# The History Teacher

## SUMMARY

The history teacher wants to preserve his students' innocence, so he refers to the Ice Age as the Chilly Age—a time period when everyone simply wore sweaters to stay warm.

He also deems the Stone Age the Gravel Age, explaining that this was just a time period when people had long driveways.

Similarly, he tells his students that the Spanish Inquisition (an infamous period of religious intolerance and persecution) was simply a time when people asked a lot of questions about Spain—questions like the distance to Madrid or the proper term for a bull fighter's hat.

He also tells his students that the War of the Roses (a series of 15th-century English civil wars) had to do with gardens, and that the Enola Gay (the plane that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima) only dropped a single, itty bitty atom on Japan.

After their history lessons, the students would bully and beat up their weaker and more studious peers on the playground.

Meanwhile, the history teacher would walk home—through neighborhoods dotted with little flower gardens and white picket fences—and wonder whether he could convince his students that the Boer War (fought between Britain and South Africa) simply involved telling really boring stories until enemy soldiers fell asleep.

## THEMES

### INNOCENCE VS. IGNORANCE

The history teacher's attempts to preserve his students' innocence result instead in transforming his students into ignorant young people who lack the skills to act with kindness or intelligence. The poem implies that understanding the realities of the world, however dark or uncomfortable, is part of what allows young people to grow into better, kinder human beings—even if this process ultimately constitutes a loss of innocence.

From the start of the poem, Collins make his protagonist's motivations clear: he is "trying to protect his students' innocence." The teacher believes that if he provides his students with alternative versions of history in which there is no unkindness or violence, they will be shielded from the horrors of the world and their innocence will remain intact.

The poem then provides a series of examples of how the history teacher reframes the world events he is supposed to be explaining to his students. The teacher often uses childlike wordplay to recast these events, as if mimicking how a child might try to put unfamiliar terms in familiar contexts. For example, he tells his students that the Spanish Inquisition—a period of intense, deadly religious persecution—was a time when people just asked a lot of questions about Spain, and that the atomic bomb—which killed thousands of people—dropped only one atom.

Yet instead of remaining gently innocent, the students, with no worldly context for understanding their actions, become the ignorant perpetrators of unkindness and violence themselves. Children become bullies who "torment the weak and the smart."

Ironically, then, in trying to preserve his students' innocence, the history teacher himself proves naïve and ignorant of the effects his teaching has on his students. In the final stanza of the poem, the history teacher sees only what he wants to see—the classically idyllic peaceful still-life of "flower beds and white picket fences"—and completely misses the cruel bullying perpetrated by his own students on the playground.

These final lines reveal the history teacher's own unwillingness to confront the horror and cruelty of the real world, suggesting that his sugar-coated curriculum is as much to protect himself from the harsh reality of the world as to protect his students. In ostensibly trying to keep his students ignorant of the truth, he has kept himself ignorant of who his students really are.

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Line 1
- Lines 2-13
- Lines 14-16
- Line 17
- Lines 18-19
- Lines 20-22

### HISTORY AND COMPASSION

"The History Teacher" demonstrates that depriving students of historical truth will also prevent students from acting with compassion and empathy in the real world. The poem thus suggests the importance of fully remembering, and learning from, the past.

The poem seems to draw a line between the misinformation that the history teacher provides his students and the behavior that the students then exhibit outside the classroom. On the playground, the students "torment the weak and the smart": their education (or lack thereof), the poem suggests, has contributed to their transformation into bullies.

The history teacher's lessons thus seem to be sculpting

students with limited compassion for their peers. Deprived of the true history of human suffering—no wars or violence, no climate disasters, no religious persecution—students have lost the opportunity to practice empathy on the historical figures they study. In examining history, the poem implies, students learn to think critically and to understand the past ethically as they consider the decisions made by leaders and civilians in the wake of major world events. In the history teacher's sunny revision of history, students no longer have the ability to put themselves in the shoes of the oppressors or oppressed people of the past: this is a timeline that is essentially story-less with no real conflict, no real risk, and no real stakes (for example, the most dangerous outcome in this retelling of the Boer War was falling asleep with boredom).

If, unlike their "weak" victims, the history teacher's students show strength instead of smarts, why do they feel empowered by their miseducation? Having never encountered stories of people who were oppressed or witnessed oppression around them, the students may feel invincible. If they have never been presented with true stories in which individuals face real consequences, nor learned about the harm that individuals can inflict, the history teacher's students have no knowledge or understanding holding them back from punishing those whose greater wisdom makes them more hesitant to engage with violence or conflict.

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-13
- Lines 14-17
- Lines 20-22

### THE DANGER OF MISINFORMATION

The history teacher's classroom functions as a broader warning about the dangers of a misinformed and under-educated community. The poem depicts, with a tongue-in-cheek style, a small group of individuals given false information by a (mis)leader. Even in such miniature conditions, the impact of this avalanche of misinformation is significant, since the kids turn against their peers from other classrooms (who, the "smart" descriptor implies, presumably have more accurate historical knowledge than they do). If this small-scale iteration of false teaching has an effect, the poem seems to suggest to the reader, how much more damage could be done in a society where misinformation about the past is widespread? What are the consequences in an *adult* world where people do not understand nor even seek the truth?

By keeping his students in the dark, then, the poem implies that the history teacher does what any leader hopes to do: keep his constituents (his students) happy and uncomplaining, but at a cost. As long as the students do not learn the truth, the status quo will be maintained—a status quo in which the ignorant may "torment the weak / and the smart ..."

The history teacher understands that he must generate misrepresentations of history that will be persuasive to his students. In the final stanza, the history teacher wonders "if they would believe" (line 20) that the Boer War has to do with being bored. This glimpse into the history teacher's thought process demonstrates that he is not merely impulsively hiding the truth to protect his students but is actually planning to deceive them.

Without understanding the past sufficiently to act in order to prevent history from repeating itself, the students act according to their basest, most uncaring instincts. The poem suggests that it is this lying that spurs on the behaviors of those who engage in acts of purposeless violence and cruelty.

The history teacher's act is, therefore, political. By misleading his students (his citizens, in a sense) and turning a blind eye to the suffering that they inflict as a result of their ignorance, the history teacher contributes, unknowingly, in this case, to the formation of an unstable and dangerous community. Understood on a larger scale, "The History Teacher" lays bare the violence that results when leaders deliberately keep historical truth away from their followers.

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 5-13
- Lines 14-16
- Line 17
- Lines 20-22

## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-4

*Trying to protect ...*
*... to wear sweaters.*

The first stanza of "The History Teacher" introduces the poem's central conceit: the title character takes upsetting or violent events from history and describes them for his students in much more child-friendly, sugarcoated terms. In this first example, the history teacher re-titles the Ice Age as "the Chilly Age," stripping away the environmental devastation of the era and its detrimental effects on human life so that it seems only to have forced people to wear warm clothing.

From the first line of the poem, the history teacher's motivation is made explicit: he is "trying to protect his students' innocence" (line 1). The history teacher seems to believe that if he shields them from the unhappiness of the long-ago past, they can then remain blissfully unaware of all human suffering. While he may make the Ice Age more conceptually accessible to young students (although his students' age is never specified, it seems

from their "playground" use that they are likely elementary or middle school students) by connecting the era to the familiar experience of a chilly day, the history teacher completely misrepresents the facts and reality of history.

This first stanza also establishes the poem's consistent absence of metrical regularity or rhyme scheme. Collins writes in blank verse, and the first stanza is a single sentence featuring enjambment that separates each line from the next. The enjambment emphasizes the reveals of the pair of punch lines in the stanza, with line breaks serving as momentary drum rolls before the discoveries of what name the history teacher used ("the Chilly Age," line 2) and how he described this era (the sweater-wearing in line 4).

Despite the poem's ultimately dark moral, the opening lines also establish a wry sense of knowing humor: the reader is invited to laugh at the history teacher's wacky creativity in the classroom but also to laugh at the kids who are presumably duped by this rather lame, pun-based historical explanation. At the same time, how would the history teacher's students know any better without previous exposure to the truth? From the poem's first lines, Collins positions the reader as an educated onlooker to the miseducation of a classroom of "innocent" students.

The fleeting use of assonance and consonance in the words "million" and "Chilly" in line 2 serve to accentuate the history teacher's attempts to make his lessons palatable and innocent. The presence of such sonic devices throughout the poem suggests the history teacher's attempts to pepper his lies with sing-song, catchy phrases.

## LINES 5-6

*And the Stone ...*
*... of the time.*

The second stanza acts as a punchline of its own: just when readers thought perhaps the Ice Age story was a stand-alone incident, it turns out that the history teacher does this sort of thing all the time.

The conversion of the Stone Age to the Gravel Age is perhaps even sillier than the first stanza's misrepresentation of history. The explanation that the history teacher provides—that the era called the Gravel Age because people had long driveways—does not only mislead students about the quality of people's lives during this time but also completely jumbles up historical understanding for the sake of explaining a ridiculous phrase. The teacher deprives students of the understanding of what the Stone Age actually meant in the development of human innovation and man-made resources while, at the same time, erroneously suggesting that humans had homes with driveways during this period in history. This not only misleads students, but also completely alienates them from any opportunity of understanding their own moment in history in any sort of comprehensible timeline or context.

The brevity of the stanza also suggests the history teacher's disinterest in engaging with questions or discussion. The barest "facts" of this fake history simply linger in the classroom unchallenged, and the absence of the students themselves from the poem's depiction of the history teacher's classroom indicates their passivity in receiving his lessons.

While, in the first stanza, the history teacher's deception is active—he "told" (line 2) them this lie—the second stanza replaces the teacher with the event as the subject of the sentence: it is the Stone Age that "became" (line 5) the Gravel Age rather than the history teacher who *fabricated* the Gravel Age. This subtle shift in the subject of the sentence between the first and the second stanza seems to indicate a growing attack on historical truth: while the history teacher actively lies in the first stanza, it seems a few lines later that the li—the existence of the Gravel Age—simply *is*.

## LINES 7-10

*The Spanish Inquisition ...*
*... the matador's hat?"*

The third stanza extends the comedy of the opening two stanzas further, as the history teacher reimagines the Spanish Inquisition as a time in history when there were a great deal of inquiries about Spain. The questions seem designed particularly to avoid any sort of historical grounding or discussion of the persecution and torture that defined the real Spanish Inquisition.

The second question, "What do you call the matador's hat?" (line 10) itself mirrors the history teacher's misdirection. A matador is a bull fighter; instead of looking at the violent act of the matador, the slaughter of a bull, the question instead distracts its recipient to drift upwards to notice the matador's montera (which is, by the way, the answer to that inquiry).

The choice of the word "outbreak" (line 8) in the description of this fictionalized depiction seems also to glance at human suffering while gliding by, conjuring up a fleeting image of widespread disease. Its appearance in the poem is, perhaps, a reminder that human misfortune forms the backbone of our language: the truth of suffering—including its linguistic legacies—is inescapable.

As in the previous stanza, the history teacher himself is absent from this retelling of his historical fabrication. The complete predicate here is "was nothing more than": the text of the stanza itself, since the history teacher is not mentioned, could be the actual language of the deceptive lesson.

Meter and rhyme combine in the final line of the stanza to emphasize the history teacher's overly cheerful interpretation of history. The sing-song rhythms of line 10, with its pair of dactyls before long stressed syllables ("What do you | call the | matador's | hat"), reflect the history teacher's attempts to turn a lesson on a dark period of history into a schoolyard chant. The

assonance and consonance of the first syllable of "mat**a**dor" and "h**a**t" help to create the innocent flavor of a child's song.

## LINES 11-13

*The War of ...*
*... on Japan.*

The examples of the history teacher's reinventions move rapidly towards the present day, leaping from the 15th-century War of the Roses to the 1945 nuclear bombing of Hiroshima. This is the only stanza to detail more than one historical revision, as if the history teacher's lies have begun to accelerate.

As with the previous three stanzas, the two historical revisions included here feature misleading, minimizing misinterpretations of the names of historical events. Unlike the first two examples (the Ice Age and the Stone Age), the history teacher appears to continue to refer to these historical events by their actual names (the War of the Roses and the dropping of the atomic bomb) but offers fictional explanations for these terms.

These explanations suggest the history teacher's hasty attempts to pass over upsetting events in the history of war that involve intentional cruelty and slaughter. The history teacher's suggestion that the War of the Roses "took place in a garden" (line 11) seems to mirror how a child might interpret the conflict's name: refusing to expand students' understanding of the world, the history teacher allows students to dwell in their innocent assumptions. In reality, the War of the Roses refers to a series of bloody English civil wars spanning three decades.

The second example in the fourth stanza, in its massive modern historical significance, seems like the most damaging and shocking historical denial: the history teacher claims that the Enola Gay, the plane that dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan, only "dropped one tiny atom" (line 12). In interpreting this line, the reader has to do a little extra work than in the previous stanzas. Without the knowledge that the Enola Gay carried an atomic bomb, the history teacher's explanation would not make much sense. To understand the poem in full, then, requires the perspective of an educated reader. Even on the level of the poem, Collins perhaps suggests, education and knowledge are the only ways to access understanding of the truth; for a reader unfamiliar with the Enola Gay, it might be feasible to imagine it really did just drop one tiny atom.

Since the bombing of Japan in 1945 is such a relatively recent—there are still living survivors—the suppression of this history seems especially horrifying. This is particularly true because it registers as the willful denial of choices by leaders who very much shaped the world in which the history teacher's students live. Depriving the students of access to recent world history ensures that they cannot learn from the past nor develop a historical context for moral decision-making.

This example also begins to reveal the poem's symbolic resonances: hiding and ignoring historical truth and evidence, as Holocaust deniers do, for example, erodes trust in historical evidence and, over time, disables individuals' abilities to determine the reliability of historical narratives.

The stanza's most distinctive metrical feature is the three-syllable final line (line 13). The isolation of "on Japan" illustrates the imagined scene of a single atom falling: the impact upon landing only lasts a few moments. At the same time, the sparsity of text in line 13 leaves a significant white space, and readers are left to fill in that emptiness on their own: with the devastation of city-leveling destruction if they know the history and with more emptiness shaped by ignorance if they do not.

## LINES 14-17

*The children would ...*
*... breaking their glasses,*

For the first time in "The History Teacher," the poem moves away from the history teacher's classroom with a change of scene to the playground after class. Here, the reader discovers, the history teacher's students become bullies, physically attacking students who are described as "the weak and the smart" (lines 15-16), presumably in contrast to the history teacher's students own (who must then be strong but not-so-smart: they are, at least, ignorant).

The poem's rapid shift from the sugarcoated peacefulness of the lessons to the seemingly automatic violence of the playground underscores the ironies at the heart of the poem. This transition suggests that the history teacher's belief in his students' innocence is misplaced. They are already practicing the violence and fomenting the chaos from which the history teacher hopes to shield them. If the students' violent actions preceded their time in the history teacher's classes, he was always fighting a losing battle to preserve the innocence of children who had lost their innocence long ago.

Moreover, by contrasting the history teacher's students with their "weak" and "smart" peers, the poem indicates that the children's violent behavior is, in some part, *caused* by the very lessons that are constructed to protect them from knowledge of violence and suffering. Unlike their peers, the history teacher's students do not possess the knowledge and the context to understand the consequences of physical violence. They have never discussed how oppression and bullying plays out in the larger world, so they fail to recognize the destructive power of their actions on their playground. Without the examples of history to guide them, they have no choice but to repeat the worst mistakes of the past.

The poem, therefore, carries a political message: when students, or citizens, do not learn about the oppression and cruelty of the past, they will enact cruelty of their own. Those

who are better educated are "smart": they understand that violence should not be perpetuated, even on the playground. At the same time, pacifists may be labeled as "weak," at least in traditional contexts that label physical violence as an act of strength: the development of a moral conscience rooted in historical understanding can be a weakness when up against those whose ignorance allows them to act without thinking through the consequences of their behaviors.

The phrase "and the smart" is placed in isolation in line 16, as if another punchline or twist of its own: bullies will always prey upon the weak, but the revelation that they also turn upon their better-educated peers demonstrates the failure of the history teacher's experiment in misleading education.

The traditional schoolyard bully images of the nerd's mussed-up hair and broken glasses in line 17 remind the reader, too, that these kids are familiar to us. Their education may be unique in the history teacher's classroom, but how many schoolyard bullies—or grown-up bullies, for that matter—truly understand oppression and unkindness in a broader context of human history? The poem suggests, on a metaphorical level, that too many ignorant people feel entitled to behave like schoolyard bullies since they have been denied the opportunity to learn lessons from history.

A brief moment of momentary metrical regularity that recalls the cadence of Dr. Seuss or other children's rhymes occurs in lines 15-16:

> for the play- | ground to tor- | ment the weak
> and the smart

This pattern of four anapests in a row metrically animates the playground, painting a violent scene with a cheery gloss, much like the history teacher does with the lessons in his classroom.

### LINES 18-22

*while he gathered ...*
*... enemy nod off.*

The final stanza of "The History Teacher" covers the most ground: in its five lines, it follows the title character on his journey home from school and also offers a glimpse into the teacher's mind as he plans his next lesson.

This last stanza provides three revelations. The first is that the history teacher remains—or, at least, acts—blissfully unaware of his students' violent tendencies on the playground. While they are attacking their peers, the history teacher packs up and walks home.

The second revelation, made possible by the reader's new awareness of the impact of the history teacher's lessons, is that this cycle of ignorance and violence will continue to perpetuate. The final lines of the poem show the history teacher continuing to fabricate new pun-based lies about history, transforming the "Boer War"—a bloody conflict between South Africa and Britain at the turn of the 20th century—into the "Bore War," in which boring stories put the enemy to sleep. As long as the history teacher remains unaware of, or unmoved by, how his lies are impacting his students, he will continue to provide future classes of students with new lies custom-made to mislead them.

The final revelation is that the history teacher evidently engages *himself* in the same sugarcoated brainwashing that he attempts to perform on his students. He has not succeeded in preserving his students' innocence, but it seems as if he has preserved his *own*.

While the reader looks over the history teacher's shoulder at the carnage behind him, the teacher sees only the "flower beds and white picket fences" (line 19). He is ignorant both of the realities of the world around him and also of the damage that he has done himself by failing to properly educate his students. Perhaps he is not really walking through a well-to-do peaceful community at all; it may be that the flower beds and white picket fences are the only objects that he chooses to notice.

At the same time, it is all too clear that the history teacher is a conscious deceiver. The final lines take the reader back into the history teacher's mind, showing him to be attempting to invent a version of history that his students "would believe" (line 20). The history teacher understands—as does any leader hoping to pull the wool over the eyes of followers—that the lies he creates must be constructed in such a way to continue to persuade his students of their veracity. Just as the soldiers in the "Bore War" that the history teacher imagines tell their stories with a particular "design" (line 22) in mind (to put their enemies to sleep), so to does the history teacher weave his falsehoods with a particular motivation: to convince his children that the tales are true and prevent them from questioning his statements.

The final two stanzas form one nine-line sentence, a "long, rambling" (line 21) sentence that might be right at home in the "Bore War." The enjambment between the fourth and fifth stanzas powerfully juxtaposes the playground scene with the teacher's serene walk home. With only the separation of a comma between the two images, the teacher's willful ignorance becomes all the more apparent.

## SYMBOLS

### PLAYGROUND VIOLENCE

The students' violence on the playground, apparently a result of the history teacher's derelict teaching method, seems to symbolize the chaos and suffering caused by the suppression and deliberate obfuscation of historical information. By depriving citizens of the ability to learn from

historical truths, the oppressive leader (the history teacher, in this case) creates a vacuum of understanding. In this state of ignorance, the people may cause suffering and move to violence, unable to lean on the past to learn from examples of morality and immorality or to comprehend the mistakes of past generations. When the students encounter peers who understand history better than they do, they take violent action against them, choosing "to torment the weak and the smart" (lines 15-16). Without the moral compass of history to guide them, the history teacher's students, like any under-educated or ignorant population, act against their fellow citizens who claim to know more than they do.

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 14-17:** "The children would leave his classroom / for the playground to torment the weak / and the smart, / mussing up their hair and breaking their glasses,"

### FLOWER BEDS AND WHITE PICKET FENCES

In the final stanza, as the history teacher walks home, ignorant of the playground violence he has helped to incite, he strolls "past flower beds and white picket fences" (line 19). These images are clear clichés of a serene, suburban American scene: it is as if the history teacher has walked into a painting of an old-fashioned vision of a peaceful neighborhood. These staples—the flower beds and picket fences—seem to stand for the innocent version of the world in which the history teacher wants his students to live. As the poem reaches its conclusion, it seems increasingly clear that the history teacher has constructed this fantasy world not only for his students but for himself as well: he cannot see the destruction his students cause but only the "flower beds" and "white picket fences," the sugarcoated, strife-less perception of an ideal American life.

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- **Line 19:** "past flower beds and white picket fences,"

## POETIC DEVICES

### ALLITERATION

The most prominent example of alliteration in "The History Teacher" occurs in the poem's final stanza. A series of words beginning with /w/ ("while," "walked," "white," "wondering," "would," and "war") in lines 18-21 transport the history teacher into his idyllic vision of his neighborhood and then into the similarly sugarcoated lesson planning. The repeated /w/ sound creates a softening transition from the hard /b/, /k/, and /g/ sounds in line 17 (in the words "breaking" and "glasses"), swiftly contrasting the violent reality of the playground with the placid fantasy taking place within the history teacher's mind. Line 19's tour of the history teacher's route with its "flower beds" and "fences" also pairs the alliterative /f/ sounds to further this sweetening effect.

An earlier example of alliteration in the poem can also be seen in the second stanza in which the history teacher's fictional questions that might be asked in the Spanish Inquisition pair two Spain-themed words — "Madrid" and "matador"—with initial /m/ sounds (lines 9-10). The jauntiness suggested by this alliteration supports the sense of childlike innocence that the history teacher intends to convey in these questions that gloss over the realties of the Spanish Inquisition.

**Where Alliteration appears in the poem:**

- **Line 9:** "Madrid"
- **Line 10:** "matador's"
- **Line 15:** "to torment"
- **Line 18:** "while ," "walked"
- **Line 19:** "flower ," "white," "fences"
- **Line 20:** "wondering," " would"
- **Line 21:** "War "

### ALLUSION

The poem derives its impact on the reader through the use of historical allusion to six events spanning millions of years in world history. Each of the history teacher's fictionalized lessons warps and vandalizes the true facts of the past beyond recognition. In order for the joke—and the horror—of the poem to land on the reader, the reader must recognize the actual historical meaning of the referenced events (or, at least, know enough to understand the sharp contrast between the truth and what the history teacher attempts to pass off as truth).

Since most of the history teacher's lessons derive from silly wordplay or deliberate misunderstanding of the names of the historical events ("Boer" and "bore," for example), the reader can "get" most of the jokes even without knowing the full history of the referenced events. The one exception is the reference to the Enola Gay in line 12: without knowing that the Enola Gay was an atomic bomb, the suggestion that the Enola Gay only "dropped one tiny atom" would not make sense to the reader.

At the same time, the use of allusion in "The History Teacher" allows readers to measure, broadly, the quality of their own history education, questioning how much of history they really fully understand: if these events don't register as familiar, or if the gravity of their historical impact is not apparent, what does that say about the reader's own past history teachers?

**Where Allusion appears in the poem:**

- **Line 2:** “the Ice Age”
- **Line 5:** “the Stone Age”
- **Line 7:** “The Spanish Inquisition”
- **Line 11:** “The War of the Roses”
- **Lines 12-13:** “the Enola Gay dropped one tiny atom / on Japan.”
- **Line 21:** “the Boer War ”

## ASSONANCE

"The History Teacher" uses subtle assonance throughout, often as if to accentuate the finite compactness of the false versions of history that the teacher offers to his students. For example, in the first stanza, the rebranding of the Ice Age as the Chilly Age pairs the words "everyone" and "sweaters" (line 4): the /eh/ sounds fit together as if the tale is pre-packaged and perfectly structured so as to avoid the need for going further with any inquiry into the topic. These historical lies must be designed to sound pristine and orderly.

This pattern continues on in the next two stanzas. The second stanza's reimagining of the Stone Age as the Gravel Age pairs the long /i/ sound in "driveways" and "time" (line 6). This pattern continues in the next stanza with the repetition of the /ah/ sound in "matador's" and "hat" (line 10) as the history teacher explains away the Spanish Inquisition and in "atom" and "Japan" (lines 12-13) as he offers his version of the bombing of Hiroshima.

This assonance accelerates in the final stanza as the history teacher walks home from school, lost in his own idyllic fantasy. The pairing of "notes" and "home" (line 18), followed closely by "beds" and "fences" (line 19), seems to indicate that this boxed-off conciseness in the way that the history teacher describes the world extends to his own interior life. The history teacher only sees the world in compressed, picture-perfect snapshots that look—and sound—as if they are beyond the need for further interrogation.

**Where Assonance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** “protect,” “students,” “innocence”
- **Line 3:** “Chilly,” “million”
- **Line 4:** “everyone,” “sweaters”
- **Line 6:** “driveways,” “time”
- **Line 10:** “matador's,” “hat”
- **Line 12:** “atom”
- **Line 13:** “Japan”
- **Line 18:** “notes,” “home”
- **Line 19:** “beds,” “fences”
- **Line 21:** “Boer War,” “stories”
- **Line 22:** “nod off”

## CONSONANCE

Billy Collins uses patches of consonance widely throughout "The History Teacher" for varying effects. In the first stanza, there is a clear consonant shift. The stanza begins with the gritty declaration of the teacher's intentions filled with the /t/ sound: "Trying to protect his student's innocence / he told" (lines 1-2). As soon as the teacher begins his first fictionalized version of history, however, the repeated /t/ sound is replaced by the /l/ in "really," "Chilly," and "Million" (lines 2-3). It is as if the history teacher has morphed his vocabulary; he is literally performing a different character for his students as he fabricates history in front of them.

In line 10, the combination of consonance and assonance in the trio of "What," "matador's," and "hat" work to create the sing-song effect that the history teacher intends, diminishing the true horrors of the Spanish Inquisition for his students. In the same way the pairs of /p/ and /t/ sounds in "dropped," "tiny," "atom," and "Japan" in lines 12-13 make the bombing of Hiroshima sound more practiced and pre-packaged, and, therefore, more palatable.

Consonance seems to work differently in the third stanza in which the students' attack on their peers arrives with a torrent of harsh /t/ sounds in "to torment the weak and the smart" (lines 15-16), followed by the sibilant pair of "mussing" and "glasses" (line 17), which seems perhaps to conjure up sonically the softer act of "mussing."

Finally, the shift to a sudden swarm of /m/ and /n/ sounds in the history teacher's closing vision of a "Bore War"—"rambling," "designed," "make," "enemy," "nod" (lines 21-22)—both signal the shift back into the teacher's historical imagination and, in their stream of sonic repetition, seem to participate in the described act of putting the listener to sleep.

**Where Consonance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** “Trying,” “to,” “protect,” “students,” “innocence”
- **Line 2:** “told,” “really”
- **Line 3:** “Chilly,” “million”
- **Line 9:** “Madrid”
- **Line 10:** “What,” “matador's,” “hat”
- **Line 12:** “dropped,” “tiny,” “atom”
- **Line 13:** “Japan”
- **Line 15:** “to,” “torment”
- **Line 16:** “smart”
- **Line 17:** “mussing,” “glasses”
- **Line 18:** “gathered,” “walked”
- **Line 19:** “past,” “flower,” “beds,” “white,” “picket,” “fences”
- **Line 20:** “wondering,” “would,” “believe”
- **Line 21:** “Boer,” “War,” “rambling”
- **Line 22:** “designed,” “make,” “enemy,” “nod”

## END-STOPPED LINE

Exactly half of the lines in "The History Teacher" could be considered end-stopped. These end-stopped lines serve primarily as punchlines or small surprises to conclude the setup of the preceding enjambed lines. These concluding lines—the history teacher's ridiculously sugarcoated version of history—sometimes shock with their absurdity in contrast to the seriousness of the historical events referenced. They also are the poem's central source of humor, serving as literal punchlines to the poem's wordplay-infused jokes.

As an example, the final line of the poem reveals that the purpose of the Boer War's "long, rambling stories" (the enjambed line 21) was "to make the enemy nod off" (line 22). The enjambment establishes the setup—What's the point of these stories in the Boer War?—to which the end-stopped line responds, making the Boer/bore pun clear.

The end-stopped line serves up a darker sort of twist in line 19, a landing point for the enjambed description of the history teacher's walk home. In line 18, the reader expects—hopes, perhaps—that the history teacher will become aware of the students' violence on the playground, but line 19 reveals instead that he is lost in his own world, strolling "past flower beds and white picket fences," the bottomlessness of his obliviousness a small shock to the system.

**Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:**

- **Line 4:** "sweaters."
- **Line 5:** "Age,"
- **Line 6:** "time."
- **Line 9:** "Madrid?'"
- **Line 10:** "hat?'"
- **Line 11:** "garden,"
- **Line 13:** "Japan."
- **Line 16:** "smart,"
- **Line 17:** "glasses,"
- **Line 19:** "fences,"
- **Line 22:** "off."

## ENJAMBMENT

"The History Teacher" employs ample enjambment throughout, in keeping with Collins's traditionally conversational style: half of the poem's 22 lines are enjambed. This enjambment often works to extend the suspense and postpone the surprise of how the teacher will distort history for his students. Examples of this occur in the enjambment between lines 2-3, lines 8-9, lines 12-13, and lines 21-22: in each case, the reader must read on to next line to discover the full egregiousness of the history teacher's lies.

In the first stanza, "he told them the Ice Age was really just" (line 2) sets up a cliffhanger that leads to the punchline of "the Chilly Age" (line 3) with a secondary shock coming in line 4 with the revelation that this was a period "when everyone had to wear sweaters" (line 4). Lines 3 and 4 arrive as miniature twists, an effect heightened by the use of enjambment.

The same can be found in the movement between the uncertain line 8, describing the Spanish Inquisition as "an outbreak of questions such as," before the ridiculous questions themselves show up in line 9. The most painful example arrives in line 12 when "the Enola Gay dropped one tiny atom" gives way, on the next line, to the two, lonely words "on Japan" (line 13). Collins creates space for the atom to drop between lines, refreshing the sense of horror as the reader remembers and anticipates what may be coming next historically.

A different set of twists occur in the fifth stanza in which the poem unveils the students' violence towards their peers. After the stanza's first line, "The children would leave his classroom" (line 14), the enjambment increases the big surprise of where these kids are actually going: "for the playground to torment the weak" (line 15). Perhaps the poem's most powerful enjambment is the transition between lines 15 and 16. The phrase could end after the word "weak" but instead it continues to expand the categories of children who are attacked: "and the smart" (line 16). With this short line, the poem makes clear not only that the history teacher's students are not smart—his lessons have made sure of that—but that being smart themselves dooms the students' peers as victims of violence.

**Where Enjambment appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 1-2:** "innocence / he"
- **Lines 2-3:** " just / the "
- **Lines 3-4:** "years / when"
- **Lines 7-8:** "more / than"
- **Lines 8-9:** "as / "How"
- **Lines 12-13:** "atom / on"
- **Lines 14-15:** "classroom / for"
- **Lines 15-16:** "weak / and"
- **Lines 18-19:** "home / past"
- **Lines 20-21:** "soldiers / in"
- **Lines 21-22:** "stories / designed"

## IRONY

The central situational irony of "The History Teacher" is that while the teacher believes his fictional version of history will "protect his students' innocence" (line 1), shielding them from violence and cruelty, his lessons, in fact, contribute to making his students violent and cruel towards their peers. The history teacher takes extreme action to avoid an outcome—his students' loss of innocence—that those same actions are actually producing.

"The History Teacher" also ends with a scene of dramatic irony in which the reader knows more than the title character about

the effects of his pedagogy. The history teacher walks away from the school, presumably content in the unchallenged belief that his pedagogy has kept his students safe from an understanding of the world's unhappiness or oppression. By the time the bucolic image of the history teacher arrives in the final stanza, however, the reader is already aware that the students, in fact, are architects of oppression on the playground, torturing their peers.

If the last two paragraphs were reversed, and the scene of the teacher's walk home came first, the juxtaposition between the effects of the history teacher's pedagogy and his beliefs about the efficacy of his teaching would be lost. As written, "The History Teacher" allows the reader to follow the history teacher home with the full knowledge that his plan has failed miserably. Read with that understanding, the final stanza reveals the history teacher's self-defeating incomprehension: he has only been successful in preserving his *own* innocence, and he has done so by promoting the ignorance of his students.

**Where Irony appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "Trying to protect his students' innocence"
- **Lines 14-22:** "The children would leave his classroom / for the playground to torment the weak / and the smart, / mussing up their hair and breaking their glasses, / while he gathered up his notes and walked home / past flower beds and white picket fences, / wondering if they would believe that soldiers / in the Boer War told long, rambling stories / designed to make the enemy nod off."

## JUXTAPOSITION

The central juxtaposition in "The History Teacher" is the contrast between the tone and setting of the fourth and fifth stanzas. In the fourth stanza, the students enact violence on their peers, physically attacking them on the playground. In the fifth stanza, the poem suddenly shifts perspective to the history teacher's serene stroll home, as he remains blissfully ignorant of his students' cruelty to other children. The quick transition—which takes place within a single long sentence split in half with a comma and a stanza break—demonstrates how little the history teacher understands the detrimental impact of his teaching method.

This tension between the clichéd placidity, the "flower beds" and "white picket fences," of the teacher's walk home and the ferocious acts of "torment" on the playground mirrors the contrast between the history teacher's lessons and the reality of history itself. Just as the history teacher's peaceful stroll masks the cruelty on the playground behind him, so too does each history lesson obscure the actual history of sorrow, oppression, and violence that took place.

For the reader, each of the first four stanzas also present jolting juxtapositions as the history teacher version of history clashes with what the reader knows the truth to be. For example, in the third stanza, line 7's reference to the Spanish Inquisition may summon up for the reader images of torture and violent persecution. These associations are suddenly replaced by the history teacher's silly vision of people asking basic questions about Spanish geography and sport. The rapid shocks of the contrasts help to highlight the absurdity of the history teacher's pedagogy.

**Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:**

- Lines 7-13
- Lines 14-22

## METAPHOR

The only example of metaphor in "The History Teacher" arrives in the third stanza when the Spanish Inquisition is defined as "nothing more than an outbreak of questions" (lines 7-8): the word "outbreak," although easily understood here idiomatically, does not refer to the literal meanings of the word in the sense of conflict (an outbreak of war) or medical crisis (an outbreak of hives). In this case, the outbreak of questions is positioned as something positive: it is meant by the history teacher to be a good thing that the Spanish Inquisition allowed for all these questions about Spain to be asked.

Yet, even as the history teacher weaves his fictitiously cheerful account of history, the alternative meanings of the word "outbreak" creep in to the poem. Before the reader sees the full phrase "outbreak of questions," the word "outbreak" comes first. The reader may fill in the blanks with a more traditional, literal response that match the traditional understanding of the Spanish Inquisition: an outbreak of violence, for example.

Associations with violence and sickness may already be present by the time the rest of the phrase arrives, revealing that this is only a not-so-scary "outbreak of questions." Since the poem has no figurative language elsewhere, the line is set up to deceive: the reader assumes, given the literalness of the past two stanzas, that the word "outbreak" will also be used literally. The metaphorical use of "outbreak" reminds the reader that escaping the realities of the historical past, as the history teacher hopes to do, may not ever be possible: violence and suffering is embedded in language—and poetry—itself.

**Where Metaphor appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 7-8:** "The Spanish Inquisition was nothing more / than an outbreak of questions"

## PUN

While all the history teacher's lessons involve punning in a way—in that they sugarcoat the actual truth of historical events by playing on words—there is also an explicit pun in the poem's

final lines. Here, the teacher plays on the homophones "Boer" and "bore."

The former is the Dutch and Afrikaans word for "farmer," and is used to refer to early Dutch settlers in South Africa (the descendants of whom are now called Afrikaners). The Boer War was a bloody conflict between Great Britain and the Boers in South Africa at the turn of the 20th century. "Bore," meanwhile, refers to exactly what the poem describes here—making someone totally lose interest or feel weary by droning on and on about something dull or tedious.

The Boer War was not boring at all, of course, and resulted in thousands of deaths. In an attempt to hide this reality from his students, the history teacher puns on the sound of the word "Boer" to make a more palatable—but totally fictitious—lesson. There is additional irony created by the fact that the students might actually be interested in learning about the reality of the Boer War were the teacher to tell the truth, instead of making up ridiculous stories. He is essentially doing exactly what the soldiers do in this pun: telling tales "designed to" make his students "nod off," to close themselves off to important moments in history.

**Where Pun appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 20-22:** "soldiers / in the Boer War told long, rambling stories / designed to make the enemy nod off."

## VOCABULARY

**Ice Age** (Line 2) - Although there have been several "ice ages" in the history of the planet—an "ice age" is any era of expanding glaciers of ice due to the Earth's surface becoming colder—the period usually referenced by the term "Ice Age" is the Pleistocene Epoch (which began 2.6 million years ago and ended about 12,000 years ago). In the poem, the history teacher deliberately misleads students about the mass extinctions of the Ice Age (a period of over two million years, more than twice as long as he suggests), making the era sound much more manageable: the "Chilly Age."

**Stone Age** (Line 5) - The Stone Age (which largely overlaps with the Ice Age) is an era of human prehistory lasting from the first known use of stone tools (2.6 million years ago) until the first known use of bronze tools (about 3,300 B.C.E.). As with the Ice Age, the history teacher uses wordplay to mislead his students, downsizing stone to gravel and thus minimizing the difficulty in surviving during this era of human existence.

**Spanish Inquisition** (Line 7) - The Spanish Inquisition was a court of justice established in the late 1400s to seek out and purify "heretics," i.e., non-Catholics, in Spain. The Spanish Inquisition is particularly infamous for its use of torture in the persecution of its victims. In the poem, the history teacher misleads his students into believing that "inquisition" merely means "questioning" and that the historical period of the Spanish Inquisition merely means a time in history during which many questions were asked in Spain.

**Matador** (Line 10) - In bullfighting, the matador is the chief bullfighter who is ultimately responsible for delivering the fatal blow to the bull. The history teacher references a matador in the context of imagining questions about Spain which might have been asked during what he claims was a period of great questioning in Spain (the "Spanish Inquisition") since bullfighting is a popular Spanish sport. (The answer to the history teacher's pretend question: the matador's hat is called a "montera.")

**War of the Roses** (Line 11) - The War of the Roses, which took place between 1455 and 1485, was a series of English civil wars between two families ("houses") who believed they had the strongest claim to the English throne. The house of York was symbolized by a white rose and the house of Lancaster was symbolized by a red rose: in the history play *Henry VI, Part 1*, William Shakespeare depicts the supposed origin of these symbols as different lords pluck roses of different colors to demonstrate their various loyalties. In the poem, the history teacher suggests that the entire War of the Roses took place in a garden so as not to frighten his students with the actual details of a genuine, bloody war.

**Enola Gay** (Line 12) - The Enola Gay was the bomber plane used by the United States in World War II to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. This was the first use of an atomic bomb in world history and was followed three days later by the bombing of Nagasaki. Since the nuclear bomb was "atomic," the history teacher in the poem suggests to his students that this means that the plane only released a single atom on to the nation of Japan. Atomic bombs actually have that name because they function based on the energy released by the splitting of radioactive atoms.

**Mussing** (Line 17) - To muss something up is to make it messy or untidy. In the context of "The History Teacher," the students of the title character are bullying and attacking their schoolmates on the playground. As part of their physical attack on their peers, they mess up their hair.

**Boer War** (Line 21) - The Boer War, which took place between 1899 and 1902 in South Africa, was a conflict between the British and the Dutch-descended Boers (or Afrikaners). The Boer War is also referred to as the South African War or Second Boer War (the first was a few decades earlier). The Boer War was the culmination of years of mounting tensions as the British sought to expand their empire in the region and was triggered particularly by the discovery of gold that would have threatened the British regional economic dominance. In the poem, the history teacher explains the Boer War by making a pun on its name, calling it the "Bore War" and suggesting that it

has to do with soldiers telling boring stories to put their enemy to sleep.

## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"The History Teacher" does not follow any formal poetic structure. There are 22 lines broken up into five stanzas: three quatrains (four lines) alternating with one couplet, one tercet (three lines), and one cinquain (five lines). All five stanzas are unrhymed.

Most of Collins's poetry employs similar free verse that does not follow a particular form, but, in "The History Teacher," the unpredictable shape that the poem's formlessness creates seems to match the sense of the history teacher's formless meandering through history as he constructs his lessons. The uneven stanza lengths may also suggest the velocity through which the history teacher hurtles through major events—the petite second stanza (lines 5-6), for example, emphasizes how quickly the history teacher dismisses and downplays the significance of the Stone Age.

### METER

"The History Teacher" is written in free verse with no fixed meter. Due to the enjambment throughout the stanzas, the poem, read aloud, sounds basically like prose.

While this is the case with most of Collins's poems, the poem's unmetered prosiness contributes to the choppy, improvised nature of the history teacher's lessons. Without truth guiding his teachings, there is no way to predict how they will sound or where they will go. The poem's fleeting moment of metrical regularity arrives in the fifth stanza as the history teacher's students show up on the playground to bully their peers (lines 15-16):

> for the play- | ground to tor- | ment the weak
> and the smart

This quartet of anapests (poetic feet with a da-da-DUM rhythm) seems to capture, ever so fleetingly, the rhythms of a playground chant (or taunt) as the bullies attack their prey.

### RHYME SCHEME

"The History Teacher" does not follow an overarching rhyme scheme. There are, however, a trio of significant instances of internal slant rhymes, built through assonance and consonance, that seem perhaps to accentuate the history teacher's child-friendly, sing-song approach to history.

In the first stanza, "Chilly" is echoed by the first syllables of "million" (line 3). Imagining the history teacher describing these chilly million years, it is easy to hear the soothing, song-like phrasing that such an explanation might carry.

This carries over into the third stanza's cheery question, "What do you call the matador's hat?" (line 10) with its internal rhyme of "mat/hat" suggesting the innocent playfulness that the history teacher intends.

In the final stanza, the history teacher considers teaching his students about the "Boer War" (line 21), a conflict with an already-rhyming name. Part of the appeal to the history teacher may be that the name already sounds danger-free because of its nursery rhyme quality. Rhymes, so closely associated for his students with the safety of their childhood, may every so often assist the history teacher in cloistering his pupils from the harsh realities of the outside world.

## SPEAKER

The speaker in "The History Teacher" appears to be an omniscient narrator who shares both what motivates the teacher inside his mind and what happens on the playground when the teacher's back is turned. The narrator shares some of the history teacher's internal life, explaining that the teacher is "trying to protect his student's innocence" (line 1) and also visiting the history teacher's thoughts to reveal that he is "wondering if they would believe" (line 20) the teacher's latest historical fiction.

At the same time, the speaker narrates a scene beyond the history teacher's knowledge, showing how his students "torment the weak and the smart" (lines 15-16) as the history teacher walks innocently, ignorantly home. The speaker maintains an impartial distance, presenting facts without arguing in favor or against the history teacher's methods. If Billy Collins's intention is to condemn the history teacher for allowing his students' ignorance to foment into violent bullying, he allows readers to reach that conclusion on their own without the speaker's voice explicitly directing their opinions.

## SETTING

"The History Teacher" appears to be set in a relatively well-off rural or suburban neighborhood. The history teacher walks home "past flower beds and white picket fences" (line 19). The poem provides little other information about the community or the school in which the history teacher works, other than the brief glance at the playground where the history teacher's students bully and attack their peers. It is possible, too, given the history teacher's own tendency to sugarcoat the world he presents to his students, that those flower beds and white picket fences are merely the landmarks that the history teacher notices: he may, as he does in his classroom, ignore the less-than-idyllic realities around him.

# CONTEXT

## LITERARY CONTEXT

"The History Teacher" appeared first in Billy Collins's fourth published collection *Questions About Angels* in 1991. The book was Collins's most successful yet: it was published through the National Poetry Series and catapulted Collins to greater prominence than he had previously experienced.

The poem is representative of Collins's humorous, colloquial, accessible style. A 2006 review in The Guardian of a reprint of an early Collins book argued that "whimsy is rare in American poetry ... so one looks in vain for obvious ancestors or influences in Collins ... a stubbornly distinctive voice." As Collins's fame has exploded (he served as Poet Laureate of the United States from 2001-2003), the easily identifiable tone and voice in his work have remained the same.

Collins himself cites the free verse of the Beat poets like Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti as significant influences in his development as a poet. He also describes the modernist 20th century poet Wallace Stevens as a major source of inspiration. (Collins has said his "life goal" as a young poet was to be seen "as a third-rate Wallace Stevens.")

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

While "The History Teacher" cites myriad examples from the historical past, the poem does not explicitly connect to any current events of the time of its composition (1991). However, a combination of cultural and political conversations at the time around education, history, and school violence may have contributed to the poem's urgent message about grounding education in morality and truth.

Across the decade prior to the publication of "The History Teacher," Howard Zinn's book *A People's History of the United States* (1980) became increasingly influential: Zinn's text retells American history from the pre-Columbian era to the 20th century in order to undo the sugarcoated patriotism of mainstream historical narratives. While the traditional sanitized, mythologized versions of history in classrooms that Zinn was, in part, responding to may be less overt than the history teacher's flagrant fictions, the book similarly emphasizes how the dominant versions of history fail to provide an accurate portrayal of the forces of oppression, marginalization, and colonialism. The poem may respond to Zinn's work with this satirical vision of pedagogical malpractice.

In the late 1980s, many educators increasing attributed a rise of violence in schools to the impact of music and movies which glorified violence. The poem poses an alternative explanation for the violence: the space for that violence is not created by the entertainment consumed by students outside of school but by the failures to properly educate about the past within classroom walls.

# MORE RESOURCES

## EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Out Loud — Watch a video of "The History Teacher" read aloud and accompanied by a series of illustrations. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3rQmzM-Q-nI)
- The Boer War — Learn more about the war referenced in the end of the poem (which had nothing to do with "boring" soldiers!). (https://www.britannica.com/event/South-African-War)
- Collins's Voice — This video provides an opportunity to hear Billy Collins's dryly witty delivery of his own poetry followed by a lengthy interview. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=evqo3HVAmQI)
- The War of the Roses — The real story of the War of the Roses, which did not take place in a garden (but did inspire the Game of Thrones series!). (https://www.britannica.com/event/Wars-of-the-Roses)
- Biography of Billy Collins — This biographical portrait of Billy Collins offers a thorough chronology of his work and a variety of responses from critics. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/billy-collins)
- The Spanish Inquisition — Read what the Inquisition actually entailed (hint: it was not about matador hats). (https://www.britannica.com/topic/Spanish-Inquisition)
- The Enola Gay — Read about the plane that dropped the atomic bomb on Japan. (https://www.britannica.com/topic/Enola-Gay)
- New York Times Review — This New York Times review of a 2001 Billy Collins collection that reprinted "The History Teacher" quotes and analyzes the poem's impact at length. (https://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/23/books/stand-up-poet.html)

## LITCHARTS ON OTHER BILLY COLLINS POEMS

- Afternoon with Irish Cows

## HOW TO CITE

### MLA

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