Barn Owl

SUMMARY

At dawn, the whole family was asleep. I woke up early, and the morning sun felt like approval. A devilish mischief-maker, I snuck out of the house with my father's gun. Let him dream of me as a rule-following, perfectly-behaved child.

That old tyrant, my father—he was asleep and therefore powerless to stop me. I knew where to find my prize: the owl who flew home in the morning, eyes burdened by the daylight, back to his favorite spot on a rafter in our family's old stables.

There he'd sleep the useless light of day away. I stood in the hay that smelled like urine, trying not to breathe, feeling like the commander of life and death. I may have had a child's wispy hair, but I was the judge whose ruling would punish the vicious barn owl.

My first gunshot hit the bird. He wobbled, destroyed but still alive, flapping his one remaining wing. I looked on, suddenly afraid of the gun that I let fall to the ground. I was just a child, all alone, a child who had thought death was orderly and definitive, nothing like this horrifying sight.

The unrecognizable body fell from the beam and bled all over the loose straw, getting tangled up in its own guts, hopping blindly closer to me. I saw, in the owl's sightless eyes, my own cruelty mirrored back at me.

The destroyed bird, which could not stand the light but could not hide away either, staggered in its own blood. Suddenly, my father was at my side, handing me the gun I had dropped. "Finish what you started," he said.

I fired the gun. The owl's blind eyes lit up one last time, meeting mine, and then he died. I buried my face in my father's arm, and sobbed, blind with tears, like the owl, as the morning sun continued to rise, crying over everything I had done.

THEMES

COMING OF AGE AND LOSS OF INNOCENCE

"Barn Owl" captures a pivotal moment in a child's coming of age. The speaker, hoping to prove they are no longer a mere rule-following child but rather a mature "master of life and death," shoots a barn owl with their father's gun. To the speaker's shock and horror, however, the violence they inflict on the owl only serves as a reflection of the speaker's own immaturity and leads to a painful loss of innocence. The poem closes on an image of the speaker weeping for what they have done to both the owl and themselves, illustrating the danger and tragedy of a child trying to grow up too soon.

The speaker is clearly impatient to grow up, characterizing themselves as a "horny fiend" bent on rebellion against their father—that "old no-sayer," who is asleep when the speaker steals his gun and sneaks out of the house to shoot a barn owl. At first, then, the speaker only views the barn owl through the prism of personal ambitions. The owl is described as "my prize" and symbolically depicted sitting "on a high beam," an implicit comparison to a pedestal. In short, the owl is the perfect target for the speaker, who sees themselves as "a wisp-haired judge whose law / would punish beak and claw." The owl's perspective as a living thing is entirely ignored in favor of the speaker's desire to dominate the owl and prove themselves powerful and grown-up.

After the first shot, however, the speaker swiftly realizes they have made a mistake. The shot fails to kill the owl, leaving the speaker to face the cruelty of their violent actions, watching, "afraid" as the owl "sway[s], / ruined / beating his only / wing." Confronted with this terrible violence, the speaker realizes they are not grown-up at all, but rather "a lonely / child [...] who believed death clean" up until that terrible moment.

As the poem goes on to describe, the speaker's attack on the owl is anything but clean. The wounded owl "dribble[s]" its bowels across the straw, and "hop[s] blindly closer," a "wrecked thing." In the owl's dying eyes, the speaker sees a reflection of "my cruelty," recognizing how terrible their actions really were. Ironically, this recognition indicates the speaker *has* gained a newfound maturity—but not in the way the speaker imagined.

The sound of the gunshot must wake the speaker's father, for he appears, hands the speaker "the fallen gun," and instructs his child to "End what you have begun." Here, the poem suggests that by making the speaker put the bird out of its misery, the father is holding the speaker accountable for their actions, just as he would a fellow adult. In other words, the speaker has been granted their wish: to be treated like a grown-up.

The speaker, however, is still a child, and like a child, after shooting the owl to death, "lean[s] my head upon / my father's arm, and we[eps...] / for what I had begun." This final line can be read two ways: as the speaker weeping over their murder of the owl, but also as the speaker mourning their loss of innocence. In a rush to grow up, the speaker has indeed triggered their own coming of age, but now possesses the wisdom to understand what a tragic mistake it was to leave childhood behind so soon.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-42

DEATH AND MORTALITY

"Barn Owl" opens with the speaker, a child, setting out to shoot an owl in order to prove their maturity. From the start, then, the poem links death and coming of age. The speaker is blithely unaware of this connection at first, however, naively believing death to be "clean / and final" and seeing their attack on the owl only as an opportunity to prove themselves. When the speaker is confronted firsthand with the wounded bird, however, they learn the hard way that death is in fact painful and messy, an "obscene" horror linked to suffering. Though the speaker does indeed gain newfound maturity, it is not the powerful adult identity they expected, but instead the brutal discovery of the dark reality of death.

As befits the speaker's initial innocence, death is not mentioned explicitly in the first half of the poem. Only after the speaker shoots the owl, but fails to kill it, does death make an explicit entrance. The speaker drops the gun, "afraid," and describes themselves as, until that moment, "a lonely / child who [had] believed death clean / and final."

Of course, death is anything but clean here, and the speaker is now confronted with death's gruesome reality: the wounded owl becomes an "obscene / bundle of stuff that dropped, / and dribbled through the loose straw / tangling in bowels, and hopped / blindly closer." Only now does the speaker realize how truly horrifying death really is.

When the speaker's father forces the speaker to put the owl out of its misery, the speaker weeps—not only for the dead owl, but for themselves, having realized for the first time how messy and painful death can be, and how cruel it was to inflict that horror on another living creature. Ironically, by gaining insight into death in this painful fashion, the speaker does indeed move closer to adulthood. But because the speaker has learned this lesson by confronting death so vividly, the speaker is now also newly aware of their *own* mortality—an essential, but challenging, part of growing up.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-42

HUMANITY VS. NATURE

At the heart of "Barn Owl" is a conflict between the poem's speaker, a human child, and an owl, a creature of the natural world. The speaker sets out to shoot the owl for sport and personal gain, but fails kill the owl with the first shot. In the face of the owl's suffering and gruesome wound, the speaker suddenly realizes that human dominance over the natural world is not a given—and moreover, that trying to assert such dominance is wrong.

The poem makes the speaker's familiarity with the natural world clear from the start. The speaker rises at "daybreak [...] blessed by the sun," and is familiar enough with animal habits to be certain that they will find the owl sleeping in "his place on a high beam / in our old stables."

Nevertheless, despite this comfort and familiarity with the natural world, the speaker still views it as a thing to be dominated and destroyed. As a human being, the speaker casts themselves in the role of "master of life and death," and sees their job as "punish[ing] beak and claw." Though this description of the owl implicitly recognizes the owl's own strengths, the speaker nevertheless believes themselves dominant over even this powerful creature.

As soon as the speaker shoots the owl, however, they realize they are wrong. The speaker describes the owl as "ruined," implicitly acknowledging that they have defiled what was a beautiful natural creature. And having previously seen themselves as above the owl, the speaker now recognizes the bird as an equal, stating that the owl's eyes "mirror my cruelty," one living thing looking on another.

By the poem's conclusion, the speaker's confidence in their human dominance over the natural world has come to an end. The speaker's father orders his child to "end what you have begun," and the speaker fires another shot to put the owl out of its misery. Then the speaker weeps, clearly regretful of what they have done, ultimately condemning their human urge to want to destroy nature just because they felt they could.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-42

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Daybreak: the household ...
... my father's gun.

From its start, "Barn Owl" is a poem marked by tension and high stakes. Three of the first four lines are interrupted by caesura—in the first line's case, immediately after the first word, "Daybreak." These interruptions build anticipation, especially that first colon, which suggests an emphatic declaration or decision, creating the sense that the speaker of the poem is on a mission. And indeed, the speaker, introduced here via the first-person, is certainly up to something. The speaker is described as a "horny fiend," creeping out of the house at dawn while the rest of "the household" sleeps—armed with their "father's gun."

This ominous hint of violence is further emphasized by the poem's language, particularly its use of consonance. The hushed sibilance of repeated /s/ sounds evoke the speaker's caution as they sneak out quietly with the stolen gun. Likewise,

the sharp /pt/ sounds at the end of "slept" and "crept" have a sharp but sneaky quality. The alliterative /f/ sounds linking "fiend" and "father" sound fierce, again hinting at violence or wrongdoing.

At the same time, however, the speaker's actions suggest they are unaware of the sense of dread hinted at by the poem's language. In fact, the speaker sees their actions as "blessed by the sun," metaphorically interpreting the early morning light as a sign of approval.

The neat rhyme scheme of these first four lines—"slept" and "crept," "sun" and "gun"—likewise feels safe, orderly, and ultimately affirming. This mixture of ominous and upbeat poetic devices suggests that the events of the poem are more complex than the speaker realizes. In particular, the striking symbol of the gun insists on readers taking this moment seriously—even if the speaker does not yet.

LINES 5-8

Let him dream ...
... by sleep.

Lines 5-8 slip readers directly into the speaker's thoughts, giving them insight into the speaker's motivations. They also definitively introduce the speaker as "a child," but one who is eager to grow up and prove themselves, as the following lines make clear. The speaker defines themselves in opposition to their father, the "old no-sayer" and obvious authority figure, whom the speaker gleefully describes as having been "robbed of power / by sleep" while his child sneaks out. "Let him dream of a child / obedient!" the speaker scoffs—while in reality the speaker is seizing their father's power for themselves, quite literally, in the form of his gun.

The language here is as wild and reckless as the speaker feels, barreling forward through heavy use of asyndeton. The sentences also jump across line and stanza breaks, using enjambment to further convey a breathless momentum. In addition, the end rhyme scheme that has characterized the poem thus far is suddenly interrupted in line 6, which reaches for a slant rhyme ("child" and "mind"), sacrificing perfect rhyme in favor of the memorable phrase "angel-mind"—emphasizing exactly what the speaker wishes *not* to be.

Interestingly, these lines also suggest a slight gap between the speaker of the poem in the moment of its telling, and the speaker at the time of the story. The lines, which are written in the child's voice, are petulant and rebellious: "let him dream" and "old no-sayer" suggest a child's limited understanding of the grown-up world. On the other hand, the lines preceding these suggest a wiser speaker than the child is—after all, would this petulant child think of themselves as a "horny fiend" in this moment, or a bold rebel? Lines 5-8 suggest the latter, and in doing so, imply that the speaker of the poem is recounting a memory from childhood. Though the speaker *is* the child, by the time they are telling this story (or writing this poem, so to speak), they can do so with some distance—and greater insight than the child-speaker had at the time.

LINES 8-13

I knew my ...
... useless time away.

Finally, the speaker reveals what they are up to: hunting the barn owl of the poem's title. Of course, the speaker does not refer to the owl as such. Instead, the speaker calls it "my prize," making both their goal and their perspective on the owl strikingly clear. Though the speaker is evidently familiar with the owl's habits, and knows that it "swoop[s] home at this hour" to roost "in our old stables," nevertheless the speaker only sees and describes the owl through the lens of their own ambition. The owl is a "prize" that sits on a "high beam"—the perfect target. The strong assonance in this section underscores the child's sense of security; the speaker's tone is confident and self-assured, reflected by the rhythmic repetition of /oo/ and /i/ sounds:

> [...] I knew my prize
> who swooped home at this hour

In addition, the speaker describes the owl as possessing "daylight riddled eyes" and preferring to "dream / light's useless time away." This draws a distinction between the speaker, who earlier considered themselves "blessed by the sun," and the owl, a nocturnal creature that struggles to see in the light. The symbolism here is interesting: owls are stereotypically considered "wise" creatures, yet the common association between knowledge and clarity of vision or sight does not apply to this owl. Instead, the wise creature is one of darkness, a bird smart enough to sleep the "useless" day away.

This surprising symbolism is implicitly juxtaposed with the speaker's own symbolic associations. In the daylight, the speaker can not only see, but see so well that they plan to take aim with a gun. The sharp contrast between the speaker and the owl implies that in this poem, light and strong eyesight go hand-in-hand not with wisdom, but with recklessness—as further evidenced by the speaker's robbery of their father's gun.

LINES 14-18

I stood, holding ...
... beak and claw.

Lines 14-15 set the scene of the attack via vivid imagery. The speaker describes "holding [their] breath" in the "urine-scented hay" of the old stables as they approach the barn owl. Beginning with line 16, however, the details depart from the tangible and enter the realm of imagination, capturing the grandiose (but inaccurate) way the speaker sees themselves: a "master of life and death," and "judge" wielding the power of the

"law."

The asyndeton here, as earlier in the poem, conveys the breathlessness and excitement that the speaker feels, as tension rises and the moment the speaker has been waiting for draws near. At the same time, the neat end rhymes and regular rhythm suggest an orderliness and predictability that don't quite match the true stakes of the situation, given that the speaker is carrying a gun. The speaker is play-acting at power, and the language itself gives that away, reminding readers of the speaker's youth and innocence.

So too does the description of the speaker as "wisp-haired." This phrase offers another hint at the distance between the child in the poem and the speaker recounting its events later on. It conjures an image of a small child with wispy hair, reminding readers that the person who sees themselves as "master of life and death" is just a kid. This child may see themselves as mighty, but "wisp-haired" reminds readers to take everything the speaker says with a grain of salt—including their characterization of the owl as a dangerous creature of "beak and claw," when in fact the owl is innocently sleeping.

LINES 19-22

My first shot ...
... the fallen gun,

Line 19 captures the moment when the speaker fires the gun at the owl. The short, staccato, consonance of "first shot struck," followed by a caesura, drive home the significance of the moment, as the poem's rhythm comes to an abrupt halt, much like the sudden burst of a gunshot.

Given the speaker's initial ambitions, readers might expect this to be a moment of triumph. Instead, the speaker's response is to drop the gun to the ground, "afraid." Confronted with the results of their violent act, the speaker seems unable to look away; they look on as the owl "sway[s], / ruined, beating his only / wing."

The vivid imagery not only conveys the depth of the bird's injury, but also underscores the fact that the speaker has failed in their mission to kill the owl. As a result, the speaker is unexpectedly forced to face the brutal consequences of their violent actions, which include terrible suffering for the maimed bird. The adjective "ruined" is key here. The owl, formerly identified as a "prize" to be defeated and won, is now acknowledged as another living thing, once a beautiful creature of the natural world, who has been destroyed.This moment in the poem captures the speaker's sudden shift in self-awareness, as they begin to see their violence in a new light.

LINES 22-24

a lonely ...
... not this obscene

Lines 22-24 further the poem's evolution in the speaker's sense of self as they reflect on who they were in the moment before the gunshot, and after. Before this moment of violence, the speaker says, they were merely "a lonely child," one "who believed death clean / and final." Indeed, the poem thus far has borne this out via its language, using neat rhyme and lilting assonance and consonance to capture the comfort, orderliness, and predictability that makes up the child's worldview. Note the /l/, /d/, /b/, and long /ee/ and /i/ sounds:

> [...] a lonely
> child who believed death clean
> and final, not this obscene

However, this moment has shattered those childlike illusions. The long hollow /o/ sound in "lonely," contrasting with the grating /ee/ sounds of "clean" and "obscene," help capture the emotions at play, as the speaker's understanding of the world begins to shift. Though "not this obscene" contains only a hint of the contrasting clause that continues into the next line and stanza, it nevertheless dramatically highlights the difference between the speaker's imagination and the reality of killing the owl. Violence *is* "obscene," not a game to be acted out with grown-ups' toys, as the speaker once believed.

Key to this moment is the poem's use of asyndeton, connecting these lines to those that preceded them *and* those that come after in a rush, mimicking the child's overwhelming emotions.

LINES 25-28

bundle of stuff ...
... blindly closer.

Lines 25-28 include some of the poem's most graphic imagery. Dedicated to the describing the wounded owl, the poem uses precise and devastating verbs like "drop," "dribble," "tangle," and "hop" to convey the depth of the bird's wounds and the way it advances on the horrified speaker. The description of the owl's body as a mere "bundle of stuff" captures the sickening transformation of the living creature into a scary mess of body parts on the brink of death. The asyndeton in these lines also suggests the speaker's mounting horror, and the way they cannot look away from what they've done to the owl.

What's more, the poem also uses a combination of alliteration and consonance to create a claustrophobic wall of sound that sinks readers into those same feelings of horror and disgust. The repetition of the /dr/ sounds in "dropped" and "dribbled," the thudding /d/, /b/, and /p/ sounds in "dropped, "dribbled," "hopped," "bundle," "bowels," and "blindly," and the slippery /l/ sounds and hissing /s/ sounds in "stuff," "loose," "straw," "tangling," "bowels" and "closer," all evoke the terror the speaker feels as they look upon the bird, stumbling around, wing shot off, in its own guts and blood.

LINES 28-33

I saw ...
... its own blood.

As the dying owl hops closer, it and the speaker make eye contact. Lines 28-30 describe the speaker's reaction to this moment, using sibilance, assonance, and consonance to continue to evoke the feelings of horror (and, increasingly, guilt) that the speaker feels:

> [...] I saw
> those eyes that did not see
> mirror my cruelty

The symbolism of eyes and sight returns in full force here, as the blind bird looks upon the sighted child. There, in the owl's sightless eyes, the speaker imagines they can see their own cruelty reflected back at them. In other words, the owl's blinded state serves as a condemnation of the speaker's misguided actions and ambitions. For the first time in the poem, the speaker acknowledges that what they have done is "cruel."

In the lines that follow, this symbolism of blindness continues, linking the owl's sightless state to darkness. Here, the poem explicitly ties the fact that the owl cannot "bear the light nor hide" from it to its imminent death. Once again, the choice of an inanimate noun—"wrecked thing"—underscores the owl's destroyed state. The fact that the poem veers away from its neat and predictable end rhyme scheme, in order to describe the owl as "hobbling in its own blood" rather than find a perfect rhyme for "could," suggests on the very level of the language that this encounter with the owl is changing the speaker's perspective on the world and their actions within it.

LINES 34-36

My father reached ...
... you have begun.'

The speaker's father enters the poem abruptly in line 34. Presumably, the sound of the gunshot has woken him; however this sudden description of the father "reach[ing] my side" mirrors the speaker's surprise at their father's arrival. This surprise is furthered by the use of asyndeton to convey, in two brief lines, the father's demand, as he hands his child "the fallen gun." In the poem's only line of dialogue, the father says, "End what you have begun." In other words: shoot the owl again, and end its misery.

The repetition of "the fallen gun" (which first appeared in line 22) underscores the speaker's fear of the weapon and its violent effects, which the poem has been unpacking over the previous stanzas, as well as the child's inability to wield both the literal weapon and the adult responsibility it symbolizes. Nevertheless, the father, who could easily shoot the owl himself, insists upon his child doing the deed. In doing so, he facilitates the second most pivotal moment of the poem, ushering along his child's coming of age as he forces the speaker to shoot again, and holds his child accountable for the adult power and responsibility they tried to wield too soon. (The back-to-back end rhyme of "begun" and "gun" here adds emphasis and weight—readers cannot shy away from the sound of the "gun," and neither can the speaker.)

LINES 37-38

I fired. The ...
... mine, and slept.

Immediately reminiscent of line 19, when the speaker first shoots the owl, line 37 opens with a very short sentence and instance of caesura: "I fired." Once again, the abrupt stop to the sentence mimics the sound and impact of the gunshot, as the speaker shoots the owl a second time. This time, the speaker succeeds in killing the bird, though they use a euphemistic metaphor, saying instead that the owl "slept" instead of died. The speaker's bravado from the beginning of the poem has completely disappeared in the wake of so much violence and horror; now the speaker can barely face what they have done.

The owl does not let the speaker off the hook quite so easily, however. The poem describes the owl's "blank eyes" as shining into the speaker's one last time before dying. This repetition of significant eye contact between the two, which first took place in line 30, when the bird's eyes reflected the speaker's "cruelty," serves as a final indictment of the speaker's violence toward the bird, as well as their immature decision to play at being grown up with a gun. It also contributes to the symbolic resonance of eyes and sight in the poem, suggesting that in this final moment before its blind eyes close forever, the owl imparts from scraps of wisdom to the speaker.

LINES 39-42

I leaned my ...
... I had begun

"Barn Owl" closes with two final invocations of eyes and sight: the speaker "leans [their] head" on their father's arm and begins to cry, describing themselves as "owl blind." Literally unable to face the barn owl they have just killed, the speaker hides their eyes and looks away—but the poem's choice of symbol and metaphor, "owl blind," suggests that nevertheless the speaker is reckoning with what they have done. Throughout the poem, the owl was consistently described as blind and sightless, but nevertheless represented an awareness of the world and wisdom that the speaker, on the other hand, did not possess.

After this brutal encounter, however, the speaker appears to have gained a bit of that wisdom. Not only do they join the owl in metaphorical blindness, but they are crying over "what I had begun." This repeated line, echoing the father's instructions to shoot again and end the owl's misery, is a literal reference to

the terrible crime the speaker committed against the owl.

However, the vagueness of the word "what" also allows the phrase to extend into a deeper metaphor, referring to something else that has begun—the speaker's coming-of-age. Ironically, the speaker set forth at the beginning of the poem with a stolen gun, determined to prove that they were already grown-up and powerful. Over the course of the poem, however, the speaker has learned that they are anything but. This *recognition* of the speaker's own innocence and immaturity, however, serves as the first step toward adulthood. By reckoning with what they have done to the owl, the speaker reckons too with their new maturity, and weeps over their lost innocence, gone before it needed to be.

SYMBOLS

LIGHT AND DARKNESS

Throughout "Barn Owl," light and darkness symbolize life/youth and maturity/death. For starters, the poem opens at "daybreak," as the speaker awakes before anyone else and describes themselves as "blessed by the sun." The speaker is clearly young and full of vitality, with a long life ahead, all of which becomes linked with the morning sun and the light that the owl, a nocturnal creature, "[can]not bear."

Unlike the owl, the speaker is invigorated by the bright morning light; their eyes are not "day-light riddled" but rather focused on "my prize" asleep on the high beam. Light is not "useless" to the speaker but rather an opportunity to achieve their goal. Owls, meanwhile, are closely linked to darkness even beyond the events of this poem, since they are creatures that hunt at night and "dream light's useless time away" during the day.

The speaker gets their wish, and in return for shooting the owl and gaining new maturity, is introduced to darkness and death. The poem closes by describing the speaker as "owl blind in the early sun," weeping with regret for the suffering they have caused the owl, and for the hard lesson they have just learned about life and death. This mixed metaphor of both dark and light captures exactly where the speaker is in life: young as the "early sun," with many years left to live, but newly older and wiser, "blind" like the owl now that they have confronted the dark reality of death.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Daybreak"
- **Line 2:** "I rose, blessed by the sun."
- **Lines 9-10:** "swooped home at this hour / with day-light riddled eyes"
- **Lines 12-13:** "dream / light's useless time away."
- **Lines 16-17:** "master of life and death, / a wisp-haired judge"
- **Lines 27-29:** "hopped / blindly closer. I saw / those eyes that did not see"
- **Lines 31-32:** " the wrecked thing that could / not bear the light"
- **Lines 37-38:** "The blank eyes shone / once into mine, and slept."
- **Line 41:** "owl blind in early sun"

EYES AND SIGHT

Eyes and sight play an important symbolic role in "Barn Owl." Throughout literature, vision and sight are often linked with knowledge, but interestingly, "Barn Owl" flips the popular associations with this symbol on its head. Here, the owl—a bird associated with wisdom—is described as blind and unable to see, while the speaker, who *can* see, is foolish and immature, using their sense of sight toward violent, selfish ends. The speaker's sight thus becomes associated with ignorance and hubris, with a kind of misguided overconfidence in one's knowledge of the world. Blindness, meanwhile, comes to represent genuine wisdom and maturity, guided by an awareness of how little one *actually* knows.

The speaker begins the poem feeling confident in their superiority to the owl, which finds the light of day "useless" (because owls are nocturnal creatures). The owl's eyes are unaccustomed to daylight, making it effectively blind when the speaker approaches it. Just because the speaker can see more than the owl, however, doesn't mean that the speaker *understands* their surroundings any better.

Later, when the speaker is faced with the horrific damage they've done to the owl, they can only "watch, afraid," their eyes suddenly put toward new purpose: soaking up some fresh wisdom and maturity. The vivid imagery used to describe the wounded owl—"obscene / bundle of stuff that dropped, / and dribbled through the loose straw"—takes up five lines, suggesting that the speaker is unable to look away from the harm they've done. What's more, the speaker looks upon the owl and sees "those eyes that did not see / mirror my cruelty," suggesting that the owl's blinded state serves as a reflection—and condemnation—of the speaker's own hubris and misguided ambitions.

Unsurprisingly, the speaker is a changed person by the close of the poem. As the owl dies, the speaker says that its "the blank eyes shone / once into mine, and slept," describing one final connection between the speaker and the bird that seems to impart some of the owl's wisdom upon the speaker. No longer able to bear witness, the speaker instead leans their "head upon / [their] father's arm," and weeps, for what they have done and "what [they have] begun"—the painful process of growing

up, and seeing the world—and themselves—more clearly.

The poem describes the speaker as "owl blind," emphasizing the symbolic link between blindness and knowledge. The poem suggests that real maturity is tied to knowledge and awareness, in this case, the speaker's new awareness of their immaturity and ignorance at the poem's start.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-11:** " I knew my prize / who swooped home at this hour / with day-light riddled eyes / to his place on a high beam"
- **Line 21:** "I watched, afraid"
- **Lines 27-33:** "hopped / blindly closer. I saw / those eyes that did not see / mirror my cruelty / while the wrecked thing that could / not bear the light nor hide / hobbled in its own blood."
- **Lines 37-38:** "The blank eyes shone / once into mine, and slept."
- **Lines 39-41:** "I leaned my head upon / my father's arm, and wept, / owl blind"

THE GUN

The gun in "Barn Owl" symbolizes both power and adult responsibility. Importantly, the gun does not belong to the speaker—it is the speaker's "father's gun," and must be "crept out with" in secret while the speaker's father is fast asleep—but the fact that the speaker is so eager to use it reflects the speaker's deep desire to grow up. And carrying the gun does, at least at the beginning, make the speaker feel powerful: like a "master of life and death," transforming the weapon, in their eyes, into "law" that will "punish beak and claw."

But when the speaker finally does shoot the owl, and fails to kill the bird, they do not react in a mature or adult way to the terrible wound they have inflicted. Instead, the speaker drops the gun to the ground. When face-to-face with the reality of the "obscene" violence a gun can produce, the speaker is no longer powerful, but instead "afraid" of the weapon they have just used. In other words, the speaker is not an adult, and suddenly realizes they are not ready to live up to the adult responsibility that carrying a gun implies.

The gunshot presumably wakes the speaker's father, who arrives on the scene and hands the speaker "the fallen gun," instructing the speaker to put the bird out of its misery. Of course, the father, to whom the gun belongs, is more than capable of doing so himself. By forcing his child to perform the deed, however, the father explicitly demands that his child live up to the adult responsibility that they themselves claimed by stealing and using the gun—however difficult the speaker finds it. In doing so, the father helps to facilitate his child's coming of age, reinforcing the implicit link between power, adulthood, and the gun itself, while underscoring the danger of trying to grow up too soon.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "A horny fiend, I crept / out with my father's gun."
- **Line 7:** "robbed of power"
- **Lines 16-18:** "master of life and death, / a wisp-haired judge whose law / would punish beak and claw."
- **Lines 19-22:** "My first shot struck. He swayed, / ruined, beating his only / wing, as I watched, afraid / by the fallen gun,"
- **Lines 34-36:** "My father reached my side, / gave me the fallen gun. / 'End what you have begun.'"
- **Line 37:** "I fired. "
- **Lines 40-42:** "wept, / owl blind in early sun / for what I had begun"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is a subtle but importance presence in "Barn Owl." In the first three stanzas, fleeting moments of alliteration add sonic interest to the poem and suggest a relationship between certain words. The shared /f/ of "fiend" and "father," for example, reflects the close relationship between the speaker and parent in the poem—a relationship also reflected later by the alliteration of "obedient" and "old nay-sayer." Later, the plosive /p/ of "power" and "prize" reflects the speaker's belief that shooting the owl—that "prize"—will be a reflection of the speaker's own power over the natural world.

In the fourth stanza, when the speaker shoots the titular barn owl, the alliteration really takes off. The /s/ of "struck" and "swayed" draws attention to the way the speaker's actions affect the innocent bird, while the fricative /f/ repeated in "fallen" and "final" captures the speaker's shock and horror in response to the owl's wound (this sound is also repeated in the stressed syllable of "afraid," which can thus be considered alliterative as well). The repetition of the /w/ sound in "wing" and "watched" underscores the child's inability to look away from what they have done.

In the fifth stanza, alliteration also dominates, creating a kind of sonic claustrophobia that captures the speaker's sense of being overwhelmed and frozen with horror. Hard /b/ sounds throughout suggest the speaker's thumping heartbeat, while the repetition of /dr/ sounds in "dropped" and "dribbled" sonically resembles the dripping guts that the speaker describes falling out of the owl. The double /m/ sound in the last line emphasizes the speaker's reluctant but honest ownership of his cruelty:

bundle of stuff that dropped,
and dribbled through the loose straw
tangling in bowels, and hopped
blindly closer [...]
mirror my cruelty

When also considering consonance, these lines become even *more* claustrophobic, with /b/, /d/, and /l/ sounds tangled thickly throughout.

The following stanza similarly uses multiple instances of alliteration to draw attention the owl's wounds. The imagery throughout these three stanzas is vivid, almost painterly, but nevertheless horrific—and the alliteration makes it almost impossible to look away. Each repetition of the same sound hammers home the brutal picture of the wounded bird.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "blessed by"
- **Line 3:** "fiend"
- **Line 4:** "father's"
- **Line 7:** "power"
- **Line 8:** "prize"
- **Line 14:** "holding "
- **Line 15:** "hay"
- **Line 19:** "struck," "swayed"
- **Line 21:** "wing," "watched," "afraid"
- **Line 22:** "fallen "
- **Line 24:** "final"
- **Line 25:** "bundle ," "dropped"
- **Line 26:** "dribbled ," "straw"
- **Line 27:** "bowels"
- **Line 28:** "blindly," "saw"
- **Line 29:** "those ," "that ," "see"
- **Line 30:** "mirror my"
- **Line 32:** "bear ," "hide"
- **Line 33:** "hobbled ," "blood"

ASSONANCE

Assonance helps create a sense of rhythm and musicality throughout "Barn Owl." Much of this is due to the poem's consistent rhyme scheme, discussed separately in this guide. Many repeated vowel sounds appear within lines as well, often making them feel unified and predictable—perhaps evoking the way that speaker of the poem, a child, understands life.

Note, for example, the long /i/ and /oo/ sounds as the speaker first goes off in search of the owl:

[...] I knew my prize
who swooped home at this hour
with day-light riddled eyes

The speaker's tone is confident and self-assured, reflected by the rhythmic assonance here. Later, however, after the speaker shoots the owl and has their worldview and sense of self rattled by the horrible violence they have caused, assonance suggests the speaker's fear. The flitter of short /ih/ sounds in lines 20-21 evoke the panic of the dying bird, while the long /ee/ and /i/ sounds later in this stanza and the next pull the reader forward through the lines:

ruined, beating his only
wing, as I watched, afraid
[...] a lonely
child who believed death clean
and final, not this obscene
bundle of stuff that dropped,
and dribbled through the loose straw

The intense assonance here feels "obscene" in itself, creating internal slant rhymes that seem out of place given the horror of what's happening. The musicality of phrases like "believed death clean," "bundle of stuff," and "through loose straw," created through both assonance and consonance, makes the imagery at hand all the more vivid, yet also creates a somewhat childish sound—the kind of sound of a nursery rhyme. In this way, the musicality created by assonance underscores the fact that the speaker was truly not ready to experience this loss of innocence, that this is someone trying to make sense of a terrible scene through a child's eyes.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Daybreak," "slept"
- **Line 2:** "blessed," "sun"
- **Line 3:** "fiend," "crept"
- **Line 4:** "gun"
- **Line 5:** "dream ," "child"
- **Line 6:** "obedient," "mind"
- **Line 7:** "old no," "power"
- **Lines 8-9:** "I knew my prize / who swooped"
- **Line 9:** "hour"
- **Line 10:** "light," "eyes"
- **Line 11:** "high beam"
- **Line 12:** "dream"
- **Line 13:** "light's ," "time ," "away"
- **Line 14:** "I," "my breath"
- **Line 15:** "in urine-scented hay"
- **Line 16:** "death"
- **Line 17:** "law"
- **Line 18:** "claw"
- **Line 19:** "swayed"
- **Lines 20-21:** "ruined, beating his only / wing"
- **Line 21:** "afraid"
- **Line 22:** "lonely"
- **Line 23:** "child ," "believed ," "clean"

- **Line 24:** “final,” “obscene”
- **Line 25:** “bundle,” “stuff,” “dropped”
- **Line 26:** “through ,” “loose straw”
- **Line 27:** “hopped”
- **Line 28:** “blindly ,” “I saw”
- **Line 29:** “eyes ,” “see”
- **Line 30:** “my cruelty”
- **Line 31:** “while”
- **Line 32:** “light ,” “hide”
- **Line 33:** “in ,” “its ”
- **Line 34:** “My,” “my ,” “side”
- **Line 35:** “fallen ,” “gun”
- **Line 36:** “what ,” “begun”
- **Line 37:** “I fired,” “eyes”
- **Line 38:** “mine,” “slept”
- **Line 39:** “I,” “my head”
- **Line 40:** “my ,” “wept”
- **Line 41:** “blind ,” “sun”
- **Line 42:** “I,” “begun”

CAESURA

"Barn Owl" is peppered with examples of caesura. This goes hand-in-hand with the poem's tendency towards long sentences divided (via enjambment) over multiple lines.

For the most part, these caesurae tend to be commas, creating brief but deliberate pauses as descriptive causes pile up, painting an ever-more vivid picture in readers' minds. However, as seen in the poem's first line, sometimes the caesura is more dramatic, as in the colon that introduces the poem's pivotal setting—"daybreak," when the rest of the speaker's family is asleep:

> Daybreak: the household slept.
> I rose, blessed by the sun.
> A horny fiend, I crept
> out with my father's gun.
> Let him dream of a child
> obedient, angel-mind-

The most attention-grabbing example of caesura in the poem, however, is the end stop in line 19, right after the speaker fires the gun at the barn owl. In contrast to the many commas in the lines that follow, which either bring the image of the wounded bird to life or elaborate upon the speaker's rattled mental state, the abrupt stop after "My first shot struck" hits hard, stopping readers in their tracks, thereby capturing the shock of a child firing a gun for the first time. The pauses that follow throughout the stanza create a kind of fragmented, stop-and-start rhythm that suggests the speaker's subsequent panic and horror of the scene:

> My first shot struck. He swayed,
> ruined, beating his only
> wing, as I watched, afraid
> by the fallen gun, a lonely
> child who believed death clean
> and final, not this obscene

A similar effect is achieved in line 37, at the very end of the poem, after the speaker shoots a second time: "I fired. The blank eyes shone."

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “Daybreak: the”
- **Line 2:** “rose, blessed”
- **Line 3:** “fiend, I”
- **Line 6:** “obedient, angel-mind-”
- **Line 7:** “ no-sayer, robbed”
- **Line 8:** “sleep. I”
- **Line 12:** “stables, to”
- **Line 14:** “stood, holding”
- **Line 19:** “struck. He”
- **Line 20:** “ruined, beating”
- **Line 21:** “wing, as,” “watched, afraid”
- **Line 22:** “gun, a”
- **Line 24:** “final, not”
- **Line 28:** “closer. I”
- **Line 38:** “mine, and”
- **Line 40:** “arm, and”

CONSONANCE

Consonance helps create the nervy, tense atmosphere of the poem as well as an undercurrent of dread. Take the first two lines, for example, where hushed sibilance evokes the speaker's caution and careful attention to the sleeping household around them as they sneak out quietly with the stolen gun:

> Daybreak: the household slept.
> I rose, blessed by the sun.

The loud, plosive /p/ sounds at the start of the following stanza then reflect the speaker's growing excitement and anticipation:

> old no-sayer, robbed of power
> by sleep. I knew my prize
> who swooped home at this hour

Another key moment of consonance takes place in line 19: "My first shot struck." The sharp /t/ sounds in each word is reminiscent of the sharp crack of a gunshot while the /s/ suggests the hiss of smoke. Coming in quick succession, they capture the speaker's shock at the violent power of the weapon they have just used for the first time.

Perhaps the most striking consonance comes in the description

of the injured owl. Here, the heavy /b/ and /d/ sounds mix with /l/ and /s/ sounds:

> not this obscene
> bundle of stuff that dropped,
> and dribbled through the loose straw
> tangling in bowels, and hopped
> blindly closer [...]

These lines sound ominous thanks to all those thudding /d/ and /b/ sounds, slippery /l/ sounds, and hissing /s/ sounds. The thick, tongue-twisting consonance evoking the horrific imagery of the injured bird blindly stumbling around in its own blood.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "household slept"
- **Line 2:** "blessed by," "sun"
- **Line 3:** "horny fiend," "crept"
- **Line 4:** "out," "gun"
- **Lines 5-6:** "child / obedient, angel-mind-"
- **Line 7:** "old," "robbed," "power"
- **Line 8:** "by sleep," "prize"
- **Line 9:** "who swooped home"
- **Line 10:** "day-light riddled"
- **Line 11:** "place," "beam"
- **Line 12:** "old stables, to dream"
- **Line 13:** "light's useless time"
- **Line 15:** "in urine-scented"
- **Line 16:** "master," "life"
- **Line 19:** "first shot struck," "swayed"
- **Line 21:** "wing," "watched, afraid"
- **Line 22:** "fallen gun," "lonely"
- **Line 23:** "child," "believed death clean"
- **Line 24:** "and final, not," "obscene"
- **Line 25:** "bundle," "stuff," "dropped"
- **Line 26:** "dribbled," "loose straw"
- **Line 27:** "tangling," "bowels," "hopped"
- **Line 28:** "blindly closer"
- **Line 30:** "mirror my"
- **Line 32:** "hide"
- **Line 33:** "hobbled," "blood"
- **Line 34:** "father"
- **Line 35:** "gave," "fallen gun"
- **Line 36:** "begun"
- **Line 37:** "shone"
- **Line 38:** "once into mine, and slept."
- **Line 39:** "leaned," "upon"
- **Line 40:** "wept"
- **Line 41:** "owl blind in early sun"
- **Line 42:** "begun"

ENJAMBMENT

"Barn Owl" is a poem full of enjambment. Composed of long sentences that run from line to line and even stanza to stanza, the run-on nature of the poem's language suggests the speaker's childish state—the rush of excitement they feel upon stealing the gun, and their eagerness to describe and justify their actions in long, breathless bursts.

The many enjambed lines also give the poem a strong forward momentum, moving inexorably toward the pivotal moment in the fourth stanza when the speaker shoots the barn owl. Notably, the sentence dedicated to this moment—"My first shot struck"—is *not* among the other long, enjambed sentences, indicating that this violent act is an aberration or interruption in the speaker's normal behavior. After shooting the owl, however, the enjambment returns in full force, as the speaker begins to understand, with horror, the consequences of their actions:

> My first shot struck. He swayed,
> ruined, beating his only
> wing, as I watched, afraid
> by the fallen gun, a lonely
> child who believed death clean
> and final, not this obscene
> bundle of stuff [...]

Finally, the poem's use of enjambment lends itself to the vivid, painterly imagery that brings this crucial moment to life. The speaker's willingness to describe, in-depth, what they are doing and seeing is key to the poem's success as an intimate, atmospheric reckoning with the speaker's loss of innocence.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "crept / out"
- **Lines 5-6:** "child / obedient"
- **Lines 7-8:** "power / by"
- **Lines 8-9:** "prize / who"
- **Lines 9-10:** "hour / with"
- **Lines 10-11:** " eyes / to"
- **Lines 11-12:** "beam / in"
- **Lines 12-13:** "dream / light's"
- **Lines 17-18:** "law / would"
- **Lines 20-21:** "only / wing"
- **Lines 21-22:** "afraid / by"
- **Lines 22-23:** "lonely / child"
- **Lines 23-24:** "clean / and"
- **Lines 24-25:** "obscene / bundle"
- **Lines 26-27:** "straw / tangling"
- **Lines 27-28:** "hopped / blindly"
- **Lines 28-29:** "saw / those"
- **Lines 29-30:** "see / mirror"

- **Lines 30-31:** "cruelty / while"
- **Lines 31-32:** "could / not"
- **Lines 32-33:** "hide / hobbled"
- **Lines 37-38:** "shone / once"
- **Lines 39-40:** "upon / my"

IMAGERY

One of the most memorable aspects of "Barn Owl" is its imagery. From the first line, which conjures a family fast asleep at dawn in just a handful of words, to the intense fifth stanza, which depicts a wounded barn owl in using vivid and horrifying verbs, the poem dedicates itself throughout to bringing to life a crucial moment in the speaker's coming-of-age.

The poem's carefully-chosen details capture the scene being described. For example, the third stanza describes the speaker's entrance into the old stables where their prey, the barn owl, is sleeping. "I stood," the speaker explains, and then goes on to add, "holding my breath, / in urine-scented hay," two details that vividly conjure the setting and the speaker's experience of standing there in the old abandoned stables. In the following stanza, after shooting the owl, vivid details again help readers put themselves in the speaker's shoes and see exactly what they see: "[The owl] swayed, / ruined, beating his only / wing, as I watched."

In addition, the poem's language also plays an important role in its imagery. When describing the owl's wound, for example, each adjective, noun, and verb conveys with horrifying precision the depth of violence that has been enacted on the bird:

> [...] obscene
> bundle of stuff that dropped,
> and dribbled through the loose straw
> tangling in bowels, and hopped
> blindly closer.

This precision makes it hard to look away (or stop reading) despite the gruesome image being described, thereby evoking the exact experience the speaker is having upon being vividly confronted with the horrible consequences of their actions.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-3:** "Daybreak: the household slept. / I rose, blessed by the sun. / A horny fiend, I crept"
- **Lines 8-12:** "I knew my prize / who swooped home at this hour / with day-light riddled eyes / to his place on a high beam / in our old stables"
- **Lines 14-16:** "I stood, holding my breath, / in urine-scented hay, / master of life and death,"
- **Lines 19-21:** "He swayed, / ruined, beating his only / wing"
- **Lines 24-28:** "this obscene / bundle of stuff that dropped, / and dribbled through the loose straw / tangling in bowels, and hopped / blindly closer."
- **Lines 31-33:** "while the wrecked thing that could / not bear the light nor hide / hobbled in its own blood."
- **Lines 37-41:** "The blank eyes shone / once into mine, and slept. / I leaned my head upon / my father's arm, and wept, / owl blind in early sun"

METAPHOR

The poem's many metaphors help deepen the meaning of the imagery and the emotional resonance of the scene at hand. In early stanzas, metaphors like "blessed by the sun" and "day-light riddled eyes" convey the speaker's wide-eyed, immature understanding of the situation they are putting themselves in. To the speaker, the morning sun (the same as every other day) feels like a blessing, or a sign of approval. Likewise, the fact that the owl cannot withstand the light looks like a sign that the bird deserves to be hunted and killed.

Later, the speaker's metaphorical reference to themselves as a god-like "master of life and death, / a wisp-haired judge whose law / would punish beak and claw" is deliberately ridiculous. The speaker, looking back as an adult, understands their earlier foolishness, and the image of a "wisp-haired child" pretending to be a serious and powerful decider of "life and death" is meant to highlight the speaker's earlier innocence, their total misunderstanding of the "judgment" they sought to impose. Later, the metaphorical (and euphemistic) description of the owl's final moment again reflects the speaker's inability to confront/genuinely understand the reality of death—choosing instead to say that the owl is simply going to sleep:

> [...] The blank eyes shone
> once into mine, and slept.

Perhaps the most powerful metaphor in the poem, however, comes from the speaker's father, who tells his child, "End what you have begun." At its most literal, this phrase is an instruction to shoot the owl a second time and stop the bird's suffering by finally killing it. On a metaphorical level, however, "what you have begun" can be interpreted as referring to much more than the owl's existence. For starters, it's a reference to and an indictment of the entire endeavor—the speaker's foolish act, and their hubristic goal.

But as the speaker suggests, in the final stanza, it's also a metaphorical reference to the speaker's own innocence and childhood. In the final line, the speaker describes themselves as weeping "for what I had begun." The "what" here refers to much more than the owl's death. This foolish endeavor has kicked off a chain reaction of the speaker's coming-of-age; "what [they]

have begun" refers to their own adulthood, as well.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "I rose, blessed by the sun."
- **Lines 5-8:** "Let him dream of a child / obedient, angel-mind- / old no-sayer, robbed of power / by sleep."
- **Line 10:** "day-light riddled eyes"
- **Lines 12-13:** "to dream / light's useless time away."
- **Lines 16-18:** "master of life and death, / a wisp-haired judge whose law / would punish beak and claw."
- **Line 36:** "'End what you have begun.'"
- **Lines 37-38:** "The blank eyes shone / once into mine, and slept."
- **Line 41:** "owl blind in early sun"

REPETITION

Two key phrases are repeated in "Barn Owl," imbuing them through repetition with greater significance.

The first is the phrase "fallen gun." Tellingly, the speaker does not actually describe dropping the gun after they shoot the owl for the first time. It appears after the fact, in line 22: "I watched, afraid / by the fallen gun, a lonely / child who believed death clean." Previously introduced only in terms of its owner—"my father's gun"—the fact that the gun has now fallen to the speaker's feet reflects that the child was not ready to take on the adult responsibility of wielding this weapon, and gives the gun powerful symbolic resonance. However, when the speaker's father appears on the scene, he gives his child "the fallen gun," and instructs the speaker to shoot again. This repetition of the phrase "the fallen gun" further emphasizes how unready the speaker was to shoot the gun, and live up to mature adult accountability, even as the father gives them no choice but to attempt to do so.

The second phrase that repeats changes slightly, but only because its pronouns and verb tense shift with its speaker. "End what you have begun," the speaker's father insists, referring to the murder of the owl with the gun. The speaker does so, and then weeps "for what I had begun." The repetition here of this phrase and concept—an undefined something just "begun"—broadens the meaning of the father's instruction. It lends the phrase new metaphorical resonance—a reference to the speaker's dawning maturity—even as it gains significance through its repetition, suggesting that the father's earlier instruction, though meant more literally, carried a similar symbolic weight of adult accountability.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "my father's gun"
- **Line 22:** "the fallen gun"
- **Line 35:** "the fallen gun"
- **Line 36:** "'End what you have begun.'"
- **Line 42:** "for what I had begun"

ASYNDETON

Asyndeton appears in "Barn Owl" at crucial moments, emphasizing the emotional highs and lows of the poem.

In the early stanzas, asyndeton helps to convey the speaker's breathless excitement as they creep out of the house with their father's gun. In particular, the asyndeton that bridges lines 5-8 conveys the speaker's rebellious attitude, and unthinking actions, as they rattle off a thrilled and taunting boast: "Let him dream of a child / obedient, angel-mind- / old no-sayer, robbed of power / by sleep." The rush of the language demonstrates how completely caught up the speaker is in their plan, without any second thought for whether this is a good idea.

Stanza 3 also contains a great deal of asyndeton. In this case, the lack of coordinating conjunctions helps capture the speaker's mounting anticipation as they enter the stables and prepare to shoot the owl. Wrapped up together with the speaker's awareness of the setting—the "urine-scented hay" that causes them to hold their breath—are the speaker's grandiose notions about the violence they are about to inflict:

> I stood, holding my breath,
> in urine-scented hay,
> master of life and death,
> a wisp-haired judge [...]

By stanzas 4 and 5, however, those notions have been horribly punctured:

> [...] He swayed,
> ruined, beating his only
> wing, as I watched, afraid
> by the fallen gun, a lonely
> child who believed death clean
> and final, not this obscene
> bundle of stuff that dropped,

Here, the asyndeton captures the speaker's growing horror, as they are confronted with the terrible reality of what they've done. The asyndeton makes it difficult for readers to stop reading, just the way the speaker is unable to look away from the injured owl.

Finally, lines 34-35 contain a small but significant example of asyndeton: "My father reached my side, / gave me the fallen gun." The speaker's father appears seemingly out of nowhere, and the lack of conjunction between his two actions—reaching his child's side, giving his child the gun—conveys the swiftness with which the father acts, as well as the speaker's continuing sense of shock as they struggle to keep up with the

consequences of their violent act.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Daybreak: the household slept."
- **Line 3:** "A horny fiend, I crept"
- **Lines 5-8:** "Let him dream of a child / obedient, angel-mind- / old no-sayer, robbed of power / by sleep."
- **Lines 14-17:** "I stood, holding my breath, / in urine-scented hay, / master of life and death, / a wisp-haired judge"
- **Lines 19-21:** "He swayed, / ruined, beating his only / wing,"
- **Lines 21-25:** "afraid / by the fallen gun, a lonely / child who believed death clean / and final, not this obscene / bundle of stuff that dropped"
- **Lines 34-35:** "My father reached my side, / gave me the fallen gun."

VOCABULARY

Fiend (Line 3) - Devil; person of great wickedness.

Horny (Line 3) - Eager or excited.

Angel-mind (Line 6) - Well-behaved, virtuous, angelic.

Old no-sayer (Line 7) - Someone who denies, refuses, opposes someone else; naysayer; tyrant.

Riddled (Line 10) - Spread through; pierced throughout.

Obscene (Line 24) - Disgusting to the senses; repulsive.

Bowels (Line 27) - Intestines, guts.

Hobbled (Line 33) - Limped; move along unsteadily or with difficulty.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Barn Owl" does not follow a conventional poetic form. That said, it is a highly regular poem composed of seven six-line stanzas (creating a total of 42 lines). Each stanza ranges from six to seven syllables in length, and the majority follow a consistent rhyme scheme. This regularity gives the poem a kind of formal cohesion that mirrors the way in which the speaker of the poem, a child, views the world: "clean," orderly, and predictable. At the same time, the frequent enjambment between stanzas subtly undermines the poem's structure, suggesting that things are perhaps not as orderly and predictable as they may appear.

The poem also alludes to the form of the dramatic monologue, since the speaker takes on the voice and perspective of a child and narrates the poem's events in the first-person. (That said, there is no specific listener being addressed, which is typically one of the hallmarks of the dramatic monologue form.) The poem's intimate first-person voice, prone to speaking in long and descriptive sentences, is one of the most compelling aspects of "Barn Owl." The poem's regular form and structure provides a sturdy scaffolding against which the use of monologue is able to shine, leaving readers with the sense of looking in on a unique and deeply personal moment in the speaker's life.

METER

Despite its very regular stanzas (all seven of which are all six lines long), the poem lacks a consistent meter. Each line is about the same length, made up of six or seven syllables, but these don't break up into any steady metrical pattern. As such, the poem sounds controlled yet conversational, never becoming overly formal or stiff.

Instead of meter, the poem relies on frequent enjambment to create momentum and rhythm. Most sentences in the poem run from one line and even one stanza to the next, creating a sense of the lines marching inexorably forward. There are also some lines in the poem that, while still not part of an overall pattern, have interesting metrical moments. "My first shot struck" in line 19, for example, and "I fired" in line 37 each feature powerful, short syllables, and their sound evokes the shock of a child firing a gun for the first time.

RHYME SCHEME

"Barn Owl" uses a very consistent rhyme scheme—one that occasionally mimics the rhyme scheme of a sonnet (though not always). Generally speaking, most stanzas in the poem follow this pattern:

ABABCC

Note that each stanza uses its *own* end rhyme sounds, rather than repeating the sounds of earlier stanzas. For example, here are the rhyme sounds of stanzas 2 and 3:

[...] power A
[...] prize B
[...] hour A
[...] eyes B
[...] beam C
[...] dream C
[...] away. A
[...] breath, B
[...] hay, A
[...] death, B
[...] law C
[...] claw. C

Occasionally, the poem uses slant rhymes, ending in similar—but not identical—consonant sounds, to achieve its

rhyme scheme. This happens in the first stanza with "child" and "mind," as well as in the sixth—which sacrifices a perfect rhyme for "could" in order to use the powerful word "blood" to convey the horrific harm the speaker has inflicted on the owl:

> while the wrecked thing that could
> not bear the light nor hide
> hobbled in its own blood.

On the whole, the consistent rhyme scheme echoes the straightforward, predictable way that a child, like the speaker of the poem, views the world. However, in moments like above, when slant rhyme is deployed, the poem uses that broken rhyme scheme to hint at the child's coming-of-age, and the important role this moment plays in helping the speaker to see the world is not as orderly or predictable as they once believed it to be.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Barn Owl" is the child at the center of the poem, who decides to shoot a barn owl with their father's gun. While the poem is based on Gwen Hardwood's own childhood, it's not necessary to read it as being autobiographical. The speaker's identity is largely undefined beyond this singular moment: the poem itself does not make clear what the speaker's gender or exact age is, nor does it tell readers where the speaker lives, or what era they live in. However, the past tense of the poem does imply that the speaker's story is a recollection, a memory from childhood being retold. Thus the poem, and the speaker's first-person voice, is weighted with a wisdom and insight that the child, at the time captured by the poem, does not possess.

This gap allows the speaker of the poem to shed mature light on the child's horrific behavior, even as the speaker also gives readers glimpses into the child's immature mindset at the time. For instance, the speaker describes themselves as a "horny fiend," a characterization that suggests the speaker's maturity, looking back on their misbehavior and rightfully describing it as fiendish, or devilish. In the following line, however, the speaker shares the rebellious thoughts going through their mind at the time, when they were a child and saw themselves instead as a brave rebel: "Let him dream of a child obedient [...] old no-sayer, robbed of power / by sleep."

This same nuanced characterization carries on throughout the poem, allowing the speaker to describe themselves in the same breath as "wisp-haired," or childish, as well as a "judge / whose law would punish beak and claw." Likewise, the distance between the adult speaker and the child in the poem allows the speaker to acknowledge that they were, in fact, just "a lonely child who believed death clean" until the moment in the poem when they shoot the owl.

Much of the power of the speaker's mature voice comes from the fact that the poem—and the speaker—describes the very moment when that maturity began to develop. It is because of the child's foolish and rebellious decision to shoot the owl (and their father's insistence that they be held accountable for it) that the speaker has the wisdom to look back on this moment and recall it as a pivotal turning point in their coming of age.

SETTING

The poem is set in a rural area. The speaker's family has "old stables" on its property and lives close enough to wildlife that a barn owl would seek refuge there. The poem also clearly takes place on a specific day in the speaker's childhood, at "daybreak" as the speaker rises before the rest of their family to go shoot the owl. The shooting itself takes place in those aforementioned stables, where the hay is still "urine-scented" and "loose straw" carpets the ground, catching the owl when it falls from the "high beam" where it had gone to sleep all day.

Beyond these specifics, the poem does not indicate the larger context of the poem's setting. It is not clear where this rural area is located, or during which era the poem takes place, although it is modern enough that the speaker's father owns a gun.

Based on the poet's identity, readers can perhaps conclude the poem is set in Australia, perhaps even in the suburbs outside of Brisbane, where Gwen Harwood grew up. These suburbs were in fact largely rural or exurban, rather than fully developed as suburbs, in the 1920s and '30s when she lived there—the sort of place where "old stables" would not have been uncommon.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

This poem is actually the first section of a two-part pieced titled "Father and Child," published as part of Harwood's *Selected Poems* in 1975. The second section of this piece, "Nightfall," depicts the same characters from "Barn Owl" much later in life, with the now-middle-aged speaker reflecting on the father's looming mortality.

Gwen Harwood is considered one of Australia's greatest poets, and is one of the best-known figures in 20th-century Tasmanian poetry. Born in 1920 outside of Brisbane, she moved to Tasmania with her husband, a university professor, in 1945. Though Harwood wrote poetry for many years prior to publication, her work was not regularly published until the 1960s. Having struggled to find publication opportunities, she often used male pseudonyms.

Harwood's early years were spent on a citrus farm and she remained fascinated with the natural world throughout her life,

as is evident throughout her work. Much of her poetry is deeply rooted in the unique natural spaces of Tasmania, or, as with "Barn Owl," inspired by her rural upbringing. However, though Harwood's work frequently explores the personal impact of natural phenomena, her poetry resists the personification of nature common to traditional Romantic or pastoral poetry. Instead, Harwood's work positions the natural world as fundamentally "other" to humanity, a distinct and separate entity providing opportunities with which to wrestle with larger philosophical themes, like life or death.

Harwood was active in the 1960s through the 1980s, publishing over 420 works and receiving considerable acclaim for her poetry. In fact, Harwood's mark on the literary landscape in Australia was so influential that one of the country's highest poetry prizes is named after her. During her lifetime, she was awarded the Grace Leven prize, Robert Frost medallion, Patrick White literary award, and a fellowship from the Australia Council. In 1989, she was made an Officer of the Order of Australia. She passed away in 1995, but in 2005 was inducted into Tasmania's Honour Roll of Women.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Harwood was writing during a turbulent but exciting time in Australian history. The 1960s through the 1980s saw the rise of the feminist movement; rapid population growth, in part due to changes to the White Australia Policy and increasing immigration; advocacy for racial equality, including the 1967 referendum in which Australians voted overwhelmingly to recognize Indigenous Australians as citizens; and a growing interest in and concern for environmentalism and conservation.

Harwood's work reflects this era of rapid change. Certainly her poetry's attention to the natural world speaks to and reflects growing national awareness of Australia's unique environment and the need to protect it. In addition, much of Harwood's work deals with feminist themes, a fitting topic given the immense changes in women's rights and roles over the course of her life. Though Harwood spoke movingly about her childhood, calling it a "golden time" in her life, even her poetry inspired by her rural upbringing resists nostalgia or sentimentality. Her work's unflinching representation of the full range of human emotion reflects a keen understanding of the complexity of the modern world, including humanity's relationship to nature.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Texts in the City: Collected Poems of Gwen Hardwood Harwood — Watch a talk about Harwood's poetry. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_J-ie1YEndQ)
- More Poems About Childhood — Check out a short essay on and compilation of poems about childhood. (https://poets.org/text/poems-about-childhood)
- "Barn Owl" Aloud — Listen to a reading of "Barn Owl" by the poet Bonny Cassidy. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uy6jTaFIo2g)
- Gwen Harwood's Biography — Read all about the poet's life and work. (https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/harwood-gwen)
- Owls of Australia — Learn more about Australia's native owls, including the barn owl. (https://www.australiangeographic.com.au/topics/wildlife/2017/06/owls-of-australia/)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER GWEN HARWOOD POEMS

- In The Park
- Suburban Sonnet

HOW TO CITE

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