Head of English

SUMMARY

The poem's speaker, the head of the English department at a British girls' school, addresses a class gathered for an assembly, telling the students that a published poet has come to speak to them today. Pointing out the appropriately poetic ink stains on the writer's fingers, the teacher tells the girls they might be about to hear some fresh new poems, before instructing them to clap—quietly—sit up straight, and listen respectfully.

The teacher reminds the students to remember what they've learned about free verse in past lessons: not every poem rhymes now, the teacher says, with obvious disappointment. Then, the teacher gets back to telling the students what to do, warning them to sit quietly—but to be sure to ask questions at the end, since the school is shelling out £40 for this visit.

The teacher veers into announcements for a minute, telling the ESL class to come to a meeting after lunch, then reiterates how lucky the students are to have a poet in class today, halfheartedly quotes Keats, and talks about their own poetry-writing and reading, noting that they're teaching Rudyard Kipling to the 9th graders at the moment.

The teacher starts to wind up this speech, encouraging the poetic "Muse" who inspires writers to take center stage instead. But first, a student needs to open a window, so the "winds of change" don't sweep around the room too much. The teacher also reminds the students to take notes so they can write an essay about the poet's ideas later. Then, at long last, the teacher gives the poet the floor, asking them to try to persuade everyone that there's something new to learn.

After the poet speaks, the teacher tells the students to go take their lunch break, noting (with subtle disapproval) that the poet has just given them a window into some unconventional views of the world, and then instructing the students to clap. Finally, the teacher thanks the poet for coming and invites them to stay for lunch—but rather rudely dashes off to (apparently) more important business. The school secretary, Tracey, will usher the poet out the door instead.

THEMES

POETRY AND EDUCATION

Carol Ann Duffy's satirical "Head of English" suggests that a fusty old educational system can suck the joy and life right out of poetry. This dramatic monologue's speaker, an English teacher at a British girls' school, introduces a visiting poet to the students with a combination of boredom, distaste, and unease. To this teacher, contemporary free verse poetry is suspect, lacking the gravitas of 19th-century rhymed verse—but, as the poem makes clear, the teacher doesn't really understand or appreciate the beauty of traditional poetry, either! A lot of poetry teaching, this poem suggests, completely misunderstands the subject it claims to venerate, treating poetry as a chore or a sign of stuffy "good taste" rather than a moving, evolving art form.

By characterizing the titular Head of English as an old-fashioned, strict, and humorless figure, the poem suggests that a lot of teaching makes poetry seem dull and dry. Not only does this teacher sternly tell the assembled students to "sit up straight," stop "whispering," and not clap "too loud," they also make it clear that they see poetry not as a living art, but as a subject for technical "lesson[s]" on abstract poetic devices and "essay[s] on the poet's themes." Reading poetry, to this teacher, is something like doing your chores: it builds character, but it's deeply unexciting.

What's more, the poem argues, plenty of poetry teaching is stuck in the past. The head of English is skeptical about the visiting contemporary poet, observing that "not all poems, sadly, rhyme these days," and that they prefer the old-fashioned (and often aggressively patriotic and racist) rhymed, metered poetry of Rudyard Kipling to newfangled free verse. In this poem's opinion, many teachers see poetry as a way to cling to old values, rather than as a sometimes revolutionary art that's still developing.

Worse, the poem goes on, a lot of old-fashioned poetry education doesn't actually value the beauty and power even of the 19th-century poetry it praises, treating poems only as symbols of good taste and classiness. When the teacher approvingly quotes the first words of the Romantic poet John Keats's great ode "To Autumn," for example, they trail off vaguely, totally unmoved: "Season of mists and so on and so forth." Even classic poetry, to this teacher, is just something that one is supposed to know about to show that one is educated; it's more important to be able to quote Keats than to be touched by what he had to say (and how beautifully he said it).

All this shortsightedness, the poem hints, isn't only to do with educational conventionality, but also with a fear of change. When the speaker asks a student to open a window before the visiting poet speaks so the "winds of change" don't get trapped in the room, it sounds as if they suspect that the poet might have dangerous things to say—things that might inspire the students to rebel against the school's strictures.

And after the poet speaks, the teacher becomes defensive, dismissively observing that the poet's words "gave an insight to an outside view" (in other words, provided a glimpse of an

outlandish and countercultural way of thinking) before sending the students to lunch. Poetry, the poem suggests, can be powerfully subversive, and dull conventional teaching might be *meant* to defang it by making it seem boring.

This poem's satirical portrait of a stuffy old teacher thus argues that poetry teaching is often woefully conservative—and hints that *good* poetry teaching, teaching that respects poetry as a vital and beautiful art form, could be a force for genuine change.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-30

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

Today we have ...
... Who knows.

The poem's first lines characterize this dramatic monologue's speaker: the stuffy old "Head of English" (that is, the head teacher of the English department) at a British girls' school. These lines also indirectly paint a picture of the environment in which such a Head is at home. Both the Head's pompous tone and the fact that this is a girls' school (and therefore, probably, an exclusive private school rather than a state school) invite readers to imagine the poem taking place in an old-fashioned wood-paneled assembly hall, where rows of girls in school uniforms sit in utter boredom, listening to the Head drone on.

Today, the Head begins, is a special occasion: "we have a poet in the class." Better still, this is a poet with "a published book"—an *official* poet, not just some hobbyist. The inkblots on the poet's fingers—stains which the Head points out as if they were markings on a songbird—are yet more evidence that this visitor is the real deal.

But all the Head's enthusiasm for this "real live poet" sounds distinctly condescending. Take a look at the repetition in the first two lines:

> Today we have a **poet** in the class.
> A real live **poet** with a published book.

That diacope on "poet"—and the intensifying "real live"—makes it sound as if the Head is being patronizing to both the visiting poet and the students, introducing the poet as if the poet were the tooth fairy: *look, the tooth fairy! Yes, the real live tooth fairy, with her wings and her wand!* A "poet," to this Head, is clearly a kind of stock character, identified by "inkstained fingers" and legitimized (barely) by a "published book"—no one to be taken too seriously.

This forced and condescending cheer about this poetic visitor gets even more pronounced when the Head remarks that the girls might be about to "witness verse hot from the press," and follows up that jolly cliché with an utterly unenthusiastic "Who knows."

Everything in this first little speech, in other words, reveals that the Head of English is pompous, small-minded—and probably not what you'd call a poetry-lover. And this, the poem will suggest, is an all-too-common irony in the world of education: the very people responsible for teaching poetry often have no love or feeling for their subject.

Note, too, that the poem never gives readers a picture of the Head; this person might be male or female, old or young (though they certainly sound on the old side). The Head's attitude, this intentional omission suggests, turns up in all kinds of teachers; readers might even imagine their own most pompous teacher in the Head's place.

LINES 5-9

Please show your ...
... Still. Never mind.

Not only is the Head of English pompous and patronizing, but they're also tyrannical, in that special way that only a bad teacher can be. In these lines, they begin a series of scolding instructions to the girls—and manage, along the way, to get in a dig at the visiting poet.

After instructing the students to applaud the poet—but "not too loud"—the Head frames the whole occasion as a dull Educational Experience, one in which the students should not forget about "the lesson on assonance" that will help them to understand the poet's unmetered, unrhymed free verse.

Listen to the passive-aggression in the Head's understated language as they remark on that poetic style:

> [...] not all poems,
> **sadly**, rhyme these days. **Still. Never mind.**

The Head's "Still. Never mind" is, in repressed-headteacher-ese, a blistering insult to the visiting poet. The Head clearly has no time for unrhymed free verse poetry—an opinion that suggests their tastes are absurdly old-fashioned:

- The Head's dislike of free verse poetry isn't just, say, the equivalent of a crusty old grandpa disliking contemporary music. Free verse poetry has been around since the 19th century, and plenty of it gets taught even in quite traditional schools; you wouldn't be surprised to find Walt Whitman or T.S. Eliot, for example, on the syllabus at the hoity-toitiest prep school.
- The Head is thus essentially saying that poetry stopped being worthwhile somewhere around, oh,

> 1840 or so. This is a downright reactionary (and shortsighted) perspective that treats poetry as a dead specimen, not a living art.

Of course, these lines also highlight one of the poem's deep ironies: this free-verse-hating Head is speaking in free verse. The poem's own unmetered and irregularly rhymed shape insults the Head right back—and suggests that the visiting poet might have more than a little in common with Carol Ann Duffy, getting her revenge for any number of draining school visits.

LINES 10-12

Whispering's, as always, ...
... paying forty pounds.

Having given the visiting poet and their rhymeless free verse a quick stab in the back, the utterly unpoetic Head gets back to admonishing the students. Reminding the girls that whispering is, "as always, out of bounds," the Head gives the impression that they've given similarly tiresome and repressive lectures countless times; this Head's poor students must be pretty tired of being scolded.

The Head isn't just an old scold, though. They're also a completely prosaic thinker. The girls shouldn't whisper, the Head continues, but they should certainly ask the poet plenty of questions: the school is "paying forty pounds" for the privilege of this visit, "after all." This is yet another passive-aggressive dig at the visiting poet: a heavy hint that the Head feels "forty pounds" is a pretty exorbitant sum for an hour of a poet's time.

But there's also another ironic joke at the Head's expense built into the poem's very shape. Here, this free verse poem introduces just a flicker of the rhyme the Head sees as the mark of quality poetry, rhyming "bounds" in line 10 with "pounds" in line 12. This rhyme hammers home the joke, drawing special attention to the idea that the Head is the kind of person who can think of value only in monetary terms.

LINES 13-16

Those of you ...
... and so forth.

Now that the Head has commanded the stage, they seem for a moment to forget that they're meant to be introducing the visiting poet, instead taking a break to tell the "English Second Language" students—in other words, a class for students learning to speak English—to come to a meeting after the poet's talk. (Readers can only imagine that these poor students are in for an *especially* condescending lecture.)

But at last, the Head manages to haul their attention back around to the idea that the poet's visit is meant to be some kind of honor: "we're fortunate," they say, rather insincerely, "to have this person in our midst."

This reminds the Head of one of the bits of poetry they do know: the Romantic poet John Keats's great ode "To Autumn." Listen to the way a homophone with "midst" sets up this joke:

> [...] We're fortunate
> to have this person in our **midst**.
> Season of **mists** and so on and so forth.

Clearly, the sound of the word "midst"—and a desire to show off—jog the Head's memory, spurring them to throw in an apt poetic quotation. Keats would certainly fall into the category of "poets the Head would approve of": he wrote rhymed poetry, and he died in 1821, before all that suspicious free verse could get a foothold. Quoting Keats, the Head seems to say, "Of course, I know what important poetry sounds like—here's an example."

But it doesn't seem the Head has ever really understood Keats, either:

- This half-baked, incomplete quotation suggests that the Head isn't moved one bit by what many consider one of the most beautiful poems ever written. The Head is just quoting Keats because Keats is a respectable, traditional poet. (Of course, that idea is itself pretty ironic: in his time, Keats was an innovative writer working at the bleeding edge of his art form.)
- And, for that matter, the Head hasn't learned a thing from "To Autumn," which is all about listening for the sad, beautiful "music" of loss and death. The conservative, old-fashioned Head has absolutely no interest in letting go of the past.

This allusion thus suggests that joyless, reactionary teaching isn't just bad because it's resistant to new ideas. It's also bad because it misunderstands the very poetry it claims to value—and makes profoundly lovely art into a mere sign of dull, worthy good taste.

LINES 17-18

I've written quite ...
... the Lower Fourth.

After ostentatiously displaying some poetic chops with a spot of Keats, the Head breezily mentions having "written quite a bit of poetry myself." There's something doubly funny going on here:

- This is yet another casual insult to the visiting poet, suggesting that poetry is something the Head just dashes off in their spare time, the way one might doodle or bake muffins. In other words, writing poetry isn't a *real* job, like being the Head of an English department.

- It also invites readers to imagine what kind of wretched verse a person like the Head might write: perhaps studious, badly rhymed imitations of Wordsworth, with plenty of daffodils to show that it's Proper Poetry.

And to top it all off, the Head notes that they're currently teaching the "Lower Fourth" (the ninth grade, in American terms) about "Kipling"—that is, Rudyard Kipling, noted rhymer and imperialist. This allusion tells readers a lot about what kind of a teacher the Head is.

Kipling certainly wrote a lot of popular and beloved poetry (and famous novels, including *The Jungle Book*)—but a not inconsiderable amount of that poetry is riddled with the unexamined racism of the British Empire. If the Head has an uncomplicated fondness for Kipling, then, they might also be old-fashioned in more sinister ways, believing in a blinkered, antiquated vision of white British power and superiority. These kinds of attitudes, the poem suggests, are not uncommon in English schools.

This allusion also reminds readers of the role that *class* plays in the Head's pomposity, snobbishness, and ignorance. Remember, this poem is taking place at a private girls' school—not a state school, but a place where the students have to pay hefty tuition fees for the privilege of attending. The poem more than hints that such wealthy institutions are often invested in a pretty conservative worldview. In the next lines, the poem will go on to suggest that poetry, taught *well*, might challenge such conservatism.

LINES 19-21

Right. That's enough ...
... about the place.

At long last, the Head *starts* to wind up their long, rambling, self-important introduction—though, as it turns out, they've still got a few more things to say before they're totally done. Take a look at the way the poem uses caesura to pace this comical moment:

> Right. || That's enough from me. || On with the Muse.

Those big pauses make it sound as if the Head is really stringing out these last few seconds as the center of attention. (They're still being a know-it-all, too: referring to poetry as the work of "the Muse," they allude to the classical idea that poets were inspired by patron spirits.) But just when they're about to finally get off stage, they remember one more thing, commanding a student to "open a window at the back" to keep the "winds of change" from getting trapped in the room during the poet's talk.

Here, the poem breaks for a moment from the realism of the Head's speech. Up until this point, the Head's voice has sounded all too believable. But when the Head warns against "winds of change about the place," the metaphor sounds more like an expression of what they're *privately* thinking and feeling than what they'd actually say. Perhaps the Head isn't even aware of how much they hate and fear change: this line might get at a fear deep down in the Head's subconscious.

The idea of change as a wind is an old cliché. But it also fits into a long poetic tradition. Writers from Percy Bysshe Shelley to Bob Dylan have written poems of changing winds—and a lot of the time, those winds symbolize *political* change, too.

Perhaps, then, the Head doesn't just dislike contemporary poetry because so much of it is written in free verse. Perhaps the Head also dislikes the thought that poetry is in some sense *on the side* of change, and still changing itself: it's an innovative, evolving art form. Poetry and the Head's conservatism, in other words, don't sit together too comfortably.

LINES 22-24

Take notes, but ...
... we don't know.

Having opened a window to keep the school safe from poetic "winds of change," the Head thinks of a few more orders to give the students before ceding the stage to the poet. The girls, the Head instructs, should "take notes" and prepare to write an essay.

Take a look at the internal rhyme and enjambment here:

> Take notes, but don't write reams. Just an essay
> on the poet's themes. [...]

This flicker of rhyme draws attention to the word "themes," highlighting just how dull the Head's ideas are: an "essay on the poet's themes" is an awfully vague and passionless assignment. (To any students who have reached this page because they, too, have been assigned "an essay on the poet's themes": hang in there.) The hurried enjambment, meanwhile, makes it sound as if the Head is having second thoughts, quickly slipping in instructions to write a whole "essay" rather than mere "notes."

These lines also suggest that bad teachers might unconsciously try to defang poetry through boring assignments. Teaching poetry so dully might be a way for the Head to kill poems and pin them down for dissection before students have really had a chance to watch them fly—or to get any dangerous, rebellious ideas from them.

The Head concludes this stanza with a challenge to the poet: "Convince us that there's something we don't know." Like the line about "winds of change," this sounds more like what the Head is *thinking* than what the Head would actually *say*. Certain that they have the only justified and correct way of looking at the world (and at poetry), they practically dare the poet to change their mind about—well—anything. It seems pretty unlikely that that's going to happen.

At long last, in any case, the visiting poet gets to take the stage.

LINES 25-27

Well. Really. Run ...
... Applause will do.

Cleverly, the poem doesn't let readers in on what the visiting poet actually *says* during their talk. Instead, readers get a sense of the kind of things the poet might have said by the Head's response. Listen to the "polite," understated disdain in the Head's voice here:

> Well. Really. Run along now, girls. I'm sure
> that gave an insight to an outside view.

That restrained "Well. Really" speaks volumes: the Head might as well be saying, "What on earth was *that* all about?" Similarly, the idea that the poet "gave an insight to an outside view" is a backhanded compliment. The Head is essentially saying that the poet's views are utterly outlandish; the poet, the Head seems to think, has given the students a glimpse only into the mind of a countercultural maniac. It's just as the Head suspected: poets aren't to be trusted. Their opinions only blow the dangerous "winds of change about the place."

Nonetheless, it's the Head's job to encourage the students to clap: "Applause will do," the Head says, suggesting that the students ought to applaud more because it's polite than because this poet is to be genuinely commended for their performance. Once more, an internal rhyme—this time between "view" and "do"—plays up the comedy here.

LINES 27-30

Thank you ...
... show you out.

In the poem's closing lines, the Head of English at last addresses the poet directly, with all the condescension readers have come to expect. Inviting the poet to "hang about" for school lunch (what a treat!), the Head quickly adds that they "must dash": no time to chit-chat with loitering poets, they have important business to get back to.

Take a look at the way these lines use enjambment to evoke the Head's swift, oily departure:

> [...] Lunch
> in the hall? Do hang about. Unfortunately
> I have to dash. Tracey will show you out.

These sentences, running smoothly across line breaks, make it clear that the Head leaves no room for the poet to say anything in reply. The Head simply has no time for poets, literally or metaphorically.

The last few words of the poem take one last little jab at the Head's arrogance and snobbery. The Head, being far too busy to walk the poet to the door, says that "Tracey will show you out." "Tracey," readers gather, must be a school secretary—a woman who's probably used to doing all the Head's unwanted chores and to being seen as far less important than the Head.

Perhaps, readers might imagine, Tracey and the poet will share a knowing look as they head for the door. And perhaps the poet will go straight home to write a biting poem about this visit—a poem that will satirize a whole blinkered, stubborn, condescending educational attitude, embodied in the form of a dreadful Head.

POETIC DEVICES

IRONY

This poem uses irony in everything from its subject matter to its shape, poking satirical fun at a soulless educational system.

The central irony here, of course, is that the Head of English—a person who clearly hates and fears the poetry they claim to respect—speaks in the form of a poem, sometimes even dipping into iambic pentameter for a while (as in the first four lines—note the five da-DUMs in "To**day** | we **have** | a **po-** | et **in** | the **class**"). In spite of these moments of meter, of course, this dramatic monologue is written in free verse, delivering the droning speech of a deeply unpoetical person in the very form they most dislike.

That points to the second big irony here: the Head of English has no real love or feeling for, well, English. While the Head claims to have "written quite a bit of poetry myself," and to have a fondness for the rhymed poetry of Kipling and Keats, their halfhearted quotations ("Season of mists and so on and so forth") and their general attitude to the visiting poet suggest that they see poetry more as a merit badge than as a moving (and living) art form. This teacher clearly feels it's better to stick to the respectable classics (even if you don't understand them or feel much about them) than to let poetry really "change" the way you look at life.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-30

ALLUSION

The poem's allusions mark the Head out, not just as a hidebound traditionalist, but as a person who doesn't value or understand the classic poems they supposedly approve of.

It should come as no surprise that the conservative old Head of English at this fancy British girls' school prefers the traditional rhymes of "Kipling"—that is, the English writer Rudyard Kipling—to the visiting poet's free verse. Not only was Kipling a dyed-in-the-wool rhymer, he was also a major voice of the British Empire, a poet who once wrote that the "white man's

burden" was to "civilize," well, everyone who wasn't a white man. An uncomplicated fondness for Kipling marks the Head of English out as a person whose attitudes and poetic tastes are firmly (and rather horribly) stuck in the past.

The Head also quotes the Romantic poet John Keats—or tries to. After trotting out the first few words of Keats's "To Autumn," the Head quickly trails off: "Season of mists and so on and so forth." This moving poem seems to have had no real effect on the Head, who clearly sees poetry "appreciation" only as a mark of good taste and traditional values.

There's thus a double irony in the Head quoting Keats. In his lifetime, Keats was a revolutionary poet—and politically left-wing, something the Head certainly would not approve of. What's more, "To Autumn" is a poem all about learning to love the melancholy "music" of death and change. The Kipling-loving Head, of course, has no intention of ever letting old beliefs about poetry or patriotism gently fade to make room for new ones.

The Head's final allusion underscores all these ideas. Preparing to cede the stage to the visiting poet, the Head briskly says, "Right. That's enough from me. On with the Muse." This is a reference to the classical belief that poets were inspired by patron spirits (see the beginning of Homer's *Odyssey* for one famous example of this idea at work). To the Head, though, the poetic Muse seems like little more than a trained monkey, here to perform (through the poet) for a mere "forty pounds."

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 16:** "Season of mists and so on and so forth."
- **Line 18:** "am doing Kipling with the Lower Fourth."
- **Line 19:** "Right. That's enough from me. On with the Muse."

METAPHOR

The poem's metaphors reveal just how small-minded and reactionary the Head of English is.

The first metaphor here is a simple cliché: the Head, trying to rustle up some enthusiasm for the poet's visit, tells the students that the poet might share some "verse hot from the press"—in other words, brand-new poetry. The Head's use of a cliché here makes them sound corny and out of touch. But it also plays into their earlier line about "a real live poet with a published book." To the Head, the contemporary poet is already suspect for not being a 19th-century rhymer; a "published book," "hot from the press," is the only thing that gives this poet even the faintest sheen of credibility in the Head's eyes.

A later metaphor suggests that the Head might actively fear poetry:

> Open a window at the back. We don't
> want winds of change about the place.

This line breaks a little from the realism of much of the rest of the Head's speech: this isn't something a real teacher would say out loud in an assembly. Instead, this metaphor reveals something about the Head's attitude to poetry. The Head doesn't just misunderstand or undervalue poetry, but fears its power. The "winds of change" here evoke all sorts of famous poems in which winds symbolize revolution—including, ironically, this famous one by Percy Bysshe Shelley, a 19th-century Romantic poet whom this traditionalist teacher has certainly read. The Head, however, prefers things to stay just as they are.

That becomes even clearer in the poem's final metaphor:

> Run along now, girls. I'm sure
> that gave an insight to an outside view.

Describing the poet as one who holds "outside view[s]," the Head paints the poet as, well, an outsider, a person on the margins of society—no one the "girls" should dream of emulating or listening to.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "Perhaps / we're going to witness verse hot from the press."
- **Lines 20-21:** "We don't / want winds of change about the place."
- **Line 26:** "an insight to an outside view."

ENJAMBMENT

By stretching sentences out across many lines, the poem's enjambments help to characterize the Head of English, evoking their droning, dreary, authoritative speech-making and underlining their moments of dismissive rudeness to the poet.

For instance, take a look at the enjambments in these lines from the first and second stanzas:

> [...] Please show your appreciation
> by clapping. Not too loud. Now
> sit up straight and listen. Remember
> the lesson on assonance, [...]

Here, enjambments carry the Head's sentences not just across lines, but right across a stanza break, making it clear there's no way to get a word in edgewise. The Head, these lines suggest, enjoys the sound of their own voice.

In the final stanza, meanwhile, enjambments make it clear that the Head is being rather dismissive to the visiting poet:

> [...] Do hang about. Unfortunately
> I have to dash. [...]

Here, an enjambment leaves the word "unfortunately" hanging out all on its own at the end of a series of lines in which the Head has been inviting the poet to stick around for lunch. That "unfortunately" thus undercuts all those brittle, polite invitations, making it clear that the Head is personally far too busy and important to spend any more time with a lowly free verse poet.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "Perhaps / we're"
- **Lines 5-6:** "appreciation / by"
- **Lines 6-7:** "Now / sit"
- **Lines 7-8:** "Remember / the"
- **Lines 13-14:** "Language / see"
- **Lines 14-15:** "fortunate / to"
- **Lines 20-21:** "don't / want"
- **Lines 22-23:** "essay / on"
- **Lines 25-26:** "sure / that"
- **Lines 27-28:** "you / very"
- **Lines 28-29:** "Lunch / in"
- **Lines 29-30:** "Unfortunately / I"

END-STOPPED LINE

The poem's end-stopped lines play against its enjambments, reminding readers that the Head is not just a boring droner, but an unexcitable, unpoetic soul.

One good example appears in the first two lines:

> Today we have a poet in the class.
> A real live poet with a published book.

Those thudding full stops make it clear that the Head is not precisely thrilled by this visit from a "real live poet." The two sentences here are actually more like one long sentence split up: without a verb, the second line is a fragment, grammatically speaking. The end-stops here thus make it sound as if the Head didn't even have enough enthusiasm to make it all the way through the "exciting" idea that a "real live poet" has come to visit in one breath!

At the end of the second stanza, meanwhile, end-stopped lines emphasize the Head's skepticism about the visiting poet:

> [...] do feel free to raise some questions.
> After all, we're paying forty pounds.

These two end-stopped lines right next to each other make the Head's remark about how much this visit is costing the school stand out. The Head could easily have stopped after inviting the students to "raise some questions," a full and reasonable thought on its own—but then just can't resist getting in a little dig that suggests they're not sure those "forty pounds" were well spent.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "class."
- **Line 2:** "book."
- **Line 4:** "press."
- **Line 9:** "mind."
- **Line 11:** "questions."
- **Line 12:** "pounds."
- **Line 15:** "midst. "
- **Line 16:** "forth."
- **Line 18:** "Fourth."
- **Line 19:** "Muse."
- **Line 21:** "place."
- **Line 23:** "go."
- **Line 24:** "know."
- **Line 26:** "view."
- **Line 30:** "out."

ALLITERATION

A few moments of alliteration give certain lines extra punch, drawing attention to some of the poem's sly jokes.

For example, listen to the /p/ sounds in line 2: "A real live poet with a published book." That strong pop of a /p/ draws extra attention to the idea that the head might find the social approval of publication rather more important than the artistic work of poetry itself; already, there's a sense that the Head believes being a "real live poet" would be an inexcusable waste of time if it *didn't* result in a "published book."

Similar /p/ alliteration turns up when the Head observes that the school is "paying forty pounds" for the privilege of this visit—and that the students should therefore ask lots of questions, to get their money's worth. The /p/ sound there again emphasizes the Head's materialistic, unromantic view of poetry: they clearly can't think why a mere classroom visit from a poet should be so expensive.

Another moment of alliteration makes a different kind of joke:

> [...] We're fortunate
> to have this person in our midst.
> Season of mists and so on and so forth.

Here, the /m/ alliteration connecting "midst" and "mists" also points out the homophone at play here. Saying the word "midst" seems to have reminded the Head of a half-memorized line of Keats that uses a similar-sounding word—a line they can use to prove that they, too, know a little something about poetry. That "and so on and so forth," though, makes it clear that the Head has no real sense of why the Keats poem is powerful.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "poet," "published"
- **Line 7:** "sit," "straight"
- **Line 12:** "paying," "pounds"
- **Line 15:** "midst"
- **Line 16:** "mists"
- **Line 21:** "want winds"
- **Line 22:** "write reams"
- **Line 25:** "Really. Run"

UNDERSTATEMENT

Moments of understatement characterize the Head as a disapproving old British teacher who can deliver some stinging insults under a veil of politeness.

When the Head warns the children that the visiting poet might write in free verse, for example, it's clear that they disapprove of such "newfangled" poetic practices a lot more than they're saying outright:

> [...] Remember
> the lesson on assonance, for not all poems,
> sadly, rhyme these days. Still. Never mind.

With the little words "sadly" and "Never mind," the Head delivers a barely veiled reactionary critique of all free verse poetry. (Note, too, that this is a criticism that would apply even to such august and respected poets as T.S. Eliot and Walt Whitman; even for a staunch traditionalist, this Head has a narrow idea of what poetry should be.)

The Head's understated insults become even more stinging in the final stanza, in which the Head comments on the poet's talk:

> Well. Really. Run along now, girls. I'm sure
> that gave an insight to an outside view.

That dry "Well. Really" might as well be a "What on earth was *that* all about?" And the icily faint praise that the poet's talk "gave an insight to an outside view" is just another way of saying, "Only a maniac or a social pariah would believe the sorts of things this poet just said."

Understatement, in other words, is all part of the Head's way of saying whatever they want under a polite disguise. This kind of false politeness is really a power move.

Where Understatement appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-9:** "for not all poems, / sadly, rhyme these days. Still. Never mind."
- **Lines 25-26:** "Well. Really. Run along now, girls. I'm sure / that gave an insight to an outside view."

CAESURA

Caesura, alongside enjambment and end-stopped lines, helps to give the Head's voice its dry, humorless tone.

For example, listen to the caesurae in the speaker's voice in their barely veiled critique of free verse:

> [...] not all poems,
> sadly, || rhyme these days. || Still. || Never mind.

Those big pauses frame the words "sadly," "still," and "never mind," making it even clearer that the Head has absolutely no time for the kind of newfangled poetry that doesn't even rhyme.

That effect feels even more pronounced in the Head's comments after the poet's talk:

> Well. || Really. || Run along now, girls. || I'm sure
> that gave an insight to an outside view.

Each of the caesurae here adds a heavy, meaningful cushion of silence around the Head's disapproving remarks. These silences make it clear that there's plenty the Head would *like* to say about the poet's talk—but that the Head is far too "polite" to say what they really thought. In other words, these are some seriously passive-aggressive caesurae.

Readers might also note that every caesura in this poem is either a grammatically necessary comma or a muted period. No exclamation points or dashes for this Head; they don't ever seem to have gotten excited in their life.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "girls. Perhaps"
- **Line 5:** " knows. Please"
- **Line 6:** "clapping. Not," "loud. Now"
- **Line 7:** "listen. Remember"
- **Line 8:** "assonance, for"
- **Line 9:** "sadly, rhyme," "days. Still. Never"
- **Line 10:** "Whispering's, as always, out"
- **Line 12:** "all, we're"
- **Line 14:** "break. We're"
- **Line 19:** "Right. That's," "me. On"
- **Line 20:** "back. We"
- **Line 22:** "notes, but," "reams. Just"
- **Line 23:** "themes. Fine. Off"
- **Line 25:** "Well. Really. Run," "now, girls. I'm"
- **Line 27:** "do. Thank"
- **Line 28:** "today. Lunch"
- **Line 29:** "hall? Do," "about. Unfortunately"
- **Line 30:** "dash. Tracey"

VOCABULARY

Assonance (Lines 7-8) - A figure of speech in which the same vowel sound repeats all through a series of words. (More on that here!)

In our midst (Lines 14-15) - Among us.

Season of mists (Line 16) - The first words of the English Romantic poet John Keats's great ode "To Autumn."

The Lower Fourth (Line 18) - The grade British students are in at age 13 or 14; the American equivalent would be ninth grade.

Kipling (Line 18) - Rudyard Kipling, an important 19th-century writer (perhaps most famous for his poem "If" and his novel *The Jungle Book*).

The Muse (Line 19) - Traditionally, a female spirit who inspires poets.

Reams (Line 22) - Piles of paper.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

This poem's form is all part of its tongue-in-cheek satire on English teaching. This free verse poem is divided into five neat stanzas of six lines apiece, giving ironic poetic shape to the Head of English's pointedly unpoetic speech.

The conservative Head of English would certainly not approve of this poem's form: while the lines sometimes dip into iambic pentameter (as in lines 1-4—see the Meter section for more on that) or internal rhyme (as in "reams"/"themes" in lines 22 and 23), they don't stick to any one meter or rhyme scheme.

But the poem does use one traditional form: it's a dramatic monologue, a poem written in the voice of a character addressing an audience. As in many dramatic monologues, the speaker here reveals more than they might have meant to about their own beliefs and personality, coming across not as a respected authority figure, but a pompous old tyrant.

In other words, the form here is itself satirical and makes it clear that the unconventional visiting poet, with their "outside view" of the world, might also be the very person writing this poem.

METER

This free verse poem doesn't use any regular meter throughout. But it does occasionally dip into meter for the sake of a joke.

The first four lines, for instance, are written in pretty steady iambic pentameter: in other words, lines of five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm. Here's how that sounds in line 1:

> To**day** | we **have** | a **po-** | et **in** | the **class.**

By having the Head of English speak these words in one of poetry's most familiar and august meters—the same meter that Shakespeare wrote in—Duffy makes it clear that the Head has marinated in the poetry of the past without ever learning much about life from it. The Head's tidy little speech might sometimes fall into a heartbeat-like iambic pulse, but it's never pumping any red blood.

RHYME SCHEME

Written in free verse, "Head of English" doesn't use any particular rhyme scheme. However, it does use flashes of rhyme, often to play up a joke.

For instance, listen to the internal rhyme in these lines:

> Take notes, but don't write **reams**. Just an essay
> on the poet's **themes**. Fine. Off we go.

This witty rhyme draws special attention to the Head's dull-as-ditchwater assignment, underlining just how joyless the poetry teaching is at this school.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is a stuffy, staid, strict old teacher—one who might have a little more power than is good for them. As the "Head of English," they run the whole English department with an iron fist. Much of their speech in this poem, supposedly an introduction to a visiting poet, is actually just a list of orders to the students: "sit up straight and listen," don't clap "too loud," "take notes."

The Head isn't just tyrannical, but conservative and small-minded. Claiming a taste for old-fashioned rhymed poetry (unlike the new-fangled free verse that the visiting poet writes), they don't actually seem to like poetry much at all, halfheartedly quoting Keats ("Season of mists and so on and so forth") without seeming the least bit moved. What *really* attracts this teacher to older poets is those poems' conventional respectability—an ironic thought, considering that the "conventional" poets of today are yesterday's rebels!

This speaker is a caricature, a figure who represents any number of teachers in the world: people more interested in maintaining order than fully embracing the life and beauty of poetry.

SETTING

The poem is set in a girls' school somewhere in the UK. The speaker never says much about their surroundings, but readers familiar with such schools might imagine this poem taking place

in an assembly hall, where uniformed students sit "whispering" until their teacher scolds them.

This setting makes it clear that this poem is interested in the way bad poetry teaching can be classist and reactionary, as well as plain old dull. The students at a private British girls' school would likely be pretty well-off, members of a wealthy cultural elite in training. And their conservative old teacher seems more interested in maintaining the traditional values of a poet like Kipling (whose colonial-era poetry is often imperialist and racist) than in getting mixed up in new-fangled (and possibly subversive) contemporary poetry.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

The Scottish-born Carol Ann Duffy (1955-present) is the first (and so far, the only) woman to serve as Poet Laureate of the UK. She was a choice likely to shake up the world's stuffy "Heads of English": a working-class writer and an out lesbian, she brought fresh air and new perspectives to a laureateship historically dominated by (mostly) straight, white, middle-class men. This satirical poem, first published in Duffy's 1985 collection *Standing Female Nude*, clearly draws on Duffy's own experiences as a public poet making school visits and reflects her interest in British class politics as well as poetry education.

"Head of English" is one of Duffy's many dramatic monologues; her poetry often takes on different characters and perspectives. In one of her most famous collections, *The World's Wife*, she writes in the voices of mythological and historical women from Medusa to Frau Freud to Mrs. Midas, giving these silent figures their own say (and offering feminist critiques of myth, history, and literature along the way).

In her fondness for dramatic monologues, Duffy follows in the footsteps of writers like Robert Browning, but she also fits into the contemporary poetry scene around her. Margaret Atwood, for example, has used the form for similar feminist purposes. Duffy is also one of many 20th-century poets to embrace free verse. She sees herself as a descendent both of more recent free verse poets like Sylvia Plath and of Romantics like John Keats (whose "To Autumn" the Head halfheartedly quotes in this poem). In turn, she has influenced (and championed) writers like Alice Oswald, Kate Clanchy, and Jeanette Winterson.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

When Duffy published this poem in 1985, British economic and social inequality were a hot topic in the UK. The Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who rose to power in 1979, was presiding over a time of ever-deepening class divisions and growing poverty in the working classes. Thatcher was notorious for cutting funding for state education; she even earned the nickname "Margaret Thatcher, Milk Snatcher" for ending a program to offer state schoolchildren free milk at lunchtime. Private schools like the girls' school in this poem, meanwhile, were largely undisturbed during the Thatcher years, floating along on a cushion of tuition fees paid by wealthy families. Then as now, wealth and class made a huge difference in whether people had access to a solid education.

In this poem, Duffy subtly investigates the way that classism makes its way into schools. Poetry and art, the poem observes, can easily be transformed from freely available sources of inspiration and beauty into class markers. The Head's pompous, fragmentary Keats quotation suggests that, in the wrong hands, poetry can become a divisive shibboleth, a mere way of demonstrating that you're a well-educated (and well-to-do) person.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a witty performance of the poem. (https://youtu.be/pXZ8Cm-FQFA)
- Duffy on the Power of Poetry — Read an article about Duffy's recent Pandemic Poetry project; Duffy discusses how poetry can help people through troubled times. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/apr/20/carol-ann-duffy-leads-british-poets-coronavirus-imtiaz-dharker-jackie-kay)
- Duffy as Poet Laureate — Listen to an interview with Duffy in which she discusses her appointment as the first female Poet Laureate of the UK. (https://youtu.be/wnt5p1DGD9U)
- A Brief Biography — Learn more about Duffy's life and work via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/carol-ann-duffy)
- Duffy's Influence — Read an article by novelist Jeanette Winterson in which she discusses Duffy's poetry—and especially Duffy's belief that poetry should be a pleasure. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jan/17/jeanette-winterson-on-carol-ann-duffys-the-worlds-wife)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER CAROL ANN DUFFY POEMS

- Before You Were Mine
- Death of a Teacher
- Education For Leisure
- In Mrs Tilscher's Class
- Little Red Cap
- Medusa
- Mrs Midas

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