In The Park

SUMMARY

The speaker describes a woman sitting in a park, wearing clothes that are out of style. Two of the woman's children are complaining and arguing next to her, and pulling annoyingly on her skirt. Her third child is drawing random designs in the dirt. A former lover passes by.

The woman realizes it's too late to pretend not to recognize the man when he casually nods hello. "How nice to see you," he says, among other expected pleasantries like "what a surprise" and "how time has passed!" The man's actual thoughts seem obvious to the woman, rising up from his well-groomed head like a balloon: "Thank God this isn't my life," the mother can tell he's thinking.

The two stand chatting a while in the dimming park light, the woman sharing the children's names and birthdays like she always does. "It's so fulfilling to hear their little voices, to watch them grow up and do so well," she says as the man walks away with a smile. Once he has gone, the mother nurses the baby, and sits staring blankly at her feet. To the wind, she confesses, "My children have consumed my entire life."

THEMES

MOTHERHOOD AND IDENTITY

"In the Park" is concerned with the smothering nature of motherhood and its effect on women's identity. The poem suggests that motherhood, something that's usually idealized, is in fact a far more disappointing and difficult endeavor than society or even women themselves acknowledge. The poem goes so far as to imply that to be a mother is to lose one's identity altogether. This deeply unconventional stance undermines centuries of societal beliefs about motherhood by portraying it as a source of regret, depression, and resentment.

The poem opens with a woman sitting in the park with her three children. From the start, it pulls no punches when it comes to depicting motherhood as a disheartening undertaking. The children "whine and bicker," or draw "aimless patterns in the dirt." The light in the park "flicker[s]" ominously, and the mother "stare[s] at her feet" blankly while she nurses her baby. Every well-chosen word precisely captures the tedium, resentment, and depression experienced by this mother of three.

In addition to describing the hardships of motherhood, the poem takes pains to paint the woman's image and identity as irrevocably impacted by her children. Her clothes are now "out of date." In the fourth line, "Someone she loved once passe[s] by," and they strike up a conversation—but only by happenstance, suggesting that the woman's social circle has shrunk since becoming a mother. However, the poem also implies ("too late / to feign indifference") that she would rather not have had her ex-lover see her in this new role and identity.

And no wonder! Over the course of their conversation, the poem suggests that women lose their sense of self, both in their own eyes and in the eyes of others, once they become mothers. The half-quoted proverb, "but for the grace of God," suggests that despite his former affection for her, the man now views this woman as nothing more than a dreary housewife and mother—a type of person he is grateful not to be associated with. He "depart[s]" even while she is still speaking to him.

At the same time, the woman, despite clearly finding motherhood to be a smothering experience, nevertheless feels obligated to perform the identity of a good mother. She "rehears[es] / the children's names and birthdays" and expresses platitudes about watching them grow.

As soon as her audience is gone, however, the woman confesses otherwise. "They have eaten me alive," she says, "to the wind," the poem's most explicit and ruthless assessment of motherhood, indicating that the woman resents her circumstances. That she utters these words while "nursing / the youngest child" makes painfully clear that the woman's identity has indeed been entirely subsumed by her role as mother.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

SOCIAL EXPECTATIONS VS. REALITY

At the heart of "In the Park" lies the sharp contrast between the ideal of motherhood and its lived reality. The poem not only highlights the struggles of motherhood, but also suggests that this struggle is made all the harder by the fact that society doesn't *acknowledge* these struggles. As the poem captures in a conversation between a mother and her ex-lover, it is socially unacceptable for mothers to talk about their challenges. This social pressure both erases and compounds motherhood's hardships, the poem implies, perpetuating a rosy, false narrative that naturally leads to disappointment when women encounter the reality of what motherhood is actually like.

The poem opens by clearly establishing motherhood's difficulties and frustrations: children "whine and bicker" and "tug [on their mother's] skirt." It then swiftly moves on to

exposing the gulf between society's idealization of motherhood and its actual treatment of mothers. A former lover passes through the park and stops to chat with the woman at the center of the poem.

Their conversation is full of surface-level pleasantries, but hints at deeper, darker sentiments that neither are willing to say out loud. For instance, the man's use of clichés (in phrases like "Time holds great surprises" and "but for the grace of God") indicates a clear lack of desire to go deeper or truly understand this woman's new life as a mother. The poem sharply juxtaposes verbs such as "feign" and "rehearse" with the mother's statement that "[i]t's so sweet / to hear their chatter, watch them grow," illuminating the gap between what she believes society expects her to say about her role and how she actually feels.

What's more, the poem indicates that the woman herself is keenly aware of this gap. The fact that she wishes she could have "feign[ed] indifference" to her passing ex-lover's "casual nod" suggests that she knows she cannot be honest with him, and so wishes she could have avoided engaging in this hollow conversation at all. She is well-aware of how her ex-lover views her now that she is a mother; she imagines she can see his disdain "ris[ing like] a small balloon" from his head. Nevertheless, she does her best to meet social expectations, "rehearsing the children's names and birthdays" like a good mother should.

In doing so, the woman ends up perpetuating the same narrative about motherhood that she herself was almost certainly brought up with and which has clearly led to major disappointment and bitterness. Unsurprisingly, her dishonest conversation leaves her feeling emptier than ever, "staring at her feet" after the man has gone while she nurses her baby. As soon he has left, she confesses, but only "to the wind," that her children "have eaten [her] alive."

The fact that this woman only feels safe being honest "to the wind" furthers illuminates the damaging effects of social expectations. Society's idealized view of motherhood has kept her from confiding in someone about the reality, someone who could potentially offer support. However, though the woman does not admit to the man she used to love how much she resents her new role and life, she is nevertheless brave enough to admit it to herself—and to readers.

Indeed, though the poem takes a grim view of both motherhood and society, its unflinching honesty about the struggle of motherhood is remarkable. By decrying the fact that women are expected to sacrifice themselves on the altar of motherhood, it stands out as a deeply radical work of art, and one in keeping with the feminist movement of the time in which it was published.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINE 1

She sits in ... out of date.

"In the Park" opens by introducing its main character: an unnamed woman who "sits in the park" wearing "out of date" clothes. From the start, the poem uses a number of different poetic devices, particularly those emphasizing sound, in order to clue readers in about the woman's unhappy situation.

Perhaps most importantly, a caesura splits the line into two separate sentences and immediately disrupts any potential for regular rhythm. This is an example of parataxis, which combines with the lines' short syllables to create a feeling of abruptness, a distinct *lack* of musicality. The poem does not allow readers to settle in, but instead keeps them on edge.

These two sentences are also full of assonance and consonance, which invite readers to pay attention to the repetition of both sharp and sibilant sounds, and the effect these have on the poem's atmosphere. The hard /t/ in "sits," "out," and "date" creates a bitter, tense feeling, while the subtle sibilance of "she," "sits," and "clothes" creates an ominous hush or hiss, suggesting all is not quite right. The assonant repetition of the short /i/ sound in "sits" and "in" and /a/ sound in "park" and "are" lends the line a sonic consistency, but that consistency feels claustrophobic rather than pleasant thanks to the short, staccato syllables of each word.

Finally, the content of the lines themselves indicate that all is not well. The woman, who is otherwise unidentified, is described only as wearing "out of date" clothing. Coupled with the ominous undertones of the line's sound and language, the implication is that these "out of date" clothes also carry a negative association.

LINES 2-3

Two children whine ...
... in the dirt

Lines 2 and 3 go a long way toward explaining the unhappiness established in the first line. They describe three children who have accompanied the woman to the park. Two of them "whine and bicker" and tug on the woman's skirt. The third plays in the dirt. Though the poem does not use any associative pronouns (note that they are not described as *her* two children, or *her* third child) nevertheless the implication is that the woman from the first line is their mother. After all, she is chaperoning them at the park, and is the person whose skirt they tug on, demanding attention.

As in the opening line, consonance plays an important role here

in emphasizing the woman's frustration and unhappiness. The sharp /k/ sound in "bicker" and "skirt" joins the sharp /t/ sounds that first appeared in Line 1 and continue here with "two," "tug," "skirt," "patterns," and "dirt." These lines also add a heavy, thudding /d/ sound, which repeats in the words "children", "third," "draws," and "dirt," reflecting the tedium of looking after small children.

Line 2 also includes an important instance of asyndeton, omitting a coordinating conjunction (like "and") between the two clauses in "whine and bicker, tug her skirt." This device feels a bit like a traffic jam, piling one clause atop the other, creating an exhausting pr overwhelming sensation. It very much mimics the experience being described—the exhaustion of young motherhood, dealing with the constant demands of three needy children—and thus further emphasize's the woman's plight.

LINES 4-5

Someone she loved ...
... that casual nod.

Lines 4 and 5 bridge the first and second stanzas of the poem, and introduce the second main character: "someone [the woman] loved once." This ex-lover is also in the park, and recognizes her as he passes by, greeting her with a "casual nod." These lines suggest that the woman would rather not have crossed paths. Unfortunately, however, it is "too late" to "feign indifference," or, in other words, to pretend not to recognize him in return.

The enjambment at the end of line 4, which not only separates the sentence into two halves but also marks the start of a new stanza, is crucial to capturing the disruption that this ex-lover creates for the woman. She is startled to see him, and her surprise is mirrored by the abrupt jump from one line and stanza to the next. The choice of words at the moment of enjambment is crucial as well—just as it is "too late" for the woman to ignore her ex, it is also "too late" for readers to stop reading. The enjambment pushes them forward just as the woman feels pushed to greet her former lover.

The lingering "too late" at the end of line 4 is especially remarkable because of the caesura (the em dash) that sets it apart from the first half of the line. It lingers there, at the end of the line and stanza; and on first read it is tempting to read it as a pronouncement on what has come before ("someone she loved once") rather than the start of a new phrase. The implication of such a reading might be that the "too late" not only describes their encounter, but also renders judgement on the state of the woman and the man's relationship, and her feelings about him; it is too late to love again, too late to get back together, too late to undo what motherhood has made of her and her life.

Regardless, the poem plunges forward into line 5, setting up these two characters for a longer encounter.

LINES 6-8

"How nice" et ...
... grace of God..."

Lines 6-8 capture the bulk of the conversation between the woman at the center of the poem and her former lover. Having crossed paths in the park, the dialogue between them indicates that it has been a long while since they last met—certainly not since before the woman married and became a mother.

The use of clichés and stock phrases here strongly suggests that their conversation is purely surface-level, driven by social expectations and nothing more. "Et cetera" especially implies that there is no need to even quote their dialogue in full, for readers can surely fill in the rest of the small talk that must pepper their conversation. Importantly, however, the snippets quoted in line 6—"How nice [...] Time holds great surprises"—suggest that though their conversation is not particularly genuine, it remains pleasant. The man expresses polite interest in and even approval of the woman's new role and identity as a mother.

However, it is clear to both readers and the woman herself that these pleasantries are insincere. Frequent caesura captures the halting, uncomfortable nature of their conversation. Lines 7 and 8 contain the poem's most vivid metaphor, as the woman imagines that "from his neat head" she can see a "small balloon" rising.

This metaphorical balloon contains an unspoken thought: "[there] but for the grace of God [go I]." In other words, the man may be saying nice, polite things about the woman's new role as a mother, but evidently his body language and insincere remarks suggest that he is in fact quite grateful not to be in her shoes. The contrast between his "neat" appearance and her dated clothes (described earlier in the poem) also suggest that the woman senses a gap between their appearances, and may suggest that she feels judged for no longer being the single, attractive woman he knew when they were together.

Indeed, there is a cruel irony throughout this section of the poem, emphasized through contrast and juxtaposition. The man's pleasant conversation is juxtaposed with his secret, less pleasant thoughts, highlighting the ironic gap between what society expects people to say about mothers and children, and how they really feel. Also ironic, as the first stanza establishes, is that the woman herself shares his opinion; it is clear she does not particularly enjoy motherhood. But—again, ironically—because neither she nor the man dare to voice their darker feelings, their shared disinterest in children and her dissatisfaction with her new life go unmentioned.

LINES 9-10

They stand a ...
... names and birthdays.

The third stanza opens with a continuation of the ex-lovers'

conversation. These lines, like those that precede them, emphasize the shallow and routine nature of their discussion. The woman "rehearse[s]" her children's names and birthdays, a verb that underscores how deeply she sees her new identity as a role to perform, that of the "good mother," as social expectations have taught her to do. However, the return of sharp and heavy consonant sounds ("flicker," "stand," "children," "birthdays") suggests that though she performs this role well, she does not enjoy it, and finds it burdensome.

The stanza also opens with a telling image: the conversation now takes place "in flickering light." It's not clear whether the poem is referring to the sun passing overhead, or, say, a park lamppost that flickers on and off. However, the light's inconsistent quality symbolically captures the discomfort of their conversation, using imagery since they are unable to explicitly discuss these feelings themselves. Furthermore, if it is indeed a reference to the setting sun, the light may also symbolize the passing of time, and further emphasize how much these two have changed—the woman, especially, and not to either of their likings—since last they met.

LINES 10-12

"It's so sweet ...
... his departing smile.

The end of line 10 and lines 11-12 capture the conclusion of the woman and her ex-lover's conversation. Here readers see the mother at her most insincere, explicitly lying about how she feels about motherhood, and like the man before her, deploying clichés in the service of making small talk. She clearly feels pressured to do so, in keeping with the man's own insincere pleasantries from the prior stanza, but as a result, she perpetuates the same false narrative about motherhood that seems to have led to her own disappointment and bitterness.

The use of asyndeton to link together her two different examples of the joys of motherhood ("to hear their chatter, watch them grow and thrive,") recalls the asyndeton from the first stanza, which was used to emphasize motherhood's challenges, and suggests she is not being truthful.

These lines are also marked by consonance, assonance, and sibilance:

> [...] "It's so sweet
> to hear their chatter, watch them grow and thrive,"
> she says to his departing smile.

Not only do the repeating vowel and consonant sounds lend a sing-song, false cadence to the woman's speech, the hissing /s/ sounds hint at her insincerity.

LINES 12-13

Then, nursing ...
... at her feet.

The end of line 12 and line 13 are made up of a single, unusual sentence. More accurately, it is a sentence *fragment*, since it lacks a clear subject, and its fragmented nature is further emphasized by its use of enjambmen, caesura, and asyndeton. This disjointed structure in many ways mimics the mental state of the mother in the poem, whom this sentence describes in the moments after her ex-lover departs: she begins breastfeeding her baby while staring blankly at her feet.

Each poetic device contributes to the evocation of the mother's disturbed sense of self. The line breaks awkwardly at the word "nursing"; though it literally refers to breastfeeding, the term "nursing" also carries connotations of care and healing, something that the mother may feel herself in need of after that unexpected and uncomfortable conversation. The caesuras, however—two commas, after the words "Then" and "child"—emphasize the halting and abrupt way the woman must put herself back together in the aftermath of this encounter. It does not suggest that she is able to nurse herself, only her baby. The asyndeton further emphasizes this brutal aftermath, seguing immediately and without any coordinating conjunctions into a depiction of the mother's exhausted, overwhelmed state—she is "staring at her feet," nearly numb.

In short, the image conjured here is a deeply lonely one. Clearly the woman's conversation with her ex has left her feeling even more despondent than she did before he showed up, revealing how truly empty and meaningless all of their exchanged words were, and thus how unfulfilling motherhood actually is.

LINE 14

To the wind ... eaten me alive."

The final line of the poem is its most explicit and damning. The mother finally says out loud what has been bubbling under the surface of the poem since its beginning: "[My children] have eaten me alive." The metaphor, which suggests that she feels consumed and subsumed by her new role as mother, is made strikingly literal given that she is indeed being "eaten" by her baby, who is currently at her breast, as described in the previous line.

It is a deeply radical confession, one that flies in the face of social expectations for mothers—as evidenced by the preceding stanzas, in which the woman did everything in her power to suggest otherwise. Now that she is alone, however, she can finally be truthful, and admit to the difficulties of motherhood, which has demanded that she give up her entire identity in the service of her children's well-being. From her "out of date" clothing to the fact that her only topic of conversation is her children, the woman has clearly undergone a deep loss of self, and here is able to express that loss quite explicitly.

However, as the poem takes pains to point out, the woman is only able to make this confession to herself and "to the wind." This suggests that her words are fleeting, doomed to be carried

away and unheard by anyone else, even someone who might be able to offer her support or encouragement. To admit to others that motherhood is this challenging would be unthinkable in polite society, and so the poem ends on a deeply bitter note, highlighting the woman's grief and resentment, while nevertheless acknowledging that she will go on suffering in silence, and alone.

SYMBOLS

CLOTHES

"In the Park" dedicates only one line to describing the woman at the center of the poem: "Her clothes are out date." These clothes immediately take on symbolic significance, representing the impact of motherhood on the woman's identity.

To begin with, this symbol establishes the draining nature of motherhood. Not only do the woman's unfashionable clothes suggest that she has no time or energy to do anything for herself—such as buy new clothes—they are also literally "tug[ged] on" by her children, indicating the constant demands of motherhood.

These unfashionable clothes also serve as a very public symbol of the woman's current state. She is now married and a mother, and as such no longer considered desirable or attractive, either physically or otherwise. Her clothes are likewise undesirable, a visible marker of her has-been status.

This symbolism is further enhanced by the appearance of the woman's ex-lover, who comes to a similar conclusion himself—that this women is undesirable as a result of motherhood—after seeing her in the park. Though the poem does not explicitly note his attention to her outfit, it does contrast his appearance—"his neat head"—with that of the woman's "out of date" clothes. The implication is that the man, unburdened by parenthood, is still dressed quite sharply, while the mother looks as worn-out as her clothes.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Her clothes are out of date."
- **Line 2:** "tug her skirt."
- **Line 7:** "his neat head"

THE FLICKERING LIGHT

The flickering light in "In the Park" is an ambiguous image. It's not entirely clear whether the poem is referring to the sun passing overhead, causing the sunlight in the park to change, or if it's literally describing a lamppost in the park that flickers on and off.

Either way, however, the poem's attention to the inconsistent quality of the light has symbolic implications. As part of the setting during the mother and her ex-lover's conversation, it is inextricably linked to the nature of their relationship. The flickering takes on ominous connotations, conveying the uncertainty and discomfort of their conversation through imagery, since they are unable to explicitly discuss these feelings themselves.

The flickering light might also be interpreted as a symbol for the passing of time, especially if readers interpret it as the setting sun overhead. As the man himself states, "Time holds great surprises." The two characters in the poem have indeed discovered the unexpected impact of the ever-forward motion of time, especially the woman, who is deeply disappointed with the outcome of her life.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "They stand a while in flickering light"

NURSING

At the end of "In the Park," the woman at the center of the poem confesses "to the wind" that her children have "eaten [her] alive." Before she does so, however, the poem notes that she has begun "nursing the youngest child."

This act of the mother breastfeeding her baby is a very explicit symbol. It embodies the metaphorical concept of the woman's children "eating" her in a very literal way. Coupled with the woman's confession, this act of nursing symbolizes the truth of the woman's statement. Her entire identity has indeed been subsumed by the needs of her children, both literally speaking, as she feeds her baby from her breast, and metaphorically, since her entire life now revolves around childcare and mothering.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 12-13:** "nursing / the youngest child"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

"In the Park" uses alliteration throughout all three stanzas. The effect is subtle, in keeping with the poem's conversational tone. Sometimes the moments of alliteration are quite space out as well—meaning they won't perhaps register as *true* alliteration, but do create a clear *echo* throughout the poem.

The first stanza, for instances, relies on the repetition of the /p/ sound in "park," "pattern," and "passed" to knit together the opening scene. These words aren't right next to one another, but still ring out clearly to the reader's ear. Combined with the

many /t/ and /d/ sounds (which appear as both alliteration and consonance), the opening stanza feels rather spiky and percussive, reflecting the woman's discomfort and bitterness at her situation:

> She sits in the park. Her clothes are out of date.
> Two children whine and bicker, tug her skirt.
> A third draws aimless patterns in the dirt
> Someone she loved once passed by – too late

The shared /l/ of "loved" and "late," meanwhile, suggest a subtle connection between these words—that the time for the woman to feel "love" has passed her by.

In the second stanza, alliteration similarly binds together "great," "grace," and "God," the hard, guttural /g/ sound adding emphasis to the man's relief at not being stuck in the woman's situation.

Perhaps most importantly, the third stanza's alliteration relies on repetition of the /s/ sound in words like "stand," "so sweet," "smile," and "sits staring." This sibilance, or hissing created by the many /s/ sounds, is reminiscent of the sound of the wind, and also suggests whispers. It foreshadows the final line of the poem, in which the woman confesses to the wind (and perhaps, as befits such a dark truth, only in a whisper): that her children have consumed her life.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "park"
- **Line 2:** "Two ," "tug ," "skirt"
- **Line 3:** "draws ," "patterns ," "dirt"
- **Line 4:** "loved ," "passed ," "too ," "late"
- **Line 5:** "to," "nod"
- **Line 6:** "nice," "great "
- **Line 8:** "balloon," "but," "grace ," "God"
- **Line 10:** "children's ," "so ," "sweet"
- **Line 11:** "their ," "chatter," "them," "thrive"
- **Line 12:** "says ," "smile," "Then"
- **Line 13:** "sits ," "staring "

ASSONANCE

Assonance appears throughout "In the Park." This device is subtle, adding quiet music to the poem. For example, lines 2-3 rely on both assonance and consonance to link "skirt," "third," and "dirt," while the short /uh/ sound connects "Someone she loved once." The result of these many repeating vowel sounds is almost a sing-song cadence, which encourages readers to speed up the reading process and makes the poem feel, at moments, like a nursery rhyme.

This continues into the second stanza, as the assonance of the long /ay/ sound leaps right over the enjambed stanza break and pushes readers forward:

> [...] to late
> to feign indifference to that casual nod.
> "How nice" et cetera. "Time holds great surprises."
> From his neat head unquestionably rises

Other assonant sounds here tend to stop readers in their tracks, encouraging them to linger. For instance, the /ah/ sound repeated back-to-back in "that" and "casual" invites readers to stop and conjure the image of the ex-lover nodding casually to the woman from across the park. The echo of the long /i/ sound in "nice," "Time," "surprises," and "rises" also serves to call extra attention to the ex-lover's comments and reaction.

In the next stanza, the long /ay/ of "names and birthdays" suggests the monotony of this conversation, while the earlier long /i/ sound again weaves its way throughout the poem's final lines, drawing readers' attention to the words "thrive," "smile," "child." Finally, the long /ee/ that repeats in "sweet," "feet" and "eaten me" draws a strong connection between the mother's various and conflicting states: her outward profession of maternal joy, her numb and empty feeling once the painful conversation is over, and her true resentment at the way motherhood has stripped her of her own identity.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "sits ," "in "
- **Line 2:** "skirt"
- **Line 3:** "third ," "patterns ," "dirt"
- **Line 4:** "Someone ," "loved once," "late"
- **Line 5:** "feign," "that ," "casual "
- **Line 6:** "nice," "Time ," "surprises"
- **Line 7:** "rises"
- **Line 8:** "small ," "balloon"
- **Line 10:** "names," "birthdays," "sweet"
- **Line 11:** "hear," "thrive"
- **Line 12:** "smile"
- **Line 13:** "child," "feet"
- **Line 14:** "eaten ," "me ," "alive"

ASYNDETON

Asyndeton in "In the Park" helps to evoke the overwhelming sensations of motherhood. It first appears in line 2, in which the poem describes the actions of the mother's two children—all of which require her to attend to their needs:

> Two children whine and bicker, tug and her skirt,

Though the details themselves are distressing in their own right, it is the asyndeton, or lack of coordinating conjunction between the two clauses, that really captures the claustrophobic sensation of childcare. The rushed rhythm of the language mirrors the rushed experience of the mother in the poem, forced to pivot from problem to problem (whining,

bickering, tugging) without a break or breather.

This effect returns in the third stanza, when the conversation between the woman and her ex-lover has begun to run its course. “It's so sweet to hear their chatter, watch them grow and thrive,” the mother says, and asyndeton yet again creates an off-kilter rhythm that suggests the mother, barely bothering to string full sentences together, is merely reciting platitudes.

Immediately thereafter, when the man has left, the poem describes her as such: “Then, nursing / the youngest child, sits staring at her feet." The combination of the lack of subject pronoun, sentence fragments, and the asyndeton, is destabilizing, creating an estranged atmosphere for readers that mirrors the way the mother feels about her children and her experience with motherhood.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “whine and bicker, tug her skirt.”
- **Lines 9-10:** “stand a while in flickering light, rehearsing / the children’s names and birthdays.”
- **Line 11:** “hear their chatter, watch them grow”
- **Lines 12-13:** “Then, nursing / the youngest child, sits staring at her feet.”

CAESURA

"In the Park" is chock-full of caesura. This creates variation in the rhythm of the poem—in this case, in order to create an off-kilter, jarring rhythm that never settles into a consistent pattern or meter. Within the very first line, for example, the poem abruptly starts and stops by dividing into two short, staccato sentences:

> She sits in the park. Her clothes are out of date.

Throughout the poem, commas, em-dashes, periods, and quotation marks indicating dialogue continue to create these kinds of interruptions. The effect is destabilizing, keeping readers on their toes. It mimics the experience of the mother at the center of the poem, who is first overwhelmed by looking after her children, then unhappily surprised by a chance encounter with an ex-lover.

In the second stanza, especially, the caesura serves as an indicator of the choppy nature of their uncomfortable conversation, in which neither really says what they mean. In the third stanza, the caesura works together with asyndeton to capture the sing-song, unnatural rhythm of the woman performing (but not really identifying with) her role as a good mother:

> They stand a while in flickering light, rehearsing
> the children’s names and birthdays. "It’s so sweet
> to hear their chatter, watch them grow and thrive,"

By the final line, however, this performance has given way to a profound truth, which is prefaced by several instances of caesura as the poem slows to the mother's halting, dire confession:

> she says to his departing smile. Then, nursing
> the youngest child, sits staring at her feet.
> To the wind she says, "They have eaten me alive."

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “ the park. Her”
- **Line 2:** “and bicker, tug”
- **Line 4:** “passed by – too”
- **Line 6:** “et cetera. "Time”
- **Line 8:** “balloon…"but”
- **Line 9:** “flickering light, rehearsing”
- **Line 10:** “and birthdays. "It’s”
- **Line 11:** “their chatter, watch”
- **Line 12:** “departing smile. Then, nursing”
- **Line 13:** “youngest child, sits”
- **Line 14:** “she says, "They”

CLICHÉ

"In the Park" uses clichés in order to capture the way in which people are constrained by societal expectations. They are most prominent in the second stanza, when the mother at the center of the poem begins a conversation with an ex-lover, whom she has not seen in the years since she became a wife and mother. Three different clichés are used, in both the dialogue and the exposition of the poem:

> "How nice" et cetera. "Time holds great surprises."
> From his neat head unquestionably rises
> a small balloon…"but for the grace of God…"

As the clichéd phrase "et cetera" implies, the conversation itself is stilted and performative, not even worthy of quoting in full because each character is merely going through the motions, saying what is expected of them by society. Immediately thereafter, the ex-lover remarks that "Time holds great surprises," an empty cliché that suggests he is relying on polite social niceties, clichés that carry a conversation along (or, in other words, small talk) rather than saying anything meaningful.

His real feelings, however, are intuited by the mother, who interprets his body language in yet another cliché: "but for the grace of God." She understands that despite her ex-lover's performance of polite interest regarding her new status as a mother, he in fact has no interest in children and is glad not to have any himself. That she translates this body language, so to speak, into yet another cliché highlights how false and meaningless their conversation feels.

Finally, the poem closes on another cliché: "They have eaten me alive." Here, the mother in the poem is in fact being brutally honest about how motherhood has impacted her. However, even in making this solitary confession, just to herself and "the wind," she relies on a clichéd turn of phrase, indicating just how deeply social expectations have become ingrained in her new identity as a mother.

Where Cliché appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "et cetera," "Time holds great surprises"
- **Line 8:** "but for the grace of God"
- **Line 14:** "eaten me alive"

CONSONANCE

Consonance plays a crucial role in creating tone in "In the Park." The opening stanza, for example, contains many sharp /t/ and /k/ sounds that sound testy and bitter. A heavier /d/ sound also repeats ominously several times, and in some moments close repetition of the back-of-the-throat /r/ sound adds to the bitter tone. The result is a stanza that sounds as frustrated as its subject, a mother dealing with her difficult children:

> She sits in the park. Her clothes are out of date.
> Two children whine and bicker, tug her skirt.
> A third draws aimless patterns in the dirt
> Someone she loved once passed by – too late

This trend continues in the second stanza as well, though the consonants change, as does the poem's tone. In the second stanza, /n/ and /s/ sounds abound, adding a nasal and sibilant sonic quality that captures the insincere conversation between the mother and her ex-lover. The sibilance actually starts with the end of the first stanza and the appearance of the lover, the hissing /s/ suggesting at once a break from the sharper consonants that appeared earlier as well as a sinister foreshadowing:

> Someone she loved once passed by – too late
> to feign indifference to that casual nod.
> "How nice" et cetera. [...]

This stanza also contains striking moments of side-by-side consonance, as in "small balloon," which draws attention to the symbolic image itself, as well as the mother's interpretation of her ex's real feelings.

By the third stanza, the sharp /t/ and /k/ sounds have returned. In addition, the /ch/ sound in "children" and "child" gets repeated in "chatter" and "watch," emphasizing subject—the tedium of childcare—and thereby hammering home the poem's final line about the challenges of motherhood.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "sits," "park," "clothes," "out ," "date"
- **Line 2:** "Two ," "bicker," "tug ," "skirt"
- **Line 3:** "third ," "draws," "patterns," "dirt"
- **Line 4:** "Someone," "loved ," "once," "passed "
- **Lines 4-5:** "too late / to feign indifference to"
- **Line 5:** "nod"
- **Line 6:** "nice," "Time," "surprises"
- **Line 7:** "neat ," "unquestionably," "rises"
- **Line 8:** "small balloon," "but," "grace ," "God"
- **Line 9:** "flickering light"
- **Line 10:** "children's "
- **Lines 10-11:** "It's so sweet / to"
- **Line 11:** "chatter," "watch," "thrive"
- **Line 12:** "departing," "smile," "nursing"
- **Line 13:** "youngest," "child," "sits staring," "feet"

ENJAMBMENT

Though it is not used frequently, enjambment in "In the Park" helps create an erratic rhythm and reading experience, thus ushering readers into the shoes of the poem's protagonist. The most striking example occurs at the end of line 4 and into line 5, across the divide between the first and second stanzas:

> Someone she loved once passed by – too late
> to feign indifference to that casual nod.

The enjambment achieves two purposes here. First, it interrupts the sentence abruptly, much the way the woman herself feels upon encountering an ex-lover by surprise in the park. The sudden leap from one line to the next, and introduction of an entirely new stanzas, mimics her experience of shock and alarm, passing on to readers the same abrupt sensation, as well as the need to rapidly catch up. However, as the sentence itself says, because of her surprise, it is already "too late" for the woman "to feign indifference" at the sight of her ex.

However, the enjambment also leaves room to interpret the first line a bit differently. With the "too late" left dangling, and separated as well by the caesura of the em dash, it reads as a pronouncement on what has come before: "Someone she loved once passed by." This reading implies that it is, alas, too late to stir their love back to life, or to imagine a future with this person the woman used to love. It serves as a deeper indictment of her new role as a mother, suggesting that she might yearn to turn back the clock and not have to look after her children anymore, and that in this moment perhaps she mourns that it is "too late" to do so.

The other instances of enjambment in the poem are more straightforward, but they likewise continue to create abrupt interruptions in the reading experience that echo the woman's

startled, bitter, and resentful state of mind.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "dirt / Someone"
- **Lines 4-5:** "late / to"
- **Lines 7-8:** " rises / a"
- **Lines 9-10:** " rehearsing / the"
- **Lines 10-11:** "sweet / to"
- **Lines 12-13:** "nursing / the"

IMAGERY

"In the Park" is filled with imagery. Much of the first stanza is dedicated to setting a scene, from the literal setting—"She sits in the park"—to the characters and their actions within it—"Two children whine and bicker, tug her skirt. / A third draws aimless patterns in the dirt."

As the poem continues, the scene expands, and imagery continues to play a vital part in describing the experience of the mother at the center of the poem. Little details, like the woman's "out of date" clothing and her ex-lover's "casual nod" and "neat head," convey a wealth of information about the characters and their circumstances.

Metaphors are also conveyed using imagery. It is the woman's image of a "small balloon" that is "unquestionably ris[ing]" from her ex-lover's head that captures not only his body language but her interpretation of his unspoken thoughts. Likewise, it is the image of the "flickering light" that further implies the conversation between the two former lovers is an uncomfortable one, despite the woman's blithe "rehearsing" of her children's names and birthdays.

Finally, the image of the woman nursing her baby while she "sits staring at her feet" and confesses "to the wind" that her children have consumed her is a profound one. The combination of the woman's attitude, her lonely windswept setting, and her literal embodiment of her declaration through the act of breastfeeding, makes for a powerful conclusion to the poem.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Line 5
- Lines 7-8
- Lines 9-10
- Lines 12-14

IRONY

Irony shows that the way things seem to be is in fact very different from how they actually are. Unsurprisingly, it plays a role in "In the Park's" subversive depiction of motherhood. From the start, simply by describing a park outing between a mother and her children as a frustrating, rather than fun or playful, experience, the poem shines a spotlight on the gap between the social *expectations* of motherhood and its lived *reality*. In sharp contrast to many other poems about motherhood, "In the Park" suggests that motherhood is not a picture-perfect experience of love and devotion, but instead often means looking after "whin[ing] and bicker[ing]" children who "tug [on your] skirt." In short, motherhood is messy, difficult, and often disappointing.

Ironically, that is not what most people believe or expect. And the poem takes pains to underscore this point, by using irony in dialogue to further emphasize the gap between expectations and reality. When the mother encounters an ex-lover in the park, she is not honest about what her circumstances are really like. For that matter, her ex is not honest about his opinion of her new role. Instead, they both rely on clichés and sentimentality to cover up their dissatisfaction and disinterest.

The poem presents this dialogue matter-of-factly in lines like, "'How nice' et cetera. 'Time holds great surprises.'" and "It's so sweet / to hear their chatter, watch them grow and thrive." But the juxtaposition of these social niceties with the distressing scene at the start of the poem, and verbs like "feign" and "rehearse," strongly suggests that these statements should be not be read truthfully. These are people saying one thing, but meaning another—the very definition of irony.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** ""How nice" et cetera. "Time holds great surprises.""
- **Lines 9-10:** "rehearsing / the children's names and birthdays"
- **Lines 10-11:** " "It's so sweet / to hear their chatter, watch them grow and thrive,""
- **Lines 12-13:** "Then, nursing / the youngest child, sits staring at her feet."

METAPHOR

Though much of "In the Park" straightforwardly describes a scene and conversation between two people, there are two metaphors in the poem that help it achieve its deeper meaning. The first occurs in the second stanza, when the poem describes the man's reaction to bumping into an ex-lover and her children:

> From his neat head unquestionably rises
> a small balloon..."but for the grace of God..."

Here, the man's thoughts are transformed metaphorically into an image of a balloon rising from his head. This metaphor suggests a literal thought-bubble, in the style of comic books, but it also captures the power of body language. Though the

man intends to keep this thought to himself, his facial expression, gestures, physical stance, or all three, give away "unquestionably" what he really feels about small children and parenthood. Through this metaphor, which gives explicit physical shape and form to invisible thoughts, the poem captures just how easily the woman is able to see through the man's pretense at politeness.

The second metaphor of the poem appears in the final line: "They have eaten me alive." The woman is referring to her children, including the baby she is literally nursing at her breast. Though the line can be read literally, it is *also* metaphorically true—that childcare in all its forms, including trips to the park, has consumed the woman's entire existence. Though her children are not always literally "eating" her, they do demand so much of her that the rest of her identity, beyond that of "mother," seems to have died or disappeared.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "From his neat head unquestionably rises / a small balloon"
- **Line 14:** "They have eaten me alive"

VOCABULARY

Bicker (Line 2) - To argue bitterly, especially over unimportant things.

Aimless (Line 3) - Without aim or purpose, not having a goal.

Feign (Line 5) - To pretend, give a false appearance of.

Indifference (Line 5) - Lack of interest in or concern about something

"but for the Grace of God..." (Line 8) - Excerpt from a common proverb, "There, but for the grace of God, go I." Expresses recognition or even gratitude that only God (or luck) has prevented one from meeting a similar fate as someone else.

Thrive (Line 11) - To grow vigorously, flourish.

Nursing (Lines 12-13) - Breastfeeding.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"In the Park" subverts a classic poetic form, the Petrarchan sonnet. Named after the 14th-century Italian poet Francesco Petrarca, who used the form to write love poetry, the classic Petarchan sonnet is made up of 14 lines that use iambic pentameter and follow a flexible but consistent rhyme scheme.

Petrarchan sonnets are also broken up into an octave and a sestet. The octave, or first eight lines, presents some issue or problem, which the sestet, or final six lines, then responds to. The moment the poem transitions between these two chunks is called the volta, or turn, and usually comes in line 9, which marks the start of the sestet.

In many ways, "In the Park" follows these sonnet rules. It is indeed composed of 14 lines, though these are broken into two quatrains (four-line stanzas), rather than presented together as an octave, and then a final sestet. The lines follow a rhyme scheme very similar to that of the Petrarchan sonnet, but they only sometimes use iambic pentameter. The poem's volta doesn't really come until the final line, either, when the woman finally expresses her true emotions regarding motherhood.

The poem's deviations suggest a desire to subvert the sonnet form, especially when coupled with the poem's content. Usually used for love poetry, here the Petrarchan sonnet is put to new use, describing a young mother's disappointment with motherhood and even her lack of love for her children. Emphasizing the claustrophobia of childcare, the regret of times gone by, and maternal resentment at a loss of identity and self, "In the Park" is a deeply pessimistic poem. Fittingly, therefore, the poem not only turns the usual content of the sonnet upside-down, but also ruptures the form as well.

METER

Most sonnets follow iambic pentameter, a meter of five iambs (poetic feet with a da-DUM rhythm) per line. "In the Park" only loosely follows this meter, however, reflecting the broader tension between the poem's content and its form—the push and pull between conforming to expectations and acknowledging harrowing reality.

The first three lines are relatively steady, albeit with an anapest (da-da-DUM) in the second foot of line 1 (granting this line 11, rather than the expected 10, syllables):

> She sits | in the park. | Her clothes | are out | of date.
> Two chil- | dren whine | and bick- | er, tug | her skirt.
> A third | draws aim- | less pat- | terns in | the dirt

It's possible to scan a few of the feet above differently, but overall the rhythm conforms to the bouncy iamb and the lines are pretty much all the same length. This reflects the woman's conformity to her role, the way motherhood has squished her into this predictable and strict pattern.

Not coincidentally, however, once she sees her ex-lover the iambic rhythm gets totally thrown off. Lines 4-5 have a very ambiguous meter than can be read in a variety of ways, for example:

> Someone she loved once passed by – too late
> to feign indifference to that casual nod.

Neither line has 10 syllables, and the rest of the stanza is similarly irregular—lines have an extra syllable here and there,

and while there are some more iambic moments, the meter generally bounces all over the place and is hard to make out. This suggests that seeing a reminder of her former life has thrown the woman off balance, that she struggles to play the part society wants her to in this moment.

When the woman mentions her kids again in the final stanza, however, the meter snaps back into place:

> the chil- | dren's names | and birth- | days. "It's | so sweet
> to hear | their chat- | ter, watch | them grow | and thrive,"

The meter is a little irregular in line 10 when read most naturally, though the line can be straight-jacketed into perfect iambic pentameter:

> the chil- | dren's names | and birth- | days. "It's | so sweet

In any case, the poem clearly becomes more regular as the woman discusses her children—that is, as she plays the role society expects of her.

RHYME SCHEME

"In the Park" uses a consistent rhyme scheme with the following pattern:

ABBA CDDC EFGEFG

The first two stanzas each follow predictable patterns of end rhyme, and this closely resembles the traditional rhyme scheme of a Petrarchan sonnet. However, unlike a traditional Petrarchan sonnet—which usually follows an ABBA ABBA pattern that re-uses the *same* two end rhyme sounds—"In the Park" brings in a *new* set of rhymes in the second quatrain:

> [...] date. A
> [...] skirt. B
> [...] dirt B
> [...] late A
> [...] nod. C
> [...] surprises." D
> [...] rises D
> [...] God..." C

This is a minor deviation, however, and the sestet is very regular. The rhymes are also all clear and full—no slant or half rhymes here. Overall, this consistent rhyme scheme is one of the few aspects of the poem that feels steady and predictable, which may be related to the subject. Many children's nursery rhymes and songs use predictable end rhymes and rhyme schemes, and their use here may be intentional, in order to evoke a similar cadence and atmosphere.

SPEAKER

"In the Park" is told by a third-person speaker closely linked to the mother at the center of the poem. Though this woman is described in the third-person ("She sits in the park") the speaker of the poem has access to her thoughts, for instance informing readers of her desire to "feign indifference" to her passing ex-lover. The mother's observations of the world around her also clearly color the speaker's point-of-view; the children are described as "whin[ing] and bicker[ing]" and at one point the mother interprets her ex-lover's body language in order to guess at his thoughts, "unquestionably ris[ing like] a small balloon" from his head.

As such, it is probably safe to assume the speaker shares some characteristics, or identifies closely, with the woman at the center of the poem. She appears to be middle-class, able to take her three children to the park on an outing. She is presumably young, since she is still nursing a baby, and is attuned to the fact that her clothes are "out of date." The fact that her only conversational topics revolve around her children, and that she seems utterly exhausted by the effort, affirms that she is likely a stay-at-home mother, whose every day is occupied with the tedium and difficulties of childcare.

SETTING

"In the Park" is set, as the title states, in a park. A young mother has brought her children there to play, when an ex-lover happens by and they strike up a conversation. As indicated by the use of the setting in both the title and the first line, it is a crucial component of the poem.

For starters, the park is a place regularly linked with childhood. The image of a woman bringing her children to the park has a deep history, from the classic 19th-century painting by Mary Cassatt (which shares the same title) to modern-day mommy blogs about playground politics, all linked to societal notions about motherhood as a role and identity. The fact that the mother in the poem is introduced as, and defined by, her presence "in the park" swiftly identifies her as a woman trapped in a children's world, where her only meaningful identity is that of a mother.

However, parks are also defined by their roles as public places, where many people spend time. As such, it is the perfect setting for the kind of chance encounter described in the poem, in which the mother and her former lover bump into each other. Their conversation, which at the surface level seems pleasant but is in fact uncomfortable for both of them, captures the two different ways these people experience the poem's park setting.

As an outdoor recreational place, for many the park suggests freedom, relaxation, the beauty of nature, and even fun. This is

certainly true for children who play in the park, and likewise, the former lover, himself child-free, presumably enjoys the park as well. He may be purposefully taking a stroll or simply passing through to enjoy nature on his way somewhere else. The mother, on the other hand, is here because it is her duty as a mother to entertain her children in the park—she is definitely not having fun. Though the park's public nature brings them together, their two very different experiences of the space set them up for a tense and unfulfilling conversation.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Gwen Harwood is considered one of Australia's great poets, and is one of the best-known figures in 20th-century Tasmanian poetry. Born in 1920 in a suburb of Brisbane, she moved to Tasmania with her husband, a university professor, in 1945. Together, they had four children. Though Harwood wrote poetry for many years prior to publication, her work was not regularly published until the 1960s.

Hardwood's poems frequently capture the frustrations and costs of women's lives, and she was not alone in tackling this subject. Writers Sylvia Plath, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Maya Angelou, and Carol Ann Duffy, among many others, were also writing with a feminist sensibility in the 1960s and 1970s.

Interestingly, Harwood frequently used male pseudonyms when publishing her work, including "Walter Lehmann," the name under which she initially published "In the Park." When she submitted poetry under her own name, she was frequently rejected. However, with time, she did begin to develop renown under her own name, and to correspond with other poets.

With the publication of her *Selected Poems* in 1977, which included 30 new poems written especially for the book, she became truly well-known in both Australia and England. Harwood was awarded the Grace Leven prize, Robert Frost medallion, Patrick White literary award, and a fellowship from the Australia Council. In 1989, she was made an Officer of the Order of Australia. In 1996, a poetry prize was named after her, and in 2005 she was inducted into Tasmania's Honour Roll of Women.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Gwen Harwood was writing at a pivotal time for women, in the second half of the 20th century. Writers like Betty Friedan and the Australian writer Germaine Greer helped spark and support the second wave of the feminist movement, which aimed to increase political equality for women by gaining more than just the right to vote. A common slogan of the times was "The personal is political," and Harwood's poetry certainly fits within that rubric, capturing the ways in which the constraints of women's private lives spoke to larger societal injustices.

Women's economic, social, and political opportunities greatly advanced from the 1960s onward, and the number of women in the workforce, particularly in Australia, multiplied immensely. Harwood's career, in which she first needed to use male pseudonyms to avoid being pre-judged by editors as a mere "Tasmanian housewife," but was later recognized and celebrated as an acclaimed poet, reflects the massive changes of her time. Today, Harwood's work is taught in schools across Australia as an example of the nation's finest poetry.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Life of Gwen Harwood — A biography of the poet. (http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/harwood-gwendoline-nessie-gwen-22407)
- Poems About Motherhood — A great Poetry Foundation collection of poems about motherhood. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/150160/poems-about-motherhood)
- Gwen Harwood's Pseudonyms — An essay on the poet's history of publishing poems under male pseudonyms, including "In the Park." (https://blog.bestamericanpoetry.com/the_best_american_poetry/2020/06/australias-gwen-harwood-nomad-of-the-mind-by-thomas-moody.html)
- Motherhood in Visual Art — A collection of paintings depicting mothers and their children. (https://news.artnet.com/art-world/mothers-in-art-history-1832367)
- Modern Australian Poetry — An overview of Australian poetry throughout the of 20th and 21st centuries. (https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20130329050645/http://australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/modern-austn-poetry)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER GWEN HARWOOD POEMS

- Suburban Sonnet

HOW TO CITE

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