

Topics For Discussion:

1. Who is the “I” in Plath’s “I am a riddle”? Is it the poem or its speaker? What is the answer to the riddle?
2. How does the form of Plath’s poem reflect the answer to the riddle? What elements would you say constitute the “form” of this poem? Of any poem?
3. How valid is it to think of a poem as a riddle? Why should a poem be puzzling? Is there some way to convey straightforwardly what the poem means? What does the resort to these metaphors add to the straightforward meaning?
4. MacLeish’s poem is largely composed of similes, each of which ascribes an adjective to the noun “poem” by making a comparison between a poem and some other thing which shares the same quality. The way in which “the other thing” share the quality is supposed to illuminate the way in which the poem possesses it. Is it immediately clear how medallions are dumb to the thumb? How illuminating are the comparisons? If they do not illuminate the qualities of poetry, what is the point of introducing them? “A poem should not mean, but be.” Is this poem meaningless, then?
5. Merwin’s riff on Asian folk-proverbs implies a comparison between poems and proverbs. How strong is the connection? What comparisons can you make between proverbs and riddles (the subject of the Plath poem)?