

# anyone lived in a pretty how town



## SUMMARY

A man named anyone lived in a quaint, ordinary town where bells frequently chimed. Season after season, he was open about all the things he hadn't done but celebrated all that he was able to accomplish.

None of the men or women in the town cared about anyone. Instead, they focused on their own achievements. The townspeople planted the things they never did in the ground and then harvested more of the same. Time continued on: day turned to night, the stars appeared in the sky, and rain fell.

Some children picked up on the fact that a woman named noone loved anyone. But as the seasons passed and the children grew up, they lost interest in the relationship, even as noone herself loved anyone more and more.

The bond between anyone and noone gradually blossomed, bit by bit. noone felt both his joy and his sadness, laughing and crying along with him. Little by little, as time continued to pass, they grew so close that anything that mattered to anyone was everything noone.

The other townspeople married their own partners. These couples also experienced their own joys and sorrows. Their lives followed an established pattern, as if the townspeople were performing the motions of a dance. They would sleep, wake, look towards the future, and repeat. They discussed everything they hadn't done and ultimately, they died.

Time continued on: the stars appeared in the night sky, rain fell, the sun and moon rose and set. It's a part of life that, as they get older, children tend to grow less interested in the lives of other people. All the while, the bells chime again and again.

Of course, at some point, anyone passed away. noone bent over to kiss him and eventually, she died too. Townspeople who were wrapped up in their own lives briefly paused to bury them next to each other.

Gradually, bit by bit, their spirits settled into the dreamlike slumber that is death. Meanwhile, their bodies decomposed, becoming one with the earth and nurturing a new spring.

The bells kept chiming as the next generation of townspeople grew up and the seasons continued to cycle on and on. These townspeople had children of their own, but then this generation died too. Day turned to night, the stars appeared in the sky, and rain fell.



## THEMES



### COMMUNITY, CONFORMITY, AND ISOLATION

The poem critiques the conformity it sees as inherent to modern life, in which, the poem implies, people are all driven to want the same things and seek the same conventional markers of success. Rather than nurturing a sense of kinship and connection based on these shared desires, however, the poem suggests that this conformity actually drives people *apart*: people are so preoccupied with reaching personal milestones—so wrapped up in their *own* lives—that they become indifferent to others' experiences. As such, the poem suggests that conformity often discourages people from empathy and introspection, instead breeding indifference and isolation within communities.

The townspeople are hyper-focused on reaching milestones that fulfill certain social expectations. For instance, the poem's fourth stanza begins "someones married their everyones / laughed their cryings and did their dance." Essentially, every member of this society follows the same framework, mechanically approaching life as if going through the motions of a "dance."

The poem itself is also highly repetitive, reinforcing the idea that the townspeople partake in the same routines that are carried out over and over indefinitely. The speaker also regularly lists the seasons as well as various phases of the sky, rotating through list items (e.g., "sun moon stars rain ... stars rain sun moon") to emphasize that these cycles never change and create a sense that the townspeople are trapped by their routine and conformity.

What's more, throughout the poem, community members reap "their same," suggesting that they all work towards the same rewards. This line can also be interpreted to mean that the townspeople give birth to children who follow the exact same path as their parents, or that because people never step out of their expected routines, their lives will never change; they will "reap," or harvest, more of the same. The townspeople industriously reproduce the "same" result again and again, seemingly committed to perpetuating existing routines without question or deviation.

And because they fixate on a blueprint for individual success, the townspeople are disconnected from one another's unique personal experiences. The speaker introduces the townspeople by pointing out that they "care for anyone not at all." Thus, they find no inherent value in their fellow community members, despite the fact that they all want the same things out of life.

Even when noone sees something in anyone, the townspeople pay him no mind.

The few children who *do* pick up on their bond gradually lose interest, suggesting that the townspeople are not *born* indifferent to the experiences of others, but rather adopt such attitudes over time when growing up in such a conformist world. The desire to conform, to follow in the footsteps of those before them, *creates* this communal indifference.

The couple eventually passes away, and even then, the townspeople show little concern. Those who bury anyone and noone are “busy,” indicating that they are again preoccupied with their own affairs. And after these deaths, the community members simply proceed with their lives, going about their normal activities. The speaker again lists the seasons, phases of the sky, and reaping crops to illustrate their seamless, instinctive return to the same habits, utterly unaffected by the loss of two of their own.

The town’s culture champions regularity, encouraging its people to dedicate themselves to established routines. But the townspeople become so swept up in these formulas that they disregard all else—including one another. The poem suggests that this behavior is learned, spread, and reinforced over time, creating a perpetual loop of isolation within their community.

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

- Lines 1-36



### LOVE AND ANONYMITY

The figures in the poem all live in relative anonymity, caught up in their own lives and relationships. The townspeople are unconcerned with the experiences of others and emotionally disconnected as a society. Still, the love between anyone and noone allows them to live full, meaningful lives—regardless of external acknowledgment. The lasting power of their bond indicates that it is possible to find true fulfillment through love, even in a society that promotes self-interest.

The main characters find true, enduring love despite their community member’s indifference. None of the townspeople pay anyone any mind, but noone takes interest in him. Few people recognize their connection, but she is not discouraged by this. Instead, noone’s love for anyone grows—she cares for him “more by more,” even as their relationship receives diminished acknowledgment from everyone else.

While their fellow townsfolk carry on with their own affairs season after season, anyone and noone invest in their relationship. Gradually, their connection blossoms into something very meaningful, like a tree growing one leaf at a time. At a certain point, their emotions are so in sync that noone “laughed his joy she cried his grief.” In other words, she

experiences true empathy and shares in his experiences. In fact, anything that is important to him becomes “all to her.” It doesn’t matter that the townspeople don’t care about their relationship; what matters to them is that relationship itself.

Even after noone dies as well and is buried alongside anyone, the townspeople remain indifferent toward their relationship. The figures who bury them are “busy” and concerned with their own matters. But this does not invalidate the bond between anyone and noone. Together, they become one with the earth, nurturing new life in which their love lives on. The speaker comments, “noone and anyone earth by april / wish by spirit and if by yes.” Their deep connection is the only trace of them that remains.

Finally, note the speaker’s highly universalized language—the characters do not receive traditional names, instead becoming “anyone,” “noone,” “someones,” and “everyones.” These naming conventions signal that the characters really could be *anyone*. The speaker seems to say that your identity is only understood by those with whom you have a true, personal connection. To everyone else, you might as well be anyone (or no one at all).

Anyone and noone’s relationship demonstrates that in a callous, anonymous world, true human connection has lasting personal significance, even when no one else sees it. As such, the speaker implies that social isolation is simply a fact of modern life—but one that can be overcome through love.

What remains ambiguous, however, is the ease with which such a connection can be achieved. Indeed, it’s possible to read the poem less romantically, as a sad tale about a place where *no one*—as in *nobody*, rather than a character named “noone”—ever loved *anyone else*, as in *any other person*; a place where people never were able to form the kind of connection that the poem insists is what makes all the monotonous steps of life meaningful.

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

- Lines 5-36



### THE POWER AND INDIFFERENCE OF NATURE

Throughout the poem, nature is shown regularly cycling through various patterns without regard for the actions and experiences of human characters. Instead, people die and are replaced by others over and over again. In this way, the speaker suggests that the natural world has a kind of dominion over humankind, or at least that individual human lives are inconsequential in the grand scheme of things. In other words, nature’s workings are indifferent to human life, moving along despite human happiness and despair.

As the characters within the poem experience profound changes, the natural world progresses through its regular

cycles. Throughout the poem, the speaker lists the seasons, cycling through them—"spring summer autumn winter ... autumn winter spring summer" and so on. Similarly, variations on the sequence "sun moon stars rain" also appear several times, contributing to this feeling of time passing relentlessly: sun corresponds with summer, the (harvest) moon with autumn, starry nights with winter, and rain with spring.

The speaker intersperses these sequences with significant events in the lives of the characters such as love, death, and birth. While momentous to the people involved, such events don't affect the natural cycles at all—which keep moving on, regardless of what happens to the people in the poem.

While human experiences have no impact on the natural world, the figures in the poem are at nature's mercy. The speaker states "one day anyone died i guess." The nonchalant language that the speaker uses to report the death of the poem's leading character shows the ordinariness and inevitability of death. It could happen to anyone on any day and that it will occur can safely be assumed as fact.

Moreover, the figures in the poem are highly depersonalized and interchangeable—suggesting they are all the same in the eyes of nature. The difference between one person and another is the same between "little and small" or "dong and ding." New generations also simply take over the roles of their parents. The children adopt their parents' indifference towards others, and eventually grow up to be the "women and men" in the final stanza who then have their own children (i.e., "[reap] their sowing") and ultimately die.

Plus, natural [imagery](#) suggests that the preservation of one's legacy and important interpersonal relationships is contingent on the earth. In particular, townspeople plant and sow crops—a reference to reproduction—in order to find success. The growth of the couple's love is also expressed using natural imagery ("tree by leaf ... bird by snow") and is preserved in the earth. In this way, nature controls the fate of the lives and legacies of the poem's characters.

The speaker's descriptions of nature emphasize its disregard for the events of individual human lives. Further, the speaker suggests that deep, invested connections are all that survive natural cycles and people should therefore focus on maintaining meaningful relationships. At the same time, the natural imagery displays the power of those cycles themselves—all life within the poem is broken down to create new life, and, if you play your cards right, preserved within it.

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

- Lines 1-5
- Lines 7-8
- Line 11
- Lines 13-16
- Lines 21-36



## PARENTS AND CHILDREN

Some children who observe anyone and noone perceive the strength of their bond. However, as the children grow older, they adopt the habits of their parents and community members, becoming too wrapped up in their own lives to recognize and appreciate the couple's love. The poem therefore suggests that when a society champions individualism, its children become desensitized to the concerns of others.

While some children initially pick up on the connection between anyone and noone, their learned self-interest gradually eclipses their concern for others. None of the adults within the town care about anyone or his relationship with noone. In fact, each member of the older generation shares many of the same attributes, including their aims and approach to life.

Still, "a few" of the children take interest in anyone and no one. This fades as they grow up, implying that their apathy is *learned* rather than *innate*. As the speaker puts it, "down they forgot as up they grew." Their growth into adults corresponds with a lack of compassion.

It is also coupled with the passing of the seasons, showing a progression through various stages of life. The second mention of the children "forgetting" anyone and noone occurs alongside the reappearance of chiming bells. As such, the speaker suggests that their loss of compassion coincides with marriage, a religious ceremony, or some other ritual that is a part of their parents' and community's accepted guidelines.

Moreover, in this instance, the children are said to be "apt" or prone to forgetting—rather than this behavior being intrinsic or inevitable. As such, the speaker emphasizes that social influences trigger their increased self-interest.

Plus, the speaker says that "only the snow can begin to explain" why they lose sensitivity towards the experiences of others. Recalling winter, snow is also one aspect of the many cycles that repeat throughout the poem to show both the standardized routines of the townspeople and indifference towards individual human experience. As such, this image subtly indicates that the "winter" or bleak aspects of this lifestyle occasion their loss of compassion.

Indeed, the children can be seen as what their parents "reap"—they are viewed as the key to their parents' self-fulfillment as well as the preservation of their society's norms. As the poem draws to a close, the children become the new "women and men," replacing their parents, who were first introduced as "Women and men(both little and small) / cared for anyone not at all."

Therefore, as the children within the town grow older, they are repeatedly exposed to the same rituals and worldviews and expected to uphold them. As such, these young people become so caught up in fulfilling their community's ideals that their

concern for others diminishes as they age.

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

- Lines 9-12
- Lines 22-24
- Lines 33-36

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

- Lines 3-4
- Lines 7-8
- Lines 10-11
- Lines 13-15
- Lines 17-36



### TIME AND LIFE CYCLES

Because the poem is so ambiguous, it's possible to read it in many ways. What is clear though—and comes to bear on the other themes we've discussed in this guide—is that the poem is very focused on the relentless passage of time and the various cycles that characterize both the natural world and human life.

The poem repeatedly interjects lines about the changing of the seasons, as well as more immediate transitions from day to night and rain to sunny skies. The message is clear: no season, no day, lasts forever, and time marches forward relentlessly. There is comfort in this as well, as the poem implies that rain will once again give way to sun just as winter always gives way to spring.

This circular sense of time is reflected on a human level too. The townspeople grow up and have children who follow in their parents' footsteps, who grow up and raise children who follow in their parents' footsteps, and so forth. People have things they accomplish and things they don't, and all end up in the same place regardless (i.e., dead).

Whether the poem is romantic and cheerful or pessimistic and depressing really depends on the reader. The poem does suggest that everyone gets married and dies, and then their kids get married and die, and on and on and a never-ending repetitive dance. At the same time, as noted in our previous theme discussions, it suggests that finding genuine connection within your own personal dance is itself meaningful and brings a great deal of joy.

Even death is cyclical, the poem subtly implies, as the bodies of anyone and noone eventually become part of the earth. The following lines can be read a number of ways, but one interpretation is that their nourish the earth that in turn creates new life in april, in the spring:

... they dream their sleep  
noone and anyone earth by april

Even if humanity is ultimately a blip on nature's radar, the poem ultimately argues that with death people return to earth and are thus able to begin the cycle of life anew. Time marches on relentlessly, but that means that there is always the promise of new life on the horizon.



### LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

#### LINES 1-4

*anyone lived in ...  
... danced his did.*

The poem's opening [stanza](#) introduces its setting and main character: a person called "anyone." At first it's not obvious that "anyone" is being treated like a name, and that's part of the point. The main character is a specific person, but also could be *anyone*. By the end of the stanza, it becomes clear that "anyone" is in fact the name of a man who lives in this town, rather than a general term. Still, his name suggests that his exact identity is unimportant. The fact that his name is not capitalized adds to the ambiguity.

The poem takes place "in a pretty how town"—another unusually structured phrase, which can be interpreted in a few ways:

1. Taken as an adjective, "pretty" indicates that the town is picturesque and an attractive place to live. This phrase could maybe be rewritten as "how pretty a town," with "how" denoting a high degree of charm and appeal.
2. Taken as a question, the "how" that follows this descriptor invites the reader to consider what makes this town a desirable home, subtly casting doubt on its virtue. How can such a place exist?
3. Alternatively, perhaps the line "how" here is meant to be more like an adjective—a town that exemplifies the "how" of life, the way things are.

The unconventional sentence structure carries over into the following line:

(with up so floating many bells down).

The parentheses that surround this image signal that it contains additional information about the setting—ringing bells can be heard throughout the town. The fact that there are "so ... many" bells suggests that this town has a bell tower, which chimes to mark the time. Bells are also often rung to mark major life events—weddings, births, funerals. As such, this line introduces the idea of life cycles and the passage of time—an

idea picked up by the mention of seasons in line 3.

These first lines also contain [assonance](#) and [consonance](#). The similarity between “how” and “town” draws the reader in and accentuates the first pair of [end rhymes](#). Similarly, “so floating” calls attention to the image of the bells, which will become an important symbol in the poem of time’s passage. Plus, the echoing sounds resemble chiming bells.

Line 3 introduces another set of symbols that will appear throughout the poem—the four seasons. They are listed in order from the start of the year to the end, reinforcing the passage of time suggested by the chiming bells. Moreover, this line positions the poem’s events—anyone’s life and romance—within the larger cycles of the natural world. Spring, which signals a new beginning, opens the list—a fitting time for a story to commence!

In the final line of the opening stanza, anyone is seen mourning all that he is unable to accomplish (“his didn’t”) and acting on everything that he *is* able to achieve (“his did”). This line features a repeating grammatical structure, or [parallelism](#), which helps the reader navigate the sentence, given its lack of punctuation and conjunctions, or [asyndeton](#).

The parallelism also results in consonant /h/ sounds, which appear alongside consonant /d/, [sibilant](#) /s/, and assonant short /ih/ sounds:

he sang his didn't he danced his did.

These clusters of repeating sounds have a musical quality, creating a suitable backdrop for anyone’s singing and dancing. Additionally, assonance draws out the /ih/ sound in “winter” within the previous line, producing a [slant rhyme](#). As such, the poem’s loose AABB rhyme scheme begins to take shape.

This first stanza also establishes the poem’s rhythm. In particular, there are about four **stressed** syllables in each line, but precisely where those stresses fall varies—an example of accentual verse:

anyone lived in a pretty how town  
(with up so floating many bells down)  
spring summer autumn winter  
he sang his didn't he danced his did.

The steady beat introduces regularity amid grammatical chaos. Accordingly, the evenness and consistency of the cadence increases the speaker’s credibility. Plus, it creates a repetitive plodding effect that mirrors the predictable, endless cycles of the natural world. Indeed, the audience works its way through four beats in each line and four lines in each stanza, much like the four seasons of each year.

## LINES 5-8

*Women and men(both ...  
... moon stars rain*

The second [stanza](#) is dedicated to the townspeople, who live alongside anyone but seem totally uninterested in him.

The speaker refers to the townspeople collectively, suggesting that they are all essentially the same. The stanza begins, “Women and men(both little and small).” Little and small are synonyms, and the [parallelism](#) in this line suggests that the relationship between women and men is akin to that between “little” and “small.” In other words, although they appear different, the male and female townspeople act very similarly and serve the same end goal. The sonic similarities between “women” and “men” as well as “little” and “small” subtly support this idea.

In the following line, [assonant](#) /aw/ sounds accentuate the stresses in “not at all,” emphasizing the townspeople’s disregard for anyone. This line also features an abundance of [consonance](#):

cared for anyone not at all

Growling /r/ and popping /t/ sounds create a harsh atmosphere, while /n/ sounds reinforce the negation (“not”). The resulting [cacophony](#) further plays up the townspeople’s callousness.

The third line of this stanza shows the townspeople hard at work:

they sowed their isn't they reaped their same

“Sow,” meaning plant, comes from the Latin word for semen. The fertilization of an ovum is sometimes referred to as “sowing a seed.” In light of later references to children and new life, this line can be interpreted as commentary on child rearing. The townspeople make sacrifices to have children, sowing “their isn’t” so that they might produce a new generation that is just like them—“their same.” This statement employs the same grammatical structure that line four does:

he sang his didn'the danced his did.

[Parallelism](#) (the line’s two clauses have the same grammatical structure) draws out the differences in their behaviors, a device known as [antithesis](#). In particular, while the townspeople make sacrifices for a distant end goal ([metaphorically](#) sowing their “isn’t”), anyone lives out all the opportunities he finds. Moreover, anyone is expressive and dances freely, while the townspeople are shown *laboring*.

This stanza concludes with “sun moon stars rain,” which recalls “spring summer autumn winter” in the previous stanza. In fact, it can be seen as a continuation of this list: spring brings rain,

while summer brings sun, autumn brings the harvest moon, and winter brings long starry nights. Therefore, this list signals that time continues on and the earth progresses through its natural cycles. These [symbols](#) thus display the natural world's indifference to the poem's events as well as the monotony of the townspeople's lifestyle, which repeats generation after generation.

## LINES 9-12

*children guessed (but only ...  
... more by more*

Over the course of the third [stanza](#), the reader learns that "noone" loves anyone. This is another play on words; the idea that "no one" loved anyone sounds like there was nobody, no person, who loved this lonely guy. The word "noone" is actually being used as a name, but the poem nevertheless evokes the sense of anyone's isolation and loneliness within broader society by calling his beloved "noone."

A small group of children pick up on her affections, but these kids lose interest in the relationship as they get older. Parentheses interrupt the revelation that some members of this society *do* care about anyone to qualify that there are "only a few" such figures, and they quickly forget about the couple.

In this stanza's second line, the speaker experiments with sentence structure using [parallelism](#):

*and down they forgot | as up they grew.*

By phrasing these statements in the same manner, the speaker reinforces their relationship—that is, the children's disregard for anyone and noone stems *from* their growing up.

Moreover, the parallel grammatical structures call attention to the contrast between "up" and "down," another example of [antithesis](#) (which is a big deal in this poem!). Antithesis portrays these two occurrences as opposites—the older the children grow, the less they care. While aging is typically associated with gain—gaining rights, knowledge, independence, experience—the speaker uses antithesis to show the *loss* of sensitivity that the children undergo as they grow up.

Further, the unconventional sentence structure recalls the poem's second line, "with up so floating many bells down." As the bells [symbolize](#) passing time, the similarity between these lines reinforces the reader's understanding that the children's apathy develops over time. In other words, their disinterest in others is *learned*—not an inborn quality.

This line is followed by "autumn winter spring summer," which shows the earth continuing to cycle through the seasons. By denoting the passage of time, this seasonal symbolism reinforces the idea that the children grow increasingly apathetic as they reach the later stages of life (sometimes called "the autumn years").

Finally, the speaker points out that noone's love for anyone grows during this time. The [diacope](#) of "more by more" highlights the growing intensity of the couple's love. The fact that the relationship between anyone and noone develops even though fewer people care speaks to the strength of their bond. To look at it from another angle, when noone prioritizes her personal feelings over society's approval, she is rewarded with a meaningful and fulfilling relationship.

## LINES 13-16

*when by now ...  
... all to her*

The poem's fourth [stanza](#) begins with a continuation of the "[X] by [Y]" sentence structure that occurs at the conclusion of stanza 33 (in "more by more"). The use of [parallelism](#) indicates that "when by now and tree by leaf" expands on the description of noone's developing love, which grows "more by more." The time-related language in "when by now" suggests that the couple's relationship progressively builds a *future* with every *present* moment. Similarly, "tree by leaf" shows their love slowly blossoming—it becomes a tree one leaf at a time.

The parallelism also establishes a strong, bouncy [iambic](#) (da-DUM) rhythm:

*when by now and tree by leaf  
she laughed his joy she cried his grief*

The repeated rises and falls build rhythmic momentum as the bond between anyone and noone grows.

Parallelism also [juxtaposes](#) "joy" and "grief," exaggerating the highs and lows that the couple endures together. As such, [antithesis](#) calls attention to the wide range of experiences that anyone and noone share, bringing them closer as a couple. Being able to connect with someone breeds life-affirming empathy intimacy, the poem argues—making it all the more tragic that the rest of the townspeople seem so isolated from one another.

The speaker returns to the "[X] by [Y]" structure—"bird by snow and stir by still." This line is somewhat cryptic, but the parallel sentence structure provides some insight into how it should be interpreted.

For starters, the parallelism recalls the above description of the growing bond between anyone and noone. Moreover, "stir," meaning to move about, is the opposite of being "still." The conflict between these terms suggests a similar opposition among "snow" and "bird." Indeed, snow repels birds, causing them to migrate. As a defining feature of winter, snow represents harsh conditions and for many species, death. As such, this line hints that the couple grows via the experiences that challenge them.

This stanza's final line then reinforces their closeness. The

speaker notes that anything that matters to anyone is incredibly important—it is "all," or everything—to noone. The two have become so close that they share the same concerns.

There is a great deal of sound play in this stanza, including [assonant](#) long /ee/ sounds and a number of [consonant](#) sounds:

when by now and tree by leaf  
she laughed his joy she cried his grief  
bird by snow and stir by still  
anyone's any was all to her

The echoing sounds create a musical effect that reflects the harmony between anyone and noone. Plus, while the third and fourth lines of this stanza do not rhyme, they contain an inverted pattern of [\(slant\) rhymes](#)—"stir" rhymes with "her" while "still" rhymes with "all." However, their order is reversed in these two lines. This interlocking rhyme pattern reflects the union of anyone and noone that occurs in this passage.

### LINES 17-20

*someones married their ...  
... slept their dream*

The fifth [stanza](#) offers additional details about the lives of the townspeople, providing insight into their relationships.

First, the speaker notes that the townspeople all find partners and get married, at which point they "laughed their cryings and did their dance." The first half of this statement recalls the previous stanza, where noone "laughed [anyone's] joy she cried his grief." While all the couples experience joyous and difficult times, noone displays an ability to respond to anyone's distinct emotions and experiences.

However—as in stanza 2, when the townspeople are first introduced—the speaker describes the townspeople collectively as "someones" and "everyones," suggesting that they all behave in the same way. Unlike anyone and noone, they generate blanket emotional responses as a matter of course.

Moreover, the poem equates the townspeople's marriage and tribulations to the performance of a dance, suggesting that they approach these major life events like a routine to be executed. [Consonant](#) /r/ sounds are prevalent in these lines, producing a harsh growling effect that subtly casts this behavior in a negative light:

someones married their everyones  
laughed their cryings and did their dance

A parenthetical statement follows the townspeople's "dance," offering additional details about their routines: "(sleep wake hope and then)." Taken as a daily routine, this list suggests that the townspeople live exceedingly monotonous lives—sleep, wake up, look towards the future, and repeat.

However, it can also be interpreted as a life cycle—an individual is dormant in the womb before being born, building a life, and ultimately dying. "Then" appears very open-ended, signaling continued action. The [enjambment](#) at the end of this line links the parenthetical to the next statement, indicating that its events are what comes next within the cycle (i.e., "and then they said..."). As such, the pattern sees a return to sleep, which represents death.

Following this line of thinking, "said their nevers" suggests that the townspeople acknowledge what they were never able to accomplish in their lifetime. Indeed, "never" implies finality—no further opportunities for such accomplishments. [Parallelism](#) likens this acknowledgment to "they slept their dream," possibly indicating that they were dormant during their only opportunity for excitement and imagination, essentially squandering their lives.

The breakdown of the rhyme scheme in this stanza enacts the disharmony within the couples as well as the distance between the members of this society, who are too concerned with their own lives to meaningfully engage with others. While the [rhyme scheme](#) falls away in this stanza, the accentual rhythm continues (there are four [stressed](#) beats in each line though their order isn't consistent):

(sleep wake hope and then)they  
said their nevers they slept their dream

[Assonant](#) short /eh/ sounds accentuate the meter while bridging the final two lines:

(sleep wake hope and then)they  
said their nevers they slept their dream

The repetitive plod of the speaker's cadence reflects the monotony of the townspeople's routines.

### LINES 21-24

*stars rain sun ...  
... many bells down)*

This stanza provides an explanation for the children's dwindling concern for others. The first hint at the root of their apathy—their lack of care for those around them—is the return of seasonal and time-related [imagery](#).

The phrase "sun rain stars moon" again reflects the passage of time—the days keep moving ahead, the rain keeps falling and then clearing up. The poem seems to be saying that townspeople got married, lived standard lives, had regrets, and died, all while the natural markers of time moved along as usual, cycling through the seasons and days just as human beings cycle through birth, life, and death.

Note, however, how the order of the words here is *different*

from earlier in the poem, when the phrase was "sun moon stars rain." In each iteration of this phrase, the sun and moon rise and set, the stars appear in the night sky, and rain falls; that things happen in a slightly different *order* doesn't affect that they keep happening over and over again.

On a literal level, sometimes it rains overnight and sometimes during the day. The point is that the sun will return, and then set; the moon and stars will appear and disappear; rain clouds will come and go and come and go. Time keeps passing, relentlessly, and people keep living monotonous lives and having children who then follow in their footsteps like the sun follows the rain.

The main idea then introduced here is that the children gradually become more self-interested as they get older, and move away from the perceptiveness and empathy of childhood. They stop caring about noone and anyone.

The speaker remarks that "only the snow can begin to explain" children's growing apathy. Snow is associated with winter, which is in turn often [symbolically](#) connected to death. Therefore, images of winter suggest that the children have entered the later stages of life, which coincide with their distraction from the experiences of others. Winter is also a difficult time for many species, perhaps indicating that the children face great challenges as they grow older, causing them to focus more on themselves.

The ringing bells return in the next line, reinforcing the association between the passage of time—and thus growing up—with the children's disregard for others. Moreover, bells chime to mark important life events, hinting that they undergo rites of passage that might increase their responsibilities or be otherwise difficult. As such, the now-grown children might become consumed too with their *own* affairs to pay attention to one another.

There is an abundance of sound play in this stanza, which recalls the echoes of ringing bells. For instance, [assonant](#) long /oh/ and [consonant](#) /n/ sounds appear in the second line:

(and only the snow can begin to explain

The long /oh/ sounds fall on **stressed** syllables, spotlighting snow as an important symbol, which can uniquely account for the children's loss of empathy. Meanwhile, consonant /n/ sounds, which also pervade the previous line, draw out the slight sonic similarity between "explain" and "moon," maintaining some trace of the [rhyme scheme](#). The subsequent line contains /r/ and /t/ sounds:

how children are apt to forget to remember

The combination of growling /r/ sounds and percussive /t/ sounds is difficult to pronounce and gives the line an aggressive

and chaotic feel—a device known as [cacophony](#). As such, sound play creates a negative atmosphere as the speaker describes the children's loss of empathy.

## LINES 25-28

*one day anyone ...  
... was by was*

In the poem's seventh [stanza](#), the main character dies—an event that the speaker reports seemingly without any emotion at all: "one day anyone died i guess." The speaker's cool detachment reflects the indifference of the townspeople. While noone goes out of her way to show affection for anyone, bending over to give him a kiss, the townspeople hardly notice even when she, too, dies. They quickly return to their hectic lives after burying noone next to her partner.

[Assonance](#) and [consonance](#) are prominent throughout this passage, shaping its mood. In particular, the soft hiss of [sibilant](#) /s/ sounds reflects noone's tenderness towards anyone as she "stooped to kiss his face." In fact, /s/ sounds occur throughout the stanza, appearing in each end word and thus creating faint [slant rhymes](#).

Moreover, [alliterative](#) /b/ sounds fall on **stressed** syllables in the phrase "busy folk buried them," reinforcing its [dactylic](#) (stressed-unstressed-unstressed) [meter](#). This metrical pattern contains a high concentration of unstressed (a.k.a. "short") syllables, quickening the pace, reflecting the fast pace of the townspeople's lives.

The final line in this stanza reads, "little by little and was by was," describing the couple's gradual burial. The past-tense "was" expresses the finality of their death, which perhaps preserves what the couple "was" in life. The [parallelism](#) (i.e., the "[X] by [X]" structure) in these lines suggests a continual process whose outcome is revealed in the following stanza.

## LINES 29-32

*all by all ...  
... if by yes.*

The penultimate [stanza](#) features a repeating a "[X] by [X]" structure. This format is introduced in the previous line, which describes the burial of anyone and noone. As such, [parallelism](#) suggests that this stanza describes the couple's fate after they die. Indeed, the couple is shown falling deeper into their eternal "sleep." The repetition of the above structure also produces a strong [iambic](#) (da-DUM) rhythm:

*all by all and deep by deep  
and more by more they dream their sleep*

The rises and falls of the iamb generate momentum, showing progression or perhaps forward movement in time. Moreover, the clusters of repeating words, or [diacope](#), give rise to [assonance](#) and [consonance](#):



all by all and deep by deep  
and more by more they dream their sleep

The repeating sounds fall on **stressed** syllables, further accentuating the bouncy, relentless rhythm.

The speaker's description here suggests that the bond between anyone and noone persists even in death. For starters, after anyone and noone pass away, the speaker begins referring to the couple collectively, i.e., as "they."

Moreover, terms like "dream," "wish," and "spirit" suggest that their presence is still felt. In fact, having become one with nature, they give rise to new life as the speaker remarks, "noone and anyone earth by april." April falls during the start of spring, a time of showers and flowers—that is, of nourishment and new growth. The line suggests that noone and anyone's bodies become part of the earth and nourish new life, their individual lives becoming part of the larger natural cycle of the seasons and of life and death.

This characterization of their death contrasts with that of the townspeople, which the speaker describes in stanza 5. While the couple "dreams their sleep," the townspeople "slept their dream." Interestingly, the slumber of anyone and noone is described in the present tense, reinforcing the idea that their love persists indefinitely. The couple *actively* dreams, suggesting the possibility of something vibrant and new. The townspeople, on the other hand, have "slept" through their opportunity for such fulfillment, the past tense indicating that they remain dormant throughout their eternal "sleep."

The rare [end-stopped line](#) that concludes this stanza suggests finality—this is the couple's eternal resting state.

### LINES 33-36

*Women and men(both ...  
... moon stars rain*

The poem's final [stanza](#) marks the renewal of the many cycles that appear throughout the poem. Line 5 first introduced the townspeople as "Women and men(both little and small)." Over the course of the poem, these townspeople get married, give birth, and die. The final stanza begins, "Women and men(both dong and ding)"—evoking the sound of bells and, as such, the passage of time.

This suggests that the townspeople's children have taken their place. Indeed, earlier in the poem, the speaker describes the children growing up to become as self-interested as their parents, fulfilling their duty as their parents' "same." In the final lines, they "reaped their sowing and went their came," indicating that this generation, too, has children and ultimately dies.

The [parallelism](#) within the phrase "Women and men(both dong and ding)" also reiterates the homogeneity, or sameness, of the townspeople—the women and men are as similar as "dong" and

"ding." Moreover, the reference to bells further suggests that they lead repetitive lives, as bells chime at the same points each day (or each hour, or to mark each religious or cultural ceremony, etc.).

As a marker of time's passage, the bells also indicate that the natural world progresses as it always has. Indeed, the speaker recites the four seasons ("summer autumn winter spring") as well as their associated images ("sun moon stars rain"). For the first time, these refrains align perfectly—"summer" corresponding with "sun," "autumn" with "moon," and so on—providing a sense of completion at the end of the poem.

Additionally, each sequence leaves off with a [symbol](#) of new life—"spring" and "rain." In fact, spring both commences and concludes the poem (see line 3), reinforcing the suggestion that the poem's cycles are renewed as the poem draws to a close. Accordingly, the final line has no punctuation, as the cycles of nature—and of this town—repeat endlessly.

Fittingly, the closing stanza finally sees a return to the poem's overarching AABB [rhyme scheme](#), contributing to the sense of completion—everything has come full circle. Lastly, the [consonance](#) and four sequential stresses that appear within "sun moon stars rain" create a strong, memorable final image.



## SYMBOLS



### BELLS

Twice within the poem, the speaker describes a chorus of bells ringing throughout the town. They are said to float up and down, producing music. Bell towers commonly feature a clock and chime to mark specific times of day and/or important events like weddings and funerals. They might also be used to convene or transition religious ceremonies. In any case, ringing bells within this poem [symbolize](#) the passage of time. Interestingly, the bells always appear within parentheses, as if they can be heard off in the distance reminding the townspeople (and the reader) that time is constantly moving forward.

First popping up in the poem's second line, the bells are one of the town's most prominent features. The bells return at the end of [stanza](#) 6, where their symbolic significance comes into focus. Here, the speaker suggests that children tend to lose interest in other people "with up so floating many bells down":

(and only the snow can begin to explain  
how children are apt to forget to remember  
with up so floating many bells down)

It's a confusing moment, but makes more sense when considering the symbolic connotations of bells in the poem. The sound of bells as the children "forget to remember" implies that

the children's forgetting, their diminishing concern for other people, is something that happens over *time*—that is, as they *grow up*.

And again, bells mark not just the passing hours but also momentous occasions that typically mark certain phases of life, like weddings, births, and funerals. The mention of bells thus suggests that the children's increasing self-interest simply arises as they get wrapped in the cycles and ceremonies of their own lives. As they grow up and find their own spouses, have their own children, and bury their own family members, they lose sight of the other people around them.

Lastly, the poem's final stanza begins, "Women and men(both dong and ding)." This stanza describes the townspeople going on with their lives after the deaths of anyone and noone—the bells ring again and again, marking the passage of hours as well as births, weddings, and funerals. The couple's life and death hasn't affected the rest of the world at all, which moves forward as normal.

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

- **Line 2:** "up so floating many bells down"
- **Line 24:** "up so floating many bells down"
- **Line 33:** "dong and ding"



### SEASONS AND WEATHER

Throughout the poem, the speaker lists seasons ("spring summer autumn winter") as well as a set of corresponding images ("sun [summer] moon [autumn] stars [winter] rain [spring]"). While the individual list items appear in various orders, they always follow the same sequence (i.e., "moon" always follows "sun" and "winter" always follows "autumn" in the list), indicating that the earth continuously cycles through the seasons as the poem progresses. Despite the major events that take place in the townspeople's lives, the earth follows this established pattern. Therefore, in general, seasons and weather [represent](#) the consistency and relentlessness of the natural world and its various cycles, which are indifferent to the activities of human beings.

In a few places, the speaker references winter ("snow") and spring ("april") in particular. Winter marks the end of a calendar year and is associated with death, hibernation, and the struggle to survive harsh circumstances. Within this broader natural symbolism, then, snow can be interpreted as a symbol for the later stages of life.

The spring months, on the other hand, bring new life and thus represent rebirth or renewal. The speaker draws on these connotations to suggest that the challenges the couple faces bring them closer over time ("bird by snow"). Further, as the children grow older and come up against difficulties, their concern for others fade ("only the snow ..."). Finally, after

anyone and noone die, they become one with the earth and nurture new life ("earth by april").

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

- **Line 3:** "spring summer autumn winter"
- **Line 8:** "sun moon stars rain"
- **Line 11:** "autumn winter spring summer"
- **Line 15:** "snow"
- **Line 21:** "stars rain sun moon"
- **Line 22:** "the snow"
- **Line 31:** "april"
- **Line 34:** "summer autumn winter spring"
- **Line 36:** "sun moon stars rain"



### FARMING

The speaker briefly describes the townspeople sowing (or planting) and reaping (or harvesting). On its most basic level, this image displays the hard work that the townspeople put into achieving their goals—the rewards that they "reap." But these actions can also be understood [symbolically](#).

The word "semen" literally means "seed" in Latin and comes from the word "serere" meaning "to sow." Accordingly, impregnation is sometimes referred to as "sowing a seed." Given surrounding references to children and life cycles, farming can be seen as a symbol for childbearing. Following this line of thinking, it also represents the transfer of life and responsibility from one generation to the next.

In an alternative reading, the farming-related language in the poem might be a way to represent the idea that these townspeople are to blame for any sense of monotony in their lives. With "sow[ing] their isn't," perhaps the speaker is saying not that the townspeople made sacrifices/didn't do certain things in the hope of future goals, but rather that they buried their regrets about all the things they didn't do in the ground. And what then grows from those regrets is more of the same—the same monotonous cycles of life is all they can hope for, because instead of acknowledging the things they haven't done (as anyone so when he "sang his didn't"), they suppress them.

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

- **Line 7:** "they sowed their isn't they reaped their same"
- **Line 35:** "reaped their sowing"



## POETIC DEVICES

### ANTITHESIS

Several grammatical structures repeat throughout the poem—a

device known as [parallelism](#). The speaker also often parallel grammatical clauses in order to draw contrasts between opposite ideas, which is an example of [antithesis](#).

In general, the speaker uses antithesis to differentiate anyone and noone from the rest of the townspeople. For instance, line 4 reads:

he sang his **didn't** he danced his **did**.

The construction of the two clauses here is exactly the same. Only the specific verbs change, and they are opposites: didn't vs. did. Three lines later, this is followed up with another example of antithesis, here with "sowed" and "reaped" being essentially opposites:

they **sowed** their isn't they **reaped** their same

While anyone expresses himself through song and dance, the townspeople are hard at work planting and harvesting (likely [metaphorical](#)) crops. As such, anyone appears to live a more emotionally honest and joyous life relative to his peers, who are preoccupied with labor.

Further, anyone laments all that he is unable to achieve ("his didn't") and celebrates all that he is able to do ("his did"). The townspeople, on the other hand, actively make sacrifices ("their isn't") in the name of a more distant reward—"their same," which might be a reference to the idea that they all have the same desires in life, or that their lives are unrelentingly monotonous.

Later, in line 10, the speaker explains that as children grow older, they begin to disregard the relationship between anyone and noone:

and down they forgot as up they grew

Here, antithesis accentuates the contrast between "down" and "up." In doing so, it emphasizes the children's loss of care and suggests that aging—growing "up"—is to blame for their apathy.

When describing the strengthening bond between anyone and noone, the speaker remarks:

she laughed his joy she cried his grief

In this case, antithesis exaggerates the highs and lows that the couple endures to demonstrate the range of experiences that they have had together. At the same time, the [juxtaposition](#) of anyone's "joy" and "grief" plays up noone's capacity to empathize with him, no matter the emotion.

Later, the speaker says that the townspeople "laughed their cryings and did their dance." Unlike anyone and noone, the townspeople are discussed collectively and are not shown

empathizing with one another's distinct emotions. Instead, they appear to share similar experiences and impersonal emotional responses. Indeed, parallelism equates this behavior to performing "their dance," suggesting that the townspeople all go through the same predetermined motions. Once again, the speaker utilizes antithesis to subtly tease out the differences in behavior among the loving couple and the members of their society.

#### Where Antithesis appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "he sang his didn't he danced his did"
- **Line 7:** "they sowed their isn't they reaped their same"
- **Line 10:** "down they forgot as up they grew"
- **Line 14:** "she laughed his joy she cried his grief"
- **Line 18:** "laughed their cryings and did their dance"

## ASSONANCE

[Assonance](#) does a few important things in the poem. For starters, the chains of repeating vowel sounds are pleasant to the ear, producing a musical effect that recalls the "dong and ding" of bells. These subtle echoes evoke the poem's setting and add texture to the otherwise shallow sense of place.

By creating sonic interest, assonance also slows the audience down, encouraging a closer reading. For instance, the speaker hints at the source of the children's fading attentiveness, noting, "only the snow can begin to explain." Here, assonance highlights the snow as a unique key to understanding the poem. The repeating long /oh/ sound allows the reader to linger for a moment on this phrase—possibly even rereading it—to gain a better grasp of how seasonal symbolism functions in the poem.

Assonance can also link terms to suggest a relationship between them, creating additional layers of meaning within the text. Stanza 7, for instance, describes the reactions of noone and the townspeople when anyone dies:

(and noone stooped to kiss his face)  
busy folk buried them side by side

Here, short /ih/ sounds subtly draw a comparison between noone's display of affection and the haste with which the townspeople return to their lives. As such, assonance contributes to the [juxtaposition](#) of their behavior, playing up noone's tenderness with the townspeople's apathy.

On a more basic level, assonance also emphasizes important phrases that don't necessarily require deeper analysis. This is the case in "not at all," where assonance simply exaggerates the townspeople's disregard for anyone.

Finally, assonance often reinforces the poem's rhythms by placing additional emphasis on **stressed** syllables. Short /eh/ sounds do just that in lines 19-20:

(sleep wake hope and then)they  
said their nevers they slept their dream

As such, assonance maintains the poem's pace, which is central to the nursery rhyme feel and evenhanded quality of the speaker's narration.

#### Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "how town"
- **Line 2:** "so floating," "down"
- **Line 4:** "his didn't," "his did"
- **Line 5:** "small"
- **Line 6:** "not," "all"
- **Line 13:** "tree," "leaf"
- **Line 14:** "she," "she," "grief"
- **Line 15:** "bird," "stir"
- **Line 19:** "then"
- **Line 20:** "said," "nevers," "slept"
- **Line 22:** "only," "snow"
- **Line 23:** "forget," "remember"
- **Line 24:** "so floating"
- **Line 25:** "died i"
- **Line 26:** "kiss his"
- **Line 27:** "busy," "side by side"
- **Line 29:** "deep," "deep"
- **Line 30:** "dream," "sleep"
- **Line 31:** "april"
- **Line 32:** "wish," "spirit," "if"

reader to critically engage with the text because the relationship between various words and phrases is open to interpretation.

In many places, the speaker repeats the subject where a conjunction would normally fall. This is the case in line 14:

she laughed his joy she cried his grief

The repetition of "she" within two identical grammatical structures reinforces both [parallelism](#) and [antithesis](#). In other words, asyndeton causes "she" to appear at the beginning of both phrases—a device known as [anaphora](#)—increasing their similarity and prompting a comparison. As line 14 illustrates, many structural devices work together within this poem to create interest and orient the reader.

#### Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "spring summer autumn winter"
- **Line 4:** "he sang his didn't he danced his did."
- **Line 7:** "they sowed their isn't they reaped their same"
- **Line 8:** "sun moon stars rain"
- **Line 11:** "autumn winter spring summer"
- **Line 14:** "she laughed his joy she cried his grief"
- **Line 20:** "said their nevers they slept their dream"
- **Line 21:** "stars rain sun moon"
- **Line 34:** "summer autumn winter spring"
- **Line 36:** "sun moon stars rain"

## ASYNDETON

The speaker often omits conjunctions when stringing simple phrases together and reciting lists. Here is a look at lines 7-8, which contain both structures:

they sowed their isn't they reaped their same  
sun moon stars rain

These are examples of [asyndeton](#). On the most basic level, this creates a quick pace in the poem, which barrels forward with few pauses—suggesting the relentless march of time. Think how differently the poem would feel if there were conjunctions used in these moments:

spring summer autumn and winter  
he sang his didn't and danced his did

Not quite as poetic and quick, is it?

Within this town, events and natural phenomena do not have set beginnings and ends, but rather occur within endless loops. The lack of hierarchy or fixed order that results from asyndeton is thus also consistent with the continuous cycles that appear throughout the poem. Furthermore, asyndeton requires the

## CONSONANCE

[Consonance](#) appears throughout the poem and performs many of the same functions as [assonance](#) and [alliteration](#). In fact, these devices often work together to fill the poem with a strong sense of music. For instance, consonant /h/, /d/, /s/, and assonant short /ih/ sounds appear in line 4:

he sang his didn't he danced his did.

Because they appear at the beginning of words, the /h/ sounds are specifically an example of [alliteration](#), while repeating /s/ sounds are referred to as [sibilance](#). Here, assonance and various forms of consonance create pleasant echoes of similar sounds that resemble chiming bells. Furthermore, such a high density of sonic effects creates interest and slows the reader down, encouraging a closer examination of the poem in this moment.

Much of the consonance within this poem stems from other forms of [repetition](#), most often [anaphora](#). In the above example, anaphora and [parallelism](#) result in the repetition of "he" and "his." Much like the poem's reinvention of basic structures, consonance reveals the beauty of common language, making it new and exciting. Indeed, the speaker describes exceedingly

familiar facts of life in an unfamiliar manner, prompting their reexamination.

Moreover, in a few key places, consonance accentuates the poem's rhythms. For example, line 27 contains the phrase "busy folk buried them." Alliterative /b/ sounds place additional emphasis on the line's **stressed** syllables, calling attention to the **dactylic** (stressed-unstressed-unstressed) structure here. The repetition of this pattern, which contains a high concentration of unstressed syllables, briefly quickens the pace to reflect the haste of the townspeople. Repeating metrical patterns are rare in this poem, and consonance (and alliteration) highlights their presence here.

Consonance also preserves some semblance of the poem's AABB **rhyme scheme** when it begins to fade away. In lines 21-22, for instance, consonant /n/ sounds draw out the faint sonic similarity between "moon" and "explain":

stars rain sun moon  
(and only the snow can begin to explain

Plus, by linking specific words through sound, consonance highlights their relationship, hinting at the poem's meaning. One of the more obvious examples of this function appears in the first line of the final stanza:

Women and men(both dong and ding)

The parallelism in this line likens women to "dong" and men to "ding." These terms contain very similar sounds, suggesting that men and women follow slightly different versions of the same path. In fact, the consonance within "dong and ding" accentuates the sonic commonalities among the words "women" and "men."

Finally, a high concentration of certain sounds can shift the poem's mood. For example, here is a look at lines 17-18:

someones married their everyones  
laughed their cryings and did their dance

The prevalence of /r/ sounds produces a growling effect, creating a harsh sonic atmosphere. For comparison, line 26 contains the phrase, "noone stooped to kiss his face." The hiss of sibilant /s/ sounds is much gentler, which aligns with noone's tenderness in this moment.

#### Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "how town"
- **Lines 3-4:** "spring summer autumn winter / he sang his didn't he danced his did"
- **Line 5:** "Women and men," "little," "small"
- **Line 6:** "anyone not"

- **Line 7:** "they sowed their"
- **Lines 7-8:** "they reaped their same / sun moon stars rain"
- **Line 11:** "autumn winter spring summer"
- **Line 13:** "leaf"
- **Line 14:** "laughed"
- **Line 15:** "bird by snow," "stir by still"
- **Line 16:** "anyone's any"
- **Line 17:** "someones married their everyones"
- **Line 18:** "their cryings," "did their dance"
- **Line 19:** "sleep," "hope"
- **Line 20:** "said," "slept"
- **Line 21:** "stars rain sun moon"
- **Line 22:** "and only," "snow can begin," "explain"
- **Line 23:** "forget"
- **Line 24:** "floating"
- **Line 25:** "day," "died"
- **Line 26:** "stooped," "kiss," "face"
- **Line 27:** "busy folk buried," "side by side"
- **Line 29:** "deep," "deep"
- **Line 30:** "dream," "sleep"
- **Line 31:** "noone and anyone," "april"
- **Line 32:** "spirit," "yes"
- **Line 33:** "Women and men," "dong and ding"
- **Line 34:** "summer autumn winter spring"
- **Line 35:** "reaped their sowing"
- **Line 36:** "sun moon stars rain"

#### ENJAMBMENT

The poem hardly uses punctuation, making it difficult to determine what lines feature **enjambment**. For instance, here is a look at stanza 4:

when by now and tree by leaf  
she laughed his joy she cried his grief  
bird by snow and stir by still  
anyone's any was all to her

In conventional prose, this stanza would appear as two sentences, each containing a comma:

When by now and tree by leaf, she laughed his joy  
she cried his grief. Bird by snow and stir by still,  
anyone's any was all to her.

Although they break mid-sentence, the lines *imply* the pause of punctuation—and as such might be deemed **end-stopped**. Then again, the lack of true punctuation causes the lines to linger in space on the page indefinitely and allows for ambiguity throughout as to where one idea stops and another begins.

As such, enjambment reflects the poem's subject—the endless, uninterrupted cycles that govern the world. The open-ended nature of enjambment also creates anticipation because it

leaves the audience wondering where the story is headed. For example, stanza 3 begins:

children guessed (but only a few

Based on this line alone, it is unclear if “only a few” is a new subject or describes the children who “guessed.” The open parenthesis adds to the sense of mystery, creating suspense and keeping the reader engaged. The parenthetical statement then takes up the rest of the stanza, before the conclusion to that first line finally arrives. Written in straight, clear prose, the line would be something like, “Children guessed (but only a few, and they forgot about it as they inevitably grew up, just as the seasons keep moving forward) that none loved him more and more.” Taking out the middle chunk, it’s just: “Children guessed that none loved him.” The “that” is essentially the conclusion to the enjambment started by line 9.

So is the whole stanza enjambed? It’s up for debate! What’s important is the way the speaker’s diction—the strange inversion of clauses and lack of punctuation—create ambiguity, tension, and release in the poem. The poem keeps pushing readers forward, encouraging their eye to move down the page.

This also makes the lines of clear end-stop all the more striking—such as that in line 32, which features a rare period at the end. This stanza also essentially ends the story of noone and everyone, marking a clear close to their chapter of the poem before moving on.

#### Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-10:** “few / and”
- **Lines 10-11:** “grew / autumn”
- **Lines 11-12:** “summer) / that”
- **Lines 19-20:** “they / said”
- **Lines 22-23:** “explain / how”
- **Lines 23-24:** “remember / with”

## DIACOPE

[Repetition](#) takes many forms within this poem and is by far its most prominent poetic device. [Diacope](#) is an especially interesting kind, and pops up many times towards the end of the poem with phrases such as “side by side” and “little by little.” On one level, diacope simply adds to the repetitive sound of the poem, because words—and thus their letters—repeat. For example, here is a look at the dominant sounds lines 29-30:

all by all and deep by deep  
and more by more they dream their sleep

The sounds that coincide with diacope—those in “deep” and “more”—are picked up elsewhere in the passage, producing a pleasant musicality. Plus, the repeating sounds overwhelmingly

fall on stressed syllables, reinforcing the [iambic](#) (da-DUM) [meter](#). As a result of the sonic harmony and soothing cadence, these lines read like a lullaby, reflecting the townspeople’s dreamlike state.

On a less sound-related level, the poem’s use of diacope is meant to create the sensation of incremental—yet insistent—change. This, in turn, reflects the poem’s broader thematic ideas about the inevitable passage of time. Note how noone “loved him more by more”—as time passes, her love grows slowly yet *steadily*. The same effect is achieved in phrases like “little by little” and “was by was,” which again point to slow but *consistent* movement and/or change.

On a different note, that they are buried “side by side” creates a sense of unity and connection between noone and anyone, as they both constitute one “side” of this new whole.

#### Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** “more by more”
- **Line 27:** “side by side”
- **Line 28:** “little by little,” “was by was”
- **Line 29:** “all by all,” “deep by deep”
- **Line 30:** “more by more”

## ALLITERATION

[Alliteration](#) works a lot like [assonance](#) and [consonance](#) in the poem, imbuing the lines with a sense of sing-song musicality that approaches that of a nursery rhyme. Alliteration often combines with assonance to create particularly musical moments in the poem, such as that in line 4:

he sang his didn’t he danced his did.

Every word in this line is alliterative, and many also feature assonance of the short /ih/ sound and consonance of the /d/ and /s/ sound. This is appropriate, given that the line mentions singing and dancing! That is, the music of the line evokes anyone’s song and dance.

The poem’s use of alliteration also contributes to its feeling of repetitiveness. Note, for example, the many /s/ sounds in the poem ([sibilance](#)), which of course also appear in the various markers of time: “summer,” “spring,” “stars,” and “sun.” The reappearance of this sound keeps reminding reader that time is passing. In this way, alliteration adds to the poem’s sense of relentless forward motion.

#### Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** “spring summer”
- **Line 4:** “he sang his didn’t he danced his did”
- **Line 7:** “sowed,” “same”
- **Line 8:** “sun,” “stars”

- **Line 11:** “spring summer”
- **Line 13:** “leaf”
- **Line 14:** “laughed”
- **Line 15:** “bird by snow,” “stir by still”
- **Line 16:** “anyone’s any”
- **Line 18:** “did,” “dance”
- **Line 19:** “sleep”
- **Line 20:** “said,” “slept”
- **Line 21:** “stars,” “sun”
- **Line 22:** “snow”
- **Line 23:** “forget”
- **Line 24:** “floating”
- **Line 25:** “day,” “died”
- **Line 26:** “face”
- **Line 27:** “busy folk buried”
- **Line 29:** “deep,” “deep”
- **Line 30:** “dream”
- **Line 31:** “and anyon”
- **Line 33:** “dong,” “ding”
- **Line 34:** “summer,” “spring”
- **Line 35:** “sowing”
- **Line 36:** “sun,” “stars”

## PARALLELISM

[Parallelism](#) appears throughout the poem, usually in conjunction with other forms of [repetition](#). At times, the speaker uses identical grammatical structures in order to help people make sense of the poem. Take line 4:

he sang his didn't he danced his did.

In this case, parallelism produces a kind of [anaphora](#), as the subject (“he”) is repeated at the beginning of two successive clauses. Because this line contains no conjunctions (making it an example of [asyndeton](#)) nor punctuation, the repeating structure clearly delineates the clauses—it essentially tells readers where to pause, and helps the reader understand how the sentence is meant to be read.

The speaker recycles this and other structures, introducing a logic and organization that is distinct to this poem. Because the reader is able to anticipate and recognize these structures, the poem becomes navigable despite its long sentences and disregard for conventional grammar.

By phrasing two or more ideas in the same way, parallelism draws comparisons between them. Oftentimes this accentuates a contrast, resulting in [antithesis](#), which is discussed in its own entry. However, parallelism can also bring forth *similarities* between seemingly disparate ideas, contributing to the poem's meaning.

For instance, line 5 reads:

Women and men(both little and small).

Little and small are synonyms, suggesting that women and men are essentially the same—though they appear different, they ultimately perform in very similar ways and reach the same conclusion.

In general, the abundance of parallelism drives home the speaker's message that the townspeople lead similar, predictable lives.

### Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** “he sang his didn't he danced his did.”
- **Line 5:** “Women and men(both little and small)”
- **Line 7:** “they sowed their isn't they reaped their same”
- **Line 10:** “down they forgot as up they grew”
- **Line 13:** “when by now and tree by leaf”
- **Line 14:** “she laughed his joy she cried his grief”
- **Line 15:** “bird by snow and stir by still”
- **Line 18:** “laughed their cryings and did their dance”
- **Lines 19-20:** “they / said their nevers they slept their dream”
- **Lines 28-29:** “little by little and was by was / all by all and deep by deep”
- **Line 35:** “reaped their sowing and went their came”

## REPETITION

In addition to [diacope](#) and [parallelism](#), the poem features lots of more general [repetition](#). For one thing, the speaker repeatedly turns to words related to dancing, dreams, reaping, sowing, laughter, and crying. The repetitive vocabulary of the poem is important for establishing the idea that the people in this town live very similar lives, that they all essentially go about the same routines.

Various [refrains](#) in the poem also enact the poem's idea that this world is cyclical, that people follow the same routines over and over again, just as day turns to night, sunshine turns to rain, and the world moves through the seasons. The use of repetition further reflects the poem's idea that people's approach to life is passed down from one generation to the next. More specifically, “up so floating many bells down” indicates the passage of time and major life events—both of which are commonly marked by chiming bells.

The speaker repeatedly lists out the seasons—albeit with changing orders—and times of day/weather events. Both of these have clear [symbolic](#) resonance (see the Symbols entry for more), and essentially never let the reader forget the passage of time contextualizing everything that is happening in the poem. As no one and anyone go about their romance, the world is still turning as it always does, and as indeed it will when they die. In a way, these refrains remind the reader that the natural world is indifferent to the poem's events—time goes on and the

earth keeps spinning.

But they can also be thought of as suggesting that human life and death is part of its own cycle as well; in the end, anyone and noone's bodies are buried in the earth, which nurtures new life the following "april." The repetition of cycles in the poem—the return again and again to lines about the natural world and the passage of time—is essentially enacting what the poem is about.

#### Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "up so floating many bells down"
- **Line 3:** "spring summer autumn winter"
- **Line 4:** "he sang his didn't he danced his did."
- **Line 5:** "Women and men"
- **Lines 7-8:** "they sowed their isn't they reaped their same / sun moon stars rain"
- **Line 11:** "autumn winter spring summer"
- **Line 14:** "she laughed his joy she cried his grief"
- **Line 18:** "laughed their cryings and did their dance"
- **Line 20:** "they slept their dream"
- **Line 21:** "stars rain sun moon"
- **Line 24:** "up so floating many bells down"
- **Line 30:** "they dream their sleep"
- **Line 33:** "Women and men"
- **Lines 34-36:** "summer autumn winter spring / reaped their sowing and went their came / sun moon stars rain"

**Sowed** (Line 7, Line 35) - Planted.

**Reaped** (Line 7, Line 35) - Harvested.



## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

While this poem does not fall into an established verse form, it does follow its own set of rules. In particular, it is made up of nine [quatrains](#), or four-line [stanzas](#). Throughout the poem, the speaker cycles through four seasons as well as four phases or conditions of the sky. As such, the repeating quatrain structure reflects nature's regularity—both progress through the same four elements over and over again. Furthermore, the poem's repetitive format is consistent with the rigid conformity of the townspeople, who are expected to follow an established routine in order to find success within their society.

This poem contains short lines, which divide sprawling sentences into smaller units. Because the poem seems to begin and end mid-sentence, the love story of anyone and noone can be seen as one episode within a larger history. The poem's structure is therefore consistent with the speaker's message that the cycles of the natural world (and of this society) are indifferent to the events of individuals' lives.

### METER

"anyone lived in a pretty how town" is an example of accentual verse, meaning that each line contains the same number of stresses (or beats). In this case, there are four stresses per line, but precisely where those stresses fall varies. For instance, here is a look at the meter in stanza 2:

Women and men(both little and small)  
cared for anyone not at all  
they sowed their isn't they reaped their same  
sun moon stars rain

Because the speaker's cadence never settles into repeating metrical patterns, the rhythm is unable to build or lose momentum (i.e., speed up or slow down). Rather, the four stresses in each line create a steady plodding effect, almost like a metronome that maintains a regular rhythm. The consistent pulse of the accentual verse is reminiscent of bells that chime to mark the time. It also mirrors the repetitive cycles of the natural world and the predictable lives of the townspeople.

Furthermore, given the speaker's unconventional phrasing, the rhythmic regularity creates a sense of order and logic. The steady beat also produces pauses where punctuation would normally occur. This effect is especially helpful when the speaker recites lists (as in "sleep wake hope and then" or "sun moon stars rain"), as it prevents list items from running into one another.



## VOCABULARY

**How** (Line 1) - "How" is being used in an interesting way here. The speaker might be using it as a standard adverb meaning "in what way." That is, maybe the speaker is asking *how* the town is pretty, or even how it's *possible* that the town is pretty. Or, perhaps, "how" is a kind of adjective being used to describe "town"—i.e., this is a "how town." What's a "how town"? Good question! This isn't a typical phrase, and might mean a place that exemplifies the "how" of life—that is, the way life is.

**Didn't/did** (Line 4) - This probably refers to the things anyone didn't do in life—his regrets—vs. the things he actually accomplished.

**Their isn't/same** (Line 7) - The phrasing here is ambiguous, but like anyone's "didn't" and "did," the townspeople's "isn't" might refer to the things they never accomplished in life. Planting their "isn't" might be a way of saying that they made sacrifices in order to "reap"—harvest—"their same," perhaps a [metaphorical](#) reference to children (who will grow up to have lives just like those of their parents). Alternatively, the lines could be saying the townspeople buried their regrets about everything they never did in the ground, and as such never were able to break out of the monotony of their lives.



Interestingly, accentual verse is very common in nursery rhymes and other children's poetry. In combination with rhyme, the speaker's cadence gives the poem a lighthearted feel while ensuring that it is memorable. The experiences of anyone and noone thus come across as a quintessential love story that helps children understand the world they live in.

## RHYME SCHEME

This poem loosely follows an AABB [rhyme scheme](#). In the second stanza, for example, there are the rhyme pairs "small"/"all" and "same"/"rain" (a [slant rhyme](#)).

Not every [stanza](#) adheres to this pattern. Oftentimes, end words contain *similar* sounds but do not necessarily rhyme, as in "winter" and "did" in stanza 1. Yet whether via perfect rhymes, slant rhymes, [assonance](#), or [consonance](#), such echoing sounds create a musicality that recalls the "dong and ding" of chiming bells.

The rhyme scheme breaks down as the poem progresses, all but disappearing by the fifth stanza ("someones ... their dream"). Here, the speaker describes the townspeople going about their lives and children growing up, paying no mind to the bond between anyone and noone. The absence of sonic harmony reflects the disconnection among the residents of the town. However, the rhyme scheme recovers as anyone and noone become one with the earth and foster new life. The final stanza follows an AABB rhyme scheme once again, providing a sense of completion at the poem's conclusion.

repeat over and over, so this particular episode could theoretically take place at any point in time.

If the speaker's representation of the town is taken literally, it has a bell tower, a four-season climate, and its land is arable (i.e., able to be cultivated). However, because these three images act as [symbols](#) within the poem, it would be fair to deduce that the poem could take place within any society that emphasizes individual achievement. Indeed, the residents of the town are "busy folk" who are so focused on their own lives that they "cared for anyone not at all."

The setting is introduced as "a pretty how town," which can be interpreted variously. The speaker often switches around conventional sentence structures, so this line might be read, "anyone lives in how pretty a town." In other words, the town is quaint and picturesque—the kind of town that is broadly considered the ideal place to raise a family, such as an American suburb. The lack of physical detail and distinguishing features allows many readers to see their society reflected in the town.



## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

Because he grew up in the northeastern United States in the early 20th century, Cummings was exposed to [transcendentalist](#) literature from a young age. Writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson ("[Self-Reliance](#)") promoted self-sufficiency, including the belief that becoming independent of society and its institutions unlocks the inherent goodness of individuals. Transcendentalists also cherished the natural world and believed that individuals should commune with nature to uncover their personal relationship with the universe. The influence of this movement on Cummings is unmistakable—he often wrote about nature and conformity as a barrier to individuality.

However, Cummings is most often cited as a modernist poet. "Modernism" is a term used to describe a series of artistic movements that took hold during the first half of the 20th century. In literature, modernism broadly denotes a break from linguistic convention—traditional verse forms, sentence structures, grammar, and so on. Indeed, Cummings's work is highly experimental. His poetry often plays with parts of speech (e.g., using a verb as a noun), upends familiar sentence structures, and makes minimal use of punctuation and capitalization. Cummings also experimented with layout and wrote a great deal of visual poetry. On top of all of his writing endeavors—fiction, essays, plays, thousands of poems—Cummings was also an avid painter.

Cummings's reputation and style were well-established by the time this poem was published in 1940. Many critics note that both his style and his subject hardly changed from the 1920s until the end of his career. However, during this time, his



## SPEAKER

The audience learns very little about the speaker, who is an omniscient narrator. In other words, the speaker does not partake in the poem's events, but rather observes and relates them. What's more, the narrator does not adopt any distinct perspective or bias that reveals the speaker's personal feelings. On the contrary, the speaker comes across as detached, never evaluating the poem's events. Even when the poem's [protagonist](#) dies, the speaker displays no emotion, simply stating, "one day anyone died i guess." Further, the speaker's plodding cadence and frequent repetition contribute to this evenhanded—even cold and droning—quality to the narration. As the speaker plainly reports the goings on of the town, their interpretation is left up to the reader—one of the reasons why this poem can be understood in many different ways.



## SETTING

The time and location of the poem's events are very ambiguous. The speaker describes various natural cycles—seasons, phases of the sky, human life—to suggest that the love story is one moment within an endless loop. In this town, similar events

portrayal of love shifted away from explicitly sexual to more romantic and spiritual themes. The speaker of “anyone lived in a pretty how town” considers love as a means to lasting fulfillment. This poem is thus consistent with such a trajectory.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Cummings published “anyone lived in a pretty how town” as the Great Depression was coming to a close in the United States. This period of catastrophic economic depression exposed the failings of America’s most powerful institutions and initially sparked a revolutionary sentiment.

However, by the end of this decade-long crisis, Americans were worn-out and nostalgic for earlier days. Calls for sweeping transformations of the nation’s economic and political systems gave way to calls for normalcy. The resulting glorification of traditional values held up the nuclear family as the fundamental building block for a productive society.

Moreover, suburban areas saw massive developments during the first half of the 20th century. Suburbanization gained speed shortly after this poem was published, but the mass migration from central urban areas to their outskirts was well underway by the end of the 1930s. Even during the depression, films and radio shows presented largely aspirational pictures of American life. They tended to follow a familiar formula—a husband and wife, their children, economic prosperity, and contentment.

During Cummings's lifetime, it became increasingly apparent that humans were significantly harming the environment. Factory expansion led to more air and water pollution, which posed serious health concerns. Beginning in the early 1930s, the Dust Bowl devastated the midwestern and southern area of the Great Plains. This human-made natural disaster resulted from the over-cultivation of land. During drought periods, nutrient-depleted topsoil created dust storms that killed people, livestock, and plants while destroying the landscape. Such events reaffirmed Cummings’s anti-establishment views and desire to break from societal conventions.

Cummings reading his poem aloud in 1953.

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DTuCIB9Xh6w>)

- [Structure and Form in the Poet's Work](#) — An overview of Cummings's expansive experimentation with form and structure, including images of relevant examples. (<https://owlcation.com/humanities/EE-Cummings-The-Power-of-Structure-and-Form>)
- [The Life and Work of Cummings](#) — A detailed introduction to the poet, including biographical information, an overview of his writings and their reception, and links to a selection of his poems. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/e-e-cummings>)
- [Cummings the Painter](#) — Explore the relationship between Cummings's poetry and painting through images of his art. (<https://www.brainpickings.org/2017/10/05/e-e-cummings-painting/>)
- [George Lucas's Film Adaptation](#) — Watch a film inspired by the Cummings poem, made by Star Wars creator George Lucas in 1967 when he was a student. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QR2gs3qASsw>)

## LITCHARTS ON OTHER E. E. CUMMINGS POEMS

- [i carry your heart with me\(i carry it in](#)



## HOW TO CITE

### MLA

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### CHICAGO MANUAL

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## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [The Poem Out Loud](#) — Listen to a recording of E. E.