Power

SUMMARY

The speaker says that poetry and rhetoric are two distinct forms of language and that poetry is like willingly sacrificing your own life in order to save your children.

The speaker feels like she's lost in a desert surrounded by fresh, painful gunshot wounds. All she can think about when trying to sleep is a dead Black child whose face and body have been torn apart by bullets, the blood pouring from his wounds becoming the only liquid in this desert. The speaker can practically taste it, and this makes her sick. But she is desperately thirsty; her mouth is dry and cracking and, seemingly of its own accord, longing for the boy's wet blood as it sinks into the sand that surrounds the speaker in this vast desert. There's no beauty or magic to help her find her way. She wants to turn this boy's death, and the hatred that surrounds it, into some kind of power, which she can then use to heal him. But before she can do so, his bones are bleached by the hot sun.

The speaker recounts the story of a young boy in Queens, New York, who was shot and killed by a policeman. The policeman stood in the child's pooling blood and told him to die. He was caught saying those words on tape. When he was tried for murder, the policeman claimed that he saw only the boy's race and that's why he killed him. He was caught saying those words on tape too.

The policeman, who is 37 years old and has been a policeman for 13 years, was acquitted today. A jury consisting of 11 white men said that they thought this was the right thing to do. The one Black woman on the jury agreed with the others, though she really had no choice but to agree; for centuries, the speaker points out, Black women have had to go along with what white men say in order to earn their approval. Even though the Black woman had some power on this jury, she gave it up in that moment, forced to harden her feelings toward a child of her own race and instead become complicit in the deaths of Black children everywhere.

The speaker says that she's been trying and failing to dig into her feelings of anger and pain. She wants her poetry to be truthful and meaningful, not empty rhetoric. If she fails to write genuine poetry, then the power she *could* harness through poetry will become rotten, useless, wasted. And eventually, that wasted power will boil over and explode, and pushing the speaker to take some horrible action, like brutally raping and beating and burning an elderly white woman, a mother herself. If the speaker were to do that, she knows that society would pity the white woman and sing the same old tune: "She didn't deserve to die, that harmless woman. Those people are animals."

THEMES

POETRY VS. RHETORIC

In "Power," the speaker, whom readers can take to be a representation of the poet Audre Lorde herself, struggles with how to use language to express her response to the racist killing of a Black child. Throughout the poem, the speaker contrasts "poetry" with "rhetoric." "Poetry," here, seems to refer to language infused with truth, lived experience, and genuine passion—the kind of language that spurs action, and through which the speaker wants to channel her "power." "Rhetoric," meanwhile, is nice-sounding but ultimately empty speech—words that might seem logical or convincing but aren't backed by the conviction that fuels true poetry.

Claiming that "The difference between poetry and rhetoric / is being ready to kill / yourself / instead of your children," the speaker equates poetry with the willingness to act; "poetry," the speaker implies, is a kind of selfless conviction felt in the soul. Poetry isn't always pretty, but it's truthful—and thus less susceptible to corruption than slippery rhetoric. This latter kind of language might sound nice, but it doesn't have the same tether of conviction and thus lacks poetry's "power." Such rhetoric might include the kind of language that the jury used to acquit the policeman in the poem—language that proved persuasive, but was rooted more in racism and injustice than in deeply-held ideals or beliefs.

As she writes about the murder that inspired this poem, the speaker fears being unable to "learn to use / the difference between poetry and rhetoric." The speaker describes the writing process as an attempt to transform "hatred and destruction" into "power," which speaks to the capacity of language to be a force for change. But, importantly, the speaker doesn't just want to jot down any words—she wants to capture her feelings and the horror of the situation objectively, properly, rather than cloak them in pleasant rhetoric. In other words, she believes that art has power, but she struggles with how to turn the horror of this murder into art. She feels lost, looking for the "imagery or magic" often associated with poetry, perhaps because poetic devices might feel like empty, inappropriate "rhetoric" here.

Ultimately, the speaker believes that poetry must come from mining the deep devastation she feels in response to this child's death—but mining such pain is, of course, painful. Writing that she "[has] not been able to touch the destruction / within me," the speaker indicates that she has been trying, and failing, to create poetry that properly expresses the anger inside her. And for the speaker, figuring out a way to "touch" those feelings is

imperative. She needs to use her "power," because otherwise that power will "run corrupt" or "lie limp and useless."

Put differently, the speaker fears that she might become a passive bystander, or even worse, that her rage might spill over into new violence if she doesn't learn how to channel her feelings into poetry that makes a difference. Lorde's poem thus captures the capacity that language can have to sway human behavior and release intense emotions, while also demonstrating that choosing the right language can be both very important and challenging.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 16-18
- Lines 43-48

THE PAIN AND BURDEN OF RACISM

The speaker of "Power" is haunted by the death of a Black boy killed by a racist white police officer. The poem illustrates the pain and burden of living in a deeply prejudiced society, demonstrating how racism is at once gut-wrenching, oppressive, and so infuriating that it can potentially spark violence.

Throughout "Power," the speaker exposes the horror of the overt racism of her world. Lorde's rich imagery captures the brutality of the boy's death, which the speaker repeatedly points out was an act based borne of racial hatred. But to the speaker, the child's death isn't just horrific: it's also emblematic of the senseless, terrible violence that has been inflicted against Black people throughout history, and the quick acquittal of the boy's white killer reflects "four centuries" of racial injustice. In other words, this child's death is terrible, but not an isolated or new event.

The speaker also illustrates how deep-seated, systemic racism doesn't just perpetuate violence and injustice: it can even force people to become complicit in their own oppression. Describing the officer's trial, the speaker notes how the "one black Woman" on the otherwise all-white jury was "convinced" of the officer's innocence, not necessarily out of any real conviction, but because her small body had been metaphorically "dragged [...] over the hot coals of four centuries of white male approval."

In other words, the speaker believes the historical relationship between white men and Black women in America meant that she *had* to agree with the white men's assessment of the crime; she didn't have enough social or political power to assert her own opinion. Racism is so deeply ingrained that the woman was either too afraid to speak up or knew her voice would be overruled, regardless of what she said. As a result, the Black woman on the jury "[made] a graveyard for our children," becoming a passive bystander in a hate crime rather than trying to protect future Black boys. And this, the speaker says, is another painful way in which a racist society maintains the status quo: forcing Black people like this jury member to "let go" even of "the first real power" they attain.

In a society that not only lets white men get away with killing Black boys but also pushes Black women to metaphorically fill their own "womb[s] with cement," the speaker feels an overwhelming sense of powerlessness and despair. The speaker writes that she is "trapped on a desert," suggesting that the world around her seems barren, hopeless, and stifling. The image of the dead boy's "blood" being "the only liquid for miles" suggests that the speaker can only think about the murder, which fills her with a desperate desire to do something despite knowing how difficult creating change will be—that "the sun will bleach" the boy's "bones" more quickly than she can "heal" him.

The speaker then ends the poem with a disturbing image: she imagines that if she doesn't learn how to harness the power of her words, her thwarted power might bubble over into senseless violence against an elderly white woman. Yet she also knows that should she resort to violence, white society won't understand; instead, people will express sympathy for the white victim and use the speaker's violence to reaffirm the racist belief that Black people like the speaker are "beasts"—that they are simply prone to violence, rather than pushed to desperation by a society that kills their children.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 5-55

POLICE BRUTALITY AND RACIAL INJUSTICE

"Power" alludes to the real-world racist killing of a young Black boy, Clifford Glover, by a white policeman named Thomas Shea. Through graphic imagery and vivid language, the speaker condemns police brutality against Black people and implies that the American justice system is essentially designed to protect systemic racism rather than dismantle it.

Even though she doesn't name the people involved, Lorde gives a fairly direct summary of the murder of Clifford Glover, portraying the crime as an undeniable instance of racist police brutality. The speaker writes that the officer "shot down a ten year old," the phrase "shot down" capturing the mindless and crude violence of the crime. Lorde even quotes from tapes that caught Shea saying, "Die you little motherfucker," and "I didn't notice the size nor nothing else / only the color."

To Shea, apparently, Glover was nothing more than his skin color. And because of that skin color, Shea clearly viewed his victim as less than human: in the trial, he admitted, "I didn't notice the size nor nothing else / only the color." Referring to

"the size," rather than *his* size, the policeman suggests that Glover was an object rather than a person. He saw the boy's size and "color," but nothing else; his race made him less than human in the eyes of his killer.

Yet despite the obvious racism and cruelty of the policeman's words, the speaker notes that he made these claims "in his own defense." He seemed to trust that the criminal justice system would protect him from repercussions, validating his racism and letting him get away with killing a child. And that's exactly what happened: the nearly all-white jury set Shea "free," having been "satisfied / justice had been done." This acquittal, the speaker implies, is a classic example of how the justice system perpetuates white supremacy, protecting white people in positions of authority rather than getting actual justice for Black victims of racist violence.

The speaker is clearly disgusted at the policeman's acquittal, and she feels her own rage and despair threaten to bubble over into further violence. Given the way the murder torments the speaker, "Power" demonstrates that police brutality is a terrible yet deeply entrenched part of racial injustice in America.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 5-20
- Lines 21-28
- Lines 29-33

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

The difference between ...
... of your children.

Lorde opens by setting up one of the poem's central themes. In a powerful, if somewhat cryptic, statement, the speaker contrasts "poetry" and "rhetoric," two different forms of language. She aligns poetry with "being ready to kill / yourself / instead of your children," suggesting that poetry involves passion, conviction, and even bravery. In contrast, rhetoric is presumably more passive, even cowardly; the implication is that those who speak or listen to rhetoric don't share the strong beliefs that inspire poetry.

This first stanza also sets the style and tone for the rest of the poem. Lorde relies heavily on enjambment, breaking this sentence into four lines without any punctuation (except for the final period). The first line, "The difference between poetry and rhetoric," stands out on a line longer than the ones that follow, hinting that this "difference" will be an important theme throughout the poem. Similarly, the second line feels stark and violent, as it breaks off right after the word "kill." Right away, the speaker thus indicates that the poem will involve themes of violence, and her impassioned tone begins to show.

Additionally, the idea of killing oneself versus one's children points to the murder Lorde discusses throughout the poem, as well as the Black jury member's decision to acquit Thomas Shea—which, in a way, made her complicit in the killing of Black children, even if she had no real choice but to succumb to her fellow jury members' courtroom rhetoric.

LINES 5-7

I am trapped ...
... of my sleep

In the second stanza, the speaker begins to write in the first person, veering away from the more impersonal and assertive tone of the opening lines. Instead, the poem becomes personal: the speaker expresses her sense of being "trapped," helpless to do anything about the violence of a Black child's death.

Readers can assume that these lines mark the beginning of an allusion to the killing of Clifford Glover, a 10-year-old Black boy shot by a white police officer in 1973. The speaker uses a metaphor of a "desert of raw gunshot wounds" to capture her desperate sorrow in response to this event. Like someone wandering thirsty and distressed through the desert, unable to think of anything but the need for water, the speaker can't think of anything besides Glover's bloodied face. The image of a "dead child dragging his shattered black / face off the edge of my sleep" suggests that the child haunts the speaker even when she tries to rest.

The imagery of this passage simultaneously captures the horror of Glover's murder and the depths of the speaker's emotions. The words "raw" and "shattered" point to the grotesque violence of the boy's death, and the word "dragging" suggests that Glover is struggling, perhaps crawling on the ground in agony after being shot. The speaker is preoccupied with thoughts of how Glover died, with his suffering and helplessness. And by ending line 6 after the word "black," the speaker emphasizes for the first time that this murder was driven by racism.

Of course, the speaker doesn't name Glover or his killer—she only refers to him as "a dead child," revealing that he haunts her almost like the ghost, who could stand for any Black child killed via police brutality. The poem is at once precise and vague, evoking the horror of this specific incident while also suggesting that it's one of many.

LINES 8-16

blood from his ...
... I am lost

Continuing the metaphor of being "trapped on a desert," the speaker discusses the dead child's blood. The image of his "punctured cheeks and shoulders" adds to the graphic description of his murder, making it easier for the reader to picture the boy's body. Writing that his blood "is the only liquid for miles," the speaker again suggests that she cannot stop

thinking about Glover's death, like someone lost in the desert who can think only about water. This metaphor also adds to the poem's desperate tone, as the speaker imagines "miles" of dry and hopeless terrain stretched out before her.

But the speaker doesn't just imagine seeing the boy's blood—she imagines tasting it. This "imagined taste" makes her stomach churn, indicating that she feels Glover's murder in a visceral, physical sense; the thought of the violence and brutality makes her sick. Even so, the speaker says she thirsts for his blood: her lips are "dry," again like someone craving water in the desert, and the blood's "wetness" seems to offer some relief.

In line 14, the phrase "without loyalty or reason" might refer to the speaker's mouth—that is, her mouth opens seemingly of its own accord. Her "dry lips" thirst for the boy's blood, and in doing so show disloyalty to the speaker, the boy, or them both. The speaker implies that she's not only unable to stop thinking about the murder, but that thinking about it also satisfies some need inside of her—perhaps a need to dwell on violence in order to understand it. Perhaps she feels guilty or disloyal for dwelling on this boy's death for the purposes of her own art.

Unlike in later sections of the poem, Lorde uses no punctuation throughout this passage. Consistent enjambment breaks one long sentence into relatively short, choppy segments with no pauses between them, almost as if the speaker is stumbling through the lines and gasping for air. The intense sibilance of these lines evokes the hiss of those gasps as well. For example, listen to all the /s/ sounds in lines 14-15:

> thirsting for the wetness of his blood
> as it sinks into the whiteness

The poem's form thus captures some of the speaker's desperation as the boy's blood "sinks into the whiteness / of the desert where I am lost." This continuation of the desert metaphor suggests that even if thinking about Glover's death somehow satisfies the speaker, she's still helpless, "lost," because she lives in a racist world where "whiteness" consumes everything. In other words, a Black boy's death disappears like water absorbed into desert sand, because no one cares enough to do anything to help.

LINES 17-20

without imagery or ...
... his bones quicker.

In this passage, the speaker reveals that she wants to turn Glover's death into a specific kind of power: the power that drives passionate, well-written, and deeply-felt poetry.

The speaker says that she lacks "imagery or magic," presumably referring to poetic imagery and suggesting that good poetry creates a kind of "magic." Writing that she wants to "make power out of hatred and destruction," the speaker indicates that she wants to derive inspiration from the boy's murder—to channel her feelings of rage and confusion into powerful poetry, which might even compel readers into action.

In lines 18 and 19, the speaker then uses anaphora to stress her struggle to write this kind of poetry. She repeats "trying to" at the start of these two lines, hinting that her efforts so far have been futile. For the speaker knows that nothing she can do can bring back the murdered child: she writes that she wants to "heal my dying son with kisses," to save him by giving him the love and protection he lacked at the moment of his death. By referring to Glover as her own "son," the speaker implies that this violence reverberates throughout Black communities—that it affects more than its immediate victims.

But, the speaker, continues, "the sun will bleach his bones quicker." With this line, the speaker revives the desert metaphor, while also recalling the image of Glover's body lying helpless after he was shot. The speaker imagines the boy exposed, subject to the "bleaching," scorching pain of racism and violence.

LINES 21-24

A policeman who ...
... At his trial

The speaker transitions from imagining Glover's body to actually describing the scene of his death. At the same time, the speaker replaces the loosely punctuated lines of the previous stanza with a more matter-of-fact, formal sentence structure.

For the first time, the speaker gives specific context for the subject of the poem. She's discussing how a policeman killed a 10-year-old boy in "Queens," a borough of New York City, and how the policeman stood in the boy's blood and told him to die. The speaker continually draws attention to the victim's youth, noting his age, calling him a "boy," and describing his blood as "childish." Meanwhile, the speaker highlights the power differential between the murderer and his victim by describing how the policeman "stood over the boy" and wore "cop shoes," looming tall and indifferent to the boy's innocent suffering.

Note the polysyndeton of these lines:

> stood over the boy with his cop shoes in childish blood
> and a voice said “Die you little motherfucker” and there are tapes to prove it. At his trial

The repeated "ands" creates a piling up effect, as though the speaker wants to get all the information down quickly yet describing the murder pains her. In quoting the policeman's words, and noting that "tapes" caught him saying such horrible things, the speaker also expresses clear shock and disgust that he could treat a child so cruelly.

The full stop after "it," meanwhile, brings the line to an abrupt

halt that suggests the officer's unequivocal guilt: tapes prove what he did, and that's all there is to it. And yet, that's actually not all there is to it: the line continues, "At his trial," and the poem then goes on to detail how despite this clear-cut "proof" of the policeman's murderous intent, justice was not served.

LINES 25-28

this policeman said ...
... prove that, too.

The speaker quotes what the policeman said at his trial. Wryly stating that he said these words "in his own defense," the speaker reveals her incredulity at the policeman's blatant and unapologetic racism. Citing the tapes that recorded the trial, the speaker recalls how the policeman said he killed Glover because he only saw his "color." He didn't notice that he was shooting an innocent child; his actions were motivated purely by racism.

Note how the policeman doesn't even use personal pronouns when talking about Glover, saying "the size" and "the color" rather than "his size" or "his color." The officer dehumanizes Glover, treating him via language as a thing rather than a person.

Reiterating that "there are tapes to prove that, too," the speaker again reveals her disbelief that the policeman said such horrible things on tape, and that he actually believed that his "defense" justified his actions. Though of course, as the next section proves, the policeman *did* convince his listeners that his crime was justified.

LINES 29-33

Today that 37 ...
... had been done

Starting a new stanza and a new sentence, the speaker pivots to the present. She situates the timeline of the poem, writing that "Today" the policeman was acquitted. Referring to "Today" suggests that the speaker is writing this poem while she processes the news of Shea's acquittal: the poem captures an immediate, gut reaction to the outcome of the trial.

The speaker again calls attention to the power dynamics at play, noting that the policeman was a "37 year old white man" who had been on the police force for "13 years." In other words, his age, race, and profession all put the policeman in a position of great power over the "boy" with "childish blood" whom he shot. That power, the speaker suggests, explains why the policeman "was set free."

The speaker notes that the jury included "eleven white men," and the specification of race and gender here is important: it implies that these jury members were sympathetic (perhaps blatantly, perhaps subconsciously) to the policeman because he was also white and male. That is, they were willing to give him leniency and the benefit of the doubt because they could identify with him (despite the fact that Shea offered no such humanity to his victim). As white men, the jury acquitted Shea to protect white privilege and power. Whether consciously or not, the jury acted out of a desire to uphold racist power structures, in which a white policeman can get away with killing a Black child.

Though of course, the jury gave an explanation for the acquittal: they "said they were satisfied / justice had been done," presumably meaning that they thought Shea had already suffered enough for his crime and that they did the right thing by setting him free.

LINES 34-42

and one Black ...
... for our children.

In addition to the 11 white men on the jury, the speaker notes that "one Black Woman" also agreed to acquit the policeman. Capitalizing "Black" and "Woman" in line 34, the speaker emphasizes that this woman had a very different identity, and accordingly much less power, than the other jury members.

The speaker quotes this woman saying "They convinced me," but she also explains the complicated subtext behind that statement. Evidently, the speaker doesn't think that the woman really believed Shea should be let free. Instead, the speaker thinks the woman was forced to agree with the white men on the jury, pressured into acquiescence by "four centuries of white male approval."

In other words, the history of racism in America, and the ongoing power imbalance between white men and Black women, meant that the woman didn't have any real choice but to agree with the other jury members. The speaker calls attention to the woman's size—she is less than five feet tall—as well as her race and gender, insisting that she lacked the power to stand alone in Glover's defense. History demanded that the woman seek "white male approval," because the consequences could be dire for a small Black woman who stands up to powerful white men. The speaker portrays the violence undergirding the pressure this woman faced, describing how the white men "dragged" her across "hot coals"—a metaphor that captures the pain and oppression behind the woman's submission.

In agreeing with the white men, the Black woman on the jury didn't just go against her beliefs—assuming that she would have wanted to punish Shea for his crime. According to the speaker, she also gave up "the first real power she ever had." In other words, the woman gained an unprecedented level of power when she was allowed to serve on the jury; she earned a voice in a justice system that has suppressed Black people since its creation. But that power proved fleeting, as the woman had to "let go" of her power and become complicit in condoning police brutality.

In the process, the speaker imagines that the woman "lined her own womb with cement / to make a graveyard for our children." This metaphor suggests that the woman helped perpetuate, albeit unwillingly, systemic racism, injustice, and violence against Black children. The image of a "womb" lined with "cement" also suggests how systemic racism hardens people to pain and injustice, forcing Black people to become complicit bystanders.

Ending the stanza with the image of "a graveyard for our children," the speaker includes herself in a supposed group of mourners—a population of Black people who must continually bury their children, unable to stop the hatred that causes their premature and violent deaths.

LINES 43-48

I have not ...
... an unconnected wire

In the final stanza, the speaker returns to the theme with which she began the poem, expressing her desire to channel her anger into impactful poetry. Writing that "I have not been able to touch the destruction / within me," the speaker reiterates that she wants to use the "destruction" she feels in the face of Glover's murder, and the injustice of Shea's acquittal, as fuel and inspiration. So far, however, the speaker says she hasn't succeeded—she can't write the poetry she wants to write, perhaps because her emotions are too overpowering.

The first sentence of this stanza contrasts with the sentence that follows, which is much longer, divided by enjambment (rather than punctuation) into a series of increasingly impassioned images. The speaker repeats that she *must* "learn to use / the difference between poetry and rhetoric," recalling that difference that she introduced in the first stanza—the difference between words with conviction and those without. If she fails, the speaker fears that her "power" will be wasted; not just wasted, but spoiled.

With poignant adjectives like "corrupt," "poisonous," "limp and useless," the speaker conveys the extent of her fear, as well as a hint of self-loathing. Consonance and alliteration of the /l/ sound in the phrase "lie limp and useless" show that the speaker is experimenting with poetic forms, testing rhetorical strategies as she attempts to write powerful verses.

Additionally, the speaker uses two different similes to describe what will happen if she doesn't use her "power": it will turn into "poisonous mold" or an "unconnected wire." The first comparison evokes a sense of rotting, wasted potential, while the second suggests that the speaker has energy inside of her that needs an outlet. If she doesn't find that outlet, the speaker's internal fuse might blow—as she warns in the remaining lines.

LINES 49-55

and one day ...
... beasts they are."

The speaker continues comparing her inner rage to electricity, which can spark powerful poetry if used properly. But the speaker warns that if she doesn't learn to use that difference between poetry and rhetoric—to write verses that contain deep meaning and passion, rather than empty and ineffectual words—then that electricity will blow like a fuse.

She anticipates that she will one day "take my teenaged plug / and connect it to the nearest socket." On the one hand, this image suggests that the speaker will eventually need an outlet for her feelings; she will explode, boil over, unable to contain her rage any longer.

On the other hand, the speaker chooses a metaphor with sexual undertones. The phrase "teenaged plug" evokes the image of a boy bursting with uncontrolled sexual energy, who channels that energy into violence. Indeed, the speaker goes on to imagine "raping an 85 year old white woman." Her anger is so intense that it could lead her to commit atrocious violence: the kind of violence which, like Glover's murder, targets a helpless, innocent victim, in this case "somebody's mother."

The speaker clearly exaggerates the crime she imagines committing, describing how she would "beat her senseless and set a torch to her bed." Even if she would never actually perform such horrible, uselessly violent acts, however, these lines indicate the depths of the speaker's desperation. Furious over the unprovoked violence that Glover experienced, the speaker imagines retaliating with a similarly senseless and violent crime against a white person.

With these final lines, the speaker increases the passionate and angry tone that she maintained throughout the poem, leaving the reader with prominent themes of violence and brutality. She also returns to the theme of racial injustice, showing how her crime would be perceived differently from Shea's. The speaker imagines that a "greek chorus," or a group of people who share homogenous views, would sing condolences to her victim. Of course, the "85 year old white woman" in this hypothetical situation doesn't deserve to die; like Glover, she is innocent and helpless, in a position of relatively little power given her age and gender. But the speaker suggests that because of her race, the old woman would receive compassion and sympathy. People would say she was a "Poor thing" who "never hurt a soul" and didn't deserve to die.

More importantly, the speaker knows that people would attribute the incident to the perceived brutality of Black people, calling her people "beasts" and assuming that all Black people are criminals. With this final line, the speaker highlights perhaps the most insidious aspect of racism discussed so far in the poem: the unfair double standard by which a racist society judges Black people versus white people. Whereas a white policeman can evade any punishment for killing a Black boy, a Black person who kills a white woman is considered monstrous,

an example of how all Black people are beastly. This final line presents a damning critique of systemic racism and racial injustice. The speaker bluntly calls out the hypocrisy of racism, expressing her profound (and deeply validated) anger at the status quo.

SYMBOLS

MOTHERHOOD

The "dead child" described in the poem is based on a real person: Clifford Glover, who was shot and killed by a police officer in 1973. While alluding to this literal crime, Lorde also uses language related to mothers and children symbolically throughout the poem. Children, here, represent Black youth more broadly as well as the promise of the future in general. Motherhood, meanwhile, represents the kind of selflessness, strength, and courage required in the present if anyone is to see that future come to light.

In the first stanza, the speaker references parenthood when describing the difference between "poetry and rhetoric": poetry requires a kind of selflessness and sacrifice in the name of saving your children—helping the next generation, even if it means "being ready to kill yourself." Parenthood is thus tied to a deep sense of responsibility and conviction.

In the second stanza, the speaker refers more specifically to motherhood when calling the "dead child" she envisions in the desert her own "son." The speaker doesn't (or doesn't only) mean that this boy is literally her son; instead, she uses this language to imply that violence against one Black child is violence against all Black children. In other words, the violence the poem describes isn't an isolated incident, but rather part of a broader pattern of racist violence that threatens to destroy Black people's futures in general.

Later, the speaker describes the "one Black Woman" on the jury as "lin[ing] her own womb with cement" upon acquitting the policeman who killed this child. In choosing her own wellbeing over that of "our children," this woman thus followed the path of "rhetoric" rather than "poetry." She betrayed the symbolic tenents of motherhood and her responsibility to the next generation, as presented by the poem. And in doing so, the speaker says, she made "a graveyard for our children"—that is, she preserved a status quo in which Black children could be killed with seeming impunity.

Finally, the speaker takes care to note that the elderly white woman whom she imagines brutally raping and murdering at the end of the poem "is somebody's mother." Again, motherhood is presented as a kind of sacred relationship in the poem—one that could theoretically connect this white woman with the speaker. Mentioning motherhood here reiterates the humanity of this white woman while subtly implying that the speaker, and other Black mothers, are denied that same humanity by the rest of society.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "The difference between poetry and rhetoric / is being ready to kill / yourself / instead of your children."
- **Lines 19-20:** "trying to heal my dying son with kisses / only the sun will bleach his bones quicker."
- **Lines 39-42:** "until she let go / the first real power she ever had / and lined her own womb with cement / to make a graveyard for our children."
- **Lines 51-52:** "raping an 85 year old white woman / who is somebody's mother"

THE DESERT

In describing her response to Glover's death, the speaker writes that she is "trapped on a desert of raw gunshot wounds." Here, the desert symbolizes the speaker's sense of helplessness and distress. She feels "lost," unable to find logic or reason in the murder of an innocent young boy. Like someone seeking water, desperately thirsty, while wandering in the desert, the speaker seeks to understand the murder, with a desperation she expresses by saying she thirsts for the dead child's blood.

Because the desert is filled with "whiteness" (as well as a scorching sun), it also symbolizes the speaker's sense of powerlessness in a racist world. She feels as if the world doesn't care about the Black boy's death: his blood "sinks" directly into the "whiteness" all around her, leaving her unable to do anything to help him or other Black victims.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "I am trapped on a desert of raw gunshot wounds"
- **Lines 15-16:** "as it sinks into the whiteness / of the desert where I am lost"
- **Line 20:** "only the sun will bleach his bones quicker."

POETIC DEVICES

ENJAMBMENT

Lorde uses enjambment consistently throughout "Power." In fact, only a handful of lines actually end with punctuation. Throughout the poem, the lines vary drastically in length: some are as little as one word long, while others cover entire clauses. The frequent, sometimes sudden line breaks determine the rhythm of the poem, which has no consistent form, meter, or rhyme scheme.

At certain moments, Lorde's use of enjambment sets a dramatic

and intense tone. By stopping after the word "kill" in line 2, for example, Lorde leaves the reader in momentary suspense, which only increases with the word "yourself" standing alone on the following line:

> is being ready to kill
> yourself
> instead of your children.

Read one way, it seems almost as if the speaker means that the "difference between poetry and rhetoric" is being ready to die by suicide—when in fact, the speaker is talking about self-sacrifice. Moments like these keep the reader engaged, wondering what the speaker really means when she introduces dramatic images.

In the second stanza, the lack of punctuation makes the poem flow quickly and breathlessly. Breaks in the middle of clauses—like between "while" and "my" in lines 11 and 12, or between "whiteness" and "of" in lines 15 and 16—make the speaker seem as if she is gasping, stumbling through her words without any capacity to stop:

> churns at the imagined taste while
> my mouth splits into dry lips
> [...]
> as it sinks into the whiteness
> of the desert where I am lost

In addition to these influences on tone, Lorde uses enjambment to set apart particularly shocking phrases. For example, "justice had been done" stands alone on line 33, hinting that the speaker finds this notion unbelievable—of course justice hadn't actually been done when Shea was set free. And in lines 43-44, breaking before the words "within me" draws attention back to the speaker's interior self, reminding the reader that she is deeply focused on her emotions and intent on using them to drive her poetry.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "rhetoric / is"
- **Lines 2-4:** "kill / yourself / instead"
- **Lines 5-6:** "wounds / and"
- **Lines 6-7:** "black / face"
- **Lines 7-8:** "sleep / blood"
- **Lines 8-9:** "shoulders / is"
- **Lines 9-10:** "miles / and"
- **Lines 10-11:** "stomach / churns"
- **Lines 11-12:** "while / my"
- **Lines 12-13:** "lips / without"
- **Lines 13-14:** "reason / thirsting"
- **Lines 14-15:** "blood / as"
- **Lines 15-16:** "whiteness / of"
- **Lines 16-17:** "lost / without"
- **Lines 17-18:** "magic / trying"
- **Lines 18-19:** "destruction / trying"
- **Lines 19-20:** "kisses / only"
- **Lines 21-22:** "Queens / stood"
- **Lines 22-23:** "blood / and"
- **Lines 23-24:** "and / there"
- **Lines 24-25:** "trial / this"
- **Lines 25-26:** "defense / "I"
- **Lines 26-27:** "else / only"
- **Lines 27-28:** "And / there"
- **Lines 29-30:** "man / with"
- **Lines 30-31:** "forcing / was"
- **Lines 31-32:** "free / by"
- **Lines 32-33:** "satisfied / justice"
- **Lines 33-34:** "done / and"
- **Lines 34-35:** "said / "They"
- **Lines 35-36:** "meaning / they"
- **Lines 36-37:** "frame / over"
- **Lines 37-38:** "coals / of"
- **Lines 38-39:** "approval / until"
- **Lines 39-40:** "go / the"
- **Lines 40-41:** "had / and"
- **Lines 41-42:** "cement / to"
- **Lines 43-44:** "destruction / within"
- **Lines 45-46:** "use / the"
- **Lines 46-47:** "rhetoric / my"
- **Lines 47-48:** "mold / or"
- **Lines 48-49:** "wire / and"
- **Lines 49-50:** "plug / and"
- **Lines 50-51:** "socket / raping"
- **Lines 51-52:** "woman / who"
- **Lines 52-53:** "mother / and"
- **Lines 53-54:** "bed / a"
- **Lines 54-55:** "time / "Poor"

CAESURA

Most of "Power" flows breathlessly down the page without pause, thanks to the heavy use of enjambment. But there are three instances of caesura that disrupt this flow and force the reader to pause in the middle of a line.

The first two caesurae appear in stanza 3, in which the speaker switches to a more formal, punctuated style. In fact, this stanza reads almost more like a paragraph, so it makes sense that Lorde inserts periods into the middle of lines 24 and 27, at the natural conclusions of two sentences:

> there are tapes to prove it. At his trial
> this policeman said in his own defense
> "I didn't notice the size nor nothing else
> only the color." And

As a result, the reader flows straight from one idea to the next—from the description of the murder to the scene of Shea's trial. Lorde uses caesura here to link the brutality of Shea's crime to the injustice of his acquittal in court, letting the reader pause briefly between sentences but hinting that each sentence in this stanza adds up to a single picture of racial injustice.

Lorde next uses caesura in the final line of the poem. This line includes three separate sentences (or fragments of sentences), all in quotation marks, because the speaker is imagining what a "greek chorus" would say if she raped and murdered an old white woman. Here, caesura divides the line into three different pulses, for the speaker imagines specifically that the chorus sings in "3/4 time":

> "Poor thing. She never hurt a soul. What beasts they are."

The line acquires a rhythmic, sing-song tone, which feels strange and almost eerie after the blunt violence and anger of the preceding imagery. If nothing else, Lorde's use of punctuation here underscores the speaker's wry and bitter tone as she considers the racism and unfair double standards that Black people must endure.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 24:** "it. At"
- **Line 27:** "color". And"
- **Line 55:** "thing. She," "soul. What"

METAPHOR

The speaker uses an extended metaphor when she compares her emotional state to being "trapped on a desert of raw gunshot wounds," suggesting that she feels helpless, drained, and desperate, unable to see or think about anything but the child's wounded body.

Throughout the second stanza, the speaker adds more detail to this metaphor. Just as there is no water in the desert, the speaker imagines that the child's blood "is the only liquid for miles"—again suggesting that his death is all she can see or think about. The speaker describes her own "dry lips" and thirst, comparing the physical impact of her grief to the physical toll of wandering in a desert. And finally, she evokes the dry sand ("sinks into the whiteness") and relentless sun ("the sun will bleach his bones") of the desert, thus comparing her racist world to an unpleasant and taxing natural environment.

Later in the poem, Lorde uses another metaphor (this time a standalone one) to describe the Black woman's decision to agree with the white men on the jury. The speaker claims that the woman "lined her own womb with cement / to make a graveyard for our children." This metaphor captures the sadness and coldness of the woman's actions. Rather than nurturing her race, using her words to protect future Black children from police brutality, the woman found herself forced to agree with the jury—she lacked the political power to stand up for what she believed. As a result, she was forced to go against any maternal, caring instinct, and become complicit in violence against Black children. The metaphor of a womb lined with cement condemns the unnatural betrayal the woman was forced to commit because of the power imbalance on the jury. Her nurturing womb turned into a graveyard: a place of death rather than life.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "a desert of raw gunshot wounds"
- **Lines 8-9:** "blood from his punctured cheeks and shoulders / is the only liquid for miles"
- **Line 12:** "my mouth splits into dry lips"
- **Lines 14-16:** "thirsting for the wetness of his blood / as it sinks into the whiteness / of the desert where I am lost"
- **Line 20:** "only the sun will bleach his bones quicker."
- **Lines 41-42:** "and lined her own womb with cement / to make a graveyard for our children."
- **Lines 49-50:** "and one day I will take my teenaged plug / and connect it to the nearest socket"

SIMILE

The speaker uses two similes to describe what might happen to her "power" if she fails to use it—in other words, if she fails to harness the "difference between poetry and rhetoric" and write verses that capture her passion and have a genuine impact.

First, the speaker imagines that her power "will run corrupt as poisonous mold." This first simile brings to mind imagery of rot and suggests that the speaker's power will spoil and become an ugly burden if she doesn't use it properly. Perhaps the speaker implies that she will feel a gross sense of guilt if she knowingly fails in her mission to write strong poetry.

Second, the speaker also writes that her power might "lie limp and useless as an unconnected wire." She extends this simile in the following line, metaphorically describing her power as a "teenaged plug." These images suggest that the speaker contains an electric current, perhaps a spark of inspiration, which needs to be directed to the proper outlet. If not channeled into poetry, the speaker's emotions might simply have no release—they will dangle uselessly, and never gain expression. Alternatively, the ensuing image of raping an old white woman suggests that this electricity could explode like a blown fuse. Either way, these similes together capture the speaker's deep anxiety that she learn how to channel her emotions into poetry; if she fails, she fears the consequences for her internal state, and she worries that she might turn violent.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 47-49:** "my power too will run corrupt as poisonous mold / or lie limp and useless as an unconnected wire / and one day I will take my teenaged plug"

IMAGERY

Lorde uses intense imagery to express powerful emotions and sensations throughout the poem. Most vividly, images of the "dead child" reveal the speaker's passionate anger and grief. The speaker describes the child's body in graphic detail, painting a picture of his "shattered black face," and "blood from his punctured cheeks and shoulders." Through such images, the speaker forces readers to confront the horror of this young boy's death. More metaphorical images, like the image of the sun bleaching the child's bones in line 20, further portray the boy's helplessness, as well as the speaker's desperation and hopeless desire to do something about the death.

In the final stanza, the speaker again uses vivid imagery to imagine how her anger might explode into action. She pictures herself "raping an 85 year old white woman" and "beat[ing] her senseless" before burning her bed. These images are again graphic and horrifying, much like the earlier images of Glover's body; however, this time, the speaker conjures these images from her imagination. So while the previous imagery revealed the speaker's current emotions, these new images capture the potential for those emotions to boil over into violence. More importantly, in its extreme violence, the image of the speaker attacking an old woman proves how potent her emotions are. This aggressive reaction underscores the horrible nature of Glover's death and the injustice surrounding it.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-9:** "I am trapped on a desert of raw gunshot wounds / and a dead child dragging his shattered black / face off the edge of my sleep / blood from his punctured cheeks and shoulders / is the only liquid for miles"
- **Line 12:** "my mouth splits into dry lips"
- **Line 14:** "thirsting for the wetness of his blood"
- **Line 20:** "only the sun will bleach his bones quicker."
- **Line 22:** "stood over the boy with his cop shoes in childish blood"
- **Lines 36-37:** "they had dragged her 4'10'' black Woman's frame / over the hot coals"
- **Line 41:** "and lined her own womb with cement"
- **Line 53:** "and as I beat her senseless and set a torch to her bed"

CONSONANCE

The consonance in "Power" adds intensity to the speaker's vivid depictions of the child's death and of her own sorrow. In line 9, for example, the speaker writes that blood is "the only liquid for miles." The repeated slippery /l/ sound makes the phrase itself sound fluid, enhancing the image of blood dripping from the dead child. The mixture of /ch/ and /k/ sounds in line 8 are similarly visceral as the speaker describes the boy's gunshot wounds:

> blood from his punctured cheeks and shoulders

There's also a strikingly sibilant passage in this same stanza, the hissing of which evokes the speaker's thirsty gasps in this metaphorical desert:

> thirsting for the wetness of his blood
> as it sinks into the whiteness

Consonance works like this throughout the poem, bringing the terrible imagery at hand to life. For another example, listen to the return of the /l/ sound in the phrase "lie limp and useless." This consonance makes the line itself feel limp and loose. By contrast, the mixture of spiky /k/ and /t/ sounds of "take my teenaged plug / and connect it to the nearest socket" fill the line with dangerous, crackling electricity.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "desert"
- **Line 6:** "dead child dragging"
- **Line 8:** "punctured cheeks," "shoulders"
- **Line 9:** "only liquid," "miles"
- **Line 12:** "my mouth," "splits into," "lips"
- **Line 13:** "loyalty"
- **Line 14:** "thirsting," "wetness"
- **Line 15:** "sinks," "whiteness"
- **Line 17:** "imagery," "magic"
- **Line 20:** "bleach," "bones"
- **Line 22:** "shoes," "childish"
- **Line 41:** "womb with cement"
- **Line 45:** "unless," "learn"
- **Line 47:** "power," "run corrupt," "poisonous mold"
- **Line 48:** "lie limp," "useless"
- **Line 49:** "take," "teenaged"
- **Line 50:** "connect it to," "nearest socket"
- **Line 51:** "white woman"
- **Line 53:** "senseless," "set"
- **Line 54:** "chorus," "3/4"

REPETITION

The speaker uses a few kinds of repetition throughout the poem. Most obviously, the speaker repeats the phrase, "the difference between poetry and rhetoric" in the first and final stanzas. As a result, this idea—that there's a difference between poetry and rhetoric, which the speaker needs to

harness to express her rage—frames the poem, providing a central underlying theme.

The speaker also repeats a variation of the phrase "and there are tapes to prove it" in the third stanza:

> [...] and
> there are tapes to prove it. At his trial
> this policeman said in his own defense
> "I didn't notice the size nor nothing else
> only the color." And
> there are tapes to prove that, too.

This repetition emphasizes just how much evidence there was to prove that "this policeman" acted out of racism. The repetition thus also emphasizes the injustice of his being acquitted.

Alongside this broad repetition, the speaker uses anaphora in stanza 2, repeating the phrase "trying to" at the start of lines 18 and 19. This anaphora captures the speaker's desperation, her struggle to write the poetry that she knows she needs to write. On one level, the repetition stresses that the speaker is really *trying* to accomplish something through her words. On another level, the speaker links her effort to "make power out of hatred and destruction" to her desire to "heal my dying son with kisses." In other words, the speaker seems to suggest that if she can channel her emotions into powerful poetry, she can also help the murdered child. Or at least, she might help "heal" or protect other children, who might face similar racism and violence in the future.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "The difference between poetry and rhetoric"
- **Line 18:** "trying to"
- **Line 19:** "trying to"
- **Lines 23-24:** "and / there are tapes to prove it"
- **Lines 27-28:** "And / there are tapes to prove that, too."
- **Line 46:** "the difference between poetry and rhetoric"

ASYNDETON

Lorde uses asyndeton throughout "Power," leaving out many conjunctions (as well as punctuation) at the ends of lines and clauses. For instance, between lines 7 and 8, Lorde doesn't use any punctuation or conjunction when one sentence ends and the other begins. As a result, the image of the dead child "dragging his shattered black / face off the edge of my sleep" flows right into the image of "blood from his punctured cheeks and shoulders."

In fact, the entire second stanza uses enjambment and asyndeton to convey the speaker's sense of desperation. Notably, the speaker skips using a conjunction or punctuation mark between lines 18 and 19:

> trying to make power out of hatred and destruction
> trying to heal my dying son with kisses

With one line bleeding into the next, it feels almost like the speaker can't form coherent, distinct sentences—like her emotion makes her pour out one line after another, as if she's overwhelmed by the horrible images in her mind.

The speaker moves to a more formal sentence structure in the stanzas that follow. This stylistic switch coincides with a switch in topic, as the speaker transitions to discussing the facts of Glover's death and Shea's acquittal. Accordingly, the loosely flowing and lightly-structured verses of stanza two contrast starkly with what follows, providing a dark glimpse into the speaker's psychological state before she dives more objectively into the subject at hand.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "sleep / blood"
- **Lines 18-19:** "destruction / trying"

ALLITERATION

The poem uses alliteration at certain moments to add intensity to the speaker's imagery and draw readers' attention to certain words and ideas.

Take the heavy /d/ sounds of lines 5-6, for example, which evoke, through sound, the horrifying struggle of this "dead child dragging" his body across the sands of a metaphorical desert:

> [...] a desert of raw gunshot wounds
> and a dead child dragging his shattered black

Later in the stanza, the alliteration of "bleach his bones" again draws readers' attention to the dead child's body, which the elements will get to before the speaker can. There's also subtle alliteration (and consonance) between "kisses" and "quicker" as well as the homophones "son" and "son":

> trying to heal my dying son with kisses
> only the sun will bleach his bones quicker.

It's almost as though the sounds of the second line here overtake those of the first, in the same way that the "sun" will overtake the boy's body before the speaker can "heal" him.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "desert"
- **Line 6:** "dead," "dragging"
- **Line 12:** "my mouth"
- **Line 14:** "wetness"
- **Line 15:** "whiteness"

- **Line 19:** "son," "kisses"
- **Line 20:** "sun," "bleach," "bones," "quicker"
- **Line 48:** "lie limp"
- **Line 49:** "take," "teenaged"
- **Line 51:** "white woman"
- **Line 53:** "senseless," "set"

VOCABULARY

Rhetoric (Line 1, Line 46) - Language designed to persuade an audience, but lacking in meaning, sincerity, or conviction.

Punctured (Line 8) - Pierced or cut, in this case with bullets.

Queens (Line 21) - One of the five boroughs of New York City.

Hot coals (Line 37) - Burning embers from a fire. To be dragged over hot coals means being harshly shamed, reprimanded, or pressured.

Corrupt (Line 47) - Become perverted, or otherwise negatively manipulated. Here, *corrupt* connotes also rotting or spoiling, like "poisonous mold."

Greek chorus (Line 54) - Deriving from the chorus in a classical Greek play, a group of people who express similar views about an action, often with a hint of moral judgment.

3/4 time (Line 54) - A musical time signature in which each measure has three beats, and one quarter note equals one beat.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Power" is a free verse poem with 55 lines broken up into five stanzas of different lengths. Most of the lines are enjambed, which adds to the breathless, urgent tone.

In a poem concerned with the writing of poetry itself, the fact that the speaker doesn't follow any regular form matters. Anything more rigid or conventionally "poetic" would likely feel too artificial or constructed here—too much like "rhetoric"—and would thus be unsuited to a poem in which the speaker seeks to translate her raw emotions into "power." Instead, the speaker lets her language flow freely and organically down the page.

METER

"Power" doesn't have any formal meter. Instead, the poem uses free verse, which means there are no rules guiding line length, rhythm, or rhyme scheme. This keeps the poem's language sounding real, raw, and grounded rather than strictly controlled or forced into an unnatural beat. Readers get the sense that they are privy to the speaker's innermost monologue rather than some artfully constructed, but perhaps less genuine, work.

That's not to say that the poem's language isn't very deliberate! On the contrary, Lorde uses devices such as enjambment, consonance, and repetition to elevate the poem's language and call attention to its visceral imagery.

RHYME SCHEME

As a free verse poem, "Power" does not have a set rhyme scheme. In fact, there are very few instances of rhyme in the poem. Instead of rhyme, Lorde focuses more on imagery and diction: the language in the poem is poignant and powerful, but not necessarily lyrical.

That said, one instance of internal rhyme stands out. In line 12, the phrase "splits into dry lips" includes an imperfect rhyme between the words "splits" and "lips." The effect is subtle, but this loose rhyme hints at the speaker's poetic aspirations. The speaker might be more focused on metaphor, imagery, and other poetic devices, but she is certainly aware of how her words sound. Beyond this moment, the *lack* of rhyme scheme helps keep attention on the themes and imagery of "Power," as well as on the speaker's passion and determination throughout the poem.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Power" never actually identifies herself, but readers can take her to be a projection of Audre Lorde. She speaks in the first person, and she expresses feelings toward Glover's death that seem to come directly from Lorde. After all, like Lorde, the speaker identifies as a poet. She wants to write about the horrific events of the murder, and "Power" is presumably the result of that urge to process her emotions through writing.

Throughout the actual poem, however, the speaker reveals little about herself, other than the fact that Glover's death is haunting her, preventing her from sleeping at night, and inspiring her to "touch the destruction" inside her and turn it into poetry.

Presumably, the speaker herself is Black, as she refers to "our children" when discussing how the Black woman on the jury couldn't protect Glover and other Black victims of police brutality. Throughout the poem, the speaker's feelings seem to grow only more intense, perhaps because she is struggling to describe Glover's death and feels increasingly frustrated at her own powerlessness to combat racism and injustice.

SETTING

"Power" doesn't have a specific setting: readers never learn *where* the speaker is as she writes the poem. However, the speaker does write that "Today that 37 year old white man" was

set free, which situates the poem in the speaker's present. Specifically, the word "Today" suggests that the poem occurs on June 12, 1974, the date that Thomas Shea was acquitted for the killing of Clifford Glover. It's also worth noting that the trial occurred in New York City, and that the murder took place in Queens early in the morning on April 28, 1973.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Audre Lorde published "Power" in a 1978 collection titled *The Black Unicorn*. "Power" is similar to Lorde's other work in that it engages directly with the racism Lorde saw all around her in 1970s America.

Lorde had begun publishing poetry regularly in the 1960s, and by the time she published "Power" in 1978, she was a prominent voice in the Black Arts Movement. This was a Black-led art movement that emphasized activism and Black pride. Like Lorde, many Black authors of the period—including Alice Walker, Ntozake Shange, and Toni Morrison, to name just a few—focused on themes of racism, sexism, and other injustices in their work.

As the social issues addressed in "Power" persist today, later poets have continued to cover similar themes, using their poetry to expose and combat racism in America. For example, "what the dead know by heart" by Donte Collins also discusses police brutality, as does Danez Smith's "juxtaposing the black boy & the bullet" and Ross Gay's "A Small Needful Fact." Other artists have referenced the specific killing of Glover as well; The Rolling Stones, for example, mention it in their song "Doo Doo Doo Doo Doo (Heartbreaker)."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Power" responds to the shooting of Clifford Glover, a 10-year-old Black boy, by a white police officer named Thomas Shea in 1973. Shea and his partner were working undercover in Queens, New York, when they stopped Glover and his stepfather, thinking they'd taken part in a robbery. Fearing for their own safety, Glover and his stepfather ran from the plainclothes officers, at which point Shea shot Glover in the back.

Shea was put on trial for murder, becoming the first on-duty officer in New York for nearly 50 years to be charged with such a crime. He was acquitted by a jury consisting, as "Power" points out, of 11 white men and a single Black woman. The verdict led to protests in Queens.

Lorde explained that she wrote "Power" as an immediate response to news that Shea had been acquitted: "A kind of fury rose up in me; the sky turned red," Lorde said. "I felt so sick. I felt as if I would drive this car into a wall, into the next person I saw. So I pulled over. I took out my journal just to air some of my fury, to get it out of my fingertips. Those expressed feelings are that poem."

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- "Jury Clears Shea in Killing of Boy" — Read The New York Times's article about Shea's acquittal from June 13, 1974. (https://www.nytimes.com/1974/06/13/archives/jury-clears-shea-in-killing-of-boy-finds-queens-officer-shot-in.html)
- "Echoing Since 1973" — Read a New York Times article written shortly after the murder of Walter Scott, who was shot in the back by a police officer in 2015. The author explores how the crime echoes Glover's killing many decades earlier. (https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/17/nyregion/fired-at-queens-boy-fatal-1973-police-shot-still-reverberates.html)
- Audre Lorde's Biography — Read about the poet's life and literary works. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/audre-lorde)
- "Power" Out Loud — Listen to "Power" read aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vYH5FgREkC0)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER AUDRE LORDE POEMS

- A Litany for Survival

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Alpert, Sarah. "*Power.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 31 Dec 2020. Web. 25 Aug 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Alpert, Sarah. "*Power.*" LitCharts LLC, December 31, 2020. Retrieved August 25, 2021. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/audre-lorde/power.