

Mushrooms

by Sylvia Plath

Overnight, very
Whitely, discreetly,
Very quietly

Our toes, our noses
Take hold on the loam,
Acquire the air.

Nobody sees us,
Stops us, betrays us;
The small grains make room.

Soft fists insist on
Heaving the needles,
The leafy bedding,

Even the paving.
Our hammers, our rams,
Earless and eyeless,

Perfectly voiceless,
Widen the crannies,
Shoulder through holes. We

Diet on water,
On crumbs of shadow,
Bland-mannered, asking

Little or nothing.
So many of us!
So many of us!

We are shelves, we are
Tables, we are meek,
We are edible,

Nudgers and shovers
In spite of ourselves.
Our kind multiplies:

We shall by morning
Inherit the earth.
Our foot's in the door.

- Mushrooms are a kind of fungi, a major group of living things, originally considered plants but now treated as the separate kingdom Fungi. They occur in all environments on the planet and include important decomposers and parasites.
- Fungi have a vegetative body called a thallus or soma, composed of one-cell-thick filaments called hyphae. They hyphae typically form a microscopic network within the substrate (food source) called the mycelium, through which food is absorbed. Usually the most conspicuous part of any fungus are its fruiting bodies—reproductive structures that produce spores. The mushrooms we like to eat are the fruiting bodies of certain fungi.
- Mushrooms are spread in nature by spores, much the way seeds spread plants. They broadcast spores that colonize and grow where the conditions are right. A mature mushroom will drop as many as 16 billion spores.
- Because mushrooms contain no chlorophyll, they can't photosynthesize their own food, so they rely on other plants for their nutritive energy. Parasitic mushrooms colonize living plants; saprophytic mushrooms live off decaying organic matter.
- Since the body of a mushroom is usually dispersed over a large area, it is rarely noticed. In nature some species of mushrooms may have a body that spreads over hundreds of square miles.
- A population of honey mushrooms (*Armillaria ostoyae*) in the Blue Mountains of eastern Oregon was found to be the largest single organism in the world, spanning 2200 acres.

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Discussion Questions

1. Ask students what they know about mushrooms and the way they grow.
2. Students divide into pairs to take turns reading the poem aloud to each other.
3. Who is speaking in the poem?
4. Describe what is happening in your own words.
5. Why does nobody see us?
6. What kind(s) of imagery are used in this poem? simile
a. metaphor b. hyperbole c. personification
7. How does the use of imagery affect your understanding of the poem?
8. How are the mushrooms shelves?
9. How are they tables?
10. Why does the poet repeat the line "So many of us!"
11. What does this poem tell you about the way mushrooms grow?
12. Draw a picture to illustrate this poem.

P.A.S.S.

Reading—Grade 4: 2.1; 3.1ab,2ad,3a; 4.1b,3b. Grade 5: 2.1; 3.1a,2abe,3a,4d; 4.2d,3bcd. Grade 6: 1.1b; 2.1; 3.1a,2ac,3ab,4d; 4.3acd. Grade 7: 1.3c; 2.1; 3.2a; 4.3a. Grade 8: 1.3c; 2.1; 3.2a,3b; 4.3ac

Oral Language—Grade 4: 2.1. Grade 5: 2.1. Grade 6: 2.3. Grade 7: 2.3. Grade 8: 2.3

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