# Those Winter Sundays

## SUMMARY

My father would also wake up early on Sunday mornings and get dressed in the freezing cold. With his rough, aching hands—worn from his job as a manual laborer who worked outside—he would light fires in the house. None of us ever said thank you to him for doing this.

Soon after, I'd wake up and hear the walls and floorboards creaking as the cold left them. Once the house was all warmed up, my father would call me down. I'd get out of bed and get dressed slowly, afraid of getting wrapped in the constant tensions in that house.

I was detached and distant when I talked to my father, even though he was the one who'd conquered the cold and polished my shoes for me too. I didn't know back then, I didn't know how tough and isolating it was to be a loving father.

## THEMES

### FAMILY AND PARENTING

"Those Winter Sundays" is a deceptively simple poem that highlights the sacrifices—often unseen—that parents make for their children. Written from an adult perspective, the poem sees the speaker reflecting on the parenting style of his father. He realizes that his father made sacrifices for him without expecting anything return, acting only out of love for his family. The poem thus presents parenting as selfless and often thankless work.

The family dynamic between the father and son in "Those Winter Sundays" is not especially warm, open, or close. But, the poem argues, this doesn't mean that the father isn't utterly devoted to his son's welfare. Familial love, as the speaker realizes in adulthood, can show itself in small gestures that may go unperceived by children as they grow up.

To that end, the poem paints a vivid picture of the speaker's father as a man with a strong sense of familial duty. On Sundays (traditionally a day of rest), the father is always the first to rise. On these harsh winter mornings, he gets up early—even though he is tired from his week of hard work outside—to light a fire and bring warmth to the house. The fact that he does this on Sundays "too" implies that he does this during the rest of the week as well. He makes this regular sacrifice in order to make his family more comfortable. This humble ritual suggests the presence of emotional warmth, even if it might not be clearly expressed in words. Indeed, as the speaker confesses, "no one ever thank[s]" the father.

Furthermore, suggests the poem, this is just one among many selfless acts that the father performs for his son. Not only does the father "drive[] out the cold," but he also polishes his son's best shoes. Parenting, implies the poem, is in part a series of small but endless tasks, most of which go unnoticed by the very person for whose benefit they are done.

It's important to note, however, that the poem doesn't overly sentimentalize or oversimplify its subject matter. Indeed, the suggestion of the presence of "chronic angers" in the house suggests that times were often difficult too (though the speaker doesn't flesh out any specifics). Parents don't have to be perfect to be good parents, the poem implies, though sometimes familial tensions can prevent children from recognizing how much their parents still do for them.

Ultimately, the speaker feels that his father didn't really get the appreciation that he deserved at this time—and that this is often true of parenting. That's why the poem widens its scope in its closing rhetorical question, asking "what did I know / of love's austere and lonely offices?" This mention of love is more general, rather than being specifically tied solely to the speaker's father. This question characters the responsibilities of a parent as a kind of work (offices can mean services or duty), one that often goes unappreciated. That's why it's "lonely" work—and it's "austere" because it's sometimes hard. Implicitly, then, the poem becomes a subtle argument in favor of appreciating—and showing appreciation—for your parents. And, indeed, for showing that appreciation before it's too late do so.

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

- Lines 1-14

### GROWING UP AND MEMORY

"Those Winter Sundays" explores the way that the experiences of childhood can seem different when looked back on from an adult perspective. In revisiting childhood memories, the poem implies, adults can see and understand what they didn't realize at the time.

The poem is told entirely in the past tense, situating it firmly in the speaker's memory as he realizes—not without a tinge of regret—that as a child he was ignorant of the subtle ways in which his father took care of him. For example, the speaker recalls the way his father would heat the house on cold Sunday mornings and polish the speaker's "good shoes." But the speaker didn't really appreciate any of this. He never thanked his father, and usually spoke "indifferently" to him. He'd also linger in bed to avoid getting caught up in any family tensions,

suggesting how, to his child's mind, family fights were more memorable than acts of love.

Basically, the speaker realizes from his adult perspective that he took his father for granted. Now in adulthood, the speaker more fully understands what it means to make sacrifices for others. Now, he can look back on his childhood and perceive the way that his father was fulfilling "love's austere and lonely offices" ("offices" can mean duties or services). Implicit in this phrase is the idea that it takes becoming an adult to learn these "austere and lonely offices"—most children can't fully appreciate their parents because they haven't had to be responsible yet for another human being. "Those Winter Sundays," then, has a kind of sadness to it that is equal parts nostalgic and regretful. The speaker knows he can't go back and show his appreciation, but that he can at least record it in the words of this poem.

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

- Lines 1-2
- Line 5
- Lines 6-10
- Lines 11-14

## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-2

*Sundays too my ...*
*... the blueblack cold,*

The poem immediately establishes itself as a memory, the title and the first word—"Sundays too"—indicating that what follows describes something that would occur regularly. These are general "winter Sundays," a fixture throughout the speaker's childhood. The focus on the father from the beginning also signals that this is a poem about family, and in particular the speaker's relationship with his father.

The second word of the poem, though humble and small, is very significant (and shows Hayden's skill with language). The "too" puts the memory that follows into context, telling the reader that the speaker's father would get up early to heat the house on the *other days* of the week as well. The father's routine, then, begins pretty much the same every day—with an act of dutiful sacrifice, braving the cold of the house in order to get it warm for the other family members. Already by the end of the first line a picture emerges of the father as a dedicated man who is also somewhat isolated. The enjambment at the end of line 1 ("early / and put ...") leaves the phrase feeling a little exposed, mirroring how the father is a lone figure in the early hours of the morning.

Line 2 then gives the reader a sense of just how cold the house used to be. In what is otherwise a linguistically sparse and spare poem, the speaker describes the cold as "blueblack." This unusual adjective applies color to something that is usually only *felt*, suggesting the biting intensity of the cold. It also suggests that the father rises so early that it is still dark, which contrasts with the speaker still enjoying his sleep in bed. The adjective also perhaps recalls the coloring of a bruise, emphasizing the almost physical brutality of the winter weather. Finally, the /l/ and /k/ consonance that runs throughout—"clothes on in the blueblack cold"—gently dominates the line. This perhaps helps convey how the winter cold has its grip firmly on the entire house.

### LINES 3-5

*then with cracked ...*
*... ever thanked him.*

Line 3 up to line 5's caesura ("... blaze.") explains why the speaker's father would get up so early: to light a fire and warm up the house. The reader doesn't generally learn much about the father's life, so this is an important section. It portrays him as a probably working-class—and probably relatively poor—individual. His "cracked hands" are his tools, and his work is most likely manual labor (hence the heavy toll that it takes on his hands). And, as "weekday weather" suggests, this work probably takes place outdoors (otherwise the weather would be neither here nor there). The /w/ alliteration of this phrase subtly suggests the repetitiveness of the father's life through repetition of sound.

Strong /d/ and /k/ consonance appears throughout these three lines as well:

> then with cracked hands that ached
> from labor in the weekday weather made
> banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

Lines 3 and 4 also feature assonance of an /ah/ sound a long /ay/ sound (also highlighted). Together these shared sounds evoke both the insistence of the cold and the crackling of a fire that breaks through that cold.

Line 5 tells the reader why the father is getting so early: to make "banked fires blaze" and thereby warm up the house. The image of a fire coming to light—emphasized by the /b/ alliteration here—contrasts with the "blueblack cold" mentioned in line 2. The fire also suggests the presence of an emotional warmth (which, as the poem explores later, doesn't normally get expressed verbally by the father).

The full stop caesura after "blaze" is the culmination of one long sentence that began with the first word of the poem. This makes the lighting of the fire into a kind of gentle climax, the end of the father's solitary actions culminating in the light and warmth of the flames. The power of this conclusion is undercut, however, by the rest of line 5: "No one ever thanked him."

Now looking back on his childhood through the lens of memory,

the speaker acknowledges that his father didn't get the recognition that he deserved. Of course, this is in part just the way that the parent-child relationship usually works. A parent wants their child to feel that comfort and warmth are the norm, and, in that way, are almost unnoticeable *because* they're constant.

## LINES 6-9

*I'd wake and ...*
*... of that house,*

The second stanza sheds more light on the speaker's role in this memory (the first stanza focused solely on the father). The house begins to warm up, driving out the cold and making the wood creak as it expands (having contracted during the night). Line 6 makes effective use of caesura and end-stopping one after the other:

> I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.

This makes the line itself seem to splinter and break, sounding almost like the thawing of frost. Following this line, the poem adapts its sound to indicate the way that the house has heated up: "When the rooms were warm." This is warm-sounding alliteration and consonance that contrasts with the harsher sound of the brittle, "splintering" cold.

This stanza is important to the poem's overall depiction of the complex relationship between the father and son. While the speaker's main thought is certainly that his father didn't get the thanks that he deserved at the time, this stanza prevents the poem from being overly simple or sentimental. The father's "call" signals to the young speaker that it's time for him to "rise," now that the house is warm. But the speaker fears getting out of bed because the house is also full go "chronic angers."

The poem doesn't go into the specifics of what this phrase means, but it sticks out. Perhaps this a house that is often full of conflict and even violence (Hayden himself grew up in this kind of environment). And "chronic" implies that this anger is ongoing and regular, like a chronic chest infection. The use of the word "that" in "that house"—mirroring the skillful use of "those" in the title and "too" in line 1—is another example of a small word carrying a lot of weight. *That* house sticks out in the speaker's memory specifically because of what happened within when the speaker was a child.

And so even though the poem is in part about the revision of the past, with the speaker now acknowledging that his father did make sacrifices for the family, the reader doesn't know enough about the relationship to understand the full picture. There were still tensions and fighting within this family, though, the speaker seems to realize as an adult, this didn't negate his father's love. It's also worth noting that line 9 ends with a stanza break, even though the sentence will continue in the next stanza (for reasons discussed in the next section of analysis).

## LINES 10-12

*Speaking indifferently to ...*
*... shoes as well.*

Though line 10 marks the beginning of a new stanza, the comma at the end of line 9 means that this is actually a *continuation* of the phrase begun all the way back in line 7. This stanza break has a subtle but important effect. The speaker here describes the way he would speak to his father back when he was a child—indeed, this the first real point of contact between the two of them in the memory. The stanza break creates a distance on the page between line 9 and 10, which mirrors the way that the speaker would talk "indifferently" to his father. That is, a literal distance on the page conveys an *emotional* distance in the speaker's childhood.

But this is still not the end of the phrase begun in line 7. The poem adds another clause (with a comma), which develops the speaker's perspective as he thinks about his father. The speaker acknowledges that his father "had driven out the cold," the enjambment here ("cold / polished") giving the line a gently forceful sense of purpose that mirrors the father's sense of duty. His father also polishes the young speaker's "good shoes," probably readying them for a family visit to church. This implies that the father figure cares about how his son comes across when in public, which can be read as both a caring and an authoritarian trait (reminding the reader that relationships are rarely simple). The consonance in this line mimics the sound of a brush rubbing against the outside of a shoe:

> and polished my good shoes as well.

This might even be considered as an example of onomatopoeia, when the sound of language mimics the sound of the thing it describes. The end-stop here creates a pause on the word "well," suggesting the relatively positive reappraisal that the speaker makes of his father. It also gives the poem an important pause before the speaker introduces the critical final rhetorical question in lines 13 and 14.

## LINES 13-14

*What did I ...*
*... and lonely offices?*

Lines 13 and 14 present a single rhetorical question, ending the poem on a note of doubt and uncertainty. The poem is a kind of conversation between two moments in time—the speaker's childhood and his present day. This is arguably the most *present-day* section of the poem (though line 5's "No one ever thanked him" is pitched similarly).

The speaker's question is about knowledge. He wonders what he knew, back then, "of love's austere and lonely offices?" Before unpacking the last line's final phrase, it's important to

note the way that the question is framed. Using epizeuxis (the immediate repetition of a word or phrase) and caesura, line 13 repeats the first part of the question verbatim. "What did I know," asks the speaker, before immediately asking it *again* (and then completing the thought). The poem's ending would feel strikingly different without this repeat:

> Speaking indifferently to him,
> who had driven out the cold
> and polished my good shoes as well.
> What did I know
> of love's austere and lonely offices?

The repeated "What did I know" makes the question far more searching, emphasizing both the intensity of the speaker's desire to *have known* more about the nature of love at the time and the impossibility of going back and changing that fact. Essentially, knowing more about "love's austere and lonely offices" would have made the speaker appreciate his father more (and his father might not even be alive anymore). Instead, this question rings out in the silence of the poem's ending, echoing through the air like a call that can have no reply.

The poem's final question is about a very specific aspect—or type—of love: the "austere and lonely offices." These "offices" belong to the father, and the word means something like "services" or "duties" (not a place where people go to work!). Through the lens of his memory, the speaker realizes that his father, who may not have been an ideal father (the reader knows little about this), *did* love him. It just wasn't apparent in a way that was obvious to the speaker at the time.

Now, looking back, the speaker perceives in his father's quietly dutiful routine an expression of genuine love. These "offices" were "austere" because they were sometimes hard, the father rising early in the cold even though he himself was probably exhausted from his week's work. Austerity can also be a kind of lack of comfort or luxury, and this definition could suggest the way the father's love went seemingly unreturned (perhaps because it was unrecognized). The speaker also now sees that his father was an isolated figure too, which is why these "offices" were "lonely." The alliteration between "love" and "lonely" ties them together conceptually, emphasizing this sense of loving isolation.

All in all, then, the poem ends with a tinge of bittersweet regret: the speaker appears to wish that he had had a better understanding of his father's personal sacrifices and commitments. But perhaps it's only in adulthood, and through fulfilling his own "offices," that the speaker can come to an empathetic understanding of his father that goes beyond the way he immediately felt at the time.

## SYMBOLS

### FIRE

As the title suggests, this poem is situated (through memory) in winter. This brings with it a brutal, almost bruising ("blueblack") cold. The speaker's father dutifully rises before anyone else in the house in order to light fires and make the house warmer. But the poem is primarily concerned with a different kind of coldness/warmth: emotional. Throughout, the references to fire represent the father's love for and dedication to his family.

The speaker recognizes that the relationship between himself as a child and his father was distant and thus cold—the speaker didn't appreciate the sacrifices that his father made for him. Likewise, perhaps the speaker's father lacked the emotional language to express this love to his son at the time, instead expressing affection through actions like lighting fires to warm up the house. In lighting these the fires, the father drives out the cold and replaces it with a literal and symbolic kind of warmth. This creates (relative) comfort and safety for the child speaker, which he didn't even really notice at the time. Looking back now, though, the speaker can read in the fires lit by his father the evidence of a deep-seated emotional warmth, one which was no less real for having been hard to notice.

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

- **Line 5:** "banked fires blaze"
- **Line 6:** "the cold splintering, breaking"
- **Line 7:** "the rooms were warm"
- **Line 11:** "driven out the cold"

## POETIC DEVICES

### ALLITERATION

Alliteration is a subtle but important presence in "Those Winter Sundays." It's first used in lines 2 and 3, with the harsh /k/ sounds in "**c**lothes," "**c**old," and "**c**racking." This sound is even more prevalent in these lines when considering consonance more generally; overall, it's a biting sound that suggests the harshness of the crackling, aching cold.

Later, in line 4, the two /w/ sounds in "**w**eekday **w**eather" create a sense of routine drudgery, conveying the way that the speaker's father has to work hard every day of the week. The next example is in line 5 with "**b**anked fires **b**laze." The alliteration has a bright, bouncy sound that adds emphasis to the phrase and suggests the sheer strength of this blazing fire.

Once the fire is lit, the poem uses warmer sounding consonants. This is most prominent in the alliteration of line 7,

with three /w/ sounds one after another:

> When the rooms were warm

The /w/ sound here infuses the line itself with this sense of warmth.

The poem has one further instance of alliteration in the final line (quoted with the preceding line for context):

> What did I know, what did I know
> of love's austere and lonely offices?

The two /l/ sounds here conceptually link "love" with being "lonely." This is an important moment because it's part of the way that the speaker, now thinking about his father from the vantage point of adulthood (as opposed to the "indifferent" view of childhood), reconsiders the way his father showed his love. In other words, his father's love was expressed in the way that he carried out his duties and responsibilities—and lack of appreciation at the time made the father into a fairly solitary figure.

**Where Alliteration appears in the poem:**

- **Line 2:** "c," "c"
- **Line 3:** "c"
- **Line 4:** "w," "w"
- **Line 5:** "b," "b"
- **Line 7:** "W," "w," "w"
- **Line 14:** "l," "l"

## ASSONANCE

Generally speaking, "Those Winter Sundays" favors simple language without much obvious sound patterning (which perhaps helps depict the "austere" nature of the father's duties). Assonance crops up occasionally, but is all the more noticeable because of the plainness of the poem's general tone.

The most striking example occurs across lines 2 to 5, where two different /a/ sounds—/ah/ and /ay/—repeat again and again:

> ... the blueblack cold,
> then with cracked hands that ached
> from labor in the weekday weather made
> banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

These lines are overflowing with these /a/ sounds. On one level, this makes this first stanza feel a bit more poetic or literary, implicitly elevating the father's mundane task into something noble and worthy of being immortalized in poetry. Looking at the words individually, it's also easy to see how they create a sense of the father's dutifulness, and the way in which his life requires him to work hard. This assonance is quite relentless, much like the work that the father has to do—both at his actual job and at home. It even continues into the first line of the next stanza in "wake" and "breaking," connecting the young speaker's ability to wake up in a warm room (in which the cold is "breaking") directly to his father's labor.

There another moment of assonance in line 6 as well:

> ... splintering, breaking.

These quick, short /i/ sounds help bring this line to life, mimicking the sounds of the house's creaking wood as it expands from the heat (having contracted during the cold of the night).

In line 8, subtle long /i/ assonance links "I" with "rise." This is a longer vowel sound than the one discussed above, and the effect is to slow the line down. This contrasting pace helps describe the way that the speaker used to be on "those winter Sundays," rising slowly and reluctantly (as opposed to the dutiful routine of his father).

Finally, the poem's final two lines are filled with long /oh/ and /aw/ sounds (and very similar "uh" sound, depending on how you pronounce certain words)—"know," "of," "love," "austere," "lonely," "offices." Both require the mouth to be wide open, subtly suggesting the speaker's awe and wonder when considering his father's sacrifices.

**Where Assonance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 2:** "o," "a," "o"
- **Line 3:** "a," "a," "a," "a"
- **Line 4:** "a," "a," "a"
- **Line 5:** "a," "a," "a"
- **Line 6:** "a," "i," "i," "ea," "i"
- **Line 8:** "I," "i"
- **Line 10:** "i," "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 13:** "o," "o"
- **Line 14:** "o," "o," "au," "o," "o"

## CAESURA

There are four caesuras in "Those Winter Sundays." The first one is halfway through line 5 and is arguably the most important of them all. This full stop caesura marks the ending of one long sentence that starts from the first line:

> banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

The descriptions from line 1 up until line 5 are entirely focused on the father, with only the "my" indicating that this is *not* spoken from a detached third-person perspective. These lines chronicle the father's morning ritual, which took place on Sundays (traditionally a day of rest) *as well* as other days in the week. This routine takes place in isolation before anyone else in

the house has woken up, and has a particular end goal: heating up the house. The routine therefore comes to its culmination once the fires are lit—and the caesura here marks this moment of transition. In other words, the full stop represents a particular moment in time, a cold and forbidding house on one side and a warm and (relatively) welcoming house on the other.

The next caesura occurs in line 6: "splintering, breaking." This line describes the noise of the house as the temperature goes from cold to warm. The wood expands, having contracted during the night, and makes creaking sounds. This "splintering" and "breaking" is conveyed by the way that the line *itself* is splintered and broken by the caesura before the line's final word. There is a caesura in line 7 too, but it's less obviously significant than the others. Perhaps by placing "he'd call" in its own clause (between two commas) it subtly suggests the father's solitariness.

The final caesura is in line 13. This combines with epizeuxis (the immediate repeat of a word or phrase):

> What did I know, what did I know
> of love's austere and lonely offices?

The caesura enables this repeated clause, making the question more searching and longing. The repeat emphasizes the way that the speaker now feels about back then—that at the time he *didn't* know anything about "love's austere and lonely offices."

**Where Caesura appears in the poem:**

- **Line 5:** "blaze. No"
- **Line 6:** "splintering, breaking"
- **Line 7:** "warm, he'd"
- **Line 13:** "know, what"

## CONSONANCE

Generally speaking, "Those Winter Sundays" uses deliberately spare and simple language. This fits with the overall tone of the memory, and the "austere" and "lonely" figure of the speaker's father. That said, consonance does occur throughout the poem.

The first four lines of the poem describe the father's Sunday morning routine. He gets before everyone else and thanklessly makes the house warm for the rest of the family. The poem uses harsh sounding consonants to create a sense of the brutality of the cold, and also to emphasize the tough nature of the father's life (he also has a hard job in manual labor). Not the plosive /b/ and /d/ sounds throughout, plus the many biting /k/ sounds:

> and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
> then with cracked hands that ached
> from labor in the weekday weather made
> banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

The hard /k/ sounds are particularly important here, making the lines sound as if they too are "cracked" (like the father's worn hands). Now contrast those sounds with the ones in line 7, once the fire is actually lit:

> When the rooms were warm, he'd call,

Here the line relies on humming /m/ sounds, plus soft /w/ sounds and swallowed /r/ sounds. These sounds are much gentler, evoking the hot air that fills up the house.

The final stanza also makes gentle but effective use of consonance. In lines 11 and 12, /d/ sounds recur, evoking a sense of quiet determination:

> who had driven out the cold
> and polished my good shoes as well.

The chime of /sh/ sounds highlighted above is also quietly beautiful. The sound is quite onomatopoeic, evoking the noise of a brush rubbing against a pair of shoes.

**Where Consonance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 2:** "cl," "bl," "bl," "ck," "c," "l," "d"
- **Line 3:** "c," "ck," "d," "nd," "ch," "d"
- **Line 4:** "l," "w," "k," "d," "w," "d"
- **Line 5:** "b," "nk," "d," "b," "l," "nk," "d"
- **Line 6:** "k," "c," "l," "l," "k"
- **Line 7:** "W," "r," "m," "w," "r," "w," "r," "m"
- **Line 8:** "s," "l," "w," "l," "w"
- **Line 11:** "d," "d," "d"
- **Line 12:** "d," "sh," "d," "d," "sh," "ll"
- **Line 13:** "W," "d," "d," "kn," "w," "d," "d," "kn"
- **Line 14:** "l," "s," "s," "l," "l," "c," "s"

## END-STOPPED LINE

"Those Winter Sundays" has a mix of end-stopped and enjambed lines. Many sentences drape across multiple lines, causing many of the end-stops—such as those from lines 7 ("When the rooms ...") to line 10 ("Speaking ...") to feel quite subtle and weak. Readers might even experience these lines as being enjambed, the phrases gently flowing down the page.

There are some explicit moments of end-stop, though. The first important one comes in line 5:

> banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

After the caesura midway through the line, which ends the poem's opening sentence, the speaker expresses regret about his father in plain and unadorned language: "No one ever thanked him." The end-stop here, combined with the preceding full stop caesura, makes this sentence feel stark and isolated,

helping convey a kind of melancholy about the past. Regardless of how the speaker feels now, there's no going back to thank his father; the end-stop here conveys a sense of finality.

The next end-stop is in the following line (line 6), also combined with a caesura:

> I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.

Just as the poem appears to be picking up pace again, the end-stop breaks the flow. This break is part of the way that the line conveys the effect of the heat as it warms up the house, "splintering" and "breaking" the line.

The final important end-stop comes in line 12. This line ends on the word "well," a positive little word that describes the care and dutifulness with which the speaker's father went about his routine:

> and polished my good shoes as well.

The end-stop creates a small pause, which sets up the heartbreakingly searching rhetorical question that concludes the poem. It's a small moment in which nostalgia and the wish to fix past wrongs are allowed to linger.

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

- **Line 2:** "cold,"
- **Line 5:** "him."
- **Line 6:** "breaking."
- **Line 7:** "call,"
- **Line 8:** "dress,"
- **Line 9:** "house,"
- **Line 10:** "him,"
- **Line 12:** "well."
- **Line 14:** "offices?"

## ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment is used throughout "Those Winter Sundays." Generally speaking, the poem favors a simple, plain tone that is almost conversational. The enjambment allows for the flow of sentences across various lines (also allowing the poet to *break* the flow at particular moments).

The enjambment in the first stanza helps give the reader a sense of the speaker's father's winter morning routine. Getting up early to heat the house is almost automatic to him, and he does it out of duty and love for his family. The fairly easy flow of the lines mirrors the way that the father goes about his ritual without hesitation or expecting thanks.

The enjambment in line 11 is best understood in contrast to line 2. Both lines end with the word "cold," but line 2 has a *comma* whereas line 11 enjambs straight to the next line. In line 2's world, the house is still cold, but in line 11 the speaker's father has "driven out the cold." The lack of a comma subtly suggests the father's small victory over the cold, with his control now exerted over the house's temperature.

Line 13 also features enjambment, requiring line 14 to complete the speaker's rhetorical question:

> What did I know, what did I know
> of love's ...

This helps with the searchingly anxious tone of this final question. The speaker's thoughts don't fit with the line breaks, ending the poem on a note of quiet disturbance.

**Where Enjambment appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 1-2:** "early / and"
- **Lines 3-4:** "ached / from"
- **Lines 4-5:** "made / banked"
- **Lines 11-12:** "cold / and"
- **Lines 13-14:** "know / of"

## EPIZEUXIS

Epizeuxis is used once in "Those Winter Sundays," in line 13. The best way to consider the effect of the immediate repeat of "What did I know" is to look at his question *without* the epizeuxis:

> What did I know
> of love's austere and lonely offices?

It's hard to pinpoint exactly why, but this certainly feels different from the lines as they are:

> What did I know, what did I know
> of love's austere and lonely offices?

The repetition works here to intensify the sentiment behind the question. With the speaker looking back on his childhood from his adult perspective, he reevaluates his father's love. Indeed, he is now able to see how his father's routine way of life was itself a quiet but consistent expression of love, borne from a desire to make the young speaker comfortable and safe. The epizeuxis emphasizes the way that the speaker, at the time, *didn't* know anything about "love's austere and lonely offices" (the thankless tasks that people perform for their children). Particularly as this is the poem's only question, the epizeuxis makes the poem end on a tangible note of regret and sadness, the question echoing into the emptiness that follows the final words.

**Where Epizeuxis appears in the poem:**

- **Line 13:** "What did I know, what did I know"

### RHETORICAL QUESTION

"Those Winter Sundays" has one rhetorical question. This takes place in the poem's two closing lines (13 and 14):

> What did I know, what did I know
> of love's austere and lonely offices?

The sudden appearance of a question is a striking shift in tone. Up until this point, the poem uses fairly plain, matter-of-fact language to build a picture of the speaker's father (now viewed from the speaker's adult perspective). Combined with the epizeuxis—the repeated "What did I know"—these lines make the poem end with a sense of doubt, longing, and, ultimately, recognition.

Looking back on his father's routine of duties and responsibilities, the speaker now realizes that his father was faithfully undertaking "love's austere and lonely offices"—the thankless tasks that a parent must perform to keep their child safe and secure. At the time, the speaker was too young to properly recognize the father's love in the forms that it would take. Now, having learned a few lessons about life in the intervening years, he can see that love more clearly.

Framing this sentiment as a question emphasizes the difference between the speaker's childhood and his present-day perspective, foregrounding the gulf between two ways of seeing the world (and the impossibility of going back and properly acknowledging his father's love). That said, the poem *is* itself a reappraisal of that father-son relationship—and so, in part, perhaps helps to give the father the credit he deserved.

**Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 13-14:** "What did I know, what did I know / of love's austere and lonely offices?"

## VOCABULARY

**Blueblack** (Line 2) - A kind of deep black color with a hint of blue. The colors are also associated with bruises, emphasizing the brutality of the winter cold.

**Banked** (Line 5) - To "bank" a fire is to create a protective wall around it, out of stones or bricks perhaps. This helps the fire to catch and avoid getting snuffed out by the wind.

**Chronic** (Line 9) - Ongoing and persistent, like an illness without cure.

**Indifferently** (Line 10) - Without emotional engagement.

**Austere** (Line 14) - Unadorned and plain, and also without pleasure. In other words, "tough."

**Offices** (Line 14) - Duties and responsibilities.

## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"Those Winter Sundays" is made up of two quintets sandwiching a quatrain (that is, the first and third stanza have five lines apiece, while the second stanza has only four lines). This structure doesn't follow a specific form, though the total amount of lines—fourteen—echoes the structure of a sonnet. Indeed, sonnets are often about love; this poem is about love too, but specifically about how it can be difficult to show or perceive. Perhaps, then, the poem's form is meant as a subtle gesture towards the sonnet in order to highlight how the speaker *can't* go back and show his father the appreciation that he now feels his father truly deserved.

The poem is told entirely in the past tense, focusing on one particular (but general) memory from the speaker's childhood. The speaker's father cuts an isolated figure throughout the poem, getting on with his tasks without thanks or appreciation. The poem uses plain language throughout, but surprises the reader by ending with a rhetorical question. This implicitly suggests the way that the speaker has come to reconsider the nature of his father's love—to see that it really was there, and that it was the motivation behind his father's sense of duty and responsibility,

### METER

"Those Winter Sundays" doesn't use a strict regular meter. Instead, it's written in free verse—which fits with its conversational, plain tone. That said, most lines are around 10 syllables in length. Coupled with the fact that the poem itself is 14 lines long—the length of a sonnet—the line lengths again very subtly recall the sonnet form (usually written in iambic pentameter, a meter with 10-syllable lines).

The gesture towards the sonnet form helps suggest that the poem is about love (often a sonnet topic), but the way in which this is not fully realized helps tease out the meaning of the poem. That is, this poem is about love that is somehow frustrated, suppressed, or unnoticed. So it's *nearly* a sonnet—but it's easy to miss this aspect of the form (just as it's easy in life to under-appreciate a parent's love, for example).

### RHYME SCHEME

"Those Winter Sundays" is written in free verse, and as such it does not have a rhyme scheme. The poem's general tone is simple and matter-of-fact, and perhaps a noticeable rhyme scheme would be too distracting, too "poetic." There is one internal rhyme though, found in line 5:

banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

This rhyme creates an ironic link between the fires that the father used to make and the thanks that he *should* have received for doing so (at least in the adult speaker's opinion).

## SPEAKER

The speaker an adult reflecting on his past, and appears to regret not appreciating the sacrifices his father made for him as a child. Little is learned about the specifics of the speaker's identity, however. We've used male pronouns for clarity throughout this guide and because the speaker is often associated with the poet himself, Robert Hayden, who has in fact said that it is autobiographical. That said, it's certainly not necessary to assume that the speaker is male.

Regardless, the poem is essentially a discussion between two different moments in this person's life. Written from a first-person perspective, the speaker reflects on childhood from the vantage point of adulthood. Looking back, the speaker realizes that his father loved and took care of him, but that he failed to see this at the time. Perhaps himself now aware of "love's austere and lonely offices"—maybe he has become a parent in the intervening years—the adult speaker is now capable of interpreting his father's quiet and dutiful routines as a way of looking after the family. But the speaker avoids oversimplifying or sentimentalizing this reappraisal, also hinting at the "chronic angers" that filled the house alongside love.

## SETTING

On one level, the poem takes place inside the speaker's childhood home on a frigid Sunday morning in winter. This day is not especially different—for the father at least—than most other days. It's one in which the father rises early to light a fire, but he does that on these days "too." The first stanza creates an atmosphere of those regular cold mornings, using harsh consonants to give the reader a sense of the "blueblack cold" (we talk more about this in the "Poetic Devices" section of this guide).

Since the speaker is relating this poem from the present moment as an adult, the poem can also be thought of as being set in the speaker's *memory*. And the poem's concluding question makes the speaker's memory feel distant. Perhaps the father is no longer around, making it too late for the speaker to show him this newfound appreciation. An important part of the setting, then, is the tension between two different points in time.

## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

Robert Hayden was an American poet who lived from 1913 to 1980. He was born in Detroit, and was raised not by his biological parents but by nearby neighbors. (Indeed, Hayden was given his name by them, having been born Asa Bundy Sheffy.) Hayden's upbringing was tough, and his childhood home was often fraught with violence and anger. In fact, Hayden makes clear in his own reading of this poem that he sees this poem—with its allusion to "chronic angers"—as autobiographical (this reading appears in the Resources section of the guide).

Books were a form of solace for Hayden, who was also bullied for having bad eyesight. He studied at the University of Michigan, reading Spanish and English and finding common ground in the works of Harlem Renaissance writers like Langston Hughes ("I, Too"; "Mother to Son") and Countee Cullen. W.H. Auden ("Funeral Blues") and W.B. Yeats ("The Wild Swans at Coole") were also important influences on Hayden's poetry. Indeed, Auden was one of Hayden's professors at Michigan, influencing his poetry's formal organization and trimmed-down tone.

After graduating, Hayden embarked on an academic career of his own, working as a professor and researcher while also publishing poetry. He was awarded numerous prizes over the course of his life. He was the first black writer to hold the position of Poetry Consultant to the Library of Congress, a precursor of the Poet Laureate role. Hayden died at the age of 66 in 1980.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Those Winter Sundays" doesn't give (nor necessarily need) much detail with regard to its historical context. That said, Hayden himself stated that the poem was autobiographical, a reflection on his own childhood. This was a tough upbringing in the ghetto of early-20th century Detroit. Hayden's family lived in Paradise Valley, an impoverished part of Detroit with a largely black population. It was home to large numbers of manual laborers (e.g. factory workers) and their families, and the poem suggests that the speaker's father worked a physically-intensive job.

That said, there is little in this poem about race or poverty. These subjects are far more prevalent elsewhere in Hayden's poetry, which was often more political in nature. Other works by Hayden focused on the oppression of black people in America (and Hayden often wrote with African-American vernacular) and the Vietnam War. This said, Hayden saw himself as an American poet more so than an African-American poet, which attracted some criticism at the time.

It's worth noting that Hayden's own view of this aspect of his

identity was significantly informed by his religion. From the early 1940s, Hayden was a follower of the Bahá'í faith. One of the central principles of this religion is the indivisibility of humankind —the essential worth of *all* peoples regardless of religion or race.

## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Hayden's Childhood — A brief interview segment that mentions Hayden's upbringing. (https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=208946759&t=1574696174816)
- A Reading by Hayden — The poem read by the poet himself. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XmJYs6PQKVc)
- Hayden at the Brockport Writers Forum — Hayden reads his poetry and discusses his influences. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5hvFBaI7nUo)
- Hayden's Life and Work — A valuable resource about Hayden from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-hayden)
- Hayden and the Academy of American Poets — Hayden's written response to being nominated to the prestigious Academy of American Poets. (https://poets.org/archive-robert-haydens-letter)

## HOW TO CITE

### MLA

Howard, James. "*Those Winter Sundays*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 29 Oct 2019. Web. 22 Apr 2020.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Howard, James. "*Those Winter Sundays*." LitCharts LLC, October 29, 2019. Retrieved April 22, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/robert-hayden/those-winter-sundays.