Afternoon with Irish Cows

SUMMARY

There was a herd of cows in the field near where we used to live. All day long they would tread the grass, lowering their heads down to eat. Occasionally, I'd look out of the window and be surprised to find the field empty, as though the cows had flown away like birds.

But then I'd look again, opening our blue door, and they would be back in the field eating grass. Or they'd be lying on their sides, which looked like black-and-white-maps, facing in different directions and anticipating rain. They seem like strange, calm, and puzzled creatures in the long afternoons.

Every now and then, I'd hear an incredible sound from the field. I would stop whatever I was doing and head out to check on the cows, assuming that they were being tortured.

Though it sounded like a cry of pain, it wasn't. One single cow, sturdy on her four legs and craning upwards, was lowing loudly. This astonishing sound began in her belly and went up through her ribs before exiting the mouth.

I realized that she was declaring her own identity to the world around her, expressing her own cowness. She was making a spirited defense of cows in general, calling out to the surrounding nature. At the same time, she was looking at me over the wall with one astonishing eye.

THEMES

HUMANITY, NATURE, AND PERCEPTION

"Afternoon with Irish Cows" explores the relationship between humankind and the animal kingdom. The poem focuses on the speaker's observations of a herd of cows in a field and argues unsentimentally that the cows represent a kind of wonder and mystery. Yet the poem is not solely focused on the cows. It also argues that the ability to perceive such wonder in the cows depends on the *mindset* of the perceiver. In making this argument, and in showing how the speaker comes to see and know the cows, the poem implicitly calls on its readers to look at the world with fresh eyes.

At first, the speaker describes the cows as fairly unremarkable creatures. The speaker, who seems to be living in a cottage across the street from a field, often sees the cows going about their usual business—eating grass, standing around, or lying down in the rain. And as the poem progresses, the speaker's observations of the cows lead to a deeper understanding of the relationship between humans and nature.

At one point, for example, the speaker hears what sounds like a cry of pain coming from one of the cows. The speaker goes out to check on the cows, expecting something extraordinary to be happening. A closer look reveals, however, that the sound is nothing special: the cow is just mooing. Yet in this moment the poem offers a kind of twist, as the speaker does not just leave it at that. Instead, the speaker *pays close attention* to the mooing cow. The speaker looks and sees in detail: the cow's "neck outstretched, her bellowing head / laboring upward," the sound echoing "up through her bowed ribs into her gaping mouth." And this close attention yields insight: the speaker realizes that the cow is "announcing" her essential "cowness."

The speaker then calls the cry the cow's "ancient apologia of her kind"—the cow's spirited defense of the place of cows in the world. Of course, there is an element of projection here, in that the speaker is attributing human communication to the cow. The speaker can't actually fully understand the cow's fundamental "cowness"—after all, cows aren't people. Yet the speaker's recognition that the cow is *beyond* human comprehension heightens the sense of wonder, mystery, and even majesty that the cows come to represent. For the speaker, the cow's regular behavior transforms from something ordinary—just a cow being a cow—to something profound: *a cow being a cow*. By paying close attention and being open to wonder in the natural world, the speaker has become connected to a wonder that was always there, but which the speaker had never before experienced.

The speaker's comment that the cow's cry is an assertion of its place in nature has a second function in the poem: it subtly asks the reader to consider *humankind's* place in nature, too. The poem emphasizes this idea as the speaker describes the cow casting its own gaze on the speaker (and perhaps the reader). It's easy for a human to think that cows—which we eat and milk—exist *for* humans. But the speaker's description of the cow's "wild, shocking eye" asserts the cow's independence and uniqueness from humans.

This moment forces the speaker and reader to wonder what the cow sees when it looks at a human being. Is it really true that a person is more intelligent than a cow? Perhaps, instead, people and cows represent two different *types* of existence and intelligence. In asking such questions, the poem avoids romanticizing nature, preferring to acknowledge people's limitations when it comes to communicating with the world around them. The poem finds in nature a glory and wonder that humans can experience—but only if they approach with a certain humility.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-35

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

There were a ...
... the soft grass,

The poem's title sets up its opening line, making it clear it's talking about cows. In this stanza, the speaker gives a general sense of the speaker's relationship to the cows. The speaker lives in a cottage in Ireland, somewhere near a field, and often sees the cows going about their usual business—mainly just eating grass! Sometimes, though, the cows are *not* there when the speaker looks out.

The first four lines intentionally set up an atmosphere of everyday life—time passing in a way that is fairly mundane and unremarkable. Note how the entire stanza—like almost all of the other stanzas—is one long sentence. This, coupled with the plainness of the language, makes the poem feel very prosaic; that is, ordinary and even *unpoetic*. Of course, this is a deliberate strategy to help make the poem's argument that wonder and mystery exist even in places where they don't seem obvious—like a herd of cows, for example.

Though the language is distinctly down-to-earth, these four lines contain subtle poetic effects. An /f/ sound is established, first through alliteration in line 1 ("few" and "field") and then as consonance in lines 3 and 4 ("tuft" and "soft"). This subtly brings the scene to life, conveying the softness of the grass upon which the cows stand. At this point in the poem, the speaker hasn't yet gained any deep insight into the cows or what they seem to represent. In these establishing lines, the cows seem almost dumb—they don't do much, and their "big heads" seem lumbering and kind of stupid. This is part of the way the poem lures the reader in, allowing for the later twist that paints the cows in a very different light.

LINES 5-7

though I would ...
... to another country.

Lines 5 to 7 hint that there is more to the cows than meets the eye. The cows are cumbersome creatures—yet the speaker is surprised to find that sometimes they aren't even in the field. This gently nods to the way that cows are transformed by the end of the poem from mundane creatures to something mysterious, mystical, and majestic. That is, there is a suggestion of magic about the way the cows seem capable of completely disappearing—as though performing a trick that the speaker can't figure out. This, then, also subtly speaks to the limits of understanding and communication between different species.

Though the speaker *wants* to understand the cows, ultimately there will always be a gulf in this understanding. The cows's disappearing act, then, is a precursor of their ultimate elusiveness.

The tone is still distinctly prosaic—the cows' disappearing act isn't something that the speaker obsesses over, but just something that the speaker notices every now and then when passing by a window. Yet the poem here deploys a deliberately fantastical simile, comparing the cows's occasional disappearance to the flight of birds (such as how certain birds disappear through the migratory habits). The enjambment between these lines captures the cow's imagined flight.

Perhaps this simile is a variation on the old expression "if pigs could fly," which is a phrase used to say that something is unbelievable. The simile indicates that the speaker *knows* that the cows haven't really disappeared—it's just that they're no longer in the speaker's immediate field of perception. This, then, helps open up the poem's discussion of human observation and ways of seeing the world.

LINES 8-12

Then later, I ...
... waiting for rain.

In the second stanza, the speaker relates how the cows would reappear just as suddenly as they would seem to disappear.

There are two things in the first line of stanza two that are interesting but easy to miss. Firstly, the use of the word "later," apart from being part of the speaker's anecdote about the cows, suggests a kind of progression. This subtly indicates that the poem is *heading* somewhere—that the observations about the cows have a developing purpose.

Secondly, it's curious that the speaker mentions the fact that the front door on the cottage was blue. The reader might reasonably ask why the color of the door is relevant. Well, although it might seem like a trivial detail, its inclusion conveys the speaker's increasingly heightened state of perception. The poem moves from a detached gaze to one that is more intensely focused—the inclusion of this detail helps suggest that transformation.

With the cows's reappearance comes the return of the /f/ sound established in the first stanza, a sound which links with the cows's taste for tufty grass. "Front," "field," "full," "facing" all alliterate despite being quite far apart from another—such is the strength of this particular consonant within the surrounding language.

And while the first stanza used simile to describe the cows's disappearing act, the poem now uses metaphor to make its images more vivid. The speaker describes the cows's "black-and-white" pattern as "maps." This isn't just an interesting visual comparison, but also speaks to the way that the poem is *searching* for understanding—like an explorer with a map. This

section also references one of the common myths about cows—that they can predict a coming storm, and sit down in anticipation. While this isn't necessarily true, its inclusion in the poem contributes to the building sense of wonder and mystery.

LINES 13-14

How mysterious, how ...
... of the afternoon.

The last two lines of the second stanza develop the speaker's complex feelings towards the cows. The cows seem "mysterious," "patient" and "dumbfounded" all at once. Mysterious because there is something unknowable about them, but dumbfounded because—to the speaker's mind—even the cows can't comprehend their own mysteriousness.

Line 13 uses diacope, repeating the word "How": "How mysterious, how patient and dumbfounded." "How" is one of the simplest, but most searching, questions in the English language—and, of course, it rhymes with cow! Something about this little word, then, seems to heighten the poem's atmosphere of mystery, the speaker's attempt to understand the world and the limits of that understanding. The /ou/ sound in "dumbfounded" chimes with "how," adding further emphasis and perhaps even a subtle suggestion of the sound of a lowing cow.

"Patient" and "long quiet afternoon" conjure a sense of time passing. Essentially, time functions here like a kind of incubator for the speaker's thoughts. It's as though the speaker reaches a limit in understanding the cows, before breaking through to the next stage—not necessarily of *knowing* the cows, but of having a clearer idea what it is about them that's so fascinating. Indeed, it's out of this sense of eerie quiet that the poem makes its key turn in the following stanza. It's also worth noting that this is the only stanza that *isn't* one long sentence. Accordingly, this section feels like a kind of lull before the important shift that comes next.

LINES 15-18

But every once ...
... an apple with

Lines 15 to 21—the third stanza—represent the key turn in the poem. While the speaker is clearly interested in the cows, so far they have been portrayed as relatively mundane creatures. They *do* intrigue the speaker, but they don't do all that much. Here, though, the cows become more active figures. The speaker recounts how, every now and then, one of them lets out a cry that seems to burrow deep into the speaker's soul.

As with the previous stanzas, the speaker is depicted at home. In fact, the speaker is going about mundane business—a human just being a human, like the cows being cows. But on occasion, the speaker hears an incredible cry coming from one of the cows. This cry sounds so pained that the speaker feels the need to rush outside and find out what is going on.

Appropriately enough, the poem intensifies its sound effects here, turning up the poetic volume to represent the intrusive lowing of the cow:

> But every once in a while, one of them
> would let out a sound so phenomenal
> that I would put down the paper
> or the knife I was cutting an apple with

These four lines are packed full of chiming sounds. First they introduce the alliterative /w/ sounds in "once," "while," "one" and "would." Then they follow up with assonance, as the long /i/ sound trickles through the stanza in "while," "I," and "knife," and the /ou/ sound repeats in "out," "sound" and "down." These lines also use consonance with the /n/ sound in words like "phenomenal" and "knife," and /p/ sound in words like "paper" and "apple."

These sounds ring out even more clearly given the generally prosaic tone of the poem. The main sound the poem depicts—the cow's cry—is also the moment in which the poem makes its own noise. Interestingly, the whole stanza is enjambed. This helps conjure a sense of urgency that reflects the somewhat panicked mindset of the speaker (who assumes something terrible has happened to one of the cows).

It's also worth taking a moment to consider one of this section's key words: "phenomenal." *Phenomenal* can mean "extraordinary," but it can also refer to something that can be perceived through the senses. After all, the root of this word is *phenomenon*. Taking a cue from this word's layered meaning, Collin's poem might be thought of as relating to *phenomenology*—a branch of philosophy that focuses on consciousness and direct experience. Arguably, this poem is an attempt to explore the same subject in a literary way, with the speaker investigating what can be known about the cows through direct experience of them.

LINES 19-21

and walk across ...
... a long spear.

Line 19 carries on the long sentence begun at the start of the stanza. Horrified by the cow's cry, the speaker rushes out to see what has happened—expecting that "one of them was being torched / or pierced through the side with a long spear." The speaker anticipates some kind of cruelty (though, as the next stanza reveals, these fears are unfounded).

As with the stanza's first four lines, the poetic sound effects remain prominent in this stanza, reinforcing the loud sound made by the cow:

> and walk across the road to the stone wall
> to see which one of them was being torched
> or pierced through the side with a long spear.

Here, the prominent sounds—e.g. the assonance between "pierced" and "spear"—seem to suggest violence, which is exactly what the speaker thinks is the cause of the sound.

Of course, this a fairly irrational assumption—it's unlikely that the cows are being set alight or stabbed. The fact that the speaker reaches for this mistaken theory comically highlights the limits of human understanding. In other words, humans don't necessarily know what's going on in the lives and minds of other beings, and something they're wildly off in their guesses. With that in mind, the "stone wall" could be interpreted as representing these barriers of human knowledge—it literally and figuratively stands between the speaker and the cows.

LINES 22-25

Yes, it sounded ...
... laboring upward

Stanza four explains what actually happened in stanza three. The "cry" of the cow is not one of pain—at least not of any apparent physical pain. It "sounded like pain," but the speaker revises this theory on closer inspection. Heading outside to get a closer look at the cry's source the speaker sees the cow in question ("the noisy one"). The sound *does* come from a cow, but not because the cow's in pain. It's worth noting that this is something that happens "every once in a while," as the speaker mentions at the start of the previous stanza. It seems that the speaker is fooled again and again by the cow's "full-bodied cry," thinking it's in pain when it's not.

These lines feature lots of caesurae, which help focus the poem on the cow itself rather than the somewhat panicked state of the speaker's mind in the previous stanza. The caesurae make the line feel more cumbersome, and therefore more representative of the sheer mass of a cow. Assonance and consonance also continue to give this section its loud poetic volume, which matches with the cow's cry (compare it to the quieter first two stanzas).

In line 23, "anchored there on all fours" grounds the poem with its /r/ consonance, representing the sturdiness of the cow. Likewise with the short /e/ sound in "neck outstretched," and the diacope of the repeated "her" in line 25 ("her neck outstretched, her bellowing head"). The poem here feels more intensely fixated on the cow, rather than the speaker. The enjambment between line 24 and line 25 ("her bellowing head / laboring upward") leaves the phrase "her bellowing head" as a fragment that hangs over the line break, mimicking the heaviness of the cow's head.

LINES 25-28

laboring upward as ...
... her gaping mouth.

The rest of the penultimate stanza describes the cow's "full-bodied cry" in detail. Everything about this section makes the cry seem more significant than the banal actions attributed to the cows earlier in the poem (like eating grass). The cow is crying out with every fibre of her being, the sound "rising" and requiring her entire body. It starts in the "darkness of her belly" and reverberates through her ribs. In other words, this cow really *means it!*

But, of course, one of the frustrating limits of human understanding is that the speaker, and the reader, can't know for sure *what* the cow is trying to say, if indeed it is trying to say anything at all. The "darkness" of the cow's belly suggests this mysterious limit of knowledge, the speaker's inability to see the world from the cow's perspective. Furthermore, the mention of an echo in line 28 ("and echoed up through her bowed ribs") creates the sense of a cavernous space. Perhaps this space which harks back through time to the era when humans lived in caves—to the mysterious origins of humans themselves.

The alliteration of "began," "belly," and "bowed" is important here, part of the stanza's prominent sound devices (which mirror the loud noise made by the cow). The assonance of "echoed" and "bowed" is also significant: it creates an actual "echo" between the two words, and the /o/ imitates the sound made by the cow itself.

LINES 29-33

Then I knew ...
... the blue bay,

The last stanza is the most contemplative part of the poem, representing the peak of its philosophical inquiry. Just as the word "phenomenal" in the third stanza hinted at the way that this is a poem concerned about knowledge—and the limits of knowledge—the verb that begins this long final sentence (which lasts the whole stanza) is "knew." This is the poem's chief interest—what can and can't be known.

The speaker realizes that the cow is not crying in pain. Instead, the speaker perceives the cow to be "announcing" her own "large, unadulterated cowness." In other words, the cow is impressing her identity and existence on the world around her, the fields echoing with the fullness of her cry. "Unadulterated" is an interesting word choice here; it primarily means something like "unfiltered" or "undiluted," but it also highlights the difference between the cow and the speaker—the un-adultness (un-humanness) of the cow.

The speaker goes one step further in lines 31 and 32, describing the cow's "ancient apologia of her kind." An apologia is a spirited defense of something—so in a way the cow is crying out to advocate for the place of cows in the world. The use of "ancient" connects this particular cow to the entire history of cows, who for thousands of years have been making similar sounds. The poem is touching on questions of essence—wondering what it is that makes a cow a cow and a human a human.

This moment could be interpreted as an instance of the

pathetic fallacy. That is, the speaker appears to be attributing human characteristics (language, thought, and emotion) onto the animal kingdom. But the whole point of the poem is that the speaker doesn't *really* know what's going inside the cow's mind—the human speaker can only perceive the world through human faculties of perception. So the question of what the cow means by its cry—whether this cry really is an "apologia"—is left unresolved.

The pastoral, or rural, imagery in this lines captures the sense of timelessness in the cow's cry. The "green fields," "grey clouds," "limestone hills," and "blue bay" (brought to life by /l/ consonance) could all be part of a scene in pretty much any century. This collapsing of time suggests that the cow always has defined its own existence, and that it always will.

LINES 34-35

while she regarded ...
... wild, shocking eye.

Lines 34 and 35—the poem's final lines—flip the poem completely on its head. While the entire poem has concerned the speaker's observations of the field of cows, and one cow in particular, that perspective is now reversed. So, instead of the speaker looking at the cow, the poem ends on an image of the cow staring at the speaker. It seems, then, as if the cow is also fascinated by the nearby human.

This ending, then, leaves the poem on a note of mystery and uncertainty. There is no way fo the speaker to know what the cow is thinking as it stares back—but the feeling of being observed, rather than observing, unsettles the speaker. The speaker describes the cow's look as "wild" and "shocking," and alliteration heightens the ending's sense of drama:

> while she regarded my head and shoulders
> above the wall with one wild, shocking eye.

It's shocking for the speaker to feel like the object of observation, rather than the subject, and this only serves to increase the atmosphere of mystic unknowability that the cow represents.

That is, the speaker intuitively feels the limits of both human powers of perception *and* those of the cow—and, indeed, the inability for these two consciousnesses to ever truly know one another. The last image, the cow's eye, gives the animal kingdom the last word. In fact, the cow's gaze extends beyond the speaker and as far as the other human involved in this poem—the reader.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is used here and there throughout "Afternoon with Irish cows." The first example is in line 1:

> There were a few dozen who occupied the field

The /f/ sound is a feature throughout the first stanza, used both in alliteration and consonance within words. This is a gentle, muffled sound that helps build a picture of the soft, turfy Irish grass on which the cows spend their days.

Lines 6 and 7 use the same alliteration, even though the words are quite far apart:

> and look out to see the field suddenly empty
> as if they had taken wing, flown off to another
> country

Indeed, even line 9 in the following stanza uses the same alliteration, helping the poem build its opening atmosphere of quiet and calm: "and again the field would be full of their munching." In the first two stanzas, the poem conjures a sense of the mundane—not much happens other than the speaker occasionally seeing cows through a window. The prominent /f/ sound helps lure the reader into this lull, the "long quiet of the afternoon."

The third stanza is the key shift in the poem, breaking the gentle spell of the first two stanzas. Here, a cow lets out a "sound so phenomenal" that it disrupts the speaker's own routine. To match the loud sound made by the cow, the poem turns up its own equivalent volume by featuring more alliteration (as well as assonance and consonance), and making it more varied. In line 16, "sound" and "so" alliterate; in the following line "put" and "paper" create a harsh plosive /p/ sound conveying urgency:

> would let out a sound so phenomenal
> that I would put down the paper

Elsewhere in the stanza, /s/ consonants keep up this prominent use of poetic sound ("stone," "see," "side," and "spear" all alliterate).

The next key example of alliteration is in lines 27 and 28, the last two lines of the fourth stanza:

> that began in the darkness of her belly
> and echoed up through her bowed ribs into her
> gaping mouth.

These lines gather /b/ sounds together in a way that represents the formation of the cow's "full-bodied cry" (which starts in the belly and echoes up through the ribs). It's another plosive sound, requiring the stopping of airflow when read out loud—this makes the alliteration more dramatic and noticeable.

One more example is in lines 34 and 35, the poem's final two

lines:

> while she regarded my head and shoulders
> above the wall with one wild, shocking eye.

These /w/ and /sh/ sounds seem to bring the poem into focus around its closing image—the cow's one staring eye. It helps make the ending more unsettling, with the reversal of perspective landing not just on the speaker, but the reader too.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "few," "field"
- **Line 2:** "where," "we"
- **Line 3:** "tuft," "tuft"
- **Line 4:** "soft"
- **Line 5:** "sometimes"
- **Line 6:** "see," "field," "suddenly"
- **Line 7:** "flown"
- **Line 8:** "would," "front"
- **Line 9:** "field," "would," "full"
- **Line 10:** "would"
- **Line 11:** "white"
- **Line 12:** "waiting"
- **Line 13:** "How," "how"
- **Line 15:** "once," "while," "one"
- **Line 16:** "would," "sound," "so"
- **Line 17:** "put," "paper"
- **Line 18:** "with"
- **Line 19:** "walk ," "stone," "wall"
- **Line 20:** "see," "which," "one," "was"
- **Line 21:** "side," "with," "spear"
- **Line 22:** "sounded," "see"
- **Line 23:** "noisy"
- **Line 24:** "her," "neck," "her"
- **Line 27:** "began," "belly"
- **Line 28:** "her," "bowed," "her"
- **Line 29:** "Then," "that"
- **Line 32:** "green," "gray"
- **Line 33:** "blue," "bay"
- **Line 34:** "while," "she," "shoulders"
- **Line 35:** "wall," "with," "one," "wild," "shocking"

ASSONANCE

Assonance is used sporadically in "Afternoon with Irish Cows." The most prominent use occurs is in the third stanza. If the first two stanzas were about establishing a sense of quiet everyday life, it's the third stanza that represents the poem's main event. From here, the poem focuses on a "full-bodied cry" made by one of the cows. This loud noise is reflected in the poem's increasing use of alliteration, consonance, and assonance.

Line 16, the second line of the third stanza, starts this off with prominent /ow/ sounds:

> would let out a sound so phenomenal

The word "down" in the following line chimes with this sound too. Interestingly, this sound is also quite close to the mooing sound made by cows—the poem, then, is allowing that sound to feature in its own language. A similar moment occurs with the /aw/ and long /o/ sounds a few lines later, in line 19: "and walk across the road to the stone wall."

In lines 20 and 21, assonance helps create a sense of (imagined) violence:

> to see which one of them was being torched
> or pierced through the side with a long spear.

None of the above is actually happening to the cow, but it's what the speaker thinks it *sounds* like is happening. The prominent assonance intensifies the images of torture.

In the fourth stanza, the short /e/ sound in line 24 gives the line a stretching sound to match the description of the cow's neck:

> her neck outstretched, her bellowing head

And the final stanza, still focusing on the cow's cry, also uses a prominent /ow/ sound:

> ... announcing
> the large, unadulterated cowness of herself,
> pouring out the ancient apologia of her kind
> to all the green fields and the gray clouds

The cow's own sound, then, runs throughout the entire section of the poem in which it is discussed. This allows the reader to not only read *about* that sound, but to get an aural sense of it too.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "few," "who"
- **Line 3:** "tuft," "tuft"
- **Line 4:** "grass"
- **Line 5:** "pass"
- **Line 6:** "see," "field suddenly empty"
- **Line 7:** "they," "taken"
- **Line 11:** "black," "maps"
- **Line 12:** "facing," "waiting," "rain"
- **Line 15:** "once," "one"
- **Line 16:** "out," "sound"
- **Line 17:** "down"
- **Line 18:** "knife I"
- **Line 19:** "walk across," "road," "stone," "wall"
- **Line 20:** "see," "being," "torched"
- **Line 21:** "or," "pierced," "spear"

- **Line 24:** “neck outstretched,” “bellowing head”
- **Line 29:** “announcing”
- **Line 30:** “cowness”
- **Line 31:** “out”
- **Line 32:** “green fields,” “clouds”
- **Line 35:** “wild,” “eye”

CAESURA

All five stanzas in "Afternoon with Irish Cows" feature at least one caesura, with some having a more significant effect on the poem than others.

A number of the caesurae help the poem establish its conversational, down-to-earth tone. The caesurae at the starts of stanzas two and three, for example, feel like part of the natural rhythms of speech:

> Then later, I would open the blue front door

and:

> But every once in a while, one of them

These caesurae help reinforce the feeling that the speaker is using everyday language.

Other caesurae capture the poem's imagery. The caesura at the end of stanza one creates a momentary pause in the poem's first simile:

> as if they had taken wing, flown off to another
> country.

The comma after "wing" gives the poem a little lift, matching with the mention of flight.

The caesurae in lines 12 and 13, at the end of stanza two, help slow down the pace of the poem (quoted with line 14 for context):

> facing in all directions, waiting for rain.
> How mysterious, how patient and dumbfounded
> they appear in the long quiet of the afternoon.

This helps establish the "long quiet of the afternoon," luring the reader into a false sense of security before the poem's main event arrives in the following stanza (the cow's cry).

In the last two stanzas, the speaker's observation of one particular cow becomes more detailed and focused. The poem ramps up its use of caesura here, as if the cumbersome size of the cow is imposing an effect on the poem (just as its cry seems to be its assertion of its own "cowness"). For instance, look at the first three lines of stanza four:

> Yes, it sounded like pain until I could see
> the noisy one, anchored there on all fours,
> her neck outstretched, her bellowing head

This stanza starts off with three caesurae, changing the poem's pace to match the crying of the cow.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** “wing, flown”
- **Line 8:** “later, I”
- **Line 12:** “directions, waiting”
- **Line 13:** “mysterious, how”
- **Line 15:** “while, one”
- **Line 22:** “Yes, it”
- **Line 23:** “one, anchored”
- **Line 24:** “outstretched, her”
- **Line 26:** “rising, full-bodied”
- **Line 30:** “large, unadulterated”
- **Line 35:** “wild, shocking”

CONSONANCE

Consonance is used throughout "Afternoon with Irish Cows." Some of this is more specifically classified as alliteration, which is covered in that specific section of the guide.

The first stanza features an /f/ sound throughout, which helps convey the grassy field on which the cows spend most of their time. Words like "field," "tuft," and "soft" all conjure the impression of a luscious green land (typical of Ireland). Line 4 has a similar effect:

> their big heads down in the soft grass

The /s/ sound has a softness to it that also helps support the image of the cows bending down to eat the grass.

One noticeable example of consonance in the second stanza is contained in one word: "dumbfounded." The dullness of these /d/ sounds speaks to the common misconception that cows are not especially intelligent (an idea that the poem later undermines).

In the penultimate stanza, the poem turns to fulsome /l/ sounds: "all," "bellowing," "laboring," "full-bodied," "belly." These sounds are all linked to the cow—to its sheer size and the volume of its cry. In the final stanza, the poem uses a similar /l/ sound to help convey the rural surroundings. This section feels almost like pastoral writing (a form of poetry that idealizes the countryside), but it also serves a significant purpose. Here, the speaker considers how the cow's cry connects it to all the other cows that came before—it is a sound that links the ancient and the modern. The surrounding "fields," "clouds," "limestone hills," and "blue bay," made vivid by this consonant sound, are ancient parts of the landscape too, helping the poem suggest a vast

history.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Line 3
- Line 4
- Line 5
- Line 6
- Line 7
- Line 8
- Line 9
- Line 10
- Line 11
- Line 12
- Line 13
- Line 14
- Line 15
- Line 16
- Line 17
- Line 18
- Line 19
- Line 20
- Line 21
- Line 22
- Line 23
- Line 24
- Line 25
- Line 26
- Line 27
- Line 28
- Line 29
- Line 30
- Line 31
- Line 32
- Line 33
- Line 34
- Line 35

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment is used throughout "Afternoon with Irish Cows." The poem has a fairly informal, conversational tone, and the flow of enjambed lines helps with this.

At times, the enjambment has more specific effects. Take, for example, the enjambment in lines 5-7:

> though I would sometimes pass a window
> and look out to see the field suddenly empty
> as if they had taken wing, flown off to another
> country.

Contrast this with lines 2-4, all of which end in commas:

> across the road from where we lived,
> stepping all day from tuft to tuft,
> their big heads down in the soft grass,

These end-stops happen when the cows are actually present on the field, while the enjambment occurs when the cows are gone. The enjambment, then, acts out what the speaker is describing.

In contrast, the third and fourth stanzas are composed mostly of enjambed lines. Stanza three represents a quickening of the poem's pace as the speaker moves from the fairly low-key descriptions of stanzas one and two to the urgency and drama of the cow's "full-bodied cry." The speaker recounts running out to check on the cows, thinking that one of the cows must be in dire pain. The quickened lines, then, represent the speaker's hurry.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** “field / across”
- **Lines 5-6:** “window / and”
- **Lines 6-7:** “empty / as”
- **Lines 9-10:** “ munching / or”
- **Lines 10-11:** “down / on”
- **Lines 13-14:** “dumbfounded / they”
- **Lines 15-16:** “them / would”
- **Lines 16-17:** “phenomenal / that”
- **Lines 17-18:** “paper / or”
- **Lines 18-19:** “ with / and”
- **Lines 19-20:** “wall / to”
- **Lines 20-21:** “torched / or”
- **Lines 22-23:** “see / the”
- **Lines 24-25:** “head / laboring”
- **Lines 25-26:** “voice / to”
- **Lines 26-27:** “cry / that”
- **Lines 27-28:** “belly / and”
- **Lines 29-30:** “announcing / the”
- **Lines 31-32:** “kind / to”
- **Lines 34-35:** “shoulders / above”

METAPHOR

Metaphor is used just once in "Afternoon with Irish Cows." The poem's language is generally quite down-to-earth and conversational (perhaps explaining the relative lack of figurative language).

This one example occurs in the second stanza:

> or they would be lying down
> on the black-and-white maps of their sides,

This metaphor takes the black-and-white patterned appearance of the cows and compares it to maps, casting the black patches as masses of land, and white as oceans and seas.

Apart from being a neat visual image, the metaphor has connotations that play into the poem's overall philosophical inquiry. That is, the poem is chiefly concerned with both people's and cows' *places* in the world—indeed, the poem is a reappraisal of the cow more generally, painting it is a mysterious, noble, and mystical figure. The metaphor of a map also suggests that the poem is a kind of journey of understanding for the speaker. However, this journey never quite reaches a conclusion, because the limits of human knowledge prevent the speaker from ever fully understanding the cows.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-11:** "they would be lying down / on / ,"
- **Line 11:** "the black-and-white maps of their sides"

PATHETIC FALLACY

Pathetic fallacy occurs when writers attribute human feelings to non-human things. Sometimes, however, it's not always clear-cut whether a particular feeling or behavior is unique to humans or not. One such ambiguous moment happens in the poem's final stanza. Here, the speaker reaches for a reason behind the cow's "full-bodied cry," the one described in the previous stanza. The speaker concludes:

> ... she was only announcing
> the large, unadulterated cowness of herself,
> pouring out the ancient apologia of her kind

An "apologia" is a kind of spirited defense. In other words, the speaker feels that the cow is crying out in order to impose her being and identity on the world around her—to prove her "cowness." This ascribes a degree of intention to the cow, implying that the cow cares whether or not this "cowness" is witnessed by the rest of the world.

Because cows are so mysterious to the speaker, it's impossible to say whether the cow is *actually* expressing an "apologia" or not. That is, it's unclear whether this is a moment of the pathetic fallacy or of literal description. Indeed, much of the cow's mystery comes from the extent to which these questions can't be answered. The speaker is certainly deeply curious about the cows, implicitly wondering to what extent human characteristics—like language, emotion, and logic—can be attributed to them. So, the speaker makes a leap and calls the cow's cry an "apologia," not knowing whether such a phrase is accurate or not.

Where Pathetic Fallacy appears in the poem:

- **Lines 29-32:** "Then I knew that she was only announcing / the large, unadulterated cowness of herself, / pouring out the ancient apologia of her kind / to all the green fields and the gray clouds,"

SIMILE

Simile is used twice in "Afternoon with Irish Cows." The first example is in the first stanza:

> and look out to see the field suddenly empty
> as if they had taken wing, flown off to another country.

Most of the time when the speaker looks out of the window, the cows are there in the field. But occasionally they aren't, which seems mysterious to the speaker. That's where the simile comes in, with the speaker imagining that the cows take to the skies (perhaps playing on the old phrase "if pigs could fly"), comparing cows to birds. The fantastical nature of the simile emphasizes how strange these moments seem to the speaker, and it's quite funny given the sheer weight and size of most cows!

The other simile takes place at the start of stanza four and helps clarify the lines from the previous stanza. Here are those lines, plus the simile:

> Yes, it sounded like pain until I could see
> the noisy one

The phrase "like pain" makes sense of the mention of "torched" and "pierced," making it clear that the cow's "full-bodied cry" is like the sound something would make while being tortured. Of course, this *isn't* why the cow makes that sound. As a result, the simile heightens the sense of mystery that surrounds the cows. In other words, there is a gap between the speaker's understanding of the cows and the reality of what is happening—and this simile captures that gap.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-7:** "the field suddenly empty / as if they had taken wing, flown off to another country."
- **Line 22:** "it sounded like pain"

REPETITION

Repetition appears in various forms throughout the poem. For example, diacope pops up in line 3, which describes the typical behavior of the cows in the field:

> stepping all day from tuft to tuft

The repetition of "tuft" here has a pleasant sonic effect, almost sounding like the tread of feet on grassy ground. It also shows

the repetitiousness of the cows's behavior—how they basically spend all day eating grass!

The speaker later repeats the word "would" several times in the second and third stanzas. In the second stanza, the speaker says:

> Then later, I would open the blue front door,
> and again the field would be full of their munching
> or they would be lying down

And then in the third stanza:

> But every once in a while, one of them
> would let out a sound so phenomenal
> that I would put down the paper

Again, the repetition highlights how these occurrences were habitual. This "would" happen, then that "would" happen, etc., and it was all fairly common.

In line 13, at the end of stanza two, the poem repeats the word "how" in quick succession, which can be considered an example of anaphora:

> How mysterious, how patient and dumbfounded

It's a subtle moment, but the repeated word speaks to the nature of the speaker's philosophical inquiries. The speaker is curious about the cows, wondering *how* it is they are the way they are—*how* they think, communicate, and perceive the world.

Next, the speaker repeats "her" in line 24 in the fourth stanza—"her neck outstretched, her bellowing head"—foregrounding how this section of the poem focuses on one particular cow, rather than the entire herd. The repeated word also captures the insistence with which this single cow cries out.

In the final stanza, the speaker repeats the words "to" and "and" in parallel phrases:

> to all the green fields and the gray clouds,
> to the limestone hills and the inlet of the blue bay,

Repeating "to" at the beginning of each line, the speaker again employs anaphora here. These repetitions capture how far the cow's mooing resounds, echoing over all these facets of the landscape.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "from tuft to tuft"
- **Line 8:** "I would"
- **Line 9:** "the field would"
- **Line 10:** "they would"
- **Line 13:** "How mysterious, how patient"
- **Lines 15-16:** "one of them / would"
- **Line 17:** "I would"
- **Line 24:** "her neck," "her bellowing head"
- **Lines 32-33:** "to all the green fields and the gray clouds, / to the limestone hills and the inlet of the blue bay,"

VOCABULARY

Tuft (Line 3) - A small clump of grass.

Taken Wing (Line 7) - Flown away.

Dumbfounded (Line 13) - With an astonished or surprised look.

Phenomenal (Line 16) - Incredible or exceptional. The word also refers to the ability of things to be perceived by our senses, and its root word is *phenomenon*. In this sense, the word may suggest connections to the branch of philosophy known as *phenomenology*, which, put crudely, investigates experience and consciousness.

Bellowing (Line 24) - Making a loud and low sound.

Laboring (Line 25) - Moving with effort.

Bowed (Line 28) - This describes the shape of the cow's ribs—they are bent in the shape of bows.

Unadulterated (Line 30) - Pure; unmixed and undiluted.

Apologia (Line 31) - A spirited defense.

Limestone (Line 33) - A type of sedimentary rock.

Inlet (Line 33) - A small, indented section of the bay.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Afternoon with Irish Cows" consists of five seven-line stanzas—a.k.a. septets. The poem doesn't fit into a strict poetic form, and this helps with its generally down-to-earth, conversational tone.

It's interesting to note the way that each stanza, apart from the second, consists of one long sentence. This makes each stanza feel like its own distinct thought, and gives the poem a sense of progression as it goes from one stanza to the next. Indeed, this matches the speaker's own journey. In the beginning of the poem, the speaker's interaction with the cows is one of distracted observation—but by the last stanza there is a much more focused and tangible sense of awe.

The key moment in this development is stanza three. Here, the poem makes its turn, shifting the focus onto what the speaker

later calls the "full-bodied cry" made by one of the cows. This opens the poem up, making it more of a philosophical inquiry. Indeed, such is the searching nature of the poem after this point that even the cow participates in it, looking back at the speaker—and even the reader—with a questioning gaze. That is, the cow stops being the observed, and becomes the observer.

METER

"Afternoon with Irish Cows" is doesn't follow a metrical pattern. Instead, the poem opts for free verse. This allows the poem to unfold in a casual, conversational way. The poem follows the rhythms of natural speech rather than the more strictly organized sound of metrical poetry. This makes sense, given that the poem focuses on something that is, upon first glance, pretty ordinary: a bunch of cows in a field. Of course, the poem's speaker eventually finds a sense of mystery and wonder in this seemingly mundane scene, just as the reader may find eloquence and beauty despite the casual-sounding nature of the poem.

RHYME SCHEME

"Afternoon with Irish Cows" is an unrhymed poem. As noted in our discussion of Meter, it is written in free verse, which prevents the poem from sounding too formal or controlled. Overall, Collins opts for a conversational tone—and perhaps regular rhymes would feel out of place with this sound. Instead, the poem's language unfolds naturally, casually, allowing the speaker's insight to go where it will without worrying about sticking to a specific pattern of sounds.

SPEAKER

"Afternoon with Irish Cows" is told from a first-person perspective, though the reader learns little about the speaker's identity. Given that he spent time working in Ireland, Collins is often taken to be the speaker in the poem—though the identity of the speaker isn't as important as the way the speaker perceives the cows. Indeed, the speaker is really just a kind of spokesperson for humanity—just as the cow is a representative of its own species.

The speaker narrates the poem like an anecdote, talking generally of a stay in Ireland. The speaker lived somewhere rural, and from the windows could often see cows in the nearby field. Just as the cows would go about their daily business, the speaker was often occupied with everyday tasks. But the cows fascinated the speaker, who found them a creature of curiosity and intrigue. Indeed, the speaker's powers of observations become more focused as the poem goes on, with the last three stanzas considering in-depth the "full-bodied cry" of one of the cows.

SETTING

The poem takes place by a field in the countryside, which is "across the road" from the speaker's home and often occupied by cows. On another level, the poem can be thought of as taking place in the speaker's memory. The speaker reflects on the cows the speaker used to see while living near this field, likely in rural Ireland (where Collins spent time). Accordingly, the poem is somewhat pastoral, conjuring a scene of rural Irish life—green fields, gray clouds, hills, and blue water. At times, the speaker is depicted in a house, making this the poem's sole interior space.

It's interesting to note the differences between the speaker's observations in the house versus out in the field itself. At home, the speaker's gaze is somewhat more detached—the speaker reflects on the cows with a degree of amusement, imagining them flying away whenever they are out of view. But when the speaker is actually in the presence of the cows—or the main cow that makes the loud noise—the nature of the speaker's observations changes. Suddenly, the cow seems more connected to thousands of years of evolution, its cry linking its own "cowness" to all the cows that came before.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Billy Collins is one of America's most popular poets, and this poem's down-to-earth conversational tone and sense of humor are typical of his work. Collins has taught in Ireland and composed "Afternoon with Irish Cows" during one of those periods.

Given the poem's specific location, readers might want to compare this poem side-by-side with other poetry related to Ireland. The poetry of Seamus Heaney and Paul Muldoon would be a good place to a start, both of whom have written about Irish nature and landscape. "Death of a Naturalist" by Heaney and "Hedgehog" by Muldoon both look at the way that humanity forms its perceptions of animals and interacts with the natural world.

Of course, the meeting point between human and animal life is by no means a subject limited to an Irish setting. Often, these poems act as a way in for people to consider their own place in the world too—not just animals'. Famous examples, then, are "The Fish" by Elizabeth Bishop, "Baby Tortoise" by D.H. Lawrence, and, going further back in time, "The Tyger" by William Blake.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Afternoon with Irish Cows" doesn't offer much by way of a specific historical context. The language itself is clear and plain, typical of Collins's work in the world of contemporary poetry.

Though the reader doesn't learn much about the speaker's specific situation, the imagery of the cows and surrounding landscape have something almost ahistorical about them. That is, they don't feel tethered to one particular point in time. Indeed, husbandry—the rearing of animals for agricultural purposes—is an activity that links modern humanity at least all the way back to the Neolithic period (around 10,000 BC). As such, cows are a familiar part of rural life in many countries around the world.

There are certain widely-held myths about cows that the poem seems to play on. Firstly, the notion that cows are unintelligent creatures. The poem doesn't put this view forward, but refers to it gently in the description of the cows in the first and second stanza ("big heads" that are "dumbfounded"). On the contrary, cows are highly intelligent creatures, with an advanced system of communication (some scientists even think that cows have names for one another!). The idea that cows lie on the ground in anticipation of a storm, however, has not been proven scientifically. Rosamund Young's *The Secret Life of Cows* is a valuable book for anyone wanting to learn more.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Animal Poems — A "greatest hits" of poetry that takes animals as its initial subject matter. (https://interestingliterature.com/2017/11/10-of-the-best-poems-about-animals/)
- Collins Reads the Poem — A 2008 reading of "Afternoon with Irish Cows" by the poet himself. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-H3_LNNM2PA)
- Collins in the Paris Review — An interview with Billy Collins shortly after he was appointed poet laureate to the Library of Congress. (https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/482/billy-collins-the-art-of-poetry-no-83-billy-collins)
- Collins's Bio and More Poems — A valuable resource from the Poetry Foundation on Collins's life and work. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/billy-collins)
- Ten Unusual Facts about Cows — There's a lot to learn about these fascinating creatures! (https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/550594/facts-about-cows)

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