An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow

SUMMARY

A rumor quickly travels around various Sydney establishments: bars, cafes, and a gentlemen's sporting and social club. At the Stock Exchange, stock brokers are suddenly distracted from their usual business. Men leave a Greek restaurant and head towards Martin Place, where there's a man crying uncontrollably.

The spectacle of the crying man is already causing traffic jams. People are flooding to the square to see him, nervously excited about what's going on. They're running through the streets towards the man, shouting out the news that there's somebody crying uncontrollably.

We surround the man but are afraid to get close to him. He does nothing but cry, openly and without shame. He doesn't cry like a child nor like the wind; he cries like a man. He doesn't shout about what's wrong nor bang on his chest, and his weeping isn't even very loud.

The purity of the man's crying seems to hold back the crowd from intruding. His sorrow forms a kind of star of empty space around him in the middle of the day. Police officers, who at first tried to grab him, now find themselves in awe, staring at the man and longing to cry themselves, much like children long for the sight of a rainbow.

In the future, people will claim that the man was protected by a halo or some sort of force field, but these things don't exist. Others will claim that they were totally appalled and would have put an end to things, but they weren't actually there. In the moment, even the most macho men among us are shocked into silence, and become filled with a surprising sense of peace and good will. Other people in the area, who just moments earlier seemed happy, suddenly start screaming. The only ones comfortable getting close to the crying man are young children, people exuding a sense of inner peace, and the city animals like dogs and pigeons.

A man near me says that the whole thing is completely silly and pretends to vomit in disgust. Then I watch a woman have a near-religious experience as she touches the man and then starts weeping uncontrollably herself.

Other people do the same thing and also start weeping, some because they feel a sense of being accepted. Others try *not* to weep because they're scared of being accepted. The weeping man, meanwhile, doesn't need anyone to do anything; he ignores everyone around him, indifferent as the earth itself. His face continues to contort with tears, but he has no words or messages to offer the crowd, only his utter sadness. His pain is pure and tough, strong as the earth and as imposing as the sea.

When the man finally stops crying, he gets up and walks through the crowd while drying the tears from his face. He carries the dignified air of someone who has completed the task that they set out to do.

He avoids the people who try to follow him and runs off down a nearby street.

THEMES

MODERN LIFE AND SUPPRESSED EMOTION

The poem suggests that the hustle and bustle of modern society (in this case, Sydney, Australia) has caused a disconnect between people and their emotions. People keep their distance from one another and keep their true feelings bottled up as they go about their busy lives, the poem implies, which is why the image of the man who weeps with “sorrow” seems so shocking. The fact that so many onlookers are deeply moved by the man’s unfiltered display of emotion suggests that they, too, would like to be able to more freely express themselves. The poem thus becomes a critique of the suppression of emotion, suggesting that the ability to *feel*—and to express those feelings—is crucial to being human.

The poem opens with a flurry of the different hallmarks of urban life—a betting shop, a café, the Australian Stock Exchange, and, of course, crowds and traffic. Yet though people in this city are packed tightly together, there isn’t much indication of emotional life or connection. The implication is that emotional expression has been inhibited by the social expectations and relentless pace of modern life.

When word quickly gets around that there is a “a fellow crying in Martin Place,” it’s thus an extraordinary spectacle that draws the city’s inhabitants into its orbit. This passionate display of raw emotion brings the city to a halt.

On the one hand, the man’s tears seem to break with the social convention that people keep to themselves and keep a lid on their emotions in public. The man’s behavior is also out of place because crying doesn’t serve any obvious *economic* function in a society built on money, productivity, and consumption; he's stopping in the middle of all the hubbub to do something that has no societally meaningful purpose beyond letting himself *feel* something.

Importantly, seeing a man crying in the street challenges other city-dwellers to consider their *own* attitudes to emotion. Some are so stuck in their mindsets that they ridicule this man, reiterating the idea that such emotional openness is out of

place in the modern urban world.

Yet many others are moved and find themselves wishing they, too, could feel so intensely. Some want to follow the man as if he were a religious leader, a prophet of a better way of life. Even the police, initially tasked with trying to remove the man, find themselves feeling, "with amazement, their minds / longing for tears as children for a rainbow."

This reference to childhood suggests that the man represents a fundamental importance of emotion to being human, implying that the ability to feel is unlearned through growing up in modern society. That is, society *teaches* people to focus on achievement, consumerism, and money, neglecting their inner emotional lives and ability to empathize with one another in the process.

The man's crying is also like a rainbow in that it is an ordinary, natural occurrence that nevertheless inspires wonder and awe. The rainbow doesn't have any economic purpose, but it moves people emotionally. Like a rainbow, the man appears briefly, attracts attention, and is gone. In doing so, he encourages people to embrace their inner emotional lives, while also exposing the attitudes of those who are too far gone to reconnect with their ability to feel.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-11
- Lines 12-21
- Lines 28-31
- Lines 32-46

♂ MASCULINITY

The poem questions old-fashioned and outdated ideas about what it means to be a man, particularly when it comes to the ability to express sorrow and grief. It suggests that male displays of emotion represent a kind of dignity and strength, rather than weakness.

The poem repeatedly calls attention to the gender of the man crying as well as those watching him, many of whom are also men. Note how the words "men," "fellow," and "man" appear throughout, challenging the reader to examine what the man's crying means specifically in terms of his gender.

It's important, then, to consider how the poem builds a picture of a more traditional and clichéd idea of "manliness" in the first place by drawing attention to many traditionally male-dominated industries. At the Stock Exchange mentioned in the first stanza, men (for the most part) compete with one another to make the best returns on their investments. In the "Greek Club," men talk business and sports (according to accounts from the time). Later in the poem, the male-dominated police force attempts—and fails—to restrain the crying man. These images subtly reflect masculinity as being tied to competition, money, power, and physicality.

The crying man's arrival in "Martin Street" thus implicitly becomes a threat to this idea of manliness, offering an alternative vision of male strength through his ability to express his emotion publicly. To that end, the poem makes it clear that the man's crying *isn't* un-masculine: he is described as weeping "not like a child, not like the wind, [but] like a man." He cries *like a man*, according to the poem, because there is nothing inherently unmanly about crying. The poem thus turns a common expression about manliness on its head, given that the phrase "like a man" usually means to respond to something (physical pain or bad news, for example) with a *lack* of emotion.

In turn, the man's willingness to cry comes to reflect a sense of personal integrity. He has the strength to keep crying even though people are trying to stop him. He doesn't need to "beat his breast" like an angry ape, which would play into a more violent vision of male expression, but instead maintains "the dignity of weeping."

This affects the men in the crowd deeply. Those with "the fiercest manhood" and "the toughest reserve" (more traditional clichés about what it means to be a man) are soon "trembl[ing] with silence," surprised to feel their hearts full of peace and empathy. Even the police (who would have been predominantly men at the time of the poem's writing) find themselves overcome with "longing for tears," their efforts at restraint failing to stop his emotional outburst.

Of course, not all the men in the crowd react this way. One man describes the crying as "ridiculous," for example, espousing a more old-fashioned view of masculinity. Overall, though, the crying man represents a challenge to the men of Sydney to examine their own emotional lives. It asks them whether they, too, have the capacity, and strength, to let themselves cry—and if they don't, what reasons lie behind that inability. Accordingly, the poem undermines the idea that masculinity is incompatible with freely-expressed emotion.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-6
- Line 11
- Lines 12-16
- Lines 25-28
- Lines 32-35
- Lines 44-46

✝ RELIGION AND SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION

The man who brings Sydney to a halt through the simple act of crying is a Jesus-like figure who inspires a sort of epiphany—a sudden and significant spiritual breakthrough—in many of his onlookers. Yet though some witnesses view the

crying man as a "prophet," he quickly runs away from these "believers" at the end of the poem. The poem thus seems to undermine its own religious significance. Perhaps the poem is saying that metropolitan society is *incapable* of spiritual transformation, stuck in the tight grip of fast-moving capitalism. Alternatively, maybe the poem is implying that people can't hold out for a savior to add meaning to their lives.

The Sydney man's effect on society is brief but profound: everything comes to a stop when he starts crying, and the speaker predicts that people will come to view the man as a prophet—that they will later say he was surrounded by a "halo" or "force."

The man's crying is also perhaps an allusion to Jesus crying tears of sorrow in numerous sections of the Bible. Jesus weeps, in part, because of the sorry state of Jerusalem. He grieves that Jerusalem can't and won't find peace, and that it won't receive his love. Perhaps, then, the man's weeping also signifies some kind of deep and pure sorrow about the humanity's inability to save itself.

Like Jesus, the crying man provokes strong reactions from the people who encounter him. Some wish to get rid of him, suggesting he is a kind of threat, while others are indifferent. Soon enough, some people view the man as a kind of prophet who brings the "gift of weeping," which one woman receives by touching him, shaking as she does so. Children, animals, and those "such as look out of Paradise" (perhaps meaning people who have something holy or faithful about them) sit around him.

But while Jesus visited humanity expressly with the intention of teaching and saving them, the man here has no "words" or "messages" to give to the people, only his own expression of "grief" and "sorrow." The speaker flatly denies that the crying man is anything more than just that: a crying man, *not* a spiritual leader. There is "no such thing" as the "halo" or "force" that seem to surround him, says the speaker. The man thus doesn't seem to be a prophet at all—just an ordinary person ascribed extraordinary significance by a society starving for some sort of meaning.

Furthermore, the man himself refuses to let people become his followers. He needs nothing from them, "like the earth." Perhaps the poem, then, is subtly undermining humanity's attempt to make sense of its place in the world through religion. If humans were to suddenly disappear the earth would just get on with being the earth. Maybe "acceptance" of its own insignificance—as opposed to God-given purpose—is the best that humanity can achieve, an idea which possibly lies at the heart of the man's urgent weeping.

In this reading, the most important aspect of the crying man's message might be that there *isn't* one. Whereas Jesus sought to convert people to his cause, the crying man makes a quick getaway from the scene as though he has just robbed a bank, offering no reassurances or hopes for the future. The crying man might then be a kind of *anti*-religious prophet, reminding people that there is no savior on the way, and that all they can do is "accept" the life right there before them.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-6
- Lines 12-21
- Lines 22-23
- Lines 24-28
- Lines 29-31
- Lines 34-47

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

The word goes ...
... can't stop him.

The poem starts by setting the scene. The speaker creates a vivid picture of 1960s Sydney, name-checking some key establishments: Repins was a coffee shop; Lorenzinis was a wine bar; Tattersalls was (and still is) a sporting, social, and business club; and the Greek Club was a restaurant. This is clearly a bustling place. The diacope of "goes round" in lines 1 and 2 also helps the reader get a sense of the speed with which news travels around Sydney, suggesting that, on the level of *information* at least, the people here are pretty connected.

The speaker also implies that many of these spaces are dominated by men—"men" is repeated twice, in fact. Likewise, the "scribblers" (the stock-brokers) at the Stock Exchange would also have been men at the time. Though the poem does refer to women (and children) later on, this opening stanza, combined with the fact that the person "crying in Martin Place" is a "fellow," makes it clear that the poem concerns thematic ideas of masculinity—what it means to be a man and, specifically, to express emotion.

This first stanza also plays with the reader's expectations. The title suggests that the poem has something to do with a rainbow, and the gossip and excitement that travels around Sydney society like electricity suggests that the rainbow has arrived in the poem. But what awaits the reader in line 6 is the reveal that the commotion isn't caused by a rainbow at all, but rather by someone crying who refuses to "stop."

Notice how the poem's syntax (the arrangement of its words and phrases) creates the surprise. The first five lines are one long sentence that builds drama as it unfurls down the page until the colon that abruptly halts things at the end of line 5. *Something* has suddenly stopped the hustle and bustle of the city. Line 6 then explains what, exactly, has put society on pause—not a rainbow, but rather an outpouring of emotion:

> There's a fellow crying in Martin Place. They can't stop him.

That said, it's perhaps not really a true *pause* and more of a shift in attention. Suddenly and seemingly out of nowhere, this crying man seems like the most important event that the inhabitants of Sydney can focus on.

After the full-stop caesura that follows "Martin Place," the poem reveals that people have tried and failed already to stop the man from crying. The placement of this phrase—"They can't stop him"—after the stop of a caesura is somewhat ironic, the brief pause in the poem quickly aborted to indicate that this is an ongoing situation. It's also worth thinking about what kind of event *usually* creates this kind of city-wide response. By and large, it's usually some kind of danger that so drastically alters metropolitan daily life—already, then, the poem suggests that the man represents some kind of threat merely though the act of crying. This heightens the sense that the man—and his action—represents something alien and disturbing.

The stanza also makes use of some subtle but effective sound effects. Alliteration in "round Repins" (line 1) conjures the sound of verbal excitement (as though the /r/ sound is a rumor going round), and the internal consonance of "murmur" achieves something similar. The clustering of consonance in line 4—the Stock Exchange scribblers forget the chalk—gives the impression of hurried economic activity.

LINES 7-11

The traffic in ...
... can stop him.

The second stanza expands on the scene-setting of the first. The language in this stanza also feels more like prose than poetry, almost reminiscent of a newspaper article. This helps build a sense that what's happening is a major event.

The entire city has stopped to watch "a fellow weeping." Openly crying is clearly unusual in the world of the poem—unusual enough to cause a traffic jam. Crowds of people trying to figure out what's going on have formed around the crying man as well. More people are rushing towards the scene, through now-deserted "busy main streets"—left empty because all the people have hurried away to see what's happening in "Martin Place."

This is a real location in the heart of Sydney's business district. This might be suggesting that the man's crying has some kind of symbolic relationship to the way of life made possible by big business and banking (namely, capitalism and consumerism). George Street was Sydney's first high street, making it an important historical location in the development of a modern city.

All in all, the fact that the man is crying in a center of business and commerce—a world ruled by money and productivity, not feelings—makes the scene feel all the more out of place. The setting thus reflects the poem's thematic ideas about the tendency of fast-paced, money-driven modern life to distance people from their emotions.

Also notice how many full stops there are in this stanza, creating emphatic caesurae in lines 8, 9 and 11. These caesurae conjure an image of intrigued citizens packing in together tightly:

> The traffic in George Street is banked up for half a mile
> and drained of motion. The crowds are edgy with talk
> and more crowds come hurrying.

The periods throughout the stanza make the lines themselves feel crowded. The enjambment here, meanwhile, creates the sensation of being pushed and pulled forward. Together, the poem evokes the feeling of being jostled by a crowd.

At this point, the reader might start wondering *why* somebody crying should gather such an incredible amount of attention—to the point of bringing an entire world of economic activity (work, shopping, transportation, and so on) to a brief pause. An answer of sorts appears in line 11, which repeats part of line 6:

> No one can stop him.

The reader knows two things for sure, then:

1. The crying man has become the center of attention;
2. People have been actively trying, and failing, to stop him from crying.

Why would they want to stop him? It could be out of the compassion of their hearts, but it could also be because the man is causing a commotion and interrupting the city's momentum. Not only is his action intriguing and mysterious, then, but it's a kind of threat, too. The poem hints that the citizens of Sydney—which stands in for any major city—are powerless against the crying man, who seems to have something that the average member of the public doesn't. It's possible that this is something as simple as the ability to express emotion, which, in this reading, has been lost amid the hustle and bustle of modern metropolitan life.

LINES 12-16

The man we ...
... sob very loudly—

The third stanza marks an important shift in perspective. Up until this point, the poem has avoided any first-person pronouns. This has given the poem a relatively detached and objective tone so far—making it sound sort of like a newspaper article. Here, though, the speaker inserts themselves into the

poem by using the word "we," making it clear that the speaker is in fact part of this jostling crowd.

The poem here also moves from the *commotion* caused by the spectacle to the *spectacle* itself. The crying man is at the center of it all, surrounded by people shocked and fascinated by his weeping. People are also afraid to "approach[]" the man, reinforcing the idea that his crying strikes them as unusual and even intimidating—it's something they can't "stop" or control.

Notice how there are caesurae in every line of this stanza, how many clauses build up on top of each other through asyndeton. The poem here reads like a process of revision, with the speaker attempting to find accurate words for the sight and experience of the crying man. The speaker seems to struggle in this task, repeatedly revising or adding detail in this attempt to capture the surreal moment.

As such, the reader learns that the man "simply weeps" without trying to cover it up. That is, he exhibits no shame or reticence about his crying. This means that this man is (at least relatively) comfortable crying in public, even though the public itself *isn't* comfortable witnessing it. This again might suggest that modern society has lost touch with the ability to fully feel and express emotion.

Of course, as line 14 makes clear, *some* crying does still happen. The speaker mentions the tears of children and the sound of the wind, but also declares that this man's crying is expressly *not* like either of those! Instead, this man cries "like a man." This can be understood in a couple of ways, which don't invalid each other:

1. This "man" can be taken as standing in for humanity in general—meaning this man cries like a human being. The implication, then, is that the onlookers have been distanced from their own humanity. The man cries without shame, and perhaps everyone should be able to make their feelings known without being treated as some kind of outsider.
2. The poem is also implying that *men specifically* can and should be able to cry without it representing some kind of weakness or lack of masculinity. Emotion and masculinity are not mutually exclusive, in other words.

Lines 15 and 16 make it clear that the man doesn't cry in order to bring attention to himself—the responsibility for the size of the spectacle belongs to the individuals who make up the crowd, not him. He "does not declaim" his crying, "nor beat his breast," two alliterating phrases that are ironically loud to contrast with the quiet dignity of the man at the center of the poem. He's not even "sob[bing] very loudly," provoking the reader to ask why people are so intrigued by him (as opposed to the reader focusing on why the man is crying).

LINES 16-18

yet the dignity ...
... pentagram of sorrow,

After the caesura in line 16 (the dash following "loudly"), the speaker moves on to talking about how the crying affects the on-lookers. It's at this point that the poem's descriptions start to sound somewhat religious and spiritual (attributes that the speaker will resist in the next stanza).

The speaker describes the man's weeping as dignified, setting up a contrast between the purity of the man's emotional expression and the varied (and somewhat frenzied) reactions of the crowd. In this, the poem starts to draw subtly parallels between the crying man and Jesus (think about how Jesus is presented in the Bible as dignified and pure).

The poem also uses dramatic enjambment across the stanza break from line 16 to line 17:

> sob very loudly—yet the dignity of his weeping
> holds us back from his space, the hollow he makes
> about him

Breaking the line at "weeping" creates tension, "hold[ing]" back the grammatical completion of the phrase to mirror the way the man's crying "holds [onlookers] back from his space." It's as though there is a force-field around the man—like his tears are a kind of superpower that keeps the crowd at bay.

Lines 17 and 18 intensify this almost supernatural atmosphere. The speaker describes a "hollow" that the speaker "makes about him" through his crying. The alliteration here on the breathy /h/ sound enacts an aura-like circle of its own around the line:

> holds us back from his space, the hollow he makes
> about him

The word "hollow" has associations with Gothic literature and witchcraft, and the fact that this takes place at "midday" (i.e., at noon) might be an ironic play on the usual witching hour—midnight.

The "pentagram of sorrow," meanwhile, is yet another allusion to the world of magic and witchcraft. A pentagram is a five-pointed star shape, and has numerous links with a range of religions (including representing the five wounds of Jesus Christ during the crucifixion).

The poem doesn't dwell or expand on the mention of the pentagram, but it's worth considering that here it has a similar effect to the pentagram in *Faust*, by the German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. In Goethe's play, a pentagram prevents one of the main characters from being able to leave a room. In Murray's poem, the "pentagram of sorrow" has a similar effect on physical space—people can't seem to cross over the border

of the man's sorrow, such is its power on the space around him.

LINES 19-21

and uniforms back ...
... for a rainbow.

The second half of the fourth stanza describes how "uniforms" (that is, the Sydney police) react to the crying man. This is a crucial section of the poem, in which a number of its possible themes/interpretations are brought together. The speaker explains that the police *tried* and failed to restrain the man, and are now effectively caught under the mesmerizing spell of his sorrowful weeping.

First, think about what the police represent. They are an expression of power—*official* power, enabled and endorsed by the government. More often than not, police forces are predominantly male too (and certainly were at the time of the poem's writing). They can be thought of here, then, as an expression of the status quo, both in a general sense and, more specifically, regarding clichéd ideas of what it means to be a man—power and physical force. The police are tasked with maintaining so-called normality, which is precisely why they try to intervene with the crying man—his public grief is *abnormal*.

In this instance, though, the crying man is *more* powerful than the police. The police fail to stop him, thus turning the idea of emotion as weakness on its head. Here, emotion *is* strength. Not only does the man's emotion repel the police, but it brings about a profound (though probably fleeting) transformation in them. Having failed to restrain him, the "uniforms":

> stare out at him, and feel, with amazement, their minds
> longing for tears as children for a rainbow.

The police are briefly restored to a kind of innocent, child-like state. They are surprised to feel that they "long" to be able to express grief and sorrow in the same way that the crying man does. This is almost a kind of religious epiphany—a sudden and life-changing spiritual realization. By the end of the poem, however, the reader is left with the impression that nothing much actually changes because of this spectacle.

This is also an important moment in the poem in how it relates to the title. Line 21, as quoted above, is actually the only mention of a rainbow anywhere in the poem. The "longing" of the police "for tears" is compared, through simile, to the way children wish to see a rainbow.

To a child, a rainbow is a true wonder—a vision of magical beauty. But rainbows are rare and, to an extent, an illusion, in that they are less solid than they appear. Perhaps, then, the police long for the expression of emotion because it's something that they, and modern society more generally, can no longer access. Something fundamental to humanity, in other words, has been lost in the rush to build the frantic intensity of life in the 20th-century metropolis.

LINES 22-25

Some will say, ...
... have been there.

Here the poem shifts gears as the speaker considers the way that people will reflect in the *future* on the spectacle of the crying man. The speaker imagines the kind of things that people will say about the experience, and the disparity between what they will say and what the experience was actually like at the time.

Essentially, the speaker is anticipating the kind of myth-making and storytelling that comes when events pass into history. The story of Jesus is a good example of the way stories, myths, and beliefs about an event—or multiple events—grow and change over time. In a way, the speaker here performs a similar role to the authors of the biblical Gospels, providing an account of their central character's life that attempts to preserve the truth of the story for future generations. But while the Gospels talk up Jesus's godliness, the speaker here emphatically *denies* that there is anything religious or magical about the crying man:

> Some will say, in the years to come, a halo
> or force stood around him. There is no such thing.

While the previous stanza talked about the seeming force-field-like effect of the crying man's sorrow, in this stanza the speaker implies that this was a reaction created by the psychology of the onlookers—not some special power on the man's part.

Interestingly, like a rainbow, a halo is a kind of image created by light. The speaker emphatically denies there is any such thing, which ties in with the "absolutely ordinary" of the title. Perhaps the poem suggests that the man's expression of emotion *should* be considered perfectly normal. Also notice how the preceding full-stop caesura gives the speaker an air of authority in denying the existence of halos or forces.

The speaker also anticipates that people will claim to have been there who weren't. This heightens the sense of this spectacle as a significant public event, one that will stay in living memory for a long time to come. In essence, people will *wish* they had been there, and some will lie to make it appear so.

LINES 25-28

The fiercest manhood, ...
... judgements of peace.

After the caesura in line 25 (in the form of a full stop after "they will not have been there."), the speaker appears to focus primarily on the reaction of the men in the crowd. The speaker seems to have in mind a particular kind of men as well—those with "the fiercest manhood, the toughest reserve, [and] the

slickest wit."

These are macho qualities that describe a clichéd idea of what a man should be: tough, emotionally reserved, and quick to make witty comments. The crying man has deeply affected even those men who most embody these attributes, making them "burn[] with unexpected / judgments of peace."

This supports the interpretation that the poem is in part about masculinity—and about revising the idea that crying is weak and effeminate. Instead, whether the crying man intends to bring an important message or not, there is no doubt that his public display of emotion is immensely powerful in its effect on onlookers.

These macho men are awed by the crying man, surprised to find themselves suddenly unable to speak and "trembl[ing]" with silence." The consonance and assonance of "trembles with silence" is quietly beautiful, portraying the awe and reverence felt by these men. This psychological state—combined with the mention of "judgments" and "peace"—paint a picture of an almost religious experience (though the speaker has denied such a thing earlier in the poem).

It's also important to consider why these people suddenly "burn[]" with intense feelings of peace. Perhaps it's because they are more accustomed to conflict and violence—a more extreme outlet when other ways of expressing emotion have been suppressed. In a sense, then, the crying man provides the more macho onlookers with a part of themselves that they otherwise struggle to access.

LINES 28-31

Some in the ...
... and dusty pigeons.

The speaker talks more about how others in the crowd react to the crying man. Some people who thought they were happy are now screaming, suggesting that the man's weeping has perhaps exposed their happiness as false and paper-thin. Here, the poem makes prominent use of consonance and alliteration:

> [...] Some in the concourse scream

These syllables are harsh and loud, evoking the noise of the onlookers' screams. Something about the man's expression of pure emotion upsets their usual surface happiness, implying that the so-called comforts and joys of modern city life are not as truly fulfilling as they appear. The poem thus hints that what humanity has come to see as happiness is a kind of illusion, conjured by the relentless pace of 20th-century society.

Following the caesura in line 29 (the full stop after "happy"), the speaker points out that there are at least *some* people in the crowd who feel comfortable around the crying man. Small children are happy to sit near him, suggesting that the man has more in common with them than the adult onlookers. These children have not yet fully learned the behaviors and social constructs of their elders. Most importantly, children are usually less likely to hide and suppress their emotions—and in this, the crying man and the surrounding children are very similar.

But it's not just small children who feel in tune with the crying man—there are also those people who "look out of Paradise." This phrase is quite mysterious, but it certainly seems a religious allusion. The capitalization of "Paradise" suggests that this is a reference to the Garden of Eden, which, like the reference to children, speaks to a state of innocence. Perhaps these are people with a genuine sense of inner peace, those with a happiness that is not dependent on money or consumerism.

Animals also happily sit around the crying man, specifically "dogs and dusty pigeons." The alliteration here conveys the connection between these creatures, neither of which are members of the busy human world; like the children and those who "look out of Paradise," these are instinctive creatures who don't take part in the hustle and bustle of modern economic activity. Like the crying man, they also don't hide their emotions. These three categories of living beings that are comfortable around him, then, share in common the ability to access and express their inner emotional state.

LINES 32-35

Ridiculous, says a ...
... gift of weeping;

The seventh stanza provides two more reactions to the crying man. In this case, they could hardly be more different—a man who almost vomits from disgust, and a woman who has a near-religious experience. These two reactions reflect two opposite perspectives on the significance (or lack of) of the crying man.

In lines 32-34, a man "near" to the speaker looks at the scene and says "ridiculous," while motioning to cover his mouth as if to prevent vomit from coming out. His reaction is intensely visceral, as though he has witnessed something truly gruesome and horrific. To him, the public display of emotion is disgusting—or, at the very least, he has learned to react *as if* he is disgusted.

By contrast, the female onlooker "shines" in the presence of the crying man. Reaching out to him, she has a kind of epiphany—a spiritual/religious breakthrough.

Both reactions are strong and bodily, and speak to the way the man and the woman perceive the expression of emotion. The woman views the weeping as something profound and beautiful, and "receives" it as a "gift." While the man offers only resistance, the woman portrays acceptance, embracing the crying man's action by performing it herself.

Simultaneously, the crying man is both a farcical figure and a kind of savior. It's possible to read the difference between the

two figures as a comment on masculinity (as well as society more generally). Arguably, the male passer-by feels more threatened than the woman because the crying man challenges his idea of what it means to be a man—strong, reserved, emotionally indifferent.

In lines 34-35, the poem uses meter to interesting effect. While the poem is metrically irregular for the most part, the two lines that focus on the woman switch to a more regular sound:

> and I see | a wom- | an, shin- | ing, stretch | her hand
> and shake | as she | receives | the gift | of weeping;

Apart from slight variations in the first and last feet above, these lines conform to iambic pentameter. Within the wider context of metrical irregularity, this portrays the woman as under a kind of spell—as though the meter itself has been brought into the influential aura of the crying man. And though he is crying, the way that he goes about it has a kind of calmness that "requires nothing"—the change in meter here signifies a shift to a similar inner calmness that contrasts with the frantic pace of modern city life.

LINES 36-40

as many as ...
... weeps ignores us,

The woman who "receives the gift of weeping" in the seventh stanza sets off a chain reaction among the other people in the crowd. This gift—the re-discovered ability to express emotion—spreads to "many" others. The enjambment between stanzas here creates a connection of its own, mirroring the way the weeping rapidly travels around the crowd. The speaker here observes two more distinct categories of people. Now, there are those who "weep for sheer acceptance," and those who "refuse" to do so.

Here, the reader is asked to consider what the poem means by "acceptance"—what exactly is it that the crowd are divided about accepting. There is no one right answer, but perhaps the crying man's public display of emotion validates the internal emotion felt by those who watch him. That is, his freedom sets them free too (if, perhaps, only for a moment).

There are others, of course, who are either too afraid, cynical, or unemotional to allow themselves to be moved to tears. This mass crying—and resistance to crying—could even be about something harder to define: the meaning or meaninglessness of life itself. Everyone in 20th-century Sydney usually has somewhere to be, something to do, and, accordingly, some apparent purpose. Maybe the man's tears remind them that, ultimately, every action they take will be lost and forgotten as time marches on.

The repetition of "acceptance" and "weep" heightens the intensity of this moment. "Weep," "weeping," and "weeps"—which together are an example of polyptoton—show how the entire city is focused on the act of crying, whether or not they as individuals allow *themselves* to cry.

The poem here also turns its attention to the way that the man interacts with the crowd. Or more accurately, the way in which he has *no need* to interact with those around him. The speaker says that, "like the earth," the man "requires nothing" of those around him and, indeed, actively "ignores" everyone else. The man thus maintains the purity of his tears, demonstrating a refusal to care about what others think of him. Perhaps there is a kind of lesson in this, hinting that modern urban citizens are overly concerned by the opinion of others.

The simile here—"like the earth"—is important too. The earth is where the entirety of human existence (apart from a few ventures into space!)—takes place. All human history is essentially set on earth. But the earth doesn't really *need* humanity—it existed well before humans and will most likely continue to exist after humans are gone!

When conceived of in this way, the earth undermines the self-inflated importance of human existence. It gently suggests that, though people go about their daily lives with intention and purpose, it doesn't really matter whether they do so or not. Perhaps an almost subconscious sense of this idea informs the strong reactions of the crowd.

LINES 40-43

and cries out ...
... as the sea—

The man's face is twisted and contorted with the act of weeping, but his body is described as ordinary (linking this moment to the title of the poem!). This seems to neatly mirror the poem's own ambiguity and paradox, which portrays the man's crying as both profoundly significant and, somehow at the same time, inherently meaningless. The poem frequently portrays the man as a figure of religious or spiritual importance—almost like the second coming of Jesus—but then in the next moment will undercut and deny this completely. The meaning of the man's crying is, ultimately, in the eye of the beholder (and, of course, the reader!).

Here the poem specifically denies that the man has a message to impart. He brings "not words, but grief, not messages, but sorrow," the parallelism of this line ("not ... but ... not ... but ...") showing that the speaker is trying to be very precise in defining what the man is actually doing. Unlike Jesus, then, the man doesn't seem to have a lesson for humanity that can be expressed in language.

Accordingly, perhaps he isn't a prophet at all (again, this is left undecided). Instead, the man appears to express a kind of "grief" and "sorrow" that is at the heart of all existence, and one which can't be easily discussed. This might be a comment on the strangeness of life itself, or, perhaps, the way in which the certainty of death informs the struggle for meaning in life.

The man is again compared to the earth itself (as in line 39). He is described through similes as "hard as the earth" and as "present as the sea." The sea is often used as an image of humanity's insignificance (as in Matthew Arnold's poem, "Dover Beach") and the earth—a huge rock floating through space—sometimes represents a kind of universal indifference to the plight humanity.

The poem can't be reduced to one single interpretation, but perhaps it is arguing that there is something fundamentally sad about the existence of life itself—and in the way in which humanity attempts to make sense of its existence. The multiple caesurae in the first two lines of the ninth stanza ("not words ...") have a searching quality that perhaps reflects the speaker's own attempt to come to terms and understand with the spectacle of the crying man.

LINES 44-47

and when he ...
... down Pitt Street.

In the poem's last four lines, the man finally stops crying. He walks through the crowd, drying his face as he does so, continuing to portray a quiet "dignity" and strength.

Once again, the poem plays with the reader's desire to know what this all means. The poem deliberately ends on an unclear note, not answering the question of whether the man was some kind of prophet or just a regular guy who happened to cry in the street. Likewise, the poem refuses to answer whether the spectacle has any continuing significance, or if its apparent meaningfulness was brief and fleeting.

But the poem does continue the stress the purity of the man's actions, even after he has finished crying. There is no sense that he now wishes for people to follow him nor to express admiration. He seems to have wept on his own terms and for his own sake. The somewhat comedic description that the man now walks like somewhat "who has wept, and now has finished weeping" is intentionally circular in terms of its logic—the man who has stopped crying is like a man who has stopped crying! This intentionally makes the reason behind the tears more elusive, the poem refusing to give any hint as to what provoked the man to cry in the first place.

The crying man makes a swift exit, intentionally avoiding those who might wish to become his followers. To some, his actions have seemed profoundly significant and, perhaps, they want more. But he essentially runs away, having no need for converts. The poem thus ends with a heightened sense of mystery and ambiguity, the reader left to contemplate what it all meant exactly as the onlookers are abandoned to their own thoughts. Possible readings hang in the air—that the man was a challenge to traditional masculinity, or a prophet symbolizing the inherent absurdity of modern life, or just a man who happened to be crying in that particular place at that particular time—but ultimately the poem refuses to settle too comfortably into any of these interpretations.

The way that the last line is presented in a stanza all of its own means that the poem ends on a deliberate cliff-hanger, as though the reader, accustomed to the longer stanza length earlier in the poem, is not permitted to know anything more about what happened.

SYMBOLS

THE UNIFORMS

In its fourth stanza, the poem refers to "uniforms" who have been trying to restrain the crying man. These "uniforms" are state officials, most likely members of the police force (making the term "uniforms" an example of metonymy). In the poem, they represent the societal status quo in general and the pressure people are under to conform to a certain way of life for fear of being deemed dangerous or simply strange.

Think about the general function of the police in society. In theory, their role is to maintain whatever that society agrees is normal, safe behavior. Their role in real life is often symbolic too, with their presence intended to make an area feel safer (though, in reality, it's far more complicated of course). The uniforms they wear mark out their identity and their role as enforcers of the status quo. Whatever it is about Sydney that makes a man crying in public so unusual, it's an atmosphere that is maintained and overseen by the "uniforms" who patrol it.

Accordingly, it's highly significant that the poem presents these uniformed people as suddenly powerless, their official authority evaporating away in the presence of the crying man's awe-inspiring display of emotion. This draws a link, or, more accurately, an opposition, between the status quo as represented by the "uniforms" and the alternative way of being represented by the crying man.

Perhaps, as enforcers of normality, the "uniforms" are the most affected by the crying man precisely because he creates the kind of spectacle that they are, subconsciously or not, *meant to prevent from happening*. And it's these "uniforms" who find themselves "long for tears as children for a rainbow" in line 21. Through the man's weeping, they feel a kind of nostalgia for a more emotionally expressive time, as opposed to the way in which they are supposed to indifferently uphold the law.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 19-21:** "uniforms back in the crowd who tried to seize him / stare out at him, and feel, with amazement, their minds / longing for tears as children for a rainbow."

THE RAINBOW

The rainbow in the poem can be thought of as symbolic of wonder, beauty, and freedom of expression—all things the poem implies that the modern citizens of Sydney have grown distant from.

Though the poem's title makes the reader anticipate the arrival of a rainbow, no rainbow ever actually appears. Instead, the speaker refers to rainbows as a way of describing the feeling experienced by the "uniforms"—the police—who, having tried and failed to restrain the crying man, find themselves overawed by his expression of emotion. These police officers long "for tears"—the kind that the crying man has in abundance—in the way that children desire to see a rainbow. That is, the officers want to feel intense emotion in the same way that children might hope to spot the colors of a rainbow in the sky.

Rainbows are beautiful and mysterious, and, to a young child especially, look like some kind of magic. The police officers—who stand in for the society-wide status quo—are so far removed from their own emotions that the ability to express them seems faraway and almost illusory. Yet while rainbows may *feel* extraordinary to children, they are, in actuality, an "ordinary" spectacle that often appear after rainstorms. This suggests that the "uniforms" are *mistaken* in their belief that the ability to cry freely is something magical and mysterious; it is a beautiful but totally normal part of being human.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 20-21:** "their minds / longing for tears as children for a rainbow."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is used here and there throughout "An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow." Alliteration can draw readers' attention to various words and phrases, reinforce thematic connections between words, and simply make the poem sound more interesting.

In the first stanza, for example, alliteration works alongside consonance to reflect the city dwellers' chattering, evoking the sound of gossip and intrigue. In line 1, "round Repins" uses a shared /r/ to signify the way in which everyone is talking about the same thing—the crying man. The "Stock Exchange scribblers" phrase has a similar effect, with the added whisper of sibilance evoking that scribbling.

Another striking moment of alliteration is in line 15, in the poem's third stanza:

> and does not declaim it, nor beat his breast, nor even

The speaker describes the dignity of the man's weeping, explaining that the man doesn't "sob very loudly." The forceful alliteration is thus somewhat ironic, mimicking the way that it *would* sound if the man were to "declaim" (shout) it or beat his chest. At the same time, the strength and insistence of this alliteration reflects the crying man's powerful, firm dignity.

In the first line of the following stanza, the poem uses many /h/ sounds:

> holds us back from his space, the hollow he makes about him

The breathy /h/ sound evokes the "hollow" space being described. These alliterative sounds also lend a sense of cohesion to the line, making the line itself like a halo or force field.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "round Repins"
- **Line 4:** "Stock," "scribblers"
- **Line 9:** "crowds come," "Many"
- **Line 10:** "minutes," "main"
- **Line 15:** "does," "declaim," "beat," "breast"
- **Line 17:** "holds," "his," "hollow," "he," "him"
- **Line 19:** "seize"
- **Line 20:** "stare"
- **Line 22:** "Some," "say"
- **Line 24:** "Some," "say," "stopped"
- **Line 28:** "Some," "scream"
- **Line 31:** "dogs," "dusty"
- **Line 32:** "says," "stops"
- **Line 34:** "shining," "her hand"
- **Line 35:** "shake," "she"

ALLUSION

"An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow" has many allusions. The first stanza, for example, references many real locations throughout Sydney in order to create a setting grounded in the hustle and bustle of modern life. As previously noted in this guide, Repins refers to a coffee shop; Lorenzinis to a wine bar; Tattersalls to a sporting, social, and business club; and the Greek Club to a restaurant. These allusions to real places are meant to make the poem feel more immediate and tangible for the reader. This setting is brimming with life, with city dwellers going about their days.

Martin's Place, meanwhile, is in Sydney's business district, and George Street was one of the city's first main streets. Their mention here brings to mind capitalism and consumerism, underscoring that way that buying, selling, and other economic activity suffuse urban life. By alluding to locations linked to the economic heart of the city, the poem creates an implied juxtaposition between the crying man's raw emotion and the

transactional nature of modern society.

The next allusion comes in line 22 with the mention of a "halo." This is a reference to Christian imagery (though halos are found in other religions too), specifically to angels. But the allusion is made in order to *deny* the man's seemingly religious significance, with the speaker stressing that people will make false claims about who and what he was.

The following stanza, however, makes another allusion to Christianity:

> [...] Only the smallest children
> and such as look out of Paradise come near him
> and sit at his feet, with dogs and dusty pigeons.

While most of the Sydney inhabitants react dramatically to the crying man, there are some people (and creatures) who are comfortable near him—indeed, they are able to move through his "pentagram of sorrow" (suggesting that the pentagram is in the minds of the onlookers). The capitalization of "Paradise" suggests that this is an allusion to the Garden of Eden, in which, according to the Bible, humanity existed *before* the Fall (the transition from innocence to sinfulness). These people appear to have an inner calm and peacefulness that sets them apart from the other city-dwellers, perhaps suggesting that their lives are based around different priorities that are less materialistic.

Finally, the whole poem appears to vaguely allude to the story of Jesus (this link is explored further in the Themes section of the guide).

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-6:** "The word goes round Repins, / the murmur goes round Lorenzinis, / at Tattersalls, men look up from sheets of numbers, / the Stock Exchange scribblers forget the chalk in their hands / and men with bread in their pockets leave the Greek Club: / There's a fellow crying in Martin Place."
- **Line 7:** "The traffic in George Street"
- **Lines 17-18:** "the hollow he makes about him / in the midday light, in his pentagram of sorrow,"
- **Lines 22-23:** "a halo / or force stood around him"
- **Lines 29-31:** "Only the smallest children / and such as look out of Paradise come near him / and sit at his feet"

ASSONANCE

Assonance is used sparingly throughout "An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow." The poem mostly opts for a fairly prose-like tone, in parts sounding like a newspaper report or a short story. That said, there are a few moments in which assonance makes the poem's images more vibrant and the events that take place more dramatic.

Take lines 26-28:

> the toughest reserve, the slickest wit amongst us
> trembles with silence, and burns with unexpected
> judgements of peace.

Here the assonance is used to a build picture of men in the crowd who usually feel tough, fierce, and clever. There is something intentionally show-offy about the assonance here, which mimics the way that these types of men feel the need to prove their worth—and are afraid of showing emotion. But the man's crying *does* affect them profoundly, and the phrases that describe how are also assonant—as if the power of the man's crying has taken control of the men.

Later in the same stanza, the speaker describes how animals are quite happy to come and sit by the crying man, feeling none of the fear of the macho men described above. The assonance in these lines is quite cutesy, conveying the animals' comfortable closeness:

> and such as look out of Paradise come near him
> and sit at his feet, with dogs and dusty pigeons.

This assonance has an almost cartoonish effect, that contrasts with the visceral reactions amongst most of the other on-lookers.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "men," "bread"
- **Line 6:** "in Martin"
- **Line 13:** "simply weeps," "does," "cover," "weeps"
- **Line 14:** "like," "child"
- **Line 26:** "slickest wit," "amongst us"
- **Line 27:** "trembles," "silence," "unexpected"
- **Line 28:** "judgements"
- **Line 30:** "him"
- **Line 31:** "sit," "his," "with," "pigeons"
- **Line 35:** "she receives," "weeping"
- **Line 36:** "follow," "also," "receive"
- **Line 37:** "weep," "sheer"
- **Line 38:** "weep," "fear"
- **Line 44:** "stops," "walks"
- **Line 45:** "mopping"

CAESURA

"An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow" is full of caesurae. They appear in every stanza, and form an important part of the poem's overall tone. In general, the poem unfolds almost like prose, with the caesurae helping it sound a bit like a newspaper article.

Caesurae also help vary the pacing of the poem. Take line 6 as

an example:

> There's a fellow crying in Martin Place. They can't stop him.

Up until the full stop shown above, the first stanza has consisted of one long sentence. The full-stop adds drama to the statement that "they can't stop [the crying man]," and also evokes the way that people have tried to put an end to his outburst of emotion. The caesura creates a brief pause which is quickly over, mimicking the way that the man himself can't be restrained.

In the second stanza, caesurae vary the sentence lengths in a way that evokes the city's atmosphere as it comes to a stand-still. Working together with enjambment, the caesurae make this stanza feel like the frustrating stop-start motion of a traffic jam—which is exactly what these lines are describing (as well as the jostling crowd building around the crying man). Here are lines 8-9 as an example of this effect:

> and drained of motion. The crowds are edgy with talk
> and more crowds come hurrying. Many run in the
> back streets

Sometimes caesurae are used to show that the speaker is trying to find the precise language to describe the spectacle of the crying man (and its effect on those who bear witness to it). The third stanza is full of this type of caesura (mostly in the form of commas), which makes the stanza feel like it is undergoing a process of live revision. The speaker attempts to capture the atmosphere of the event through expressing what the man's crying is *not* like, as in line 14:

> [he weeps] not like a child, not like the wind, like a
> man

A similar effect is achieved towards the end of the poem in the final full stanza (excluding the single line that ends the poem).

Another effect worth noticing is how the caesurae evoke the way in which the man's weeping seems to cast a spell over some onlookers. In lines 27 to 29, caesurae make the poem very slow, suggesting that city's relationship to time has also come almost to a halt (as opposed to the usual hustle and bustle of metropolitan society):

> trembles with silence, and burns with unexpected
> judgements of peace. Some in the concourse scream
> who thought themselves happy. Only the smallest
> children

In the seventh stanza, a woman has an experience that looks a lot like a religious epiphany (lines 34-35):

> and I see a woman, shining, stretch her hand

The commas here also slow the poem right down, evoking the strange and somewhat hypnotising aura that seems to surround the man.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** “Tattersalls, men”
- **Line 6:** “Place. They”
- **Line 8:** “motion. The”
- **Line 9:** “hurrying. Many”
- **Line 10:** “streets, pointing”
- **Line 11:** “there. No”
- **Line 12:** “surround, the”
- **Line 13:** “weeps, and,” “it, weeps”
- **Line 14:** “child, not,” “wind, like”
- **Line 15:** “it, nor”
- **Line 16:** “loudly—yet”
- **Line 17:** “space, the”
- **Line 18:** “light, in”
- **Line 20:** “him, and,” “feel, with,” “amazement, their”
- **Line 22:** “say, in,” “come, a”
- **Line 23:** “him. There”
- **Line 25:** “there. The”
- **Line 26:** “reserve, the”
- **Line 27:** “silence, and”
- **Line 28:** “peace. Some”
- **Line 29:** “happy. Only”
- **Line 31:** “feet, with”
- **Line 32:** “Ridiculous, says,” “me, and”
- **Line 33:** “hands, as”
- **Line 34:** “woman, shining, stretch”
- **Line 37:** “acceptance, and”
- **Line 39:** “man, like,” “earth, requires”
- **Line 40:** “us, and”
- **Line 42:** “words, but,” “grief, not,” “messages, but”
- **Line 43:** “earth, sheer, present”
- **Line 44:** “stops, he”
- **Line 46:** “wept, and”
- **Line 47:** “believers, he”

CONSONANCE

Consonance is used throughout "An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow" and helps to bring the poem's images to life. Some of the poem's consonance is also alliteration—because it occurs at the start of the words—and those examples are covered in the Alliteration section of the guide.

The poem's first two lines create a sense of growing excitement, similar sounds arriving quickly in the reader's ear just as the news of the "fellow crying" travels around some of Sydney's main establishments:

> The word goes round Repins,
> the murmur goes round Lorenzinis,

Another striking example is in line 17, at the start of the fourth stanza, which finds the speaker describing how the man's weeping:

> holds us back from his space,

The hushed quality of this phrase (which is achieved through the line's repetition of /s/ sounds, or sibilance) almost sounds like a kind of spell, evoking the way in which the spectacle of the man crying seems to mesmerize many of those who are watching.

Sibilance pops up again clearly in lines 25 to 26, combined with the consonance of popping /t/ sounds:

> but they will not have been there. The fiercest manhood,
> the toughest reserve, the slickest wit amongst us

These /s/ sounds have a slippery, slimy quality that helps evoke a certain kind of masculine ideal. It is as though the lines have been preened and groomed, and are trying to show off their mighty sibilant sound in the same way that these onlooking men usually scoff at any display of emotion.

In the following stanza, sibilance combines with hard /k/ sounds to create an unpleasant and loud effect: "Some in the concourse scream" (line 28). The harshness of these sounds evokes the piercing noise of people screaming.

Overall, then, consonance is used to add some musicality to an otherwise very prose-like poem, and often to help vividly evoke the imagery of certain lines.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "word goes round Repins"
- **Line 2:** "murmur goes round Lorenzinis"
- **Line 3:** "at Tattersalls"
- **Line 4:** "Stock Exchange scribblers," " forget," "chalk"
- **Line 5:** "pockets," "Greek"
- **Line 6:** "crying in Martin"
- **Line 8:** "and drained," "motion"
- **Line 9:** "crowds come"
- **Line 10:** "main," "pointing"
- **Line 12:** "man," "surround," "man no one"
- **Line 13:** "simply weeps," "weeps"
- **Line 14:** "not like," "not like," "like"
- **Line 15:** "does," "declaim," "beat," "his breast"
- **Line 16:** "yet," "dignity"
- **Line 17:** "holds us," "his space," "hollow he," "him"
- **Line 19:** "seize"
- **Line 20:** "stare"
- **Line 22:** "Some," "say"
- **Line 23:** "force stood," "such"
- **Line 24:** "Some," "say," "shocked," "stopped"
- **Line 25:** "fiercest"
- **Line 26:** "toughest," "slickest wit amongst us"
- **Line 27:** "trembles," "silence," "burns," "unexpected"
- **Line 28:** "judgements," "peace," "Some," "concourse scream"
- **Line 29:** "Only," "smallest," "children"
- **Line 30:** "such," "Paradise"
- **Line 31:** "sit at," "feet," "dogs and dusty pigeons"
- **Line 32:** "Ridiculous, says," "man near me," "stops"
- **Line 33:** "his," "his hands," "it uttered vomit"
- **Line 34:** "woman, shining," "her hand"
- **Line 35:** "and," "shake as she receives," "weeping"
- **Line 36:** "also receive"
- **Line 38:** "for fear"
- **Line 41:** "and ordinary body"
- **Line 42:** "messages," "sorrow"
- **Line 43:** "present as," "sea"
- **Line 44:** "stops," "simply walks," "us"
- **Line 45:** "face," "one"
- **Line 46:** "man," "wept," "weeping"
- **Line 47:** "he hurries," "Pitt Street"

ENJAMBMENT

The poem uses enjambment throughout, which makes sense considering that the tone is, for the most post, very prose-like. That is, the poem often reads like a story or newspaper article. Enjambment allows the poem to vary the length of its sentences across multiple lines, keeping the pacing interesting and preventing things from feeling too rigid or constructed.

Interesting moments of enjambment occur in the second stanza. Here, enjambment works with caesura to give the stanza a frustrating stop-start sound, which mirrors the description of traffic jams and crowded streets. Look at the way that momentum is built up and abruptly lost in lines 7 to 9 by the mix of enjambed lines and full stop caesuras:

> The traffic in George Street is banked up for half a mile
> and drained of motion. The crowds are edgy with talk
> and more crowds come hurrying. Many run in the back streets

In the following stanza, the speaker describes the sight of the weeping man—how he weeps "not like a child" or "the wind," but "like a man." This entire stanza is enjambed. In fact, the enjambment continues over into the next stanza too! Enjambment creates momentum, pulling the reader forward through the poem's lines. This, in turn, suggests a kind of

urgency, as though the speaker wants to capture the spectacle of the weeping man in precise language before it's over. The enjambment helps the poem focus on its central figure, as though purifying itself from any distractions and drawing the reader's attention fully to the weeping at the heart of the poem.

Finally, enjambment towards the end of the poem expresses the continuity and simplicity of the man's actions—he just keeps crying and crying without any explanation.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "hands / and"
- **Lines 7-8:** "mile / and"
- **Lines 8-9:** "talk / and"
- **Lines 9-10:** "streets / which"
- **Lines 12-13:** "approaches / simply"
- **Lines 13-14:** "weeps / not"
- **Lines 14-15:** "man / and"
- **Lines 15-16:** "even / sob"
- **Lines 16-17:** "weeping / holds"
- **Lines 17-18:** "him / in"
- **Lines 19-20:** "him / stare"
- **Lines 20-21:** "minds / longing"
- **Lines 22-23:** "halo / or"
- **Lines 24-25:** "him / but"
- **Lines 26-27:** "us / trembles"
- **Lines 27-28:** "unexpected / judgements"
- **Lines 28-29:** "scream / who"
- **Lines 29-30:** "children / and"
- **Lines 30-31:** "him / and"
- **Lines 32-33:** "stops / his"
- **Lines 34-35:** "hand / and"
- **Lines 36-37:** "it / and"
- **Lines 37-38:** "more / refuse"
- **Lines 40-41:** "out / of"
- **Lines 41-42:** "body / not"
- **Lines 44-45:** "us / mopping"
- **Lines 45-46:** "one / man"

METAPHOR

Metaphor is not a strong presence in "An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow." Instead, the poem opts for fairly down-to-earth, prose-like language, encouraging the reader to puzzle out the question of whether man's crying actually means anything or not. In fact, the speaker explicitly *denies* any future attempt to describe the spectacle in language that is too fanciful (e.g., that the man had a "halo"). This makes the few moments of metaphorical language stand out.

One examples appears in the fourth stanza, in which the speaker describes the effect that the crying man has on the surrounding crowd. His "weeping":

> holds us back from his space, the hollow he makes
> about him
> in the midday light, in his **pentagram** of sorrow,

A pentagram is a five-pointed star shape, often ascribed supernatural or magical properties. This metaphor and the mention of a "hollow" around the crying man help demonstrate the way that most people are too freaked out by him to get any closer. The man seems to have supernatural protection surrounding him.

The word "pentagram" evokes the world of witchcraft and magic, but also possibly Christianity. In *Faust*, a play by German writer Goethe, one of the main characters is prevented from leaving a room by the power of the pentagram. Likewise in this poem, most people are unable to get near the crying man—as if he has a force field around him. The pentagram also sometimes represents the five wounds of Christ on the cross, so the word contributes to the way the poem plays with the ambiguity of the man's identity.

The other main metaphor is in line 35. Here, a woman has what looks like a religious epiphany—a sudden and profound breakthrough of spiritual significance (something else which the poem simultaneously denies):

> and I see a woman, shining, stretch her hand
> and shake as she receives **the gift of weeping**;

Weeping is described metaphorically as a gift, suggesting it is something rare and precious. Though the man doesn't appear to have a particular mission, his expression of pure emotion seems to validate the woman's own emotional state. His gift, then, is to make it *okay* to cry in public, and momentarily pull back the veil of metropolitan life. Describing the expression of emotion as a gift suggests it something to be treasured, but also that it is an ability that modern life has lost sight of (generally people try to avoid giving gifts that the recipient already has!).

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 17:** "the hollow"
- **Line 18:** " pentagram of sorrow"
- **Line 35:** "the gift of weeping"

REPETITION

"An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow" is full of various types of repetition. The first example comes right at the beginning of the poem:

> The word **goes round** Repins,
> the murmur **goes round** Lorenzinis,

These two lines are almost identical grammatically, using both

anaphora and diacope. This has the effect of capturing the strange excitement that surrounds the crying man, here growing quickly as a rumor spreading around Sydney.

The second stanza also uses anaphora and diacope, this time to suggest the way that Sydney comes to a standstill because of the crying man. The stanza's sentences are somewhat laborious, reflecting the way that the city has stopped its usual hustle and bustle. Anaphora in the repeated "the" and the diacope of "streets" helps show the way that the man's weeping quickly casts a kind of spell on the city. This stanza also repeats a near-identical sentence from earlier in the poem: "No one can stop him." The first stanza ends with "They can't stop him." This repetition shows there is a clear and ongoing effort to stop the man from making his public expression of emotion.

The third stanza is, once again, full of diacope and anaphora: "The man," "weeps," "and does not", "not like a," "nor" all repeat throughout the stanza. These place the crying man front and center in the poem, and also help the speaker in the attempt to find the right words to capture the spectacle.

In the eighth and ninth stanzas, the poem is again full of the word "weep" and its variations ("Weeping," "wept," and "weeps" also appear). This type of repetition is known as polyptoton, and emphasizes the impact of the man's weeping—and how it becomes the sole focus of the onlookers. The repetition of the word also mimics the abundance of the man's tears.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "The," "goes round"
- **Line 2:** "the," "goes round"
- **Line 6:** "They can't stop him."
- **Line 7:** "The"
- **Line 8:** "The"
- **Line 9:** " streets"
- **Line 10:** "streets"
- **Line 11:** "No one can stop him."
- **Line 12:** "The man," "the man"
- **Line 13:** "weeps," " and does not," "weeps"
- **Line 14:** "not like a," "not like," "like a"
- **Line 15:** "and does not," "nor," "nor"
- **Line 19:** "him"
- **Line 20:** "him"
- **Line 22:** "Some will say"
- **Line 24:** "Some will say"
- **Lines 25-26:** "The fiercest manhood, / the toughest reserve, the slickest wit"
- **Line 35:** "weeping"
- **Line 37:** "weep," "acceptance"
- **Line 38:** "weep," "acceptance"
- **Line 39:** "weeping"
- **Line 40:** "weeps"
- **Line 42:** "not," "but," "not," "but"
- **Line 46:** "wept," "weeping"

SIMILE

The poem's first simile—or what *appears* at first to be a simile—is found in the third stanza:

> The man we surround, the man no one approaches
> simply weeps, and does not cover it, weeps
> not like a child, not like the wind, like a man

This section starts by saying what the crying man is *not* like—essentially the opposite of a simile. And when the simile does come, it essentially says that the man is exactly what he is—that he weeps "like a man"! This isn't really a true simile, then, and as such undermines the idea that there is something fundamentally wrong with the man's expression of emotion, implying that men should be able to cry without being seen as somehow less of a man.

The next simile is a key moment in the poem, and is found in the fourth stanza:

> uniforms back in the crowd who tried to seize him
> stare out at him, and feel, with amazement, their
> minds
> longing for tears as children for a rainbow.

This section describes the reaction of the police to the spectacle of the crying man. They try to restrain him but are unable to do so. Instead, they feel overwhelmed with an unexpected feeling, longing for their own tears "as children for a rainbow." In other words, the man's crying reminds them of a part of themselves that perhaps no longer exists—the ability to feel and express emotion freely.

Just as children wish to see rainbows, the police long for something that seems, to their adult selves, mythical and awe-inspiring. Police represent the official enforcement of the status quo—and the man's weeping represents a challenge to this status quo, and shows them something that everyday metropolitan society has lost touch with.

The next and final important examples of simile are found towards the end of the poem. Both are part of the speaker's description of the weeping man and the way in which he performs his crying:

> the weeping man, like the earth, requires nothing,
> the man who weeps ignores us, and cries out
> of his writhen face and ordinary body
> not words, but grief, not messages, but sorrow,
> hard as the earth, sheer, present as the sea—

These similes compare the weeping man to the earth and sea. Essentially, this speaks to the mystery of the crying man—the inability to know exactly what motivates his crying. The earth

existed long before humanity, and most likely will exist afterwards. Likewise, the crying man doesn't seem to need anything from the onlookers. This, perhaps, intimidates them, and questions their own values about what is important.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 12-14:** "the man no one approaches / simply weeps, and does not cover it, weeps / not like a child, not like the wind, like a man"
- **Lines 19-21:** "and uniforms back in the crowd who tried to seize him / stare out at him, and feel, with amazement, their minds / longing for tears as children for a rainbow"
- **Line 33:** "as if it uttered vomit"
- **Line 39:** "the weeping man, like the earth, requires nothing,"
- **Line 43:** "hard as the earth, sheer, present as the sea—"

ASYNDETON

It often feels in the poem as if the speaker is trying very hard to find the right words to describe the spectacle of the crying man, undergoing something like a live process of revision. This sense is reinforced by the poem's use of asyndeton. Asyndeton also adds to the poem's feeling of immediacy; because the poem unfolds in the present tense—and describes a brief but exciting moment in Sydney life—it's as if the speaker sometimes doesn't have *time* for conjunction words like "and."

In line 12, asyndeton suggests hesitation:

> The man we surround, the man no one approaches

The asyndeton (and repeat of "the man") shows that the crowd is tentative, unsure of the meaning and purpose of this weeping man. In the same stanza, the speaker uses asyndeton to explain that the man's weeping is "not like a child, not like the wind, like a man"—showing that there is something pure about his emotional expression in that it is not really like any other crying the speaker has seen before. In lines 17 and 18, the poem uses asyndeton to similar effect as in line 12, the careful unfolding of the phrases reflecting the air of caution around the crying man.

In lines 25 and 26, asyndeton is used a little differently:

> but they will not have been there. The fiercest manhood,
> the toughest reserve, the slickest wit amongst us

There is something puffed-up and proud about the way the asyndeton groups these three phrases together, mimicking and even mocking the kind of macho version of masculinity that the man's crying seems to threaten.

Finally, in line 43, asyndeton once again portrays the man's weeping as pure and instinctual. It is compared to the earth and the sea, a "sheer" imposing presence that exerts itself on the grammar of the line.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** "The man we surround, the man no one approaches"
- **Lines 13-14:** "weeps / not like a child, not like the wind, like a man"
- **Lines 17-18:** "holds us back from his space, the hollow he makes about him / in the midday light, in his pentagram of sorrow,"
- **Lines 25-26:** "The fiercest manhood, / the toughest reserve, the slickest wit amongst us"
- **Line 43:** "hard as the earth, sheer, present as the sea—"

VOCABULARY

Repins (Line 1) - Repins is a long-standing coffee bar in Sydney.

Lorenzinis (Line 2) - Lorenzinis was a wine bar in Sydney.

Tattersalls (Line 3) - Tattersalls a sporting and social club in Sydney, which in the 1960s would have been primarily visited by men.

Stock Exchange (Line 4) - Where stockbrokers buy and sell shares in different companies.

Greek Club (Line 5) - A restaurant in Sydney.

Martin Place (Line 6) - A square in central Sydney.

George Street (Line 7) - A main Street in Sydney.

Declaim (Line 15) - Speak in a loud, impassioned way.

Hollow (Line 17) - A kind of hole. This is the visual effect of the gap in the crowd created by the weeping man's presence.

Pentagram (Line 18) - A five-pointed star shape. It has been used as a symbol by various cultures and religions over the course of human history.

Halo (Lines 22-23) - A circle of light, often sported by angels.

Reserve (Line 26) - Inner strength.

Slickest Wit (Line 26) - The ability to think quickly and be funny in a way that is somewhat arrogant.

Concourse (Line 28) - A large, open pedestrian space in an urban environment.

Paradise (Line 30) - Possibly an allusion to the Garden of Eden.

Writhen (Line 41) - Scrunched up and contorted.

Sheer (Line 43) - Whole and imposing.

Pitt Street (Line 47) - A main road in Sydney's business district.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow" is made up of 47 lines divided into 10 stanzas. The poem begins with a sestet (a six-line stanza), which is followed by eight quintets (five-line stanzas), finally concluding on a single-line set on it own apart from the other stanzas. The quintets might be a subtle nod to the "pentagram of sorrow" mentioned in line 18 (a pentagram is a five-pointed star), while the dangling last line cuts what might be thought of as the final stanza short—just as the crying man leaves his "believers" hanging.

The poem moves through three distinct phases. First, there is the electric excitement that travels quickly around Sydney at the news that there is a "fellow crying in Martin Place." Once everyone has gathered around this "fellow," the speaker focuses on how people react to this public display of emotion. Here, the reader also learns about the mysterious qualities that surround the crying man himself. Then, at the end, the single-line conclusion sees the crying man effectively running away from those who might wish to follow him, the way that the line is set apart representing the way that the man is suddenly gone.

Formally speaking, the poem sits somewhere between a narrative and lyric poetry, with a dash of dramatic monologue thrown in for good measure. The poem tells a story, but it's also self-aware about telling a story. Indeed, part of the speaker's motivation seems to be about getting the truth down on paper, because the speaker anticipates that some will make false claims about what happened when it gets retold in the future. The poem also resembles parts of the biblical narrative of Jesus, particularly in the way that Jesus wept over the state of Jerusalem. That said, Murray's poem is keen to stress the ambiguity of its story, and so ends with little sense of whether anything significant has truly happened.

METER

"An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow" does not have a consistent meter and can be thought of as a free verse poem. Generally speaking, the lines are roughly the same length and tend to have five stresses—but this is not a hard and fast rule by any means. The lack of steady meter and rhyme scheme add to the poem's sense of immediacy, of the speaker recounting something in the moment without taking the time to structure those recollections into a specific poetic form. The poem strikes a tone that sounds often like prose, almost even like a live news report in places, e.g.:

> The traffic in George Street is banked up for half a mile
> and drained of motion.

In short, not having a meter allows the poem to unfold more like a traditional story.

RHYME SCHEME

"An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow" is a free verse poem, lacking both a consistent meter and any kind of rhyme scheme. Perhaps rhyme would have made the poem feel overly ordered, which would be at odds with the tone; part of the poem's power is in the way the spectacle seems to unfold almost in real time, somewhat unpredictably. The lack of rhyme, like the lack of steady meter, makes the poem feel almost like prose.

SPEAKER

For the most part, the speaker in "An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow" *reads* like a third-person observer. The first stanza, for example, presents a kind of omnipresent view of Sydney in which the poem relays the growing exciting about the "fellow crying in Martin Place," word of which travels quickly around the city. The second stanza is similar, focusing on the accumulation of traffic and crowds caused by the spectacle of the crying man.

Suddenly, though, the poem introduces the first-person pronoun in line 12, "we":

> The man **we** surround, the man no one approaches

Now, the reader learns that this is actually a first-hand account of the crying man—that the speaker is one of the individuals in the crowd. This shift in perspective allows for the speaker to both record the different reactions of people who witness the crying man *and* to offer an intimate experience of the crying man himself.

The speaker doesn't seem to have as strong a reaction to the weeping man as some others, but is preoccupied in giving a truthful and precise account of what happened. The speaker also anticipates that people will make false claims about the spectacle in the future, stating that, though people will probably claim otherwise, "there is no such thing" as a halo.

Nearer to the end of the poem, the speaker shifts to the first-person singular perspective (line 32)—using the words "me" and "I." This perhaps heightens the sense that individuals in the crowd are having their own distinct reactions to the crying man (e.g., the crying woman or the disgusted man who nearly vomits). It's as though the people of Sydney mass into a crowd at the sight of the man, but are then defined by their readiness and willingness to engage with the man's emotional expression.

SETTING

"An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow" is set firmly in mid-20th

century Sydney, a large city in Australia. The poem thus draws on Murray's own autobiographical experience as Sydney inhabitant—he both studied and worked there for a number of years.

In the poem, Sydney represents the hustle and bustle of modern life in general. Normally, the city is a hive of economic activity. It's also a place of gossip and intrigue, in which news travels fast. Indeed, this how the poem opens—with "word" and "murmur[s]" quickly getting around Sydney like electricity.

The setting thus becomes an important part of the poem. The fact that Sydney is usually so fast-paced makes its being brought to a halt by a crying man all the more remarkable. What is it, the reader wonders, about the man's public expression of emotion that can cast such a strong power over an entire city?

In this way, the poem feels almost like a biblical parable, an account of a Jesus-like figure coming to a new town and leaving it utterly transformed. Of course, it's not clear if anything really changes in the poem—or if Sydney goes back to being Sydney as soon as the crying man "hurries off down Pitt Street."

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Les Murray was one of Australia's most prominent poets, active from the mid-20th century until his death in 2019. He has published vast amounts of poetry and other literary works, including plays.

"An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow" is taken from Murray's first collection, *The Weatherboard Cathedral* (published in 1969), and is probably his best-known poem. Much of this collection is set in more rural environments, which Murray's poetry often implies a preference for over the more built-up metropolises of the modern world. Indeed, this particular poem seems to argue that something fundamental to humanity is lost in the hustle and bustle of city life—perhaps the ability to express emotion fully and without shame. Poems like "When I Was Alive" from the same collection show a longing for living off the land, and for a time before the "endless town."

The alienating effect of living in a big city is a common subject in 20th-century poetry, found in works as various as "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" by T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats's "The Second Coming" (which also shares a quasi-religious atmosphere with Murray's poem). Other poets, of course, embraced the metropolitan environment as one rich with poetic material—e.g., poets like Frank O'Hara.

Murray was a key figure in Australian poetry and had close connections with other important poets from the same country. He was friends with Clive James—perhaps the only other Australian poet who is as well-known as Murray around the world—from his university days. James called Murray a true "agrarian" poet, meaning that the rural environment is seen somehow as the one more appropriate to human existence. Peter Porter, another famous Australian poet, called Murray the "custodian of Australia's soul"—and it does seem that in this poem Murray is striking at the heart of modern city life, asking whether it really speaks to the humankind's fundamental nature.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow" offers a vivid snapshot of Sydney in the mid-20th century. Like a number of similarly-sized cities around the world, Sydney is one that grew quickly through industry and economic activity. The modern city as it is now is relatively young, settled by the British who initially used Sydney as a penal colony.

The poem gives the impression of a fast-paced environment governed by money. The first stanza is full of transactions and, indeed, one of the ultimate examples of capitalist society—the Stock Exchange. It's hard to imagine Sydney really coming to a stop for a crying man, and that is in part the poem's power. It asks the reader to consider whether this kind of pure emotional expression really fits in with the values of the modern metropolis.

The poem also plays with the quasi-religious aspects of its story, the crying man fulfilling a similar (though much smaller) role to that of Jesus Christ. Jesus is depicted as weeping numerous times in the Bible, and, particularly relevant here, he cries over the state of Jerusalem, which he feels has gone too far down a certain path to achieve its now salvation. But the crying man in this poem has a less obvious purpose. He *seems* to bring an important message, but that message is either intentionally out-of-reach or simply impossible to understand.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- More Poems by Murray — A generous collection of Murray's poem on his own website. (http://www.lesmurray.org/pm_pf.htm)
- Murray's Life and Work — An informative article about Murray produced by the Guardian after his death. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/nov/22/les-murray-poet-life-profile)
- A Reading of the Poem — The poem read by Thomas Keneally for an album of Australia poetry. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CYSaIFT54Zk)
- Murray and His Influences — The poet in discussion about his own work and the works of others that were important to him. (https://www.youtube.com/

watch?v=dfJ0KHNMlcs)

- Murray Reads from His Own Work — A selection of poems read by the poet himself. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Qph3NCu3c0)

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Howard, James. "*An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 12 Jun 2020. Web. 29 Jul 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Howard, James. "*An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow*." LitCharts LLC, June 12, 2020. Retrieved July 29, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/les-murray/an-absolutely-ordinary-rainbow.