

What's in a title?:
'sheep in fog'



The first thing that springs in my mind while reading Sylvia Plath's *Sheep in Fog* is the complex and strange relation of its title to the content of the poem where the speaker-traveler witnesses a herd of sheep in a foggy winter, as mentioned by the poetess, in her introductory speech on the work. But we never get any mention of it again throughout the poem, yet it sets the mood of the poem, for it symbolizes the metaphorical reunion of all the living beings with the natural phenomenon and its subsequent disappearance.

The sheep in the title have disappeared (both literally from the poem and metaphorically from the scenery) into the vastness of nature but they left a realization in the witness, who perhaps anticipates a similar fate. Here the speaker is riding down '[t]he hills [that] step off into whiteness'. With each of her steps she herself is approaching this self-same 'whiteness', which symbolizes death. The hills leave behind the color of life (fields-green) to be dissolved into the foggy air. By yielding up to the thick clouds they become active, for they were passive for ages, bearing the assaults of weather. But now they attempt to act on their behalf, they wish to assert their presence yet this very act leads to a blending into greater entity. There is a threat on existence here; we discern the personification of hills, that move, but actually it is the speaker who approaches this symbolic deadly 'whiteness'.

The title carries several implications: the fog suggests an antagonistic characteristic of nature which reduces our visibility, which in turn implies nature opposing our senses that enable us in our perception of the world. 'Sheep' is another important agent-noun here, which is a grown-up, hence experienced and corrupted version of the biblical lamb, that stands for innocence, purity and compassion. Significantly, this sheep is not alone but

in group and appears in fog, accompanying not just experience but doubt, unease and vagueness. The 'fog' in question also implies a psychological state of mind when one is lethargic and confused.

This confusion spills over in the next line of the poem, where the speaker is unable to understand the cause of her dismay: People or star Regard me sadly, I disappoint them. She cannot tell whether it is her relations or her fate that loses faith in her and sees her failing in life, and thus, become a cause of her gloomy disposition. Second stanza of the poem introduces another metaphor with the personified train that is alive and breathes out air: The train leaves a line of breath. O slow Horse the color of rust [.]. The second line of this stanza seems to me incomplete and disconnected, it just ends with, may be, a wish [o slow (!)] Can it be an adjective attributed to the horse? But had Plath meant it, she would certainly have not ended this particular line there, or she would have added a punctuation mark after the horse to specifically address the horse. The authoritative voice here leaves us with uncertainty regarding the treatment of the word 'slow', which can be both an adjective and/or a verb. It may as well be that Plath's speaker intends to ask somebody (or something) to slow down, but whom? Certainly, it cannot be the horse, as I remember her words for a BBC recording of the poem: In this poem, the speaker's horse is proceeding at a slow, cold walk down a hill of macadam to the stable at the bottom. It is December. It is foggy. In the fog, there are sheep. It can as well be an expression of regret that the horse is slow as compared to the train, which is rapid and lively, but sadly it leaves her behind. Perhaps the traveler-speaker is distraught that

her horse cannot keep pace with the train. It is as if life with all its color, mobility and warmth has deserted her.

Her gloominess is further intensified by the 'color' of the horse that resembles rust; destruction is once again evoked here by the reference to decaying iron (rust). Iron deteriorates as a result of oxidation, when it comes in contact of moisture. Significantly, the allusion to iron comes after the 'a line of breath', which implies life-it is this liveliness which weakens (moistens) and enlivens her at the same time, thereby making her lose her vigor and strength like the iron. The hooves of the horse produce a sad yet solemn and sacred (dolorous) sound, another symbol for death (which might lead her to heaven); the 'Horse' and its hooves remind of biblical verse 3 from Jeremiah: At the noise of the stamping of the hoofs of his strong horses, at the rushing of his chariot, and at the rumbling of his wheels, the fathers shall not look back to their children for feebleness of hands (.) This horse, thus, bears an ominous sign of destruction; her father too seems to have turned his back upon her ('fatherless' in fifth stanza), leaving her at the mercy of fate, which slowly but surely brings only her doom and gloom ('starless'). Morning brings with it light and warmth but this morning has accompanied coldness [('stillness' of bones in the next stanza), another reference to winter, hence death] and darkness ('fog'). She is abandoned like a flower, only to drop on earth with dusk. Although the greenery of fields inspires in her the 'desire' (which symbolizes fire), to live and 'melts' her (frozen) heart. But these fields are 'far' away, and they prevent her from ascending to heaven. Devoid of luck (starless) and paternal affection (fatherless), she seems to have been caught at the threshold between earth

and heaven, with a life (a dark water, whose fluidity refers to the continuity of life but this water is contaminated and perhaps poisoned as well) in question (terrestrial or celestial).