

an afternoon nap



SUMMARY

The determined, demanding mother who lives across the street once again gives her son a beating, all the while declaring that doing so makes her a good mother. She yells at her son for his various perceived inadequacies, starting with his subpar academic performance.

The mother pounds harsh chords during her son's piano lesson that afternoon. She shrilly mimics his second language (in Singapore, students are required to study Chinese, Malay, or Tamil as a second, "Mother Tongue" language) as she threateningly paces in circles around her recoiling son. Her intimidating movements require a level of physical exertion comparable to exercise.

The mother's physical movements are fast and aggressive; she twists her body as she scolds her son, mimicking him in a variety of ways for his shortcomings. There are no gentle expressions of support or guidance. Instead, she trudges around him like a screaming monster, smacking him for playing incorrect notes on the piano.

The son cries precious tears because, three days a week, his language and piano teachers come to give him lessons, taking \$90 from the piggy bank and leaving him with homework and less spending money.

The resentful boy who lives across the street is once again declaring that he cannot understand why his mother is so mad at him. He yells at her for all her faults, the foremost being her willingness to pay a high price to provide him with an excellent education.

further subtly critiques the society that encourages the mother's narrow, competitive vision of success in the first place.

The mother clearly wants her son to achieve a certain level, and type, of success—and he's definitely not living up to her expectations. Her "expensive taste for education" includes frequent piano lessons and second language tutoring, and she routinely scolds and "beats" her son for not working as hard as she thinks he should.

The speaker describes the mother's physicality and rage in almost monstrous terms. She aggressively "strikes" piano chords and her movements are "swift" and "contorted." She circles her "cowering" son like an animal closing in on its prey, and she even mimics him in a variety of ways—"an ape for every need"—adding humiliation to physical brutality. She expresses none of the traditional qualities associated with motherhood and nurturing; she is not "soft," kind, or gently encouraging but insulting and cruel.

Instead of motivating her son, the mother's beatings just leave him "embittered" and "bewildered." He does not quietly accept his beating, but "shouts out her wrongs," beginning with "her expensive taste for education." Her vision of what his life should look like has disregarded his own desires; he laments, for example, that his lessons leave him "little / pocket-money." He cries when she disciplines him, and the speaker states the son's "tears are dear." This suggests that his mother's "expensive taste for education" is not only materially costly but also emotionally costly for her son.

Worth noting is that her expectations for good grades, a second language, and musical prowess nod to the educational system of Yap's homeland of Singapore, known for being one of the best, and most demanding, in the world. The poem is not just critical of the tough love but also of a broader society that pressures parents into placing these demands on their children in the first place.

Indeed, in this intergenerational conflict, the mother believes her ambitiousness and harsh discipline to be evidence of her "goodness." She may even be offering opportunities to her son that she herself did not have. Yet her efforts clearly backfire, as her son is resentful, confused, and emotionally scarred by her behavior. What he needs, the poem suggests, is understanding and gentleness, not endless scolding. Rather than help her child, the mother's discipline and pressure to fit into a rigid model of success have pushed him away.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4



THEMES



THE HIGH COST OF PARENTAL PRESSURE TO SUCCEED

"An Afternoon Nap" illustrates what can happen when parents push their children too hard. The poem describes an "ambitious" mother who viciously berates her son for his poor academic performance, believing all the while that she's doing the right thing. Rather than motivating her son, however, the mother's high expectations and harsh discipline just make her son bitter, distant, and miserable. The mother's ambitions for her son may be well-intentioned (in her mind, at least), but the poem suggests that they've also prevented her from giving him the kind of love and support he actually wants and needs. Overall, the poem suggests that intense parental pressure and punishment are not simply unhelpful but downright harmful. It

- Lines 5-8
- Lines 9-12
- Lines 13-21



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

*the ambitious mother ...
... mediocre report-book grades.*

The unnamed speaker of "An Afternoon Nap" begins the poem by describing a scene that they've apparently witnessed before: a woman who lives across the street is beating her son and scolding him for various wrongdoings, starting with his poor grades in school.

The speaker calls this mother "ambitious," a word that, in many contexts, has positive connotations. Here, though, it suggests that the mother is living vicariously through her child—that she wants him to succeed for her *own* gratification.

The [enjambment](#) of the poem's opening also creates anticipation: readers are propelled across the first line as they wait to discover what, exactly, this "ambitious mother" is doing. The phrase "at it again" conveys that whatever she's doing is a regular occurrence in this household. The full-stop [caesura](#) in the middle of the line then creates a moment of suspense before the reveal that she's beating her child:

is at it again. proclaiming her goodness
she beats the boy. [...]

Placing the phrase "proclaiming her goodness" front and center emphasizes the [irony](#) of the situation: there's a clear disconnect between what the mother *perceives* herself to be doing, which is demonstrating that she's a good mother, and what she's *actually* doing, which is beating her child. (The irony here is also situational because, as readers learn later in the poem, the mother's punitive discipline does not, in fact, produce the effects she intends on her son's behavior.)

The mother loudly scolds her son, "shouting out his wrongs" while she "raps," or smacks, him. She reproaches him by detailing a list of his perceived inadequacies, beginning with his "mediocre report-book grades," or the average grades he's received on his school report card. His academic performance, apparently, is below her expectations.

[Alliteration](#) brings the mother's anger to vivid life on the page. Listen to the booming /b/ sounds of "beats the boy" and the growling /r/ sounds of "wrongs"/"raps," for example.

[Consonance](#) adds to the effect as well. In addition to those /b/ and /r/ sounds, listen to the sharp /p/ and guttural /g/ sounds that fill this passage:

[...] proclaiming her goodness
she beats the boy. shouting out his wrongs, with raps
she begins with his mediocre report-book grades.

The [assonance](#)/consonance of "shouting out" turns up the volume on that phrase in particular, calling readers' attention to the ferocity of the mother's scolding.

LINES 5-8

*she strikes chords ...
... strenuous p.e. ploy.*

The mother "strikes chords" during her son's "afternoon piano lesson." This might mean that she is literally pounding the keys, intruding on the lesson and trying to correct her son's shoddy playing. The speaker might also be [metaphorically](#) comparing the mother's voice to the harsh sound of piano keys being slammed (as opposed to more melodiously "played"). Either way, the word "struck" is violent and harsh.

Next, the speaker says that "her voice stridently imitates 2nd. lang. tuition." The mother is not *literally* speaking as if she were an inanimate object such as a currency note or check. But by saying that she "imitates [...] tuition," the speaker links the mother with the money she pays for her son's language instruction, emphasizing the importance she places on this subject.

The phrase "2nd. lang." is an abbreviation for "second language" and a reference to the fact that Singapore has a bilingual education system:

- In English-language schools, students are required to study one of three "mother tongues" as a second language, based on their ethnic heritage: Mandarin, Malay, or Tamil. The son's implied lack of proficiency reflects the generational disconnect between the son and his elders.
- Alternatively, Yap might mean that the son is getting extra lessons in "standard English" outside of school. As the language of international commerce as well as official functions, standard English is considered more prestigious and elevated than the colloquial English ("Singlish") commonly spoken in Singapore.

In either case, the compressed, figurative language in the line itself ("2nd. lang. tuition") is rich with meaning:

- In one interpretation, the mother is attempting to speak this second language to her son's tutor while she pays the tuition. The word "imitates" suggests that she may not be adept at this language, however; her imitation may sound affected or unnatural. Perhaps her own parents could not afford "2nd. lang. tuition" when she was growing up. The mother may want her son to have a strong command of this

language especially because she herself does not.

- Alternatively, the mother mimics her son's poor use of this second language to chastise him. In this reading, the mother "stridently," or unpleasantly, chastises her son for his poor study habits. She views standard language lessons as important for her son's upward mobility.

The speaker then describes the mother's rageful physicality by evoking [imagery](#) that is almost monstrous. As the mother yells and hits her son, she stalks threateningly around him, "circling" as a bully or predator might circle their target/prey. The son, for his part, "cowers" like a cornered or overpowered animal, recoiling from her. And as she punishes him, the mother's movements require a level of physical exertion comparable to "the most strenuous p.e. ploy," or the vigorous exercise one does in a physical education class.

The sounds of these lines bring the mother's anger to life on the page. Listen, for example, to the sharp [consonance](#) in words like "strikes," "chords," "circling," and "cowering." Combined with the stanza's sinister [sibilance](#) ("strikes," "lesson," "circling," "most strenuous"), the lines feel distinctly harsh and threatening. These sounds evoke the mother's spitting, hissing rage.

LINES 9-10

*swift are all ...
... for every need;*

The mother's "swift" and "contorted" movements suggest the fast, aggressive way she grimaces and twists her body as she berates her son. This description of the mother's physicality highlights how profoundly gripped she is by emotion. She is unable to contain or control her anger, which contorts her facial features. The speaker may also be implying that such rage distorts her character as a mother, since people typically associate mothers with care and tenderness.

The phrase "an ape for every need" implies that she meets "every need" with cruel mimicry. (As a verb, to "ape" means to imitate or copy.) The speaker thus suggests the mother is not just beating her son but taunting him as well, adding humiliation to physical brutality.

Notably, the speaker once again describes the mother's behavior as animalistic. In the previous stanza, she was "circling" her child like a bird of prey. Now, she has an "ape for every need." The word "ape" means to imitate or mimic, but it also, of course, can refer to an animal. Again, the mother seems more like a predator than a nurturing presence.

LINES 10-12

*no soft gradient ...
... 2 notes missed.*

Note how the speaker's description here begins with a

negation. In the lines "no soft gradient / of a consonant-vowel figure," the speaker uses more figurative language to describe the kind of mother "the ambitious mother across the road" is *not*: a sweet, nurturing, gentle one.

"Figure" is a play on words. On one level, the word refers to a silhouette or the shape of something. A "consonant-vowel figure" might refer to a word like "Ma," a word comprised of a consonant and vowel and used as one term of endearment for a kind mother. This mother is decidedly *not* a "soft," gentle presence in her son's life; she's no "Ma."

A "figure" also refers to a number (like one calculates in math). The word thus reminds readers that the other is disappointed with her son's *academic* performance. The same is true of the phrase "consonant-vowel," which invokes the son's language studies mentioned earlier in the poem.

The phrase "soft gradient" also brings to mind academia: "gradient" is another term used in math and refers to the calculation of a line's incline. A "soft gradient" describes a gentle slope. In describing the furious mother as a figure who lacks a "soft gradient," then, the speaker uses a [metaphor](#) to describe the mother's severity. If her emotional response to her son resembled a "soft gradient," or gentle incline, she might be slower to anger and more understanding. Instead, the ambitious mother's punitive behavior resembles the severity of a *sharp* incline. Her emotions escalate quickly to rage.

The speaker is critical of the intense physicality and vocalization of the mother's rage. She "lumbers and shrieks," trudging around her son like a screaming monster and smacking him for playing incorrect notes on the piano, "a hit for every two notes missed."

LINES 13-17

*his tears are ...
... pocket-money*

In the fourth [quatrain](#), the poem starts to focus on the son's reaction to his mother's criticism. Clearly, he doesn't take it well: the boy cries, and "his tears are dear." The [internal rhyme](#) between "tears"/"dear" calls readers' attention to the son's misery, as well as to the fact that those tears are costly: the word "dear" can mean beloved, precious, or cherished, but it can also mean expensive.

He weeps these "dear" tears on "mondays, wednesdays, and fridays" because those are the days his language tutor and piano teacher visit for extracurricular lessons. These are also the days, readers can guess, that his mother berates him for his disappointing performance during those lessons, which cost \$90 a week.

The speaker notes that the family saves this money in a "kitty," perhaps an object akin to a piggy bank. The poem doesn't specify who, exactly, is regularly contributing to the "kitty," but the fact that money for the son's extracurricular lessons is

saved in such a spot suggests that this family is not wealthy; a wealthy family probably wouldn't need to scrimp and save bills or change in order to pay for the son's lessons. Note, too, that this is the second mention of money in the poem, the first being the word "tuition" in stanza 2. Again, this repeated focus on finances suggests that this family isn't rich.

It's also clear that the son does not value his educational opportunities as highly as his mother does. Each week "miss low & madam lim," the son's teachers, "appear & take away \$90 from the kitty / leaving him an adagio, clause analysis, little / pocket-money." In other words, Miss Low and Madam Lim come to the house for lessons, take payment for their services, and then leave the son with music and language homework ("adagio" is a musical tempo marking while "clause analysis" refers here to grammar exercises).

The son is not keen on this transaction, because the money his teachers take for his lessons leaves him with less money for fun. That the entire last line of the stanza is comprised of the word "pocket-money" highlights the importance of this word to the son.

This stanza, like the previous stanzas, is filled with [asyndeton](#), as in "each monday, / wednesday, friday," and "leaving him an adagio, clause analysis, little / pocket-money." The speaker omits coordinating conjunctions, and as a result, the poem barrel swiftly forward, subtly conveying just how relentless the son's lessons feel. Asyndeton also heightens the [juxtaposition](#) between what the teachers take and what they leave behind; the son's homework butts right up against his lack of "pocket-money," reflecting the tension he feels between his studies and his ability to enjoy his life.

LINES 18-20

*the embittered boy ...
... wrongs, with tears*

The final stanza [parallels](#) the first: the opening stanza describes the angry mother, while the last describes the angry son. Note how similar the language is in these stanzas:

- In the first, the "ambitious mother" is "proclaiming her goodness" while she "beats" her son. In the last, the "embittered son" is "proclaiming his bewilderment" while he "yells" at his mother.
- In the first stanza, the speaker describes the mother as "shouting out [the son's] wrongs, with raps." In the last stanza, the speaker describes the son as "shouting out [the mother's] wrongs, with tears."
- The son, like the mother, is "at it again," conveying that the tension in this household is nothing new.

The parallelism of these stanzas calls readers' attention to the [juxtaposition](#) between these characters. Throughout the poem, the son has endured his mother's punitive discipline and rage,

but in the last stanza, the poem gives the son a voice. He yells back at his mother. Just as the mother has enumerated his perceived faults, the son tearfully points out what he perceives to be her deficiencies, or "wrongs," as a mother. He conveys, through his "bewilderment," how her harsh treatment has produced resentment and pain.

But just as there was [irony](#) in the mother's proclamations of goodness as she beat her son, there is irony in the son's confusion. The son may *claim* not to understand why his mother is so angry with him, but the speaker suggests this claim is false. The son may feel undeserving of her wrath, but he cannot reasonably doubt why his mother is so angry with him. The title of the poem is "an afternoon nap, the implication being that the son chose—or attempted to choose—to take a nap rather than study or practice piano.

The poem's use of parallelism highlights what's at stake in the intergenerational conflict. Through this parallelism, the poem expresses competing views of filial duty, or what it means to be a good parent and a good child. The mother believes a good son is ambitious, hard-working, and high achieving. She believes a good mother is someone who provides the educational opportunities necessary for her child's success in life, and disciplines them—harshly, if necessary—when they squander the opportunities they have been given. The son, the poem suggests, believes a good mother is someone with more reasonable expectations and a willingness to let him rest and play.

LINE 21

he begins with ... taste for education.

The poem concludes with the "bewildered" son enumerating the faults of his overbearing mother, the foremost being her willingness to pay a high price to provide him with (in her mind) an excellent education. The price the mother pays is not simply material, but also refers to the *emotional* cost of the conflict between these generations.

The son describes the mother's emotional and material investment in his education metaphorically, as a matter of "expensive taste." This phrase is typically used to describe preferences in a person's consumption choices that are more material, perhaps even frivolous, and less abstract than something like education. For instance, one might have an "expensive taste" for gourmet food, or designer shoes, or luxury cars.

In describing his mother's desire for him to be well educated as an "expensive taste for education," then, the son is trivializing the mother's desire or even rendering this desire suspect. The son may view the mother's "expensive taste for education" as superficial, a form of status-mongering comparable to those who buy flashy cars and expensive clothes to signal how wealthy, successful, and important they are. The son may view his mother's "expensive taste for education" as motivated not

by the best intentions for his future success and fulfillment, but by a crasser desire for higher social status and its material trappings.

The poem also leaves open the possibility that the son does not value his mother's "expensive taste for education" because his skills are incompatible with the educational pursuits his mother values, and/or because he simply does not want to put in the effort required to excel academically, play piano well, or learn new language skills. He may not fully appreciate how the "expensive education" imposed upon him is meant to improve his life or future opportunities. Perhaps he simply would prefer to nap in the afternoon.



POETIC DEVICES

CONSONANCE

One of the most striking features of the poem is its rich and varied use of [consonance](#). Much of this consonance evokes the ferocity of the mother's anger. For example, the first stanza is filled with a mixture of sharp /k/ and /g/ sounds, plosive /b/ sounds, and growling /r/ sounds:

the ambitious mother across the road
is at it again. proclaiming her goodness
she beats the boy, shouting out his wrongs, with raps
she begins with his mediocre report-book grades.

Thanks to all this consonance, the poem simply *sounds* forceful, energetic, and angry. There's nothing "soft" about these lines, just as there's nothing soft about this mother. Note that some of this consonance is also [alliterative](#): "beats the boy," "wrongs with raps." Alliteration overlaps with and works just like consonance in the poem, making certain images stand out more strongly to the reader's ear.

The next stanza features yet more harsh /k/ consonance along with biting /t/ and /p/ sounds. These lines are also filled with a specific kind of consonance known as [sibilance](#) (in the form of /s/, /z/, and /sh/ sounds), which fills the lines with a slightly sinister, spitting hiss:

she strikes chords for the afternoon piano lesson,
her voice stridently imitates 2nd. lang. tuition,
all the while circling the covering boy
in a manner apt for the most strenuous p.e. ploy.

The sounds of the poem make the mother come across almost like a predator cruelly stalking her prey.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "ambitious," "across," "road"

- **Line 2:** "again," "proclaiming," "goodness"
- **Line 3:** "beats," "boy," "wrongs," "raps"
- **Line 4:** "begins," "mediocre report-book grades"
- **Line 5:** "strikes chords," "afternoon," "lesson"
- **Line 6:** "voice stridently imitates," "2nd," "tuition"
- **Line 7:** "circling," "covering"
- **Line 8:** "manner apt," "most strenuous p.e. ploy"
- **Line 9:** "swift," "contorted movements"
- **Line 11:** "consonant"
- **Line 12:** "shrieks," "2 notes missed"
- **Line 13:** "tears," "dear"
- **Line 14:** "miss," "madam lim"
- **Line 15:** "take away," "kitty"
- **Line 16:** "clause analysis, little"
- **Line 17:** "pocket"
- **Line 18:** "embittered boy"
- **Line 19:** "bewilderment"
- **Line 20:** "shouting out," "tears"
- **Line 21:** "begins," "expensive taste"

METAPHOR

The poem's figurative language is often unusual or unexpected, and it's not always clear whether the speaker is being [metaphorical](#) or not. For example, in line 5, the speaker says that the mother "strikes chords for the afternoon piano lesson." This might mean that the mother *literally* interrupts the lesson, crudely pounding out chords on the instrument to correct her son's imperfect playing. However, this might also be a *metaphorical* description of the way the mother is "shouting out" her son's "wrongs," her *voice* ringing out like harsh "chords." The ambiguity links the mother with the lesson and emphasizes the painful, grating nature of her discipline.

In the next line, the speaker conflates the mother's voice with "2nd. lang. tuition." The mother cannot *literally* imitate "tuition," of course; she can't literally sound like money. But this compressed language allows the speaker to convey lots of information at once:

- The son is getting extracurricular lessons in a second language (Singapore has a bilingual education system), for which payment is required. The mother has a financial stake in her child's success.
- The metaphor might liken the raging mother's "strident" voice as she punishes her son to a distorted version of the voice she uses when paying her son's tutor. The mother's attempts to speak "2nd. lang." with the tutor may sound unnatural or affected.
- Alternatively, the mother might be cruelly mimicking her son's poor use of his second language to chastise and humiliate him for not studying hard

enough.

There's another metaphor in lines 10-11, when the speaker says that the mother is "no soft gradient / of a consonant-vowel figure." There's nothing gentle, smooth, or soft about the mother; her criticism and punishments are "swift" and sharp. "A consonant-vowel figure" might refer to a term of affection like "Ma." The point is that this mother is not a particularly nurturing, kindly figure. This metaphor also again links the mother's discipline directly with the son's lessons; his whole life, it seems, is filtered through a lens of academic study.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "she strikes chords for the afternoon piano lesson"
- **Lines 5-6:** " / her voice stridently imitates 2nd. lang. tuition"
- **Lines 10-11:** "no soft gradient / of a consonant-vowel figure"

IMAGERY

Using spare but vivid language, the poem conjures powerful visual and sonic [imagery](#) while describing the mother's behavior. For example, lines 11-12—"she lumbers / & shrieks, a hit for every 2 notes missed"—evoke an image of the mother trudging heavily as she screams and smacks the son. The imagery in stanza 2 similarly engages readers' senses of sight, sound, and touch. Readers can hear the mother's strident, or harsh/grating, voice and picture her aggressive, "contorted" movements as she menacingly "circles" her "cowering" son. This imagery makes the mother seem monstrous rather than tender or nurturing.

Devices like [consonance](#) and [alliteration](#) enhance this imagery as well. Listen to all the spiky, plosive, and hissing sounds in stanzas 2 and 3, for example: "strikes chords," "stridently," "circling the cowering boy," "most strenuous p.e. ploy," "swift [...]" contorted," "shrieks," and so on. The poem sounds harsh, jarring, and even threatening, further conveying the extent of the mother's frightening rage.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-12:** "she strikes chords for the afternoon piano lesson, / her voice stridently imitates 2nd. lang. tuition, / all the while circling the cowering boy / in a manner apt for the most strenuous p.e. ploy. / swift are all her contorted movements, / ape for every need; no soft gradient / of a consonant-vowel figure, she lumbers / & shrieks, a hit for every 2 notes missed."

IRONY

In lines 2-3, the speaker observes the mother "proclaiming her

goodness" as "she beats the boy." There is nothing in the poem to suggest that the mother believes she is anything but a good mother; she "proclaims her goodness" because she believes that by punishing her son, she will encourage him to work harder and make the most of the educational opportunities she's given him. There's thus a sharp, [ironic](#) disconnect between what she thinks she's doing (being a good mother) and what she's actually doing (making her son miserable).

Ironically, despite her intentions, the mother has alienated rather than motivated her son. After describing how the mother harshly disciplines the son, the speaker observes the consequences of the mother's behavior: the son is resentful, confused, and frightened. His son's "tears are dear," implying that the mother's "expensive taste for education" is not only materially costly but also emotionally costly for her child. The mother is unmoved by her son's pained response to her criticism, however; his tears only result in the continuation of his expensive music and language lessons, and the son becomes "embittered" and "bewildered." Instead of quietly accepting his beating, he "yells" at his mother. Again, her punishment, ironically, produces the opposite of the desired effect: the son grows resentful rather than obedient. Instead of working harder, he becomes angry, hurt, and confused.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-3:** "the ambitious mother across the road / is at it again. proclaiming her goodness / she beats the boy."
- **Lines 18-21:** "the embittered boy across the road / is at it again. proclaiming his bewilderment / he yells at her. shouting out her wrongs, with tears / he begins with her expensive taste for education."

PARALLELISM

The poem features clear [parallelism](#) between the first and final stanzas, which highlights the [juxtaposition](#) between the mother and son. Both are angry, but for very different reasons:

- In the first stanza, the "ambitious mother" is "proclaiming her goodness" while she "beats" her son. In the last stanza, the "embittered son" is "proclaiming his bewilderment" while he "yells" at his mother.
- In the first stanza, the speaker describes the mother as "shouting out [the son's] wrongs, with raps." In the last stanza, the speaker describes the son as "shouting out [the mother's] wrongs, with tears." Just as the mother has listed his perceived faults as a child, the son tearfully enumerates his mother's deficiencies as a parent.

This repetitive language reveals that, in a way, the mother and son are very similar; they are related, after all! And yet, they

clearly don't see eye to eye. The parallel language highlights the intergenerational conflict between the mother and son, who clearly have very different takes on education.

Parallelism further hammers home that the mother's behavior is what *causes* the son's response. Her harsh criticisms and punishments are what make the son angry and confused; her *ambition*, the parallelism implies, is precisely what fuels his *resentment*.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "the ambitious mother across the road / is at it again. proclaiming her goodness / she beats the boy. shouting out his wrongs, with raps / she begins with his mediocre report-book grades."
- **Lines 18-21:** "the embittered boy across the road / is at it again. proclaiming his bewilderment / he yells at her. shouting out her wrongs, with tears / he begins with her expensive taste for education."



VOCABULARY

Raps (Line 3) - Blows or strikes issued in rebuke or reprimand. Within the poem, the speaker uses "raps" to describe how the mother hits her son to punish him.

Mediocre report-book grades (Line 4) - Akin to a report card in the U.S., a "report-book" in Singapore is a document that communicates a student's academic performance. "Mediocre," meanwhile, means neither bad nor good, but of average quality. In the context of the poem, the mother considers the son's "mediocre" academic performance to be inadequate; she expects him to excel.

2nd. lang. (Line 6) - Singapore has a bilingual education system. Students in English-language schools are required to study their "mother tongue" as a second language (either Mandarin, Tamil, or Malay, depending on a student's ethnic background). The speaker might also be referring to "standard English," which is more formal than the colloquial "Singapore English" or "Singlish" spoken in everyday contexts. Standard English is derived from British and American English and is the language used in Singapore for official government business.

Cowering (Line 7) - Crouching or retreating to seek protection from danger or out of timidity. The son is "cowering" in the poem to avoid being hit by his raging mother.

Strenuous p.e. ploy (Line 8) - The speaker compares how the mother "circles" her fearful son to the kind of physically aggressive maneuver one might use in a physical education (i.e., gym) class.

Contorted movements (Line 9) - Twisted or drawn out of shape by a twisting action. The speaker describes the mother's movements as swift and "contorted" to suggest the fast,

aggressive way she moves her body as she berates her son.

Lumbers & shrieks (Lines 11-12) - To lumber is to move in a clumsy or blundering manner. To shriek is to utter a loud, sharp, shrill cry, often in response to pain. The speaker describes the mother as "lumbering" and "shrieking" to highlight her inability to move with grace, or to quiet her voice, when she is gripped by rage and disappointment with her son.

Kitty (Line 15) - In the poem, the family saves tuition money for the son's lessons in a "kitty," or a special stash of saved funds, perhaps placed inside an object akin to a piggy bank.

Adagio (Line 16) - From the Italian for slowly, adagio refers to the tempo in which a musical piece is to be sung or played. In the poem, the word indicates that the son's music teacher has assigned him piano music that is meant to be played adagio.

Clause analysis (Line 16) - Examination of a short sentence or passage of writing, or a part of a sentence, for its grammatical structure. In the poem, this refers to work assigned by the son's language tutor.

Embittered (Line 18) - Rendered hostile or discontented. The speaker describes the son as "embittered" by his mother's constant criticism and severe discipline.

Bewildered (Line 19) - Confusion.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"an afternoon nap" is a [free verse](#) poem. There's no regular pattern of [meter](#) or [rhyme](#) here, and the speaker uses casual abbreviations and numerals throughout (such as "2nd. lang.," "2 notes," and "\$90"). As a result, the poem sounds and looks conversational and modern.

The poem doesn't lack organization, however. Its 21 lines are broken into five stanzas. Most of these are more specifically [quatrain](#)s, meaning they contain four lines. Stanza 4, however, is a [quintain](#), meaning it has five lines:

his tears are dear. each monday,
wednesday, friday, miss low & madam lim
appear & take away \$90 from the kitty
leaving him an adagio, clause analysis, little
pocket-money

Placing "pocket-money" alone on its own line emphasizes a major part of what's driving a wedge between this mother and son: money. The mother is angry about paying a lot for lessons that the son, in her estimation, is not taking seriously enough. The son, meanwhile, resents the fact that these lessons eat into his spending money.

METER

"an afternoon nap" is a [free verse](#) poem, meaning it doesn't contain a regular [meter](#). Instead, the poem's language sounds conversational. Harsh [consonance](#) and frequent [asyndeton](#) also lend the poem a choppy rhythm that helps to convey the sharpness of the mother's anger and the disconnect between her and her son.

Although the poem has no metrical *consistency* from line to line or stanza to stanza, the strategic use of meter at certain moments enhances the poem's thematic ideas. For instance, line 3 contains the phrase "she beats the boy." This phrase consists of two metrical feet known as [iamb](#)s, in which an unstressed syllable is followed by a **stressed** syllable:

she **beats** the **boy** [...]

This use of meter highlights the [alliterative](#) /b/ sounds in "beats" and "boy," and it also emphasizes the mother's action (giving a beating) and its object (her son). The phrase "his **tears** are **dear**" at the start of line 13 uses the same pattern, making this [internal rhyme](#) stand out all the more clearly to the reader's ear.

The poem plays with stressed beats elsewhere as well. Take the double phrase "strikes chords" in line 5, where having two stressed beats in a row evokes the sound of the mother pounding on the piano keys.

RHYME SCHEME

As a [free verse](#) poem, "an afternoon nap" contains no formal [rhyme scheme](#). The lack of a regular pattern of rhyme keeps things sounding conversational and contemporary. Instead of rhyme, the poem relies on sharp [consonance](#), [alliteration](#), and [assonance](#) to create its striking music.



SETTING

The poem takes place in contemporary Singapore, presumably in the "afternoon." Because Singapore is an urbanized island city-state with limited land for housing, an overwhelming majority of Singaporean citizens, of all class backgrounds, live in flats, or apartments. These flats are typically in high-rise buildings clustered in close proximity. As such, an observant neighbor could easily develop the kind of familiarity the speaker has with this mother and son.

The Singaporean setting illuminates some of the poem's details. For example, Singapore has a bilingual education system—hence the reference to "2nd. lang. tuition" in the second stanza. The fact that the mother and son's home contains a piano suggests that this family is middle class. Keeping money in a "kitty," meanwhile, implies they're not particularly wealthy; they must set aside specific funds for the son's lessons.

Note, too, that the speaker says that both the mother and son are "at it again." The scene the poem describes is not unique; the speaker has overheard these two fighting many times, revealing that this is a home marked by frequent conflict.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Singaporean poet Arthur Yap published "an afternoon nap" in his 1977 collection *Commonplace*. Scholars of Yap's work note his tendency to write about ordinary, everyday experiences, and "an afternoon nap" exemplifies this by focusing on the significance of a squabble between a mother and her son. Yap's poetry also often moves between colloquial Singapore English, or "Singlish," and more formal "standard English," a legacy of the British colonial era.

Before his death in 2006, Yap published four major collections: *Only Lines* (1971), *Commonplace* (1977), *down the line* (1980), and *man snake apple & other poems* (1986). His work has been translated widely in Asia and anthologized in England, the U.S., Canada, and Australia. He was also a painter and fiction writer.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Singapore is an island city-state with a multiethnic population comprised of people primarily of Chinese, Malay, and Indian descent. Singapore's diverse population is a result of its centuries-long history as a port for regional and international trade, as well as colonial-era labor policies. A former British and Japanese colony, Singapore's formal decolonization occurred when Singapore became an independent republic on August 9, 1965.

Singapore's population typically speaks at least two languages:



SPEAKER

The speaker of "an afternoon nap" is someone who lives "across the road" from the mother and son that the poem describes. This speaker regularly overhears (and, perhaps, can even see) the mother and son fighting, implying that their homes are quite close together.

As an onlooker, the speaker is a stand-in for the reader (and perhaps represents the poet himself). The poem focuses on what the speaker *observes* rather than the speaker *themselves*, but those observations nevertheless suggest where the speaker's loyalties lie. The poem's first three stanzas are devoted to the speaker's extremely critical assessment of the mother's severe discipline. The speaker's unflattering description of the mother's rage implies the speaker is sympathetic to the "cowering" son (and might even feel protective of him).

a "mother tongue" language that is ethnically specific (Mandarin, Tamil, or Malay) and English. Colloquial Singapore English, or "Singlish," is the island's *lingua franca* and is spoken in everyday, rather than formal, contexts. "Standard English" is more formal than Singlish and is used on official occasions and for commerce.

The nation's government has long promoted bilingual education policies: English is the medium of instruction in public schools, and students are required to study one of the "mother tongues" as a second language. In Yap's poem, the "2nd. lang." might refer to the son's "mother tongue" language studies or extracurricular lessons to help him with his "Standard English."



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Singapore and Bilingual Education](https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2016-09-01_093402.html) — Read about the history of Singapore's bilingual education policy, alluded to in Yap's poem. (https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2016-09-01_093402.html)
- [An Introduction to Arthur Yap](#) — Read a biography of Yap, selected works, and scholarly analysis of Yap's writing on a

popular website for Singaporean poets and poetry. (<http://www.poetry.sg/arthur-yap-bio>)

- [A Brief History of Singapore](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/discover-singapore/history-timeline/) — Learn more about the poet's home. (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/discover-singapore/history-timeline/>)
- [The Poet's Voice](http://www.poetry.sg/arthur-yap-videos) — Listen to Yap read three poems, with artsy video footage of Singapore. (<http://www.poetry.sg/arthur-yap-videos>)



HOW TO CITE

MLA

Casumbal-Salazar, Melisa. "an afternoon nap." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 27 May 2022. Web. 5 Dec 2022.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Casumbal-Salazar, Melisa. "an afternoon nap." LitCharts LLC, May 27, 2022. Retrieved December 5, 2022. <https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/arthur-yap/an-afternoon-nap>.