Little Boy Crying

SUMMARY

The poem opens with a description of a little boy's mouth twisting into an expression of anger and pain. The boy's laughter has just transformed into shrieking cries, and his posture—which was previously loose and care-free—has become stiff, ultimately reflecting the kind of irritation and anger that is characteristic of three-year-old children. The child's perceptive eyes have also teared up and are now overflowing so that the tears fall onto his feet as he stands in place and tries to detect a sense of guilt or remorse on behalf of his father, who slapped him.

The boy's father stands above him like a cruel, terrifying monster, an ominous giant who feels no emotion at all. Incredibly large and mean, the father is the one who will—by the end of this interaction—truly feel the consequences of his own actions and be defeated by the boy's emotional reaction. To that end, the boy hates him and imagines chopping down a tree that his father—in his imagination—is trying desperately to climb out of; alternatively, the boy fantasizes about antagonizing his father by digging holes in the ground as a way of setting traps into which the man might fall.

The boy isn't yet old enough to understand how much it pains his father to see him cry. He also couldn't possibly grasp that his father has begun to second-guess his own disciplinary actions even though his facial expression suggests that he's still furious. In reality, what this seemingly intimidating man really wants is to embrace his son and comfort him by playing with him. However, the boy's father doesn't do this because he's afraid that cheering up his son might contradict the lesson he originally wanted to teach the boy.

The poem then concludes with an ambiguous warning about not taking the rain seriously enough.

THEMES

YOUTH AND INNOCENCE

"Little Boy Crying" explores the simple innocence of youth and the ways in which children try to make sense of the world. The poem specifically focuses on a little boy's attempt to process the fact that his father has just hit him. As he responds to this violent outburst, the boy is overcome by emotion and begins to cry. However, the boy also senses that his father might feel "guilt or sorrow" for having hit him, and this realization suggests that the child isn't quite as naïve as it might seem. In this way, the poem implies that children are capable of picking up on complex emotions even if they don't yet know how to fully process or make sense of them.

Although it is made contextually clear by the end of the first stanza that the little boy is upset because his father has hit him, it's worth noting that the poem begins *after* this act of violence. As a result, readers experience the same kind of confusion and disorientation that the boy himself feels in the aftermath of the slap. This, in turn, invites readers to empathize with the boy's struggle to grasp why his father would intentionally hurt him—an idea that floods the child with tears in an overflow of sudden emotion. In this moment, then, the poem presents the child as too innocent and sensitive to fully comprehend what has just happened.

Despite the child's apparent naivety, though, the last two lines of the first stanza clarify that he is able to sense the more complicated emotions lying behind his father's mask of anger. Standing before his father while crying, the boy tries to detect a "hint" of "guilt" on his father's behalf. This awareness that his father might regret his own actions is remarkable because it indicates that, although the boy might not completely understand what has just happened, this doesn't mean he's totally naïve when it comes to recognizing certain emotional complexities.

And yet, registering his father's possible guilt doesn't make the boy feel any better. The boy senses that his father might feel bad for hitting him, but this is a seemingly momentary realization, not one that actually endears the father to the boy or helps the boy see him as a human being capable of making mistakes. Rather, the boy resents his father, unable to see that his father hit him precisely because he cares about him so much. In this regard, the poem frames the boy as emotionally intuitive but ultimately limited by his lack of experience in navigating the confusing nuances of the adult world.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20

PARENTING, LOVE, AND DISCIPLINE

"Little Boy Crying" captures how difficult it can be for a parent to discipline a child. In keeping with this, the poem suggests that sometimes misguided and harsh methods of discipline actually come from a place of love.

This becomes clear in the poem's third stanza, when readers witness the father's struggle to balance his remorse for hitting his son with his desire to teach the boy a lesson. Of course, it's never made clear *what*, exactly, this lesson is, but it's obvious that the father doesn't want to diminish it by showing remorse, even if he regrets the violent way he handled the situation. All

in all, then, the poem portrays just how challenging it can be to convey love and affection to a child while also trying to discipline that child—a challenge the father ultimately fails to handle effectively.

The poem does not condone the father's violent behavior, but it also doesn't go out of its way to cast judgment on him. Instead, the unidentified speaker simply suggests that the father suffers as a result of his own violent reaction. Indeed, the speaker calls the father the "soon victim of the tale's conclusion," meaning that, although the boy is the one who immediately feels the pain of the slap, the father is the one who will truly suffer the consequences. This, in turn, implies that the father will regret his outburst for a long time, remembering it and wishing he could take it back.

At the same time, though, the father doesn't even *try* to take back his violent outburst. Instead, he just stands there and watches his son cry, trying his best to hide the fact that the boy's tears hurt him deeply. To that end, he hides his own emotions because he "dare not ruin the lessons" he thinks the boy should learn—and since he slapped the boy in an attempt to teach him one of these lessons, he believes cheering him up in the aftermath of this slap would be unwise. In other words, the father regrets hitting the boy, but he fears that letting this regret show might diminish an otherwise important lesson.

As a result, it becomes clear that the father sees it as his duty to teach his son certain things, and though he goes about this in a problematic way, he won't let himself undermine the message he originally tried to convey. In this way, the poem doesn't excuse the father's violence but *does* shed light on the complicated fact that sometimes a parent's mistreatment of a child can be wrapped up in love and affection, ultimately coming from a place of genuine care and concern.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 6-7
- Lines 8-13
- Lines 14-20

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Your mouth contorting ...
... with three-year-old frustration,

The poem opens by focusing on a little boy—referred to as "you"—who has just begun to cry. At this point, it's not yet clear what has happened to make the boy's expression twist into an image of pain and anger.

Instead of clarifying the circumstances of the little boy's exasperation, though, the first four lines ("Your mouth ... bright eyes") simply draw attention to the nature of the boy's unhappiness. They create a stark juxtaposition between the boy's previous joy and his current mood by highlighting the quick transformation of "laughter" into tears and "howls." In turn, the poem encourages readers to experience the raw and overpowering onslaught of emotion that the little boy himself is feeling in this moment.

To achieve this effect, the unidentified speaker uses anaphora, repeating the word "your" at the beginning of each clause. This not only calls attention to the little boy (who is the primary subject of the poem), but also spotlights the fact that readers should inhabit the boy's perspective as if *they* are the ones whose laughter has suddenly transformed into "howls." Accordingly, the world of this little boy ultimately emerges as relatable and immediate, allowing readers to remember what it's like to be young and deeply upset.

On that note, it becomes apparent that the boy's discontent is all-consuming, since his entire body —which was previously "relaxed"—has gone stiff and rigid in "three-year-old frustration." This description suggests that the boy is unable to keep whatever is upsetting him at bay, thereby indicating that he doesn't yet have the coping mechanisms to process troubling emotions. In this sense, the boy's innocence comes to the forefront of the poem, framing him as a youngster who hasn't yet developed the ability to work through hardship.

The consonance in this section also adds to the general sensation of what it's like to be overwhelmed, as the guttural /r/ and tapping /t/ sounds repeat rather relentlessly:

> Your mouth contorting in brief spite and hurt,
> your laughter metamorphosed into howls,
> your frame so recently relaxed now tight
> with three-year-old frustration

These sounds creating a low growling, biting sound that is reminiscent of the child's frustration. Consequently, readers feel the overpowering quality of the boy's emotions, which are intense and seemingly impossible to control.

LINES 4-7

your bright eyes ...
... quick slap struck.

The second half of the first stanza continues to focus on the little boy and his intense emotions. This concentration on the boy's impressionable state of mind is emphasized by the enjambment after the phrase "your bright eyes," which leads directly into the phrase "swimming with tears." This enjambment merges the image of the boy's clear and vulnerable eyes with the image of him crying helplessly, further accentuating the juxtaposition between his previous happiness and his current discontent.

Now, though, the speaker clarifies *why* the boy is so upset. Line

7 references a "quick slap" that "struck" the boy, making it clear that this is why the child has descended into "howls" and tears.

But the child does more than just cry. He also looks up at the man who has hit him, peering at him with "bright eyes" filled with tears. This is an important detail because it characterizes the boy's eyes as curious and full of life, an image that encourages readers to consider the boy's sensitivity and innocence. After all, it's hard to think of a child looking up at an adult with vibrant, teary eyes and *not* feel empathetic. In this moment, then, the poem presents the boy as somewhat helpless and confused, as if he can't fathom why he has just been struck.

At this point, it's worth noting that—although the poem never explicitly states this—the person who hit the boy is, in all likelihood, his father. The following stanzas make this increasingly obvious by concentrating on the close relationship between the man and the young boy, but it's helpful to keep this in mind even at this early stage in the poem, since the relational dynamic that arises in lines 6 and 7 ("you stand ... slap struck") is especially charged by the fact that the boy knows—on an intuitive level—that his father is supposed to love and protect him, not hurt him.

In this regard, the boy stands before his father and looks up at him with his tear-filled eyes in a way that makes it seem as if he's trying to detect whether his father feels guilty for slapping him. The word "angling" in line 6 is particularly noteworthy, since it suggests that he's actively looking for or seeking out some kind of reaction from his father. This, in turn, implies that the little boy is more capable than it might seem of picking up on complex emotions. Although the child is certainly confused about why his father would hit him, he is apparently aware that this is something that might make the man feel guilty. Consequently, he subtly tries to use his own sadness against his father.

On another note, these lines are filled with sibilance, as the /s/ sound runs throughout this section. In fact, these lines are even *more* sibilant if readers expand their definition of sibilance to include the /z/, /sh/, /th/, and /f/ sounds:

> ... your bright eyes
> swimming tears, splashing your bare feet,
> you stand there angling for a moment's hint
> of guilt or sorrow for the quick slap struck.

This sibilance creates a hushed sound that ties these four lines together while also creating an overall quality that feels soft and almost fragile. This, in turn, reflects the boy's sensitivity and, moreover, his apparent awareness that it is this kind of vulnerability that might make his father feel guilty for having hit him.

LINES 8-11

> *The ogre towers ...*
> *... at last.*

In the second stanza, the poem describes the way the little boy sees his father. The use of the word "ogre" makes it clear right away that (at least in this moment) the child sees his him as frightening and cruel. In folklore, ogres are giants who eat humans, so the fact that the little boy would associate his own father with this such a menacing creature is significant, implying that he resents and fears the man because his father's violence.

However, the poem ventures beyond the idea that the little boy now resents his father. With this in mind, there is a noticeable shift after line 9 ("empty of feeling, a colossal cruel"), as the unidentified speaker goes from portraying the father in a negative light to acknowledging that he—rather than the child—is the one who will truly suffer the consequences of his own violent outburst. In other words, lines 8 and 9 describe the father as a "cruel" and unfeeling beast, but line 10 ("soon victim of the tale's conclusion, dead") complicates this notion by suggesting that *he*, the father, is the true "victim" of this situation.

There is, therefore, a subtle shift that occurs between these lines: the unfavorable depiction of the father in lines 8 and 9 aligns with how the angry little boy views his dad, but line 10's suggestion that the father will suffer because of his own actions more closely aligns with the *father's* guilty perspective—a perspective that the little boy senses on some level but perhaps doesn't have enough worldly experience to fully consider in a meaningful way.

The poem here might also be alluding to the fairy tale "Jack and the Beanstalk," in which a little boy named Jack escapes a malicious giant by chopping down the beanstalk that leads to the giant's castle. The possible allusion to this fairy tale is more evident in the second half of this stanza, but it's still notable here because of the fact that the speaker uses the words "ogre," "giant," and "colossal," all of which present the father as an evil giant. To that end, the speaker also refers to this moment between the son and father as a "tale." In combination with the multiple references to a malicious giant, one might argue that the use of the word "tale" signals a connection to the *fairy tale* "Jack and the Beanstalk."

Lastly, readers will perhaps note the percussive and contoured sounds that jump out of these lines, as the /k/ sound repeats alongside the consonance of the /l/ sound in lines 9 and 10:

> empty of feeling, a colossal cruel,
> soon victim of the tale's conclusion, dead

Both the /l/ and /k/ sounds are very consonant in this passage, but the /k/ sound also alliterates in the phrase "colossal cruel."

This makes these lines sound forceful and powerful, two things that ultimately align with the subject matter, since this section focuses on presenting the father as large and merciless. And yet, the speaker suggests that the father is "dead at last," thereby emphasizing just how devastated he is by his own violence toward his son, as if the aftermath of this situation has killed him on an emotional level. In this regard, a sense of irony works its way into the poem, highlighting the odd fact that the father is more hurt than the boy by his own violent outburst.

LINES 11-13

You hate him, ...
... trap him in.

A very noticeable caesura appears in line 11 ("at last ... you imagine") before the phrase, "You hate him." This pause marks a brief moment of transition, as the speaker shifts from acknowledging the father's guilt to focusing once again on the little boy's anger. After all, the speaker has just noted that the father—not the boy—will be the "victim" of this situation when all is said and done. However, lines 11 through 13 ("at last ... him in") feature a return to the little boy's frustration at having been hit—a frustration that seems to have turned into bitter resentment.

To illustrate this resentment, the speaker uses a rather odd and ambiguous metaphor in which the boy imagines cutting down a tree that his father is desperately trying to descend. This is a strangely specific image that is made all the more confusing by the fact it's also fairly abstract. Indeed, it's unclear why the boy would envision his father in a tree, except perhaps that this represents the child's feeling that his father is "colossal" and huge, "towering" above him in a display of strength and authority.

Under this interpretation, it makes sense that the boy would fantasize about chopping down his father's tree, apparently wanting to sabotage the man's sense of power. At the same time, though, this thought also suggests once again that the boy is aware that his father feels guilty, since he imagines the man frantically "scrambling down" the tree, as if his father wants to subvert his own power in order to make up for his violent outburst. And yet, this doesn't stop the boy from dreaming about sabotaging his father, suggesting that he wants to use the man's guilt against him. Indeed, the strange metaphor about digging holes in line 13 also confirms the boy's desire to "trap" his father, a sign that the child hopes to weaponize the man's guilt against him.

It's also worth considering the possibility that the boy's fantasy about chopping down a tree to spite his father is another allusion to the fairy tale "Jack and the Beanstalk." In fact, line 12 provides the strongest moment of connection to this old tale, since "Jack and the Beanstalk" ends when the young protagonist defeats an evil giant by cutting down the large beanstalk that leads to the giant's castle in the sky. According to this interpretation, the boy sees his father as an actively malicious figure who isn't "scrambling" to reverse his wrongdoings, but to chase after the boy.

Of course, readers know that the father doesn't want to punish the boy further and, for that matter, actually wishes he could take back his actions, a point made clear by line 10's assertion that he is the "victim" of this story. Therefore, the fact that the boy might see him as an evil figure would only exacerbate his guilt. In turn, readers will recognize the irony that is central to the poem—namely, that seeing the boy's pain ends up hurting the father more than the slap hurts the innocent child.

LINES 14-16

You cannot understand, ...
... behind that mask.

These lines consider the boy's limited ability to fully comprehend the complexity of his father's emotions. Although the boy is perhaps able to pick up on his father's guilt, lines 14 through 16 ("You cannot ... that mask") make it clear that he is unable to understand the extent to which his own pain hurts his father. This makes sense, considering that this is a very contradictory and ironic idea given that the father is the one who caused the boy's pain in the first place. And though the boy senses his father's regret, he is only capable of recognizing it in a cursory way.

As if to highlight the boy's limited understanding of the world of adult emotion, line 14 is one of the poem's shortest, made up of just eight syllables. Of course, "Little Boy Crying" is not composed in any kind of set meter, but the vast majority of its lines contain 10 syllables. For this reason, the fact that line 14 only contains eight syllables is noticeable, ultimately disrupting the poem's rhythmic flow and infusing the third stanza with a feeling of incompleteness or shortcoming that reflects the young boy's inability to completely understand his father's contradictory emotions.

This effect is also emphasized by the caesura that appears between "understand" and "not," a pause that breaks up line 14 and, in doing so, calls attention to its deviation from the poem's previously established rhythm. And as if this weren't enough to highlight this new cadence, line 14 is also end-stopped, giving it an extra feeling of brevity.

The consonance that runs throughout these lines, creating a blunt, unyielding effect:

> You cannot understand, not yet,
> the hurt your easy tears can scald him with,
> nor guess the wavering hidden behind that mask.

This repetition of the /d/, /t/, /k/, and /n/ sounds make the lines feel as though they're being said through gritted teeth—an effect that reflects the father's hard exterior. Indeed, the general sound and feel of these lines aligns with the way the

father presents himself as a powerful authority figure who is "empty of feeling," despite the fact that he actually second guesses his disciplinary actions and feels bad about having hit his son—an internal "wavering" that (according to line 16) the son is unable to detect.

With this in mind, it's worth noting that the first stanza suggested that the boy actually *does* pick up on the possibility that his father feels guilty. Now, though, the speaker upholds that the boy couldn't possibly "guess" that his father feels unsure about his own actions. This is obviously a contradiction, but it's an analytically interesting one, since it invites readers to carefully consider the extent to which the boy is aware of his father's emotions, thereby calling into question the ways in which children perceive nuanced relational dynamics.

LINES 17-19

This fierce man ...
... you should learn.

Lines 17 through 19 ("This fierce ... should learn") reveal that what the father really wants is to comfort his son and make up for having hit him. Although he is still described as a "fierce man," the father emerges here as somebody who has tender feelings, somebody who only wants to shower his son in love in whatever way he can. Indeed, the father would like to get rid of the boy's "sadness" by playing games with him, hoping that this might cheer the child up and compensate for the fact that he feels betrayed by his father's violence.

Interestingly enough, though, one of the things the father wishes he could do with his son is pretend to be in a bullfight, meaning that he wants to playfully imitate an inherently violent, bloody sport. This, in turn, indicates that the father has normalized aggression and made it integral to the way he plays with his son. Keeping this in mind, it's not all that surprising that the father ended up hitting the child in the first place—after all, certain forms of violence have clearly been normalized and integrated into the way he interacts with his son.

Furthermore, it's significant that the father actively stops himself from reaching out to comfort his child. He refrains from doing this, it appears, because he's afraid that any kind of affection might contradict the stern message he sent to the boy by hitting him (though it's never made clear what, exactly, this message is). In this section, then, readers witness the father's dilemma between teaching his son important "lessons" and showing him the love and affection he knows the boy deserves.

In terms of the sonic quality of these lines, readers will perhaps notice that the /l/ sound repeats rather often, creating both alliteration in phrases like "longs to lift you" and consonance in words like "bull." What's more, these lines are also fairly sibilant, especially if readers count not only the /s/ sound, but also the /z/, /th/, /sh/, and /f/ sounds:

> This fierce man longs to lift you, curb your sadness
> with piggy-back or bull fight, anything,
> but dare not ruin the lessons you should learn.

On the whole, this sibilance creates a soothing and delicate sound, as if the speaker has started whispering to the readers. In this way, the poem's tone reflects the father's sensitive side, though the fact that line 19 is so decisively end-stopped gives the entire phrase that runs throughout these lines a somewhat clipped and serious feeling, one that ultimately represents the father's unwillingness to risk jeopardizing his strict lesson by showing kindness.

LINE 20

You must not ... of the rain.

The poem's final line ("You must not make a plaything of the rain") is ambiguous. The one thing that *is* clear no matter how readers interpret it, though, is that it functions as some kind of instruction or order. In this regard, the line exists as one of the "lessons" the father wants to teach his son—one of the lessons that keeps the father from apologizing for his violence and comforting his son, since he's afraid that providing this reassurance and fatherly love would overshadow the important message he wants to convey to his son.

And yet, the message itself is hard to interpret, since it can't be taken literally. After all, it's difficult to say what, exactly, it would mean to "make a plaything of the rain." This ambiguity adds to the overall disconnect between the father and the son, as the son stands before his father in an emotional state of confusion—a state of confusion that is only exacerbated by the father's abstract and unclear lesson. Indeed, this lesson is undoubtedly difficult for the boy to apply to his own experience, and this emphasizes his struggle to fully comprehend the adult word, which is not only full of anger and violence, but also full of inscrutable lessons.

Having said that, it's worth pointing out that the image of rain in the last line *could* be seen as a metaphor for the boy's tears. Under this interpretation, the father's lesson upholds that the boy shouldn't use his own tears to get what he wants. This would suggest that the father has sensed that the boy wants to weaponize his own sadness, crying loudly to make his father feel guilty. However, if readers feel that this analysis is too prescriptive or narrow, it's perfectly acceptable and reasonable to interpret this moment as little more than an illustration of the young boy's confusion and his inability to fully comprehend the seemingly abstract rules of adulthood that so obsess his father. In other words, the fact that this line is hard to analyze allows readers to inhabit the little boy's inexperienced perspective.

Regardless of the line's precise meaning, it has a musical quality that gives it the sound of a simple lesson that has been repeated very frequently. This is partially because of the internal slant rhyme that occurs between "make" and "rain," an

imperfect rhyme that ties the line together and makes it sound like it's the moral of some kind of well-known fairy tale (an effect that aligns with the poem's previous allusions to "Jack and the Beanstalk"). Furthermore, the line's musicality is also enhanced by the assonance that occurs with the repetition of the long /a/ sound:

> You must not make a plaything of the rain

With the quick repetition of the long /a/ sound three times in the space of just one line, the poem ends with a sing-song effect, though this is hardened to a certain extent by the short alliteration of the /m/ sound in the phrase "must not make"—a phrase that sounds stern and authoritative. In turn, the poem's final line conveys the father's strict approach to parental discipline in addition to a lighter, more whimsical mood that perhaps reflects the child's innocence and the poem's vague fairy-tale-like characteristics.

SYMBOLS

THE TREE

The child in "Little Boy Crying" imagines that his father is climbing up a tree, an image that represents the disconnect he feels from his father as a result of his father's disciplinary actions. More specifically, it's notable that the tree physically elevates the father over the boy, ultimately symbolizing his power over the child.

The fact that the boy fantasizes about cutting down this tree suggests that he actively resents his father's authority and control and hopes to use his power against him. After all, if the tree is a symbol of the father's dominance, then the boy's desire to cut it down is a clear indication that he wants to turn that power around to hurt him. In turn, the tree itself comes to symbolize not only the father's authority, but also the boy's recognition of that authority and, furthermore, his ability to respond to nuanced and contradictory adult emotions (even if he doesn't fully understand these emotions).

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-12:** "you imagine / chopping clean the tree he's scrambling down"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration appears in very concentrated areas in "Little Boy Crying," often as a way of adding subtle emphasis to phrases and contributing to the poem's overall musical quality. The speaker uses alliteration in short bursts, offering up phrases like "recently relaxed" and "colossal cruel" to add a brief sense of repetition that ultimately enhances the rhythm of the poem.

This also calls attention to important words or phrases, like the notion that the father wants his son to learn certain lessons: "but dare not ruin the lessons you should learn." The alliterated /l/ sound in this moment spotlights the line's most important words ("lessons" and "learn"), thereby underlining just how adamant the father is that the son must pay attention to life lessons even when they are harsh.

Other instances of alliteration are even less apparent because they are folded into the poem so neatly. For instance, line 12 ("chopping clean ... scrambling down") includes alliteration even though none of the words in the entire line begin with the same letter. Indeed, the word "chopping" and "tree" both begin with the /ch/ sound, and since alliteration is based on sound and not spelling, this means that these words are alliterative with one another.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "recently," "relaxed"
- **Line 5:** "swimming," "splashing"
- **Line 9:** "colossal," "cruel"
- **Line 12:** "chopping," "tree"
- **Line 13:** "plotting," "pits"
- **Line 17:** "longs," "lift"
- **Line 18:** "back," "bull"
- **Line 19:** "lessons," "learn"
- **Line 20:** "must," "make"

ANAPHORA

With the repetition of the word "your" at the beginning of each clause, anaphora runs throughout the first stanza ("Your mouth ... slap struck"). This creates a list-like effect, as the speaker catalogs the little boy's reaction to his father's violent outburst. By repeating "your" (or, in one instance, "you") so many times, the speaker firmly situates the readers in the boy's perspective:

> Your mouth contorting in brief spite and hurt,
> your laughter metamorphosed into howls,
> your frame so recently relaxed now tight

It's notable that the word "your" isn't just the first word in each of the above three clauses, but that it appears in the exact same place in every line. This, in turn, not only invites readers to inhabit the little boy's perspective, but also adds a sense of consistency to the poem. And considering that "Little Boy Crying" is written in free verse, this pattern that emerges in the first three lines is important, ultimately giving the opening of the poem a somewhat predictable cadence even though it isn't written in meter.

Above all, though, what's most important about the use of anaphora in the poem is that it urges readers to identify with a figure they might otherwise be unable to fully understand: a young child. Indeed, without the excessive repetition of the words "your" and "you" that appear in the first stanza and then reappear in line 11 ("You hate him, you imagine"), readers might find themselves aligning with the father instead of the little boy, since it can be difficult for adult readers to meaningfully connect with characters who are so young. In this way, anaphora ensures that readers won't side with the father, who—at least for the majority of the poem—is supposed to be viewed as an antagonistic figure.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Your"
- **Line 2:** "your"
- **Line 3:** "your"
- **Line 4:** "your"
- **Line 6:** "you"
- **Line 11:** "You," "you"

ASSONANCE

The poem is full of assonance, as the speaker repeats vowel sounds and sometimes peppers the same sound throughout several lines. Like many of the other poetic devices used in "Little Boy Crying," this calls attention to certain words while also contributing to the poem's musicality, which at times makes the piece sound almost like a fairy tale or nursery rhyme.

At first, though, the poem's assonance does little more than simply create a pleasing sound. This is evident in lines 3 through 5, in which the /ee/ sound repeats several times:

> your frame so recently relaxed now tight
> with three-year-old frustration, your bright eyes
> swimming tears, splashing your bare feet

The /ee/ sound is threaded throughout these three lines (even if the words "year" and "tears" are subtly different because /r/ sound slightly dampens the otherwise clear and resonant /ee/ sound). This passage rings out in a way that is both musical and a little sharp—something that ultimately conveys the urgent sound of the boy's crying.

But the most important moment of assonance in the entire poem comes in the very last line, when the long /a/ sound repeats three times in quick succession:

> You must not make a plaything of the rain.

Like the other instances of assonance, this assonant repetition creates a musical sound. In fact, the musicality of this long /a/ sound is particularly noteworthy in this line because it brings out a certain sing-song quality, one that makes the entire line feel like some kind of nursery rhyme. To that end, the assonance actually turns the words "make" and "rain" into internal slant rhymes, thereby knitting the line together and adding to its song-like sound. This, in turn, suggests that the father has told the boy many times not to "make a plaything of the rain," a phrase that has been repeated so often that it has taken on the predictable but pleasing characteristics of a nursery rhyme or perhaps the central lesson of a fairytale. In this way, then, assonance engages with the poem's examination of the ways in which parents pass along important lessons to their children.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "recently," "relaxed"
- **Line 4:** "three," "year," "bright," "eyes"
- **Line 5:** "tears," "feet"
- **Line 6:** "hint"
- **Line 7:** "guilt," "quick"
- **Line 9:** "cruel"
- **Line 10:** "soon," "conclusion"
- **Line 11:** "at," "last," "him," "imagine"
- **Line 12:** "clean," "tree," "he's"
- **Line 13:** "deeper," "pits," "him," "in"
- **Line 14:** "cannot," "understand"
- **Line 15:** "easy," "tears," "him," "with"
- **Line 20:** "make," "plaything," "rain"

CONSONANCE

The poem's consonance is quite prominent and makes the poem sound quite musical throughout. It also often evokes the content of a line. Take line 13:

> or plotting deeper pits to trap him in

The /p/ sound in this line is percussive and sharp. This, in turn, aligns with the frustration the little boy feels in this line as he "plot[s]" to take revenge on his father for hitting him.

The use of consonance also reflects the subject or mood in line 17 ("This fierce ... sadness"), which repeats several consonant sounds. Indeed, this line includes the /r/ and /l/ sounds, but the most notable form of consonance is the sibilant /s/ sound. In fact, if readers choose to include the /th/, /f/, and /z/ sounds as sibilant (which many people do), the line is extremely sibilant:

> This fierce man longs to lift you, curb your sadness

Sibilance creates a soft sound that is comforting and soothing—an effect that fits perfectly with this moment of the poem, in which the father wishes he could go to his son's aid and calm him down. In this regard, sibilance (and, in turn, consonance) helps the speaker convey a particular emotion and

mindset that might otherwise not come through as strongly for readers. On the whole, then, consonance contributes to the poem's unique and musical sound while also occasionally emphasizing subtle but important emotional elements that add depth to the development of both the father and the son as subjects.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "contorting," "spite," "hurt"
- **Line 2:** "your," "laughter," "metamorphosed," "into"
- **Line 3:** "your," "frame," "recently," "relaxed," "tight"
- **Line 4:** "three," "year," "frustration," "your," "bright"
- **Line 5:** "swimming," "tears," "splashing," "your," "bare," "feet"
- **Line 6:** "stand," "there," "for," "moment's," "hint"
- **Line 7:** "guilt," "sorrow," "for," "quick," "slap," "struck"
- **Line 8:** "ogre," "towers"
- **Line 9:** "feeling," "colossal," "cruel"
- **Line 10:** "conclusion"
- **Line 11:** "hate," "him," "imagine"
- **Line 12:** "chopping," "tree"
- **Line 13:** "plotting," "deeper," "pits," "trap"
- **Line 14:** "cannot," "understand," "not"
- **Line 15:** "hurt," "your," "easy," "tears," "scald"
- **Line 16:** "nor," "guess," "wavering," "hidden," "behind," "mask"
- **Line 17:** "This," "fierce," "longs," "to," "lift," "curb," "sadness"
- **Line 18:** "back," "bull"
- **Line 19:** "dare," "ruin," "lessons," "should," "learn"
- **Line 20:** "must," "make"

METAPHOR

The speaker uses metaphors to illuminate the situation between the father and his son. For instance, lines 8 through 10 ("The ogre ... dead") metaphorically depict the father as an ogre, or a frightening and malicious monster. The speaker goes on in line 8 to compare the father to a "grim giant," thereby adding to the idea that he is terrifying to his child. In this section, then, these metaphors help the speaker illustrate to readers that the boy sees his own father as a scary and mean-spirited creature.

The second half of this stanza is a bit more complicated, as the metaphor shifts away from depicting the father as an ogre or giant:

> ... You hate him, you imagine
> chopping clean the tree he's scrambling down
> or plotting deeper pits to trap him in.

In some ways, the ideas expressed here are actually quite simple: the boy imagines that his father is in a tree, and he fantasizes about cutting down that tree before his father can safely make it to the ground. That his father is in this tree in the first place is perhaps a reflection of the fact that he is an authoritative figure who "towers" above the boy. Then, in the next line, the boy thinks about digging holes in which to "trap" his father. In both cases, the boy's desire to get back at his father for hitting him is evident.

If readers choose to interpret this section as an allusion to "Jack and the Beanstalk," it becomes easier to interpret these thoughts. After all, "Jack and the Beanstalk" is a fairy tale about a young boy who finds an evil giant's castle after planting and climbing up enormous magical beanstalks. When the giant smells the boy and tries to find him, the boy makes a narrow escape by climbing down the beanstalk, cutting it down before the giant can follow.

This element of the story aligns with the poem, at least insofar as the little boy wants to cut down the tree that his father—whom he sees as an evil giant—is in. There are other hints that this allusion is on the speaker's mind, like the fact that the father is described as the "soon victim of the tale's conclusion," a phrase that not only suggests the father will suffer a similar downfall as the giant in "Jack and the Beanstalk," but also uses the word "tale," thereby nodding to the poem's similarity to a fairy tale.

On another note, the final line delivers yet another ambiguously metaphorical idea, this time suggesting that the child must avoid making a "plaything of the rain." What this means is never made explicit. However, it is possible that making a "plaything of the rain" is a metaphor for treating tears (and therefore human emotion) lightly or flippantly.

Under this interpretation, the father doesn't want his son to simply cry as a way of getting what he wants—a sign that the father has picked up on the fact that his son is exploiting his tears in order to make the father himself feel bad. And yet, this is just one interpretation; the ambiguity of the last line's metaphor about rain is all but inscrutable, effectively putting readers in a state of confusion that mirrors the young boy's own inability to fully grasp his father's emotions and demands.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-13:** "The ogre towers above you, that grim giant, / empty of feeling, a colossal cruel, / soon victim of the tale's conclusion, dead / at last. You hate him, you imagine / chopping clean the tree he's scrambling down / or plotting deeper pits to trap him in."
- **Line 20:** "You must not make a plaything of the rain."

CAESURA

Although "Little Boy Crying" isn't written in meter, it does feature several caesuras that disrupt its general rhythm. These pauses appear first in the opening stanza ("Your mouth ... slap struck"), effectively separating observations about the little boy

from one another:

> your frame so recently relaxed now tight
> with three-year-old frustration, || your bright eyes
> swimming tears, || splashing your bare feet

These pauses act as small moments of transition, as the speaker shifts from commenting on the boy's posture to the look in his eyes and then, after the second caesura, to the image of tears falling onto his feet. More importantly, though, the caesuras control the rhythm of the poem, which is otherwise untethered to any kind of meter.

In other moments, caesuras create pauses that intensify the gravity of emotion that already exists in the poem. For example, the caesuras in lines 10 and 11 ("soon victim ... imagine") are especially significant because they draw attention to the boy's anger toward his father:

> soon victim of the tale's conclusion, || dead
> at last. || You hate him, || you imagine

In this section, the poem presents the father as an ogre who will be the one who suffers the consequences of his own violent outburst. In this capacity, the father will soon be defeated, "dead at last"—a phrase that underscores either just how badly he feels for hitting his son *or* that the boy is so angry at him that he doesn't hesitate to imagine his own father's death. Regardless, this is a powerful line, and the fact that it is surrounded on both sides by caesuras is indicative of its significance. Likewise, the phrase "You hate him" is closed in by caesuras, encouraging readers to briefly stop to consider the emotional implications of the son's newfound hate for his own father. In this way, the caesuras in "Little Boy Crying" help signal particularly important, meaningful moments.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "frustration, your"
- **Line 5:** "tears, splashing"
- **Line 8:** "you, that"
- **Line 10:** "conclusion, dead"
- **Line 11:** "last. You," "him, you"
- **Line 14:** "understand, not"
- **Line 17:** "you, curb"
- **Line 18:** "fight, anything"

ENJAMBMENT

Most of the lines in "Little Boy Crying" are end-stopped, which makes the few instances of enjambment all the more noticeable. The first enjambed line comes rather early in the poem, as the phrase "your frame so recently relaxed now tight" on line 3 tips into "with three-year-old frustration" in line 4. This creates a somewhat unwieldy or unpredictable pattern, since the first two lines ("Your mouth contorting ... howls") are end-stopped. However, this new pattern of enjambment continues in line 4, which leads directly into line 5:

> with three year-old-frustration, your bright eyes
> swimming tears, splashing your bare feet

This moment of enjambment is somewhat obvious because the phrase "your bright eyes" is incomplete, as is the phrase "swimming tears." Indeed, it is only when readers put these two phrases together that they make any kind of sense, ultimately asserting that the little boy's eyes are full of brimming tears.

But the most analytically interesting moment of enjambment occurs between lines 10 and 11 ("soon victim... imagine"), when the speaker suggests that the father will soon be "dead at last" because he will be the true "victim" of this interaction with his son. The fact that line 10 ends after the word "dead" is significant, since it calls attention to the word and thereby emphasizes the severity of such an idea. With this in mind, this is an interesting case of enjambment, since it's clear that the word "dead" is connected to the words "at last" in the next line, but most readers will most likely feel a brief pause after "dead." Syntactically, then, "dead / at last" is enjambed, but rhythmically, line 10 sounds as if it is end-stopped. In turn, this mixed feeling of enjambment and end-stopping keeps readers on their toes, creating a sense of anticipation and surprise that perhaps aligns with the boy's unsuccessful attempts to gauge his father's emotions.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "tight / with"
- **Lines 4-5:** "eyes / swimming"
- **Lines 6-7:** "hint / of"
- **Lines 10-11:** "dead / at"
- **Lines 11-12:** "imagine / chopping"
- **Lines 17-18:** "sadness / with"

JUXTAPOSITION

It is never made clear what, exactly, the boy did before the poem began to deserve his father's anger. It is, however, quite clear that his father hit him, a fact clarified at the end of the first stanza. Before the speaker mentions this slap, though, the speaker spends time describing the little boy. More specifically, the speaker juxtaposes the boy's current state with his state immediately before his father hit him. This, in turn, is how readers receive the first indication that something happened to provoke a drastic shift in the child's mood.

The stark change that overcomes the boy is made evident in line 2 ("your laughter ... howls"), in which the speaker mentions that the boy's laughter has "metamorphosed into howls." Needless to say, laughter and howls of pain are manifestations

of completely different emotions, and this creates a noticeable sense of juxtaposition. Similarly, the boy's "frame" (or body posture) has gone from "relaxed" to "tight"—two states that are, again, in opposition to one another. Lastly, the boy's "bright eyes" are now "swimming" with tears, suggesting that they were previously full of life and happiness but are now perfect representations of his newfound sorrow.

It is through these juxtapositions that the poem communicates just how thoroughly the father has disrupted the child's happiness by hitting him. Rather than simply stating that the father upset the boy by hitting him, the speaker goes through all the ways in which this act of violence completely altered the boy's mood, taking him from laughter and glee to confusion, pain, and anger. Simply put, then, juxtaposition enables the speaker to illustrate the effect of the father's violence on the boy in especially vivid terms.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-5:** "your laughter metamorphosed into howls, / your frame so recently relaxed now tight / with three-year-old frustration, your bright eyes / swimming tears"

IRONY

Although the boy is the one dealing with the immediate pain of having just been slapped, the father is the one who will truly suffer the consequences of this act of violence. This, at least, is what the poem indicates, hinting at the ironic fact that the slap will ultimately hurt the father more than the boy. For this reason, the father will soon become the "victim of the tale's conclusion," emerging from this situation not as the triumphant authority figure, but as the person who was most damaged by the interaction. Of course, this outlook doesn't take into account the lasting emotional damage that physical violence can have on a child—instead, the poem focuses on the father's remorse for betraying his son's trust.

To that end, the mere fact that the father hit his son in the first place contains a certain amount irony, albeit a rather depressing kind. Indeed, it becomes clear in line 19 ("but dare ... should learn") that the father sees it as his duty to protect the boy by teaching him how to navigate life. In order to do this, though, the father has resorted to violence, meaning that the very person who is supposedly going to care for the boy has also become the very person antagonizing him.

This irony speaks directly to the contradiction that comes along with corporal punishment, since violence against children does little more than make them suspicious of the people who claim to want to help them. And it is exactly this contradictory dynamic that characterizes the tension between the father and his son in "Little Boy Crying."

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "soon victim of the tale's conclusion"
- **Lines 14-15:** "You cannot understand, not yet, / the hurt your easy tears can scald him with,"

VOCABULARY

Contorting (Line 1) - Twisting, distorting, or bending out of shape.

Spite (Line 1) - In this context, the word "spite" refers to the child's anger and a sense of vindictiveness against his father.

Metamorphosed (Line 2) - Transformed or profoundly changed.

Frame (Line 3) - In reference to the body, the word "frame" refers to a person's general shape or bone structure. In this context, though, it seems to refer to the boy's posture or the way he holds himself.

Angling (Line 6) - To "angle" for something is for a person to seek it out by subtly or indirectly urging somebody else to offer it up. In this case, the boy is trying to get his father to reveal that he feels guilty for hitting him.

Ogre (Line 8) - An ogre can refer either to a terrifying and mean person or to the kind of human-eating giant that might appear in folklore and fairytales.

Grim (Line 8) - Ominous, harsh, or merciless.

Colossal (Line 9) - Extremely large.

Soon (Line 10) - In this case, the word "soon" means inevitable or eventual, indicating that the father will, by the end of this interaction with the son, be the one who truly suffers.

Plotting (Line 13) - To "plot" something is to make secretive plans in order to carry it out. The word can also be used to refer to the act of marking out a specific area. The poem combines these two meanings, since the boy is both planning different ways to take revenge on his father *and* imagining "trap[ping]" him in literal "pits" that he has plotted out on the ground.

Scald (Line 15) - To be "scalded" by something is to be injured by its intense and searing heat.

Wavering (Line 16) - To "waver," in this context, is to second-guess oneself or to falter in one's conviction. It is also often used to describe a shaking, quivering motion.

Curb (Line 17) - To control, restrain, or manage. In this context, the father wants to diminish the boy's sadness.

Plaything (Line 20) - A toy.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Little Boy Crying" does not adhere to any standard poetic form. In fact, it doesn't even follow its own structure, since it isn't consistent with itself. To that end, the first stanza contains seven lines, whereas the second and third stanzas each include only six, and the final stanza stands apart from the rest of the poem as a single line.

The fact that the last stanza is so short is quite noticeable, calling attention to the line and setting it in contrast to the rest of the poem. This aligns with the overall tone and meaning of this line, considering that it is more ambiguous and abstract than anything else in the poem.

To that end, the final line functions as a short lesson that the the father hopes the child will internalize. It therefore differs from the other lines because it represents a shift in tone, as the majority of the poem describes the situation developing between the father and the son, whereas the last line is a directive that could have been uttered by the father himself. In turn, readers see that the decision to give this final line its own stanza ultimately emphasizes an overall shift in tone and (possibly) perspective.

METER

"Little Boy Crying" is a work of free verse. That said, many of the lines that are roughly the same length (10 syllables). Consequently, the poem's rhythm remains loose and unpredictable even though the lines match each other in length—a blend of spontaneity and structure that reflects the juxtaposition between the child's free-spirited innocence and the father's strict, authoritative parenting.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem does not follow a rhyme scheme, nor does it even contain many rhymes at all. The poem does use assonance to create a sense of musicality, but it lacks the strictness of full rhyme. This, in turn, keeps it from feeling too structured or predictable.

That said, there is an internal slant rhyme between "make" and "rain" in the final line. This rhyme gives the line a song-like quality that ultimately suggests that the father has told the boy not to make a "plaything of the rain" many times before. In other words, this imperfect rhyme (which is the result of the assonant long /a/ sound in both words) musically presents the entire last line as if it's a well-worn phrase, one that would perhaps appear as the moral of a fairytale.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Little Boy Crying" remains anonymous. Instead of revealing any self-identifying information, the speaker focuses on the father and the little boy, concentrating on the various dynamics of their relationship. Consequently, it's impossible to draw any conclusions about the speaker's identity. At the same time, though, it's worth noting that it's possible to interpret the last line ("You must not make a plaything of the rain") as having come not from the speaker, but from the father himself. Under this interpretation, the perspective shifts in the final line so that the father can outline one of the "lessons" he wants his son to learn. However, it's also perfectly possible that this isn't the case and that the original speaker is the one to clarify the father's wish that his son refrain from making a "plaything of the rain."

SETTING

The poem's setting is never fully described. The only thing readers know for sure is that the little boy and his father are spending time together and that the father slapped the child immediately before the poem began. Why he did this is never revealed, since the speaker doesn't clarify what the boy and his father were doing right before, nor where they are or, for that matter, anything else about their circumstances. Instead, the poem fixates on the nuances of their relationship in this specific moment of conflict, choosing to highlight the anger, resentment, and love that characterizes their bond. This, in turn, makes up for the lack of contextual information in the poem.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Mervyn Morris was born in Kingston, Jamaica, in 1937. He later became a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University in England before returning to live and teach in Jamaica. An important figure in the West Indian literary landscape, he was an early proponent of poetry that uses "nation language," a term that refers to the unique approach to language employed by writers from the Caribbean and the African Diaspora. Morris has praised nation language in poetry as a way of establishing and vitalizing Jamaican culture through the arts.

Given his advocacy of this kind of West Indian representation in literature, it's worth considering Mervyn Morris alongside other contemporary and 20th-century West Indian poets like Derek Walcott, Kamau Brathwaite (who came up with the term "nation language"), James Berry, and Lorna Goodison. However, unlike some of his contemporaries, Morris has throughout his career refrained from composing blatantly political poems about Jamaican independence and post-colonialism, instead focusing on more personal matters in his poetry. In 2014, he was appointed as the Poet Laureate of

Jamaica, the first to hold that title since the country won independence from the United Kingdom in 1962.

Setting aside Morris's influence on Jamaican and West Indian literature, though, "Little Boy Crying" is not written in nation language, nor does it draw upon Jamaican or West Indian contextual elements. Instead, the poem focuses on universal ideas about parenting and fatherhood, thereby placing it in conversation with other famous poems about the same topic. Indeed, poems about fatherhood like Li-Young Lee's "The Gift," James Wright's "Youth," and "Those Winter Sundays" by Robert Hayden all engage with similar themes of responsibility and the nuances of parent-child relationships.

What's more, "Little Boy Crying" should also be considered alongside other poems about childhood, since it largely focuses on the little boy's feelings. With this in mind, readers might notice a connection between Morris's poem and Mark Doty's "A Replica of the Parthenon," in which two children struggle to make sense of adult ideas. Similarly, James Merrill's "The World and the Child" features a child yearning to be loved and cared for by an adult—a feeling that the boy in "Little Boy Crying" undoubtedly feels after his father betrays him by slapping him unexpectedly.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Little Boy Crying" doesn't take place in a specific environment or time period. At the same time, though, it's worth noting that the poem was published in 2006, making it an example of contemporary poetry. To that end, the fact that the poem is written in free verse is unsurprising, since the majority of poetry published in the contemporary era avoids the use of meter.

Furthermore, the poem explores the negative impact of violent disciplinary measures on the relationships parents have with their children. This is a distinctly contemporary area of interest, since widespread condemnation of physical punishment is a rather recent development. In fact, corporal punishment in schools is still technically legal in many places, including Jamaica (where Morris lives). However, there's no denying that the overall attitude toward violently punishing children has shifted in the last 50 years or so—a shift that "Little Boy Crying" reflects with its concentration on the tension that arises as a result of the father's violent behavior and the son's reaction to this severe form of discipline.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Poems About Fatherhood — Check out the Poetry Foundation's collection of poems that, like "Little Boy Crying," center around the topic of fatherhood. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/68596/poems-for-fathers-day)
- Morris Gives a Reading — Watch Mervyn Morris read some of his poetry aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GVHCiefnN50)
- More About Morris — Check out this overview of Mervyn Morris's life and work, including a number of recordings of the poet reading his own work (including "Little Boy Crying"). (https://poetryarchive.org/poet/mervyn-morris/)
- Poems About Childhood — Take a look at this overview of poems that, also like "Little Boy Crying," are concerned with childhood and growing up. (https://poets.org/text/poems-about-childhood)

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Lannamann, Taylor. "*Little Boy Crying.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 6 Mar 2020. Web. 26 May 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Lannamann, Taylor. "*Little Boy Crying.*" LitCharts LLC, March 6, 2020. Retrieved May 26, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/mervyn-morris/little-boy-crying.