Education For Leisure

SUMMARY

The speaker describes wanting to kill something—it doesn't matter what. He is tired of being ignored and announces that today, he's going to pretend to be God. It's a regular day, with gray skies and a bored feeling pervading the streets.

He kills a fly by squashing it against the window. This reminds him of a line from Shakespeare that he read in school. He couldn't understand much of the language, just like this fly now exists in another language that the living can't understand. He fogs up the glass by breathing on it and writes his name, thinking that he's breathing out his extraordinary talent.

The speaker thinks he's a genius and the world is his oyster, if he could just have a bit of luck. Today he plans to change the world, at least from some creature's perspective. He notices that the cat is avoiding him. He thinks that this is because the cat knows he's a genius.

He kills the pet goldfish by flushing it down the toilet. He quotes the Bible: "I see that it is good." The parrot squawks in fear. Once every two weeks, he walks two miles into town to sign unemployment papers and receive benefits. The people there don't seem happy to be getting his autograph.

The speaker has now killed everything in the house. He calls a local radio station and tells the host that he, the speaker, is a superstar. The host hangs up on him. The speaker takes a bread knife from the kitchen and goes out into the street. The sidewalk seems to sparkle. He touches the arm of someone in the street.

THEMES

ALIENATION VS. DESIRE FOR CONNECTION

The speaker of "Education for Leisure" is profoundly alienated from the world around him. (From his references to "school," he seems to be a teenager, although the poem never makes this explicit.) His murderous psychosis is rooted in a sense that no one can understand him—and perhaps that no one *wants* to understand him—and he has increasingly grand and narcissistic fantasies of his own genius which cannot be reconciled with the realities of his ordinary life. At the same time, however, the speaker seems to desire connection with others and at various points tries to make people understand his (admittedly twisted) point of view. This double-edged and perverse desire for intimacy comes to a painful end at the poem's implied violent conclusion.

The speaker depicts himself as unjustly neglected, isolated, and misunderstood by others. He declares that "I have had enough of being ignored," suggesting that he thinks performing some sort of dramatic act will force people to notice him, to realize his significance. Throughout the poem, the speaker seems isolated from others; even animals hide from him, as when he remarks that "The cat / knows I am a genius, and has hidden itself." The fact that he attributes his isolation to his "genius" rather than his violent tendencies indicates his growing detachment from reality. His delusions are also self-protective: he justifies his isolation by asserting that it is a result of his genius and talent, rather than his own failings. His conviction that he is a misunderstood genius thus allows him to blame the world (and not himself) for his sense of estrangement from others.

However, the speaker's self-protective delusions force him into a further cycle of isolation and anger. When the speaker makes attempts to connect with other people, his efforts often end in failure when people fail to understand what he sees as his "genius" or inherent greatness. For instance, when he goes into town to sign his unemployment papers, he complains that the people there "don't appreciate my autograph." The speaker's delusion extends to thinking that people should be asking for his autograph—a desire that is thwarted when no one sees him as he thinks he deserves to be seen. The speaker calls in to a radio station, an act of reaching out to the world that also ends in disappointment for him. When he tells the radio host that "he's talking to a superstar," he is angry when the host "cuts him off." The speaker's attempts to communicate his narcissistic fantasies are continually frustrated.

Even as the speaker becomes increasingly alienated, the desire for connection seems to remain. Apparently enraged by his encounter with the man on the radio, he goes out into the streets with a knife and narrates a simple description that ends the poem: "I touch your arm." This moment is chilling because it is heavily implied that the speaker goes on to stab the "you" whose arm he has touched. But the fact that the poem ends with an act of physical touch and connection is significant, given that it is the first instance of such human touch in the poem. The speaker does still seem to be "reaching out" to the world from his isolation, even if his interactions with the world inflict violence on others.

The poem does not simply depict the protagonist as an isolated and violent loner. Rather, it demonstrates the way that alienation is interwoven in complex ways with desire for human connection. The speaker's extreme self-obsession, grandiosity, and inability to connect with others result in dark and violent ends—the destruction of other human lives—even as, perversely, the speaker still seems to want others to

understand him.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-3
- Line 8
- Lines 9-12
- Lines 15-16
- Lines 17-19
- Line 20

THE FAILURES OF EDUCATION

The poem is titled "Education for Leisure," and thus education is a theme in the work from the beginning. In the most literal sense, the protagonist is a teenager who has only recently left school or perhaps been expelled, and so scenes of teaching and learning are prominent in the poem. However, it becomes clear that this more conventional education has failed to leave a positive mark on the speaker: in fact, he seems to have learned all the wrong lessons. Moreover, as the poem continues the speaker embarks on a different, darker kind of education "for leisure," in which the killing and maiming of animals teaches and accustoms him to performing even more violent actions.

Like other teenagers, the speaker has received an education: he recalls attending school and in fact seems to have a fairly clear memory of what he learned and read there. For instance, when the speaker kills a fly by squashing it against the window, he is able to make the leap to remembering a line from Shakespeare that he read in school, remarking that "We did that at school. Shakespeare." The line the speaker is alluding to is from *King Lear*, when a character laments: "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; / They kill us for their sport." The line in *King Lear* refers to the cruelty of fate, comparing humans to flies squashed by the gods. However, the speaker has taken a different lesson entirely from reading the play: rather than empathizing with the powerless, he places *himself* in the role of the cruel god who squashes flies.

Although the speaker read the same texts as everyone else in school and received the same education, the supposed power of literature to build empathy does not seem to have had much effect on him. His imperviousness to sympathetic feeling also seems to apply to his reading of religious texts such as the Bible. He paraphrases the words of God when, in Genesis, God creates the world—"I see that it is good." However, the speaker echoes these words in the context of flushing a goldfish down the toilet. Once again, the speaker places himself in the role of an all-powerful and vengeful god, using his education in canonical Western literary texts (like Shakespeare and the Bible) to prop up his own delusional claims of grandiosity. The speaker even echoes a common inspirational phrase often taught to schoolchildren: "I could be anything at all." But clearly, the speaker has taken that seemingly positive belief to disastrous conclusions.

Even as his traditional education seems to have failed, the poem depicts the speaker engaging in another kind of education, in which his habit of killing and torturing animals prepares him to perform similarly violent acts against humans. The speaker abuses a range of animals throughout the poem, from smaller (the fly that he squashes against the window) to larger: the cat (which hides from him), the goldfish (which he flushes down the toilet), and the budgie, or bird (which he describes as "panicking"). He continues to torment animals until, in his words, "there is nothing left to kill." It is only then that he goes out into the street with a knife, suggesting that his killing of animals has been an "education" in violence that prepares him for the next step: killing humans.

The poem's title, "Education for Leisure," thus points to both the failures of the speaker's education in school—reading, for instance, doesn't seem to have taught him much about empathy and care for others—and his choice to educate himself in an entirely different way. By killing animals, the speaker self-educates and prepares himself for a very dark form of "leisure," or recreation: violent acts against other people.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 5
- Lines 6-7
- Lines 9-10
- Line 11
- Lines 11-12
- Line 13
- Line 14
- Line 17

THE BANALITY OF EVIL

In 1963, the philosopher Hannah Arendt coined the phrase "the banality of evil" to describe the way that evil deeds can take place in the context of everyday life and normal activities. Arendt's point is that evil doesn't always look extraordinary; it can also be "banal"—which is to say, dull or ordinary. Although written in a very different context (Arendt was writing about the dutiful German bureaucrats and order-obeying German soldiers who facilitated the Holocaust of World War II), Duffy's "Education for Leisure" is similarly interested in the way that astonishing evil can develop and flourish within the rhythms of an ordinary life. The poem explores this tension between the banal and the extraordinary: the protagonist is a psychotic killer in the making, and yet he also in many ways lives the life of a normal teenager.

From the first word—"today"—the poem signals its situation within an ordinary life: today might be a day like any other. In short order, however, the poem subverts this expectation.

"Today," the speaker continues, "I am going to kill something." The factual, colloquial manner of this pronouncement drives home the incongruity of the statement. The speaker describes his intention to "kill something" with the same matter-of-fact tone someone might use to announce an intention to, for instance, buy milk at the grocery store. This tension between the ordinary and extraordinary is made explicit when the speaker describes today as "an ordinary day, / a sort of grey with boredom stirring in the streets." The speaker clearly dislikes the "ordinary"; he describes the world as "grey" and his personal boredom seems to pervade the outside world. The description of boredom as "stirring" makes this banal, ordinary emotion seem somewhat sinister, as if violence is brewing from the simple fact of the speaker being bored.

As it goes on, the poem registers the increasingly vast distance between the grand, extraordinary narrative the speaker is spinning in his head and the banal, ordinary surroundings in which he finds himself—even if this incongruity is lost on the speaker. For instance, when the speaker declares that "today I am going to change the world," this an impossibly ambitious claim that is comically implausible given the bland suburban world he inhabits. Sometimes this incongruity even takes on a comic register. For instance, noticing that "the cat avoids me," the speaker suggests that this is because "the cat knows I am a genius"—an obviously inflated self-assessment that is almost humorous in its narcissistic grandiosity, even as it links the speaker's sense of his own "genius" with a capacity for malevolent violence.

At the end of the poem, even the speaker's murderous rampage maintains elements of the banal. For example, when the speaker goes out into the street, he "get[s] our bread-knife." One of the most ordinary and unremarkable objects in a kitchen is thus weaponized as an instrument of violence, a transformation that thematically echoes the shift from the banal to the incomprehensibly evil that pervades the entire poem.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Lines 3-4
- Line 10
- Lines 11-12
- Lines 15-16
- Line 19
- Line 20

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

Today I am ...
... to play God.

The poem begins with the word "today," which seems to suggest that today might be an ordinary day like any other—but the speaker announces that "Today I am going to kill something," subverting the reader's expectation of normalcy. This pronouncement is chillingly matter-of-fact, delivered in the colloquial tone of everyday speech. For example, the speaker uses a caesura after "something," which he qualifies with "Anything." In other words, the speaker uses the rhythms of the poem to make killing seem normal.

The speaker also seems to feel that he has been unjustly overlooked by society, and announces: "I have had enough of being ignored." These first two lines, read together, suggest the speaker hopes that acts of violence will garner him the respect and attention that he feels he deserves. By declaring that "today I am going to play God," he also suggests that he sees his violent tendencies as expressions of control over others. By wielding power over life and death, he hopes to get people to notice and respect him. In contrast to the first line, these second two lines are enjambed. Where the first line is staccato and choppy, the second two lines form one long, fluid sentence ("I have had enough of being ignored and today / I am going to play God"), giving the impression that the speaker has gotten carried away in his enthusiasm for what he calls "playing God."

LINES 3-4

It is an ...
... in the streets.

As in the first stanza, the speaker focuses on the time of "today," which he describes as "an ordinary day." However, this assertion of ordinariness is again belied by the speaker's violent pronouncements: today is clearly not an ordinary day, since he has previously declared that "Today I am going to kill something." The ordinariness of the day and the setting thus contrast sharply with the speaker's extraordinary threats of violence and murder. Even by the end of the first stanza, the poem has made it clear that evil doesn't have to be exotic or exciting; on the contrary, it often pops up in dull, everyday circumstances.

The speaker depicts the day as "a sort of grey," implying that the weather is overcast, with grey skies. But he also describes "boredom" as "stirring in the streets," a description that is less easy to understand. This is because it is not exactly a straightforward literal depiction of the weather. Rather, the speaker uses pathetic fallacy to conflate his interior feelings (his "boredom") with the external world, as if the streets themselves are as bored as the speaker. The assertion that boredom is "stirring in the streets" also takes on a sinister quality, implying that boredom is not just placid but also contains a restless potential for violence. Furthermore, the alliteration between "stirring" and "streets" sticks out (especially since there's so little alliteration in most of the

poem), subtly foreshadowing that something more significant—namely, the speaker—will be troubling the streets by the end of the poem.

LINES 5-7

I squash a ...
... in another language.

In this stanza, the speaker kills a fly by squashing it against the window. The fly is a small creature, but this minor act of violence proves significant, since it foreshadows the murder of other animals and even people later on in the poem. Furthermore, the killing is senseless and gratuitous. The fly wasn't bothering him, and so the speaker had no reason to squash it; he seems to kill for no reason other than his own gratification. This suspicion that the speaker takes pleasure in killing is supported by the next lines, in which the speaker alludes to Shakespeare's play *King Lear*, which he read at school.

The speaker clearly remembers his education, recalling enough of the play to bring to mind its lines about killing flies: "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; / They kill us for their sport." This allusion, however, takes on new meaning in this context. The character in *King Lear* was lamenting the cruel fate that made him feel like a fly callously squashed by the gods. The speaker, on the other hand, transforms *himself* into the god who carelessly kills helpless flies. In this sense, the ethical message of the play seems lost on the speaker, who, instead of feeling empathy for those less powerful than him, kills a vulnerable creature in precisely the same way depicted in *King Lear*.

He describes Shakespeare's play as written "in / another language," suggesting that he found Shakespeare's 16th-century English difficult to understand, almost as if it were written in another language entirely. He then turns this statement into a metaphor that he applies to the fly, observing that "the fly is in another language as well." Here the repeated phrase "in another language" (a form of repetition called diacope) becomes a metaphor that refers to the idea of death. That is, the fly is "in another language" because it can no longer be understood; it's dead, and death is a mystery to the speaker—and indeed to tall humans. This moment is strikingly figurative and even poetic for a speaker who generally avoids poetic language and speaks in a direct, colloquial tone. The brief flight into metaphor here perhaps suggests that the speaker gets carried away in his enthusiasm for killing, while nothing else seems to bring him much joy.

LINES 8-10

I breathe out ...
... the chance.

These lines showcase the speaker's grandiosity and narcissistic sense of his own under-recognized "genius." He breathes on the foggy glass of the window and writes his name with his finger, but he describes this commonplace action using metaphorical, even flowery language: "I breathe out talent on the glass[.]" This metaphor likens the speaker's breath to an outflow of talent, suggesting that he thinks he is so gifted that his very breath *is* talent.

This sense of the speaker's high assessment of himself carries over into the next stanza, when he proclaims: "I am a genius." The short, choppy quality of this statement, with no attempt at adding nuance or clarification, suggests the extent of the speaker's delusion; he thinks that his genius is self-evident. He believes that "[he] could be anything at all, with half the chance." This statement too has a colloquial tone (using the phrase "half the chance") that makes the speaker's conviction that he is destined for great things and belief in his superiority seem unexamined. It sounds as if he's just speaking off the cuff, rather than expressing a carefully considered opinion. And the poem gives the reader reason to doubt this statement later on, when it becomes clear that the speaker is unemployed and so has grand fantasies that don't seem to correspond to the realities of his situation. Finally, the speaker's belief that he can be "anything at all" has eerie echoes of the kind of motivational statements often taught to young children. Just as with his lessons on Shakespeare, the speaker clearly paid attention in school—but again, he drew all the wrong conclusions from the things he was taught.

LINES 10-12

But today I ...
... has hidden itself.

After the speaker's grandiose pronouncements of the previous lines, this line returns to the context of "today," when the speaker plans (no less grandly) to "change the world." Continuing with the short, direct, end-stopped lines that generally characterize his voice, the speaker quickly amends this to "Something's world." The choice of words—*something* rather than *someone*—suggests that the target of the speaker's violence will not just be people but also non-human creatures. This impression is further confirmed by the speaker's shift of attention to his cat which, he notes, "avoids me." The strong implication is that the cat is avoiding the speaker because it is afraid, suggesting that this isn't the first time that the speaker has harmed animals. In this sense, the speaker seems to be engaged in a dark, ongoing "education" in violence in which he practices torturing animals on his way to performing even more violent deeds.

Although the speaker seems to have contempt for the cat and refers to it as a thing ("something"), he also oddly anthropomorphizes the cat, imagining that it has thoughts and feelings close to those of a human. For instance, he speculates that the cat "has hidden itself" because it "knows I am a genius." This speculation is fantastical, given that the cat almost certainly does not think the speaker is a genius and is in fact hiding to avoid torture. In this sense, the anthropomorphism in

the line highlights the speaker's lack of empathy: when he imagines the cat's inner feelings, he narcissistically assumes that the cat is thinking about his genius, rather than simply feeling fear for its life. Diacope comes up again in the repetition of the phrases "the cat" and "I am a genius" (repeated from the first line of this stanza), hinting that the speaker is inescapably caught up in his own thoughts; it's as if his ideas are playing on a loop that's defined by his narcissism.

LINES 13-14

I pour the ...
... budgie is panicking.

In these lines, the speaker moves on from the fly and the cat to torture other animals in his house, including a goldfish (which he flushes down the toilet, or "the bog") and the "budgie," or parrot, which is described as "panicking." These actions are narrated in a series of short, end-stopped lines. The effect of these frequent stops and periods (which also show up here as caesuras) is to make it seem as if the speaker is recounting these sadistic actions in a matter-of-fact way, without emotion or a need to explain himself. Indeed, the speaker seems to feel little remorse for his actions, as indicated by the direct and even casual way that he recounts killing the family pets.

After he flushes the goldfish down the toilet, the speaker alludes to the Bible by declaring: "I see that it is good." This is a reference to God's words in Genesis, when he creates the world and all the creatures within it (including many animals) and pronounces that "it is good." The speaker puts a dark spin on this allusion, just as he did with the previous allusion to Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Like God in Genesis, he mentions a litany of animals: a fly, a cat, a goldfish, and a parrot. But rather than creating life, the speaker *takes* the lives of the animals. In this sense, he casts himself in the role of God—suggesting his exceedingly high opinion of himself—but he also revises that role to turn the acts of creation in the Bible into acts of cruelty and destruction.

LINES 15-16

Once a fortnight, ...
... appreciate my autograph.

These lines convey more biographical information about the speaker, who, it is revealed, is unemployed and must "sign on," a colloquialism meaning that he must sign in with a government office to receive unemployment benefits. Given his previous reference to school, the speaker is likely an older teenager who has left school or been expelled, and who has not yet obtained a job. Moreover, he only makes this trip once a "fortnight" (every two weeks), and must walk two miles into town, suggesting that he lives in a somewhat isolated suburban area. All this information is revealed in an enjambed line that leaves the reader in suspense for a moment: one might suspect that the speaker would go into town for more nefarious reasons, given his history of violent behavior. The context implied here—a protagonist on unemployment benefits, an apparent lack of economic opportunity, and an early departure from secondary education—also hint at a wider dimension of social and economic critique in Duffy's poem.

The speaker complains that the people at the unemployment office "don't appreciate my autograph," indicating the extent of his delusion: in line with his previous proclamations about his "talent" and "genius," the speaker seems to think that people should be begging for his autograph when he is simply signing unemployment papers. This sense of aggrievement at being (supposedly) unjustly overlooked pervades the poem, dramatizing the speaker's increasing detachment from reality.

LINES 17-19

There is nothing ...
... cuts me off.

In contrast to the enjambed line in the previous stanza, this stanza features several end-stopped lines, as the speaker continues to narrate his actions using chillingly simple statements that make little effort to use poetic or metaphorical language. The line "there is nothing left to kill" heavily suggests that the speaker has now killed all the pets in the house: the goldfish, the cat, and the budgie. But by leaving this point implicit rather than explicit, the poem maintains suspense as the speaker refrains from telling the reader exactly what he has done.

Seemingly once again looking for recognition of his "talents," the speaker dials in to a radio station and tells the radio host that "he's talking to a superstar." This is yet another indication of the speaker's hyperbolic belief in his own abilities and desire to make others conform to his way of seeing things. At the same time, though, this moment can also be seen as a final attempt to connect with another human being through a means other than violence; the speaker is genuinely trying to talk to someone else, even though he's doing so in a twisted, unsettling way. As at the unemployment office, however, it doesn't work: the radio host "cuts him off." This is a common colloquialism that takes on more significance here, since this moment of rejection seems to tip the speaker over the edge. Unable to control other humans in the way that he controls and terrorizes animals, he takes terrible actions in the next line to try to exert control and, at last, find connection.

LINES 19-20

I get our ...
... touch your arm.

When the speaker goes out of the house this time, it is with "our bread-knife," a commonplace item of kitchenware. The fact that he describes it as "*our*" bread-knife suggests that he lives in a family home, although his family doesn't appear in the poem. Although the knife is a banal household object, the fact that the

speaker is wielding it in the streets gives this domestic scene a horrible cast, turning an ordinary object into an instrument of violence. The speaker's state of mind is indicated by the continued use of end-stopped lines; he seems to be recounting events directly as they happen, without much attempt at stringing together a coherent narrative. But the end-stops also suggest a matter-of-fact, deliberate quality to what the speaker is doing: he recounts his actions without any indication of remorse.

The phrase "The pavements glitter suddenly" is striking because it is one of the few metaphors in the poem. The speaker seems to either be using the metaphor of "glitter" to describe the shine of rain or fog on the sidewalk, or using a pathetic fallacy to liken the world around him to what's going on in his mind. And indeed, the description of the pavements as bursting into sparkles is a poetic and even transcendent moment; something seems to have changed for the speaker, as a previously gray and overcast world becomes alive with color and light. The occasion for this change, however, is a dark and violent cause: the murder of another person.

The final phrase—"I touch your arm"—suggests that the speaker touches the arm of someone before stabbing them with the bread knife. It is the first instance human touch in the poem; perversely, the speaker finally seems to have achieved his initially stated goal of being noticed and not "ignored." This moment of human contact may also be the cause of the "glitter" that the speaker perceives, at least in part; it's as if the thrill of the impending murder is caught up with the speaker's excitement at connecting with another person at last.

This concluding phrase is also the first and last moment of direct address in the poem, and it is directed, chillingly, at the "you" of the reader. The appearance of the second-person at this late point is so powerful and unsettling because it has the effect of implicating the reader in the story. Rather than just reading as the story of one violent individual, the final line of the poem brings home Duffy's social critique by making it seem as if attacks like this could happen anywhere, at any time, and to anyone.

SYMBOLS

THE FLY

The fly is the first animal that the speaker kills in the poem, by squashing it against the window. Although it is only a small insect, the speaker's killing of the fly foreshadows his torture and killing of other, larger animals later in the poem. The fly is also symbolically important because its death makes the speaker think of a line from *King Lear*: "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; / They kill us for their sport." However, the speaker doesn't identify with the helpless fly killed for "sport," or amusement; rather, he becomes the callous god who kills the fly for fun. In this sense, the speaker's killing of the fly symbolically marks his increasing lack of empathy and appetite for killing. The related allusion to *King Lear* also symbolizes how the speaker's education has failed him; he paid attention in school, but he clearly took away all the wrong lessons.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "I squash a fly against the window with my thumb."
- **Lines 6-7:** "We did that at school. Shakespeare. It was in / another language and now the fly is in another language."

THE BREAD-KNIFE

When the speaker goes out on his murderous rampage at the end of the poem, he uses a bread knife stolen from the kitchen of his family house. The fact that he refers to it as "*our* bread-knife" suggests the presence of his family, although they are conspicuously absent from his life (perhaps suggesting a lack of parental care). This knife is thus a symbol of the home—it is a banal, ordinary object found in nearly every kitchen—but also of the speaker's capacity for violence and destruction, because he turns it into a weapon. The use of such a commonplace object as a lethal weapon highlights the way that evil can turn up anywhere, at any time. In Duffy's broader social commentary, the bread knife also symbolizes a pervasive social ill in 1980s Britain, a time when crimes committed with knives were on the rise.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 19:** "I get our bread-knife and go out."

POETIC DEVICES

END-STOPPED LINE

The poem makes heavy use of end-stopped lines, a formal feature that reflects the speaker's preference for short, direct statements without much adornment. For instance, he begins his narration in line 1 with one short sentence ("Today I am going to kill something.") followed by an even shorter one ("Anything.").

This pointed, forceful style continues as he describes his violent actions, as in lines 13-14:

> I pour the goldfish down the bog. I pull the chain.
> I see that it is good. The budgie is panicking.

The end-stops here, especially in combination with the caesuras in the middle of each line, give the impression that the speaker is narrating his actions in a matter-of-fact way, without reflection, emotion, or justification. His descent into psychopathy is thus reflected in the formal characteristics of the poem, particularly its use of end-stops.

Although end-stops are prevalent throughout the poem, they increase in number and cluster in intensity as the poem reaches its conclusion. While the earlier stanzas feature some enjambment, the fifth and final stanza has three end-stopped lines in a row. The final progression of actions is narrated entirely in end-stops, again with caesuras as well:

> He cuts me off. I get our bread-knife and go out.
> The pavements glitter suddenly. I touch your arm.

It is no coincidence that this is the climactic moment of the poem, in which the speaker seems to have graduated from killing animals to killing (or at least attacking) humans. As he becomes more violent and unpredictable, the language of the poem becomes correspondingly choppier. In this sense, the end-stop in the poem comes to reflect a world in which violence is inevitable, and in which the speaker takes irrevocable actions without consideration or empathy.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Anything."
- **Line 3:** "day,"
- **Line 4:** "streets."
- **Line 5:** "thumb."
- **Line 7:** "language."
- **Line 8:** "name."
- **Line 10:** "world."
- **Line 12:** "itself."
- **Line 13:** "chain."
- **Line 14:** "panicking."
- **Line 16:** "autograph."
- **Line 18:** "superstar."
- **Line 19:** "out."
- **Line 20:** "arm."

ENJAMBMENT

Although the poem features many end-stopped lines, enjambment is present as well. Indeed, because so many of the lines end with a period, enjambment becomes a more notable formal feature when it does appear. It often functions to maintain the poem's characteristic atmosphere of fear and dread, by keeping the reader in suspense as to what will happen next. For instance, in the first instance of enjambment in the poem, in lines 2-3, the speaker's statement that "today / I am going to play God" plays for a moment with the reader's expectations. The speaker has just announced that he's going to kill something, and so the question of *what* exactly he plans to do today becomes a matter of suspense and anxiety.

Similarly, lines 15-16 evoke a sense of dread through their use of enjambment:

> Once a fortnight, I walk the two miles into town
> for signing on. They don't appreciate my autograph.

By this point in the poem, the speaker has demonstrated a history of delusional thoughts and violence towards animals. The enjambment after "I walk the two miles into town" therefore naturally activates the reader's fear of what the speaker will do next. It turns out that he is merely going into town to "sign on" (that is, receive unemployment benefits), but the sense of dread that builds here foreshadows what happens in the next stanza, when the speaker goes out again and does actually hurt someone. Enjambment thus plays an important role in creating the atmosphere of fear and suspense that pervades this dark and disturbing poem.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "today / I am"
- **Lines 6-7:** "in / another"
- **Lines 9-10:** "half / the"
- **Lines 11-12:** "cat / knows"
- **Lines 15-16:** "town / for"
- **Lines 17-18:** "radio / and"

PATHETIC FALLACY

The poem depicts the inner world of a narcissistic, self-centered protagonist with delusions of grandeur. So it isn't surprising that the speaker makes use of the device of pathetic fallacy, describing the world in a way that reflects his personal thoughts and feelings. The first instance of pathetic fallacy occurs in the first stanza, when the speaker describes the world outside his window:

> I am going to play God. It is an ordinary day,
> a sort of grey with boredom stirring in the streets.

The speaker describes the gray skies of a cloudy, overcast day, but his description isn't just a literal depiction of the weather. He describes the "boredom stirring in the streets," a pathetic fallacy that expresses his own boredom and sense of frustration and isolation rather than the literal facts of his environment. The description of this boredom as "stirring in the streets" is a somewhat sinister turn of phrase, hinting at the violence that is building within the speaker.

The speaker also uses pathetic fallacy in the final stanza, when he recounts how the pavements "glitter suddenly." As a metaphor, this is a somewhat vague statement, perhaps

referring to the glint of rain or fog on the sidewalks. As a pathetic fallacy, however, it refers to the speaker's suddenly ecstatic state of mind. It is a poetic and colorful image that could not be further from the "sort of grey" of the world in the first stanza. Disturbingly, then, the speaker's enthusiasm about violence seems to color the world in a dazzling and much different light.

Where Pathetic Fallacy appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "It is an ordinary day, / a sort of grey with boredom stirring in the streets."
- **Line 20:** "The pavements glitter suddenly."

ALLUSION

"Education for Leisure" features allusions to the Bible and Shakespeare's *King Lear*, a set of references that underscores the theme of education in the poem. The speaker recalls reading *King Lear* in high school, remarking: "We did that at school. Shakespeare." The speaker is recalling a line from the play about killing flies: "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; / They kill us for their sport." However, he takes an unusual message from this line. *King Lear* compares people to flies crushed carelessly by the gods, but rather than seeing the line as it is usually read, as a lament against the cruelty of fate, the speaker casts himself in the role of the "wanton boy" who kills flies for "sport," or for fun. He doesn't empathize with the fly; rather, he identifies with the killer. The speaker clearly paid attention in school, since he remembers the play fairly well, but it's also clear that his education has somehow failed him; he didn't learn the right lesson at all.

Similarly, the speaker quotes the Bible by recalling the words of God in Genesis, who declares after creating the world that "it is good." The speaker alludes to these words—"I see that it is good"—but gives the allusion a new, darker edge in the context of killing a goldfish. In this sense, the speaker uses his education in literature and the Bible to conceive of himself as a cruel, all-powerful god who kills for fun.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-7:** "We did that at school. Shakespeare. It was in / another language and now the fly is in another language."
- **Line 14:** "I see that it is good."

ANTHROPOMORPHISM

Throughout the poem, the speaker tortures and ultimately kills animals. He has a complex attitude toward these animals; he sometimes seems to think of them as "things," as when he proclaims that "today I am going to kill something" and "there is nothing left to kill." On the other hand, he sometimes thinks of animals as if they are somewhat close to humans, with human thoughts and fears. For instance, he suspects that the cat "avoids" him because it "knows [he is] a genius, and has hidden itself."

This is a moment of anthropomorphism, since the speaker ascribes human knowledge to the cat; it's very unlikely that the cat considers the speaker a "genius," in part because even the idea of genius is a human concept rather than an animal one. Similarly, the speaker attributes fear to the budgie, noting that it is "panicking." The speaker's anthropomorphizing of these animals serves a few different purposes in the poem. First, it highlights the speaker's lack of empathy. He registers the animals' fear or anxiety, but he doesn't feel sympathy towards them as a result. Rather, he seems to revel in terrorizing animals. Second, the description of the cat emphasizes the speaker's absurd grandiosity—he's so convinced of his own genius that he assumes it's obvious even to animals. Finally, the speaker's use of anthropomorphism subtly hints at his own loneliness and desperation for connection. There don't seem to be any other people in his house, and the people he tries to connect with out in the world (like the radio host) ignore him. So perhaps his belief in the animals' inner lives is his own twisted way to imagine a relationship with another thinking, feeling being.

Where Anthropomorphism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-12:** "The cat avoids me. The cat / knows I am a genius, and has hidden itself."
- **Line 14:** "The budgie is panicking."

CAESURA

The poem features numerous instances of caesura, because it is written in a rather casual style that mimics ordinary speech. For instance, the poem begins with the line: "Today I am going to kill something. Anything." The caesura after "something" gives a choppy quality to this statement, as if the speaker is figuring out what to say as he goes. There is a similar stream-of-consciousness effect produced by the caesura in line 6: "We did that at school. Shakespeare." The line might easily have been phrased as something like "We did Shakespeare at school," but the choice to write the line using a caesura preserves the impression that the protagonist is speaking directly to the reader, without editing or attempting to make his language sound more polished.

These short sentences, which are often created by end-stop as well, also give an impression of an uncompromising and even frightening directness in the speaker's voice. For instance, take the staccato recitation of the killing of a fish:

> I pour the goldfish down the bog. I pull the chain.
> I see that it is good. The budgie is panicking.

These lines are rendered even more chilling by the speaker's choppy, unadorned language—he doesn't seem to feel any need to explain himself or show emotion. His use of caesura thus not only makes the poem seem like an exchange of everyday speech; it also conveys the sense of a speaker who seems impervious to empathy.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "something. Anything."
- **Line 3:** "God. It"
- **Line 6:** "school. Shakespeare.," " It"
- **Line 9:** "genius. I," "all, with"
- **Line 10:** "chance. But"
- **Line 11:** "world. The"
- **Line 12:** "genius, and"
- **Line 13:** "bog. I"
- **Line 14:** "good. The"
- **Line 15:** "fortnight, I"
- **Line 16:** "on. They"
- **Line 17:** "kill. I"
- **Line 19:** "off. I"
- **Line 20:** "suddenly. I"

COLLOQUIALISM

The poem makes frequent use of colloquial, casual language, employing common monosyllabic words and uncomplicated syntax. Colloquialisms such as "play God," "half the chance," and "cuts me off," as well as slang words like "bog," "budgie, and "superstar," are everyday words and phrases rather than elevated poetic language. For instance, the speaker declares: "I could be anything at all, with half / the chance[,]" using a colloquial and confidential tone that gives the impression he is speaking directly to the reader. These colloquialisms have the effect of making the poem seem less like a poem at all, and more like the speech of ordinary life. This casual tone highlights the thematic point that violence like the speaker's isn't rare or exceptional; it's actually as mundane as any regular day.

But this direct, colloquial tone also becomes increasingly disturbing, since the speaker often makes no effort to use euphemism or metaphor in his descriptions of his violent actions. Rather, he recounts his torture and killing of animals in a flat, conversational tone. He doesn't seem to feel the need to mask the fact that he has killed the goldfish, for instance, simply remarking: "I pour the goldfish down the bog." This directness reaches a frightening conclusion in the final line of the poem—"I touch your arm"—which makes it seem as if the speaker is speaking to and even threatening the reader.

Where Colloquialism appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "play God"
- **Lines 9-10:** "with half / the chance"
- **Line 13:** "the bog"
- **Line 14:** "budgie"
- **Line 16:** "signing on"
- **Line 18:** "superstar."
- **Line 19:** "cuts me off"

METAPHOR

This poem is remarkably short on metaphor, which is perhaps surprising because metaphor is one of the basic building blocks of poetic language. However, this absence of metaphorical and poetic terms is a deliberate formal technique. The speaker prefers short, direct statements that are straightforward to the point of seeming simplistic. This style of speech makes the poem seem startlingly alive and real, as if the speaker is directly addressing the reader in an everyday conversation. The literal tone of the poem as a whole makes isolated moments of metaphor seem even more significant.

For example, when the speaker kills the fly in the second stanza, he describes the fly as "in another language," like the plays of Shakespeare. Here the idea of "another language" becomes a metaphor for death, which is similarly inaccessible and difficult to understand. This metaphor is poetic, and all the more striking because it is devised in response to the death of a fly. The speaker's sudden detour into metaphor suggests, chillingly, that he finds killing inspiring; where his speech is normally flat, here it becomes alive with metaphorical resonance.

The speaker also uses metaphor when he describes how he "breathe[s] out talent on the glass to write my name." In a literal sense, the speaker is simply breathing on a windowpane and writing his name when it fogs up. But he uses metaphor to associate his breath with his "talent," suggesting an elevated assessment of his abilities—the speaker seems to think that he breathes out talent with every breath.

Metaphor then disappears for most of the rest of the poem, until the final line, when the speaker notices that "the pavements glitter suddenly." This may mean literally that the sidewalks are glittering with rain or fog, since it is a cloudy day. But metaphorically, this is a moment of figurative language that transforms the gray world in which the speaker lives into a world of color and "glitter." Again the speaker's use of metaphor is troubling, since the occasion for this eloquent description is his appearance on the streets wielding a knife. The poem's most visually engaging metaphor, then, is also the moment when the speaker apparently takes his first human life.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-7:** "It was in / another language and now the fly is in another language."
- **Line 8:** "I breathe out talent on the glass to write my name."

- **Line 20:** "The pavements glitter suddenly."

Diacope appears in a few instances in "Education for Leisure," all in the first three stanzas. In each case, the speaker seems to be repeating exact phrases as a way of emphasizing his certainty of himself and his intentions. For instance, in the first three lines, the phrase "today I am going to" shows up twice, when the speaker could easily have written a more straightforward version of the same idea, like the following:

> Today I am going to kill something. Anything.
> I have had enough of being ignored, so I'm going to play God.

The two versions have about the same meaning, but the version using diacope is more forceful and intentional, emphasizing "today" and making the speaker's plans feel more immediate to the reader.

Additionally, the various instances of diacope also create the odd sense that the speaker is somehow stuck in his own thoughts. The exact repetitions of phrases make it sound like the speaker is cycling through the same mental territory over and over, obsessed with his delusions of grandeur and his violent plans. Notably, diacope doesn't show up in the final two stanzas. This change subtly suggests that once the speaker starts taking more extreme actions—starting with killing the goldfish—his psychic tension eases. Disturbingly, it seems as if violent acts are the only tool the speaker has with which to soothe himself and slow his racing thoughts.

Where appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Today I am going to"
- **Lines 2-3:** "today / I am going to"
- **Lines 6-7:** "in / another language"
- **Line 7:** "in another language"
- **Line 9:** "I am a genius"
- **Line 11:** "The cat," "The cat"
- **Line 12:** "I am a genius"

VOCABULARY

Shakespeare (Line 6) - William Shakespeare (1564-1616) was an English playwright and poet. He is perhaps the most famous and frequently-taught English writer, so it is fitting that the speaker recalls reading one of his plays in school. The speaker alludes to a line from Shakespeare's *King Lear*, although he seems to have had trouble understanding the language of the 17th-century play and describes it as written "in another language."

Bog (Line 13) - "Bog" is a slang word for a toilet in British English.

Budgie (Line 14) - A "budgie" is the term in British English for a bird—specifically, a parrot or parakeet.

Fortnight (Line 15) - A fortnight is a period of two weeks.

Signing on (Line 16) - In this context, "signing on" refers to the requirement that the speaker present himself at a government office in order to receive unemployment benefits. He has to sign a form to prove he was there, hence his remark about the government employees not appreciating his "autograph."

Pavements (Line 20) - In British English, the word "pavements" often refers to what Americans call sidewalks.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Education for Leisure" is a dramatic monologue written in five quatrains (four-line stanzas), with a mix of enjambed and end-stopped lines.

The simplicity of the form, along with the prevalence of end-stops and period caesuras, lends the poem a colloquial, conversational tone. The poem thus gives the impression that the speaker is directly addressing the reader in the language of ordinary speech. This is fitting given that it is a dramatic monologue, in which the speaker narrates his experiences and inner thoughts in the first person. A second person is introduced in the final line—"I touch your arm"—to chilling effect, since the "you" makes the disturbing monologue of the preceding five stanzas feel suddenly personal and threatening to the reader.

METER

The poem is written in free verse. It thus has no regular meter, and is in fact somewhat choppy rather than melodic or flowing, reflecting the speaker's habit of using casual, direct speech. Frequent uses of end-stops and caesuras break up the lines of the poem into short sentences. For example, the caesuras in lines 6-7 make it difficult to maintain a consistent meter when reading the poem aloud:

> We did that at school. Shakespeare. It was in another language and now the fly is in another language.

Other lines with this particularly choppy quality include 1, 10-11 ("the chance ... The cat"), and 15-16 (Once a fortnight ... autograph.").

However, the poem is not completely devoid of meter. There are some lines with iambic meter, in which the stressed syllable follows the unstressed syllable in a regular da-DUM pattern. Consider line 4, for example:

a sort of grey with boredom stirring in the streets.

Or line 13:

I pour the goldfish down the bog. I pull the chain.

In this sense, the poem is not as simple or artless as it might at first seem to be. The poem does have some meter, and when it shows up, it subtly indicates that there's an underlying logic, however twisted, to the speaker's plans. The lack of meter in the rest of the poem also serves an important function, which is to reinforce the speaker's casual habits of speech within the form of the poem itself.

RHYME SCHEME

"Education for Leisure" has no consistent rhyme scheme; rather, it is written in free verse. The lack of a rhyme scheme furthers the impression that the poem is an act of free, direct speech addressed from the speaker to the reader. Indeed, the absence of rhymes or many of the other common features of poetic language makes it seem as if this is less a poem at all, and more a conversation or monologue. The poem's lack of rhymes is fitting for a speaker who generally (with a few exceptions) does not seem interested in poetic language and prefers short, simple statements, as in lines 1, 10-11 ("the chance ... The cat"), and 13-14 ("I pour ... panicking.").

However, the poet does highlight the speaker's direct and even simplistic speech patterns by occasionally using *rime riche*, a French term for "identical rhyme." *Rime riche* occurs when a poet deliberately repeats the same-sounding word (either a homonym or the same word). This occurs in the poem in lines 2-3:

I have had enough of being ignored and today
I am going to play God. It is an ordinary day,

There's also some internal rhyme in those lines, with the word "play." These forms of rhyme aren't exactly sophisticated, but they are deliberate formal techniques that reflect the speaker's lack of poetic polish. In this sense, the poem's lack of rhyme is central to its themes and characterization of the protagonist.

SPEAKER

Although the poem delves into the mind of its protagonist, a disturbed individual who ultimately brings a knife into the street and seems prepared to kill a passer-by, much remains mysterious about the speaker. Readers of the poem have generally assumed that the speaker is male, perhaps because the vast majority of crimes of the sort depicted in the poem are committed by men. This guide uses male pronouns to refer to the speaker for simplicity's sake, but the speaker's gender is never explicitly stated within the poem itself. Similarly, the speaker is usually assumed to be a teenager, given the references to school and the fact that he seems to live in a family home with pets and kitchenware (he refers to his weapon as "our bread-knife"), but he could be older.

Certainly the poem's title—"Education for Leisure"—seems to make education and adolescence central themes of the poem. However, the circumstances of the speaker's departure from school are unclear. He may have graduated, or he may have dropped out or been expelled. If the latter, then the poem's depiction of the speaker's aimlessness and descent into delusion and violence makes for a pointed social critique. It may be that Duffy is depicting the effects of expulsion and school truancy on a disturbed teenager who is forced to entertain himself (the "leisure" of the title) at home, without a job or economic prospects.

Despite his bleak circumstances—he does't go to school, lives two miles from the nearest town, and is receiving unemployment benefits—the speaker is characterized as possessing immense self-confidence and delusions of grandeur. He describes himself as a "genius" who is misunderstood and "ignored" by others. He seems to see acts of violence as a way of proving his worth and gaining the attention and interpersonal connection that he thinks he deserves. He is also engaged in a dark sort of education at home in which he tortures and kills animals, behaviors that the poem depicts as gateways to more serious acts of violence against humans.

SETTING

"Education for Leisure" is set in a deliberately nondescript environment: it feels as if the poem could take place almost anywhere, which is fitting given the poem's focus on social critique and social problems. Since the speaker's actions are not located anywhere specific, the reader gets the sense that evil can crop up anywhere, even places that are usually viewed as commonplace and uninteresting.

The world outside the protagonist's home is described as an "ordinary" landscape with dull, gray skies. The speaker clearly feels bored by his environment and desires more excitement and stimulation. He lives in a suburban or perhaps rural area two miles from a bigger town, where he goes to receive his unemployment benefits. He seems to live in a family home with pets, although the poem provides little contextual information about his family or the home itself. This dull, colorless world only comes alive in the final line, when the speaker goes outside with a knife and imagines that "the pavements glitter suddenly." Whether this is a genuine change in the weather or a result of the speaker's fevered imagination, the physical setting of the poem seems to mirror the speaker's inner life and moods.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Carol Ann Duffy is a Scottish poet who was Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom from 2009 to 2019. She is considered one of the foremost living poets in the UK, and is often mentioned alongside other famous British poets of the 20th and 21st centuries like Ted Hughes, Seamus Heaney, Simon Armitage, and Gillian Clarke. "Education for Leisure" appeared in Duffy's first collection of poems, *Standing Female Nude* (1985). The poem's disturbing themes have attracted significant critical attention (and sometimes protest), but the poem is consistent with the provocative tenor of Duffy's work. Her poems often respond to topical issues and have a strong element of political and social critique. For instance, her first poem as poet laureate addressed a political scandal involving fraudulent expenses claimed by members of Parliament, and she has also written about climate change and the war in Afghanistan.

"Education for Leisure" was once a set text for the GCSE exams in the UK, which are standardized tests taken by British high school students. However, it was banned from school textbooks in 2008, after some claimed that it glamorized knife violence. The ban set off a debate about artistic freedom and depictions of violence in literature. Although some schools banned the poem, many teachers and writers spoke up in Duffy's defense, writing editorials that argued for the poem's value as an educational tool. Duffy herself responded to the ban and the critique of the poem by stating: "It's an anti-violence poem. It is a plea for education rather than violence." Her statement suggests that the *lack* of education depicted in the poem is a cautionary tale and a social critique, inviting readers to reflect on the importance of education in a just and peaceful society.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Education for Leisure" was written in 1985, and the poem appears to be set around the same time. In mid-1980s Britain, Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister and prosperity for some increased, even as the same period also saw a rise in economic inequality and social unrest. Carol Ann Duffy wrote "Education for Leisure" while teaching at a school in an underprivileged area of East London, and the poem responds to the social conditions she observed in schools there.

The poem dramatizes the experiences of a discontented young person who has clearly not been a beneficiary of the economic boom of the 1980s. The speaker lives two miles from the nearest town and receives unemployment benefits. It is implied that the teenager has left school early or been expelled. The title "Education for Leisure" might be seen as a commentary on school truancy and harsh disciplinary measures against troubled students, nodding to the ways in which lack of access to education isolates teenagers (especially those who may be dealing with mental health issues) and increases their propensity for violence and antisocial behavior. The failures of education—and the broader failure of society to care for its most vulnerable members—are thus central themes in "Education for Leisure" and in Duffy's critique of 1980s Britain.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- More About the Poem — From the BBC, helpful analysis and context for Duffy's poem, including a performance of the poem and a list of writing prompt ideas. (https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/clips/zhyqxnb)
- Additional Annotations — The text of the poem with helpful crowd-sourced annotations, from the lyric analysis encyclopedia Genius. (https://genius.com/Carol-ann-duffy-education-for-leisure-annotated)
- Curriculum Controversy — Read an op-ed from an English teacher in response to the controversial ban of the poem from the school curriculum in 2008. (https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2008/sep/04/english.knifecrime)
- The Ban of "Education for Leisure" — Read a summary of the original controversy around the banning of the poem in 2008. (https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/2674128/Poem-banned-from-schools-over-knife-crime-fears.html)
- A Live Reading — Watch a clip of the poem performed by actor Russell Tovey. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=po0czXogqBk)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER CAROL ANN DUFFY POEMS

- In Mrs Tilscher's Class
- Little Red Cap
- Valentine
- Warming Her Pearls
- War Photographer

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Houghton, Eve. "*Education For Leisure.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 29 Oct 2019. Web. 22 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Houghton, Eve. "*Education For Leisure.*" LitCharts LLC, October 29, 2019. Retrieved April 22, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/carol-ann-duffy/education-for-leisure.