Genetics

SUMMARY

The speaker begins by observing that they have the same fingers as their father and the same palms as their mother. Looking at the combination of their father and mother's traits makes the speaker happy because it reminds them that they're a creation of their parents.

Now, the speaker's parents live far apart, on opposite sides of the earth. They have romantic relationships with other people. They're still linked to each other through the speaker's hands, however, meeting where the speaker's fingers connect to their palms.

The only thing left of the parent's marriage is a tentative friendship. The speaker describes their parents as two people who search for what they mean to each other much like miners draw minerals from the earth. The speaker is glad that their hands offer a more stable record of their parent's marriage.

The speaker can bring their hands together to form a church steeple. When the speaker turns this steeple upside down, they can see the underside of their hands, where their fingers and palms remind them of their mother and father.

Looking at their hands in this shape, the speaker envisions their mother and father standing solemnly in front of a priest, reciting religious hymns or verses. The speaker's body is a physical record of their parent's marriage. They can recreate the wedding with their hands, which combine traits from both parents.

The speaker turns to address their own partner and asks them to have a child, saying that it's human nature to want to pass down genetic traits to future generations. The speaker promises to pass down their fingers if their partner passes down their palms. All children can look at their own hands and see evidence of where they came from.

THEMES

FAMILY AND INHERITANCE

The speaker of "Genetics" reflects that their hands contain traits inherited from both their father and mother and thus serve as a reminder that the speaker's parents "made" them. The speaker knows, too, that they will one day pass down similar traits to their own children. In this way, the poem illustrates how people's ancestors live on in their bodies, which offer a comforting, grounding sense of connection to the past—and, ultimately, to the future.

Having inherited their father's fingers and their mother's palms, the speaker looks at their hands "with pleasure." In proving that their parents "made" them, the speaker's hands lend them a sense of belonging; they know that they're the product of love and part of a family line.

The poem goes on to suggest that, even though human relationships are frail and changeable, the speaker's body remains a stable record of the past. The speaker's parents are no longer together, having "repelled" each other "to separate lands," but they still "touch" where their traits meet in the speaker's hands. Though there's "nothing left of their togetherness," the speaker's hands are evidence that their parents were once a couple. The speaker's very existence thus preserves pieces of both their parents as well as a specific moment in time.

The speaker wants to continue the cycle of inheritance by having a child with their partner. They ask their partner to "take up the skin's demands," a phrase suggesting that it's simply human nature to want to have children and attempt to live on through future generations. In the final lines, the speaker makes the choice to "bequeath" their fingers to a future child, in combination with the partner's palms. This child will serve as a record of the speaker's own relationship and existence, and the poem implies that the speaker can take comfort in being part of this continuity across generations.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-19

MARRIAGE AND RELATIONSHIPS

In addition to commenting on the ways in which genetic inheritance connects people to their pasts, "Genetics" also illustrates how drastically relationships can change over time. The speaker's parents are no longer married, and the speaker now serves as the only record of their "togetherness." In other words, the *product* of their marriage, the child, outlived the relationship itself. In this way, the poem speaks to the unpredictability of relationships; romantic love, "Genetics" suggests, isn't always as steadfast as people may hope.

The speaker's existence proves that their parents were once close enough to have a child. Their mother and father still "touch" where the speaker's fingers and palms meet. In this sense, the speaker's body is their parent's "marriage register," physical proof that they were once together.

Since having their child, however, the speaker's parents have "been repelled to separate lands." In other words, they've broken up and now live far apart. The word "repelled" implies

that there's little, if any, warmth between them these days. They both might "sleep with other lovers," the speaker adds, hammering home the idea that each has moved on. Indeed, the speaker says that there's no "togetherness" left in their relationship, which has changed from being romantic to merely cordial.

By telling the story of how their parents moved from a close union to a distant friendship, the speaker illustrates how completely a relationship can change over time. The speaker isn't saying that all couples are doomed, however. On the contrary, if the speaker thought that relationships were hopeless, they wouldn't want to have a child with their own partner. Presumably, the speaker's parents didn't *plan* for their feelings to change, and the speaker's desire to start a family of their own suggests that, really, no one ever does. Love and romance are unpredictable, the poem ultimately suggests, and thus require a certain leap of faith.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 4-15

IDENTITY AND NEW BEGINNINGS

Though the speaker's parents have separated, this doesn't prevent the speaker from wanting to start a family of their own. At the end of the poem, the speaker turns to their partner and asks them to "take up the skin's demands / for mirroring in bodies of the future"—in other words, to have children together, whose "bodies" will reflect the speaker and their partner. The fact that the speaker wants to embark on this journey with someone conveys their hope that history won't simply repeat itself—that they won't end up in a failed marriage as their parents did. Rather than being an exact replica of the past, the poem suggests, each generation is unique—and thus represents a chance for a new beginning.

The speaker says that their hands are a combination of their father's "fingers" and their mother's "palms." Likewise, the speaker's child will inherit a new mix of traits from the speaker and their partner. The speaker invites their partner to "bequeath [their] palms" to a future child, promising that they (the speaker) will pass down their fingers in turn.

While this process might echo the way the speaker was "made," the result won't be the same because the speaker's partner introduces a new set of traits into the mix. The poem conveys that children are *reflections* of their parents, not exact *copies*; likewise, people's identities are *informed* by their pasts, but not necessarily *dictated* by them.

The speaker thus isn't doomed to repeat their parent's patterns because, connected as they may be, they're not the same people. Ultimately, genetics combine to create children who are entirely new, independent individuals. In this way, the poem suggests that children don't simply preserve the past, but also offer a chance for a fresh start.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 16-19

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

My father's in ...
... by my hands.

The speaker begins the poem by describing their hands, which reflect traits inherited from both their father and mother. The speaker doesn't merely say that their hands *look* like their parents' hands; instead, the speaker claims that their parents are "in" their fingers and palms, as though both parents maintain a physical presence *within* the speaker's body.

The parallel grammar of this opening line emphasizes the fact that the speaker is a combination of their parents—that they're equally part of their father and mother. Note, too, how a caesura breaks the line cleanly in half, separating the speaker's parents from each other:

> My father's in my fingers, but my mother's in my palms.

Looking at their hands makes the speaker happy because it helps them feel close to their parents. Their hands are a reminder that the speaker's parents "made" them, and thus that the speaker belongs to a family lineage.

This opening stanza also establishes the poem's form. "Genetics" is written in iambic pentameter, for the most part, a meter in which each line contains five iambs (poetic feet that follow an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern). The meter isn't perfect—the first line has two extra iambs (making it iambic *heptameter*) and the second line has an extra unstressed beat at its end:

> My fa- | ther's in | my fin- | gers, but | my mo- | ther's in | my palms.
> I lift | them up | and look | at them | with plea sure— | I know | my pa- | rents made | me by | my hands.

These variations are relatively minor and, overall, the lines echo the clear da-DUM da-DUM rhythm of a heartbeat.

"Genetics" is also something called a villanelle, meaning its first and third lines will be repeated (albeit with some variation) at the ends of the following stanzas. Keep an eye out for this repetition.

LINES 4-6

They may have ...
... link to palms.

The speaker reveals that their parents are no longer together. They've been "repelled to separate lands," meaning they live far from each other, and "may sleep with other lovers."

The word "repelled" implies that they actively dislike each other, while the words "lands" and "hemispheres" conveys a vast sense of distance. The diacope of "to separate," meanwhile ("repelled **to separate** lands, / **to separate** hemispheres"), hammers home the fact that these two people have split up. There are no longer romantic feelings between the parents, who are neither emotionally nor geographically close.

Similarly, the use of asyndeton in these lines makes the poem feel fragmented:

> They may have been repelled to separate lands,
> to separate hemispheres, may sleep with other
> lovers,

And yet, the speaker continues, their parents remain forever connected to each other via the speaker's body. The speaker has inherited their father's fingers and their mother's palms; their parents thus metaphorically "touch" where these features touch in the speaker's hands.

Again, this poem is something called a villanelle, meaning that the first and third lines from the opening stanza repeat throughout the poem. The final line of this stanza is a variation of line 1: "My father's in my fingers, but my mother's in my palms." In the first stanza, the line is simply descriptive, describing how the parent's traits are in the speaker's hands. When the line is repeated here, it becomes more active, as the parents "touch" where their traits connect. Rather than just describing the parent's presence, then, the repeated line actively brings the parents together.

LINES 7-9

With nothing left ...
... by my hands.

The speaker's parents are no longer romantically involved. Now, the speaker says, the only thing left of their former "togetherness" is tentative friendship.

The speaker uses a complex metaphor to describe the nature of this relationship, calling their parents "friends who quarry for their image by a river." Quarrying involves extracting stones or minerals from the ground. That they quarry "for their image" suggests that the parents are searching or digging for some reflection of their partnership that's been buried over the years.

By contrast, the speaker can see their marriage clearly anytime they look at their hands—something concrete and durable, a lasting "image" of their parent's "togetherness."

The "at least" in the final line of this stanza implies that the speaker is happy to have proof that their parents "made" them. For the speaker, inherited traits provide not just a sense of belonging, but also a window into the world as it once was.

LINES 10-14

I shape a ...
... their marriage register.

The speaker brings their fingertips together to create the "steeple" of a church. They then flip this "steeple" upside down, revealing the underside of their hands and their "father" and "mother" (again represented here by the speaker's fingers and palms).

The speaker then envisions their parents inside this "church" on their wedding day, "demure," or quiet and humble, while listening to a "priest reciting psalms."

These lines are brimming with consonance and whispery sibilance. Listen to the gentle /m/, lilting /l/, hushed /s/, and delicate /p/ sounds, which fill the scene with music and evoke the parents' quiet reverence on their wedding day:

> I shape a chapel where a steeple stands.
> [...]
> my father's by my fingers, my mother's by my palms
> demure before a priest reciting psalms.

Once again, the poem follows the established villanelle form: the third line of stanza 3 is a variation of the first line of the poem: "My father's in my fingers, but my mother's in my palms." The lines are *almost* exact copies of each other, but there is a subtle difference. In this stanza, the repeated line uses asyndeton, removing the conjunction "but" from the middle of the line.

This omission pulls the two parts of the sentence (one describing the father's fingers and the other describing the mother's palms) closer together, which makes sense for lines devoted to recreating their wedding—a day when they would have been united.

LINES 14-15

My body is ...
... with my hands.

These lines build on the imagery of the previous stanza, where the speaker reenacted their parents' wedding using their hands. Now, the speaker says that their entire "body" is their parents' "marriage register"—physical proof that their parents were once married.

The speaker "re-act[s] their wedding" with their hands. Note that the final line of this stanza is a pretty big variation of the villanelle form. Remember, the line "I know my parents made

me by my hands" repeats at the end of every other stanza. But here, the speaker changes that line quite a bite. While the original line is more passive (the speaker simply "know[s]"), this version is more active (the speaker "re-enact[s]").

This adds a new dimension to the speaker's relationship with their parents. No longer does the speaker simply feel connected to their parents by looking at their inherited traits, but they actively bring their parents together—they marry them, one might say—with their hands. The speaker thus becomes a more active participant in their family history. This foreshadows the poem's final stanza, in which the speaker decides to continue their family lineage by having a child of their own.

LINES 16-17

So take me ...
... of the future.

In the final stanza, the speaker brings a new person into the poem: their own partner, "you." The speaker talks directly to this person, inviting them to have a child together. Doing so, the speaker says, is a matter of following "the skin's demands." In other words, it's human nature to want to pass down one's genetics—to see oneself reflected in "bodies of the future" (the next generation).

The word "mirroring" also recalls the speaker's previous description of their parents "quarry[ing] for their image by a river." Those lines hinted at the fleeting, ephemeral nature of romantic relationships. This contrasts with the enduring connection created by having children.

Note how the first two lines of this stanza use both asyndeton and anaphora, omitting any conjunction between "take me with you" and "take up the skin's demands." This makes the speaker sound more forceful and urgent. It also develops a contrast between these two commands:

- The command to "take me with you" is relatively romantic, conveying the couple's desire to be together.
- On the other hand, "take up the skin's demands" is less personal, and is focused on genetic inheritance rather than romantic love. People are compelled by their bodies to reproduce.

LINES 18-19

I'll bequeath my ...
... by our hands.

The villanelle's repetitive structure comes full circle as the speaker repeats the lines that have alternated at the end of the previous three stanzas:

> I'll bequeath my fingers, if you bequeath your palms.
>
> We know our parents make us by our hands.

First, the speaker forms a conditional statement. They promise to pass down their fingers if their partner passes down their palms, mirroring what their own parents did. This repeats the image of fingers and palms from the beginning of the poem, creating a parallel between the speaker's parents' generation and their own; the speaker is continuing the family line. Of course, the speaker's partner brings an entirely new set of traits into the picture. The *process* of genetic inheritance might be repeated, but the outcome—the child—will not be exactly the same. Children reflect their parents, are mirrors for them, but not exact *copies*.

The poem's final line is then a variation of "I know my parents made me by my hands"—with one important shift: now, the speaker uses collective pronouns (we, us, our). This places the speaker's personal experience within the broader human experience. Anyone—not just the speaker—can see where they came from by looking at their inherited traits.

SYMBOLS

HANDS

In "Genetics," the speaker's hands symbolize their connection to their mother and father. Quite literally, the speaker's hands contain physical traits inherited from each parent: they have their father's fingers and their mother's palms. In this way, the speaker's hands also represent their parents' relationship—and the way that this relationship has made the speaker who they are.

The speaker's parents have separated, but they still "touch" where their traits meet in the speaker's hands ("where fingers link to palms"). The speaker's hands thus preserve a piece of the past and remind the speaker that they're part of a family lineage. When the speaker declares at the end of the poem that they want to "bequeath [their] fingers" to a child of their own, this represents their desire to continue their family's legacy.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "My father's in my fingers, but my mother's in my palms."
- **Line 3:** "I know my parents made me by my hands."
- **Line 6:** "but in me they touch where fingers link to palms."
- **Line 9:** "at least I know their marriage by my hands."
- **Line 12:** "my father's by my fingers, my mother's by my palms"
- **Line 15:** "I re-enact their wedding with my hands."
- **Lines 18-19:** "I'll bequeath my fingers, if you bequeath your palms. / We know our parents make us by our hands."

POETIC DEVICES

CONSONANCE

There are many examples of consonance throughout the poem, which fill the speaker's language with music and intensity. Listen to line 1, for example:

> My father's in my fingers, but my mother's in my palms.

This line, which is repeated (with variation) throughout the poem features both /f/ alliteration and /m/ alliteration/consonance. As a result, the line feels lyrical and memorable. The /l/ consonance and alliteration in the second line work similarly:

> I lift them up and look at them with pleasure—

These gentle, lilting sounds evoke the pleasure the speaker feels when they see their parents' reflected within their own body.

More consonance appears in line 10, with its crisp /p/, gentle /t/, liquid /l/, and soft /s/ sounds:

> I shape a chapel where a steeple stands.

All this consonance makes the line stand out to the reader's ear, in turn calling their attention to the image of the speaker recreating their parents' marriage with their hands. And in lines 12-13, humming /m/ sounds and whispery sibilance create a solemn, reverent tone:

> [...] my mother's by my palms
> demure before a priest reciting psalms.

Thanks to all this consonance, the scene sounds peaceful and hushed.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "father's," "fingers," "my mother's," "my palms"
- **Line 2:** "lift," "look," "pleasure"
- **Line 4:** "repelled," "separate," "lands"
- **Line 5:** "separate hemispheres," "sleep"
- **Line 10:** "shape," "chapel," "steeple stands"
- **Line 11:** "turn"
- **Line 12:** "father's," "fingers," "my mother's," "my palms"
- **Line 13:** "demure," "priest reciting psalms"

METAPHOR

"Genetics" is filled with metaphorical language. Take the poem's opening line:

> My father's in my fingers, but my mother's in my palms.

On one level, this is literal: both parents' genes are literally reflected in the speaker's body. But the idea that the speaker's parents are "in" their hands is also metaphorical. The speaker is describing how the sight of their hands reminds them that they're part of a family lineage; they make them feel like their parents are always with them.

The speaker builds on this idea in the second stanza. Though the speaker's parents have since separated from each other, they still "touch," metaphorically, "where fingers link to palms"—that is, where their genetic traits meet within the speaker's hands. And in the fourth stanza, the speaker metaphorically "re-enact[s]" their parents' wedding by forming a church steeple with their hands.

There's another, non-hand-related metaphor in lines 7-8:

> With nothing left of their togetherness but friends
> who quarry for their image by a river,

The speaker is saying that their parents search for their "image" the way a miner might dig for stone or minerals. That "image" seems to represent the parents' relationship to each other in the wake of their separation; they "quarry" for something solid. The reference to a river also might suggest that whatever "image" they're searching for is as unstable or fleeting as a reflection on water. Their relationship has shifted unpredictably over time.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "My father's in my fingers, but my mother's in my palms."
- **Line 6:** "but in me they touch where fingers link to palms."
- **Lines 7-8:** "With nothing left of their togetherness but friends / who quarry for their image by a river,"
- **Lines 10-15:** "I shape a chapel where a steeple stands. / And when I turn it over, / my father's by my fingers, my mother's by my palms / demure before a priest reciting psalms. / My body is their marriage register. / I re-enact their wedding with my hands."

PARALLELISM

"Genetics" contains multiple examples of parallelism. This repetitive, cyclical language reflects the poem's thematic ideas about genetic inheritance across generations.

Take line 1:

> My father's in my fingers, but my mother's in my

palms.

And line 12:

> my father's by my fingers, my mother's by my palms

In each line, the clause on either side of the comma (an example of caesura) follows the same grammatical structure. The lines are essentially cut in half, reflecting the fact that the speaker has inherited equal traits from their mother and their father.

Line 18 then echoes lines 1 and 12. Now, however, the speaker is talking about passing on their *own* traits to their future children:

> I'll bequeath my fingers, if you bequeath your palms.

This parallelism underscores the idea that the speaker is repeating the same process as their parents.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "My father's in my fingers, but my mother's in my palms."
- **Line 12:** "my father's by my fingers, my mother's by my palms"
- **Line 18:** "I'll bequeath my fingers, if you bequeath your palms."

REPETITION

As a villanelle, repetition is built into the very structure of "Genetics." The first and third lines of the opening stanza become refrains, which alternate (with some variations) as the last lines of each subsequent tercet:

> My father's in my fingers, but my mother's in my palms.
> [...]
> I know my parents made me by my hands.

These two lines then appear together, one after the other, at the very end of the poem.

This repetition reflects the way that parents pass on traits to their children. The fact that these refrains are a bit *different* each time they appear, meanwhile, reflects the idea that children aren't *exact* copies of their parents.

There are other forms of repetition *within* lines as well. Much of this overlaps with the poem's use of parallelism, as previously discussed in this guide. More discrete moments include the diacope of lines 4-5:

> They may have been repelled to separate lands,
> to separate hemispheres, [...]

This repetition makes the speaker's point all the more emphatic. The speaker is describing the vast distance between their parents in order to illustrate how completely their relationship has dissolved. The repetition of "to separate" doubles down on that sense of distance, emphasizing just how disconnected the parents are.

There's also a brief moment of anaphora in line 16:

> So take me with you, take up the skin's demands

Once again, this repetition makes the speaker sound more emphatic.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "My father's in my fingers, but my mother's in my palms."
- **Line 3:** "I know my parents made me by my hands."
- **Line 4:** "to separate"
- **Line 5:** "to separate"
- **Line 6:** "but in me they touch where fingers link to palms."
- **Line 9:** "at least I know their marriage by my hands."
- **Line 12:** "my father's by my fingers, my mother's by my palms"
- **Line 15:** "I re-enact their wedding with my hands."
- **Line 16:** "take," "take"
- **Line 18:** "I'll bequeath my fingers, if you bequeath your palms."
- **Line 19:** "We know our parents make us by our hands."

VOCABULARY

Quarry (Line 8) - To dig for stone or minerals, usually in a large hole or pit. Here, the parents aren't literally quarrying; instead, the word suggests that they're just searching for something solid.

Steeple (Line 10) - A tall tower on top of a church. The poem does not describe an actual steeple, but a model of a tower formed by the speaker's fingers.

Demure (Line 13) - Modest, shy, or humble.

Psalms (Line 13) - Religious hymns.

Bequeath (Line 18) - Pass something on to another person.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Genetics" is a villanelle. This means it has 19 lines broken into five tercets (or three-line stanzas) and one concluding quatrain (a four-line stanza).

As a villanelle, "Genetics" also has two refrains that repeat

(with variations) throughout the poem. These refrains come from the first and third lines of the first stanza, which then alternate as the final lines of each subsequent tercet. The repetition isn't exact, but there's a clear pattern with references to "hands" and "palms" in each refrain line. Here are stanzas 1-3 to illustrate this pattern in action:

> My father's in my fingers, but my mother's in my palms. Refrain 1
> [...]
> I know my parents made me by my hands. Refrain 2
> They may have been repelled to separate lands,
> [...]
> but in me they touch where fingers link to palms. Refrain 1
> With nothing left of their togetherness but friends
> [...]
> at least I know their marriage by my hands. Refrain 2

These refrains then appear *together*, one after the other, in the poem's closing quatrain:

> So take me with you, take up the skin's demands
> for mirroring in bodies of the future.
> I'll bequeath my fingers, if you bequeath your palms.
> Refrain 1
> We know our parents make us by our hands. Refrain 2

As readers can see, villanelles are very repetitive, circular poems. As such, this form is fitting for a poem about genetic inheritance and the way people are reflections of their parents. Readers might even think of these refrains as representing the speaker's father's fingers and their mother's palms; the refrains echo throughout the poem, just as the speaker's parents' features appear within their own body.

Again, "Genetics" doesn't repeat these refrains *exactly*. Sometimes, these changes are very slight, as between lines 1 and 12:

> My father's in my fingers, but my mother's in my palms.
> [...]
> my father's by my fingers, my mother's by my palms

Other changes are more substantial, such as between lines 3 and 15, where the only constants are "my hands" and similar grammar:

> I know my parents made me by my hands.
> [...]
> I re-enact their wedding with my hands.

The poem makes similar changes when it comes to the villanelle's expected ABA rhyme scheme. Some rhymes are perfect, like "palms" and "psalms." Others are subtle slant rhymes, like "palms" and "hands."

All this imperfect repetition mirrors one of the poem's key themes. In "Genetics," children are *reflections* of their parents, but not *exact* copies.

METER

"Genetics" follows a rough iambic pentameter. An iamb is a poetic foot that follows an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern, da-DUM, and pentameter simply means there are five iambs per line (for a total of 10 syllables). Some lines don't follow this pattern exactly, but the poem clearly has an iambic bounce to it overall. Take a look at the opening stanza:

> My fa- | ther's in | my fing- | ers, but | my mo- | ther's in | my palms.
> I lift | them up | and look | at them | with pleasure—
> I know | my pa | rents made | me by | my hands.

Line 1 has seven iambs, making it a line of iambic heptameter. The other two have the expected five iambs, however, making them iambic pentameter (albeit with an extra dangling unstressed beat at the end of line 2, something called a feminine ending).

This meter lends the poem a sense of regularity and deliberateness—every syllable seems to be placed carefully. The poem feels musical and assured, while variations on this meter prevent it from becoming too stiff or predictable. Iambs are also often likened to the rhythm of a heartbeat, and they're thus appropriate for a poem about genetics and inheritance.

RHYME SCHEME

"Genetics" follows the expected rhyme scheme of a villanelle. Each tercet rhymes ABA and the final quatrain then rhymes ABAA.

The poem doesn't stick to this pattern all that strictly, however. For the most part, the poem uses slant rhymes (and some very subtle ones at that). For example, the two A rhymes in the first stanza are "palms"/"hands"—words with *similar* sounds, but which definitely aren't perfect rhymes. The B rhymes are likewise subtle: "pleasure," "lover," "river," etc.

All in all, the poem's rhyme sounds are related but not identical. As with the poem's varying refrains, this reflects of the main thematic ideas in "Genetics": that children inherit traits from their parents but are still unique individuals. Like these rhymes, children *echo* their parents rather than mimic them exactly.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is someone reflecting on the ways that their parents' features are reflected in their own body. The speaker's parents are no longer together, but the speaker takes comfort in being a testament to the fact that they once were. The speaker also has a partner with whom they're considering having children, which means they're probably in their 20s or 30s.

It's easy to read the speaker as representing Sinéad Morrissey herself, given that her parents separated and she has two children. In any case, it's clear that the speaker is comforted by their physical connection to the parents and longs to pass down those traits to children of their own. Despite their parents' failed marriage, the speaker hopes that their current relationship is a fresh chance.

SETTING

The setting of "Genetics" is more about a specific time than a specific place. That is, readers don't know *where* the speaker is, but they know *when* they're speaking: in the present, as an adult, after their parents have separated. Given the fact that the parents live in "separate hemispheres" and "may sleep with other lovers," it's fair to assume that a decent amount of time has passed since this separation. Now, the speaker is gearing up to have children of their own.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Sinéad Morrissey was born in Northern Ireland in 1972 and has published five books of poetry. Her collection *Parallax* won the prestigious T.S. Eliot Prize in 2013. "Genetics" appears in her 2005 collection, *The State of the Prisons*.

This collection, Morrisey's third, explores prisons both literal and metaphorical, including those created by the human body and individual perception. Morrisey's poetry more broadly touches on themes related to religion, politics, motherhood, femininity, and Northern Irish identity. In this latter topic, she draws from a rich literary history whose contributors include poets such as Seamus Heaney, Paul Muldoon, and Ciaran Carson.

"Genetics" is also a villanelle, a form that dates back to early 17th-century France. Perhaps the most famous example of this cyclical form is Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Genetics" doesn't explicitly reference any particular historical context. That said, given that Morrisey's parents separated and that she has two children of her own, it's reasonable to assume that the poem was inspired by her own life experience.

The poem's themes also might be informed by the history of Northern Ireland. Morrisey grew up in Belfast during "The Troubles," a period of violent conflict that began in the late 1960s and lasted until the Good Friday agreement of 1998. The conflict was between (mostly Protestant) unionists who wanted Ireland to remain a part of the UK and (mostly Catholic) nationalists who desired Irish independence. The poem's references to parents being "repelled to separate lands," as well as its religious imagery, perhaps reflect this context.

Incidentally, Morrissey's father was born to a Catholic family while her mother is English, though the poet has said that she was raised without any major religious leanings. Speaker of her upbringing, she told one interviewer:

> "We had really good values instilled in us by our parents. When things get very tribal and divided between two groups of people, much of reality is predetermined by which side of the divide you stand on and where your values were formed. It was very liberating not to be on either side and to feel quite apart from those two dynamics."

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- "A Maker of Intricate Poem Machines" — An interview in which Morrissey talks about the use of strict poetic forms in her writing. (https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/sinead-morrissey-a-maker-of-intricate-poem-machines-1.3260694)
- History of the Troubles — An introduction to the history of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. (https://www.britannica.com/event/The-Troubles-Northern-Ireland-history)
- Carcanet Interview With Morrissey — An interview with Morrissey around the time of writing "Genetics." (https://www.carcanet.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?showdoc=16;doctype=interview)
- Morrissey's Life and Work — A biography of Morrissey and introduction to her work via the British Council. (https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/sinead-morrissey)
- Morrissey on Her Childhood — Read an interview in which Morrissey discusses her "very different upbringing." (https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/life/features/sinead-morrissey-we-had-a-very-different-upbringing-and-im-

grateful-to-my-parents-for-that-it-was-very-liberating-not-to-be-on-either-side-here-36159548.html)

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