Blackberry-Picking

SUMMARY

The speaker, looking back in time, describes a period in late August when, if there was enough heavy rain and sunshine, blackberries would ripen over a single one-week period. One would ripen first, before the others, resembling a shiny purple clump, contrasting with those that weren't yet ripe and still remained red, green, and very firm. The speaker addresses "you" (this could be the reader, the speaker, or an unspecified individual from the speaker's life). This "you" ate that first blackberry and it was sweet like wine that has started to ferment and thicken. The blackberry juice was like the essence of summer. The dark juice left stains on the tongues of those who ate the berries and the taste inspired a strong urge to pick more berries. The previously unripe red berries then also became ripe, gaining a dark color like ink. The blackberry pickers, eager for more, went outside with their various containers for picking and into the prickly blackberry bushes, which scratched them while the wet grass left marks on their boots. The pickers crossed hayfields, cornfields, and potato drills (shallow ditches for growing potatoes). Throughout this journey, they picked berries until their containers were full and the bottom of each can, which made a tinkling sound when the blackberries dropped into it at first, was covered. They first picked the green, unripe blackberries, which sat at the bottom, and then the darker, riper berries. These darker ones remained on top and the speaker compares them to a plate of staring eyes. When they were done, the blackberry pickers' hands would be sprinkled with pricks of thorns from the blackberry bush briars and their palms would be sticky with blackberry juice. The speaker compares their sticky hands to those of Bluebeard (a fictional character known for murdering his wives).

The pickers stockpiled and saved the fresh berries in a barn, inside a bathtub, which they filled to the brim with berries. But then they discovered fuzzy gray mold taking over their valuable collection of blackberries. The blackberry juice would stink with the odor of fermentation and rot. After they had been picked, the berries would spoil and become sour. The loss of the berries always made the speaker want to cry, because it seemed unfair that the containers full of juicy, ripe berries ended up stinking and rotting. Every year, the speaker hoped the blackberries would stay fresh, even though they knew this was not possible.

THEMES

GROWING UP AND THE TRANSIENCE OF YOUTH

In "Blackberry-Picking," the speaker describes a seemingly sweet childhood memory of picking blackberries in summer. The first stanza describes this act, building up a sense of anticipation, while the second describes what happens after the blackberries have been picked and stored in the "byre" (a barn or shed): they get moldy and rot, resulting in bitter disappointment for the speaker. This experience of blackberry-picking serves as an extended metaphor for the tempestuous process of growing up, something that is just as inevitable as the blackberries getting moldy.

The poem sets the scene in late August, a time of year marked by transformation. Blackberries are ripening, a process that can be compared to a child maturing (people are often said to "ripen with age"). The time at which the poem is set indicates a point of seasonal change, comparable to the transition from childhood to adolescence. The reference to "summer's blood" also highlights the *death* of summer, implying the death of childhood, and the subsequent start of the harvest season. The poem itself then describes an act of harvest, which starts with the taste of a "sweet" berry ("that first one") and ends in "lovely canfuls [that] smelt of rot," mirroring the natural decay that eventually comes with aging.

The poem's first lines, however, still suggest a sense of hope and anticipation, as "for a full week, the blackberries would ripen." But the environment in which they do so is tempestuous: there's a mix of "heavy rain and sun," both of which are needed for the blackberries to ripen. This reflects the realities of life, which has its own rain and sun, figuratively speaking—moments of dark and light, bad and good, negative and positive. Both the "heavy rain and sun" of life help people grow and mature, just like the blackberries.

What's more, the process of blackberry-picking itself is shown in somewhat violent terms. This innocent childhood act is not as simple, easy, or painless as it might first seem, much like growing up itself. The language used to describe blackberry-picking is raw and aggressive: the "briars scratched" and the "wet grass bleached our boots." Afterwards, the speaker's "hands were peppered / With thorn pricks." The children are left with physical marks. Similarly, eating the blackberries is described as "Leaving stains upon the tongue."

The violence of this language is made even more ominous by the description of the dark berries that "burned / Like a plate of eyes." The dark eyes watching appear to be threatening, a sense

that is affirmed by the allusion to Bluebeard. The comparison of the children's blackberry-stained hands to those of Bluebeard, a murderer, suggests the children themselves are not so innocent as they may first appear. They are painted in animalistic terms as they eat the sweet "flesh" of the berries and are driven by a "lust for / Picking."

Ultimately, it's not the speaker's active choice to go blackberry picking. Rather, the speaker's *hunger* is the driver: "hunger / sent us out." The speaker's desire for the berries thus seems unavoidable, like a basic need for food. The fact that the speaker develops a "lust for / Picking" further suggests a lack of control. This mirrors the reality that people—although they may "hunger" for the knowledge and freedom of adulthood—really have no control over growing up. The simply *will* grow up in time and lose their youth whether they like it or not, just as the berries inevitably "turn sour."

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Before Line 1
- Lines 1-24

ADULT WISDOM AND ACCEPTANCE

Growing up and getting older goes hand-in-hand with a loss of childhood innocence—a second major theme in the poem. The speaker of the poem describes a childhood memory from an adult's point of view. The poem's events all occur in the past, and this memory is thus painted with the knowledge of a person who is *aware* of the transience of youth, who no longer possesses their own childhood innocence, and who is well acquainted with life's inevitable disappointments.

The second stanza of the poem delivers on the ominous promise made by the first. In the end, the experience of blackberry-picking is marred by the simple fact that the blackberries don't keep and instead get moldy. It's impossible to avoid such disappointments and losses in life, the poem suggests—a fact that people come to realize as they grow up and lose their childish innocence.

To that end, the process of decay is described in repulsive, negative terms. The mold on the berries is "a fur, / A rat-grey fungus." The smell is also bad: "The juice was stinking too," and "the lovely canfuls smelt of rot." The unsavory sense of taste is depicted with the phrase "the sweet flesh would turn sour." The second stanza thus provides a stark contrast to the image of innocent children cheerfully picking blackberries, speaking instead, through its vivid description of decay, to the trauma of that innocence being lost.

The end result of "Blackberry-Picking" (both the poem and the process) is one that can't be avoided—the rotting. This is made clear as the speaker emphasizes that this is an annual event, witnessed repeatedly: "I *always* felt like crying" and "*Each year* I hoped they'd keep, knew they would not." The outcome is always the same. The speaker's disillusionment takes time, however, as the speaker repeatedly witnesses with distress the inevitable cycle of harvesting and rotting. The speaker also notes that "It wasn't fair" that the blackberries rotted. This reflects the fact that there is an injustice that comes with getting older. It's not something people do because they want to, but because it's unavoidable.

One reading of the poem might interpret it as the speaker's ultimate acceptance of this inevitability. The poem itself marks a moment of resignation, as if the speaker is finally coming to terms with the way youth's sweetness must come to an end. The epigraph sometimes published with the poem, "for Philip Hobsbaum," could also be interpreted as an adult's acceptance that life is filled with loss and disappointment. Hobsbaum was Seamus Heaney's teacher. Teachers are often heroes of a person's childhood. If the speaker is to be equated with Heaney himself, the poem might serve as his message to the teacher that he is now grown and understands adult realities.

In depicting a childhood memory from an adult's point of view, "Blackberry-Picking" shows how people come to resign themselves to life's disappointments as they grow up. Although this is both inevitable and natural, it is bittersweet as the innocence of childhood gives way to the wisdom of adulthood. The process of change (of growing up, ripening, maturing) is not a calm one, the poem implies, but the poem also suggests that this adult wisdom itself may be a reward of sorts. Accepting these inevitabilities instead of mourning them is one way to make peace with the harsh reality of life.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Before Line 1
- Lines 17-24

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Late August, given ...
... as a knot.

The first line of the poem sets the scene in late August and paints a tempestuous picture, as it describes the "heavy rain and sun" of late summer storms. The rain and sun are needed, however, as the word "given" emphasizes. That is, the blackberries ripen only if there's enough sun *and* rain, and would presumably fail to ripen without these elements. This emphasis hints at the way that growing up, which will soon be revealed to be a key theme of the poem, requires a certain degree of strife, just as the blackberries need harsh weather to ripen. The first line starts with unstressed-stressed iambic

pentameter, which means that there are five poetic feet per line with a da-DUM rhythm:

Late Aug- | ust, giv- | en hea- | vy rain | and sun

This steady meter mirrors the rhythmic turning of the seasons, further highlighting the passage of time in the poem.

The second line builds a sense of suspense with the words "For a full week," as the word "full" implies a sense of anticipation and waiting. The eager blackberry-pickers must wait the full seven days, to the very end of the week, for the berries to ripen. The alliteration ("For a full") and assonance used ("glossy purple clot") create round, robust language that builds up this sense of promise. The speaker uses past tense here ("would ripen"), making it clear that this is a memory being reflected upon from the perspective of an older person.

The first four lines also establish the poem's A/A/B/B rhyme scheme ("sun"/"ripen" and "clot"/"knot"). This is carried throughout the poem, although often in the form of slant rhyme. The poem is full of visual imagery, exemplified in lines three and four as the speaker describes the "glossy purple clot" of a ripe berry and contrasts it to "the others, red, green, hard as a knot." These bright, vivid images bring the stanza to life and emphasize the lively, hopeful atmosphere of the children's berry-picking. A simile is used to describe the texture of the unripened berries, "hard as a knot" (like a knot in a person's back, contrasting with the "just one" ripe berry in line 3. The use of caesura, in the commas around "just one," further sets apart this one ripe berry and heightens the anticipation around eating it, which the speaker will describe in the next line.

LINES 5-8

You ate that ...
... Picking.

The word "You" in the fifth line can be read in two ways. It can be seen to address an unseen person, a fellow childhood blackberry-picker in the speaker's memory. Alternatively, it can be seen to address the reader and make them part of the blackberry picking process, bringing them into the poem's sensory world of sight, smell, sound, touch, and taste (all five senses are addressed throughout the poem). By addressing the reader, the poem makes its meaning more immediate and suggests that nobody can avoid growing up or getting older; everyone has experienced some version of what the speaker describes here. Not even the reader is immune to aging—or to what's to come in the rest of the poem.

In line 5, the reference to the "first one" emphasizes a newness and a sense of beginning. This first one is the start of the harvest, and it promises much more to come. Repetition from line 3, which refers to "At first, just one," emphasizes this one special berry. The blackberry is described as if it has a body of its own, as having "flesh" that is "sweet / Like thickened wine" (using a simile for the comparison). Corporal language is again seen in the phrase "summer's blood." The comparison to wine and the association with flesh could be read as an allusion to the Christian ritual of Holy Communion, in which participants receive Christ into their body through the symbolic consumption of bread (his flesh) and wine (his blood). This subtle symbolism gives the process of blackberry picking a new gravitas, a deeper and more profound meaning as it is compared to a ritualistic, sacred act.

The speaker's language in line 7 becomes more powerful as the "blood" of the berries is described as "leaving stains upon the tongue" and marking the blackberry pickers. This is the first hint that berry-picking might not be as innocent as it initially seems; it may have lasting consequences. Meanwhile, the taste of the juice inspires a "lust for / Picking." This diction is noteworthy, as the word "lust" is often used to mean intense sexual desire and thus suggests a raw, animal, almost instinctual psychological force. Again, there's something deeper and darker involved in blackberry-picking, even though it still seems light-hearted on the surface. The enjambment used throughout the poem, exemplified in the jump from lines seven to eight ("for / Picking"), supports this sense of sudden aggression or danger, as if the children's thoughts are leaping forward forcefully in the same way the lines do. Lines 1-2 are neatly punctuated with a period, as are lines 3-4. In lines 5-8, however, this order starts to unravel.

LINES 8-10

Then red ones ...
... bleached our boots.

The phrase "inked up" in line 8 refers to the red, unripe berries ripening and gaining a purple hue (like that of ink) similar to the aforementioned "glossy purple clot" in line 4. Lines 8-9 further the idea of an uncontrollable "lust" for picking with the words "hunger / Sent us out." Hunger is the active agent here, directing the actions of the blackberry pickers, almost as if against their will. This moment again points to the theme of lost innocence; people may *want* to avoid growing up, but they'll have to do it nonetheless, just as the pickers feel inexorably drawn to the ripening blackberries.

The poem's sensory focus becomes even clearer in line 9, as consonance is used to replicate the clatter that children getting together pails and other containers to go blackberry picking would undoubtedly make:

Sent us out with milk cans, pea tins, jam-pots

Note the repetition of the hard /t/ and /k/ sounds, which ring out like metal objects rattling together. Again, the enjambment continues through these lines, such as with the division of the subject and verb across lines 8 and 9 in "hunger / Sent." This continued enjambment reflects the berry pickers' energy and

enthusiasm as they embark on their trek, as the lines too surge forward energetically.

Then, line 10 takes the implications of an uncontrollable lust or desire further, by introducing somewhat violent imagery alongside aggressive language. The "briars scratched" and "grass bleached." In both cases, these actions leave external marks on the berry pickers; the experience of seeking the berries leaves them changed. Throughout these lines, the children are passive objects being acted on by external forces ("hunger," "briars," "wet grass"), which again indicates that growing up happens to everyone; it's not something that can be avoided. Line 10 also uses alliteration ("briars," "bleached," "boots") for a strong, forceful sound.

LINES 11-15

Round hayfields, cornfields ...
... plate of eyes.

Lines 11-15 show a rapid progression in language that reflects the evolution of what is at first a seemingly innocent scene into one with a darker, more ominous tone.

Lines 11 and 12 describe the path of the berry-pickers using upbeat consonance ("hayfields"/"cornfields" and "trekked"/"picked"). The repetition of the word "full" echoes its use in line 2, calling back to the hopeful tone of the first part of this stanza. Now, the promise of the opening lines has been delivered upon, as the poem has progressed from the berry pickers waiting for "a full week" for the berries to ripen to them picking berries "until the cans were full, / Until the tinkling bottom had been covered." The use of onomatopoeia with the word "tinkling" still suggests a merry, happy sound (one might think of a tinkling melody, for instance). Note that it is the "green ones" (the unripe berries) that are able to make this sound when they hit the bottom of the pail, thanks to the fact that they are "hard as a knot." A riper, larger, juicier berry wouldn't make such a noise.

The carefree tone quickly declines, however, and is replaced as the "tinkling" green berries are covered by the ripe ones: "on top big dark blobs burned / Like a plate of eyes." The use of the verb "burned" mirrors the aggressive, dangerous-sounding language seen with "briars scratched" and "grass bleached." As with these acts of scratching and bleaching, burning likewise would leave a mark. The use of simile to compare the ripe berries to eyes ("Like a plate of eyes") also adds to the ominous tone. The children picking blackberries are not only being acted upon by the forces around them; they are also being watched. Overall, these lines create a clear sense that blackberry-picking has much deeper, more complex layers of meaning than the reader may have expected at the outset.

LINES 15-16

Our hands were ...
... sticky as Bluebeard's.

Lines 15-16 add an additional image describing the way that children have been transformed through picking the blackberries. These lines focus on an allusion to Bluebeard, a figure from a French folktale who is known for murdering his wives. The term "Bluebeard" is even in the dictionary as "a man who marries and kills one wife after another."

Given that the poem deals with a childhood memory, the reader might think for a moment of Blackbeard the pirate—arguably a more kid-friendly allusion. The intent is clear, however, as line 16 uses a simile to compare the children's hands, sticky with berry juice, to Bluebeard's, which are presumably sticky with blood ("our palms sticky as Bluebeard's"). The comparison of children's hands to a murderer's is jarring and unexpected, making the allusion even more notable. One reading could interpret this to be a mark of a loss of childhood innocence. By comparing children to a renowned murderer, the simile indicates that the blackberry pickers themselves are not all that innocent either. In view of the central theme of growing up, the comparison suggests that while the process is inevitable and unavoidable, individuals also play a part in the process. Kids are always hungering for more experiences and knowledge, wanting to behave like adults, without understanding the consequences and responsibilities that come with the adult world. So while the world causes children to lose their innocence, they also cause that loss themselves.

The words "Our hands were peppered / With thorn pricks" again reiterate the violent imagery and aggressive language that the poem often uses to describe blackberry-picking. In line with the theme of growing up, this closes out a stanza that ultimately represents the tumultuous, stormy, and unpredictable process of transitioning from childhood to adolescence and, finally, adulthood. The process leaves people marked with memories and experiences; they are "peppered" with these "thorn pricks" that they carry into adulthood and into the adult world—a world where people like Bluebeard exist, and where children are at risk of *becoming* people like Bluebeard.

Another reading of the thorn pricks might also tie it back to the references to Christianity in lines 5-6. The thorns could symbolize the thorns on the crown Christ wore upon the cross, again framing blackberry-picking as something sacred, ritualistic, and even macabre.

LINES 17-21

We hoarded the ...
... would turn sour.

Line 17 begins the second stanza with a concise, single sentence, concluded with a definitive period: "We hoarded the fresh berries in the byre." The picking process is complete and the pickers had stored their harvest in a barn. They don't just store their goods, though; the diction specifies that they "hoard" them. Hoarding carries a slightly negative connotation,

as it's associated not only with collecting something but also with hiding it away for oneself. One might think of a greedy Scrooge-type hoarding away his money, for example. The word implies greediness, as if the children have somehow taken more than they deserve or have earned.

Alliteration through lines 17-18 is seen in "berries," "byre," and "bath." The upbeat mood of these positive /b/ sounds (which mirror the ones in line 10) is contrasted with the revelation at the end of line 18—namely, the fact that the berries are getting moldy. The alliteration continues with "found a fur," and the fur itself could still be acceptable instead of grotesque; it's not yet clear what this fur means. This illusion of positivity is shattered with line 19, however, as it's revealed that the "fur" is in fact "A rat-grey fungus."

The use of the word "glutting" reiterates the association with greed previously suggested by "hoarding." Glutting usually means to fill, most commonly with food (if you eat too much at a buffet, for example, you glut yourself). A cache is a hiding place, usually meant to conceal goods. So this line makes it clear that the berry pickers' greed has, in a sense, turned on them. They were so eager to hoard the berries that the fruit has gone rotten, and the mold is now eating the once-sweet berries. The speaker seems to be suggesting here that trying to hold onto something fleeting—like childhood or innocence—only makes the eventual loss of that thing more painful.

The speaker uses vivid imagery to speak to almost every one of the senses in the grotesque description of the berries' deterioration. The reader can imagine the feeling of the fuzzy "fur" and can envision the "rat-grey fungus." This is followed up with the idea of the stench that rotting blackberries would create in line 20: "The juice was stinking too." Even the taste is suggested, in line 21, with the words "the sweet flesh would turn sour." The one sense not covered here is that of hearing. This is a major contrast compared to the use of onomatopoeia in association with the "tinkling" unripe berries ("green ones") in lines 13-14. This relative silence makes the scene feel eerie and even a bit horrific, as the speaker confronts the reality that the fresh berries have completely decayed.

LINES 22-24

I always felt ...
... they would not.

Lines 22-24 starkly contrast with the rest of the poem by suddenly emphasizing the speaker's first-person point of view using the word "I". This allows the speaker to directly convey their emotions ("I always felt like crying") without any ambiguity. Enjambment is again used after "It wasn't fair," momentarily leaving the reader to wonder what the "it" is that the speaker is referring to. Ultimately, the "it" is the fact that the blackberries rot. The use of the word "always" makes it clear that this incident is not a one-time event but recurs repeatedly, and seemingly inevitably.

Line 24 makes further makes it clear that this event happens annually ("Each year"). The tone is despondent—but it is also one of resignation and even acceptance. The overt first-person point of view and past tense verbs remind the reader that the speaker is looking back at a childhood memory, presumably as an adult. The aphorism in the last line (to paraphrase: "I knew they wouldn't keep") states a simple truth concisely, reflecting the speaker's adult recognition, acknowledgement, and ultimate acceptance of the fact that life is filled with disappointments and losses. As a child, the speaker may have cried at the loss. But as an adult, the speaker is resigned to the loss—and the poem suggests that perhaps readers should be similarly resigned, since no one escapes this kind of disappointment and loss of innocence.

Lines 23 and 24 are each tidily wrapped up with a punctuation mark, a period, at the conclusion. This end-stop, coupled with the use of sharp consonance ("smelt of rot") and full rhyme ("rot"/"not"), makes for a definitive conclusion. The speaker's final point can't be questioned, just like natural cycles of growing up can't be questioned.

SYMBOLS

BLACKBERRIES

On one level, the blackberries in the poem represent both youth and the loss of that youth. The ripening of the blackberries described in lines 3-4 is representative of the maturing of a person and the physical development from childhood to adolescence. Just as the newly ripe blackberry's "flesh was sweet," this stage is when a person is still sweet and innocent, not yet damaged by the physical or emotional marks of aging and life's hardships. But the fact that the blackberries leave "stains upon the tongue" foreshadows the changes to come.

Then, the somewhat violent impact that the blackberries have on the blackberry *pickers* symbolizes the hardships that come with growing up and getting older. Life makes its mark on people as they come to see the disappointments and losses it brings. Similarly, the blackberries make their mark as their "briars scratched" the pickers' hands, leaving their hands "peppered / With thorn pricks."

Finally, the ultimate fate of the blackberries, the rotting described in the second stanza, speaks to the eventual impact of aging on a person. From a physical standpoint, human bodies inevitably deteriorate over time. The grotesque images of the rotting blackberries ("a fur / A rat-grey fungus", "The juice was stinking too", "The fruit fermented") represent this physical decline.

This is made especially clear with the phrase "the sweet flesh would turn sour." From a psychological standpoint, aging and

the life experience it brings often leave people jaded and disillusioned. The imagery in the second stanza surrounding the blackberries' fermentation can also symbolize this aspect, particularly when considering the emotional impact the rotting berries have on the speaker. The speaker is left with the sight of disgusting fungus, with the smell of "stinking" juice, with the "sour" taste of spoiled flesh. As a result, the speaker "always felt like crying." The symbol of the blackberries thus reveals both the physical and emotional toll of growing older and losing youthful vitality and innocence.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-8:** "the blackberries would ripen. / At first, just one, a glossy purple clot / Among others, red, green, hard as a knot. / You ate that first one and its flesh was sweet / Like thickened wine: summer's blood was in it / Leaving stains upon the tongue and lust for / Picking."
- **Line 10:** "briars scratched"
- **Lines 14-15:** "green ones, and on top big dark blobs burned / Like a plate of eyes"
- **Lines 15-16:** "Our hands were peppered / With thorn pricks, our palms sticky as Bluebeard's."
- **Line 17:** "the fresh berries"
- **Line 19:** "our cache"
- **Line 20:** "The juice"
- **Line 21:** "The fruit," " fermented, the sweet flesh would turn sour."
- **Lines 23-24:** "all the lovely canfuls smelt of rot. / Each year I hoped they'd keep, knew they would not."

WINE

The "thickened wine" and "summer's blood" referenced in Line 6 functions as a religious symbol and an allusion to the Christian tradition of celebrating Holy Communion. Given that the poem's author, Seamus Heaney, was Catholic, he would have been familiar with the tradition. According to tradition, at the Last Supper, Jesus gave his disciples bread, telling them "This is my body," and wine, telling them "This is my blood." The reference to the blackberry as having "flesh" in line 5 suggests the berry symbolizes Christ's body while its juice symbolizes his blood. The fact that the phrase "summer's blood" is used to describe the berry juice supports this reading.

Holy Communion functions as a memorial act through which participants recall Christ's words and actions on the night before he was crucified. Given that it is closely tied to his crucifixion, this symbol emphasizes an end point of life. Within the context of the poem, it represents the conclusion of a person's childhood. The symbolism is fitting in relation to the poem's overarching themes, especially when considering that Christ rose again following his crucifixion. Just as the end of childhood does not mark the end of a person's life, the crucifixion did not mark the end of Christ.

This subtle hint at Christ's story highlights the speaker's point that people carry on after the tumultuous process of growing up, even though adolescence and the loss of childhood innocence will inevitably leave its marks on them. The reference to "thorn pricks" in line 16 further supports a religious reading, as it can be seen as a reference to the crown of thorns Christ wore upon his crucifixion. The marks left on Christ's face as a result are sometimes shown in religious imagery. This is comparable to the thorn pricks on the hands of the blueberry pickers.

Leaving a religious interpretation aside, the reference to wine can also simply serve as a symbol of aging. Made from ripe, juicy grapes, wine is produced by fermenting grape juice. The substance itself requires aging, which again points to the inevitability of growing older and more complex.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "its flesh was sweet"
- **Line 6:** "Like thickened wine: summer's blood was in it"
- **Lines 15-16:** " Our hands were peppered / With thorn pricks,"

BLUEBEARD

The allusion to Bluebeard at the end of the first stanza punctuates the sense of foreboding that has been built up through the first 16 lines. Basically, Blackbeard symbolizes the children's lust and greed. Bluebeard was a man who murdered his wife. Using a simile ("palms sticky as Bluebeard's") to compare the hands of apparently innocent children to a murderer's is chilling. It serves to suggest that the blackberry pickers themselves aren't totally innocent. It's said a person "has blood on their hands" when they're guilty of something, and this is exactly how the children are described.

Indeed, in the next stanza, the children appear to be guilty of gluttony and greed. They picked way too many berries and can't even eat them all before they go bad. The fact that the children are described as having a "lust for / Picking" in lines 7-8 also suggests a sense of wrongdoing. Lust, greed, and gluttony are three of the seven deadly sins. Inserting the gruesome symbol of Bluebeard and using a comparative device to draw similarities to the children makes it clear they are not totally innocent, and hints that perhaps no one can truly remain innocent in the process of growing up.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 16:** "Bluebeard's"

POETIC DEVICES

EXTENDED METAPHOR

The entirety of "Blackberry-Picking" functions as an extended metaphor, unfolding and developing the poem's central comparison (of blackberry-picking to growing up and losing childhood innocence) across the poem's two stanzas. In the first lines, the berries ripening "For a full week" suggests impatience, much like the impatience of a little kid who wants to grow up and be able to do "adult" things like stay up late. These first five lines speak to childhood innocence, as is reflected by the fact that the newly ripe berry's "flesh was sweet" and unspoiled.

From line 7 onwards, however, the first stanza develops the metaphor of blackberry-picking in new directions, using almost violent language ("briars scratched" and "wet grass bleached") and vivid imagery to mirror the tumultuous process of growing up and transitioning from childhood to adolescence. The blackberries end up "Leaving stains" which can be seen as the marks of tough experiences people increasingly accumulate as they get older. However, people, especially younger people, still strive to collect more experiences, comparable to the children's "lust for / Picking." Younger people in particular are eager and less cautious about entering potentially painful situations, like falling in love and opening oneself up to the possibility of heartache. By the end of the first stanza, the children's hands are "peppered / With thorn pricks" and the experience of blackberry picking itself is concluded, indicating that the children may have reached a new stage of maturity.

The second stanza reflects the aftermath of such an experience, hinting at the way that many life experiences become marred by loss, disappointment, and difficulty. The berries rot (the experience sours) and despair ensues. This stanza points to the difficulty of accepting that hard experiences are simply a part of life and, in particular, of growth. The extended metaphor thus functions to display the entire cycle of a "growing" life experience, from the anticipation of the experience, to the challenges of the experience itself, and finally to the lasting marks these challenges leave behind.

The metaphor is carried through to the very end of the poem and plays one last important role with the final line: "Each year I hoped they'd keep, knew they would not." The speaker is referencing the blackberries rotting and expressing a sad acceptance of the fact that they always do spoil. This can be compared to an adult kind of wisdom, namely the resignation older persons tend to develop regarding life's losses and disappointments. The more difficulties people experience, the poem suggests, the more resigned they become to such challenges. The metaphor reflects this by concluding with resignation and acceptance, sentiments that tend to only develop later in life, once the tough process of growing up is in the past.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24

ALLITERATION

Alliteration occurs in multiple instances throughout "Blackberry-Picking" and emphasizes key turning points in the poem. In line 5, "first" and "flesh" are brought together with /f/ sounds, emphasizing the idea of youth. Taken together, the words "first flesh" even hint at a loss of innocence as in a loss of virginity, a reading that is further supported by the use of the word "lust" (oftentimes associated with sexual desire) in line 7.

In line 10, the alliteration of /b/ sounds emphasizes the increasingly violent turn the poem is taking as the "briars scratched" and "grass bleached our boots." This ominous new direction comes to a head in lines 14-16 when the troubling image of the "plate" of eyes deepens the sense of building foreboding, while the physical marks of the tumultuous process of blackberry picking (or, figuratively speaking, growing up) are seen on the children's bodies as their hands are "peppered / With thorn pricks, our palms sticky as Bluebeard's."

The second stanza picks up on the stream of alliteration found in the last three lines of the first stanza, helping to tie the two sections of text together despite the physical gap between them. Line 17 introduces the "berries in the byre." While line 17 concludes with a conclusive punctuation mark, a period, line 18 continues this alliteration of /b/ sounds ("But when the bath"). The repetition draws the reader forward through the poem, reflecting the inevitability of growing up, loss of innocence, and the unavoidable disappointment that life brings.

Technically, the narrative of the poem could stop here. A complete story of picking blackberries and storing them has been told. This *could* be a simple depiction of a nice childhood memory. The speaker goes on, however. Line 18 introduces the pivotal turn and again alliteration is used to emphasize the moment: "But when the bath was filled we found a fur / A rat-grey fungus[.]" These /f/ sounds are again picked up in line 21 with "The fruit fermented, the sweet flesh would turn sour." The use of /f/ sounds here ties up the narrative nicely when taking into consideration the introduction of /f/ sounds in line 5. The speaker has taken the reader on a journey from "first [...]flesh" to "fruit fermented" — "sweet" has turned "sour" as the alliterative technique emphasizes the narrative arc of the poem's extended metaphor. The poem closes on two more tidy pairs of alliteration, each of which emphasizes the speaker's first-person perspective and final acceptance of this disappointment. The speaker "felt" that it wasn't "fair" that the berries had rotted, but at the same time, they "knew" that the berries would "not" keep.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "F," "f"
- **Line 3:** "f"
- **Line 5:** "f," "f"
- **Line 10:** "b," "b," "b"
- **Line 14:** "b," "b," "b"
- **Line 15:** "p," "p"
- **Line 16:** "p," "p"
- **Line 17:** "b," "b"
- **Line 18:** "B," "b," "f," "f," "f"
- **Line 19:** "f"
- **Line 21:** "f," "f," "s," "f," "s"
- **Line 22:** "f," "f"
- **Line 24:** "kn," "n"

CONSONANCE

Consonance is used throughout the poem to enhance its cadences, the natural rise and fall of intonation that would be heard when reading the poem aloud. It also highlights important words that drive the narrative of the poem and its extended metaphor.

In line 7, for example, the repetition of /t/ sounds emphasizes the most important words: "Leaving stains upon the tongue and lust for." In line 12, similarly, the consonance serves to emphasize the active words, "trekked and picked." Meanwhile, the use of consonance with short, sharp, staccato /t/ sounds in lines 22-24 (e.g., "smelt of rot") serves to drive the poem to a more rapid and forceful conclusion. The reader is propelled forward, towards the inevitable conclusion of the entire process of deterioration that the poem describes.

On multiple occasions, the poem makes use of single words that contain matching, close-together consonant sounds. Examples include "blackberries" in line 2, "purple" in line 3, "peppered" in line 15, and "Bluebeard's" in line 16. The use of "blackberries" in line 2 is actually the only time that the actual word blackberries/blackberry appears in the poem. Given that the entire poem revolves around this topic, the use of other words mirroring the repeated consonant sounds in "blackberries" can also be interpreted as signposts, pointing the reader back to the subject of the poem.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "v," "v," "n," "n"
- **Line 2:** "F," "f," "b," "b," "n"
- **Line 3:** "f," "t," "t," "l," "p," "p," "l," "l"
- **Line 4:** "r," "r," "r"
- **Line 5:** "t," "t," "f," "t," "t," "f," "t"
- **Line 7:** "t," "t," "t"
- **Line 8:** "ck," "k"
- **Line 9:** "t ," "t," "k," "c," "t," "t"
- **Line 10:** "b," "s," "s," "ss," "b," "b," "s"
- **Line 11:** "f," "f," "t," "t"
- **Line 12:** "kk," "ck," "c"
- **Line 13:** "t," "t"
- **Line 14:** "b," "b," "b," "b"
- **Line 15:** "p," "r," "p," "pp," "r"
- **Line 16:** "th," "th," "p," "ck," "p," "ck," "B," "b"
- **Line 17:** "b," "b"
- **Line 18:** "B," "wh," "b," "w," "f," "w," "f," "f"
- **Line 19:** "g," "f," "g," "g"
- **Line 20:** "ff"
- **Line 21:** "f," "t," "f," "t," "s," "t," "f," "t," "s"
- **Line 22:** "f," "t," "k," "c," "t," "t," "f"
- **Line 23:** "t," "ll," "l," "l," "l," "l," "t," "t"
- **Line 24:** "kn," "n," "t."

ASSONANCE

"Blackberry-Picking" uses assonance throughout to reinforce the impact of certain sounds and the images they help to paint. For instance, the picture of the first ripe blackberry, round and juicy, is supported by the description of it as a "glossy purple clot." The double appearance of the letter o, along with the round parts of the p almost side-by-side, adds to the idea of a round, ripe berry (or even a cluster of berries). Assonance is used to a similar effect in line 19, where the /u/ sounds of "fungus, glutting" highlight the poem's dramatic turn, the transition from ripe and hopeful to rotten and jaded. The imagery of the mold is likewise made clearer through the emphasis the assonance places on these words.

The use of assonance also supports distinct rhymes throughout, drawing attention to certain lines as with "clot"/"knot" in lines 3-4 and "rot"/"not" in lines 23-24. As with the repetition of the alliteration in lines 5 ("first [...] flesh") and 21 ("fruit fermented, the sweet flesh," this repeated assonance rounds out the poem's entire narrative, emphasizing the trip the reader has taken from the ripe young berries to the "rot" of the spoiled, old berries.

In some instances, assonance serves instead to trip the reader up, as in line 15 when two different vowels unexpectedly create a similar sound: "Like a plate of eyes." The lack of coherence between the appearance of the words is at odds with their similar assonant sounds, causing the reader to stumble over this phrase and thereby creating an uncomfortable sensation that mirrors the strange, troubling idea of "a plate of eyes."

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "o," "o"
- **Line 4:** "o," "o," "o"
- **Line 6:** "i," "i," "oo," "a," "i," "i"
- **Line 7:** "u," "o," "u"

- **Line 8:** “i,” “i,” “e,” “e,” “i,” “u,” “u”
- **Line 9:** “i,” “i,” “a,” “i,” “o”
- **Line 11:** “ie,” “ie,” “o,” “o”
- **Line 12:** “e,” “e,” “e”
- **Line 13:** “i,” “i,” “o,” “o,” “o”
- **Line 14:** “o,” “o,” “o”
- **Line 15:** “i,” “e”
- **Line 16:** “i,” “i,” “i”
- **Line 19:** “u,” “u,” “u”
- **Line 20:** “ui,” “oo”
- **Line 21:** “ui,” “e,” “e,” “e”
- **Line 22:** “i,” “y”
- **Line 23:** “o”
- **Line 24:** “Ea,” “ea,” “ee,” “o”

IMAGERY

"Blackberry-Picking" makes extensive use of rich imagery, engaging each one of the reader's five senses at one point or another. For example, a ripe berry isn't just "ripe" or "purple" but a "glossy purple clot," as described in line 3. In line 4, the unripe berries aren't just described in terms of colors but also in terms of how they would feel to the touch, as they are "red, green, hard as a knot." The speaker not only describes the appearance of the berries but also how they tasted "sweet / Like thickened wine" in lines 5-6.

Then, there is the aggressive tactile imagery of line 10, where the "briars scratched," which gives the reader a further sense of the *feeling* of blackberry-picking. The same is true for the description of hands "peppered / With thorn pricks" and "palms sticky as Bluebeard's."

The reader's sense of hearing is also engaged with the description of the unripe berries bouncing off the bottom of the cans and creating a "tinkling" sound in line 13.

The vivid imagery reaches a climax in the disgusting description of the rotting berries throughout the second stanza. Again, almost all five senses are engaged. The reader can imagine the feeling of "a fur" in line 18 and envision the "rat-grey fungus" of line 19. The reader can smell the "stinking" juice of line 20 and taste the "sour" flesh of line 21. Even the reference to crying in line 22 inspires the thought of a child's tears and all the sounds of sniffling and sobbing this might bring with it.

Throughout, these intense images bring the reader into the speaker's experience and subtly highlight how the reader—like any human—simply can't avoid experiencing the kinds of tumultuous transformation, disappointment, and growth described here. The poem suggests that all of this is universal; everyone grows up, and everyone has to learn to come to terms with losing their childhood innocence. The way that imagery brings these ideas to life for the reader is one way that the poem conveys this sense of universality.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** “a glossy purple clot”
- **Line 4:** “Among others, red, green, hard as a knot.”
- **Lines 5-6:** “sweet / Like thickened wine:”
- **Line 7:** “Leaving stains upon the tongue”
- **Line 8:** “red ones inked up”
- **Line 10:** “briars scratched and wet grass bleached our boots.”
- **Line 11:** “Round hayfields, cornfields and potato-drills”
- **Lines 13-16:** “the tinkling bottom had been covered / With green ones, and on top big dark blobs burned / Like a plate of eyes. Our hands were peppered / With thorn pricks, our palms sticky as Bluebeard's.”
- **Lines 18-20:** “a fur, / A rat-grey fungus, glutting on our cache. / The juice was stinking too.”
- **Line 21:** “the sweet flesh would turn sour.”
- **Line 23:** “all the lovely canfuls smelt of rot.”

SIMILE

The poem includes four similes. In line 4, the phrase "hard as a knot" describes the tough, non-juicy texture of an unripe berry. The word "knot" here is used in the sense of a knot in a muscle, something to be worked out and softened. The comparison drives home the point that the unripe berry's hardness is only temporary but can (and will) give way to softness.

The use of the phrase "sweet / Like thickened wine" to describe the first ripe berry's taste in lines 5-6 is the second example of a simile. The fact that the wine is "thickened" suggests it's fermenting or fermented, which mirrors the concepts of ripening and rotting described in the poem. This simile can also be interpreted as a religious allusion to Holy Communion and Christ's crucifixion, as discussed in more detail elsewhere in this guide. This reading likens the speaker's berry-picking to a sacred ritual and heightens the poem's overall sense of drama and significance.

In line 14, the ripe berries are described as "big dark blobs [that] burned / Like a plate of eyes." This comparison is jarring and ominous, suggesting that the children are somehow being watched by the berries they pick. The image of a "plate of eyes" is grotesque and foreshadows the gruesome imagery to come in the second stanza.

Finally, there is the comparison between the children's hands and those of a murderer, in line 16's phrase: "palms sticky as Bluebeard's." This follows soon after the "plate of eyes" and, by comparing the children's hands to the bloody hands of a murderer, reinforces the ominous tone of that image. This final simile also suggests that the children aren't quite as innocent as they may have seemed, foreshadowing the greed and gluttony that the next stanza will reveal them to be guilty of.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "hard as a knot"
- **Lines 5-6:** "sweet / Like thickened wine:"
- **Lines 14-15:** "big dark blobs burned / Like a plate of eyes."
- **Line 16:** "our palms sticky as Bluebeard's."

ONOMATOPOEIA

"Blackberry-Picking" makes one prominent use of onomatopoeia with the word "tinkling" in line 13. The word describes the sound the unripe berries make when thrown into a can and suggests a happy, carefree sound. A person might think of the word "tinkling" in relation to a "tinkling" melody, or even a childish euphemism for urination. The fact that the word here is used in direct relation to unripe berries (as is made clear by the fact that it's the "green ones" that cover the bottom of the can and make the "tinkling" sound) reinforces the association of "tinkling" with childlike innocence.

The aural imagery that this use of onomatopoeia creates gains significance when analyzing the imagery of the second stanza. In this stanza, the grotesque berries are described in a way that accounts for every possible sense (sight, taste, smell, touch) *except* for hearing. It's only in the notable use of onomatopoeia in the first stanza that the reader's sense of hearing is explicitly spoken to, so the *lack* of this sense in the second stanza mirrors the lack of innocence (now lost) that the second stanza describes. Another reading could suggest that the second stanza does at least *hint* at sound and the sense of hearing with the speaker's words "I always felt like crying," which inspire the idea of a child's crying and the sounds (sobs, sniffles) that this would create. But in that case, too, the sounds described have become despairing ones instead of light-hearted ones, again indicating that a sense of innocence has been lost.

Where Onomatopoeia appears in the poem:

- **Line 13:** "tinkling"

ALLUSION

"Blackberry-Picking" contains one attention-catching and unsettling allusion with the reference to Bluebeard in line 16. The reader might at first misread this and think of the pirate Blackbeard, but in fact, Bluebeard is a folktale character known for murdering his wives. The reference to Bluebeard is jarring, especially given the fact that the children's hands are compared to his using the simile "palms sticky as Bluebeard's." This implies that the children themselves "have blood on their hands" (a phrase commonly used to suggest a person is guilty of something) and are not as innocent as one might at first have thought. The idea that the children aren't totally innocent is reinforced by the fact that they then "hoarded" the berries in line 17, suggesting greed, since hoarding usually means storing something away, often secretly, for your own use.

The allusion to Bluebeard punctuates the conclusion of the first stanza, throughout which the process of blackberry-picking (which the speaker subtly compares to the process of growing up) has been described. It thus suggests that, following this experience, the children have already lost some of their innocence. The second stanza carries this idea forward, emphasizing the fact that the experience of blackberry-picking concludes with a harsh lesson about loss and disappointment in life.

Additionally, the poem arguably includes a second, more subtle allusion in its mention of "thickened wine" and "summer's blood" in line 6. The language linking "wine" to "blood" recalls the Christian concept of communion, in which worshipers are said to consume the body and blood of Jesus Christ in the form of bread and wine. This subtle reference makes the act of picking berries feel like a sacred or religious act, one which will have profound consequences—and indeed, the second stanza shows that this is the case. Following this interpretation, it could also be that the "thorn pricks" mentioned in line 16 are an allusion to the marks left on Christ's body after the crucifixion, as if the children are undergoing a kind of death (and resurrection) as they move away from innocence and toward maturity.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "Like thickened wine: summer's blood was in it"
- **Line 16:** "thorn pricks," "Bluebeard's"

ENJAMBMENT

The poem uses enjambment frequently throughout the first stanza, driving the reader forward in the narration of events. For example, in line 7, the concluding phrase "lust for" leaves the reader hanging, wondering, "lust for what?" and propels the reader onto the next line. The use of enjambment also highlights two surprising similes in the first stanza, in each case leaving the comparison dangling to be resolved in the next line. This happens with "sweet / Like thickened wine" in lines 5-6 and "burned / Like a plate of eyes" in lines 14-15.

The second stanza doesn't make use of enjambment to the same extent. Instead of allowing for the free flow of narration that the first stanza's use of the device encourages, the second stanza punctuates the ends of most lines distinctly. The first stanza is 16 lines long and adds punctuation at the conclusion of five lines (four periods and one comma in total). Although the second stanza, with eight lines, is only half as long as the first stanza, it adds punctuation at the conclusion of six lines (five periods and one comma in total). As a result, the second stanza is more direct and harsher, featuring short, choppy phrases and ideas. This counters the romantic free-flow of the first stanza,

emphasizing the shift in mood between the two parts of the poem and its transition from innocent childhood memory to jaded adult looking back on that memory.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "sun / For"
- **Lines 3-4:** "clot / Among"
- **Lines 5-6:** "sweet / Like"
- **Lines 6-7:** "it / Leaving"
- **Lines 7-8:** "for / Picking"
- **Lines 8-9:** "hunger / Sent"
- **Lines 9-10:** "jam-pots / Where"
- **Lines 11-12:** "potato-drills / We"
- **Lines 13-14:** "covered / With"
- **Lines 14-15:** "burned / Like"
- **Lines 15-16:** "peppered / With"
- **Lines 20-21:** "bush / The"
- **Lines 22-23:** "fair / That"

CAESURA

Caesura is frequently used to interrupt the poem's natural flow and rhythm, calling attention to key phrases and turning points while forcing the reader to momentarily reflect on these moments.

In the first line, for example, the comma after "August" sets the scene while also drawing attention to the fact that the berries will only ripen "given heavy rain and sun." It's not a given that the weather will cooperate and that the berries will ripen, and the pause after August highlights this fact. In line 3, the commas around "just one" set apart the words and distinguish the concept of this *one*, the very first blackberry to ripen. This effect is mirrored in the imagery of the blackberry itself, which is described uniquely as a "glossy purple clot" against the "others, red, green," in line 4.

The use of a caesura becomes more jarring in line 6, when a colon interrupts the line and draws a direct link between the the berry's flesh and "summer's blood." The comparison of the berry juice first to wine and then subsequently, following the colon, to summer's blood heightens the impact of this simile. In the pause the caesura creates, the reader is invited to reflect on the significance of this comparison and to interpret its symbolism. In particular, the comparison to wine and blood can be seen as an allusion to the religious rite of Holy Communion.

The use of caesura becomes more prevalent in the second stanza, where five of the stanza's eight lines have some sort of punctuation and pause in the middle. This mirrors the increased use of end-stop and decreased use of enjambment in the second stanza (compared to the first) and supports the reading of the second stanza in short, punctuated phrases. This shift in style mirrors the conclusive attitude of an adult who has experienced life and its disappointments and losses, and who no longer holds the open-ended hope of a young person. The caesuras in the second stanza highlight that the narrative there becomes conclusive and resigned, lacking the childish hope with which the poem opened.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "August, given"
- **Line 2:** "week, the"
- **Line 3:** "first, just one, a"
- **Line 4:** "others, red, green, hard"
- **Line 6:** "wine: summer's"
- **Line 8:** "Picking. Then"
- **Line 9:** "cans, pea tins, jam-pots"
- **Line 11:** "hayfields, cornfields"
- **Line 14:** "ones, and"
- **Line 15:** "eyes. Our"
- **Line 16:** "pricks, our"
- **Line 19:** "fungus, glutting"
- **Line 20:** "too. Once"
- **Line 21:** "fermented, the"
- **Line 22:** "crying. It"
- **Line 24:** "keep, knew"

ANTITHESIS

The final line of "Blackberry-Picking" uses antithesis to present two juxtaposed sentiments. This brief line is a summation of the entire poem and the overarching themes that the two stanzas describe. The first part of the phrase "Each year I hoped they'd keep," exemplifies the viewpoint of the naive child. Even though this event occurs repeatedly (as shown in words like "I always felt like crying" in line 22 and "Each year" in line 24) the child clings on to the hope that *this* year, the outcome might be different and the berries *won't* rot.

The second part of the phrase, "knew they would not," speaks to the adult recognition of the fact that the loss of the berries is inevitable. The tone is not only one of recognition and acknowledgement, but also of resignation and acceptance. The fact that this second part of the phrase is still attributed to the character of the child the speaker is describing emphasizes the concept of childish hope that persists despite being presented, year after year, with facts that go against that hope. It's only after many years go by and childhood innocence is long gone that this hope also definitively disappears.

The use of caesura with the comma separating the two thoughts emphasizes the distinction between these two contrasting points of view, innocent chid versus jaded adult. What's more, it also breaks the sentence into two nearly equal parts, subtly indicating that neither point of view is necessarily superior or more important; they're both essential, unavoidable parts of being human and growing up.

Where Antithesis appears in the poem:

- **Line 24:** "Each year I hoped they'd keep, knew they would not."

VOCABULARY

Clot (Line 3) - A clot is like a lump, usually formed by a substance that sticks together. It can also refer to a mass of blood that has clotted and formed a coagulated mass. Describing the first ripe berry as a "clot" is in this sense quite visceral and gives a hint of the grotesque turn the poem will take. A blood clot can also result in fatal health complications, making this word choice even more ominous.

Thickened wine (Line 6) - The berry's flesh is compared to wine, providing for religious symbolism that compares the process of eating blackberries to the celebration of Holy Communion. The fact that the next words are "summer's blood" affirms a religious reading (in Holy Communion, the bread is meant to represent Christ's body or flesh, and the wine his blood).The fact that the wine is "thickened" suggests it is fermenting and mirrors the poem's narrative of rotting berries.

Potato-drills (Line 11) - This refers to the even rows of potatoes planted in a field.

Tinkling (Line 13) - One definition of a tinkle is a sound, often used to describe a line of song (as in "a tinkling melody"). Another definition is associated with urination. The use of the word "tinkling" is very childish. No adult would say they "need to tinkle," for instance. In this context, the word is representative of childlike innocence (in line with either one of these definitions). The onomatopoeia of the word reflects this, as tinkling suggests a sound that is cheery, sprightly, and bright—not ominous, slow, or dark.

Eyes (Line 15) - The ripe blackberries are described as eyes. This implies watching and a foreboding sense that the children are under surveillance. The fact that the eyes are removed in this description (sitting on a plate) creates a grotesque and visceral image.An eye can also refer to the "eye of a storm" such as the calm part in the center of a hurricane. The children can be seen as being in the eye of the storm, blissfully unaware of the nasty fate that awaits the berries (and the children who discover them) in the second stanza.

Peppered (Line 15) - The verb "to pepper" can mean to shower with force as in "they fought and he peppered the man with blows." Alternatively, it can also mean simply to appear as a sprinkling, as in "freckles peppered her body." Finally, it can mean to season as in "he peppered the soup." In this context, the first two definitions are most relevant. Not only are the children's hands covered with a sprinkling of thorn pricks, these pricks speak to a violent act, as if the briars actively peppered their hands with these pricks.

Bluebeard (Line 16) - Bluebeard is a folktale character known for murdering his wives. His hands would be sticky with their blood after killing them. The blood on his hands is compared here to the berry juice on the children's hands.

Hoarded (Line 17) - "To hoard" means to stash away a supply of goods, often secretly. A greedy miser might hoard away his money, for example, or a squirrel might hoard away its acorns for winter. Hoarding implies a sense of greed and selfishness, as it involves keeping large quantities of goods for oneself.

Byre (Line 17) - A byre is a cow barn or shed. It's an old English word, no longer commonly used.

Fur (Line 18) - The fur in this sense describes mold. It's a jarring use of the word since fur is usually thought of in association with cute, fuzzy animals. It's soft and makes the reader want to *pet* it—until the reader realizes this "fur" is actually mold.

Glutting (Line 19) - "To glut" (verb) means to fill oneself, usually with food. A "glutton" (noun) is a person who eats too much. A "glut" (noun) can also refer to an excessive amount. "Gluttony" is eating too much, or in a Christian context, the deadly sin of eating or drinking in excess, or indulging in greedy excess. Given that the children pick more berries than will keep, they seem to be guilty of this sin.

Cache (Line 19) - A collection, hoard, or stockpile of something.

Fermented (Line 21) - Fermentation refers to a chemical process that transforms substances, such as the fermentation of grape juice into wine. The entire poem revolves around this process, which is the end result of berry-picking season. To be "in a ferment" can also mean to be in a state of intense activity or agitation. The agitated state of the speaker in the second stanza reflects this second meaning.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Blackberry-Picking" does not adhere to any formal guidelines in terms of stanzas or verses. It consists of two uneven stanzas, one 16 lines and the second 8 lines long. These two stanzas reflect the trajectory of the poem's narrative, distinguishing between childhood innocence and jaded adult wisdom. In the first stanza, the process of blackberry picking-reflects the process of growing up. In the second, the discovery of the rotten berries reflects the loss of childhood innocence and the disillusionment that adulthood brings, followed by the concluding adult acceptance of the fact that life is full of loss and disappointment. The break between the two stanzas highlights the contrast between these two distinct phases of human life.

METER

"Blackberry-Picking" starts with iambic pentameter, meaning that each line has five poetic feet in a da-DUM rhythm. The first line shows this steady meter:

> Late Au- | gust, giv- | en hea- | vy rain | and sun

This meter mirrors the rhythmic turning of the seasons that is being introduced in the first line, as the last month of summer fades away to the fall.

There are variations to this regular meter throughout the poem, however. Line 21 marks a notable deviation:

> The fruit | fermment- | ed, the | sweet flesh | would turn sour.

This line contains an instance of pyrrhic meter, consisting of two unstressed syllables within the same foot ("ed, the"). There is also a spondee, two hard stress syllables ("sweet flesh") as well as an anapest, two soft syllables followed by a strong one, at the very end of the line ("would turn sour"). These changes highlight that the steady innocence of the first stanza has been corrupted, just as the mold rots the blackberries.

In line 22, an anapest likewise occurs:

> I al- | ways felt | like cry- | ing. It was- | n't fair

This metrical change connects the two distinct clauses while emphasizing the unfairness of the situation, since that foot gets an extra syllable.

The final line of the poem uses a trochee (stressed-unstressed), on "knew they":

> Each year | I hoped | they'd keep, | knew they | would not.

A caesura (the comma) interrupts the iambic pattern, emphasizing the word "knew" and drawing attention to the ultimate takeaway of the speaker's blackberry-picking experience, namely an adult knowledge of the fact that life is full of let-downs.

RHYME SCHEME

"Blackberry-Picking" follows a standard rhyme scheme of:

AABBCCDDEEFF

Not all of the rhymes are exact and some are half-rhymes or slant rhymes instead, as in "sun"/"ripen" in lines 1-2 and "byre"/"fur" in lines 17-18. This generally steady rhyme gives the poem a sing-song feel that matches its narrative of childhood exploration.

Additionally, notable repetition of rhyme is seen in lines 3-4:

> At first, just one, a glossy purple clot
> Among others, red, green, hard as a knot.

and 23-24:

> That all the lovely canfuls smelt of rot.
> Each year I hoped they'd keep, knew they would not.

The repetition ties the end of the poem back to its beginning, and lends a sense of continuity to the entire narrative. By the end, the reader has similarly come full circle, witnessing the transition from hopeful child to jaded adult. This narrative also encompasses an emotional journey on the speaker's part. First, there is childish indignation in the form of tears. Then, there is adult resignation to the simple fact that loss is a part of life.

SPEAKER

"Blackberry-Picking" provides an adult point of view on a childhood memory. The speaker is grown up and reflecting on the process of blackberry-picking, a seasonal event that the speaker experienced annually (every August) throughout the speaker's childhood. In describing the event and the disappointment it resulted in every year when the blackberries rotted, the speaker reveals a defining moment of childhood, the realization that life is marred by loss and accompanying disappointment. The speaker wants to convey the impact of this epiphany and suggests that it is only the beginning of the journey to "growing up" and realizing that life will hold many such disappointments (and usually on a much larger scale than spoiled blackberries).

By describing childhood disappointment from an adult's perspective, the speaker is further able to demonstrate an acceptance of the fact that life is filled with loss and disappointment. The speaker is no longer the child who "always felt like crying." The speaker is instead resigned to the bitter facts of loss and no longer holds the naive hope of the child who "hoped they'd keep, knew they would not."

There is no specification within the poem that the speaker is Seamus Heaney himself, or indeed any concrete information about the speaker's exact age, gender, or any other biographical information. That said, the epigraph could support such a reading. Some versions of the poem are dedicated to Philip Hobsbaum, a teacher of Heaney's at Queen's University, Belfast. A teacher is often a role model for a child and may impart life lessons as well as academic ones. The epigraph functions as a message to Hobsbaum, a signal that the speaker (Heaney) now understands what the adults in his life have long known when it comes to loss and disappointment.

SETTING

"Blackberry-Picking" describes a childhood memory set on a farm in the countryside. This is apparent from the references to "hayfields, cornfields and potato-drills" as well as the "byre" (a sort of barn or shed). The memory is not a one-time occurrence but rather describes an event that happened repeatedly, in "late August." The repetitive nature of the event, now encompassed in a single poem, is affirmed in the second stanza by the phrasing "I always felt like crying" and "Each year."

Although it is clear that the speaker is reflecting on the past and that the poem describes a memory, it is not clear where the speaker may be located in the present day.

Though the poem doesn't specifically identify Heaney himself as the speaker, it's possible to read the poem as an autobiographical account. In that case, the setting could in rural Ireland, where Heaney himself grew up on a farm. Given that Heaney was born in 1939, the setting would then be roughly the mid-20th century.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Blackberry-Picking" was first published in 1966, in the collection of poems *Death of a Naturalist*. Heaney's first major published volume, it helped the Irish poet, then living in Belfast, to gain international recognition. The volume won multiple awards, including the Somerset Maugham Award and a Cholmondeley Award. Like many of Heaney's earlier works, "Blackberry-Picking" is influenced by his rural upbringing in County Derry, Northern Ireland. He grew up a farmer's son.

Heaney's early influences include Robert Frost (1874-1963) who likewise dealt with topics and themes related to nature and the natural world, as well as the English romantic poet John Keats (1795-1821). In his 1995 Nobel Prize lecture, Heaney referred to Keats's "Ode to Autumn" as the "ark of the covenant between language and sensation." Especially given this poem's use of imagery and literary devices like onomatopoeia to convey a sensory experience of blackberry-picking, this comment speaks to Heaney's value of this mastery of language. William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) is significant another influence and Heaney even wrote essays on Yeats, "Yeats as an Example?" (1978) and "A Tale of Two Islands: Reflections on the Irish Literary Revival" (1980).

Patrick Kavanagh (1904-1967) was another of Heaney's early influences. According to Heaney's work, reading Kavanagh taught him that "nothing is trivial" and that seemingly insignificant, mundane occurrences (like picking blackberries) are just as important as larger, far-reaching themes. Michael McLaverty was another influence and Heaney found inspiration through the writer's lyrical, emotionally charged novels.

Heaney graduated from Queen's University, Belfast (QUB) in 1961 and had his first poems published in student magazines during this time. Upon the publication of *Death of a Naturalist* in 1966, he was in the same year appointed as an English lecturer at QUB. *Death of a Naturalist* additionally includes ideas introduced to Heaney through his participation in The Belfast Group, a writing workshop organized by Philip Hobsbaum, his teacher at QUB. Some versions of "Blackberry-Picking" are printed with an epigraph dedicating the poem to Hobsbaum.

Heaney is arguably the best-known poet of The Northern School, a group of Northern Irish poets that began to garner attention in the 1960s, coinciding with the rise of political and cultural unrest in that country. The 1960s were a period of tumultuous evolution in Ireland and in Irish literature. Government censorship of the past was challenged more actively. In 1960, for example, Edna O'Brien published the novel *The Country Girls*, which described the oppressive force of the Roman Catholic religion on women. The novel was banned and O'Brien left Ireland.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Heaney was born in Northern Ireland in 1939. He grew up in a time when Ireland was wracked by what would become "The Troubles" or the Northern Ireland conflict. The Troubles were a dispute from about 1968 (different sources mark different start dates) to 1998 between Protestant unionists, who wanted Ireland to remain a part of the United Kingdom, and Roman Catholic nationalists, who wanted Northern Ireland to join the Republic of Ireland. The struggle was often violent and more than 30,000 people were wounded and 3,600 killed in these decades.

The year that "Blackberry-Picking" was published, Heaney was living in Belfast. The same year, the Ulster Volunteer Force, a unionist paramilitary group, was formed. In 1968, a civil rights march took place in Derry and in August of 1969, the Battle of Bogside occurred and British troops were deployed, escalating the violence. Heaney himself was Catholic and a nationalist who chose to live in the south of Ireland. Heaney was criticized for his failure to take explicit sides in the Troubles, but some of his writing did address the conflict (such as his books *Wintering Out* and *North*). "Blackberry-Picking" does not specifically address these events, but it perhaps hints at them through its themes of lost innocence and confronting difficult realities.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- An Introduction to Holy Communion — "Blackberry-Picking" includes religious symbolism referencing the

Christian tradition of Holy Communion. Learn about the history and significance of Holy Communion, also called the Eucharist or Lord's Supper. (https://www.britannica.com/topic/Eucharist)

- Seamus Heaney's 1995 Nobel Lecture — The author of "Blackberry-Picking" won the Nobel Prize in 1995. Read his speech upon the occasion, in which he references influences like John Keats. (https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/seamus-heaney-dead-poets-1995-nobel-lecture-8791520.html)
- Obituary: Seamus Heaney — Read about the life of the poem's author. (https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-13930435)
- History of The Troubles in Ireland — Although "Blackberry-Picking" does not explicitly address the Troubles, these events were ongoing throughout Seamus Heaney's career. Other writings of his do speak to these events. Learn about the history. (https://www.britannica.com/event/The-Troubles-Northern-Ireland-history)
- The Folktale of Bluebeard — "Blackberry-Picking" makes an allusion to Bluebeard, a folktale about a man who kills his wives one after the other. Read the tale. (https://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/68/fairy-tales-and-other-traditional-stories/4858/blue-beard/)
- An Introduction to the Belfast Group — Learn more about The Belfast Group, which informed a new generation of writers in Northern Ireland, including Seamus Heaney. (https://belfastgroup.ecds.emory.edu/)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER SEAMUS HEANEY POEMS

- Death of a Naturalist
- Digging
- Follower
- Mid-Term Break
- Storm on the Island

HOW TO CITE

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