Partition

SUMMARY

At any rate, Cyril Radcliffe was certainly impartial when he first started his task, seeing as he'd never even been to the region it was his job to divvy up (India) between two cultures (that is, Hindu and Muslim) in the midst of an intense conflict, who ate different food and followed opposing religions. Back in London, the government had told him that time was of the essence; there was no hope of the two sides coming to some kind of understanding or even participating in a reasonable discussion. They'd decided that the only thing to do would be to divide India into two separate countries. The governor believed it'd be best not to be seen with Radcliffe, so they found him somewhere else to stay. They said they'd provide him with two Muslim judges and two Hindu judges to offer some advice, but ultimately he would be the one to decide things.

Locked away in a huge, secluded house under constant guard to protect him from those who might try to kill him, he settled into his task of deciding the future for millions of people. The maps of the region he'd been given were old and there was no way the census records were accurate, but he didn't have enough time to double-check the numbers or examine the places under dispute. The weather was much hotter than he was used to, and a spell of diarrhea kept him running back and forth from the toilet. Still, he completed his project in seven weeks: the boundaries between India and Pakistan were chosen, splitting up a continent.

As soon as he finished he boarded a ship for England and, like any good lawyer, was able to put the whole ordeal out of his mind. He would never go back to the region since he was scared, he told the others in his club, that he'd be killed if he did.

THEMES

THE VIOLENCE AND HUBRIS OF BRITISH COLONIALISM

"Partition" depicts the 1947 separation of British India into two nations: an independent India and a newly created Pakistan. The poem focuses on Cyril Radcliffe, a British barrister (a.k.a. lawyer) who, despite never having set foot in India before, was given "seven weeks" to decide "the fate / Of millions" by drawing official borders between Muslim and non-Muslim districts. His decision resulted in mass migration and widespread violence as countless Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs were forced to seek safety in religious majorities on the other side of new boundaries. With this context in mind, the poem highlights the devastating effects of British colonialism. The poem suggests that colonialism is inherently wrong and destructive: outsiders who are not intimately familiar with a country's history, geography, religion, and culture are not the ones who should be deciding its future.

The poem describes how completely unqualified Radcliffe was to make such a monumental decision. The speaker ironically remarks that Radcliffe was "Unbiased" about his "mission": alas, his lack of bias was due entirely to ignorance. As the speaker explains, Radcliffe had "never set eyes on the land he was called to partition." He was an outsider who couldn't understand what the consequences of his decision might be. The poem highlights just how out of his depth Radcliffe was by describing him as if he were a dazed tourist. The speaker reports that Radcliffe found India "frightfully hot" and was miserable with "dysentery" (or diarrhea) while he was there. In short, Radcliffe comes across as a person who's been put in this job merely because he's a British authority, not because he's qualified to make decisions about India's fate.

Radcliffe's unsuitability, of course, wasn't only his fault, but the fault of the arrogant British government that assigned him. By the time Radcliffe arrived on the scene, the speaker says, the British felt it was "too late / For mutual reconciliation or rational debate." This suggests the British weren't too concerned with meeting the needs of India's cultures; they had already decided they weren't going to be able to make anyone happy. The speaker also emphasizes the lack of "Time" Radcliffe had to make his decision and notes that although he was given "two Moslem and two Hindu" counselors, he alone was responsible for marking the final borders.

To further complicate matters, the "maps" and "Census Returns" he was provided were "out of date" and "almost certainly incorrect." Even if he had *wanted* to make an informed decision, this lack of resources would have made it nearly impossible. All of these details suggest that Britain put criminally little time, effort, understanding, or foresight into a decision that would impact millions of lives.

The poem thus condemns colonialism, a system in which people from *outside* of a given culture make decisions without any understanding of the harm it will cause. After his decision, Radcliffe "sailed for England," leaving behind an entire "continent" that had been "for better or worse divided." For him, the choice was something he could "forget." But for the millions of people whose lives were permanently altered, his choice was a matter of life or death. The poem implicitly argues that no such decision should ever be made by someone who doesn't deeply understand the issues at hand—and that colonialism in general is shortsighted, arrogant, dangerous, and cruel.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-25

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Unbiased at least ...
... and incompatible gods.

Some background context is necessary to fully understand "Partition," which is about the 1947 division of British India into the newly independent India and the newly created Pakistan.

When Britain agreed to grant India, which had been under the rule of the British crown for nearly a hundred years, its independence, the Indian people were divided as to whether they wanted to remain a single, united country or whether they wanted to form two new nations. (The Hindu majority wished for the country to remain united, while Muslims, the largest minority, wished to have their own nation.) Britain ultimately made the choice for them, entrusting the British barrister (or lawyer) Cyril Radcliffe with the task of drawing the boundaries between what would remain India and what would become the new Pakistan.

Radcliffe had never so much as stepped foot in India when he was appointed with the task of partitioning it—a fact the poem nods to in its ironic opening lines:

> Unbiased at least he was when he arrived on his mission,
> Having never set eyes on the land he was called to partition

The speaker is being sarcastic in calling Radcliffe "Unbiased" (meaning that he's free of bias or prejudice). Sure, he may not have been inclined to side with the Hindus or Muslims, but he also didn't know the first thing about this region and the people who live there. Radcliffe's lack of bias reflects his *ignorance*, not his magnanimity.

Calling Radcliffe's task a "mission" is another subtle jab at the man's (and Britain's) hubris: this word implies that this border creation was something noble and impressive rather than arrogant. To Radcliffe, this was just a job; he had no real connection to the cultures he was supposedly there to serve.

The speaker goes on to describe the Hindus and Muslims as "fanatically at odds, / With their different diets and incompatible gods." The speaker is stepping inside Radcliffe's mind here and reflecting British attitudes towards Indians more generally at the time. The word "fanatically" is derogatory and dismissive, implying that the British saw the Indian people as overzealous and irrational. What's more, the speaker lumps religious "incompatib[ility]" into the same sentence as "different diets," suggesting that to the British, these deep religious differences were on the same level as having different cuisines.

Despite purporting to have a lack of "bias," then, these lines convey that those tasked with deciding India's fate were in fact deeply prejudiced against the Indian people. The British didn't understand or respect the delicate, complicated dynamics at hand.

These first four lines follow an AABB rhyme scheme ("mission" rhymes with "partition," "odds" with "gods"). This simple, sing-song rhyme pattern perhaps echoes the ways that the British grossly overly-simplified India's complex religious and cultural identities during the process of partitioning it.

LINES 5-7

"Time," they had briefed ...
... lies in separation.

Before ever stepping foot in India, Radcliffe's superiors informed him that he had little "Time" in which to complete his task. They also told him that there was no chance of Hindus and Muslims coming to any kind of supposedly reasonable agreement or compromise. The only thing the British could do (according to the British, that is) was "separat[e]" these people into two different countries.

Again, these lines convey the lack of respect and understanding that the British had for India and its people: they dismissed the situation as too far gone for any other solution and depicted the Indian people as unable to figure things out "rationally."

The sonic devices in these lines make Radcliffe's superiors sound slippery and pompous. Listen to the consonance of the liquid /l/ and nasally /n/ sounds, the shushing and hissing sibilance, and all the words ending in "-tion." Readers can almost hear the spitting, self-satisfied disdain in these people's voices as they lay out their plan:

> [...] "is short. It's too late
> For mutual reconciliation or rational debate:
> The only solution now lies in separation.

The sonic chime between "solution" and "separation" makes it sound as though the British were quite pleased with themselves for coming up with this plan.

While the poem generally follows a simple AABBCC rhyme scheme, line 7 deviates from this pattern: it doesn't form a couplet with line 8 (readers won't reach its rhyme pair until line 10). This makes the word "separation" stand out even more, highlighting the decision the British made to divide India into different parts.

LINES 8-12

The Viceroy thinks, ...
... rest with you."

In lines 8-9, sibilance emphasizes the hush-hush way the British tried to keep Radcliffe's work from passing a shadow on the Viceroy's reputation:

> The Viceroy thinks, as you will see from his letter,
> That the less you are seen in his company the better,

The Viceroy ruled India on behalf of the British. Viceroy Louis Mountbatten was chosen specifically to oversee Partition, yet he didn't want to be "seen" with the man in charge of deciding what the new boundaries would look like. Instead of working together with Radcliffe, the poem declares, the Viceroy "arranged" for "other accommodation"—that is, another place for Radcliffe to stay.

This hints at all the shady politics going on behind the scenes of this monumental decision. Britain was giving India its independence, but they were only superficially interested in a successful transition. Really, they were trying to get out of India as quickly as they could so they could turn their attention elsewhere.

Radcliffe's superiors also informed him that he would get four "judges" with whom to "consult," two of whom were Muslim and two of whom were Hindu. This provision seems mostly for show, as "the final decision" remained up to Radcliffe—again, a complete outsider.

Notice that aside from the rhyme between "separation" and "accommodation" in lines 7 and 10, the poem still uses pairs of end rhymes: "letter" and "better," and "Hindu" and "you." These rhymes continue to lend an almost childlike rhythm to the poem, while also perhaps hinting at the two religions/cultures the partition is meant to divide.

LINES 13-16

Shut up in ...
... Of millions.

The second stanza begins with Radcliffe in India, holed up in an enormous house with police surrounding him every moment of the "night and day" from "assassins." Clearly, the locals weren't happy with Radcliffe's presence!

The phrase "He got down to work" seems remarkably casual, given that this "work" involved "settling the fate / Of millions." The poem's language conveys that, to Radcliffe, this momentous task was nothing more than a job. After all, *he* wouldn't have to live with the consequences of this "work."

The "lonely mansion," meanwhile, symbolizes the vast chasm between the British and the Indians:

- The word "mansion" reveals that Radcliffe was living in luxurious accommodations, the like of which most Indians would never get to experience.
- The mansion thus reflects the stark divide between the space and comfort afforded Radcliffe and the lived realities of the "millions" of people whose fate he was tasked with deciding.
- The mansion also reflects the fact that the people *making* decisions for India were sheltered from the *impacts* of those decisions. Radcliffe (and the British colonial powers more generally) could never fully comprehend the magnitude of their task and what their choices meant for those who would actually have to live with the boundaries created by Partition.

LINES 16-19

The maps at ...
... Contested areas.

Radcliffe had insufficient tools to work with when deciding the new boundaries of India and Pakistan. "The maps at his disposal were out of date," the speaker says, and "Census Returns" (essentially population records) contained "incorrect" information. Thus even if Radcliffe *had* been personally invested in making a responsible, thoughtful choice for India, he wouldn't have been able to.

Again, the poem makes it clear that the British weren't actually concerned with doing the *best* thing; they just wanted to get the job done quickly. They rushed things, failing to "check" the accuracy of the lines of their maps or to take a closer look at places to which multiple groups laid claim. That's because, the poem implies, they wouldn't be around to suffer the consequences. The Indian people would; indeed, Partition led to years of violent conflict, millions of deaths, and an enormous refugee crisis.

The parallelism and asyndeton in line 18 speed up the poem, conveying the swiftness and recklessness with which the British went about their task:

> But there was no time to check them, no time to inspect

The short /eh/ assonance and crisp /k/ and /t/ consonance of lines 17-19 add to the poem's clipped atmosphere :

> And the Census Returns almost certainly incorrect,
> But there was no time to check them, no time to inspect
> Contested areas. [...]

The sibilance of these lines ("Census," "almost certainly," "inspect / Contested") adds a sinister hiss to the poem as well. The flurry of sounds suggests a flurry of messy motion.

LINES 19-22

The weather was ...
... or worse divided.

These lines further illustrate Radcliffe's unsuitability for the job at hand. Not only was Radcliffe relying on inaccurate, outdated information, but he also struggled to adjust to India's intense heat and was afflicted by multiple bouts of diarrhea (likely from eating unfamiliar foods) that kept him running to the toilet.

Radcliffe was utterly out of his element, and his discomfort should make readers question why someone who couldn't handle everyday life in India was given the power to determine India's future. The poem also implies that Radcliffe's misery distracted him from the job he was there to do; chances are, he wanted to get it over with and get out of there.

Persistent /t/ consonance ("frightfully hot," "bout of dysentery," etc.) and short /aw/ assonance ("hot," "constantly on the trot") make these lines sound almost comical. Radcliffe doesn't exactly come across as a heroic—or even sympathetic—figure. The crude description of Radcliffe running to the toilet also undermines the seriousness of the whole endeavor. Such gastrointestinal distress would be nothing compared to the horror that would arise once the country was divided.

After just "seven weeks," the speaker continues, Radcliffe finished what he set out to do: he mapped out the new boundaries of India and Pakistan, dividing up the country "for better or worse." The casual, colloquial phrase "for better or worse" again implies an inappropriate, even immoral, nonchalance on the part of Radcliffe and the British. The job was done, but Partition also led to immense bloodshed and the displacement of millions of people. Simply writing this off as "for better or worse" conveys a remarkable amount of ignorance and disrespect.

LINES 23-25

The next day ...
... might get shot.

The poem's final stanza is much shorter than the previous two: it has just three lines, and this brevity reflects just how little Radcliffe thought about Partition once it was over. While the consequences for India and Pakistan would be immense, Radcliffe was able to pack up and set "sail for England" as soon as he'd completed his assignment, effectively washing his hands of the bloodshed he'd caused.

Like any "good lawyer," the speaker says, Radcliffe "quickly forg[o]t / The case." To him, the partition of India was only ever a job, one that he could simply put behind him the moment it was over. But for the "millions" of Indians who had to live with the notorious "Radcliffe Line"—the name for Radcliffe's boundary between India and Pakistan—there was no "forget[ting]." Families were torn apart; people who had lived in one place for generations were forced to flee their ancestral homes as they sought relative safety in religious majorities on the other side of new boundaries.

Of course, the poem doesn't focus on the extreme violence and mass displacement set in motion by Radcliffe's decision (and by colonialism more generally, as Partition didn't happen in a vacuum but rather after a century of British exploitation of India). Instead, it points out Radcliffe's decision to never return to India for fear of "get[ting] shot." The poem's lack of elaboration on what Indians faced after Partition went into effect mirrors Radcliffe's own lack of investment in the consequences of his decision. The mention of Radcliffe talking to "his Club" about his fear further suggests that he saw the danger as a kind of bragging right; he knew what he did was unpopular, but instead of focusing on the consequences for Indians, he talked about the potential danger *he* would face were he ever to return.

To Radcliffe, and to the British more generally, it didn't really matter what happened to India *after* Partition; they only cared about making a decision and getting out as quickly as possible. Thus, the poem points not only to the devastating effects of British colonialism in India but also highlights the inherent evils of colonialism itself.

SYMBOLS

THE LONELY MANSION

The "lonely mansion" that Radcliffe stays in symbolizes the vast gulf in power between the British and Indian people, as well as the way the British were sheltered from the impact of their decisions in India.

The word "mansion" implies luxurious accommodation—something the majority of Indians would never have experienced. Right off the bat, then, it's clear that Radcliffe could never fully understand the everyday lives of those whose fates were in his hands.

Saying that Radcliffe was "Shut up" in this mansion further implies that he had little, if any, contact with the Indian people. The fact that the mansion was guarded, meanwhile, implies that there was a great deal of hostility between the British and the Indians, who clearly had no real say in their own future.

The contrast between the Indian "millions" and the seeming "loneliness" of this mansion emphasizes just how far removed Radcliffe was from Indian locals. Being "shut up" in this mansion essentially means he was cut off from reality itself. All in all, the mention of the "lonely mansion" hammers home the injustice of a distant colonial power getting to shape another nation's fate.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-15:** "Shut up in a lonely mansion, with police

> night and day / Patrolling the gardens to keep the assassins away, / He got down to work"

POETIC DEVICES

ASYNDETON

In the poem's second stanza, asyndeton helps to create a casual tone that's at odds with the seriousness of Radcliffe's task. Take lines 15-16, where the speaker describes Radcliffe settling into his "lonely mansion" and starting his task:

> He got down to work, to the task of settling the fate
> Of millions. [...]

Asyndeton speeds up the line, making this transition to "work" seem almost flippant. There's a clear juxtaposition between the daunting nature of Radcliffe's work and the casual way in which he simply gets "down to [...] the task of settling the fate / Of millions."

In lines 18-19, asyndeton again speeds up the poem. The lack of any coordinating conjunction between the two clauses here evokes Radcliffe's rapidity and carelessness:

> But there was no time to check them, no time to inspect

Parallel phrasing adds to the chaos of the lines, that repeated "no time to" creating a sense of franticness. Likewise, the asyndeton of the stanza's final lines makes the clauses speed past, suggesting a rapid—and reckless—race to the finish line:

> But in seven weeks it was done, the frontiers decided,
> A continent for better or worse divided.

Note that "for better or worse" is also an example of understatement: Partition led to the violent deaths and displacement of millions of people. But the poem's swift, casual language implies that Radcliffe and the British didn't particularly care; they just wanted to get the job done and move on.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 15-16:** "He got down to work, to the task of settling the fate / Of millions."
- **Lines 18-19:** "But there was no time to check them, no time to inspect / Contested areas."
- **Lines 21-22:** "But in seven weeks it was done, the frontiers decided, / A continent for better or worse divided."

CONSONANCE

Consonance (and occasional assonance) makes the language of "Partition" more memorable, and it also draws readers' attention to specific words and phrases.

Lines 5-7, for example, are filled with sharp /t/ sounds, nasal /n/ sounds, lolling /l/ sounds, and sibilance. The poem also features four words in two lines that end in or include "-tion." Altogether, the thick consonance of these lines makes the dialogue sound slimy and self-satisfied; Radcliffe's bosses sound distinctly mealy-mouthed:

> For mutual reconciliation or rational debate:
> The only solution now lies in separation.

This language sounds stiff and formal, suggesting that the British don't feel very connected to or emotionally invested in the people whose fate they're deciding. Note, too, just how similar the sounds are of the words "solution" and "separation." This sonic similarly suggests that Partition sounded like a good idea on the *surface* of things, even if the reality was far less elegant.

The sibilance in lines 8-9, meanwhile, sounds rather threatening:

> The Viceroy thinks, as you will see from his letter,
> That the less you are seen in his company the better,

The "Viceroy" doesn't want to be "seen" with Radcliffe because he (the Viceroy) wants to preserve his own reputation. These slippery /s/ sounds evoke the whispery hiss of a snake, a classic symbol of treachery and deception. In this way, the poem's sounds help to evoke the Viceroy's (and the British government's) character.

There's more sibilance, plus short /eh/ assonance and crisp /c/ and /t/ consonance, in lines 17-19:

> And the Census Returns almost certainly incorrect,
> But there was no time to check them, no time to inspect
> Contested areas. [...]

The sharp, clipped sounds here convey the swift efficiency with which Radcliffe went about his job (even in the absence of accurate information).

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "partition"

- **Line 3:** “peoples,” “odds”
- **Line 4:** “different diets,” “gods”
- **Line 5:** “short,” “It's too late”
- **Line 6:** “mutual reconciliation or rational debate”
- **Line 7:** “only solution now lies in separation”
- **Line 8:** “Viceroy thinks,” “see,” “letter”
- **Line 9:** “less,” “seen”
- **Line 13:** “police”
- **Line 14:** “Patrolling”
- **Line 16:** “millions,” “maps”
- **Line 17:** “Census,” “Returns,” “almost certainly incorrect”
- **Line 18:** “time to,” “check,” “time to inspect”
- **Line 19:** “Contested”
- **Line 20:** “dysentery kept,” “constantly,” “trot”
- **Line 21:** “done,” “decided”
- **Line 22:** “divided”

ALLITERATION

Like consonance, alliteration adds emphasis to specific words and phrases in the poem.

In lines 2-3, for instance, the plosive alliteration of "**p**artition" and "**p**eoples" highlights what Radcliffe is really being called to divide: not just land, but *human beings*. The booming /d/ sounds of "**d**ifferent **d**iets" emphasize a superficial difference between Hindu and Muslim Indians, in turn suggesting the lack of respect and seriousness with which the British treated India's diverse cultures.

In the final lines of the second stanza, heavy, rhythmic /d/ alliteration ("**d**one," "**d**ecided," "**d**ivided") underscores the finality of Radcliffe's decision. Although he got to "forget" about this "case" the second he was finished with it, the millions of people who actually lived on the land he "divided" would be stuck with his choices.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “partition”
- **Line 3:** “peoples”
- **Line 4:** “different,” “diets”
- **Line 7:** “solution,” “separation”
- **Line 13:** “police”
- **Line 14:** “Patrolling,” “assassins,” “away”
- **Line 16:** “millions,” “maps”
- **Line 17:** “incorrect”
- **Line 18:** “inspect”
- **Line 21:** “done,” “decided”
- **Line 22:** “divided”

IRONY

The opening lines of "Partition" are ironic. The poem's speaker says that when Radcliffe arrived in India, he was "Unbiased": impartial or objective. In other words, he wasn't inclined to take one side or the other and, one might assume, well-suited to figuring out a solution to the fighting between "two peoples fanatically at odds."

It quickly becomes clear that this opening is a bit tongue-in-cheek, however, as the speaker goes on to explain that the *reason* Radcliffe was unbiased was that he had "never set eyes on the land" whose future he was in charge of deciding. Calling someone "unbiased" might sound like a compliment, but the speaker is really pointing out how completely *unqualified* Radcliffe was for the job. He was unbiased not because he was especially patient and magnanimous, but because he was totally ignorant about those "two peoples."

There's some subtler irony at the end of the second stanza, when the speaker sardonically describes just how ill-suited Radcliffe was to the Indian climate. "The weather was frightfully hot," the speaker says, and Radcliffe was waylaid by "a bout of dysentery" that "kept him on the trot" (that is, running to the toilet). There's a mismatch here between the immense responsibility Radcliffe faced and cutesy, colloquial language like "on the trot" and "frightfully hot." Such language makes the whole situation sound like a simple holiday gone wrong. The speaker is using this understated, lighthearted language to suggest that Radcliffe and the British didn't take their job as seriously as they should have.

The speaker never comes right out and says that Radcliffe was inept or that the British were criminally irresponsible for putting as little time and thought into Partition as they did. Instead, these opening lines set the tone for the poem. The speaker's use of irony suggests that Radcliffe shouldn't have been chosen and that the British should have handled everything differently, but the reader is given the chance to come to this conclusion on their own.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** “Unbiased at least he was when he arrived on his mission, / Having never set eyes on the land he was called to partition”
- **Lines 19-22:** “The weather was frightfully hot, / And a bout of dysentery kept him constantly on the trot, / But in seven weeks it was done, the frontiers decided, / A continent for better or worse divided.”

VOCABULARY

Unbiased (Line 1) - Objective or impartial; free from bias or prejudice.

Partition (Line 2) - Divide into separate parts.

Fanatically at odds (Line 3) - The speaker is saying these people are in the midst of an intense conflict.

Incompatible (Line 4) - Unable to exist alongside one another.

Briefed (Line 5) - Informed.

Mutual reconciliation (Lines 5-6) - Both sides coming to an agreement or compromise.

Viceroy (Lines 8-9) - Someone who governs a colony or colonized country on behalf of the monarch of another country (so in this case, Viceroy Louis Mountbatten governed India on behalf of King George VI of the United Kingdom).

Accommodation (Line 10) - A place to stay.

Hindu (Line 11) - Someone who practices Hinduism.

Moslem (Line 11) - An antiquated variant of the word "Muslim," which describes someone who practices Islam. (Note that while this spelling was predominant in Auden's time, it has fallen out of use as many Muslims find it offensive.)

Census Returns (Line 17) - Records of official surveys that collect information about a population.

Contested (Lines 18-19) - Disputed; at the center of an argument or debate.

A bout of dysentery (Line 20) - A *bout* is a short but intense period or spell, and *dysentery* is an intestinal infection that results in diarrhea.

On the trot (Line 20) - Constantly busy (in this case, rushing to and from the toilet).

Frontiers (Line 21) - The boundaries or borders of these countries.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Partition" contains 25 lines broken up into three stanzas. Most (but not all) lines also form rhyming couplets, filling the poem with simple, sing-song music that clashes with the seriousness of the subject at hand.

Note, too, that the first two stanzas are quite long: stanza 1 focuses on Radcliffe's (utter lack of) preparation, while stanza 2 focuses on what happens when Radcliffe arrives in India and gets "down to work." With just three lines, the poem's final stanza is considerably shorter.

This is by design: in this stanza, Radcliffe hightails it out of India and "quickly forget[s]" about his task. The brevity of the final stanza reflects the ease and rapidity with which Radcliffe was able to move on from Partition—a luxury the millions of people whose future he decided didn't have.

METER

"Partition" doesn't use a regular meter. Instead, its language feels casual—at times, perhaps inappropriately so. The speaker uses colloquial phrases such as "got down to work," "frightfully hot," "for better or worse," and "on the trot" that belie the historic magnitude of the event at hand. The poem's conversational language helps to convey just how little men like Radcliffe were affected by Partition, even as it led to the violent deaths of millions of Indians.

RHYME SCHEME

"Partition" consists, for the most part, of rhyming couplets. As such, the poem follows a rhyme scheme of AABBCC and so on. The neat rhyme scheme adds some sing-song music to the poem. There's something almost *too* simple about all these perfectly rhyming pairs of rhymes, which perhaps mirror the way that the British tried to split India's diverse cultural identity into two neat halves.

Again, there are some moments where the poem veers away from couplets. For example, line 7 rhymes with line 10 rather than line 8, as readers might expect:

> The only solution now lies in separation.
> The Viceroy thinks, as you will see from his letter,
> That the less you are seen in his company the better,
> So we've arranged to provide you with other
> accommodation.

This disrupts the predictable pattern established in the first 6 lines of the poem by *separating* line 7 from its other half. Not coincidentally, line 7 also introduces the idea of "separation." The poem's rhymes subtly reflect the poem's content.

The final stanza tweaks the couplet pattern as well: it begins with a single unrhyming line before concluding with one last end rhyme between "not" and "shot." This variation on the rhyme scheme might evoke the swiftness with which Radcliffe "quickly forget[s]" India.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is anonymous. The speaker never refers to themselves at all, instead focusing entirely on an unnamed man whose job is to "partition" a "land" that's being fought over by "two peoples fanatically at odds."

While the poem identifies neither the speaker nor the subject of the poem, it's clear that the speaker is referring to Cyril Radcliffe, the British barrister (or lawyer) who was in charge of partitioning India in 1947. The speaker, then, might be seen as an extension of Auden himself, who uses the poem to criticize Britain's colonization of India and the terrible legacy of Partition.

SETTING

The poem is set in British India in the weeks leading up to the

1947 Partition.

The speaker says that the man the poem follows had "never set eyes on the land he was called to partition," which was true of Cyril Radcliffe, the British lawyer tasked with dividing India into two new countries. The speaker describes the man as having to divvy up the region "Between two peoples" serving "incompatible gods." This refers to the Hindus and Muslims who made up the majority of India's population.

The poem draws attention to how disconnected Radcliffe was from the Indian people by describing the "lonely mansion" he stayed in while deciding India's fate. The speaker says that police kept a 24-hour guard "to keep the assassins away," suggesting how unwelcome Radcliffe was and the danger he was in while making this decision.

The speaker also says that "the weather was frightfully hot" and that the man kept having to run to the toilet due to "dysentery" (or diarrhea). This suggests how unaccustomed Radcliffe was to India's climate and diet—further emphasizing that he was an outsider.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Wystan Hugh Auden (1907-1973) had such a distinctive and unusual poetic voice that many critics see him as a school of his own: he and his contemporaries Cecil Day-Lewis, Stephen Spender, Christopher Isherwood, and Louis MacNeice are sometimes classed together as the "Auden group."

Unlike many of the modernist poets of his generation, Auden didn't abandon metered poetry for free verse. Instead, Auden was a great proponent of old poetic forms, plain and approachable language, and light verse. Poetry, he believed, didn't have to be highfalutin to be meaningful. His poems often deal with death and suffering in a voice that's equal parts crisp, witty, and melancholic. He also delighted in writing everything from pantoums to villanelles to scandalous limericks.

Auden's early work flirted with social and political aspirations; "September 1, 1939" is a leading example of such (as well as an homage to another political poem, W.B. Yeats's"Easter, 1916"). As time went on, however, especially in the wake of World War II, Auden became increasingly skeptical of poetry's ability to effect change. Nevertheless, even as his poetry became increasingly personal, his work remained at the forefront of culture while also retaining his signature talents for capturing everyday people's speech and displaying technical expertise.

"Partition" was published in Auden's 1969 collection, *City Without Walls*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Auden wrote "Partition" in 1966, nearly 20 years after the partition of British India in 1947. After World War II, Britain struggled to maintain its vast empire—including India, which had been under British rule since 1857. As Britain made plans to pull out of India in 1947, the question arose as to whether India would remain one united nation or partition itself along political and religious lines.

Indians themselves were divided on the issue. Many Hindus, including Mahatma Ghandi, wished for India to remain united and foresaw violence and displacement if it were to be partitioned. Others, including many Muslims, felt that Pakistan already existed in essence—it just needed to be made official. Ultimately, Britain partitioned India along religious lines not because that is what most people wanted or because they thought it would provide the most stability and peace, but because it would allow Britain to transition their power and extricate themselves from India more quickly.

Partition didn't happen *because* of "two peoples fanatically at odds," but rather was a major catalyst for the violence between them. Diverse religious groups, including Hindus and Muslims, had lived together in comparative peace for centuries. The quick, careless transition of power by the British exacerbated tensions between these groups, creating instability and uncertainty in the region and leading to massive outbreaks of violence.

Partition displaced roughly 15 million people, who suddenly found themselves on the wrong side of the newly created religious borders. People fled their ancestral homes as massacres broke out, and more than a million people lost their lives.

Auden's poem focuses specifically on Cyril Radcliffe, the British lawyer in charge of deciding what the boundaries between India and Pakistan would be. The "Radcliffe Line" is notorious to this day for splitting communities down the middle and inciting what many would come to call a mutual genocide.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Succinct Overview of India's Partition — Watch a TedEd video explaining the British partition of India, its bloody aftermath, and how its effects are still felt today. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DrcCTgwbsjc)
- The Poet's Life and Career — Read a Poetry Foundation biography of Auden. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/w-h-auden)
- A 2018 Humanities Feature on Auden — Read an article juxtaposing the poet's disheveled persona with his disciplined literary output. (https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2018/summer/feature/the-messy-genius-w-h-auden)

- "Children of Partition" — Watch a video in which five childhood survivors of the 1947 Partition describe how the event changed their lives. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wD1R0IxH0v4)
- The Joy of Reading Auden — Susan McDonald writes in the Guardian about the lasting impact of Auden's poetry. (https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/dec/26/how-i-fell-in-love-with-wh-auden-again-and-again)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER W. H. AUDEN POEMS

- As I Walked Out One Evening
- Funeral Blues (Stop all the clocks)
- Musée des Beaux Arts
- Refugee Blues
- September 1, 1939
- The More Loving One
- The Shield of Achilles
- The Unknown Citizen

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Mottram, Darla. "*Partition.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 2 Aug 2022. Web. 30 Aug 2022.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Mottram, Darla. "*Partition.*" LitCharts LLC, August 2, 2022. Retrieved August 30, 2022. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/w-h-auden/partition.