Filling Station

SUMMARY

The speaker describes an alarmingly filthy little gas station. It's absolutely drenched in oil, to the point that the whole place seems covered in a sheer, unsettling layer of black. It's definitely not safe to light a match in there!

The father who runs the station wears a filthy uniform that's also drenched in oil and fits him too tightly beneath his arms. The gas station is a family-run business, and some of the father's quick, cheeky, grimy, and equally filthy sons help him out.

The speaker wonders if the family actually lives in the filling station, given that there's a concrete porch behind the gasoline pumps, on top of which is a cluster of run-down wicker furniture that's utterly saturated with grease. A filthy dog is sitting on the wicker couch, looking rather cozy.

The one hint of any color in the gas station comes from a stack of comic books, which rest atop a large, dingy crocheted mat that's been laid across a small table or cabinet, next to a big, fuzzy begonia plant.

What's the point of the unnecessary begonia, the speaker wonders, or of the little table? And what on earth is the point of that crocheted mat, embroidered using decorative, floral stitches in dense, gray material?

There's someone, the speaker says, who made that decorative mat and who waters that begonia (or, better point, oils it, the speaker jokes). Likewise, there's someone who neatly organizes the "Esso" brand oil cans, arranging them in a way that allows the "so" part of their labels to stand out; it looks like they're gently whispering that "so" over and over again to the temperamental vehicles that come to the gas station. There's someone, the speaker concludes, who loves each and every one of us.

THEMES

JUDGMENT, CURIOSITY, AND EMPATHY

The speaker of "Filling Station" describes a small, dingy gas station, initially seeming aghast at how "dirty" and "greasy" the space is. The speaker's disdain soon gives way to curiosity, however, as they begin to wonder about the family running the station and notice the subtle but tender work that they've done to make the place more comfortable. The closer the speaker looks, the more they realize that, despite the station's rundown appearance, a lot of love and care go into maintaining it. The poem thus suggests the value of setting aside judgment for curiosity, something that encourages empathy by pushing people to see beyond the surface of things.

The speaker isn't impressed with this shabby little gas station at first, which they say is so thoroughly "permeated" with oil that the whole place looks "black." They note that the "Father" who runs the station "wears a dirty, / oil-soaked monkey suit" (uniform) that's too small for him, while his "greasy sons" are also "quite thoroughly dirty." The speaker also notices some oil-saturated wicker furniture, including a "sofa" where a "dirty dog" is curled up. Even the bit of brightness "provide[d]" by a pile of "comic books" seems somehow distasteful to the speaker, contributing to the overall squalor of the scene.

The closer the speaker looks, however, the more their thoughts move from judgment, to curiosity to, eventually, appreciation. They begin to notice small signs of domesticity, which prompt them to wonder if the family who runs the station in fact lives there and to see the place in a new light. There's a "cement porch / behind the pumps," for instance, where the family must sit and rest. Those comic books are piled on top of a "doily" (an ornamental lace mat) that's draped over "a taboret" (a word referring either to a stool or a low cabinet/stand), which stands next to a huge, fuzzy "begonia" (a flowering, decorative plant). The doily may be "dim" with dust or oil, but its decorative presence still stands out in this harsh and utilitarian environment.

Startled by these observations, the speaker wonders: "Why the extraneous" (inessential) "plant? / Why the taboret?" In other words, why is the family bothering with decoration when the place is so filthy? "Why, oh why, the doily," the speaker asks, bewildered by the presence of this delicate and utterly unnecessary object.

Yet these objects (along with some carefully arranged oil "cans") speak to the human need for beauty, comfort, and entertainment. The speaker notes that the dog on the sofa is "dirty," but also "quite comfy," suggesting that it feels safe and at home around its owners. And it occurs to the speaker that "Somebody" spent time "embroider[ing]" the beautiful doily; maybe the doily and comic books are how the family passes their time when they're not working.

The speaker thus begins to see the humanity that exists in the gas station and concludes that "Somebody loves us all," ending the poem on a warm note that contrasts with its skeptical opening. Curiosity is a powerful tool, the poem suggests, one able to lead people away from judgment and towards empathy.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-41

THE REALITY AND UNIVERSALITY OF LOVE

The final line of "Filling Station" reveals that the poem is an unlikely commentary on love—or, perhaps, a commentary on unlikely love. This dirty gas station turns out to be a testament to the closeness of the family who runs it, as well as to the kind of love that hard work demands. Eventually, the filling station seems to *fill* the speaker with warmth and affection as they notice all its homey, even charming, details. The poem thus suggests that love isn't always picturesque or easy. Its sources are often humble and its upkeep is challenging, but people can find it everywhere—if they know how to look.

The speaker's descriptions of the station suggest that this is a difficult business maintained by both hard work and a strong family foundation. The speaker specifies that this is "a family filling station," run by a "Father" and the "sons" who "assist him." These sons are described as "quick and saucy" (or cheeky), suggesting that they have a teasing, casual relationship with their father. The speaker feels a kind of warmth and playfulness emanating from them as they go about their work.

The poem may also hint at the presence of a mother or other family member, as the speaker imagines "Somebody" who must have "Embroidered" the doilies "in daisy stitch / with marguerites." That the speaker recognizes the specific patterns of "crochet" suggests this kind of work is familiar to them. It might not be as obvious as the main work of the gas station, but it reflects the overall homey spirit of the place.

The speaker adds that "Somebody waters the plant, / or oils it, maybe," again recognizing the work that goes into running this station (even if they're still a bit snarky about how dirty it is). The station may be covered in grease, but someone takes the time to carefully align"cans" of motor oil "so that they softly say: / ESSO—SO—SO—SO." In other words, someone put effort into making an attractive display; somebody cares about this place and puts real love into it. This love might not be grand and showy, but it is *real*. It's the love of people working together—a love that can be felt even by a complete stranger.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 7-13
- Lines 19-20
- Lines 23-41

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

Oh, but it ...
... with that match!

The speaker begins the poem with vivid imagery, conveying just how utterly filthy the filling (or gas) station of the title is. Notice how short /i/ assonance adds intensity to these opening lines, emphasizing the speaker's shock as they exclaim:

> Oh, but it is dirty!
> —this little filling station,

The station is dirty, the speaker continues, because it's "oil-soaked, oil-permeated." These two descriptions mean the same thing, and the repetitiveness of the speaker's language draws attention to the culprit for the gas station's less-than-stellar appearance: motor oil.

It makes sense that a filling station would have motor oil everywhere, but the speaker's insistence suggests that there is more than a normal amount of grease in this particular spot. Still, the speaker is being a bit hyperbolic; the station certainly has oil residue all over the place, but it isn't *literally* drenched through and through with grease. The exaggeration here helps to convey the speaker's distaste for the scene at hand.

Asyndeton (the lack of coordinating conjunction between "oil-soaked" and "oil-permeated") speeds things up, as does the enjambment across lines 3-5 ("oil-soaked [...] translucency"). This speed creates the sense that the speaker is looking around quickly and dismissively.

According to the speaker, the place is so dirty that it's "disturbing," the whole place smothered in the translucent "black" of oil. The speaker warns someone (A fellow visitor to the station? The reader?), "Be careful with that match!" The place is liable to go up in flames, not simply dirty but dangerous.

LINES 7-13

Father wears a ...
... quite thoroughly dirty.

The speaker goes on to describe the people running the filling station, beginning with a father who "wears a dirty, / oil-soaked monkey suit." This is an unflattering nickname for a uniform and it again suggests the speaker's judgmental disdain. Note, too, the repetition of "dirty" and "oil-soaked" from the first stanza; this station is utterly filthy. The speaker adds that the uniform "cuts [the father] under the arms," meaning that it doesn't fit him right and looks decidedly uncomfortable. Maybe he's had to buy a cheaper uniform that was cut poorly, or maybe he's had this one for so long that he's outgrown it (i.e., by gaining weight) and can't afford a new one.

At least the father isn't working alone: he has "several quick and saucy / and greasy sons" there to "assist" him. The polysyndeton of this list (the repeated use of "and") makes it sound like it could go on and on; the adjectives pile up, reinforcing just how dirty these sons are. Listen, too, to all the /s/ alliteration and broader sibilance in these lines:

> oil-soaked monkey suit
> that cuts him under the arms,
> and several quick and saucy
> and greasy sons assist him

All of these /s/ sounds suggest the speaker's disdain, as though they're hissing in disgust. At the same time, however, there's something playful about this image of quick-footed, "saucy" (or cheeky, bold, flippant, silly) sons helping their dad out.

The speaker goes on to say that it's a "family filling station," and that the boys are "all quite thoroughly dirty." This is the third time the speaker has used the word "dirty" in the poem; clearly, they're appalled at how filthy this place is! The /f/ alliteration in "family filling," meanwhile, emphasizes that this place is family-run—that the workers are related rather than simply thrown together.

LINES 14-20

Do they live ...
... dog, quite comfy.

The speaker wonders if the father and sons live at the station (presumably, in rooms above or towards the back of the property). Apparently, despite the filth, there are some homey touches to the place. For example, there's "a cement porch / behind the [gas] pumps" where some rather dilapidated "wickerwork" (or woven) furniture sicks. This furniture is so soaked with oil that the speaker calls it "grease-impregnated," hammering home once more just how dirty the gas station is.

Still, the presence of a porch and wicker furniture, looking well-used (it's "crushed," presumably by years of people sitting on it), implies that people hang out together at the station when they're not working. There's also a "dirty dog" looking "quite comfy" on top of "the wicker sofa." This is the fourth time the speaker has repeated the word "dirty," and the second time they've used the word "grease"/"greasy" in the poem. Yet the speaker seems to soften a little at the sight of that cozy dog; the place may be a mess, but there's something "comfy" and cozy about it as well. The dog certainly isn't complaining!

Alliteration adds music and emphasis throughout the stanza. The /p/ sounds in "porch" and "pumps" and the /d/ sounds in "dirty dog" make each phrase stand out more clearly to readers. There's plenty of /c/ alliteration and consonance in lines 17-20 as well:

> a set of crushed and grease-
> impregnated wickerwork;
> on the wicker sofa
> a dirty dog, quite comfy.

The speaker still sounds critical of the dingy gas station, but they also seem drawn to the evidence that suggests a family calls the station home.

LINES 21-27

Some comic books ...
... big hirsute begonia.

The speaker goes back to describing the station itself, noting that there are "Some comic books" laying around. These offer "the only note of color" in the place—well, "of certain color." This addendum suggests that the color isn't exactly vibrant or beautiful, in the speaker's eyes.

These comic books rest on "a big dim doily," or a large, decorative mat. Doilies are usually made from paper or fabric woven in a lacy pattern; they're quite delicate and also typically white, meaning the doily in the gas station probably looks decidedly out of place. It's draped across "a taboret" (a low, portable cabinet, table, or workstation). This little table is one piece of "the set"—presumably, of the wicker furniture set on the porch. Finally, there's a "big hirsute begonia," or a fuzzy, flowering plant. This, too, seems unexpected and incongruous with the setting.

The precise imagery of these lines suggests that the speaker is paying close attention to the scene before them, having become intrigued, maybe, by the details of the family's life. These lines also feature more alliteration, consonance, and sibilance. Take the crisp /c/ sounds in "comic books" and "color" as well as the plentiful /b/ and /d/ and /s/ sounds in lines 24-27:

> upon a big dim doily
> draping a taboret
> (part of the set), beside
> a big hirsute begonia.

These sounds make the poem's imagery pop, creating a more vivid scene for the reader.

LINES 28-33

Why the extraneous ...
... with gray crochet.)

In the fifth stanza, the speaker follows up their observations with a string of rhetorical questions. "Why," the speaker wonders, has this family decided to place this "extraneous" (or unnecessary) "plant" in the gas station? For that matter, what's the "taboret" doing there? Above all, "Why, of why, the doily?"

The speaker's questions reveal the bewilderment they feel in response to seeing these decorative objects in such a utilitarian setting. Why would the people who run a dirty little gas station

worry about dressing it up with pretty plants, matching tables, and an elegant doily? What's the point?

Anaphora (the repetition of "Why the") and more general parallelism create momentum and intensity, suggesting that the speaker is genuinely perplexed. At the same time, diacope ("Why, oh why") creates a bit of humor: they're being a bit over-the-top with these questions, exaggerating just how utterly out of place all these items seem to them to make their point.

The speaker then launches into a detailed description of the doily, highlighting its intricate embroidery and, in doing so, creating a sharp juxtaposition between its delicate beauty and the greasy, grime-filled world of the gas station. The speaker places their thoughts about the doily in parenthesis, turning them into an aside and suggesting that these details aren't exactly the most important part of the poem. And yet, the speaker is clearly drawn to this doily, presumably because they recognize the effort that went into it. The speaker is familiar with the specific stitches used ("daisy" and "marguerites"), suggesting that they, too, have embroidered something at some point. This little moment of recognition suggests that the speaker is beginning to appreciate this gas station and the family running. There's more here than just dirt and grime; this is a home.

LINES 34-41

Somebody embroidered the ...
... loves us all.

The speaker's questions lead to a realization: "Somebody embroidered the doily," just as "Somebody waters the plant, / or oils it, maybe." These objects might seem random to the speaker, a stranger, but they're not to the people who run this business and probably live here. Though the gas station might appear to be a mess at first, there are signs of real love and care here. People don't bother with adorning something they don't care about. Doilies are time-consuming creations; keeping plants alive takes dedication. The speaker isn't totally letting this place off the hook—they still make a joke about somebody "oil[ing]" the plant rather than watering it. Still, it's clear they're beginning to see the charm in the gas station and understand that it's not just a business, but a home.

The anaphora (the repetition of "Somebody") and parallelism ("embroidered," "watered") of these lines call readers' attention to that "Somebody" and their care for the station. The repetition of "somebody" also suggests that this figure is unseen (in the poem, at least). It's unlikely that the father and sons are making doilies and watering the plants; these images might suggest a mother or sister is trying to make the place more comfortable and beautiful for her family. Perhaps the speaker relates to—or even longs for—this unseen presence.

The speaker goes on with their list, saying that this person also places the cans of Esso motor oil in neat rows. Arranged as such, the label of one can cuts off part of the label of the next (the "ES"), so that they all seem to "softly say: / ESSO—SO—SO—SO / to high-strung automobiles."

Motor oil is a lubricant that reduces friction between engine parts. The speaker turns this action into something more metaphorical, as though the cans soothe the "high-strung," or stressed/tense vehicles that come into the shop. In personifying the cans and cars, the speaker further suggests that the station itself is soothing to the people who live there or visit.

The soft, sibilant sounds of these lines suggest the whisper of those cans and the tenderness with which they care for the "high-strung automobiles":

> so that they softly say:
> ESSO—SO—SO—SO

This image of tender soothing leads the speaker to end the poem with a bit of a surprising proclamation: "Somebody loves us all." It isn't entirely clear whether the speaker is saying that the same "Somebody" who made the doily and waters the plant and arranges the cans of "ESSO" (motor oil) is the source of this love, or if they're gesturing to something broader. They might even be saying that the gas station itself is the recipient of love, and is therefore proof that no one or nothing is beyond love. In any case, the poem implies that love can be found even in the unlikeliest of places, if one knows how to look for it.

SYMBOLS

THE DOILY

The "doily" stands out amidst the dirty, utilitarian environment of the filling station, symbolizing the love and care that "Somebody" (perhaps the unseen mother of this family) put into making the station feel more like a home. Its presence reminds the speaker that "Somebody loves us all."

The speaker's descriptions of the doily slowly reveal its significance. When they first notice it "draping a taboret" (a small, portable cabinet or table), they describe it as "big" and "dim," suggesting that it's smudged with dirt and oil. Something so delicate doesn't seem to belong in such a practical environment.

But as the speaker wonders about the point of the doily ("Why, oh why, the doily?"), they begin to think about the work that went into making it. It's "Embroidered in daisy stitch / with marguerites," decorative floral patterns at odds with its dingy surroundings. Whoever made this doily seems to have taken their time.

Note, too, that embroidery, traditionally, has been linked with women's work. The lacy doily, with its "daisy stitch," stands out not just because it's decorative, but also because it suggests a

female presence in the otherwise masculine world of the filling station, occupied by the father and his "greasy sons."

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 23-25:** "They lie / upon a big dim doily / draping a taboret"
- **Lines 30-34:** "Why, oh why, the doily? / (Embroidered in daisy stitch / with marguerites, I think, / and heavy with gray crochet.) / Somebody embroidered the doily."

THE BEGONIA

Like the doily, the begonia symbolizes the love and care that the family put into taking care of the filling station. When the speaker first notices that "big hirsute" (or bushy) plant, they think it's "extraneous" (or unnecessary). They can't understand the point of trying to spruce the place up with a plant when it's so dirty; it seems pointless.

Yet as the speaker thinks about the fact that "Somebody waters the plant," they begin to see the station a little differently. There's someone who takes the time to tend to that plant, to keep it alive. Its presence speaks not just to the fact that "Somebody loves us all," but that this love is essential to life itself.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 26-28:** "beside / a big hirsute begonia. / Why the extraneous plant?"
- **Lines 35-36:** "Somebody waters the plant, / or oils it, maybe."

POETIC DEVICES

REPETITION

The poem uses lots of repetition, which creates rhythm, musicality, and emphasis.

Some repetitions occur across stanzas. For instance, the word "dirty" appears in lines 1, 7, 13, and 20:

- "Oh, but it is **dirty**!"
- "Father wears a **dirty**, / oil-soaked monkey suit"
- "all quite thoroughly **dirty**"
- "a **dirty** dog, quite comfy"

The repetition makes it impossible to ignore this key element of the gas station: it is almost shockingly unclean. The speaker also frequently repeats some version of the words "oil" and "grease":

- In line 3, the speaker uses diacope and more general parallelism, describing the gas station as "**oil**-soaked, **oil**-permeated."
- They use the phrase "**oil-soaked**" again in line 8, describing the father's uniform.
- In line 11, they call the sons who work at the station "**greasy**."
- In lines 17-18, they call the furniture outside the gas station "**grease**-impregnated."

All in all, these repetitions emphasize that oil and grease have infiltrated every square inch of this place as well as the people who work and possibly live there.

There are other forms of repetition in the poem too. For example, listen to the polysyndeton in lines 10-11, which makes the adjectives describing the sons pile up in a potentially limitless list:

> **and** several quick **and** saucy
> **and** greasy sons assist him

It sounds like the speaker could go on and on describing just how filthy these sons are.

Finally, note that the poem can practically be broken in half based on the words the speaker repeats:

- The words "dirty," "filling station," "oil," and "grease" are repeated throughout the first three stanzas.
- By contrast, stanzas 4-6 repeat the words "color," "taboret," "doily," and "embroidered."

The repetitions in the poem's first half highlight the gas station's utilitarian ugliness, while those in the poem's second half highlight the human touch that nevertheless fills the space. The gas station might be filthy, but it's also speckled with evidence that someone cares for it and the people working there.

(The poem also contains a great deal of anaphora, discussed in a separate entry in this guide.)

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "dirty"
- **Line 2:** "filling station"
- **Line 3:** "oil-soaked, oil-permeated"
- **Lines 7-8:** "a dirty, / oil-soaked monkey suit"
- **Line 11:** "greasy sons"
- **Line 12:** "filling station"
- **Line 13:** "all quite thoroughly dirty"
- **Lines 17-18:** "grease- / impregnated wickerwork;"
- **Lines 19-20:** "on the wicker sofa / a dirty dog"
- **Lines 22-23:** "the only note of color— / of certain color"
- **Lines 24-25:** "a big dim doily / draping a taboret"
- **Line 27:** "a big hirsute begonia"

- **Lines 28-30:** "Why the extraneous plant? / Why the taboret? / Why, oh why, the doily?"
- **Line 31:** "Embroidered in daisy stitch"
- **Lines 34-35:** "Somebody embroidered the doily. / Somebody waters the plant,"
- **Lines 36-37:** "Somebody / arranges the rows of cans"
- **Line 39:** "ESSO—SO—SO—SO"
- **Line 41:** "Somebody loves us all."

ANAPHORA

There is also lots of anaphora and more general parallelism in the last two stanzas of the poem. Take a look at lines 28-30, for example:

> Why the extraneous plant?
> Why the taboret?
> Why, oh why, the doily?

Altogether, this string of repetition creates momentum and emphasis. That repeated "why" is rhetorical, the speaker using it to hammer home the point that such decorative, unnecessary items seen utterly incongruous in the grimy gas station. What on earth is the point of all this fluff, the speaker wonders, in a place that's so grease-filled and dirty?Diacope ("Why, oh why") adds a hint of humor; the speaker is being a bit over-dramatic about that doily, implying that it seems totally out of place in the midst of so much filth.

More anaphora and parallelism appear in the poem's final stanza as well:

> Somebody embroidered the doily.
> Somebody waters the plant,
> [...] Somebody
> arranges the rows of cans
> [...]
> Somebody loves us all.

This repetition emphasizes the role of this invisible person who clearly cares about this place. This "Somebody" (perhaps the mother of this family) might not appear in the poem, but their influence is felt throughout the filling station.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Lines 28-30:** "Why the extraneous plant? / Why the taboret? / Why, oh why, the doily?"
- **Lines 34-35:** "Somebody embroidered the doily. / Somebody waters the plant,"
- **Lines 36-37:** "Somebody / arranges the rows of cans"
- **Line 41:** "Somebody loves us all."

ALLITERATION

Alliteration makes the poem more rhythmic and musical, and the device also draws the reader's attention to important words and images.

Much of this alliteration is sibilant, as in lines 8-12:

> oil-soaked monkey suit
> [...]
> and several quick and saucy
> and greasy sons assist him
> (it's a family filling station),

All this /s/ alliteration evokes the speaker's rather critical tone; they seem to be practically hissing in their astonishment at how dirty this place is.

Elsewhere, alliteration makes the poem sound more lively. Take the plosive /p/ sounds of "porch" and "pumps," or the is /d/ and sharp /c/ sounds of

> a dirty dog, quite comfy.

The pounding /d/ and /b/ alliteration at the end of the following stanza emphasize the imagery at hand while also making the whole passage sound rather clunky and inelegant:

> upon a big dim doily
> draping a taboret
> [...] beside
> a big hirsute begonia.

These bold, bouncy sounds are both comical and musical, conveying the unexpected, clumsy charm of these seemingly random decorative objects.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "soaked," "suit"
- **Line 10:** "several," "saucy"
- **Line 11:** "sons"
- **Line 12:** "family filling," "station"
- **Line 15:** "porch"
- **Line 16:** "pumps"
- **Line 20:** "dirty dog," "quite comfy"
- **Line 21:** "comic"
- **Line 22:** "color"
- **Lines 24-25:** "dim doily / draping"
- **Line 26:** "beside"
- **Line 27:** "big," "begonia"
- **Line 38:** "so," "softly say"
- **Line 39:** "SO—SO—SO"
- **Line 40:** "strung"

SIBILANCE

The sibilance throughout "Filling Station" has a few interesting effects. For one thing, it evokes the speaker's sneering distaste for the dirty scene before them—at least, it does so at first. Just listen to all the hissing, spitting sounds that fill the opening two stanzas:

> —this little filling station,
> oil-soaked, oil-permeated
> to a disturbing, over-all
> black translucency.
> [...]
> oil-soaked monkey suit
> that cuts him under the arms,
> and several quick and saucy
> and greasy sons assist him

Note that these lines are also filled with sharp consonance, particularly of /k/ and /t/ sounds: "station," "disturbing," black translucency," "oil-soaked," "monkey suit," "cuts," "quick," "assist." These biting sounds add to the speaker's dismissive, even snobby tone.

The sibilance in the poem's final moments has an entirely different effect, however. By this point, the speaker has come to recognize the tender love and care that has gone into making this filling station feel more like a home. The gentle /s/ sounds here mimic the "soft" whispering of those Esso oil cans:

> so that they softly say:
> ESSO—SO—SO—SO
> to high-strung automobiles.
> Somebody loves us all.

Thanks to this hushed sibilance, the poem sounds tender, sweet, and soothing. The speaker may have spent most of the poem describing how dingy this place is, but in the end they're clearly won over by its subtle charms.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "station"
- **Line 3:** "soaked"
- **Line 4:** "disturbing"
- **Line 5:** "translucency"
- **Line 8:** "soaked," "suit"
- **Line 9:** "cuts"
- **Line 10:** "several," "saucy"
- **Line 11:** "greasy sons assist"
- **Line 26:** "set," "beside"
- **Line 27:** "hirsute"
- **Line 38:** "so," "softly say"
- **Line 39:** "ESSO—SO—SO—SO"
- **Line 40:** "strung"
- **Line 41:** "Somebody," "us"

IMAGERY

The poem contains precise imagery that creates a vivid portrait of a very specific place. The speaker doesn't just call the station "dirty" and then leave it at that; instead, they go on to describe what the station looks like in rich, evocative detail:

> oil-soaked, oil-permeated
> to a disturbing, over-all
> black translucency.

Motor oil has seeped into every nook and cranny of this place, so that the entire station seems coated in a layer of sheer, greasy, black. Even the furniture out "behind the pumps" is "crushed and grease- / impregnated." Nothing here can escape.

The filth that coats the station covers those who work there as well. The father "wears a dirty, / oil-soaked monkey suit" (or uniform) "that cuts him under the arms." That this uniform is dirty and doesn't fit right suggests that the father doesn't have the money or time for a new one. Using the same phrase ("oil-soaked") to describe both the station and the father also draws a clear parallel between the place and the people who take care of it, suggesting how much of themselves these people put into their business.

The speaker later notes that "Some comic books provide" a hint of "color," and that they are piled on top of "a big dim doily" that's draped across "a taboret" (a small table). Next to this stands a big, bushy "begonia" (a kind of flowering plant). These details suggest that the family cares about the appearance of their business, even if it doesn't seem like it at first glance; it takes the speaker a beat to see through the grime and spot the tenderness beneath. It occurs to the speaker that someone—whether it's the father and sons or an unseen mother or someone else—made the doily, waters the plant, and "arranges the rows of cans" of "Esso" (motor oil).

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 3-5
- Lines 7-11
- Lines 15-20
- Lines 21-27
- Lines 31-33
- Lines 36-40

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The speaker asks three rhetorical questions in a row in the poem's second-to-last stanza:

Why the extraneous plant?
Why the taboret?
Why, oh why, the doily?

These questions also feature anaphora (the repetition of "Why"/"Why the") and diacope ("Why, oh why"), two devices that make them sound more emphatic. The speaker isn't looking for an answer here; these questions reflect how utterly out of place the begonia, taboret, and doily look in the greasy, grimy gas station. The speaker is implying that there's no discernable point to having decorative objects in such a filthy place. Why on earth would anyone bother to put, of all things, a dainty doily in a filling station?

Yet the speaker's questions ultimately push them to reassess their initial judgment of this place. Looking at these incongruous objects, the speaker realizes that *somebody* must have deliberately placed them there—somebody made the doily and takes care of the plant by watering it regularly. The "why" is love; those items are in the station because someone who cares about the business and the people working there tried to turn it into a more pleasant environment. These rhetorical questions ultimately help the speaker arrive at a deeper understanding—and appreciation—of the filling station.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 28-30:** "Why the extraneous plant? / Why the taboret? / Why, oh why, the doily?"

VOCABULARY

Filling station (Line 2) - A place where people can refuel their vehicles, get oil changes, and so on (a gas station).

Oil-permeated (Line 3) - Completely drenched or soaked through with motor oil.

Black translucency (Lines 4-5) - The speaker is referring to the black, sheer motor oil that seems to cover the filling station.

Monkey suit (Line 8) - A disparaging term for the father's uniform.

Saucy (Lines 10-11) - Cheeky or irreverent.

Wickerwork/Wicker (Lines 17-19) - Furniture made from woven material.

Grease-impregnated (Lines 17-18) - Utterly soaked through with grease.

Doily (Lines 23-24, Line 30) - A decorative mat made from embroidered or lace fabric.

Taboret (Line 25, Line 29) - This can refer to either a low, portable table/cabinet or a small stool.

Hirsute (Line 27) - Fuzzy or bushy.

Begonia (Line 27) - An ornamental plant with bright flowers.

Extraneous (Line 28) - Unnecessary.

Daisy stitch with marguerites (Lines 31-32) - Two types of decorative embroidery stitches.

Crochet (Line 33) - A kind of textile work.

Esso (Lines 37-39) - The name of a gas station and the brand name of products it sells (in this case cans of motor oil).

High-strung (Line 40) - Tense or temperamental.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Filling Station" contains 41 lines broken up into six stanzas of 6-8 lines apiece. Though they lack a perfectly regular meter or rhyme scheme, the lines are fairly uniform, each between 5 and 9 syllables in length. The poem thus feels consistent and controlled but not rigid. Frequent enjambment pulls readers down the page as the speaker begins to take a closer look at the filling station and discover the love that exists beneath all the grime.

METER

While it looks, at first, like it's written in pure free verse, "Filling Station" actually features a loose accentual meter. This means that, instead of using a strict pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables, each line contains a similar *number* of stresses that can appear in any order. Here, lines generally contain three stresses. Take lines 16-20, for example:

behind the pumps, and on it
a set of crushed and grease-
impregnated wickerwork;
on the wicker sofa
a dirty dog, quite comfy.

As readers can see, the pattern isn't rigid; some lines have two or four stressed beats, and some are open to interpretation. Accentual verse allows the poem to feel rhythmic and musical without feeling overly *controlled*. This loose use of meter makes the poem sound more conversational and casual rather than formal. This makes sense, given that the speaker is detailing a very ordinary place.

RHYME SCHEME

"Filling Station" doesn't use a rhyme scheme. Like many poets of her generation, Bishop preferred more natural-sounding rhythms. The poem's language feels casual and conversational, while frequent assonance, consonance, and alliteration create subtle music (as in "little filling," "dirty dog, quite comfy," "gray crochet," and so on).

It makes particular sense to skip a steady, obvious pattern of rhyme in a poem about a gas station. The lack of regular rhyme mirrors the station's lack of obvious beauty and charm. The speaker has to dig a little deeper to find what makes this place special, and this is reflected in the poem's understated lyricism.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Filling Station" is anonymous—they don't share anything about themselves, such as their age or gender. They've presumably stopped at this "dirty" filling station to refuel or tune up their vehicle. Instead of focusing on themselves, the speaker observes (and, at first, judges) the appearance of the gas station and the people who run it.

The speaker only refers to themselves once throughout the entire poem, in fact, when they notice a certain kind of "Embroider[y]" used to make the doily:

> (Embroidered in daisy stitch
> with marguerites, I think,
> and heavy with gray crochet.)

This aside implies that the speaker is somewhat familiar with embroidery and understands the effort that must have gone into creating this decorative object. Indeed, right after this observation, the speaker reflects that "Somebody embroidered the doily" as an act of love and care. By setting aside their judgment for curiosity, the speaker is able to feel a sense of connection and perhaps even kinship with this place and the family running it.

SETTING

The poem takes place, as the title reveals, in a filling station: a place for people to refuel their vehicles, get an oil change, etc. This particular station is extremely "dirty," so drenched with motor oil that the whole thing looks coated in a layer of slick, "black translucency." The "Father" running the place is just as dirty as his surroundings, and he wears an ill-fitting "oil-soaked monkey suit" (or uniform). His sons are "greasy" and "quite thoroughly dirty as well." The filth of this place seemingly penetrates everything, and everyone, it touches.

There are also some markers of domesticity, which prompt the speaker to wonder if the family "live[s] in the station." For example, the speaker describes "a cement porch" where the family keeps some "grease-impregnated wickerwork" (woven furniture utterly soaked through with grease—not exactly an enticing place to sit, but a place to sit nonetheless). A "dirty dog" is curled up on the furniture, looking "quite comfy" despite the filth.

There is also one splash of "color" from a pile of "comic books" that sit atop a "doily," but even this piece of decoration is "dim" with dust or grime. The speaker doesn't linger on its filth, however. Instead, they notice that the "taboret" (or low table/cabinet) the doily rests on is one of a "set" (presumably the wicker furniture set on the porch) and that there is a big, bushy "begonia" (a kind of plant) sitting next to it. These are purely decorative touches, there to make the station feel homier.

The speaker also observes that the doily is "Embroidered in daisy stitch / with marguerites." That the speaker is familiar with these specific stitches suggests they know a thing or two about embroidery, and perhaps their feelings of empathy and connection with the family stem in part from this small realization. Though this place and everyone in it is covered in grease, the sight of these little details prompts the speaker to reflect that "Somebody" cares deeply for the station and the people working there.

In the last stanza, the speaker describes the "rows of [Esso motor oil] cans" that are arranged so that their labels are all aligned, seeming to whisper to the cars that come and go. This again suggests the effort that goes into taking care of the gas station, even if it isn't immediately apparent.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Elizabeth Bishop was a celebrated American poet, as well as a short story writer, painter, and translator. Bishop created visual art throughout her life and kept multimedia journals. Her work is sometimes described as imagistic; she tends to describe the physical world in minute detail, often while exploring themes of loss, belonging, and yearning. "Filling Station" is a great example of Bishop's distinctive style, with the speaker's close observations of their environment eventually giving way to the revelation that love abounds in even the unlikeliest places. Bishop published "Filling Station" in her third poetry collection, *Questions of Travel*, in 1965.

The time frame of Bishop's career places her within the generation of Confessional poets. These poets—who included Bishop's peers Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, as well as her longtime friend Robert Lowell—emphasized the autobiographical in their poetry, often highlighting intense emotional and psychological experiences. Bishop, however, was critical of this mode of writing and resisted including such detailed or direct personal accounts in her poems. Though her poems draw on her life, they often do so with a degree of distance and convey their feeling in indirect or ironic ways.

Bishop was also a gay woman writer in the male-dominated 20th-century literary world, and even her implied portrayals of same-sex love led to rejections from publications like *Poetry* and the *New Yorker*. It's fair, then, to see her restrained, indirect approach as both an artistic decision and a professional

prerequisite. She asserted that she didn't want to be judged on the basis of her sexual orientation or gender, but on the quality of her work as a poet.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Bishop had a difficult, traumatic early life: her father died when she was only a baby, and her mother was institutionalized not long after. She lived with her mother's parents in Nova Scotia until her father's family (whom she hardly knew) demanded custody, and at the age of six, she had to move to Massachusetts to live with them. She bounced between cold and often abusive households until she finally escaped to Vassar College, where she met fellow poet Marianne Moore and, inspired, began to develop a whole new style of writing.

Bishop also traveled extensively throughout southern Europe and northern Africa, recording many of her observations in verse. Half the poems in *Questions of Travel*, the collection in which Filling "Station" appears, were written in Brazil, where Bishop lived for 15 years. (The others—including this poem—were written elsewhere.)

The wider 20th-century world around Bishop was chaotic and troubled. She lived through World War I, World War II, and the turbulent 1960s and '70s. But for the most part, the painfully shy Bishop strove to avoid the outside world: she was most at ease when traveling to secluded islands, or holed up in the Library of Congress (where she worked for a time as a poetry consultant).

All through these difficult times, poetry was Bishop's escape and solace. The detailed portrait of the filling station in this poem suggests that pure, focused attention was one way she learned to transcend an often painful life.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poet's Life and Work — A biography of Bishop from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/elizabeth-bishop)
- A Breakdown of Bishop's Poetic Style — A brief video introduction to Bishop's work. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i58B8euDJ88)
- A Reading of the Poem — Listen to "Filling Station" read out loud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xl4mLhJ7RcU)
- Read an Interview with the Poet — Bishop discusses her poetry and influences in this 1977 Ploughshares interview. (https://www.pshares.org/issues/winter-2011-12/archive-work-conversation-elizabeth-bishop)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ELIZABETH BISHOP POEMS

- First Death in Nova Scotia
- One Art
- Sestina
- The Fish
- The Mountain

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