state. Here, at last, she feels an inner vitality that corresponds with the vitality of the tulips. Her heart "opens" just as the tulips are "opening"; it feels a "sheer love of me," a pure joy at being alive. However gradually, the speaker seems to be losing her desire for "numbness" and "empt[iness]."

LINES 62-63

The water I ...
... away as health.

Lines 62-63 don't rhyme or share a meter, but their single sentence has the force of a closing couplet:

> The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea,
> And comes from a country far away as health.

"The water I taste" must refer to the speaker's own tears, since they have a "warm" and "salt[y]" flavor. The speaker's growing "aware[ness] of [her] heart" in the previous lines seems to have brought an emotional catharsis. After a long period of numbness, she's now crying—whether from joy, relief, pain, sadness, or all of the above.

Her salty tears remind her of "the sea" and seem to flow from a "country far away as health." This simile implies that a full recovery (psychological as well as physical) is a long way away. At the same time, it implies that she now feels some *connection* to the distant "country" of health; in other words, the very fact that she's crying may indicate that recovery is possible. She isn't doomed to remain numb (due to medication or death).

Alliteration ("water"/"warm," "comes"/"country") and assonance ("water"/"salt," "comes"/"country") underscore several of the stressed syllables in these lines, making the couplet-like ending more crisp and emphatic.

SYMBOLS

TULIPS

Unsurprisingly, tulips are the central symbol in "Tulips"! Over the course of the poem, the tulips the speaker has received take on a wide range of associations and connotations. They're a get-well gift (the speaker's just gone through surgery), so they're *supposed* to symbolize health and recovery, as well as love from the person who sent them. But for the speaker, they come to represent the power, pain, and complications of life itself—something she has very mixed feelings about! As gifts from a friend or loved one, they also represent her relationships with other people—something she's equally ambivalent about.

Because the tulips are red as blood, the speaker associates them with both pain *and* vitality:

- For example, she links their "redness" with her "wound" (meaning her surgical scar) in line 39; to her, the one "corresponds" with the other.
- At the same time, "The vivid tulips eat my oxygen" (line 49); they're so dynamically alive that they seem to drain some of her own vitality. Yet they also "concentrate [her] attention" (line 55), disrupting her zoned-out, almost death-like state and pulling her back toward the demands of life.
- And in the final stanza, she links the tulips with her own heart, which she compares to a "bowl of red blooms" that feels "sheer love" for her body (line 61).

Thus, in the end, the flowers symbolize the same powerful life force that she feels inside her, despite her attraction to sickness and death.

Similarly, the tulips are a clear reminder of the speaker's attachments and responsibilities to other people, despite her love of solitude, anonymity, and freedom from responsibility. Though she claims that "I am nobody" (line 5), the get-well bouquet reminds her that she is, in fact, somebody: a living person with relationships to others. This element of the tulips' symbolism is clearest in the fifth stanza:

> I didn't want any flowers, I only wanted
> To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty.
> How free it is, you have no idea how free [...]

Though she may not have wanted them, she *does* receive flowers, which remind her that she's neither "utterly empty" (like the dead) nor completely "free." She still has important bonds with other people, which she'll have to renew and tend to once she leaves the hospital.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "The tulips are too excitable, it is winter here."
- **Lines 29-31:** "I didn't want any flowers, I only wanted / To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty. / How free it is, you have no idea how free——"
- **Lines 36-61:** "The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me. / Even through the gift paper I could hear them breathe / Lightly, through their white swaddlings, like an awful baby. / Their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds. / They are subtle: they seem to float, though they weigh me down, / Upsetting me with their sudden tongues and their color, / A dozen red lead sinkers round my neck. / Nobody watched me before, now I am watched. / The tulips turn to me, and the window behind me / Where once a day the light slowly widens and slowly thins, / And I see myself, flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow / Between the eye of the sun and the eyes of the tulips, / And I have no face, I have wanted to efface myself. / The vivid tulips eat my oxygen. / Before they came the air was calm enough, / Coming and going, breath by breath, without any fuss. / Then the tulips filled it up like a loud noise. / Now the air snags and eddies round them the way a river / Snags and eddies round a sunken rust-red engine. / They concentrate my attention, that was happy / Playing and resting without committing itself. / The walls, also, seem to be warming themselves. / The tulips should be behind bars like dangerous animals; / They are opening like the mouth of some great African cat, / And I am aware of my heart: it opens and closes / Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is an important part of "Tulips," adding to the musicality and meaning of key passages. For example, repeating, liquid /l/ and /w/ sounds create a soothing music in lines 3-4, reinforcing the "peacefulness" the speaker is describing:

> I am learning peacefulness, lying by myself quietly
> As the light lies on these white walls, this bed, these hands.

Later, line 21 bristles with /s/ alliteration (also known as sibilance) and /k/ consonance:

> Their smiles catch onto my skin, little smiling hooks.

The combination of hissing sibilance and hard /k/ sounds turns this ordinary image of a "family photo" into something ominous and unpleasant. These consonants also slow down the poem's pace, as if digging "little [...] hooks" into the rhythm of the language.

A similar effect occurs in lines 53-54, as the speaker describes air currents "snag[ging]" on the bright red tulips:

> Now the air snags and eddies round them the way a river
> Snags and eddies round a sunken rust-red engine.

Here, sibilance and /r/ alliteration—along with other effects, such as /n/ consonance and the assonance of "sunken"/"rust"—slow the poem's rhythm considerably. Again, it's as if the language itself has hit a snag.

Alliteration is especially prominent at the very end of the poem, in lines 62-63:

> The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea,
> And comes from a country far away as health.

Repeating /w/, /s/, and /k/ sounds help make the language musical and memorable, so that these last two lines function almost like a closing couplet.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "tulips," "too"
- **Line 3:** "learning," "lying"
- **Line 4:** "light lies," "white walls"
- **Line 5:** "nobody," "nothing"
- **Line 9:** "white," "will"
- **Line 17:** "bring," "numbness," "bright," "needles," "bring"
- **Line 21:** "smiles," "skin," "smiling"
- **Line 25:** "plastic-pillowed," "trolley"
- **Line 26:** "teaset," "bureaus," "books"
- **Line 27:** "Sink," "sight," "water went"
- **Line 28:** "nun now," "never"
- **Line 33:** "nothing," "name"
- **Line 40:** "subtle," "seem"
- **Line 42:** "red," "round"
- **Line 44:** "tulips turn," "window"
- **Line 45:** "Where once," "widens"
- **Line 50:** "came," "calm"
- **Line 51:** "Coming"
- **Line 53:** "snags," "round," "river"
- **Line 54:** "Snags," "round," "sunken," "rust-red"
- **Line 57:** "walls," "warming"
- **Line 58:** "behind bars"
- **Line 61:** "bowl," "blooms"
- **Line 62:** "water," "warm," "salt," "sea"
- **Line 63:** "comes," "country"

ASSONANCE

Assonance, like alliteration, pops up throughout the poem (including in the first and last lines!). It adds some pleasing musicality to a poem with a mostly flat tone and prose-like rhythm; it also helps bring the poem's imagery and figurative language to life. Take the combined metaphor and simile in lines 15-16, for example:

> My body is a pebble to them, they tend it as water
> Tends to the pebbles it must run over, smoothing
> them gently.

Here, the speaker compares the nurses handling and treating her body to flowing water smoothing a small stone. The repeating /eh/ and /uh/ sounds mimic the repetitive motion of the "water," giving the lines themselves a rhythmic flow.

In lines 41-42, dense assonance starts to weigh the lines down, mimicking the heavy "sinkers" the speaker's describing:

> Upsetting me with their sudden tongues and their
> color,
> A dozen red lead sinkers round my neck.

The cluster of /uh/ and /eh/ sounds, along with the emphatic internal rhyme "red lead," makes the lines themselves sound as if they're being dragged by lead weights!

Similarly, in lines 53-54, assonance and internal rhyme impede the flow of the language in a way that mirrors the poem's imagery. Combined with alliteration, dense /eh/, /uh/, /in/, and /ed/ sounds make the lines themselves seem to "snag[]" and drag:

> Now the air snags and eddies round them the way a
> river
> Snags and eddies round a sunken rust-red engine.

In the poem's final lines, by contrast, the more spaced-out assonance of "water"/"salt" and "comes"/"country" adds to a smoother, gentler rhythm:

> The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea,
> And comes from a country far away as health.

This gentle, wave-like flow seems to fit the closing simile about the sea.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "tulips," "too," "it is winter"
- **Line 2:** "white," "quiet"
- **Line 3:** "I," "lying by myself quietly"
- **Line 4:** "light lies," "white"
- **Line 6:** "name," "day"
- **Line 7:** "history," "anesthetist"
- **Line 9:** "eye," "white," "lids," "will"
- **Line 10:** "Stupid pupil"
- **Line 12:** "pass," "pass," "caps"
- **Line 13:** "one just," "another"
- **Line 15:** "pebble," "them," "tend"
- **Line 16:** "Tends," "pebbles," "must run," "gently"
- **Line 17:** "needles," "sleep"
- **Line 18:** "baggage"
- **Line 19:** "patent," "black"
- **Line 20:** "child smiling"
- **Line 21:** "smiles," "skin, little," "smiling"
- **Line 25:** "Scared," "bare"
- **Line 31:** "free," "free"
- **Line 32:** "peacefulness"
- **Line 36:** "tulips," "too," "first," "hurt"
- **Line 38:** "Lightly," "white"
- **Line 41:** "Upsetting," "sudden tongues," "color"
- **Line 42:** "dozen," "red lead," "neck"
- **Line 45:** "light," "widens"
- **Line 46:** "flat," "shadow"
- **Line 48:** "face," "efface"
- **Line 50:** "enough"
- **Line 51:** "Coming," "breath," "breath," "any," "fuss"
- **Line 53:** "eddies"
- **Line 54:** "eddies," "sunken rust-red engine"
- **Line 55:** "They concentrate"
- **Line 56:** "committing itself"
- **Line 57:** "walls, also"
- **Line 59:** "African cat"
- **Line 60:** "opens," "closes"
- **Line 62:** "water," "salt"
- **Line 63:** "comes," "country"

PERSONIFICATION

During her extended descriptions of the bouquet she's received, the speaker repeatedly personifies the tulips. She imagines them as somewhat alarming or threatening figures; their intense *aliveness* is a reminder of the pain, danger, and intensity of life itself.

First, in the opening line, the speaker calls the tulips "too excitable," as if their bright red color were a sign of high emotion or nervous tension. (In fact, the speaker may be projecting her own feelings onto the flowers.) Later, in lines 37-39, she compares them to an ominous infant who can somehow talk:

> Even through the gift paper I could hear them
> breathe
> Lightly, through their white swaddlings, like an awful
> baby.

> Their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds.

Combined with a simile, this personification suggests that the flowers seem *disturbingly* alive—so much so that the speaker believes she can "hear them breathe." (Perhaps this is just her imagination, or perhaps she hears their "gift paper" crinkling in the breeze.) Moreover, the blood-red flowers remind her so much of the color of her "wound"—that is, her surgical scar—that the two seem to "talk[]" or "correspond[]" on some profound level. (In addition to her appendectomy, Plath had suffered a miscarriage not long before writing "Tulips," so the baby/blood imagery here may relate to the pain of that experience as well.)

In lines 43-47, the personification becomes borderline paranoid, as the speaker feels "watched" by "the eyes of the tulips" (as well as "the eye of the sun"). This eerie description emphasizes that the speaker has *enjoyed* her isolation here, and now feels reluctant to return to her normal life. The tulips serve as a painful reminder of that life, both because they're the color of blood (the "life force") and because they're a gift from a loved one outside the hospital. As a result, their presence seems to threaten her solitude.

Tulips aren't the only thing the speaker personifies. In lines 8-10, she compares her head to an "eye," then personifies it as a "Stupid pupil" who "has to take everything in." The word "pupil" here is a pun; it can mean both "center of the eye" and "student." Either way, the speaker imagines her head as a kind of passive entity that simply processes things as they come. In lines 50-51, the speaker personifies the air in her room, which she claims was "calm" and made no "fuss" before the arrival of the tulips. Here she seems to be projecting her own feelings onto her surroundings; as the poem makes clear, *she* felt much calmer before the flowers came.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "The tulips are too excitable, it is winter here."
- **Line 10:** "Stupid pupil, it has to take everything in."
- **Lines 37-38:** "Even through the gift paper I could hear them breathe / Lightly, through their white swaddlings, like an awful baby. "
- **Line 39:** "Their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds."
- **Lines 43-47:** "Nobody watched me before, now I am watched. / The tulips turn to me, and the window behind me / Where once a day the light slowly widens and slowly thins, / And I see myself, flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow / Between the eye of the sun and the eyes of the tulips, "
- **Lines 50-51:** "Before they came the air was calm enough, / Coming and going, breath by breath, without any fuss. "

REPETITION

The poem contains many examples of repetition. One obvious example is the word "tulips" itself, which pops up not only in the title but seven times in the body of the poem, always as part of the phrase "the tulips" (or "the vivid tulips," line 49). In four of those instances, the phrase "The tulips" begins a line (lines 1, 36, 44, 58). These repetitions emphasize how central the tulips are to the poem—the way they disrupt the speaker's serenity "like a loud noise" (line 52) and magnetize all her focus ("concentrate my attention," line 55).

If repetition helps convey the disruptiveness of the tulips, it also helps convey the soothing predictability of the routine they've disrupted. Notice how repeated words and phrases ("pass," "pebble(s)," etc.) create a soothing rhythm in lines 11-17:

> The nurses **pass** and **pass**, they are no trouble,
> They **pass** the way gulls **pass** inland in their white caps [...]
> My body is a **pebble** to them, they **tend** it as water
> **Tends** to the **pebbles** it must run over, smoothing them gently.
> **They bring me** numbness in their bright needles, **they bring me** sleep.

The repetition becomes almost hypnotic, lulling the reader the way the nurses and their drugs lull the speaker to "sleep." (Note that the repetition of "pass," "pebble[s]," and "tend[s]" are more specifically examples of the device known as diacope, while "they bring me" is anaphora.)

Repetition has some subtler effects, too. In the first stanza, for example, three straight sentences begin with "I" (lines 3-7):

> I am learning peacefulness [...]
> I am nobody [...]
> I have given my name and my day-clothes up [...]

This anaphora sounds almost mantra-like, as though the speaker is soothing herself by reaffirming her lack of identity. But it's ironic that, as she insists on her anonymity, she keeps saying *I*, *I*, *I*! This clash between what she's saying and how she's saying it points to a deeper tension in the poem: the speaker's conflicting desires to remain in the hospital as "nobody" and to resume her life as a normal person.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "The tulips"
- **Line 2:** "how," "white," "how," "how"
- **Line 3:** "I," "peacefulness"
- **Line 4:** "these," "white," "these"
- **Line 5:** "I," "I"

- **Line 6:** "I," "my," "and my," "to the"
- **Line 7:** "And my," "to the," "and my," "to"
- **Line 9:** "white"
- **Line 11:** "pass," "pass"
- **Line 12:** "pass," "pass," "white"
- **Line 15:** "pebble," "tend"
- **Line 16:** "Tends," "pebbles"
- **Line 17:** "They bring me," "they bring me"
- **Line 20:** "smiling"
- **Line 21:** "smiles," "smiling"
- **Line 26:** "my," "my," "my"
- **Line 32:** "peacefulness"
- **Line 36:** "The tulips," "red"
- **Line 38:** "white"
- **Line 39:** "redness"
- **Line 44:** "The tulips"
- **Line 47:** "the eye of the," "the eyes of the," "tulips"
- **Line 48:** "face," "efface"
- **Line 49:** "The vivid tulips"
- **Line 51:** "breath," "breath"
- **Line 52:** "the tulips"
- **Line 53:** "snags and eddies round"
- **Line 54:** "Snags and eddies round," "red"
- **Line 58:** "The tulips"
- **Line 59:** "opening"
- **Line 60:** "opens"

METAPHOR

The poem contains many metaphors, which tend to overlap with the related devices known as personification and simile. In general, the speaker perceives her surroundings in imaginative, figurative terms, so that it's sometimes ambiguous as to whether she's speaking literally or metaphorically.

In lines 1-2, for example, she *might* mean that it's literally "winter here" and that the hospital is actually "snowed-in," but in context, these could also be metaphorical descriptions of the hospital's sterile whiteness.

Most of the poem's metaphors characterize the speaker's feelings and mental state:

- For example, she calls her head a "Stupid pupil" (*pupil* meaning *the center of the eye*, and also *student*) that "has to take everything in" (line 10). In other words, she feels as if she's forced to passively absorb whatever happens around her.
- She compares her "body," under the nurses' care, to a "pebble" smoothed by water (line 15)—suggesting both the gentleness of the nurses and the inertia she feels in herself.
- She calls herself "a thirty-year-old cargo boat" that's "let things slip" and has been "swabbed clear" of its "loving associations" (line 22)—meaning that she feels mentally unburdened and cleansed of all but life's bare essentials. Yet the tulips, whose startling color (and implied get-well message) intrudes on her peace, feel like a new kind of burden; she compares them to "A dozen red lead sinkers round my neck" (line 42).

Notice, by the way, how many of the poem's metaphors are water-related! While this pattern isn't consistent enough to form an extended metaphor, the many figurative comparisons to running water, boats, sinking, etc. lend a bit of cohesion to the speaker's swirling thoughts. It's as if the speaker's imagination is free-associating, sometimes coming up with totally unexpected comparisons—as when she likens the tulips to "explosions" in line 5—but returning often to images and metaphors from the same general family.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "I have nothing to do with explosions."
- **Line 10:** "Stupid pupil, it has to take everything in."
- **Line 15:** "My body is a pebble to them,"
- **Line 21:** "Their smiles catch onto my skin, little smiling hooks."
- **Lines 22-24:** "I have let things slip, a thirty-year-old cargo boat / stubbornly hanging on to my name and address. / They have swabbed me clear of my loving associations. "
- **Lines 26-27:** "I watched my teaset, my bureaus of linen, my books / Sink out of sight, and the water went over my head. "
- **Line 28:** "I am a nun now, I have never been so pure."
- **Line 40:** "they seem to float, though they weigh me down, "
- **Line 41:** "Upsetting me with their sudden tongues"
- **Line 42:** "A dozen red lead sinkers round my neck."
- **Line 45:** "Where once a day the light slowly widens and slowly thins, "
- **Lines 46-47:** "a cut-paper shadow / Between the eye of the sun and the eyes of the tulips, "
- **Lines 60-61:** "And I am aware of my heart: it opens and closes / Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me."

SIMILE

"Tulips" is full of similes, which the speaker uses to describe her flowers, her surroundings, and herself. Her figurative language helps make an experience that might normally sound dull—an extended recovery period in a hospital—seem vivid, compelling, and even a bit surreal.

The first simile is a fairly restrained one. In fact, it's about restraint:

> I am learning peacefulness, lying by myself quietly

> As the light lies on these white walls, this bed, these hands.

By comparing herself to the calm light of the hospital, the speaker presents herself as a "quiet[]," passive, contemplative figure. In fact, passivity is something she seems to take pride in and desire (she's enjoying this respite from her busy, normal life). Later similes emphasize passivity as well: she compares her head to an "eye" that has no choice but "to take everything in" (lines 8-10), and her body under the nurses' care to an inert "pebble" smoothed by water (lines 15-16):

> My body is a pebble to them, they tend it as water
> Tends to the pebbles it must run over, smoothing them gently.

So much does she value the "peacefulness" of the hospital that she imagines it as a final reward or sacred rite before death: "I imagine [the dead] / Shutting their mouths on it, like a Communion tablet" (lines 34-35).

By contrast, other similes emphasize the jarring, disturbing nature of the tulips. The speaker claims she can hear them breathing "like an awful baby," and that they dominate the room "like a loud noise" (lines 38, 52). She imagines them as blocking or stealing the room's fresh air; she says the air swirls around them "the way a river / Snags and eddies round a sunken rust-red engine" (lines 53-54).

Finally, in the last stanza, she compares them to "dangerous animals" and "some great African cat," such as a leopard or lion (lines 58-59). All these similes stress her fear and resentment of the flowers, which were meant to cheer her up but instead seem to shatter the peace of her surroundings.

The poem's last two lines feature a last important simile:

> The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea,
> And comes from a country far away as health.

Here, the speaker compares her tears, which she can "taste" on her lips, to a "sea" that flows to her "from a country far away as health." To some degree, the tears seem to predict her eventual recovery; their "warm[th]" matches her perception that the room itself is "warming" (line 57) and suggests the return of strength, love, etc. Even though "health" still seems "far away," it's at least faintly within range.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "I am learning peacefulness, lying by myself quietly / As the light lies on these white walls, this bed, these hands. "
- **Lines 8-10:** "They have propped my head between the pillow and the sheet-cuff / Like an eye between two white lids that will not shut. / Stupid pupil, it has to take everything in."
- **Lines 11-12:** "The nurses pass and pass, they are no trouble, / They pass the way gulls pass inland in their white caps,"
- **Lines 15-16:** "My body is a pebble to them, they tend it as water / Tends to the pebbles it must run over, smoothing them gently."
- **Line 19:** "My patent leather overnight case like a black pillbox, "
- **Lines 34-35:** "It is what the dead close on, finally; I imagine them / Shutting their mouths on it, like a Communion tablet. "
- **Lines 37-38:** "Even through the gift paper I could hear them breathe / Lightly, through their white swaddlings, like an awful baby. "
- **Line 52:** "Then the tulips filled it up like a loud noise."
- **Lines 53-54:** "Now the air snags and eddies round them the way a river / Snags and eddies round a sunken rust-red engine. "
- **Line 58:** "The tulips should be behind bars like dangerous animals; "
- **Line 59:** "They are opening like the mouth of some great African cat, "
- **Lines 62-63:** "The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea, / And comes from a country far away as health."

IMAGERY

"Tulips" has lots of vivid imagery. The central image in the poem is, of course, the vivid red tulips themselves, whose "redness" the speaker describes in almost hyperbolic terms: "The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me" (line 36).

This redness sharply contrasts with the surrounding "white[ness]" of the hospital setting, which the speaker emphasizes repeatedly (for example, in line 2: "Look how white everything is, how quiet, how snowed-in"). As the poem goes on, these literal color descriptions take on complex symbolic overtones: for example, the redness becomes associated with blood, life, pain, love, and more.

The poem also includes visual images of the hospital environment, such as the description of the nurses "pass[ing] and pass[ing]" (line 11) in the second and third stanzas. However, not all the imagery is visual; the poem also engages the senses of hearing, touch, and taste. Take the eerie sound imagery in lines 37-38, for example:

> Even through the gift paper I could hear them breathe
> Lightly, through their white swaddlings, like an awful baby.

Most likely, this detail refers to the crinkling of the tulips' "gift

paper" in the drafty hospital air—an ordinary sound that the speaker interprets as an unnatural, ghostly "breath[ing]." We know the air is drafty, by the way, because line 51 describes it "Coming and going, breath by breath": an image that engages the senses of hearing *and* touch.

The speaker also mentions the drug-induced "numbness" she feels after the nurses' injections (line 17)—an example of touch imagery describing what someone *doesn't* feel! Taste imagery plays only a small role in the poem, but it shows up at a crucial moment in the next-to-last line:

> The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea [...]

Here, the speaker is describing the flavor of her own tears: an indirect way of suggesting that her psychological numbness is wearing off and her emotions have begun to spill over.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "The tulips are too excitable, it is winter here. / Look how white everything is, how quiet, how snowed-in. "
- **Line 4:** "As the light lies on these white walls, this bed, these hands. "
- **Lines 8-9:** "They have propped my head between the pillow and the sheet-cuff / Like an eye between two white lids that will not shut."
- **Lines 11-14:** "The nurses pass and pass, they are no trouble, / They pass the way gulls pass inland in their white caps, / Doing things with their hands, one just the same as another, / So it is impossible to tell how many there are."
- **Line 17:** "They bring me numbness in their bright needles,"
- **Lines 19-21:** "My patent leather overnight case like a black pillbox, / My husband and child smiling out of the family photo; / Their smiles catch onto my skin, little smiling hooks."
- **Lines 25-27:** "Scared and bare on the green plastic-pillowed trolley / I watched my teaset, my bureaus of linen, my books / Sink out of sight,"
- **Lines 36-41:** "The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me. / Even through the gift paper I could hear them breathe / Lightly, through their white swaddlings, like an awful baby. / Their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds. / They are subtle: they seem to float, though they weigh me down, / Upsetting me with their sudden tongues and their color, "
- **Lines 44-47:** "The tulips turn to me, and the window behind me / Where once a day the light slowly widens and slowly thins, / And I see myself, flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow / Between the eye of the sun and the eyes of the tulips, "
- **Lines 50-54:** "Before they came the air was calm enough, / Coming and going, breath by breath, without any fuss. / Then the tulips filled it up like a loud noise. / Now the air snags and eddies round them the way a river / Snags and eddies round a sunken rust-red engine. "
- **Line 57:** "The walls, also, seem to be warming themselves."
- **Line 62:** "The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea,"

JUXTAPOSITION

The speaker presents at least two main juxtapositions:

- Between her life before and after entering the hospital;
- And between her hospital experience before and after receiving the tulips.

The first of these juxtapositions plays out in lines 18-28. According to the speaker, her pre-hospital life was full of strong family and social bonds, or "loving associations" (line 24). It was a domestic life full of creature comforts and acquired possessions: "my teaset, my bureaus of linen, my books" (line 26).

Now she's let all that go, or at least wants to. She's so "sick of" the emotional "baggage" it represents that she's even irritated by her "husband and child smiling out of the family photo" (line 20). She feels as if she's shed her life's "cargo" (burdens) and is "hanging on" only to her "name and address" (lines 22-23). She claims that the hospital staff has "swabbed [her] clear"—that is, cleansed her life—of her old "associations," and that "I am a nun now, I have never been so pure" (lines 24, 28). Entering the hospital has felt like entering a convent: turning her back on the ordinary world and embracing radical simplicity.

However, the tulips mark a distinct change in her experience *within* the hospital. They arrive as a kind of message from the outside world, reminding her that she isn't permanently sick or dying and can't stay hospitalized forever. Stanzas 5-8 (lines 29-56) illustrate this conflict at length. The speaker grumbles that "I didn't want any flowers, I only wanted / To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty" (lines 29-30): in other words, she wanted the sustained simplicity of prolonged convalescence or even death. She didn't want get-well flowers because, on some level, she didn't want to get well!

Now that the flowers are in her room, they seem to "hurt [her]," reminding her of the pain and blood-red color of her "wound" (lines 36, 39). They seem to "watch[]" her, as if monitoring her recovery (line 43), and to focus her attention, "like a loud noise," on their unignorable presence (line 52).

All in all, the speaker seems to prefer hospital life to regular life and to prefer her hospital experience *before* the tulips' arrival to her experience *after*. (For a few days there, she was in heaven!) At the same time, the poem's ending suggests that, on some

level, she understands the need to return to her old, "health[y]" life (line 63).

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 18-28
- Lines 29-56

ASYNDETON

In several instances, the poem uses asyndeton to make lines flow more rhythmically. This flow, in turn, helps illustrate the "peacefulness" the speaker feels in the hospital. Notice, for example, how the omission of "and" contributes to the calming rhythm of lines 2 and 4:

> Look how white everything is, how quiet, how
> snowed-in.
> I am learning peacefulness, lying by myself quietly
> As the light lies on these white walls, this bed, these
> hands.

Sticking an "and" between "quiet" and "how," or between "bed" and "these," would throw off the consistent rhythm in these phrases ("how quiet, how snowed-in"; "this bed, these hands"). A similar omission of "and," for the sake of concision and rhythm, occurs in line 26 ("my teaset, my bureaus of linen, my books") and line 33 ("a name tag, a few trinkets").

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Look how white everything is, how quiet, how snowed-in. "
- **Lines 3-4:** "lying by myself quietly / As the light lies on these white walls, this bed, these hands. "
- **Lines 26-27:** "I watched my teaset, my bureaus of linen, my books / Sink out of sight,"
- **Line 33:** "And it asks nothing, a name tag, a few trinkets."

VOCABULARY

Excitable (Line 1) - Easily excited or stimulated. Here used metaphorically (or as part of a personification) to describe the tulips' vibrant appearance.

Snowed-in (Line 2) - Covered in, or kept inside by, heavy snow. Here used metaphorically to describe the blank whiteness of the hospital.

Anesthetist (Line 7) - A nurse who helps administer anesthesia to patients.

Sheet-cuff (Line 8) - The band of fabric along the top of a bedsheet.

Gulls (Line 12) - That is, seagulls (gray or white seabirds).

Overnight case (Line 19) - A small item of luggage for overnight stays or short trips. (Here, the speaker has packed it for her hospital stay.)

Pillbox (Line 19) - A small container for storing and organizing medications.

Cargo boat (Line 22) - A ship built for carrying freight (cargo). Here, a metaphor for the speaker, who has tried to let go of things that were weighing her down psychologically (see "I am sick of baggage," line 18).

Swabbed (Line 24) - Cleaned with absorbent material, such as cotton (as during a surgical or medical procedure that involves cleaning a wound). The speaker is also punning on another meaning of *swab*: to mop the deck of a ship (she's earlier compared herself to a "cargo boat").

Trolley (Line 25) - Refers, here, to a *gurney* (a wheeled stretcher for patients).

Teaset (Line 26) - A set of items for serving tea, such a tray, pot, etc. (Here used as an example of the personal items the speaker has left behind during her hospital stay.)

Bureaus (Line 26) - Dressers; chests of drawers.

Trinkets (Line 33) - Small items of little value. (Can refer specifically to low-cost jewelry or similar accessories.)

Communion tablet (Line 35) - The wafer used in the Catholic rite of Communion, symbolizing the body of Christ.

Swaddlings (Line 38) - Wrappings. (Often meaning cloth used to wrap a baby, but here meaning the wrapping paper for the flower bouquet.)

Corresponds (Line 39) - Matches or aligns with. (Here, the red of the flowers matches the red of the speaker's wound.)

Sinkers (Line 42) - Weights attached to something to make it sink.

Cut-paper shadow (Line 46) - A figure that has been cut out of paper and seems as thin and flat as a shadow. (This whole phrase is a metaphor for the speaker herself, who feels vulnerable and insubstantial after surgery.)

Efface (Line 48) - Erase; make less visible or prominent.

Eddies (Line 54) - Moves in swirls or circles (like water around an obstacle).

Committing (Line 56) - Focusing on or investing in something. (The speaker's attention hadn't "committ[ed] itself" in the sense of focusing on anything in particular.)

Great African cat (Line 59) - Any of various large, wild cats found in Africa: lions, leopards, cheetahs, etc.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Tulips" consists of nine septets, or seven-line stanzas. It's a free verse poem, so it doesn't have a regular meter or rhyme scheme. In fact, its rhythm tends to sound prose-like, despite the presence of line breaks.

Each stanza is also end-stopped with a period, making each seem like a self-contained unit. Sometimes there are logical connections between stanzas, as when "They" at the start of stanza 2 refers to the "nurses," "anesthetist," and "surgeons" from stanza 1. But sometimes the stanzas—or even the individual sentences—are pieced together through a collage-like technique, without logical transitions between them. (This technique is known as parataxis.) For example, stanzas 4-7 ("I have let things slip [...] The vivid tulips eat my oxygen.") could be rearranged without changing the poem's meaning.

This makes the speaker's thoughts seem relatively spontaneous and undirected. Just as her "attention [...] was happy / Playing and resting without committing itself" before the arrival of the tulips (lines 55-56), her focus drifts and scatters in the poem itself—even if, sooner or later, it always returns to the tulips. At the same time, the end-stopping of stanzas and sentences, along with the consistent number of lines per stanza, may reflect the speaker's own effort to rein in her wandering focus.

Ultimately, the poem imposes both a thematic and formal logic on what would otherwise be a disjointed meditation, breaking it into equal-sized chunks anchored by the subject of "Tulips." It's as if the form itself helps the speaker make sense of her thoughts, at a time when she feels uneasily balanced between sickness and health, solitude and community, etc.

METER

As a free verse poem, "Tulips" has no regular meter. Its rhythm is fairly flat and prose-like, reflecting the psychological "flat[ness]" described in line 46. This is not a speaker who's prepared to shape her thoughts into elaborate, musical language. Instead, she records them in a dry, clinical, matter-of-fact way, more or less as they come to her—an approach well suited to her hospital environment and post-surgery fatigue.

Still, the poem isn't completely lacking in rhythm. Some lines sound pretty close to iambic pentameter, a classic meter in which there are five feet (metrical units) per line, each consisting of an unstressed followed by a stressed syllable: da-DUM | da-DUM | da-DUM | da-DUM | da-DUM.

Many variations are possible within this pattern; for example, lines can contain an unstressed eleventh syllable. Listen to how this pattern shapes line 11:

> The nur- | ses pass | and pass, | they are | no trou|ble,

Other lines that use or approximate iambic pentameter include line 31 ("How free | it is, | you have no | idea | how free——"), 42 ("A do- | zen red | lead sink- | ers round | my neck"), 49 ("The vi- | vid tu- | lips eat | my ox- | ygen"), and 63 ("And comes from a country far away as health"). Notice that several of these are the closing lines of their respective stanzas. Even though "Tulips" is meterless, then, it uses these moments as a kind of satisfying "home base" to return to now and then, or a subtle anchor for the speaker's drifting thoughts.

RHYME SCHEME

"Tulips" is a free verse poem, so it has no rhyme scheme. Again, any kind of elaborate musicality would be at odds with the poem's tone and content. Line 10 ("Stupid pupil [...] everything in.") suggests that, like a passive eyeball, the speaker is just "tak[ing] everything in" as she lies in bed after surgery. Rather than navigating complex poetic forms, she seems intent on setting down her impressions as crisply and clinically as possible.

In reality, of course, the poem is artfully shaped in many ways, but it at least wants to *appear* simple and straightforward. In fact, its use of free verse seems related to the freedom praised in line 31: "How free it is, you have no idea how free." Just as the speaker values the visual and emotional simplicity of the hospital, she values formal simplicity in the poem she writes about it.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Tulips" is a hospital patient recovering from an unnamed surgical procedure. She claims that she's "nobody" (line 5), or at least that she's "given [...] up" her name and history while hospitalized, but she also provides some clues about her life.

She is a "thirty-year-old" woman (line 22) who has a "husband and child" (her gender is never stated outright, but the poem was written in the UK long before legal same-sex marriage). She keeps a "family photo" of these two in her hospital room, although she's "sick of" the emotional "baggage" it represents (lines 18-21). This word, "sick," is especially interesting because she never reveals her actual ailment; it's almost as if the hospital stay is a remedy for her personal baggage! She's also received get-well flowers ("Tulips") from a friend or loved one.

In other words, as much as the speaker may be savoring her time alone—along with the illusion of freedom the hospital provides—she clearly has relationships and responsibilities beyond these walls. At its core, "Tulips" dramatizes the tension between her desire to remain sick, isolated, and free of obligations and her need to return to normal life. Statements like "I only wanted / To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty" (lines 29-30) and "I have wanted to efface myself" (line 48) suggest that she may even be wrestling with a

desire to die. (Plath often grappled with suicidal thoughts in her poetry, and she tragically took her life two years after writing "Tulips.") By the end of the poem, though, she seems to feel a renewed "love" of her own body, and to anticipate a return to "health," distant as it may be (lines 60-63):

> And I am aware of my heart: it opens and closes
> Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me.
> The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea,
> And comes from a country far away as health.

The circumstances of the poem map closely onto the poet's life: she wrote "Tulips" shortly after a hospital visit during which she had her appendix removed. It's fair to assume, then, that the speaker is either Plath or a lightly fictionalized version of Plath. In fact, Plath is famous for her autobiographical poetry, which was part of a broader 20th-century poetry movement called Confessionalism.

SETTING

The setting of "Tulips" is a hospital where the speaker is recovering from surgery. The speaker describes her room and surroundings in some detail, in part because she's clearly content there. She feels "peacefulness" in this environment ("I am learning peacefulness," she says in line 3; "The peacefulness is so big it dazes you" in line 32)—so much so that she's reluctant to return to her normal life.

Here, she has a welcome feeling of giving up control, as she's cared for by hospital staff (including "nurses," an "anesthetist," and "surgeons," whom she mentions in lines 6-7). She feels as natural and passive as a "pebble" as she's tended by the nurses, who pass by like "[sea]gulls," perform manual tasks, and are too numerous to keep track of. She especially seems to welcome the "numbness" and "sleep" the nurses bring her in the form of drug injections (she says in line 17: "They bring me numbness in their bright needles, they bring me sleep."). Amid the blank, sterile "white[ness]" of this setting, she feels as "pure" as a "nun" in a convent.

Like a nun renouncing material things, she's traded her everyday possessions—"my teaset, my bureaus of linen, my books" (line 26)—for the few personal effects she's permitted in the hospital, including a "patent leather overnight case" and "family photo" of her "husband and child" (lines 19-20). She also has a "name tag" and "a few trinkets" (line 33): small items provided by the hospital. At first she was "Scared" of this tradeoff and the danger it represented (line 25), but now she welcomes the loss of her everyday "baggage," which she claims to be "sick of" (line 18).

However, the "Tulips" of the title are disturbing her peace. As explained in the Symbols section of this guide, the flowers come to symbolize the painful, vibrant, complicated nature of life itself—namely, the life awaiting her outside the hospital. Their redness disturbs her "like a loud noise" (line 52), signaling that her blissful isolation is coming to an end.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Tulips" was written in 1961, published in *The New Yorker* in 1962, and collected posthumously in *Ariel* (1965), after Sylvia Plath had died by suicide in 1963. By this final phase of her career, Plath was increasingly well-known, both for her own writing and as the wife of poet Ted Hughes, whose work had gained wide acclaim. (Her marriage to Hughes collapsed during the last year of her life, a personal shock that inspired some of her best-known writing.) She had published one previous collection, *The Colossus and Other Poems*, in 1960. Following her death, her poetry and fiction achieved worldwide renown.

"Tulips" is an example of Confessional poetry, a style that emerged in the U.S. during the 1950s.Confessional poets focused on deeply personal experiences, including private or even taboo subjects such as mental illness, sexuality, and suicide. Other well-known Confessional poets include Robert Lowell, John Berryman, and Anne Sexton.

Plath wrote "Tulips" on March 18, 1961, shortly after undergoing an appendectomy that required a 10-day hospital visit. (Interestingly, she wrote another published poem, "In Plaster," on the same day.) The poem's descriptions and themes have echoes elsewhere in *Ariel*; for example, Plath's "Morning Song" also features a stark white hospital setting, while "Poppies in October" also features blood-red flowers as its central image. The "husband and child" mentioned in this poem almost certainly refer to Hughes and the couple's daughter Frieda, both of whom appear (unnamed) in other poems in the book. And while "Tulips" isn't as explicit about suicidal themes as a poem like "Lady Lazarus," its speaker quietly wrestles with a desire for oblivion. As one of the earliest poems in *Ariel*, "Tulips" seems to have been something of a breakthrough poem for Plath, a source of ideas she returned to in later pieces.

Plath really did receive tulips (from her friend Helga Huws) during her hospital stay. She explained the poem's origins in a letter to one of her mentors, the writer Olive Higgins Prouty:

> ["Tulips"] recalls to me the times when, after major surgery, I just floated thankfully, yet in clouded consciousness, reluctant to take up the business of full return to living—too weary yet to assume responsibility. Anything that compels one's return to that awaiting struggle is, at first, a rude intruder—be it a well-meaning friend or, as here, a vase of vibrantly red tulips.

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 Plath received 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. While "Tulips" was inspired by a routine surgery, it draws on Plath's deep familiarity with hospitals and hints at a struggle between competing desires to live and die. (For example, the speaker's wish "To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty" in lines 29-30 suggests that she's tempted to give up on life.)

There's also a wider context to the speaker's distaste for the "baggage" of family relations, including her aversion to "My husband and child smiling out of the family photo." Plath had a famously complicated family life; the death of her father during her childhood left her grief-stricken, and her relationship to her mother was often contentious. 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 raise a family.

Since Plath had dreamed of being a writer from a young age, she had no intention of giving up her ambitions just to fulfill society's expectations. But as she got older and fell in love, she found herself desiring the very things that represented a lack of freedom to her: marriage and children. Some of Plath's more conflicted poems, including "Morning Song," express ambivalence about traditional motherhood, and many of her late poems, written after her separation from Hughes, seem to mock traditional marriage. This emotional complexity caused her work to resonate with second-wave feminists in the 1960s; women during this period saw their own experiences reflected in Plath's honest introspection.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- More About the Poet — A biography of Plath at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/sylvia-plath)
- The Poem in Plath's Own Voice — Listen to Sylvia Plath reading "Tulips." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vLNXOA9CzAQ)
- Plath, Silence, and Identity — A biographical article on Plath, including context about the appendectomy that inspired "Tulips." (https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1993/08/23/the-silent-woman-i-ii-iii)
- A Brief Guide to Confessionalism — An introduction to the poetic movement Plath is closely linked with. (https://poets.org/text/brief-guide-confessional-poetry)
- An Interview with Plath — Listen to an interview with the poet, recorded the same year as "Tulips" was published. (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
- 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
- Words
- You're

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