Night Sweat

SUMMARY

The speaker describes a room that might be a study or office: there's a desk, some bits of trash, books, a floor lamp, simple things like that. The speaker's work equipment is motionless, and there's an unused broom nearby. Now, though, the speaker says he's stuck in a neat and tidy room. For the past ten nights, sweat has soaked through his white pajamas. That sweet, salty sweat seems to embalm his body (preserve it in death) and wets his head. Everything around him seems to be streaming and telling him that everything is as it should be. He feels like the great passion of his one and only life, his writing, is drenched in sweat. Yet the strain of day-to-day existence saps the speaker of his creative energies and ideas. The speaker's childhood self, though gone, still forever exists within him, along with that child's desire to die. There's only one universe and the speaker has one body in it. Within this container of the human body, the animalistic, creative energy of the spirit burns. Suddenly the speaker senses someone or something behind him and feels the gray morning light against his heavy eyelids. In the patchy dawn, the speaker shivers in his soaked clothes and sheets, his body and bedding swathed in daylight. The child inside him now explodes with a burst of energy. The speaker calls out to his wife, who seems to be the only person who can lift his spirits, her gentle, tender heart helping to lighten the darkness that surrounds him. Yet he is aware of the terrible burden that his struggles place upon his wife, whom he compares to a mythological tortoise who carries the entire world on its back. And even with her help, the speaker ultimately fears that he may never be able to swim above the surface of the "troubled waters" of his mind (that is, to escape his anxieties).

THEMES

CREATIVE ANXIETY AND SELF-DOUBT

Robert Lowell's "Night Sweat" demonstrates the toll of creative anxiety and self-doubt. The poem's speaker keeps waking up drenched in sweat, a condition implied to be the result of deep anxiety tied to his writer's block. On one level, the poem simply illustrates the terrifying, overwhelming anxiety that bubbles up at night, when people's unconscious minds take over. But more specifically, it speaks to the pain and anxiety of feeling creatively stuck—to the terror that creeps in when one can't seem to do what they feel it's their life's purpose to do.

The poem immediately establishes the invasive, horrifying nature of the speaker's night sweats. It begins in the relatively normal setting of a "tidied room," which is quickly invaded by the "creeping damp"—seemingly the product of some continual, looming fear.

The speaker soon feels "embalm[ed]" by his own sweat-drenched clothes, which wrap him tightly like a mummy's casings. This claustrophobic image illustrates the frightening, overwhelming feeling of these sweats, which the poem goes on to imply are caused by the speaker's anxiety over his writer's block. He's unable to quench his burning desire to create—his "life's fever"— because he's grappling with "stalled equipment" (i.e., his writerly brain isn't working how he thinks he should). As such, this "fever" creates the sweat that surrounds and overwhelms the speaker, turning him into a "heap of wet clothes."

While the speaker never says what exactly is causing this writer's block, he feels that simply existing "wrings us dry." Merely getting through the day seems to leech the speaker's body of its artistic energies and ideas. The speaker is so dismayed by this, the poem implies, because his whole identity hinges upon his ability to create. He has just "one life" and "one writing," in "one body" in "one universe"—phrasing that suggests writer's block poses a real existential threat to the speaker. He feels compelled to create "one writing" that will define his "one life," before time runs out—before he succumbs to the "downward glide" of life.

And at the end of the poem, the speaker worries that he may not be able to escape the "these troubled waters here." This might suggest that self-doubt is a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy: that it leads to a spiral of anxiety that threatens to pull the speaker under. Figuratively speaking, the "night sweat" is just a tiny part of a larger, significantly more ominous body of water. The speaker fears that someday, instead of being able to dry off his "night sweat" and shake off his creative anxiety, he could remain submerged beneath his self-doubt.

Ultimately, then, this poem deals with the common fear that intense creative anxiety can submerge or even destroy an artist's potential.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-28

THE POWER AND PAIN OF RELATIONSHIPS

"Night Sweat" speaks not only to the nature of creative anxiety, but also the push and pull of relationships and how one partner's comfort can sometimes become the other's

burden. While the poem's speaker initially seems isolated from the rest of the world, his wife is able to help temper both his creative and existential anxiety. This relationship represents a vital way out of the speaker's misery, but this aid does not come without costs to his wife. The speaker seems to acknowledge the way in which his own comfort takes a toll upon his partner and, potentially, upon their relationship.

When the speaker feels trapped beneath the overwhelming weight of his writer's block, his wife has the unique ability to "[alter] everything," to lift some of his anxiety with her own "lightness." When the speaker's wife relieves the speaker's "night sweat," she "tears the black web from the spider's sack." Given that spider webs are traditionally linked with darkness and fear, her destruction of the "spider's sack" represents her destruction of the speaker's spiral of self-doubt and dread.

Although the speaker's wife supports the speaker, her assistance requires great sacrifice on her part: she cannot help her partner without taking on his burdens. Referencing Aesop's famous fable of the tortoise and the hare as well as a popular religious myth in which the earth rests upon a giant tortoise's shell, the speaker compares his wife to both a leaping hare and a plodding tortoise.

While her heart may be light in a way that the speaker's own heart is not, she emotionally supports him and therefore—like the mythological tortoise carrying the world on its back—bears the burden of his suffering. Thus while their relationship is powerful enough to offer the speaker a unique comfort, her sacrifice makes it painful at the same time.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 20-28

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

Work-table, litter, books ...
... a tidied room,

The speaker starts the poem by describing his physical surroundings, noting the furniture and decorations present in his room. It's not clear whether this is a bedroom, a study, or some combination of the two; the speaker dives into this list of objects without any preamble to orient the reader.

In doing so, the speaker immediately establishes an atmosphere that feels overwhelming, hectic, and confusing. The asyndeton of these opening lines adds to that anxious atmosphere, the speaker bouncing between objects without pausing to add conjunctions between each item.

The mention of a "work-table, litter, books, and standing lamp," meanwhile, suggests that the speaker's work has to do with writing: readers might imagine the speaker hunched over a desk, surrounded by books, scraps of paper littering the floor.

When the speaker then mentions his "stalled equipment," this is the first indicator of his inability to work/write. His "equipment" might be a metaphor for his mind, which isn't working the way it should, or for a pen or pencil, which is literally "stalled"—motionless—because the speaker hasn't been able to write. When he then says that he lives in a "tidied room," this might mean he's somewhere separate from this messy workspace, or that his normally messy workspace is now neat and tidy (implicitly because he hasn't been able to do the messy work of creating lately).

The poem is written in loose pentameter, each line having approximately 10 syllables. Yet, as readers can see in these first three lines, the meter itself is pretty irregular, the pattern of stressed and unstressed beats occasionally iambic (da-DUM) but generally unpredictable:

> Work-ta- | ble, lit- | ter, books | and stand- | ing lamp,
> plain things, | my stalled | equip- | ment, the | old broom—
> but I | am liv- | ing in | a ti- | died room,

This keeps things feeling free-wheeling up top, again evoking the speaker's scattered state of mind. The use of rhyme and sonic devices like assonance, alliteration, and consonance, meanwhile, tie the lines together, lending the poem a sense of musicality and rhythm that pulls readers forward.

Here, for example, note the crisp consonance of /k/, /t/, b/, /t, and /s/ sounds, plus the assonance of "standing lamp":

> Work-table, litter, books and standing lamp,

The flurry of sounds might evoke the flurry of the anxieties that lead to the speaker's "night sweats."

LINES 4-9

for ten nights ...
... life, one writing!

The speaker reveals that, for 10 nights now, he's been dealing with night sweats. Each night he feels dampness "creeping" across his body. The language here, and throughout the poem, is highly symbolic and metaphorical. The "creeping damp" that represents the night sweat does not *literally* "float" over the speaker's pajamas, but the speaker uses this language to describe how easily his anxiety dominates him and his space, like a ghostly presence that threatens to overwhelm him.

That sweat soaks the speaker's white pajamas to the point that they seem to "wilt." This imagery suggests his clothes sticking limply to his frame, and also might call to mind a wilting flower. Such sweat, it seems, isn't conducive to life; instead, it seems

suffocating.

The next line adds to this unnerving atmosphere, as the speaker says that the "sweet salt" of his night sweat metaphorically "embalms" him (or covers him in fluid used to preserve dead bodies). All this imagery of suffocation, death, and drowning reveals just how serious this night sweat is. Whatever is causing it threatens to end the speaker's life itself.

Also note the sibilance in these lines, in words like "sweet salt," "streams," "soaking," and "sweat." These sinister hissing sounds subtly evoke the way in which the speaker's anxiety creeps through the room. It's as though "everything streams" around him, a strange, vague phrase that evokes the surreal landscape of the speaker's nightmares. And yet, something "tells" the speaker that "this is right"—that what's happening is a good thing. Perhaps the speaker is delirious, or perhaps he's attempting to describe how it feels to be in a state of creative flow.

In lines 8 and 9, the speaker then reveals what's behind all this sweating and confusion: writer's block. The phrase "life's fever" implies that the speaker has a burning passion for writing, but with no release for that passion, his body becomes drenched in sweat. In the next line, the speaker calls out "one life, one writing!"—a phrase that even more specifically implies that his overwhelming dread is closely linked with his ability—or, more accurately, his present inability—to produce art.

The parallelism of this phrase links life itself to writing; that is, it suggests, perhaps, that the speaker equates life itself with his art, and feels he gets just one shot at each. The caesura after "writing" (that exclamation mark) adds emphasis to the phrase.

LINES 9-12

But the downward ...
... will to die—

The speaker never describes the precise cause of his writer's block, but he suggests in this section that the weight of life—the "bias of existing"—saps his creative energies. The metaphor of the "downward glide / and bias of existing" suggests that life has a physical shape—one that seems to gravitationally drag the speaker down. The enjambment between lines 9 and 10 brings that "downward glide" to vivid life, pulling readers themselves down the page:

> [...] But the downward glide
> and bias of existing wrings us dry—

Rather than simply exhausting people, the speaker says, life "wrings us dry." The speaker portrays himself as a shell of a person: someone completely and violently drained of his creative juices by the mundane pressures of existence.

Next, the speaker says that "the child who died" still exists "inside" him. This might be a reference to the speaker's childhood self, the metaphorical "death" of whom represents the loss of innocence that comes with growing up. The speaker thus seems to link creativity with childhood, which makes sense when considering that children don't have to deal with the "bias of existing" in the way that adults must. Kids are growing up, whereas adults are growing old; kids can play, whereas adults have responsibilities.

The next line is less clear, however, and is possibly an allusion to Lowell's own extended struggle with mental illness: the speaker claims that his childhood "will to die" remains inside him. The speaker may be describing a deliberate suicidal impulse, or he may be describing a childish wish to grow up (to experience the metaphorical "death" of childhood and become an adult).

Whether "the child who died" refers to the loss of innocence that comes with age, a childhood trauma, or the early onset of mental illness, it becomes clear that the speaker has been constantly plagued by "his will to die." Perhaps that "writing" is the only thing keeping the speaker alive, pushing back against that ever-present "will." Basically, the speaker's existence is wracked with anguish he has likely felt for a long time—far beyond the 10-night duration of this particular night sweat.

The anaphora of these two lines, both of which begin with the phrase "always inside me," lends a sense of momentum to the poem that again pulls readers forward. The assonance and rhyme in these lines also serve to link the pain of life (glide, bias, dry) with the speaker's continuous "will to die."

LINES 13-17

one universe, one ...
... soot of night.

These lines repeat the parallelism first seen in line 9 with "one life, one writing." Now, the speaker says "one universe, one body." In the moment of the poem, the speaker's universe *is* his body, since he is trapped within the limits of his own mind.

Next, the speaker metaphorically compares his body to an urn, a large container often used to contain human ashes. Again, the speaker brings death imagery into the poem, echoing earlier mentions of wilted clothes, embalming fluid, and, of course, the "will to die." These images set the stakes for the poem: writing, for this speaker, is a matter of life and death.

Within this "urn" of the speaker's body, "the animal night sweats of the spirit burn." That is, his anxieties and creative energies are burning inside him, leading to the "creeping damp" that drenches his sheets. The "animal" quality of these "sweats" makes them seem wild and uncontrollable and adds to the overwhelming, nightmarish atmosphere of the poem.

But then, something changes: the speaker senses someone, or something, behind him, a familiar presence signaled by his cry of "You!" It's clear that morning is coming, its light "lighten[ing]" the speaker's heavy eyelids, metaphorically described as being weighed down by lead.

The morning might offer relief from the terror of the speaker's nighttime anxiety, yet the speaker's fear isn't giving him up without a fight. As morning approaches, those "animal night sweats of the spirit" seem to actually take nightmarish shape, morphing into"gray skulled horses" that exemplify the strange and monstrous quality of the speaker's fear. These horses "whinny for the soot of night," an image that recalls the idea of the speaker's body as an "urn," or container for ashes.

LINES 18-21

I dabble in ...
... exploding into dynamite,

Line 18 is one of the most sonically striking in the poem, filled with richly poetic language. Notice all the assonance, alliteration, and consonance here—lovely poetic sound effects that suggest a release from the nightmarish world of ashes and "gray skulled horses":

I dabble in the dapple of the day,

To "dabble" can mean to partake in something casually, but it can also mean to dip one's finger or toe into water. "Dapple," meanwhile, refers to a patch of light. If the speaker is "dabbling" in the patchy early light of day, then, he's *just* starting to wake up—but that secondary meaning of "dabble" might suggest that the daytime isn't totally free from the terrifying dampness that plagues the night!

Now more fully awake, the speaker describes himself as "a heap of wet clothes." Readers can picture the speaker in bed, covered in a clammy sweat, the fresh sunlight pouring over his body. But the metaphor here (the speaker says he *is* those wet clothes) implies that, instead of simply being surrounded by the product of his writer's block, he seems to have merged with it. Like the earlier equation of his universe and his body, this metaphor collapses the boundaries between the speaker as an individual and the speaker's emotional torment. At this moment, he is essentially defined by the night sweat—and thus by his creative anxiety.

The use of the word "seamy," meanwhile, foreshadows the way in which his anxiety burdens his wife: the word basically means sordid, and thus implies that there is something morally wrong with the speaker's condition.

His language becomes more metaphorical as he then dramatically imagines his child "exploding into dynamite." That "child" might refer to the speaker's inner child/childhood self mentioned earlier in the poem. Then, that child was dead yet always "inside" the speaker; now, the child seems either to come vividly to life or cause total destruction and havoc. "Exploding into dynamite" might suggest the speaker's wish to die disappear, or, alternatively, reaching its boiling point and taking over his life.

LINES 22-24

my wife . ...
... like a hare.

The entrance of the speaker's wife is a key transitional moment in the poem. In fact, the ellipses following the speaker's direct address to his wife separate the following lines from the preceding horrors. Within the broader formal context of the poem, the line in which the speaker's wife "alters everything" is actually the volta (the rhetorical or tonal shift) of the Petrarchan sonnet that comprises the poem's second half (more on that in the "Form" section of this guide).

It's also notable that this line adheres to iambic pentameter (note that "everything" is scanned as having two beats, "ev'rything"):

my wife... | your light- | ness al- | ters ev- | erything

The stable meter in this line gives readers an auditory sense of the solidity and comfort that the speaker's wife provides him.

She's able to lift the weight of the speaker's own anxieties and tear the metaphorical "black web" away from the "spider's sack" of his dread (notice the sibilance in the phrase "spider's sack," which echoes the sinister hissing from earlier in the poem when the speaker first describe the "creeping damp" of his anxiety).

Through a simile, the speaker then compares his wife's heart to a hare, suggesting that, unlike his own, her heart is light and free. It "hops and flutters," or beats quickly, unburdened. Although this poem demonstrates that the speaker's fear is both intense and hyper-present, these lines provide a brief respite from the dark world of the speaker's anxiety.

LINES 25-28

Poor turtle, tortoise, ...
... on your back.

Unfortunately, the speaker soon realizes that his wife's comforting presence does not come without serious costs to both her and their relationship. While the speaker's wife was previously compared to a hare, the speaker describes her here as "poor turtle, tortoise."

Read together, these lines are an allusion to Aesop's famous allegory of the tortoise and the hare. The speaker's wife has a light heart that naturally "hops and flutters," but the weight of the speaker's troubles transforms her, slowing her down and changing her very identity.

In these lines, the speaker's anxiety returns. Because he is aware of the pain he causes his wife, he is wracked with guilt. At the same time, he fears that he cannot permanently escape his writer's block (which produces the night sweat) or his larger existential anxieties. In an example of extended metaphor, these anxieties swell from the dampness of the night sweat into

a menacing sea of troubles ("these troubled waters here").

Finally, in a separate allusion to the myth of a tortoise carrying the world on its back, the speaker pleads with his wife (she is both the "Poor turtle, tortoise" and "Dear Heart") to forgive him for the emotional burden she must bear. At the end of this poem, the speaker feels that his lack of creative energy—"this world's dead weight and cycle"—is a punishment he has foisted upon his wife rather than the solitary torment that dominates the beginning of the poem.

SYMBOLS

DROWNING

The speaker uses imagery related to drowning and/or being smothered throughout the poem. The "night sweat" of the poem's title is a consequence of the speaker's creative blockage and self-doubt, and the idea of drowning thus symbolizes not being able to escape or overcome those doubts.

When the speaker describes "the creeping damp / float over my pajamas," for example, it almost seems as though he's lying in a room that is slowly filling with water. He then says that his sweat "embalms" him, a word that refers to the process of preserving dead bodies. Together, these images suggest that the speaker's creative anxiety threatens to smother or suffocate him.

The drowning symbolism is clearest at the poem's end, however, when the speaker explicitly expresses his fear of being unable to "clear / the surface of these troubled waters here." In other words, he's worried that he might not be able to overcome his mental struggles and will remain trapped below "the surface" of his anxiety.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-6:** "for ten nights now I've felt the creeping damp / float over my pajamas' wilted white . . . / Sweet salt embalms me and my head is wet,"
- **Lines 25-26:** "if I cannot clear / the surface of these troubled waters here,"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration makes the poem's language more fluid, intense, and lyrical. Repetitive sounds can also draw attention to important images in the poem. When the speaker describes his pajamas' "wilted white," for example, that shared /w/ sounds emphasize the image of the speaker's sweat-soaked pajamas.

Later in the poem, the speaker provides more sensory details when he feels the morning "light / lighten" his "leaded eyelids." The lilting /l/ sounds here might evoke the gentleness with which this morning light brushes against the speaker's heavy eyelids. At the same time, the alliteration highlights the play on words (technically polyptoton) between the noun "light" (which refers to the sunrise) and the verb "lighten" (which can refer to both a visual "lightening" and a reduction of weight).

The most alliterative (and assonant, for that matter) line in the poem, however, is line 18:

> I dabble in the dapple of the day,

On one level, the /d/ and /ah/ sounds here simply make the line sound pleasant and musical; as daylight enters the poem, its language becomes lovelier.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "wilted white"
- **Line 6:** "Sweet salt"
- **Line 8:** "soaking," "sweat"
- **Lines 15-16:** "light / lighten"
- **Line 16:** "leaded"
- **Line 18:** "dabble," "dapple," "day"
- **Line 23:** "spider's sack"
- **Line 24:** "heart hops," "hare"
- **Line 25:** "turtle, tortoise," "cannot clear"
- **Line 28:** "world's," "weight"

SIBILANCE

In the first part of the poem, hissing sibilance underlines the sinister nature of the speaker's anxiety. In lines 6-10 ("Sweet salt [...] wrings us dry—"), for example, repeated /s/ sounds creep through the poem like the very night sweat they describe.

When morning breaks later in the poem, a mixture of /s/ and /sh/ sounds seems to bring the mushy dampness of the clothes and bedding surrounding the speaker to vivid life:

> a heap of wet clothes, seamy, shivering,
> I see my flesh and bedding washed with light,

Strong sibilance then fades throughout the end of the poem, reflecting the dissipation of the speaker's dread and anxiety. The one exception is the phrase "spider's sack": the spider's sack is, of course, a representation of the speaker's anxiety, so it makes sense that it brings that hissing sound back into the poem for a beat.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "Sweet salt"

- **Line 7:** “streams”
- **Line 8:** “life's,” “soaking,” “sweat”
- **Line 10:** “bias,” “existing”
- **Line 14:** “sweats,” “spirit”
- **Line 19:** “seamy,” “shivering”
- **Line 20:** “flesh,” “washed”
- **Line 23:** “spider's sack”

ASSONANCE

Like alliteration and sibilance, assonance is a lyrical tool that adds music and emphasis to the speaker's language. The phrase "head is wet," for example, repeats the short /eh/ sound as if to demonstrate how closely the night sweat clings to the speaker's body.

Assonance also affects the rhythm and flow of the poem; long sections of repeated vowel sounds seem to speed the poem up, lending it a frantic, escalating quality. For example, towards the beginning of the poem, there is a long section of repeated long and short /i/ sounds that build towards the climactic line in which the narrator reveals "his will to die":

> one life, one writing! But the downward glide
> and bias of existing wrings us dry—
> always inside me is the child who died,
> always inside me is his will to die—

The slew of assonance here seems to speed the poem up, reflecting the speaker's anxious state of mind.

Assonance can also reflect thematic links between words, as in "life" and "writing" above; to the speaker, life *is* writing, and writing is life.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** “living in”
- **Line 6:** “head,” “wet”
- **Line 9:** “life,” “writing,” “glide”
- **Line 10:** “bias,” “existing wrings,” “dry”
- **Line 11:** “inside,” “child,” “died”
- **Line 12:** “inside,” “is his will,” “die”
- **Line 15:** “I,” “light”
- **Line 16:** “lighten,” “leaded,” “eyelids,” “while”
- **Line 18:** “dabble,” “dapple”
- **Line 20:** “flesh,” “bedding”
- **Line 22:** “my wife,” “lightness”

METAPHOR

Much of the poem's language is metaphorical. That is, it's not meant to be taken literally, but rather to convey the intensely surreal, disturbing nature of the speaker's anxiety and its causes.

The first metaphor comes in line 2, where the mention of "stalled equipment" might be a metaphor for the speaker's mind (which is stalled in the sense that it's not creating ideas). It also might refer to a pen/pencil—the literal "equipment" used to write, but which sits motionless.

Later, when he describes "the downward glide / and bias of existing," the speaker does not mean that life is a literal sloped surface that physically "wrings us dry." Instead, he's talking about the way that the demands of daily life feel heavy and burdensome and sap the speaker of his creative energies.

The animal metaphors in this poem are some of the most explicit comparisons the speaker makes. In the middle of the poem, for example, the "gray skulled horses" represent an abstract, nightmarish vision of the nighttime darkness that fades as the sun rises. And towards the end of the poem, the speaker's wife "tears the black web from the spider's sack," a metaphor for the way in which she clears away the dark cobwebs of her husband's anxiety.

When the speaker calls himself a "heap of wet clothes," this is another metaphor. It's as though the speaker has literally transformed into the byproduct of his anxiety—his sweat-soak clothing. The speaker's writer's block—and the night sweat, which can be understood as the direct product of that creative stress—wholly dominates his life and has even overtaken his sense of self.

Finally, the speaker also uses metaphorical language when comparing his wife to both a tortoise and a hare, which form part of an allusion to a famous Aesop fable.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “my stalled equipment”
- **Line 6:** “Sweet salt embalms me”
- **Line 8:** “my life's fever is soaking in night sweat—”
- **Lines 9-10:** “But the downward glide / and bias of existing wrings us dry—”
- **Lines 13-14:** “in this urn / the animal night sweats of the spirit burn.”
- **Lines 15-17:** “Again I feel the light / lighten my leaded eyelids, while the gray / skulled horses whinny for the soot of night.”
- **Line 19:** “a heap of wet clothes, seamy, shivering,”
- **Line 21:** “my child exploding into dynamite,”
- **Line 23:** “and tears the black web from the spider's sack,”
- **Lines 25-28:** “Poor turtle, tortoise, if I cannot clear / the surface of these troubled waters here, / absolve me, help me, Dear Heart, as you bear / this world's dead weight and cycle on your back.”

ASYNDETON

The asyndeton in this poem evokes the frantic nature of the speaker's thoughts as his creative anxiety makes his words

alternately race and stutter. At the same time, it creates a constant self-editing effect that reinforces the speaker's identity as a writer.

Line 2 is a good example of asyndeton in action:

> plain things, my stalled equipment, the old broom—

As the speaker lists off the items in this room, asyndeton speeds things up. There's no time for an "and" here, and the acceleration of the poem's pace reflects the speaker's growing panic.

Similarly, asyndeton appears in critical moments of the poem where the speaker appears close to losing control. These moments often precede the poem's emotional peaks. Take lines 19-22, where the speaker takes in the scene around him upon waking up with increasing panic:

> a heap of wet clothes, seamy, shivering,
> I see my flesh and bedding washed with light,
> my child exploding into dynamite,
> my wife . . . your lightness alters everything,

The lack of conjunctions makes it feels as though the speaker is barrelling through these lines until finally coming to a stop after "wife." That this caesura appears just as the speaker's wife does is no coincidence, and this reinforces the idea that she's able to calm the speaker when he's in moods like this.

Finally, asyndeton appears in the speaker's closing remarks, which are directed towards the speaker's wife. He calls her, "Poor turtle, tortoise." In this moment of self-consciousness, the speaker seems to edit his language as he realizes the extent and intensity of the emotional burden he places upon his wife. A few lines later, he pleads with her—"absolve me, help me"—as if he can't quite find the right words for his request.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "plain things, my stalled equipment, the old broom"
- **Lines 6-7:** "my head is wet, / everything streams"
- **Line 9:** "one life, one writing!"
- **Lines 11-13:** "always inside me is the child who died, / always inside me is his will to die— / one universe, one body"
- **Line 19:** "a heap of wet clothes, seamy, shivering,"
- **Line 20:** "I see my flesh and bedding washed with light,"
- **Lines 21-22:** "my child exploding into dynamite, / my wife"
- **Line 25:** "turtle, tortoise,"
- **Line 27:** "absolve me, help me,"

ALLUSION

The speaker alludes to "The Tortoise and the Hare," a famous Aesop fable, at the end of the poem. The story is about a race between the two titular characters: the quick-footed hare and the slow tortoise.

This allusion reflects the effect that the speaker's anxieties have on his partner. First, the speaker uses a simile to say that his wife's heart "hops and flutters like a hare." This emphasizes how she is not weighed down by anxieties and doubts in the way that her husband is.

Yet it's almost as though helping her husband turns her into the tortoise; having cleared the metaphorical cobwebs of her husband's mind, she slows down, becomes a "Poor turtle, tortoise." She can no longer hop and flutter about, but must carry her husband's burdens.

The additional allusion in the poem's final lines reflects this shift, as the speaker compares his wife to a tortoise who carries "this world's dead weight and cycle on your back." Multiple cultures share a myth of a giant turtle bearing the earth itself atop its shell. The wife becomes that turtle here, forced to bear the "dead weight" of her husband.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 24-28:** "as your heart hops and flutters like a hare. / Poor turtle, tortoise, if I cannot clear / the surface of these troubled waters here, / absolve me, help me, Dear Heart, as you bear / this world's dead weight and cycle on your back."

ANAPHORA

Anaphora adds to the poem's frantic, intense rhythm. The device is clearest in lines 11 and 12:

> always inside me is the child who died,
> always inside me is his will to die—

Because this phrase opens with the word "always," it drives home the continual pain of the speaker's condition. That "child" likely refers to the speaker's childhood self, someone whom he links with creative potential. That this child "died" may be a reference to growing up and the loss of innocence. In other words, the speaker has left the freely creative world of childhood behind, but still feels his former, younger self inside him, itching to get out.

There's more subtle anaphora (and broader parallelism) later in the poem, when the speaker begins three sentences in a row with I:

> Again I feel [...]
> I dabble [...]

I see [...]

These lines take place as morning arrives. The return to the word "I" reflects the speaker waking up and becoming more aware of his body and surroundings.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "always inside me is"
- **Line 12:** "always inside me is"
- **Line 15:** "I"
- **Line 18:** "I"
- **Line 20:** "I"
- **Line 21:** "my"
- **Line 22:** "my"

PARALLELISM

In addition to its anaphora, the poem uses broader parallelism throughout. Like the previous examples of poetic repetition, the poem's parallelism underlines the close relationship between the speaker's creative calling and his very existence.

The phrase "one life, one writing," for example, contains two grammatically identical phrases that establish continuity between the elements they compare. In other words, to the speaker, life and writing are one and the same. This whole phrase itself is then in parallel with the phrase "one universe, one body" (which equates the speaker's universe with his body).

Both the speaker's life and the universe are very large-scale concepts. The speaker's writing and the speaker's body should be, in comparison, smaller things. So what does it mean when both of these large things are equated to smaller, more limited things? Through these parallel structures, the speaker implies that his writing and body limit his life and universe. His body *is* his universe, just as his writing *is* his life.

Yet the *contrasts* between these lines are what make them so touching and painful. The tragedy of the speaker's existence—particularly in the context of his writer's block—is that his "one life" may not necessarily produce one successful writing. And the fact that the speaker's "one universe" is limited to the scope of his "one body" means that the speaker is trapped within his own anxiety.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "one life, one writing!"
- **Lines 11-13:** "always inside me is the child who died, / always inside me is his will to die— / one universe, one body"
- **Line 15:** "I feel"
- **Line 18:** "I dabble"
- **Line 20:** "I see"
- **Line 21:** "my child"
- **Line 22:** "my wife"

ENJAMBMENT

Although many of this poem's lines are end-stopped (typically with commas, em-dashes, or ellipses), some phrases continue over the end of lines without pause or punctuation. These instances of enjambment add to the poem's frantic, at times frenetic pace and thus evoke the speaker's anxious train of thought.

Enjambment pops up at high stress points throughout the poem—at those moments when the speaker seems most overcome by emotion. In fact, the first enjambed line marks the entrance of the speaker's night sweat itself. As "the creeping damp" invades the speaker's room and soaks his clothes, it quite literally creeps over the edge of the poetic line:

> for ten nights now I've felt the creeping damp
> float over my pajamas' wilted white . . .

This linguistic trespass mirrors the physical incursion of this sweat.

Enjambment shows up again when the speaker refers to "the downward glide / and bias of existing." The reader is pulled across the line break and down the page, in a motion that mimics the gravitational pull behind said "downward glide." In other words, the poem's language here follows the shape and path it describes.

There's then a flurry of enjambment when the speaker struggles to wake up:

> Behind me! You! Again I feel the light
> lighten my leaded eyelids, while the gray
> skulled horses whinny for the soot of night.

The speed of the lines here adds intensity to this battle between the light of day and the pull of those nightmarish "gray / skulled horses," which threaten to pull the speaker back into the "soot of night."

Finally, when the speaker worries that he will never be able to escape his anxiety ("if I cannot clear / the surface of these troubled waters here"), the enjambment conveys a growing sense of fear. The poem's final sentence similarly continues over the line break, as the speaker fervently pleads for his wife's forgiveness and comfort:

> absolve me, help me, Dear Heart, as you bear
> this world's dead weight and cycle on your back.

Like the speaker's emotions in these moments, the enjambed

lines are intense, fluid, and uncontrolled.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "damp / float"
- **Lines 9-10:** "glide / and"
- **Lines 13-14:** "urn / the"
- **Lines 15-16:** "light / lighten"
- **Lines 16-17:** "gray / skulled"
- **Lines 25-26:** "clear / the"
- **Lines 27-28:** "bear / this"

IMAGERY

The poem is filled with intense, vivid imagery, most of which is metaphorical and helps to evoke the overwhelming, surreal, and nightmarish quality of the speaker's anxiety and its causes.

Much of this imagery is devoted to describing what it feels like to experience "night sweats." The speaker notes how he feels "the creeping damp / float over my pajamas wilted white," for instance, a striking line that calls forth the sense of a sinister wetness looming over the speaker in his bed.

The speaker then describes the salt of his night sweat "embalm[ing]" him, covering his body in the fluid used to preserve the dead. This metaphorical description of how it feels to be covered in sweat adds to the eeriness of the poem and raises its stakes: the speaker's anxiety is something potentially deadly, that may smother him.

Later, the speaker uses more intense imagery when describing how it feels to confront the light of day after one of these "night sweats." Readers can envision the way "light" filters through the speaker's closed "leaden eyelids," another bit of metaphorical imagery that conveys how burdened the speaker is by his anguish.

The image of "gray / skulled horses whinny for the soot of night" is another disturbing one, and vividly conveys the pull of the speaker's anxiety. This image echoes an earlier line when the speaker described his body as an "urn," or a container often used for ashes of the dead, in which "the animal night sweats of the spirit burn." Those animalistic night sweats take form here, transforming into terrifying horses that threaten to drag the speaker back into the sooty night.

When the speaker does finally awake, he feels transforming into "a heap of wet clothes, seamy, shivering." This imagery evokes how it feels to wake after a fever, surrounded by damp clothes and shivering in the morning light.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-8:** "I've felt the creeping damp / float over my pajamas' wilted white . . . / Sweet salt embalms me and my head is wet, / everything streams and tells me this is right; / my life's fever is soaking in night sweat—"
- **Lines 15-20:** "Again I feel the light / lighten my leaded eyelids, while the gray / skulled horses whinny for the soot of night. / I dabble in the dapple of the day, / a heap of wet clothes, seamy, shivering, / I see my flesh and bedding washed with light,"
- **Line 23:** "and tears the black web from the spider's sack,"

SIMILE

The speaker uses a simile in line 24 to describe his wife:

> as your heart hops and flutters like a hare.

This simile establishes the contrast between the speaker and the wife who apparently lifts his burdens. The speaker is filled with heaviness—he's "a heap of wet clothes," his eyelids are "leaded," he's constantly sinking along "the downward glide" of life. His wife, meanwhile, is not so weighed down; her heart is quick and free, fluttering along with the lithe movements of a "hare."

And yet, in the next lines, the speaker will compare his wife to a "tortoise"—famously the hare's counterpart in the fable of "The Tortoise and the Hare." Having lightened her husband's load, the speaker's wife becomes slower, eventually bearing "this world's dead weight" on her back.

The simile thus draws attention to the speaker's ultimate awareness of the great cost of their relationship. Even as he celebrates the lightness of her heart, it feels like he knows it's tainted by the heaviness of his own.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 24:** "your heart hops and flutters like a hare."

VOCABULARY

Embalms (Line 6) - The process of embalming a corpse is intended to preserve it from decay; historically, it typically involved covering the body with spices and bandages (think about the mummification process). The speaker likely uses this word to refer to the way in which his night sweat (and his soaked sheets/clothes) surrounds him—at the same time, its ghastly connotations reinforce his later allusions to death.

Bias (Line 10) - In this context, the word bias simply refers to a physical slope or angle. The speaker is comparing the experience of existence to a downward-sloping surface: one that drags him down and saps his energies.

Urn (Line 13) - An urn is a large vase-like container often used to contain ashes (typically, the end product of cremation). Since the speaker uses "this urn" as a metaphor for his body—in which "the animal night sweats of the spirit burn"—its specific

deathly connotations reinforce the previous lines regarding the speaker's "will to die."

Leaded (Line 16) - The word leaded describes something that has been made heavy, as if weighed down by lead. In this instance, the speaker's eyelids are "leaded" due to his lack of sleep.

Dapple (Line 18) - The speaker is describing the way in which the morning light ("the day") coming through a window casts a patchy pattern over the bed.

Seamy (Line 19) - Shady, disreputable, or morally corrupt.

The spider's sack (Line 23) - The spider's sack refers to the webbed pouch in which a female spider deposits her eggs. This phrase is a metaphorical representation of the speaker's anxiety—when his wife "tears the black web from the spider's sack," it is implied that she is able to lift some of his troubles.

Absolve (Line 27) - To absolve someone is to rid them of guilt. Here, the speaker begs his wife to forgive him for burdening her with the effects of his creative anxiety.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

This poem is composed of two sonnets stacked on top of each other: lines 1-14 make up a Shakespearean sonnet, while lines 15-28 form a Petrarchan sonnet.

The Shakespearean sonnet is broken up into three quatrains, or four-line stanzas, followed by a rhyming couplet. Traditionally, the couplet of a Shakespearean sonnet wraps up or responds to the 12 preceding lines. In this poem, it communicates the danger of the speaker's creative anxiety, which burns wildly inside the "urn" of his body:

> one universe, one body . . . in this urn
> the animal night sweats of the spirit burn.

The Petrarchan sonnet, meanwhile, is broken up into an eight-line octave following by a six-line sestet. As is typical for a Petrarchan sonnet, the octave introduces a problem of sorts (the speaker's confusion and disorientation upon waking up) while the sestet responds to that problem.

Petrarchan sonnets have a volta, or turn, between the octave and the sestet, at which point there's some sort of major shift in direction in the poem. In "Night Sweat," that volta appears in line 22, which indicates a glimmer of hope as the speaker's wife is able to lift some of his troubles:

> my wife . . . your lightness alters everything,

The use of two sonnets is notable for a few reasons here. For one thing, this is a classic, very "poetic" form. Given that this is a poem about creative anxiety and writer's block, the use of such a traditional form might reflect the speaker's longing to be a great poet. Shakespeare, of course, is widely considered the greatest English-language writer, so the fact that the speaker uses the sonnet form that Shakespeare popularized taps into the lineage.

Petrarchan sonnets, meanwhile, are linked with love poetry. It makes sense, then, that the section of the poem about the speaker's relationship with his wife turns to this poetic form.

METER

This poem is written in a very (very) loose iambic pentameter. That means that each line five iambs, poetic feet with an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern, for a total of 10 syllables per line. Iambic pentameter is the traditional meter of a Shakespearean sonnet, which this poem contains in its first 14 lines. Line 3 is a good example of iambic pentameter in action:

> but I | am li- | ving in | a ti- | died room

This meter, which sonically resembles the da-DUM of heartbeat, provides a sense of stability and predictability. At the same time, however, it could echo the anxious pounding of the speaker's heart.

Again, though, the meter is very irregular; while most lines have just about 10 syllables, that untressed-stressed pattern varies quite a bit. The very first line, for example, has 10 beats but starts with a spondee (two stressed syllables in a row):

> Work-ta- | ble, lit- | ter, books | and stand- | ing lamp,

The speaker front-loads lines like this often, as in line 5 ("float over"), 6 ("Sweet salt"), 9 ("one life"), and 25 ("Poor turtle").

Such deviations from regular iambic pentameter convey the speaker's frantic state of mind. It's as though he's reaching for a steady structure, but his anxiety and doubt keep getting in the way.

RHYME SCHEME

As noted in the "Form" section of this guide, the poem consists of two sonnets piled on top of each other: the first 14 lines of this poem form a Shakespearean sonnet, while the latter form a Petrarchan sonnet. These sonnet forms have different rhyme schemes.

The first half of the poem follows the rhyme pattern:

> ABBA CDCD EFEF GG

In most Shakespearean sonnets, that first quatrain (four-line stanza) would be ABAB (thus mirroring the pattern of the next two quatrains, which use an alternating pattern in which the first and third lines of the stanza rhyme with each other, as do the second and fourth).

- The ABBA form here (line 1 rhymes with line 4, "lamp"/"damp," while line 2 rhymes with line 3, "broom"/"room") is in fact more common in a Petrarchan sonnet, which pops up in the poem's second half.
- This might reflect the speaker being a bit off his game. As with the unsteady meter, he's reaching for a regular rhyme scheme but faltering.

The quick couplet at the sonnet's end ("urn"/"burn") then provides a brief conclusion to the poem, which abruptly shifts gears in the next line as morning breaks:

> Behind me! You! Again I feel the light

The next 14 lines of the poem are, again, a Petrarchan sonnet. The rhyme scheme here, though, is even more irregular than that above. Petrarchan sonnets usually rhyme:

ABBA ABBA CDC DCD (or CDE CDE)

But here, the rhyme scheme is:

ABAB CAAC DEF FED

For one thing, note how it looks like the first four lines of the Shakespearean and Petrarchan sonnets have been switched! The first quatrain here should technically be ABBA, just as the first quatrain of the Shakespearean sonnet should be ABAB; the poet has swapped them.

The next four lines introduce a new rhyme sound (the "C" sound: "shivering"/"everything"), but otherwise follow the expected pattern (the first and fourth lines of the quatrain rhyme with each other, as do the middle two).

The divergence from the Petrarchan rhyme scheme is particularly notable in the sestet, or final six lines. In fact, the "E" rhymes above are also slant rhymes with the "F" rhymes. In other words, all the rhymes here sort of sound the same: "hare"/"bear" and "clear"/"here."

The big shift in the final six lines of the poem reinforces the difference between the speaker's wife's ability to lift her husband's burden and the emotional cost of this labor.

SPEAKER

This poem's speaker is a writer grappling with writer's block. This is extremely distressing to him, because it seems his entire sense of self hinges upon his being able to write. As much of the poem indicates, he is also someone who feels that daily life is draining (that the "bias of existing" saps him of his creative potential), and who is plagued by intense anxiety. The speaker is also married and experiences a moment of comfort and optimism in his wife's presence. That said, he ends the poem unsure if he'll ever pull himself out of this creative funk.

Given Robert Lowell's tendency to include autobiographical details in his poetry (particularly his experiences with relationships, creative struggles, and mental illness), it's fair to read the speaker of this poem as a representation of the author himself.

SETTING

This poem's setting is relatively straightforward: in the first few lines, the speaker describes the ordinary details of his room. This might be a bedroom, a study, or a mix of both. And although much of the poem veers off into abstract representations of the speaker's creative anxiety, it is clear that it specifically takes place in his bed.

The contrast between this basic, mundane space and the poem's surreal, nightmarish imagery reflects the intensity of the speaker's fear and self-doubt. Such emotions transform his home itself into a terrifying world that threatens to drown him.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Robert Lowell was an American poet who lived from 1917-1977. He was an important figure in the confessional poetry movement, which emerged in the U.S. in the 1950s and '60s.

Confessional poetry was extremely personal and often touched on trauma, sexuality, and mental illness. Other famous figures often deemed confessionalists include Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, both of whom studied under Lowell at Boston University. Lowell himself counted Elizabeth Bishop and modernist poet William Carlos Williams among his strongest artistic influences.

"Night Sweat" originally appeared in 1964, in Robert Lowell's collection *For the Union Dead*. Although this was the poet's sixth book, it became one of his most well-known. Many of the poems in this collection focus on his relationships rather than explicitly discussing his mental illness. In this sense, they are considered less "confessional" than some of Lowell's more "taboo" earlier writing. At the same time, the intense focus on nightmarish depictions of anxiety fit right in with the confessionalist mode. "Night Sweat" also touches upon Lowell's complex relationship with his soon-to-be ex-wife Elizabeth Hardwick.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Many scholars take confessionalism to be, in part, a response to the many horrors of the 20th century. Events like the Holocaust and the Cold War pushed some artists to turn inward, focusing on their own deeply personal experiences. Confessonalist poets also often wrote in response to the

stifling atmosphere of 1950s America, which romanticized domestic life.

Lowell himself lived with bipolar disorder and was institutionalized multiple times throughout his life. Although this poem does not address Lowell's mental illness as directly as some of his previous poetry (e.g., "Waking in the Blue," which chronicles the poet's time in a mental institution), it still alludes to material that would have been somewhat controversial in 1964, especially in the poet's upper-class New England environment.

The "wife" referenced here is the writer Elizabeth Hardwick, to whom Lowell was married for 23 years. Hardwick's own career as a writer renders the poem even more poignant, as she would have certainly understood the speaker's creative anxiety (and would have been extremely sensitive to its emotional burdens).

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Kingdom of the Mad — Check out an overview/review of Lowell's "Collected Poems" that addresses the way the poet's mental illness was reflected in his writing. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/aug/09/poetry.robertlowell)
- For the Union Dead — An overview/review of Lowell's "Collected Poems" that explores the poet's creative process. (https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/for-the-union-dead)
- Robert Lowell's Biography — Learn more about Lowell via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-lowell)
- Lowell and Hardwick — Learn more about Lowell's turbulent relationship with Elizabeth Hardwick, the "wife" referred to in this poem. (https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/12/16/marriage-betrayal-and-the-letters-behind-the-dolphin)

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Berke, Matilda. "*Night Sweat.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 13 Jul 2021. Web. 6 Aug 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Berke, Matilda. "*Night Sweat.*" LitCharts LLC, July 13, 2021. Retrieved August 6, 2021. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/robert-lowell/night-sweat.