Hide and Seek

SUMMARY

When you're playing hide-and-seek, start by yelling to the seekers that you're ready for them to come and find you. The bags in the toolshed where you're hiding smell like the beach. The seekers won't notice you in this salt-smelling darkness—but make sure your feet aren't visible. You'd better play it safe and not yell again. The floor of the shed is chilly. The others will likely look in the shrubbery by the swing. No matter what, you can't sneeze when they come in the shed. Listen, they're here, murmuring outside; they've never been this quiet in the past. Hold your breath. Stay still and quiet. Lay low in the pitch darkness. They're getting nearer; one of them trips and grumbles; you hear them talking, laughing, then leaving. But don't show yourself too soon. They'll search the path nearby, then the greenhouse, then check back in here. They've got to be admiring your ingenuity, feeling more and more confused as they look around for you. It seems like it's been a while since they left. Now your legs ache, you're cold despite your jacket, and you're breathing the unpleasant smell of wet sand. You should tell the others you've won the game. Shove aside the bags you've been hiding behind, stand and stretch out—now you feel better! Step outside and yell that you're the winner; announce "Here I am!" and tell them to admit defeat. The dim surrounding garden stares back at you, and nothing moves. The shrubbery is silent, and the sun has set. Sure, you're here, but where did the seekers go?

THEMES

WITHDRAWAL, ISOLATION, AND ABANDONMENT

On the surface, "Hide and Seek" is about the children's game in its title. Narrated in the second person, it advises "you"—the main character or reader—how to hide without being caught. All seems to go well at first: you lie low, feeling "clever" and successful. But once you've "won," you emerge to find that all the seekers are gone, casting doubt on the nature of your victory. Did anyone really care where you were? Was anyone even searching? The poem seems to add up to an extended metaphor, representing a *psychological* experience of withdrawal, self-concealment, and loneliness. Hiding your true self, the poem suggests, can feel shrewd at first, but it's frighteningly lonely in the end: a way of abandoning others that may cause them to abandon you in turn.

The poem makes successful "Hid[ing]" (withdrawal from others) sound triumphant at first. The speaker instructs "you" to "Call loud" for others to come find you, as if confident in your hiding place and eager to frustrate seekers. Adding that it's "Wiser not to risk another shout," the speaker advises going even further into hiding, suggesting that such caution and withdrawal are "Wise[]." Soon, you feel as if "They'll never find you" and indulge in a smug fantasy about the others' admiration for you: "They must be thinking that you're very clever, / Getting more puzzled as they search all over."

Yet as the poem goes on, hiding becomes lonelier and more uncomfortable, until it finally becomes downright unpleasant and chilling. Even at first, "The floor" of the shed you're in "is cold." As you think you hear the seekers approaching, you try not to "breathe" or "move," and even suppress your senses like a "dumb" and "blind[]" person (someone who can't speak or see). Now you're really hiding from the *world*, not just your fellow players! Eventually, you feel you've been hiding for a troublingly "long time," and you're not enjoying isolation anymore: "Your legs are stiff, the cold bites through your coat," etc. The discomfort of the situation worsens till you can't take it anymore. Finally, it's *you*, not the seekers, who feel puzzled, as you reappear to find that they've vanished.

The absolute loneliness of the ending suggests the consequences of "hiding" in a broader sense: you may discover that no one wants to "seek" you, or connect with you, anymore. When you emerge, gloating, you encounter total desolation: none of the seekers (your friends?) are around, "Nothing stirs" in the vicinity, and "the sun is gone." It's as dark and lonely outside as it was in the shed—as if you've turned the whole world into a hiding place. The poem ends with a plaintive rhetorical question: "Yes, here you are. But where are they who sought you?"

The question seems unanswerable, and hiding is no longer a triumph; you seem to have outsmarted and defeated *yourself*. Ironically, in fact, you're now searching for the seekers! You've gone from a position of centrality and certainty to one of instability and confusion. The question also seems to open outward, beyond the ending. This *could* just be a literal description of a kids' game, but the mystery of the situation, punctuated by that question mark, suggests a deeper, psychological conflict.

Ultimately, then, the poem seems to serve as a warning against *metaphorical* hiding. Even if self-effacement or social withdrawal feels fun and "clever" at first—as if you've "won" by escaping the world—it can become permanently isolating. This general warning might have a particular application to writers (like the poet), who craft language puzzles in solitude but can't count on others to stay interested in "solving" them. If so,

there's a bit of irony involved, because *this* poem doesn't exactly come out and announce its meaning!

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-27

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Call out. Call ...
... aren't sticking out.

Lines 1-4 establish the poem's setting and dramatic situation. "You," the main character, are one of the players in a game of hide-and-seek. The speaker, addressing you in the second person, is advising you on how to hide without getting caught. (Presumably, this means you're supposed to be a child—although the second-person narration invites readers to imagine themselves in the situation, no matter how young or old they may be.)

As the poem begins, you've already chosen your hiding place: behind or underneath some heavy "sacks" in a "toolshed." Really, then, the speaker's advising you on how to *stay* hidden: how to be quiet and unobtrusive enough to avoid detection.

From the start, this game is a bit unusual. Although many variations of hide-and-seek are played around the world, the most common versions involve one "seeker" looking for multiple "hiders" or multiple "seekers" looking for multiple "hiders." Often, the seeker will announce the start of their search by yelling a phrase like, "Ready or not, here I come!" Here, however, a group of seekers is looking for a single hider—you!

Moreover, they don't announce that they're ready to start looking; instead, the speaker tells *you* to announce that you're ready to be found:

> Call out. Call loud: 'I'm ready! Come and find me!'

In real life, this yelling would risk giving away your hiding place, or at least giving a clue as to your whereabouts. Yet in the poem, you seem strangely confident that you won't be found: "They'll never find you in this salty dark." (Still, the speaker warns you to "be careful that your feet aren't sticking out," in case the others *do* stumble on your hideout.)

One possible reason for these strange circumstances is that the hide-and-seek game is more metaphorical than literal. That is, it might be an extended metaphor for other, less playful kinds of "hiding," such as isolating oneself from others or concealing one's true self. The poem's mysterious ending will provide further support for this interpretation.

Since most of the poem takes place in a dark shed, it relies heavily on non-visual imagery. These opening lines, for example, appeal to the sense of smell, as if "you" are sniffing around and getting your bearings in the darkness. The air has a "salty" scent, and the sacks you hide behind "smell like the seaside," presumably because they contain sand or salt. (Perhaps the "seaside" image is meant to evoke the loneliness of a deserted shore, since the shed is its own kind of isolated retreat.) Sandbags are often used as part of military fortifications, and as barriers against flooding—so if these sacks do contain sand, their presence may hint at an atmosphere of danger or unease.

LINES 5-8

Wiser not to ...
... they come prowling in.

In an example of parataxis, lines 5-8 seem to tumble out almost in random order, without clear logical connections between them:

> Wiser not to risk another shout.
> The floor is cold. They'll probably be searching
> The bushes near the swing. Whatever happens
> You mustn't sneeze when they come prowling in.

Now that you've announced your "read[iness]" to be searched for (line 1), the speaker urges "you," the main character, to stay as silent as possible. "Wiser not to risk another shout," the speaker advises; in other words, don't call out again, or the seekers might find you too easily. Then the speaker abruptly registers the fact that "The floor" of the shed "is cold"—then, just as abruptly, speculates that the seekers will search "The bushes near the swing" outside. Finally, the speaker warns you again to be silent, especially when "they" enter the shed: "You mustn't sneeze when they come prowling in." (Perhaps the "salty" shed air, or whatever's in the "sacks," is irritating your nose.)

These rapid shifts convey the nervous excitement of the moment. In fact, they seem to mimic "your" scattered thoughts as you wait for the seekers. It's even possible to read the speaker as a voice inside your own mind—instructing you, warning you, and observing your surroundings all at once.

The observed details are significant in their own right. The statement "The floor is cold" (followed by a weighty mid-line pause, or caesura) signals that this won't be a *comfortable* hiding place. The setting is chilly, maybe even spooky or ominous. Meanwhile, "The bushes near the swing" is the poem's first reference to the world outside the toolshed. The surrounding area sounds pleasant: a garden, lawn, or similar place for children to play in (complete with a swing). In fact, it sounds much more pleasant than the "cold," dark, cramped hiding place you've chosen! These details hint that the game of hide-and-

seek might not be entirely fun; in fact, it might become a feat of endurance.

LINES 9-13

And here they ...
... and laughter scuffle, and they're gone.

In lines 9-13, you experience a close call, as the seekers nearly "stumble[]" across your hiding place. They arrive "at the door" of the shed, "whispering" and sounding more "hushed" than they ever have "before." The speaker warns you not to "breathe," "move," or speak. The seekers approach in the darkness, bumbling, talking, and laughing—but they don't find you, and suddenly "they're gone."

Notice that you never *see* these other players; you only hear them. They're also never identified (as friends, siblings, etc.), and this is their sole appearance in the poem—they leave as quickly as they came. All these factors combine to make them seem a little ghostly. Presumably, they're real, and really searching for you, but when they mysteriously vanish at the end of the poem, the reader might have reason to wonder!

Also, they seem to come very close to you without actually finding you, because you've made yourself so silent and motionless. You "Hide in your blindness," as if your inability to see *them* might guarantee that they can't see *you*. It's hardly a foolproof strategy, but it works—you seem invisible to each other. There may be nothing ghostly going on here, but there *is* a sense that you're totally isolated from others, even when others are just inches away.

The poet's skillful use of sonic and rhythmic devices—including alliteration, consonance, and caesura—ratchets up the tension in these lines. Listen to how soft /h/, /s/, and /sh/ consonants make lines 9-10 sound "whisper[y]" and quiet:

> And here they are, whispering at the door;
> You've never heard them sound so hushed before.

By contrast, dense consonance and assonance—including /s/, /m/, /t/, /z/, and /uh/ sounds—give line 12 a clashing, discordant sound:

> They're moving closer, someone stumbles, mutters;

These tongue-twisting consonants and vowels help conjure up the image of clumsy, noisy kids. The line almost forces you to trip up, like the player who "stumbles" in the shed.

Finally, look at the caesuras in line 11, which fall after each of the lines' first three iambic feet. These strong pauses (indicated by periods) accentuate the "da-DUM, da-DUM" rhythm of the meter:

> Don't breathe. | Don't move. | Stay dumb. [...]

This rhythm sounds a lot like a pounding heartbeat—like *your* pounding heartbeat as you lie in hiding! Working subtly together, iambic meter and caesuras dial up the excitement of the scene.

LINES 14-17

But don't come out ...
... search all over.

After the other players have "gone" (line 13), the speaker urges you to stay in hiding: "But don't come out just yet" (line 14). The speaker, and you, expect that the others will return: "they'll try the lane / And then the greenhouse and back here again." In other words, you believe that the seekers are determined to find you. They'll roam all over this country estate (with its "lane," "greenhouse," etc.) and circle back to the shed—as opposed to just abandoning you. This expectation sets up a clear situational irony, because, in the end, abandoning you is exactly what they do.

The speaker's next statement (lines 16-17) is also laced with irony:

> They must be thinking that you're very clever,
> Getting more puzzled as they search all over.

For now, you feel "clever" and even powerful in hiding. You imagine that the other players admire your ingenuity and skill and that they're "puzzled" but determined to solve the challenge you've posed. As you soon learn, however, this is a fantasy; the others give up quickly. (If the poem is an extended metaphor, this fantasy might reflect the poet's own feeling of cleverness in posing an interpretive challenge for his readers. He can "hide" behind mysterious lines, but that doesn't mean readers will care enough to solve the mystery!)

Notice the slant rhymes in this passage: "lane"/"again," "clever"/"over." The poem's mix of full rhymes, slant rhymes, and unrhymed lines keeps its language slippery and unpredictable, reflecting the uncertainty of the speaker's situation.

LINES 18-22

It seems a ...
... stretch. That's better!

Lines 18-22 mark a transition in the poem—a jump forward in time. (Some published versions of the poem contain a stanza break after line 17, as if to reflect this shift.)

By now, you've been hiding for a while. "It seems a long time" since the other players "went away" from the shed; you don't hear them outside anymore. Worse, you're uncomfortable in your hiding place. "Your legs are stiff" and cramped, you're "cold" even in "your coat," and you can practically taste "The dark damp smell of sand," which seems to come from the "sacks" you're hiding under. Clashing alliterative consonants—harsh /k/s, harsh /d/s, hissing /s/s—make these

lines sound as unpleasant as your cramped little corner:

> Your legs are stiff, the cold bites through your coat;
> The dark damp smell of sand moves in your throat.

It sounds almost as if you're in danger of freezing or choking. Undignified as your situation is, however, you still feel triumphant—you imagine "you're the winner." You decide to announce this fact to the others and end your discomfort in the process: "Push off the sacks. Uncurl and stretch. That's better!"

According to the speaker, then, coming out of hiding relieves you of a burden. You cast off a heavy weight, stretch, and feel immediately "better." If the poem is read as an extended metaphor, these details suggest that *figurative* forms of hiding—such as social isolation or social pretense—are a *psychological* burden. You may feel "clever" when you first withdraw from others (or disguise your true self), but ultimately, you'll want to be seen and recognized again.

LINES 23-27

> *Out of the ...*
> *... who sought you?*

Lines 23-27 end the poem on a note of uncertainty and mystery.

The speaker instructs "you" to venture "Out of the shed," declare victory in the game of hide-and-seek, and demand the other players admit ("own up" to) the fact that you've "caught" them. The phrasing here is a bit unusual, since it would normally be the seekers who "catch" the person hiding. Still, this word choice might align with the earlier fantasy of "puzzl[ing]" the seekers (line 16-17), as if setting them a problem they can't solve. You seem to imagine your success in the game as an assertion of power; even as you curl up in the darkness, you feel "clever" (line 16) and in control.

But all this is a setup for the poem's ironic twist: the seekers are no longer looking for you. They've all gone away. Even "the sun is gone," and the "darkening garden" around the shed "watches" you in eerie silence. Everything outside is as lightless, soundless, and motionless as the inside of the shed; the whole world seems to have become a hiding place, leaving "you" both literally and metaphorically in the dark. (The "darkening garden" might be an allusion to the Garden of Eden; like Adam and Eve getting kicked out of paradise, you seem to be losing a certain innocence in this moment.)

In a further irony, *you're* now in the position of searching for others, as the speaker's final words make clear:

> Yes, here you are. But where are they who sought you?

This closing rhetorical question contrasts starkly with everything that's come before: a series of authoritative statements and instructions. The speaker's authority seems to have vanished along with the other players, disorienting you completely.

The unanswerable question leaves the narrative unresolved, suggesting that the poem is not, in the end, a straightforward story about childhood. Instead, it seems to add up to a parable or extended metaphor. The lesson seems to be that you can "hide" too long—so long that others stop trying to find you, and you lose yourself in some deeper sense.

Translated to an adult context, "hiding" might represent withdrawing from society, disguising one's true self, and/or remaining deliberately mysterious to others (the way some writers do, perhaps). Other interpretations are also possible—because, in a final irony, the poem *itself* never comes right out and reveals its meaning! The author's intention remains somewhat "hidden" and elusive, challenging readers to work it out.

SYMBOLS

SALT, SAND, AND SANDBAGS

The speaker notes that "The sacks in the toolshed smell like the seaside" (line 2) suggesting they contain sand and/or salt. The poem also describes the air in the garden shed as "salty" (line 3) and mentions "The dark damp smell of sand" that fills "your throat" after a long time hiding among these sacks. Clearly, both sand and salt are present in some form. Symbolically, the "seaside" smell they create might suggest "your" isolation compared to others in the game of hide-and-seek. It's as if you alone are on a deserted shore in the midst of the thriving "garden" where the game takes place.

If these bags are full of sand, they carry other symbolic possibilities. For example, soldiers sometimes use piles of sandbags as barricades. As a WWII veteran, Scannell would certainly have been familiar with this practice. Sandbags are also used as barriers against flooding from the "sea[]" or other large bodies of water. Hiding amid bags of sand could thus suggest a strong desire for self-protection, an impulse to defend oneself against a hostile world. (By the end of the poem, "your" hiding seems more figurative and psychological than literal.)

Finally, *sandbagging* can refer to misrepresenting your true potential or intentions in order to gain an unfair competitive advantage. If the poet has that definition in mind here, the sandbags might evoke more grown-up forms of "hiding": concealing your true nature, manipulating others, etc. The bags' uncomfortable weight ("Push off the sacks [...] That's better!") might symbolize the psychological burden of "hiding" in this deeper sense.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "The sacks in the toolshed smell like the seaside. / They'll never find you in this salty dark,"
- **Line 20:** "The dark damp smell of sand moves in your throat."
- **Line 22:** "Push off the sacks. Uncurl and stretch. That's better!"

POETIC DEVICES

IMAGERY

The poem is full of rich imagery, even though "you," the main character, spend most of the time hiding in the dark! In fact, *because* you can't see well, the poem evokes your surroundings through a variety of non-visual cues, appealing more to the senses of smell, touch, taste, and hearing than to sight. It's as if the darkness has sharpened your other senses. The smell imagery in lines 2-3 is a good example:

> The sacks in the toolshed smell like the seaside.
> They'll never find you in this salty dark,

These "sacks" seem to be bags of salt, sand, or both: items that give off a beach-like fragrance. Later, in line 20, "The dark damp smell of sand moves in your throat," suggesting an odor so overwhelming that you begin to experience it as an unpleasant *taste*. And throughout your time in the shed, you feel chilly: in line 6 you note that "The floor is cold," and by line 19, "the cold bites through your coat." As for sounds, you initially hear the "whispering," "words," and "laughter" of the other players, but these soon lapse into eerie silence.

Most of the visual imagery happens in your mind's eye, as you picture the seekers "searching / The bushes near the swing," checking the "lane" and "greenhouse," and so on. Only at the end (line 25-26) do you step outside the dark, still shed—only to encounter more darkness and stillness:

> The darkening garden watches. Nothing stirs.
> The bushes hold their breath; the sun is gone.

Although these lines do sketch a visual environment, the emphasis is on what's missing: namely, light and movement (along with sound). For all its vivid details, the poem ultimately emphasizes sensory *deprivation*, which seems to reflect a deeper, psychological experience of isolation and loss.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "The sacks in the toolshed smell like the seaside. / They'll never find you in this salty dark,"
- **Line 6:** "The floor is cold."
- **Lines 9-10:** "And here they are, whispering at the door; / You've never heard them sound so hushed before."
- **Lines 12-13:** "They're moving closer, someone stumbles, mutters; / Their words and laughter scuffle, and they're gone."
- **Lines 14-15:** "they'll try the lane / And then the greenhouse and back here again."
- **Lines 19-20:** "Your legs are stiff, the cold bites through your coat; / The dark damp smell of sand moves in your throat."
- **Lines 25-26:** "The darkening garden watches. Nothing stirs. / The bushes hold their breath; the sun is gone."

EXTENDED METAPHOR

The poem can be read as an extended metaphor for social withdrawal or isolation. The poem seems to invite this metaphorical reading for a couple of reasons. First, if it's read purely as a literal narrative, not much happens in it. A player hides during a game of hide-and-seek, then emerges to find that their friends have left. This might be an unpleasant experience, but in real life, it would be pretty mundane, at least if the child knew their way home. In the poem, it's the *way* the story's told—through structure, detail, and so on—that makes the experience seem to represent a darker psychological ordeal. For example, the narrative never comes to a satisfying resolution; instead, it ends with the lonely player standing confused in the darkness.

Second, the poem depicts an unusual version of hide-and-seek. The game typically involves one "seeker" searching for a group of "hiders," or an accumulating group of "seekers" (including players who've been caught) searching for remaining "hiders." In the poem, however, a whole group searches for a single player from the start. Though not unheard of, this odd format stands out and lends itself to metaphorical interpretations.

Again, the game ultimately seems to represent a profound kind of social withdrawal, a process of building walls between oneself and others. "You" alone are hiding from *everyone*—the way truly lonely or self-protective people do. Moreover, the poem suggests that you can "hide" (isolate yourself or conceal your true self) so long that others give up on finding you. Hiding may feel "clever" at first (lines 16-17), but in the end, it can destabilize your whole world, leaving *you* in the position of puzzled searcher.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-27

ALLITERATION

The poem uses alliteration at a number of key moments, often

for emphasis or dramatic effect. it's part of the abrupt, attention-grabbing opening, for example:

> Call out. Call loud: 'I'm ready! Come and find me!'

Right away, the crisp alliteration adds to the speaker's tone of brisk authority. Later, in lines 9-10, breathy /h/ sounds and whispery /s/ sounds help evoke the "hush[]" of the seekers:

> And here they are, whispering at the door;
> You've never heard them sound so hushed before.

(Notice how the sibilance in the middle of the words "whispering" and "hushed" adds to this effect.)

Alliteration becomes especially prominent in lines 19-20, as a cacophonous combination of hard /c/ sounds, hard /d/ sounds, and hissing /s/ sounds helps convey "your" uncomfortable situation:

> Your legs are stiff, the cold bites through your coat;
> The dark damp smell of sand moves in your throat.

The music of these lines is almost as unpleasant as the cold, damp, awkward hiding place they describe.

Alliteration sometimes works in concert with other sound effects, too. For example, listen to the dense cluster of /s/, /z/, /m/, /t/, and /uh/ sounds—a mix of alliteration/consonance and assonance—in line 12:

> They're moving closer, someone stumbles, mutters;

This sonic complexity turns the line into a tongue-twister, mimicking the "stumbl[ing]" of the seekers in the shed. Saying it out loud, you have to be careful not to "stumble[]" as well!

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Call," "Call," "Come"
- **Line 2:** "sacks," "smell," "seaside"
- **Line 4:** "But be"
- **Line 9:** "here"
- **Line 10:** "heard," "sound so," "hushed"
- **Line 11:** "Don't," "Don't," "dumb"
- **Line 12:** "someone stumbles"
- **Line 18:** "seems," "since"
- **Line 19:** "stiff," "cold," "coat"
- **Line 20:** "dark damp," "smell," "sand"
- **Line 22:** "sacks," "stretch"
- **Line 24:** "Come," "caught"
- **Line 26:** "bushes," "breath"

CAESURA

Most of the poem consists of a series of brisk commands. Many of these commands end in the middle of lines, creating caesuras. These caesuras help give the lines a tense, staccato rhythm, evoking the nervous excitement of hide-and-seek. You can hear this effect in the first line, for example:

> Call out. Call loud: 'I'm ready! Come and find me!'

The two rapid commands, punctuated by a period and colon ("Call out. Call loud:"), also help establish the speaker's tone of brusque authority.

In lines 11-13, as the seekers approach "your" hiding place, the caesuras suggest rapid, confused sounds and movements:

> Don't breathe. Don't move. Stay dumb. Hide in your blindness.
> They're moving closer, someone stumbles, mutters;
> Their words and laughter scuffle, and they're gone.

As in the earlier example ("Call out. Call loud:"), the caesuras in line 11 strongly accentuate the lines' iambic meter (its da-DUM, da-DUM rhythm). As a result, the rhythm sounds like a loud heartbeat, capturing the pulse-pounding excitement of the scene: "Don't breathe. Don't move. Stay dumb." But the caesuras in the next line fall in the *middle* of iambs (after unstressed syllables and not stressed ones), muddling the rhythm and mimicking the characters' confused "stumbl[ing]" and "scuffl[ing]."

Caesuras contribute to the poem's pacing and meaning in other ways, too. For example, the mid-line periods create heavy pauses after certain chilling phrases and details, such as "The floor is cold" (line 6) and "The darkening garden watches" (line 25). The semicolon after "breath" in line 26 subtly reinforces the line's imagery:

> The bushes hold their breath; the sun is gone.

Semicolons indicate a medium-heavy pause, so in this context, it's as if the line itself sharply "hold[s]" its "breath" for a moment before continuing.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "out. Call," "loud: 'I'm," "ready! Come"
- **Line 6:** "cold. They'll"
- **Line 7:** "swing. Whatever"
- **Line 9:** "are, whispering"
- **Line 11:** "breathe. Don't," "move. Stay," "dumb. Hide"
- **Line 12:** "closer, someone," "stumbles, mutters"
- **Line 13:** "scuffle, and"
- **Line 14:** "yet; they'll"

- **Line 19:** “stiff, the”
- **Line 22:** “sacks. Uncurl,” “stretch. That's”
- **Line 23:** “them: 'I've”
- **Line 24:** “am! Come”
- **Line 25:** “watches. Nothing”
- **Line 26:** “breath; the”
- **Line 27:** “Yes, here,” “are. But”

RHETORICAL QUESTION

"Hide and Seek" contains just one rhetorical question, but it's an important one and it concludes the poem. After a long series of authoritative commands and statements, the speaker suddenly introduces a note of uncertainty:

> The bushes hold their breath; the sun is gone.
> Yes, here you are. But where are they who sought you?

The speaker's questioning reflects "your" own confusion, as you emerge to discover that the seekers ("they who sought you") are nowhere in sight. It seems as if, after a while, they gave up on finding your hiding place. Did they go home? How long were they actually looking for you? Since you no longer know "where" *they* are, you, the hider, have become the seeker!

The unanswered—perhaps unanswerable—closing question seems to place "you," the main character and/or reader, in a permanent state of uncertainty. You've gone from feeling "clever" and in control (line 16) to bewildered and lost. In fact, the game of hide-and-seek seems to have become a metaphor for loneliness and loss more generally. The poem leaves you literally and figuratively in the dark, feeling a poignant absence of direction, authority, community, etc.—and possibly puzzling over the poet's cryptic meaning!

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

VOCABULARY

Sacks (Line 2) - Large bags, here apparently filled with sand, salt, or both.

Toolshed (Line 2) - A small roofed structure, often in a yard or garden, built to store tools and other materials used for property maintenance.

Prowling (Line 8) - Entering like a *prowler* or burglar; sneaking or skulking.

Scuffle (Line 13) - Have a minor fight or struggle; here, a metaphor for the clashing of voices and laughter in the air.

Lane (Line 14) - A narrow road or path; here, a path through the "garden" (line 25).

Greenhouse (Line 15) - A shed-like glass structure used for growing plants.

Uncurl (Line 22) - Straighten; stand or stretch out from a curled-up or hunkered-down position.

Caught you (Line 24) - Defeated you; won (the game of hide-and-seek). The phrasing is curious, because seekers typically try to *catch* hiders and hiders try not to *be* "caught."

Own up (Line 24) - Admit.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Hide and Seek" consists of one long stanza. It's written in iambic pentameter, meaning that its lines generally follow a "da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM" rhythm. This is the most common, conventional meter in English-language poetry. (See the Meter section for more.)

The poem has no set rhyme scheme, but the majority of its lines contain slant or full rhymes, even as others (such as lines 2 and 3) remain unrhymed. The rhyme pairs tend to fall in successive lines, forming couplets within the larger stanza (see lines 4 and 5, for example), but this isn't always the case. For example, the poem's final rhyme bridges line 24 ("caught you") and line 27 ("sought you").

Overall, the poem's form is a mix of the traditional and the freewheeling—a bit like the game of hide-and-seek itself! The mix of rhymed and unrhymed lines might also suggest a cross between children's poetry and adult poetry (since the former nearly always rhymes, whereas the latter often doesn't). In a similar way, the poem treats a childhood scenario with adult sophistication, gesturing toward deeper themes of alienation and loss.

METER

"Hide and Seek" uses iambic pentameter, the most common meter in English poetry. This means that its lines typically contain five feet (metrical units), each consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. In other words, the rhythm of each line tends to sound like: "da-DUM | da-DUM | da-DUM | da-DUM | da-DUM." You can hear this pattern clearly in line 3:

> They'll ne- | ver find | you in | this sal- | ty dark,

Sometimes an extra, unstressed syllable falls at the end of the line; this is called a feminine ending, and it's part of the standard pattern rather than a variation. Listen to line 6, for example:

> The floor | is cold. | They'll prob- | ably | be sear- | ching

Like most metrical poems, this one also contains plenty of metrical variations. Line 2, for example, is highly non-standard—almost a complete departure from iambic pentameter:

> The sacks | in the | toolshed | smell like | the sea- | side.

Because most of the lines adhere strictly or fairly strictly to the pattern, the poem never goes too far off the beat, so to speak. As with its other formal features, its mix of regular and irregular meter suggests a cross between the traditional and freewheeling—typical of children's games such as hide-and-seek. One could say that the poem has rules, like the game it describes, but the rules are fragile and sometimes broken.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem doesn't have a consistent rhyme scheme, but it does include a number of rhymes. Some of these are slant rhymes, like "clever"/"over" in lines 16-17; others are full rhymes, like "out"/"shout" in lines 4-5. Most fall in successive lines, but others, like "caught you" and "sought you" (lines 24 and 27), fall farther apart.

There are ambiguous cases, too: for example, is "find me" (line 1) meant to form an imperfect rhyme with "blindness" (line 11)? If so, the two phrases are too far apart to strike the ear as a rhyme; only the eye will draw the connection. Similarly, "winner" and "better" (lines 21-22) don't rhyme strongly but share an unstressed "-er" ending. Then there are line-ending words that clearly don't rhyme with anything, such as "seaside" in line 2.

Overall, the rhymes in "Hide and Seek" are freewheeling and unpredictable. Some are out in the open; others are almost hidden. In these ways, they resemble aspects of hide-and-seek itself. Their inconsistency also keeps the reader a bit off-balance, perhaps reflecting the tension and uncertainty in the poem.

SPEAKER

The speaker narrates the game of hide-and-seek in the second person. Addressing "you," the main character of the narrative, through a series of descriptions and instructions, the speaker gives advice on how to play and win the game. (By the end, however, it's not clear that "you" have really won at all!) Though the poem's scenario is very specific, involving young characters and a detailed setting, the narration style also makes it seem as if the speaker is addressing the *reader*, whoever and wherever they may be.

The result is a strange kind of closeness between speaker and reader. The speaker seems to have access to "your" thoughts and experiences while you're alone in hiding. The speaker is also quite authoritative in their instructions, from the opening onward: "Call out. Call loud." They seem to be micromanaging your every action or inaction: "You mustn't sneeze"; "Don't breathe. Don't move. Stay dumb," etc. They sound almost like a bossy older kid or adult showing you the ropes of the game. This style makes the narration vivid but also unsettling: the poem seems to proceed along a rigidly predetermined course toward an inevitable ending. But it's never clear who the speaker is or where their mysterious authority comes from.

Moreover, the final lines seem to undermine their authority, or else suggest that they never had "your" best interests at heart. Suddenly the other players are gone, your victory is in doubt, and you're bewildered. At this moment, the speaker's commands give way to a question, which ends the poem: "Yes, here you are. But where are they who sought you?" Either the speaker has led you astray—and is subtly mocking you—or they're as confused as you are. Maybe their voice is only a projection of "your" own feelings. Either way, the disappearance of their confident tone is chilling, hinting at an experience of abandonment and isolation that goes deeper than a children's game.

SETTING

The poem's setting is a "toolshed" in a "garden" where children are playing hide-and-seek. The garden also features "bushes," a "swing," a "lane," and a "greenhouse." This appears to be a fairly nice property in a country setting—perhaps the kind of English country house you'd find in the poet's native UK. Presumably, one or more of the hide-and-seekers live there.

Until the closing lines, the landscape around the shed is not observed directly but pictured in "your" mind's eye. Meanwhile, you're hidden under some heavy "sacks" on the "floor" of the shed, waiting for the seekers to find you. Because the shed is dark, the poem describes its interior largely through non-visual imagery, engaging the senses of touch, smell, taste, and hearing. (See the Imagery entry in the Literary Devices section for more.)

Eventually, you emerge from hiding and step into the garden. Rather than encountering daylight and the other players, you find that "the sun is gone," the garden "darkening," the scene hushed and motionless, and the others nowhere to be found. In other words, the outside world suddenly resembles the darkness, silence, and isolation inside the shed. There's a sense that your "hiding" might have become permanent, and that it might be a metaphor for some deeper, psychological alienation. The empty darkness might even be meant to evoke death, or the fear of death.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Vernon Scannell (1922-2007) was a British poet, novelist, memoirist, and (briefly) boxer. Perhaps best known as a war poet, he served as an infantryman with the British Army in World War II. Though he was born John Vernon Bain, he changed his name during the war years, both "as an act of symbolic dissociation" from a father he hated and to avoid detection as a temporary deserter from the army. Scannell's generation also produced several other acclaimed UK war poets, including Keith Douglas and Henry Reed.

"Hide and Seek" appears in the 1965 collection *Walking Wounded: Poems 1962–65*. Although it's superficially a poem of childhood, it may channel aspects of Scannell's wartime trauma (see Historical Context below). During the decades after the war, Scannell also held teaching jobs, which informed some of his writing about younger people.

Troubled by the aftereffects of combat and allegedly violent in his home life, Scannell nevertheless remained popular with UK audiences throughout his career. He was honored with a number of literary prizes, including the UK's Cholmondeley Award for poetry and a fellowship in the Royal Society of Literature.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The poem isn't set in an identifiable time period and doesn't refer to any historical events. It doesn't even have a clear geographical location (though it appears to be set in the countryside somewhere). This relatively "timeless" or "universal" quality allows the poem to tap into some of the archetypal feelings of childhood, including fears of abandonment and loneliness.

Still, a few details are interesting to consider in relation to the poet's life and times. As a young man, Scannell served as a soldier in World War II and saw bloody combat in northern Africa and France. At one point, he was imprisoned in Egypt for deserting the army, apparently after witnessing war crimes. Perhaps the scenario in "Hide and Seek"—which involves "dark[ness]," confinement, physical discomfort, isolation, and so on—draws to some degree on Scannell's war experience. After all, it appears in the collection *Walking Wounded*, which was celebrated for its war poetry (including the title poem). And it's not hard to imagine the choking "smell of sand" (line 20), for example, as a detail partly inspired by Scannell's ordeal in the desert. Soldiers sometimes use sandbags as barricades, so it's possible that even the "sacks" that serve as "your" hiding place (line 2) subtly allude to the poet's experience of war.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poet's Life and Work — A brief biography of Scannell at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/vernon-scannell)
- The Poet's Obituary — A 2007 obituary for Scannell in The Guardian, with more information about his life and work. (https://www.theguardian.com/news/2007/nov/19/guardianobituaries.poetry)
- Scannell and World War II Poets — Read Scannell's work alongside that of other poets who served in WWII. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/101637/world-war-ii-poets)
- Scannell Resources — Browse a digital exhibit on Scannell's work, courtesy of the library at Leeds University. (https://library.leeds.ac.uk/special-collections/research-spotlight/28)
- The Poet's Biographer — Watch Scannell's biographer, James Andrew Taylor, discussing his life and work. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ioRab9ShQg)

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