A Prayer for my Daughter

POEM TEXT

Once more the storm is howling, and half hid
Under this cradle-hood and coverlid
My child sleeps on. There is no obstacle
But Gregory's wood and one bare hill
Whereby the haystack- and roof-levelling wind,
Bred on the Atlantic, can be stayed;
And for an hour I have walked and prayed
Because of the great gloom that is in my mind.

I have walked and prayed for this young child an hour
And heard the sea-wind scream upon the tower,
And under the arches of the bridge, and scream
In the elms above the flooded stream;
Imagining in excited reverie
That the future years had come,
Dancing to a frenzied drum,
Out of the murderous innocence of the sea.

May she be granted beauty and yet not
Beauty to make a stranger's eye distraught,
Or hers before a looking-glass, for such,
Being made beautiful overmuch,
Consider beauty a sufficient end,
Lose natural kindness and maybe
The heart-revealing intimacy
That chooses right, and never find a friend.

Helen being chosen found life flat and dull
And later had much trouble from a fool,
While that great Queen, that rose out of the spray,
Being fatherless could have her way
Yet chose a bandy-leggèd smith for man.
It's certain that fine women eat
A crazy salad with their meat
Whereby the Horn of Plenty is undone.

In courtesy I'd have her chiefly learned;
Hearts are not had as a gift but hearts are earned
By those that are not entirely beautiful;
Yet many, that have played the fool
For beauty's very self, has charm made wise,
And many a poor man that has roved,
Loved and thought himself beloved,
From a glad kindness cannot take his eyes.

May she become a flourishing hidden tree
That all her thoughts may like the linnet be,
And have no business but dispensing round
Their magnanimities of sound,
Nor but in merriment begin a chase,
Nor but in merriment a quarrel.
O may she live like some green laurel
Rooted in one dear perpetual place.

My mind, because the minds that I have loved,
The sort of beauty that I have approved,
Prosper but little, has dried up of late,
Yet knows that to be choked with hate
May well be of all evil chances chief.
If there's no hatred in a mind
Assault and battery of the wind
Can never tear the linnet from the leaf.

An intellectual hatred is the worst,
So let her think opinions are accursed.
Have I not seen the loveliest woman born
Out of the mouth of Plenty's horn,
Because of her opinionated mind
Barter that horn and every good
By quiet natures understood
For an old bellows full of angry wind?

Considering that, all hatred driven hence,
The soul recovers radical innocence
And learns at last that it is self-delighting,
Self-appeasing, self-affrighting,
And that its own sweet will is Heaven's will;
She can, though every face should scowl
And every windy quarter howl
Or every bellows burst, be happy still.

And may her bridegroom bring her to a house
Where all's accustomed, ceremonious;
For arrogance and hatred are the wares
Peddled in the thoroughfares.

77 How but in custom and in ceremony
78 Are innocence and beauty born?
79 Ceremony's a name for the rich horn,
80 And custom for the spreading laurel tree.

SUMMARY

The storm is raging once again, and, partly covered by her cradle, my daughter keeps sleeping. Nothing—apart from the nearby forest called Gregory's Wood and a single hill—can stop the strong wind, which destroys haystacks and roofs as it blows in from the Atlantic Ocean. And for an hour, I've been walking around and praying because of the deep sadness that I feel inside my head.

I've been walking and praying for my young daughter for an hour. And as I've done so I've heard the screaming sound of the ocean wind, which blows against the tower where we're staying, underneath the curves of the bridge, and through the elm trees along the overflowing stream. I've eagerly imagined, as in a daydream, that the future is already here, dancing to a wild drumbeat and arising from the harmful yet blameless ocean.

I pray that my daughter will be beautiful, but not so beautiful that she drives others mad—nor herself mad when she looks in the mirror. For those who are made too beautiful think that beauty is something to be pursued for its own sake. They lose their kind nature, as well as the ability to be truly intimate and good. Because of all this, they never make friends or find a romantic partner.

Helen of Troy, who was chosen to be a king's wife, found life with him very boring; later, she suffered at the hands of her lover, Paris, a foolish man. Meanwhile, the queen Aphrodite, who was born in the ocean waves, had no father and could have chosen any man. Yet, she chose Hephaestus, a crippled blacksmith, as her husband. Without a doubt, beautiful women waste the gift of their natural beauty by doing crazy things.

I'd have my daughter educated mainly in manners and civility. Other people's affection isn't something you're given like a gift, but rather is something that those who aren't completely beautiful have to work for. Even so, many people who have acted foolishly in the pursuit of beauty have later been made wise by a woman's charming manners. And many poor men who have roamed about, loved, and felt loved by others are attracted to a woman by simple acts of kindness.

I pray that my daughter becomes a prosperous tree that is hidden from view. I hope her thoughts are like the finch: interested only in sharing their generous, pleasing sounds with the world. I hope she only chases after things or argues as a kind of silly joke. Oh God, let her live like a green laurel tree standing forever in a single, precious place.

My mind—because the minds I have loved and the kind of beauty I have been attracted to come to nothing—has recently gone dry. Nonetheless, I know that being full of hatred may be the worst of all evils. If a mind is free of hatred, then the destruction of the wind can never rip the finch from the tree branch.

The worst kind of hatred is the one that originates in the mind, so let my daughter think that opinions are something to be avoided. Have I not seen the most beautiful woman ever born out of nature's rich abundance, due to her opinions, trade her natural blessings—and everything that quiet, sensitive people would consider good—for an old, angry man?

Thinking about all of this, all hate having been sent away, the soul becomes radically pure again and finally realizes that it is self-sufficient: it can make itself happy, peaceful, and frightened. The soul also learns that its own pure will is the will of God. My daughter—even if all people frown and the wind howls everywhere or every bellows breaks—can be happy nonetheless.

I also pray that her husband takes her to a home where everything is done according to custom and ceremony. For feelings of superiority and ill will are sold in the streets. How else but in tradition, order, and respect are purity and beauty created? Ceremony is a name for the rich bounty of nature, and custom is a name for the growing laurel tree.

THEMES

WOMANHOOD AND TRADITIONAL FEMININITY

In “A Prayer for My Daughter,” the speaker imagines the woman he hopes his infant daughter will become: someone who's pretty, independent, and intelligent, but also demure, pleasant, and obedient. His prayers reflect both his hopes for his daughter and his take on womanhood in general; to this speaker, living a happy life as a woman means living life well within the confines of social convention. He believes that fulfilling the ideals of traditional femininity is how women can survive the stormy dangers of the world.

The speaker makes this prayer for his daughter in the first place because he feels that women are particularly vulnerable to the world's dangers and difficulties. The storm that howls at the poem's start symbolizes those dangers, which threaten the speaker's infant daughter “half hid” in her cradle. Women, the speaker believes, must protect themselves—or, really, find someone to protect them—from the “[a]ssault and battery” of the unpredictable winds of life.

To do so, the speaker believes that women must tread a careful path within the bounds of social convention. In other words,

they should try to live up to traditional (if often conflicting) feminine ideals.

The speaker thus says that women should be beautiful, but not so beautiful that they become vain or make men "distraught." Women should be courteous and pleasant, free from "hatred" and filled with "radical innocence," yet also "wise" enough to catch foolish men's eyes. They should know how to "earn[]" another's heart, but lack headstrong opinions that might lead them astray from what (the men in their lives think) is best for them. They should dispense plenty of happy thoughts and never seriously argue with someone else. In essence, women should be attractive yet humble, charming yet demure, independent yet submissive.

All of this is in service, it seems, of finding a "bridegroom" who will look after them in a "ceremonious" home far from the "arrogance and hatred" of the common world. The speaker's ultimate hope that his daughter "become a flourishing hidden tree" further emphasizes his belief that women should be encouraged to grow and prosper in a controlled and even secretive environment, protected by social convention from the dangers and indignities of the world.

Though this all seems limiting and sexist by today's standards, the poem nonetheless expresses a tender hope that the speaker's daughter will find happiness and peace. Even as the speaker asserts women's need for isolation, protection, and restraint, he also honors their dignity, power, and beauty. In the speaker's view, this traditional path lets femininity blossom and offers women a life of happiness and stability. If the speaker's daughter follows such a path, he argues, she will learn that her soul is "self-delighting"—in other words, fulfilling such "ceremony" and "custom" is its own reward.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 17-80

THE POWER AND DANGER OF BEAUTY

The speaker of "A Prayer for My Daughter" makes what might seem like a strange request: he wants his daughter to be blessed with beauty, but not *too much* beauty—to be attractive to men, but not so attractive that men become "distraught" at the sight of her or that she herself can't stop looking in the mirror. Beauty, the speaker argues, is at once alluring and dangerous, with the power to turn beautiful people themselves and those who desire them into vain, lonely fools.

According to the speaker, people who are too beautiful, especially women, are prone to destroying themselves and others. For example, the speaker thinks of the mythical Helen of Troy (whose beauty inspired the bloody Trojan War) and the "great Queen" Aphrodite (the goddess of love and beauty, who wasted her looks, the speaker says, by marrying the "bandy-leggèd" Hephaestus). Both these legendary figures, the speaker imagines, were too beautiful for their own good; their beauty just caused destruction and made them unhappy. Extreme beauty, in this speaker's view, makes everyone who comes in contact with it go a little bit loopy.

Because physical beauty is so alluring, it also has the power to make beautiful people and their admirers alike so obsessed with looks that they become unkind and isolated. To illustrate this, the speaker laments how he has seen "the loveliest woman born"—a reference to Maud Gonne, a famously beautiful woman who repeatedly rejected Yeats's romantic advances—waste her beauty and fail to live the good life she could have had by marrying the wrong man (Yeats is certainly bitter here!). He also warns that people who "[c]onsider beauty a sufficient end" (that is, who prize beauty itself above all) lose their "natural kindness" and humanity—thus losing their ability to connect with others and "find a friend."

Because beauty is so powerful and dangerous, the speaker argues, it's best if his daughter—and indeed, all women—are not *too* beautiful. For this speaker, the best kind of beauty is a beauty of restraint; beauty is too powerful and destructive a force to exist in uncontrolled excess.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 17-40
- Lines 49-64

THE HOPES AND FEARS OF PARENTHOOD

In "A Prayer for My Daughter," the speaker balances fear of the world's chaos, danger, and uncertainty with hope that his daughter will grow into a lovely woman with a happy, stable life. The speaker knows that nothing in life is guaranteed, however, and though he hopes his daughter will live a life of "innocence and beauty," he's also anxious that she will not get to have the ideal life he imagines for her. His prayer's mixture of "excited reverie" and "frenzied" panic illustrates the tension parents may feel between anxiety and hope regarding their children's uncertain futures.

In the speaker's mind, his infant daughter is almost unbearably vulnerable to the world's dangers. When he notes that his daughter is only "half hid" in her cradle, this suggests that she's exposed to both the literal storm outside *and* to the unpredictable ups and downs of life that this storm represents. And even as the speaker prays that she will have a happy future, he imagines all the ways that said future could go wrong.

The speaker wants to protect his daughter—from the perils of adult womanhood, negative opinions, hatred, and the overall destructiveness of the outside world—but he worries that he

won't be able to do so. Though he has high hopes for his child, he is always aware of the "[a]ssault and battery of the wind"—the metaphorical storms of life—that threaten to "tear the linnet from the leaf" and make her unhappy.

But while the world's uncertainty frightens the speaker, it also creates space for him to express ambitious hopes for his daughter's future life. Imagining his daughter as an adult, the speaker prays she will possess the perfect amount of beauty—not too much, not too little—and that she'll be courteous, full of pleasant thoughts, and free of hatred. If the speaker's hopes come true, he predicts, his daughter will "flourish[]." And envisioning the "radical innocence" he hopes his daughter will achieve, he dreams that she will be self-sufficient and happy despite the many challenges and uncertainties of the outside world. The speaker thus balances his anxiety about the adversity his daughter will inevitably face with a hopeful vision of the type of woman he imagines she could become.

Ultimately, then, the poem suggests that parenthood is a source of both agonized fear and joyful hope. The speaker balances his anxieties about the future with his robust hope that his daughter will live a prosperous, stable, happy life, growing like a "spreading laurel tree." By achieving a balance between hope for the future and fear of uncertainty, the speaker explores the conflicting emotions that *all* parents feel for their children. Those mixed emotions, the poem suggests, are an inevitable, necessary part of loving one's kid.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16
- Lines 17-80

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-8

Once more the storm is howling, and half hid
Under this cradle-hood and coverlid
My child sleeps on. There is no obstacle
But Gregory's wood and one bare hill
Whereby the haystack- and roof-levelling wind,
Bred on the Atlantic, can be stayed;
And for an hour I have walked and prayed
Because of the great gloom that is in my mind.

The poem begins with a storm raging outside "[o]nce more," a phrase that suggests that there was a brief ebb in this storm before the poem began (and, perhaps, that the speaker has been sitting with his daughter for quite some time). The speaker's young daughter is "half hid" in her cradle and "sleeps on," apparently oblivious to the chaos of the wind "howling" outside.

Right away, note how the daughter is at once protected (she's indoors with the speaker, and she's halfway sheltered by her cradle) and vulnerable (she's *only* halfway sheltered by her cradle, which is to say that she's also halfway exposed, and unaware of the danger that swirls around her).

The speaker, for his part, is clearly aware of his daughter's vulnerability to this storm, worrying that "[t]here is no obstacle" apart from a nearby forest and a single "bare hill" to shelter their residence from the violent weather. ("Gregory's wood" refers to an actual forest on the estate of Lady Gregory, Yeats's close friend and literary associate.) The storm outside has gotten this speaker pretty worked up, and he paces and prays anxiously "[b]ecause of the great gloom that is in my mind."

By this point, readers might start to sense that this storm is not just a literal one, but also *symbolic* of the worldly dangers that await the speaker's daughter. Yeats's first child, a daughter named Anne, was born just two days before this poem was written, in 1919, and readers can assume that the poem evokes his personal anxieties as a new parent.

This eight-line stanza also establishes the poem's rhyme scheme, which runs AABBCDDC, and meter, which is a loose mixture of iambic pentameter and tetrameter. An iamb is a poetic foot with a da-dum rhythm; pentameter means there are five of these iambs per line, while tetrameter means there are just four. This meter adds some steadiness and rhythm to the poem, though Yeats stretches and plays with the meter a lot. For example, listen to lines 1 and 2:

Once more | the storm | is howl- | ing, and | half hid
Under | this cra- | dle-hood | and cov- | erlid

Notice that both lines have five feet (pentameter) and that, overall, the iambic da-dum rhythm predominates. Yet clearly not all the feet here are iambs (starting with the poem's very first foot: "Once more")! The point of this metrical flexibility is simple: it adds emphasis to certain words and ideas, like "Once more" and "half hid." The steady pulse of the iamb, meanwhile, also helps create an ominous, threatening atmosphere, which makes the "great gloom" in the speaker's mind seem more heartfelt, urgent, and intense.

LINES 9-16

I have walked and prayed for this young child an hour
And heard the sea-wind scream upon the tower,
And under the arches of the bridge, and scream
In the elms above the flooded stream;
Imagining in excited reverie
That the future years had come,
Dancing to a frenzied drum,
Out of the murderous innocence of the sea.

The speaker reiterates that he has "walked and prayed" for his young daughter for an hour, underscoring just how worked up

this storm has made him. Framing the poem in this way makes the speaker's "[p]rayer," once it begins in the next stanza, seem especially tender and genuine—after all, he's already been thinking hard about it for an hour, before the poem even begins!

Next, the speaker again describes the storm, this time focusing on the screaming of the wind. Nowhere, it seems, can escape this wind, which the speaker hears in all sorts of places: "upon the tower," "under the arches of the bridge," and "[i]n the elms above the flooded stream."

Notice how the speaker repeats the word *and* in this list, even when it isn't grammatically necessary:

> And under the arches of the bridge, and scream

This kind of repetition for emphasis is called polysyndeton, and it echoes the threatening intensity of the wind's screaming (the word "scream" is repeated in line 11, which also adds to the intensity of the lines).

Line 13 then marks a shift in the stanza. Whereas the first half of this stanza describes what's actually happening outside—the wind is screaming—the second half describes what's happening in the speaker's *imagination*. He *imagines* "in excited reverie / That the future years had come." But this "excited reverie" isn't so much a pleasant daydream as a nightmare:

- For one thing, the future dances "to a frenzied drum," a phrase suggesting that the future comes along like a chaotic, insistent march.
- The future also comes out of the sea's "murderous innocence," a near oxymoron that presents the "sea" as deeply dangerous despite its intentions; it seemingly can't help but murder. The sibilance here adds a menacing hiss to the phrase itself: "murderous innocence of the sea."

It's clear that the storm raging outside causes the speaker to think of the dangers that lie ahead in his daughter's future. Indeed, for this speaker, the literal storm symbolizes all the unknown difficulties his daughter will face in her life. The speaker's anxiety over those difficulties (the "great gloom" in his mind) is what finally prompts him to begin his prayer in the next stanza.

It's worth noting that the storm has another layer of potential symbolic meaning:

- Yeats was devoted to the cause of Irish Nationalism, and the War of Irish Independence had begun shortly before he wrote "A Prayer for my Daughter." Europe was also just recovering from the trauma and destruction of World War I.
- The storm thus represents the challenges the speaker's daughter will face in her life *and* the chaotic, dangerous political situation in Ireland and Europe as a whole in 1919. Though "A Prayer for my Daughter" isn't as obviously political as some of Yeats's other poems of this time (like "Easter, 1916" and "The Second Coming"), its political overtones are still important.

LINES 17-24

> *May she be granted beauty and yet not*
> *Beauty to make a stranger's eye distraught,*
> *Or hers before a looking-glass, for such,*
> *Being made beautiful overmuch,*
> *Consider beauty a sufficient end,*
> *Lose natural kindness and maybe*
> *The heart-revealing intimacy*
> *That chooses right, and never find a friend.*

At last, the speaker's actual prayer begins. Readers might wonder to whom, exactly, the speaker is praying:

- Though God is never specifically mentioned or addressed, it's clear that the speaker is directing his words to some sort of higher power. Given that Yeats was a Protestant and that the poem is titled "A *Prayer* for my Daughter," it seems reasonable to assume that the speaker is thinking of some sort of Christian God when he makes his requests.
- Alternatively, the speaker might just be putting these hopes out into the universe. Either way, it's clear that he feels the need to articulate his hopes and fears for his daughter.

The speaker's first such request might seem a bit strange. He asks that his daughter "be granted beauty and yet not / Beauty to make a stranger's eye distraught." In other words, the speaker hopes his daughter will be beautiful, but not *too beautiful*. People (and especially women) who are too beautiful, the speaker thinks, drive other people—and even themselves—crazy with their physical attractiveness. Those who are "made beautiful overmuch" come to think of beauty as "a sufficient end"—something to be pursued and valued for its own sake, divorced of inner beauty, virtue, or kindness. These people become unkind, lose their ability to connect intimately with others, and "never find a friend."

The speaker's idea seems a little contradictory at first, but it makes its own kind of sense. The speaker's wish expresses his belief in moderation, restraint, and decorum: he wants his daughter to have plenty of beauty, but he also wants her to know how to use that beauty responsibly, kindly, and in a way that leads to a happy, fulfilled life.

Notice how the enjambment of line 17 reinforces the seeming contradiction in the speaker's wish for his daughter to be both

beautiful and "not":

> May she be granted beauty and yet **not**
> **Beauty** to make a stranger's eye distraught,

The enjambment pulls readers through the brief confusion at the end of line 17, pushing them towards the speaker's real point about moderation.

The repetition (in the form of diacope and polyptoton) and alliteration of the bold /b/ sound in this stanza also draws intense attention to the daughter's "beauty":

> May she **b**e granted **beauty** and yet not
> **Beauty** to make a stranger's eye distraught,
> Or hers **b**efore a looking-glass, for such,
> **B**eing made **beautiful** overmuch,
> Consider **beauty** a sufficient end,

LINES 25-32

> *Helen being chosen found life flat and dull*
> *And later had much trouble from a fool,*
> *While that great Queen, that rose out of the spray,*
> *Being fatherless could have her way*
> *Yet chose a bandy-leggèd smith for man.*
> *It's certain that fine women eat*
> *A crazy salad with their meat*
> *Whereby the Horn of Plenty is undone.*

In order to support his point that no good comes from women having too much beauty, the speaker now turns to ancient Greek mythology. First, he gives the example of Helen of Troy, famously known as the most beautiful woman in the ancient world:

- Helen found life with her husband, the Greek king Menelaus, "flat and dull" and went (or, in some versions of the story, was forced to go) to Troy with Paris, her lover. The elopement of Helen and Paris set off the Trojan War, which was a bunch of "trouble" for everybody involved.

Next, the speaker mentions the "great Queen" Aphrodite:

- In one version of her myth, Aphrodite was born in the sea ("rose out of the spray"), had no father ("being fatherless"), and chose as her husband Hephaestus, the god of blacksmiths (and someone who had a leg deformity, hence Yeats's description of him as "a bandy-legged smith").
- As the goddess of love and beauty, Aphrodite could have had any man she wanted, yet in the speaker's view, she wasted her beauty. And like Helen, she also ended up cheating on her husband with men who were younger and more beautiful.

Both of these women, the speaker says, are examples of the destructiveness of excess beauty. He uses an odd but powerful metaphor to describe this wastefulness and destruction: "fine women eat / A crazy salad with their meat." The speaker isn't really talking about what these women eat for dinner; rather, he means that very beautiful women do crazy things and get distracted from what's important in life ("their meat"). In so doing, they waste the natural beauty they've been given by the "Horn of Plenty," a symbol of nature's abundance that will come up in the poem again.

Note how, in Yeats's hands, even the relative *lack* of strong sonic devices in a line can express meaning. Listen to line 25:

> Helen being chos**e**n found **l**ife **fl**at and du**ll**

Notice how the line contains a huge range of vowel sounds—/eh/, /ee/, /o/, /ow/, /i/, /ah/, and /uh/—and yet only one of them repeats (in "Helen" and "chosen"). This relative lack of assonance makes sense, given that the line describes Helen's boredom. Likewise, the three /f/ and /l/ sounds (a combination of alliteration and consonance) in "**f**ound **l**ife **fl**at and du**ll**" emphasize the humdrum boredom the phrase describes, making the line feel muffled. In "A Prayer for my Daughter," even very subtle sonic devices like these contribute in big ways to the poem's meaning and power.

LINES 33-40

> *In courtesy I'd have her chiefly learned;*
> *Hearts are not had as a gift but hearts are earned*
> *By those that are not entirely beautiful;*
> *Yet many, that have played the fool*
> *For beauty's very self, has charm made wise,*
> *And many a poor man that has roved,*
> *Loved and thought himself beloved,*
> *From a glad kindness cannot take his eyes.*

After the previous stanza's brief detour to ancient Greece, the speaker returns to his wishes for his daughter. He wants her educated mainly in "courtesy," which refers to good manners but also to a larger sense of kindness, charm, grace, and generosity.

The speaker's reasoning may seem a little dense and hard to follow, but the basic idea is that people (again, he's thinking specifically of women) who have *just* the right amount of beauty can't depend on physical beauty alone to win people over—and that's a good thing. "Hearts are not had as a gift," the speaker says, "but hearts are earned" by a woman's good nature, kindness, and charm (in short, by her "courtesy").

This statement features antithesis, in the sense that being given something as a "gift" and "earning" something are essentially opposite ideas:

> **H**earts are not had as a gift but **h**earts are earned

The diacope of "hearts" further drives home the speaker's point, calling readers' attention to the way that women can expect to win over others' "hearts" (in the speaker's mind, at least).

The speaker then acknowledges that many people (now he's thinking of men) have "played the fool" and "roved" widely in their pursuit of physical beauty. In other words, they've done silly, ridiculous things to try to get beautiful women. Yet even a woman who's not glamorously beautiful can win these beauty-loving fools over with her "glad kindness." Her "charm" can make these "fools" become "wise," able to turn away from the fruitless pursuit of beauty and consider the well-mannered woman before them.

The speaker thus spends a whole stanza elaborating this point to begin painting a more detailed picture of the type of woman he wants his daughter to be. He's already said (in the third stanza) that he hopes she won't have too much physical beauty, but now he clarifies the things he hopes she *will* have that will make her truly, completely beautiful. The speaker's overall message is that physical beauty is temporary and unreliable; his daughter's *character* is what will win her friends and ensure that she finds herself a good husband.

LINES 41-48

May she become a flourishing hidden tree
That all her thoughts may like the linnet be,
And have no business but dispensing round
Their magnanimities of sound,
Nor but in merriment begin a chase,
Nor but in merriment a quarrel.
O may she live like some green laurel
Rooted in one dear perpetual place.

The sixth stanza begins, like the third, with a direct appeal to an unspecified higher power, as the speaker prays for his daughter to "become a flourishing hidden tree." This is the first appearance in the poem of the symbol of the laurel tree, which represents the prosperous, secure, and generous woman the speaker hopes his daughter will become. The speaker's paradoxical language here echoes his earlier wish that his daughter be beautiful, but not too beautiful:

- It seems contradictory that a tree (to say nothing of a person!) could be "flourishing" but also "hidden"!
- People usually think of success, growth, and prosperity as dependent on being an active participant in the wider world. But the speaker reverses that notion, asserting that *shelter* from the unknown, potentially dangerous world will actually let his daughter flourish.

The speaker's concern for his daughter's protection (and perhaps even seclusion) echoes the poem's opening, where the newborn girl is "half hid" in her cradle. Throughout, the poem expresses anxiety about the daughter's vulnerability and her need for shelter—shelter that can never be taken for granted.

The speaker continues with a simile asking that his daughter's thoughts be "like the linnet," a type of finch that has a pleasant song. It's a striking image: the daughter as a grounded, healthy tree with branches full of songbirds, which project happy, pleasant thoughts ("magnanimities") all around. The speaker also hopes his daughter will begin a "chase" or a "quarrel" only "in merriment." In other words, even when she's fighting or in pursuit, she should be playful and happy. The anaphora of lines 45 and 46 communicates the earnestness of the speaker's wish:

> Nor but in merriment begin a chase,
> Nor but in merriment a quarrel.

The stanza ends with a direct address (apostrophe) to God: "O may she live like some green laurel / Rooted in one dear perpetual place." These lines reiterate the wish that opened the stanza while adding some new details:

- The tree is now specifically a "green laurel," a tree historically associated with success and prosperity (ancient Romans were laurel wreaths to celebrate military victory, for example).
- This tree is also rooted in one spot. The idea of being firmly grounded adds to the paradox of "flourishing" while being "hidden" since, in a sense, it strips the daughter of her agency and freedom, even the freedom to move around.
- Even so, the speaker insists that staying in a single, comfortable place and cultivating a positive attitude are the keys to his daughter's happiness.

LINES 49-56

My mind, because the minds that I have loved,
The sort of beauty that I have approved,
Prosper but little, has dried up of late,
Yet knows that to be choked with hate
May well be of all evil chances chief.
If there's no hatred in a mind
Assault and battery of the wind
Can never tear the linnet from the leaf.

Now the speaker turns his attention to himself and his past, focusing briefly on his own experiences with women. The speaker has recently suffered because the people he has loved ("the minds that I have loved / The sort of beauty that I have approved") have not done so well. He establishes a direct contrast between the "flourishing" woman he envisions his daughter becoming and those he has loved, who "[p]rosper but little." (Yeats is alluding to Maud Gonne, the beautiful woman

who rejected his repeated marriage proposals and ended up in an unhappy marriage with another man. Gonne will be referenced at greater length in the next stanza.)

Though the speaker has suffered, he knows that "to be choked with hate" is the worst evil that can happen to a person. The speaker's use of the word "hate" is curious—he means both the usual definition of the word as well as a broader, somewhat spiritual connotation. He seems to be thinking of *all* negative emotions—dislike, resentment, unkindness, and more—that can come to define a person's life, especially when that person has faced adversity.

He himself tries not to be "choked with hate," despite his rejection by Maud Gonne, and he hopes his daughter will likewise steer clear of all negativity, no matter the symbolic storms life throws at her. If his daughter lives free of hatred, the "[a]ssault and battery of the wind / Can never tear the linnet from the leaf." The intense fragility and vulnerability of his daughter can be countered, the speaker suggests, by a particular way of living, thinking, and feeling that emphasizes stability and happiness over resentment and negativity.

LINES 57-64

An intellectual hatred is the worst,
So let her think opinions are accursed.
Have I not seen the loveliest woman born
Out of the mouth of Plenty's horn,
Because of her opinionated mind
Barter that horn and every good
By quiet natures understood
For an old bellows full of angry wind?

Having introduced the broad concept of "hate," the speaker asserts that "[a]n intellectual hatred"—that is, hatred originating in the mind—"is the worst." Therefore, he hopes his daughter will not be too strongly opinionated.

He drives this hope home with a long rhetorical question about Maud Gonne, the "loveliest woman born" who rejected his repeated proposals of marriage:

- Yeats claims that Gonne had an "opinionated mind" that caused her to throw away her beauty (given to her by "Plenty's horn") in exchange for "an old bellows full of angry wind," a reference to her husband, Major John MacBride.
- The speaker sees Gonne's example as a warning against women who have too many strong thoughts of their own. He hopes his daughter, in contrast, will be deferential, polite, and easygoing rather than confrontational and fiercely independent.

This stanza further develops the rich symbolism of the Horn of Plenty and the windstorm:

- The speaker adds Maud Gonne to the list of overly beautiful women who waste their beauty, causing destruction and suffering to themselves and to the people who love them. Helen of Troy and the "great Queen" Aphrodite undid the Horn of Plenty by eating a "crazy salad with their meat"; in a similar way, Gonne traded her natural blessings "and every good / By quiet natures understood" for an angry, disappointing husband.
- The speaker refers to that husband (John MacBride), meanwhile, in a metaphor that develops the symbolism of the wind. Whereas the speaker hopes his daughter will *avoid* the dangers of life's storms, his beloved Maud Gonne *chose* to throw herself into the "angry wind" when she rejected Yeats, threw away her beauty, and married MacBride.

It's worth noting that the speaker's ideas about ideal femininity, especially the idea that women should not have or express their own opinions, seem outdated and even downright sexist by today's standards. In a way, the question about Maud Gonne could be read more as an expression of Yeats's lingering resentment than a valid reflection on the appropriate behavior of women. Indeed, the rather opinionated passage is a bit ironic since the whole point of the stanza is that people should avoid having hateful opinions. Nonetheless, this stanza still contributes in key ways to the speaker's hopeful, tender vision of his daughter's future.

LINES 65-72

Considering that, all hatred driven hence,
The soul recovers radical innocence
And learns at last that it is self-delighting,
Self-appeasing, self-affrighting,
And that its own sweet will is Heaven's will;
She can, though every face should scowl
And every windy quarter howl
Or every bellows burst, be happy still.

The next-to-last stanza marks a shift in tone away from the speaker's somewhat turbulent thoughts about Maud Gonne toward an ideal state of purity and calm. Rather than asking God to bless his daughter, as in lines 17 and 41 ("May she become..."), the speaker envisions an ideal future that has *already been achieved*. He speaks in the present tense: "all hatred" has been "driven hence," and his daughter's "soul recovers radical innocence." Whereas in the second stanza, the "future years" had violently invaded the speaker's experience of the present, now the future is a pleasant and harmonious one.

Much like the speaker's use of the word "hatred," the phrase "radical innocence" has a broad, almost spiritual connotation. At its core, the phrase embodies the ideal woman the speaker

hopes his daughter will become. She will learn that she is self-sufficient—with the ability to delight, satisfy, and even frighten herself—and that, because she is "sweet" and pure, her will is the will of Heaven itself. In this state of innocence and self-sufficiency, the speaker's daughter will be happy no matter the challenges she faces in life. In a sense, her purity of mind and spirit will shelter her from the indignities and challenges of the outside world; she becomes her own cradle of protection from the storms of life.

The drastic change in mood is marked by a change of music. The alliteration on the /h/ sound in line 65 adds emphasis to the reassuring and positive declaration: "all hatred driven hence." And, as in the third stanza, there's a sudden outpouring of sibilance in this stanza and the next. The many /s/ and /sh/ sounds combine with gentle /f/, /l/, and /w/ consonance to create a soft, calm, peaceful atmosphere that ends the poem:

> Considering that, all hatred driven hence,
> The soul recovers radical innocence
> And learns at last that it is self-delighting,
> Self-appeasing, self-affrighting,
> And that its own sweet will is Heaven's will;
> She can, though every face should scowl
> And every windy quarter howl
> Or every bellows burst, be happy still.

The final bold alliteration of line 72, meanwhile ("bellows burst, be") ends the stanza on a forceful note, as if the daughter's happiness is bursting" through the page.

LINES 73-80

> *And may her bridegroom bring her to a house*
> *Where all's accustomed, ceremonious;*
> *For arrogance and hatred are the wares*
> *Peddled in the thoroughfares.*
> *How but in custom and in ceremony*
> *Are innocence and beauty born?*
> *Ceremony's a name for the rich horn,*
> *And custom for the spreading laurel tree.*

Following the speaker's vision of his daughter's self-sufficiency, the last stanza begins with a slightly surprising paradox. Though the speaker hopes his daughter will achieve "radical innocence" that will ensure her happiness, he also hopes she will find a husband who will "bring her to a house / Where all's accustomed, ceremonious." The quick asyndeton here ("accustomed, ceremonious") quickens the line's pace, suggesting the easiness of a life filled with custom and ceremony.

In other words, the speaker wants his daughter to be at once self-sufficient *and* protected by (and perhaps dependent on) her husband. This seeming contradiction is in keeping with the several other paradoxical hopes the speaker embraces: that his daughter be beautiful, but not too beautiful, and especially that she flourish, but also keep hidden.

Indeed, this last stanza clarifies the speaker's belief that in order to truly prosper, his daughter should be somewhat removed from mainstream society, which he sees as dangerous and morally suspect. At the beginning of the poem, the daughter is sheltered from the storm by her cradle and the tower. At the poem's end, the speaker envisions her similarly sheltered from the "arrogance and hatred" of public life, perhaps tucked away in an aristocratic country house and living a life of moderation, respect for tradition, and virtue. "[I]nnocence and beauty," the speaker claims, can only be born "in custom and in ceremony," his way of referring to the deference, respect for social norms, good manners, and shelter he views as necessary for his daughter's prosperity and happiness.

The speaker even goes so far as to directly link ceremony and custom with the Horn of Plenty and the laurel tree, two of the poem's most important symbols. The poem thus concludes in a moment of metaphorical intensity that underscores the passion of the speaker's hopes for his daughter and his country (remember that the speaker's prayer can also be read as an expression of hope for the type of country he hopes Ireland will soon become). Ultimately, "A Prayer for my Daughter" is a tender, moving expression of a parent's deepest fears and hopes for his newborn daughter. His dearest hope is that by living a sensible life of moderation ("custom" and "ceremony"), she will discover what it is to truly flourish.

SYMBOLS

THE LAUREL TREE

In the poem, the laurel tree symbolizes happiness, security, and prosperity.

The laurel is an evergreen tree native to the Mediterranean. In ancient Rome, it was a symbol of victory and good fortune (people wore laurel wreaths after military victories, for example). It's also commonly linked to poetry (and artistic beauty) itself. Trees more broadly are symbols of stability, tradition (in that they're rooted in one spot), and growth. When the speaker says that he wants his daughter to (metaphorically) "become" a laurel tree, he's drawing on all of these symbolic associations.

Specifically, the speaker prays that his daughter will become "a flourishing hidden tree" and that she will "live like some green laurel / Rooted in one dear perpetual place." This tree speaks to the woman he hopes his daughter will become:

- Strongly rooted (in "one [...] perpetual place");
- Beautiful and pure ("green");

- Protected ("hidden" in a "dear," or precious, "place");
- And generous/prosperous ("flourishing").

The speaker also believes she will become like this laurel through "custom," or tradition, which he says is a name "for the spreading laurel tree." In other words, the speaker links respect for tradition with stability and flourishing beauty. His daughter's future happiness, in turn, will thus also depend on her adherence to "custom"—on being (what the speaker considers to be) a good woman. And again, the fact that this isn't just any tree but a *laurel* tree emphasizes how much success and joy the speaker wishes his daughter to have.

It's also notable that the image of the daughter as a flourishing laurel tree may *itself* symbolize the speaker's hopes for the type of nation Ireland will become. Ireland is often represented as a beautiful woman, especially in literature, and Yeats was dedicated to the Irish Nationalist cause. His prayer for his daughter is also, perhaps, a prayer for Ireland herself. The speaker's heartfelt hopes for both are united in the symbol of the "spreading laurel tree."

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 41:** "May she become a flourishing hidden tree"
- **Lines 47-48:** "O may she live like some green laurel / Rooted in one dear perpetual place."
- **Line 56:** "Can never tear the linnet from the leaf."
- **Line 80:** "And custom for the spreading laurel tree."

THE HORN OF PLENTY

The Horn of Plenty, or cornucopia, is a horn-shaped vessel overflowing with nuts, fruits, flowers, and other wonders of the natural world. It generally symbolizes natural abundance and the blessings of nature. In "A Prayer for my Daughter," it more specifically seems to represent women's natural beauty.

The speaker says that some women who are too beautiful act foolishly, wasting their beauty and "undo[ing]" the Horn of Plenty—that is, wasting all their blessings. Yeats specifically alludes to a Maud Gonne, his longtime love interest, when he mentions "the loveliest woman born / Out of the mouth of Plenty's horn." Gonne, he says, traded the beauty the horn gave her for "an old bellows full of angry wind," likely a reference to John MacBride, the man she married instead of Yeats.

At the end of the poem, the speaker says that "[c]eremony's a name for the rich horn," suggesting that true beauty and prosperity come from the dignity, respect, and order that "ceremony" ensures. In this sense, the speaker hopes his daughter will be blessed by "Plenty's horn" not as Maud Gonne was (with too much physical beauty), but that she will make herself truly beautiful by behaving according to tradition, moderation, and propriety.

The Horn of Plenty may also symbolize the natural resources and cultural richness of Ireland. Yeats was involved in the cause of Irish Nationalism, and the poem was written during the Irish War of Independence. Read in this way, the poem seems to suggest that Ireland's true beauty, like that of the speaker's daughter, also depends on "ceremony," tradition, and restraint.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 32:** "Whereby the Horn of Plenty is undone."
- **Line 60:** "Out of the mouth of Plenty's horn,"
- **Line 79:** "Ceremony's a name for the rich horn,"

THE STORM

The storm that is "howling" at the beginning of the poem is an actual storm—the threat to the speaker and his daughter is immediate and real. But the storm also symbolizes the larger challenges of life: the unknown difficulties the speaker's daughter will face in the future.

The speaker spends so much of the first two stanzas emphasizing the destructive terror of the storm because the *literal* storm raging outside has prompted him to think of the many *symbolic* storms his newborn daughter will face in her life. The speaker earnestly hopes that his daughter will live a moderate, stable, happy life in which "[a]ssault and battery of the wind"—the many, unpredictable difficulties she will face—won't bring her harm or misery. If she lives a modest, kind, sheltered life of "custom" and "ceremony," the speaker thinks, not even the strongest storm life throws at his daughter will be able to harm her, or "tear the linnet from the leaf."

It's worth noting that the storm also symbolizes the political turmoil of Ireland and the world at large. The poem was written in 1919, just after the end of World War I and the beginning of the Irish War of Independence. The poem thus expresses Yeats's fears of brewing political troubles and his desire that Ireland, like his daughter, follow a path of caution on its way to achieving prosperity.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Once more the storm is howling"
- **Lines 3-6:** "There is no obstacle / But Gregory's wood and one bare hill / Whereby the haystack- and roof-levelling wind, / Bred on the Atlantic, can be stayed;"
- **Lines 10-12:** "And heard the sea-wind scream upon the tower, / And under the arches of the bridge, and scream / In the elms above the flooded stream;"
- **Lines 55-56:** "Assault and battery of the wind / Can never tear the linnet from the leaf."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

"A Prayer for my Daughter" contains many examples of alliteration. Take the first two lines, where breathy /h/ sounds suggest the fiercely blowing wind and crisp, brittle /c/ sounds evoke the precarious position of the speaker's daughter:

> Once more the storm is howling, and half hid
> Under this cradle-hood and coverlid

Later in the same stanza, the hard /g/ of "great gloom" makes the speaker's "gloom" all the more "great," that hard /g/ ringing out to the reader's ear.

Alliteration can evoke the poem's imagery as well. For example, in the second stanza, the hissing /s/ of "sea-wind scream" suggests the shriek of the wind over the water, and the thudding /d/ of "Dancing to a frenzied drum" calls forth the emphatic pounding of that metaphorical drum.

Sometimes alliteration also helps create continuity *between* stanzas, which are otherwise quite self-contained. For example, the third stanza is tied to the fourth by their shared alliteration on the /f/ sound: "find a friend" in line 25 leads right into "found life flat and dull" and then "fool" at the top of the next stanza. This kind of link between the stanzas is appropriate since the speaker presents Helen, in the fourth stanza, as an example of the type of woman he talks about in the third. Such subtle sonic connections also help the poem flow in a broad sense by preventing the stanzas from feeling *too* disconnected.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "howling,," "half hid"
- **Line 2:** "cradle-hood," "coverlid"
- **Line 8:** "great gloom"
- **Line 10:** "sea-wind scream"
- **Line 15:** "Dancing," "drum,"
- **Line 20:** "Being," "beautiful"
- **Line 24:** "find a friend."
- **Line 25:** "found," "flat"
- **Line 26:** "fool,"
- **Line 47:** "live like," "laurel"
- **Line 48:** "perpetual place."
- **Line 49:** "loved,"
- **Line 51:** "little,," "late,"
- **Line 52:** "choked"
- **Line 53:** "chances chief."
- **Line 56:** "linnet," "leaf."
- **Line 65:** "hatred," "hence,"
- **Line 66:** "recovers radical"
- **Line 67:** "learns," "last"
- **Line 72:** "bellows burst,"
- **Line 73:** "bridegroom bring"
- **Line 78:** "beauty born?"

CONSONANCE

In a sense, consonance is like alliteration's big sibling—older and wiser, and often backing that alliteration up. It, too, emphasizes certain points and makes the poem's ideas and imagery all the more vivid.

Take a look at the consonant sounds of the poem's beginning:

> Once more the storm is howling, and half hid
> Under this cradle-hood and coverlid
> My child sleeps on. [...]

Notice how the dense consonance, with many different sounds pelting the lines, creates a stormy, turbulent atmosphere.

There are many other examples of consonance in the poem (some of which we've highlighted here), which lend it a sense of intensity and lyricism throughout.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Once ," "more," "storm," "howling,," "half hid"
- **Line 2:** "Under," "cradle-hood," "coverlid"
- **Lines 3-3:** "My / on."
- **Line 3:** "child sleeps"
- **Line 4:** "hill"
- **Line 5:** "roof-levelling"
- **Line 8:** "great gloom"
- **Line 10:** "sea-wind," " scream"
- **Line 11:** "under," "arches," "bridge,," "scream"
- **Line 12:** "elms," "stream;"
- **Line 13:** "Imagining"
- **Line 14:** "future"
- **Line 15:** "Dancing," "frenzied drum,"
- **Line 16:** "murderous innocence," "sea"
- **Line 17:** "be," "beauty"
- **Line 18:** "Beauty," "stranger's," "distraught"
- **Line 19:** "looking-glass,"
- **Line 20:** "Being made beautiful overmuch,"
- **Line 21:** "Consider," "sufficient"
- **Line 22:** "Lose natural kindness"
- **Line 23:** "heart-revealing intimacy"
- **Line 24:** "find a friend."
- **Line 25:** "Helen," "found life flat and dull"
- **Line 26:** "later had," "trouble from," "fool,"
- **Line 27:** "that great," "that," "out"
- **Line 34:** "gift but hearts"
- **Line 35:** "entirely beautiful;"
- **Line 38:** "roved,"
- **Line 39:** "Loved," "beloved,"

- **Line 41:** “tree”
- **Line 42:** “That,” “thoughts,” “linnet”
- **Line 47:** “live like,” “green laurel”
- **Line 48:** “Rooted,” “dear perpetual place.”
- **Line 52:** “Yet,” “that to,” “choked,” “hate”
- **Line 53:** “well,” “all evil chances chief.”
- **Line 54:** “hatred”
- **Line 55:** “Assault,” “battery”
- **Line 56:** “tear,” “linnet,” “leaf.”
- **Line 57:** “intellectual hatred,” “worst,”
- **Line 64:** “old bellows full”
- **Line 66:** “soul recovers radical”
- **Line 67:** “learns at last,” “self-delighting,”
- **Line 69:** “sweet will,” “will;”
- **Line 71:** “windy,” “howl”
- **Line 72:** “bellows burst, be”
- **Line 73:** “bridegroom bring her,” “house”
- **Line 74:** “Where,” “ceremonious;”
- **Line 75:** “For arrogance,” “hatred,” “ are,” “wares”
- **Line 76:** “thoroughfares.”
- **Line 77:** “ceremony”
- **Line 78:** “Are,” “beauty born?”
- **Line 79:** “Ceremony's,” “rich horn,”

ASSONANCE

The poem's occasional assonance marks moments of particular importance, excitement, or intensity. Listen to the dense, sensual repetition of vowel sounds just in the first two lines, for example:

> Once more the storm is howling, and half hid
> Under this cradle-hood and coverlid

Along with the alliteration on the /h/ and /c/ sounds, this assonance subtly creates an atmosphere of tension, evoking the many sounds of the threatening storm raging outside. Similarly, in line 10, the assonance (and sibilance) of "sea-wind scream" mirrors the eerie, threatening sound described.

Sometimes, as in line 72, assonance emphasizes an especially important point. Along with alliteration on the /b/ sound, the short /eh/ sound repeated in "every bellows burst" gives the speaker's words a particularly emphatic and heartfelt quality. The speaker's deep belief in his daughter's capacity for happiness—despite the world's many challenges—becomes more moving and persuasive thanks to assonance.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “Once ,” “more,” “storm,” “hid”
- **Line 2:** “Under ,” “this,” “coverlid”
- **Line 3:** “no obstacle”
- **Line 4:** “wood,” “one”
- **Line 10:** “sea-wind scream”
- **Line 13:** “Imagining,” “reverie”
- **Line 15:** “frenzied”
- **Line 17:** “she be,” “beauty”
- **Line 18:** “make,” “stranger's”
- **Line 24:** “right,,” “find”
- **Line 26:** “much trouble”
- **Line 33:** “courtesy,” “chiefly”
- **Lines 33-33:** “her / learned;”
- **Line 34:** “Hearts are,” “had as,” “hearts are”
- **Line 37:** “very self”
- **Line 41:** “she become”
- **Lines 41-41:** “flourishing hidden / tree”
- **Line 42:** “linnet be,”
- **Line 43:** “business,” “dispensing”
- **Line 44:** “magnanimities”
- **Line 45:** “in merriment begin”
- **Line 46:** “in merriment”
- **Line 49:** “My mind”
- **Line 52:** “knows,” “choked”
- **Line 53:** “be,” “evil,” “chief.”
- **Line 56:** “leaf.”
- **Line 60:** “Out,” “mouth”
- **Line 65:** “Considering,” “driven”
- **Line 66:** “innocence”
- **Line 69:** “its,” “will is,” “will;”
- **Line 72:** “Or every bellows burst,”
- **Line 74:** “Where,” “accustomed, ,” “ceremonious;”
- **Line 75:** “arrogance,” “wares”
- **Line 77:** “but,” “custom”

SIBILANCE

Sibilance is like the fourth member of the string quartet of sonic devices that make "A Prayer for my Daughter" such a moving and memorable poem. Along with alliteration, consonance, and assonance, the repetition of various /s/ sounds emphasizes important moments, creates a variety of atmospheres and moods, and contributes to the overall music of the poem.

The very first instance of sibilance demonstrates one of its most important uses in the poem: contributing to the forbidding atmosphere of the storm. "Once more the storm is howling" just wouldn't sound as scary were it not for those closely repeated /s/ sounds. Likewise, in line 10, the /s/ sounds in "sea-wind scream" almost seem to mimic the screaming of the wind itself. And in line 16, sibilance adds a sinister, menacing hiss to the "murderous innocence of the sea."

But sibilance doesn't always have to be ominous! It can also be pleasant, as in the last two stanzas. Take the soothing sounds of lines 65-68:

> Considering that, all hatred driven hence,
> The soul recovers radical innocence

> And learns at last that it is self-delighting,
> Self-appeasing, self-affrighting,

Note that the muffled /f/ sound here is often considered sibilant in a broad definition of the term, and adds to the gentleness of these lines.

These stanzas mark a shift away from the speaker's resentful musings about Maud Gonne toward a concluding, hopeful vision of his daughter's future. Now that "all hatred" has been "driven hence," it seems, the speaker turns to sweeter sounds to communicate his feelings of peace and hope for the future.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Once," "storm is"
- **Line 3:** "sleeps"
- **Line 10:** "sea-wind scream"
- **Line 16:** "murderous innocence," "sea."
- **Line 18:** "stranger's," "distraught,"
- **Line 19:** "looking-glass,," "such,"
- **Line 21:** "Consider," "sufficient"
- **Line 22:** "kindness"
- **Line 23:** "intimacy"
- **Line 65:** "hence,"
- **Line 66:** "soul," "innocence"
- **Line 67:** "last," "self"
- **Line 68:** "Self," "self"
- **Line 69:** "its," "sweet"
- **Line 70:** "She," "face ," "should scowl"
- **Line 77:** "custom," "ceremony"
- **Line 78:** "innocence"
- **Line 79:** "Ceremony's"
- **Line 80:** "custom," "spreading"

METAPHOR

"A Prayer for my Daughter" is a richly metaphorical poem. The "storm" that is "howling" outside the tower is a literal storm, but the speaker also treats it as symbolic of the larger uncertainties and challenges that the speaker's daughter will face as she gets older (as well as Ireland's specific political situation in 1919). In keeping with this broad symbolism, the speaker turns to specific storm-related metaphors throughout the poem to dramatize his thoughts and anxieties. For example, he says in lines 54-56:

> If there's no hatred in a mind
> Assault and battery of the wind
> Can never tear the linnet from the leaf.

The "[a]ssault and battery of the wind" here is a metaphor for worldly troubles and dangers, the "linnet" represents the daughter's happiness, and the "leaf" represents the daughter herself (it's a leaf of that "tree" that he wants his daughter to become). The speaker is saying that his daughter's happiness and prosperity won't be destroyed by life's difficulties.

This metaphor builds on another metaphor that the speaker returns to throughout the poem: that of the speaker's daughter becoming "a flourishing hidden tree." Of course, he doesn't want his daughter to become an *actual* tree, but he *does* hope that, like the tree he describes, she will grow strong roots, prosper, become beautiful, and live a generous, stable, happy life.

Several other metaphors add flavor and depth to the poem as well:

- In lines 30–32, the speaker says that beautiful women "eat / A crazy salad with their meat." The point is that women who are too beautiful have a tendency to do illogical, destructive things.
- In line 64, John MacBride, the man Maud Gonne married instead of Yeats, is called "an old bellows full of angry wind" (a bellows refers to a tool used to create a blast of air).
- And in the poem's last two lines, the speaker draws a metaphorical connection between "ceremony" and "custom," on the one hand, and the "rich horn" of Plenty (a symbol of natural beauty and abundance) and "spreading laurel tree" (a metaphor for his daughter's prosperous future life) on the other. In other words, he's saying that people should respect tradition/ceremony/custom if they want to live happy lives.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 30-32:** "It's certain that fine women eat / A crazy salad with their meat / Whereby the Horn of Plenty is undone."
- **Line 41:** "May she become a flourishing hidden tree"
- **Lines 54-56:** "If there's no hatred in a mind / Assault and battery of the wind / Can never tear the linnet from the leaf."
- **Line 64:** "For an old bellows full of angry wind?"
- **Lines 70-72:** "though every face should scowl / And every windy quarter howl / Or every bellows burst,"
- **Lines 79-80:** "Ceremony's a name for the rich horn, / And custom for the spreading laurel tree."

SIMILE

There are just two similes in "A Prayer for my Daughter," but they work alongside the poem's metaphors, to which they are closely related, to communicate the speaker's thoughts.

Both similes occur in the sixth stanza, in which the speaker asks that his daughter "become a flourishing hidden tree" (a direct metaphor) and that "all her thoughts may **like** the linnet be." The metaphor and simile work together elegantly:

- The speaker hopes that his daughter will be a thriving tree hidden away from sight.
- Then, he hopes her thoughts will be *like* (that crucial word makes the simile) a finch, known for its beautiful song. Her thoughts will adorn her person as finches adorn a tree, and they will have no business but spreading their pleasing songs far and wide.

At the end of the stanza, the speaker repeats his hope that his daughter will become a tree, but this time, he frames it as a simile: "O may she live **like** some green laurel." He also specifies that he hopes she will be a *laurel* tree—an especially fragrant evergreen tree often associated with poetry and prosperity.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 42:** "That all her thoughts may like the linnet be,"
- **Lines 47-48:** "O may she live like some green laurel / Rooted in one dear perpetual place."

POLYSYNDETON

"A Prayer for my Daughter" contains polysyndeton in lines 10–12, where the coordinating conjunction "and" is repeated three times for emphasis:

> **And** heard the sea-wind scream upon the tower,
> **And** under the arches of the bridge, **and** scream
> In the elms above the flooded stream;

The speaker could have simply said, "I heard the sea-wind scream upon the tower, under the arches of the bridge, and in the elms above the flooded stream." Instead, he emphatically repeats the word "and." At the end of line 11, he also unnecessarily repeats the word "scream," which adds to the repetitive effect.

All of this repetition creates a moment of striking intensity, making the screaming wind seem even more menacing and powerful than it was in the first stanza, where the speaker describes the wind as "haystack- and roof-levelling." The polysyndeton also underscores the point that nothing can escape this fierce wind. It's everywhere—outside the tower *and* under the bridge *and* in the trees by the stream.

This idea that the wind is everywhere and ultimately inescapable is important to the storm's symbolism. The storm is definitely a real storm, but it also represents all of the challenges and uncertainties the speaker knows his daughter will face in the future. Moreover, it gestures toward the political chaos of post-World War I Europe, especially Ireland, which had just begun its fight for independence from England when the poem was written in 1919. This one use of polysyndeton intensifies the storm's multiple layers of meaning. That intensity, in turn, makes the rest of the poem—which is essentially the speaker's response to the "great gloom" the storm has caused him to feel—more powerful and compelling.

Where Polysyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-12:** "And heard the sea-wind scream upon the tower, / And under the arches of the bridge, and scream / In the elms above the flooded stream;"

PARADOX

"A Prayer for my Daughter" embraces several paradoxes, or apparent contradictions that are somehow true. From the very first line, the speaker offers a minor paradox when he says his daughter is "half hid" in her cradle. If someone is only halfway hidden, then they're not *really* hidden at all—the point of being hidden is, well, to be hidden entirely! The speaker seems aware of this tension and embraces it; he takes comfort in his daughter's half-hidden state even as he worries about her intense vulnerability to the storm.

Line 16 offers a more striking paradox, the "murderous innocence of the sea." It seems impossible that something murderous could also be innocent, yet there's actually some truth to the speaker's phrase (which could also be called an oxymoron since it comprises two words that seem to contradict each other). The sea *is* murderous, especially during the type of stormy weather the speaker describes. Yet, the sea isn't actually alive, and it has no conscience or control over its actions. Therefore, it is innocent of blame for any destruction it causes.

Another seeming paradox immediately follows. The speaker prays that his daughter be beautiful, but not *too* beautiful. It seems like a strange thing to ask, but it lies at the heart of the speaker's hope that his daughter lead a life of moderation, stability, kindness, and tradition. The enjambment at the end of line 17 makes the paradox all the more striking, ending the line on a note of unresolved tension via the word "not":

> May she be granted beauty and yet **not**
> **Beauty** to make a stranger's eye distraught,

Later, he asks that she "become a flourishing hidden tree," another seeming contradiction. How can a tree (much less a person) truly flourish if it is hidden away? The speaker turns this question on its head, asserting that his daughter will prosper *only* if she is protected from the rest of society, which he sees as a dangerous, unpredictable, and corrupting force.

Lastly, in the ninth stanza, the speaker imagines his daughter achieving self-sufficiency and realizing that she can be happy on her own. In stanza 10, however, he seems to suggest that her ultimate happiness depends on finding a husband who will "bring her to a house" that's comfortable, protected, and rooted in traditional social norms. To the end, the speaker's

comfort with apparent contradictions reflects the hopes he has for his daughter and for Ireland in rich, nuanced ways.

Where Paradox appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "half hid"
- **Line 16:** "murderous innocence"
- **Lines 17-18:** "May she be granted beauty and yet not / Beauty to make a stranger's eye distraught,"
- **Line 41:** "flourishing hidden tree"
- **Lines 66-69:** "The soul recovers radical innocence / And learns at last that it is self-delighting, / Self-appeasing, self-affrighting, / And that its own sweet will is Heaven's will;"
- **Lines 73-74:** "And may her bridegroom bring her to a house / Where all's accustomed, ceremonious;"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The speaker of "A Prayer for my Daughter" asks two rhetorical questions in the poem. The first, in lines 59–64, refers to Maud Gonne, "the loveliest woman born" who rejected Yeats's repeated marriage proposals. Instead, she married Major John MacBride, "an old bellows full of angry wind" who was an abusive husband. This rhetorical question sharply expresses the lingering resentment Yeats feels toward Gonne and supports his argument that women should be neither too beautiful nor too opinionated.

The second question is much shorter than the first, though no less impactful. The speaker wonders aloud how true innocence and beauty (the things he wishes for his daughter) can be born other than "in custom and in ceremony"—terms Yeats uses to refer to tradition, respect for social norms, moderation, and deference.

In such a long poem, these two questions draw attention to themselves by contrasting in an obvious way with the rest of the speaker's statements. At moments of special intensity, this talkative, rather opinionated speaker resorts to asking a question instead of making a straightforward statement.

Notice, though, that the answers to the questions are pretty obvious. *Of course* the speaker (Yeats himself) has seen Maud Gonne throw away her beauty; *of course* there's no way for innocence and beauty to be born besides in "custom" and "ceremony," at least in the world of the poem. The questions thus place strong rhetorical emphasis on the two key points the speaker most badly wants to drive home: namely, that women (especially his daughter) should not be too beautiful or opinionated, and that living a life of true beauty and innocence depends on respect for social tradition.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 59-64:** "Have I not seen the loveliest woman born / Out of the mouth of Plenty's horn, / Because of her opinionated mind / Barter that horn and every good / By quiet natures understood / For an old bellows full of angry wind?"
- **Lines 77-78:** "How but in custom and in ceremony / Are innocence and beauty born?"

REPETITION

"A Prayer for my Daughter" makes use of several kinds of repetition. In line 7, for example, the speaker says that "for an hour I have walked and prayed" because of the "great gloom" in his mind. Then, in line 9, he says the same thing almost verbatim—though this time, the "hour" part comes at the end: "I have walked and prayed for this young child an hour."

This repetition thus approximates chiasmus, reversing the order of its clauses:

> And for an hour *I have walked and prayed*
> [...]
> *I have walked and prayed* for this young child an hour

This structure emphasizes just how long (an hour) the speaker has been troubled *even before* beginning his prayer. By sandwiching the reason for that trouble—the "great gloom" in the speaker's mind—the repeated phrases also emphasize just how gloomy the speaker's really feeling.

Throughout the rest of the poem, there are also many instances of what's called polyptoton. Take a look at the third stanza, where "beauty" (used three times) appears alongside its closely related cousin, "beautiful" (used once). This kind of thing happens a lot elsewhere in the poem with words like "chose" (and "chooses" and "chosen"), "hate" (and "hatred"), and others.

All this polyptoton lets the speaker to emphasize his points (after all, he has a lot of impassioned things to say about beauty, choices, hatred, and more!) while slightly varying his specific words. It's a way of talking about a single subject for a long time while using fresh (and therefore persuasive) language to do so.

Finally, the speaker also uses diacope. A good example of this is line 69, where the repetition of the word "will" emphasizes the *closeness* of his daughter's will to the will of God:

> And that its own sweet will is Heaven's will;

In the very next lines, the speaker repeats the word "every" three times in close succession, making a passionate and moving case for his daughter's capacity for happiness despite her facing seemingly "every" possible obstacle in the world. The double repetition of "custom" and "ceremony" in the last stanza is also a kind of diacope, one that asserts just how foundational those two ideas are to the speaker and his hopeful vision of his

daughter's future.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "And for an hour I have walked and prayed"
- **Line 9:** "I have walked and prayed for this young child an hour"
- **Line 17:** "beauty"
- **Line 18:** "Beauty"
- **Line 20:** "beautiful"
- **Line 21:** "beauty"
- **Line 24:** "chooses"
- **Line 25:** "chosen"
- **Line 29:** "chose"
- **Line 34:** "Hearts are not had as a gift but hearts are earned"
- **Line 35:** "beautiful"
- **Line 37:** "beauty's"
- **Line 49:** "mind," "minds"
- **Line 52:** "hate"
- **Line 54:** "hatred"
- **Line 57:** "hatred"
- **Line 58:** "opinions"
- **Line 61:** "opinionated"
- **Line 69:** "will," "will"
- **Line 70:** "every"
- **Line 71:** "every"
- **Line 72:** "every"
- **Line 77:** "custom," "ceremony"
- **Line 79:** "Ceremony's"
- **Line 80:** "custom"

PARALLELISM

The speaker of "A Prayer for my Daughter" uses the power of parallelism to make his points more elegant, logical, and persuasive. Have a look at lines 45–46, where anaphora (a form of parallelism) underscores his hope that his daughter be happy and good-natured, even when fighting or in pursuit:

> Nor but in merriment begin a chase,
> Nor but in merriment a quarrel.

In line 34, another special parallel structure called antithesis drives home the speaker's argument that the love of another person must be earned, not received like a gift:

> Hearts are not had as a gift but hearts are earned

More broadly, much of the speaker's "[p]rayer" follows a very similar structure. He repeatedly asks God to grant his daughter a happy, prosperous future by using phrases like "[m]ay she," "let her," "may her," and so on:

> May she be granted beauty and yet not
> [...]
> May she become a flourishing hidden tree
> [...]
> And may her bridegroom bring her to a house

This broad parallelism elevates the overall rhetoric of the poem, giving the speaker's prayer a sense of continuity, coherence, and passionate commitment.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 17:** "May she be granted beauty and yet not"
- **Line 34:** "Hearts are not had as a gift but hearts are earned"
- **Line 41:** "May she become a flourishing hidden tree"
- **Lines 45-46:** "Nor but in merriment begin a chase, / Nor but in merriment a quarrel."
- **Line 47:** "O may she live like some green laurel"
- **Line 58:** "So let her think opinions are accursed."
- **Lines 67-68:** "self-delighting, / Self-appeasing, self-affrighting"
- **Lines 70-72:** "though every face should scowl / And every windy quarter howl / Or every bellows burst"
- **Line 73:** "And may her bridegroom bring her to a house"

ALLUSION

In the fourth stanza, the speaker makes two allusions to Greek mythology in order to support his idea that women who are too beautiful end up causing chaos and destruction. The first reference is to Helen of Troy:

- Helen was "chosen" to be the wife of Menelaus but, in many versions of the myth, found life with him boring and unsatisfying. Because of this, she eloped to Troy with the young, handsome Paris, setting off the great "trouble" of the Trojan War.
- It's good to know that in some tellings of the story, Helen was *forced* to go to Troy with Paris, but the speaker seems to be alluding to the version in which she goes willingly.

The second allusion is to the "great Queen" Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty who was born in the ocean waves:

- Aphrodite had no father and could have chosen any man in the world, yet she chose Hephaestus, a blacksmith with a crippled leg, to be her husband.
- Like Helen, she ended up taking younger, more attractive men as her lovers.

The speaker sees both women as examples of those who have wasted their immense physical beauty and caused suffering to themselves and others.

The speaker makes one final allusion, this time to an actual person, Maud Gonne:

- Gonne was a noted beauty (the speaker calls her "the loveliest woman born") who had a close, and at times intimate, relationship with Yeats. However, she rejected his repeated marriage proposals, instead marrying Major John MacBride, who turned out to be an abusive husband (an "old bellows full of angry wind").
- The speaker (a stand-in for Yeats himself) sees Gonne, like Helen and Aphrodite, as a cautionary tale against excess beauty and independence of mind in a woman.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 25-29:** "Helen being chosen found life flat and dull / And later had much trouble from a fool, / While that great Queen, that rose out of the spray, / Being fatherless could have her way / Yet chose a bandy-leggèd smith for man."
- **Lines 59-64:** "Have I not seen the loveliest woman born / Out of the mouth of Plenty's horn, / Because of her opinionated mind / Barter that horn and every good / By quiet natures understood / For an old bellows full of angry wind?"

VOCABULARY

Gregory's Wood (Line 4) - A forest near Thoor Ballylee, the "tower" where Yeats was living with his newborn daughter, Anne, when he wrote the poem.

Tower (Line 10) - This word refers to an actual tower in County Galway, Ireland, called Thoor Ballylee. Yeats was living there with his newborn daughter, Anne, when he wrote the poem.

Reverie (Line 13) - A daydream, usually a pleasant one. Here, however, the speaker seems more agitated than pleased by his "excited reverie."

Looking-Glass (Line 19) - A mirror.

Helen (Line 25) - Helen of Troy, said to have been the most beautiful woman in the world. In Greek myth, Helen was "chosen" to be the wife of Menelaus. According to some sources, she found life with him to be boring, which led her to go to Troy (some say she went willingly, others that she was kidnapped) with Paris, her lover and the "fool" the poem refers to. The elopement of Helen and Paris set off the massive "trouble" of the Trojan War.

Great Queen (Line 27) - The Greek goddess Aphrodite, frequently associated with love and beauty. Aphrodite was born in the waves of the ocean and had no father. Though she could have had any man in the world, she chose Hephaestus, a blacksmith, as her husband.

Spray (Line 27) - Vapor, froth, or foam formed at the surface of ocean waves. According to Greek myth, the "great Queen" Aphrodite was born out of such spray.

Bandy-Leggèd (Line 29) - Being bowlegged, or having legs that curve outward at the knees. In the poem, the phrase refers to the blacksmith Hephaestus, Aphrodite's husband, who was lame.

Crazy Salad (Line 31) - Expresses the idea that overly beautiful women, like Helen and Aphrodite, squander their beauty and good fortune by doing crazy, senseless things and getting distracted from what really matters (the "meat" of life). The phrase might also refer to the ways beautiful women cheat on their husbands (or "their meat") with men they find more attractive. Helen eloped to Troy with Paris, and Aphrodite cheated on Hephaestus with Ares and many others.

Horn of Plenty (Line 32, Line 60, Line 79) - A cornucopia, or large horn-shaped vessel overflowing with fruits, vegetables, nuts, flowers, and other natural riches. In mythology and in the poem, the horn represents abundance, good fortune, and the blessings of the natural world, especially the natural beauty of women. According to the poem, women who are too physically beautiful waste their natural gifts and "undo[]" the Horn of Plenty.

Linnet (Line 42, Line 56) - A European finch, often referenced in poetry and known for its pleasing song.

Magnanimities (Line 44) - Things that are pleasant, calm, generous, noble, or otherwise uplifted and distinguished in spirit. Used to compare the daughter's thoughts to the pleasing sound of the linnet's song.

Laurel (Line 47, Line 80) - A fragrant, evergreen tree that was important in ancient Greece and is often associated with poetry.

Bridegroom (Line 73) - A man who is about to be or has just been married; a husband.

Accustomed (Line 74) - Done according to custom and tradition. The word expresses the speaker's wish that the house his daughter shares with her husband will be comfortable, stable, and secure.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"A Prayer for my Daughter" has 80 lines broken up into 10 stanzas. These eight-line stanzas are called octets or octaves (the latter term often refers to the first part of a sonnet, though it can also mean any eight-line stanza). Based on the poem's rhyme scheme, each stanza can be broken down further into

two rhymed couplets (AABB) followed by a quatrain, or group of four lines, of enclosed rhyme (CDDC). (More on that in the Rhyme Scheme section of this guide.)

This form gives the speaker plenty of room to express a wide variety of thoughts and moods. Each stanza acts as a self-contained unit, though the stanzas also build on the ones that have come before. Contrasts are often developed within stanzas themselves—as in stanza 2, where the first four lines describe the wind outside, and the last four invoke the speaker's "excited reverie." Likewise, the first half of stanza 3 expresses the speaker's wish that his daughter be beautiful, but not too beautiful. The second half of the stanza explains *why* he has that wish.

At a larger level, the poem can be divided into three rough sections:

1. Stanzas 1 and 2 set the scene, describe the violence of the storm, and express the speaker's "great gloom," which prompts the rest of the poem (the actual "[p]rayer") that follows.
2. Stanzas 3 through 8 express some of the speaker's hopes and dreams for his daughter and warn against excess beauty and hateful opinions.
3. Stanzas 9 and 10 paint a peaceful and pleasant final picture of the "radical innocence" the speaker hopes his daughter will achieve by following the path of "custom" and "ceremony."

In its progression from the literal, threatening present, to the speaker's hopes for the future, to a peaceful vision of that future fulfilled, the poem expresses the movement of the speaker's mind from fear, to uncertain hope, to peaceful contentment.

METER

"A Prayer for my Daughter" follows a more-or-less regular, though fairly complex, metrical pattern. Most lines are written in loose iambic pentameter, a meter composed of five feet that follow an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern. Line 37 is a straight line of iambic pentameter:

For beau | ty's ve- | ry self, | has charm | made wise,

However, lines 4, 6, and 7 of each stanza mostly follow loose iambic tetrameter. This means the feet still follow the unstressed-stressed syllable pattern, but there are only four of them, not five. Line 31 is a good example of iambic tetrameter:

A cra- | zy sa- | lad with | their meat

"A Prayer for my Daughter" follows this general pattern throughout: in each stanza lines 1, 2, 3, 5, and 8 are in iambic pentameter, while lines 4, 6, and 7 are iambic tetrameter.

Things get complicated, however, because Yeats frequently replaces one or more of a line's iambs with another type of metrical foot. These could include trochees (stressed-unstressed), anapests (unstressed-unstressed-stressed), pyrrhics (unstressed-unstressed), or spondees (stressed-stressed).

If all of these funny-sounding feet seem a little intimidating, don't worry! Though the meter of "A Prayer for my Daughter" can seem complex, understanding it isn't hard if you follow your ear and remember the poem's basic metrical skeleton.

Let's take a look at how Yeats varies the meter throughout the poem. Right off the bat, there's some interesting metrical substitution going on in line 1:

Once more | the storm | is howl- | ing, and | half hid

The metrical backbone of the line is iambic pentameter, but a whopping *three* iambs have been swapped out for other feet! The progression of feet in this line goes like this: spondee-iamb-iamb-pyrrhic-spondee. What's the point of all these metrical shenanigans?

- More than anything, changing the meter like this gives special intensity, focus, and power to the line. The double stress on "Once more" emphasizes that this isn't the first time the storm has howled—and that it won't be the last time either. Starting the poem with that heavy dum-dum also establishes an ominous, somewhat threatening atmosphere.
- The atmosphere created by the spondee, in turn, mirrors the literal and psychological atmosphere the stanza describes. It makes the "great gloom" the speaker feels seem more genuine and urgent (and notice, too, that "great gloom" is itself a double stress!).
- In a similar way, the spondee "half hid" at the end of line 1 underscores the daughter's vulnerability and the speaker's knowledge that he will never be able to fully protect her from the storms of life.

There are many other examples of the poem's metrical flexibility. Line 15, for instance, begins with a strong trochee instead of the usual iamb:

Dancing | to a | fren- | zied drum,

The initial dum-da rhythm gives the whole line a somewhat wild, violent pulse, almost as if the line itself were doing what it says, "[d]ancing to a frenzied drum."

The poem is full of these moments. And, overall, this intense rhythmic variation lets the speaker be more expressive. Because he isn't stuck with the same old strict iambic pentameter, he can speak in a more natural, varied, interesting,

and heartfelt way.

RHYME SCHEME

"A Prayer for my Daughter," like most of W. B. Yeats's poems, follows a regular rhyme scheme. Each eight-line stanza contains two rhymed couplets (AABB) followed by a quatrain of enclosed rhyme (or four lines that follow the CDDC pattern; notice how the inner D rhyme is "enclosed" by the outer C rhyme). The basic rhyme scheme followed by each stanza thus looks like this:

AABBCDDC

Shifting the poem's rhyme scheme in the middle of each stanza reflects the fact that the stanzas themselves often have a sort of shift in tone or content partway through. In stanza 2, for example, the first four lines talk about the violent storm, whereas the latter four talk about the speaker's "excited reverie."

This rhyme scheme enhances the poem's meanings in some subtle ways as well:

- The two rhymed couplets that begin each stanza create a sense of stability, continuity, and cohesion. The closely repeated end rhyme sounds link the lines and lend emotional weight and intensity to what is being said. In the first stanza, for example, the first four lines describe the sleeping child, who is only "half hid" in her cradle, and the few "obstacle[s]" that can stop the destructive wind. The couplet rhymes, which mirror the partial protection of the cradle by neatly dividing the first four lines in half, emphasize both the importance of shelter and its fragility.
- Following the two couplets, the quatrain of enclosed rhyme changes things up a bit. Instead of another pair of rhymed couplets (CCDD), the poem places one couplet inside another (CDDC). This new pattern creates a dynamic sense of openness, change, and even vulnerability.

It's interesting to note that the rhyme scheme of "A Prayer for my Daughter" isn't a standard or traditional one. However, it could be read as a variant of *ottava rima*, a very traditional rhyme scheme first used in Italian poetry that follows an ABABABCC pattern. Yeats famously used ottava rima in his late poems "Among School Children" and "Sailing to Byzantium." His experimentation with the rhyme scheme of eight-line stanzas in "A Prayer for my Daughter" demonstrates both his loyalty to traditional forms and his willingness to play with them.

SPEAKER

It's widely accepted that the speaker of "A Prayer for my Daughter" is William Butler Yeats himself. Yeats wrote the poem in 1919, just two days after the birth of his daughter, Anne. At the time, Yeats was living at Thoor Ballylee, a tower in County Galway. Thoor Ballylee is the "tower" referred to in line 10, and "Gregory's wood" is a nearby forest on Lady Gregory's land.

In addition to these real-life details, which strongly suggest that Yeats himself is the poem's speaker, the poem references Maud Gonne, the great love of Yeats's life who rejected his repeated marriage proposals. Gonne is "the loveliest woman born" the speaker mentions in line 59. Gonne rejected Yeats in favor of Major John MacBride, who turned out to be abusive—Yeats refers to him as "an old bellows full of angry wind." These lines about Gonne express Yeats's continued disappointment in her actions; to the speaker, Gonne is like the mythological figures Helen of Troy and Aphrodite, warnings to his daughter of the dangers of hatred, opinionated thoughts, and excessive beauty.

The speaking voice of Yeats in this poem is worried but hopeful. He believes in tradition, moderation, and kindness, and he resents what he sees as the frustrating actions of some beautiful women. However, he also shows genuine, earnest concern for the future well-being of his daughter, as well as that of Ireland and the world at large.

Finally, even though the speaker is widely accepted to be Yeats himself, it's also possible, of course, to read the poem in a more general way—spoken by any parent to an infant daughter. Read in this way, the poem becomes a powerful meditation on the hopes and fears of parenthood.

SETTING

"A Prayer for my Daughter" can be read as taking place at Thoor Ballylee, the "tower" in County Galway, Ireland, where Yeats was living when he wrote the poem. A violent storm rages outside, and the speaker (Yeats himself) and his infant daughter take shelter inside the tower. It is here and in this moment that the speaker says his prayer.

Read less literal, the poem's setting can be read as symbolizing Ireland as a whole in the year 1919. Yeats was committed to the cause of Irish Nationalism, and the Irish War of Independence had begun just before he wrote the poem. In this sense, Ireland is threatened by the "storm" of conflict with England, and the poem is concerned not just with the well-being of Yeats and his daughter inside the tower but also with that of all the people of Ireland.

The poem also makes brief excursions to other times and places. The fourth stanza refers to the ancient Greece of Helen and Aphrodite, for example, and the eighth stanza draws on the

speaker's complicated past with Maud Gonne, the beauty who rejected Yeats's repeated marriage proposals.

Finally, the poem is dominated—perhaps more than by any other time or place—by the future home of the speaker's daughter. The speaker imagines her as a hidden, flourishing tree who lives a traditional, orderly life of custom and ceremony, perhaps in an aristocratic country house. This hopeful vision sharply contrasts with both the immediate threat the daughter faces from the storm and the unknown, future dangers of the wider world.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Yeats wrote "A Prayer for my Daughter" in 1919 and published the poem in his 1921 collection, *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*. Several other of Yeats's famous poems, including "The Second Coming" and "Easter, 1916," also appeared in that volume. Whereas those poems are somewhat pessimistic and explicitly political, "A Prayer for my Daughter" is more personal and perhaps more peaceful and optimistic. Though it still has political implications, they are secondary to the intimate, heartfelt concern Yeats expresses for his newborn daughter.

"A Prayer for my Daughter" was written during a time of intense innovation and experimentation in literature: James Joyce's *Ulysses* and T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" were both published in 1922, and on the other side of the Atlantic, Wallace Stevens's *Harmonium* was published in 1923. Modernism, which responded to an increasingly connected and technological world by seeking radically new forms of artistic expression, was the hot movement of the moment.

In a way, the publication of Yeats's *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* in 1921 set the stage for the Modernist literary revolution of the early 1920s. Yeats strongly influenced Ezra Pound (who served for a time as his secretary), James Joyce, and many other somewhat younger writers, many of them champions of Modernism.

Yet while many Modernist poets championed free verse, Yeats was fiercely loyal to traditional verse forms, rhyme, and meter (though he stretched them in unprecedented ways, as "A Prayer for my Daughter" demonstrates). He was influenced by a somewhat strange mix of Symbolism, Imagism, and spiritualism, and he had a personal and literary interest in the occult. He was also strongly influenced by Romantic poets, such as Percy Bysshe Shelley and William Blake.

Yeats's early work shows an interest in Irish folklore and mythology, and throughout his life, he wrote in a way that was distinctly and proudly Irish. He was the central member of the Irish Literary Revival, a movement that formed in the early 20th century with the goal of enriching and promoting Ireland's literary culture.

In 1923, he won the Nobel Prize for Literature, which cemented his status as the most important Irish writer of the 20th century. He was a towering influence on other prominent Irish writers, including Samuel Beckett and Seamus Heaney, and he continues to influence poets, playwrights, and prose writers in Ireland and far beyond to this day.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Yeats wrote "A Prayer for my Daughter" in 1919, after the end of World War I and the beginning of the Irish War of Independence, which would last until 1921. Many poems of this period (by Yeats and others) are filled with a sense of dread about the state of the world. In "A Prayer for my Daughter," the raging storm might represent the political unrest between Ireland and England, as well as the larger forces of war and conflict that had so recently ravaged Europe. Yeats's prayer for his daughter can thus be read as his prayer for the future of Ireland, too—his hope that it will become a stable, flourishing nation of its own. This hope would soon be fulfilled, and in 1922, Yeats became a senator of the newly formed Irish Free State.

Yet "A Prayer for my Daughter" remains a primarily personal poem about a father's deepest wishes for his newborn daughter. Yeats's daughter, Anne, was born just two days before he wrote the poem. At the time, Yeats was living at Thoor Ballylee, a tower near the estate of Yeats's close friend Lady Gregory. Yeats wrote a poem following the birth of Anne's younger brother, Michael, called "A Prayer for my Son," which was published in his 1928 collection, *The Tower*. That poem is a kind of companion piece to "A Prayer for my Daughter."

Yeats's lifelong, fraught relationship with Made Gonne also informs the poem in key ways. Yeats met Gonne, a great beauty and fellow artist and Irish Nationalist, in 1889. They established a close relationship and she became his muse, but she rejected all of his repeated marriage proposals. Gonne eventually married Major John MacBride, though the marriage fell apart in 1906 (the speaker refers to MacBride as "an old bellows full of angry wind").

In 1917, he married Georgie Hyde-Lees (known as George), and in 1919 their first child, Anne, was born, prompting Yeats to write "A Prayer for my Daughter." Though Yeats seemed to have found some happiness with George, "A Prayer for my Daughter" indicates the lingering resentment he felt toward Gonne, who he felt wasted her beauty and brought chaos and suffering into the world.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Irish Literary Revival — An online exhibit about the

literary movement defined by W. B. Yeats. (https://libapps.libraries.uc.edu/exhibits/irish-lit/sample-page/)

- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to a reading of "A Prayer for my Daughter." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v19aVYVPQmU)
- The Abbey Theatre — A history of the Abbey Theatre, which Yeats founded with his close friend Lady Gregory. (https://www.abbeytheatre.ie/about/history/)
- Yeats's Life and Work — A short biography of William Butler Yeats, along with links to many of his poems. (https://poets.org/poet/w-b-yeats)
- Maud Gonne — A short entry about Maud Gonne, who rejected Yeats's repeated marriage proposals and partially inspired "A Prayer for my Daughter." (https://www.britannica.com/biography/Maud-Gonne)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS POEMS

- Among School Children
- An Irish Airman Foresees his Death
- Easter, 1916
- Leda and the Swan
- Sailing to Byzantium
- The Lake Isle of Innisfree
- The Second Coming
- The Wild Swans at Coole
- When You Are Old

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Martin, Kenneth. "*A Prayer for my Daughter.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 6 Mar 2020. Web. 17 Apr 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Martin, Kenneth. "*A Prayer for my Daughter.*" LitCharts LLC, March 6, 2020. Retrieved April 17, 2021. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/william-butler-yeats/a-prayer-for-my-daughter.