

“Parliament Hill Fields” Discussion Guide for Teachers

- 1. This poem resembles a riddle. On February 5, Sylvia Plath had had a miscarriage. Are there any hints in the poem, composed a week later, that suggest that the answer to the question “what I lack” is this lost baby? Does anyone seem to notice that she has lost something or someone?** *Students should notice that the opening images of a “bald hill” and a “round sky” contrast with the flat womb of a woman who is no longer pregnant. When she refers to “your absence” as “inconspicuous,” she silently addresses the absent baby. When she says, “Nobody can tell what I lack,” she both challenges the reader to guess, and she also laments her lonely loss as something unspeakable, unknowable by others, unnoticed by them. Perhaps the poet is echoing the American folksong, “Nobody knows the trouble I feel.” Indicating an overwhelming grief, the image of the “crocodile of small girls” who “swallow[s]” her reverses the image of pregnancy to put the mourning mother inside the “body” of the children whom she sees in a group. The child’s barrette that falls “unnoticed” to the ground also symbolizes the mother’s loss of a small, unborn child.*
- 2. Folktales indicate that a stork brings a baby to its parents. The soul is sometimes imaged as a bird in flight. How does the natural environment of hills, water, and gulls in flight contribute to the mood of this poem? Do the external sights and sounds symbolize what the bereaved speaker thinks and feels? If so, how?** *Students should notice the “silence after silence” when the children disappear from sight, leaving the speaker alone outdoors. An “ashen smudge” (perhaps an allusion to the cross of ashes placed on the forehead on Ash Wednesday as a reminder of mortality) obscures the distance, even as the fact of death and loss separates this life from the next. The image of the “ghost of a leaf, ghost of a bird” that flies “too happy” around the heavy, brooding cypress trees symbolizes the way the departed life of the child encircles the thoughts of the mother who is left behind in her grief. (In Greek myth, the cypress is a symbol of mourning.) The “cry” that can still be heard by the mother as the bird flies away blends together the cry of a gull and the imagined cry of the lost baby. Plath’s use of the verb “swaddles” to describe cloud-covering evokes the “swaddling clothes” used to cover an infant.*
- 3. “I suppose it’s pointless to think of you at all. / Already your doll grip lets go.” To whom is she speaking when she says “you”? Who is the “I” that is “too happy”? How would you describe the relationship between the mother and her miscarried child?** *The reference to the “doll” points to the child. Students should notice that the mother sorrows deeply over the loss of the child, but also that her direct address to the miscarried baby makes possible the child’s ghostly answer in return. The words “You know me less constant, / Ghost of a leaf, ghost of a bird. / I circle the writhen trees. I am too happy,” seem to be spoken by the departing child, who, unlike her mother, knows no grief.*
- 4. How is the grief that results from a miscarriage both similar and dissimilar to that sorrow felt after an abortion? (A miscarriage is sometimes called a “natural abortion.”)** *Students may reply that mothers who lose unborn children, whether by their own decision or unwillingly, typically mourn a loss. They may fear that they will never again have the opportunity*

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to get pregnant, to give birth. Their fears may also concern their relationship with the child's father. Depending on the circumstances, the mother of a miscarried child may blame herself, even if guiltless, but the guilt carried by a mother who chooses abortion is a heavy moral burden that complicates her sorrow.

5. **Does the speaker's living daughter comfort or disturb her in her bereavement? Is there any implied competition between the two children, living and dead, for the mother's attention?** *Students should notice that as the natural world grows dark outside at end of day, the speaker sees a "glow" in the "birthday picture" of the sister—perhaps a lit object in the child's bedroom, seen through a window. The "little pale blue hill" in that "picture" contrasts with the "bald hill" in the opening line of the poem. The sister's "birthday picture" is colorful, in contrast to the barren landscape outdoors.*
6. **How do you interpret the line: "The old dregs, the old difficulties take me to wife"? Is there trouble in this marriage?** *Students may notice that the woman's return inside the "lit house" is not without its own difficult duties. Perhaps the miscarriage represents for the woman not only the loss of a child, but also the potential loss of her marriage. Her husband, poet Ted Hughes, left her in 1962 for another woman. Plath killed herself on February 11, 1963, two years to the day after the composition of "Parliament Hill Fields."*