Prayer

SUMMARY

On days when it's impossible to pray, sometimes a prayer suddenly emerges all on its own. In such moments, a woman who has been holding her face in her hands will raise her head and look at the musical notes that a tree seems to sing as the wind moves through its leaves. She will experience this music as an unexpected gift.

On nights when we don't have any faith, sometimes the truth comes into our hearts, bringing with it a slight ache that feels familiar. At such times, a man will stand, totally still, and think about how the sound of a train resembles the sound of Latin being chanted in a lesson or mass from his childhood.

Now, pray for us. A first-grader's piano scales comfort a visitor, looking out over a town in the middle of the country. Then, in the early evening, someone calls out the name of their child, and the call sounds like they are naming something they have lost.

Outside, it's dark. Inside, the radio's shipping broadcast sounds like a prayer, listing out each place along the coast: Rockall. Malin. Dogger. Finisterre.

THEMES

FAITH AND DOUBT IN MODERN LIFE

In "Prayer," the speaker presents scenes from modern society in which people seem to struggle with finding traditional religious faith. At the same time, the poem illustrates how some form of spirituality may often emerge unexpectedly from even the most familiar aspects of daily life. Secular and ordinary experiences, the poem suggests, can offer people their own kind of spiritual comfort.

The poem describes a contemporary society—a place filled with trains, radios, grade schools, and so on—marked by despair, isolation, and a distinct absence of traditional faith. The opening stanza, for example, describes a woman who "lift[s] her head from the sieve of her hands," implying that the woman had been holding her head in her hands in a gesture of despair. Similarly, a "lodger," or visitor, "look[s] out across a Midlands town" in apparent awareness of his isolation, in need of being "console[d]."

Despite ostensibly being part of a community—all of these people are part of the collective "we" in the poem—the poem shows these individuals experiencing a kind of deep loneliness in their daily lives. And this, the poem implies, is connected to people's inability to find faith—and the sense of comfort and consolation such faith might offer—in the modern world.

Yet though the speaker acknowledges that "we cannot pray," the speaker *also* says that "sometimes […] a prayer / utters itself" and "the truth / enters our hearts." The poem suggests, then, that though many people have lost touch with or deliberately distanced themselves from traditional religious practices, they still can experience a sense of spiritual comfort and connection via the surrounding world itself.

For example, the woman who was holding her head in her hands lifts her head at the sound of "the minims," or musical notes, "sung by a tree." She hears the wind in the leaves as music, and experiences this as "a sudden gift." Likewise, the lonely "lodger" is unexpectedly comforted by hearing "Grade 1 piano scales," perhaps floating through the window of a house.

The rhythms of daily life can be holy, the poem implies, especially in the image of a man who hears "the distant Latin chanting of a train." The phrase "Latin chanting" evokes not only the repetition with which many people learned Latin in their childhood, but also the Latin of Catholic prayers. This description, then, suggests that this everyday sound of the train has within it a kind of mysterious "chanting" that is akin to prayer—a chance for meditation, comfort, remembrance, and connection.

At the end of the poem, the speaker describes "the radio's prayer" at night, and then lists places that would be named in the nightly British shipping broadcast (used to alert ships off the coast to potential danger). This list of names: "Rockall. Malin. Dogger. Finisterre" would likely be familiar and ordinary to British readers, yet within the poem, the words sound once again like their own form of prayer. The poem imbues all these moments with a mysterious, even luminous quality that implies a unique kind of faith *does* still underlie contemporary life, and can be found within the most mundane of experiences.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

Some days, although ...
... utters itself.

The title of the poem lets the reader know that the poem will be about prayer, and the meaning of prayer. At the same time, the title also implies that the poem *itself* is a prayer. From the outset, then, the title asks the reader to consider forms of

prayer and faith that exist beyond traditional religious conventions.

Then, in the opening lines, the speaker describes a condition of being *unable* to pray—at least in a traditional sense. "Some days, although we cannot pray," the speaker begins. The collective "we" implies that the speaker is speaking for a group of people, and perhaps for a society as a whole. The opening implies that this "we"—which could stand for many people within modern society— have difficulty praying or finding traditional religious faith.

Yet, as the speaker goes on to assert, sometimes "a prayer / utters itself." Here, the speaker subtly personifies prayers, suggesting that "a prayer" has the ability to "utter," or speak, itself, to emerge of its own accord. This personification imbues the idea of prayer with agency and power, and it suggests that prayer can emerge not only from people but also from the surrounding world.

The poem's sound and form help to reinforce this idea. First, the enjambment of line 1 ("prayer / utters") conveys the complexity of what the speaker describes. The enjambment divides the prayer from its utterance, implicitly showing the difficulty of finding the ability to pray. At the same time, the enjambment requires the reader to speed up over the line ending, to reach the completion of the clause. This enjambment, then, also connects the two words together, integrating the prayer with its own utterance. Additionally, assonance and consonance connect the /er/ ending of "prayer" to "utters," implying that this ability to "utte[r] itself" is some fundamental quality of prayer.

Finally, the speaker repeats "pray" and "prayer" at the end of the opening line. This repetition takes the form of polyptoton, since the root word "pray" repeats in a different form (here, as the noun, "prayer"). This polyptoton has several effects.

First, since the root word repeats, the repetition implies that though "we cannot pray," prayer can still emerge, even within such experiences of doubt. At the same time, because the word takes a different form, as the verb ("pray") shifts to the noun, the poem *also* suggests that the prayers that emerge might be slightly different than what people expect. These prayers might not meet traditional norms or expectations of what it means to "pray," but they are all the more powerful and present because of this.

LINES 2-4

So, a woman ...
... a sudden gift.

In the second half of the opening stanza, the speaker describes an instance in which a prayer seems to emerge on its own. The speaker depicts a woman who has been holding her face in her hands, and suddenly lifts her head to look at the leaves of a tree, which make a kind of music as the wind moves through them. The woman will experience this, the speaker says, as "a sudden gift."

The imagery in these lines reinforces their feeling and meaning. First, the speaker describes the woman lifting "her head from the sieve of her hands." In this image, the woman's hands are described metaphorically as a "sieve"—a kind of wire mesh strainer often used for draining liquid or water. This image implies that the woman has had her head in her hands in a gesture of despair. It also implies that her hands aren't really able to hold her despair or offer comfort to herself—since, as through a sieve, her tears could slip through the gaps between her fingers.

Then, the speaker depicts the woman suddenly lifting her head to "stare / at the minims sung by a tree." "Minims" are musical notes, so the image implies that the woman experiences the wind, which is implicitly moving through the leaves, as making a kind of music, making the tree seem to sing. This image subtly personifies the tree, since the speaker implies that the tree is uttering this music. And it is worth noting, here, that in religious tradition, hearing sudden music is often associated with the approach of angels or God.

Importantly, though, what the speaker describes here is an experience that would commonly be seen as both ordinary and secular. The wind moving through the trees is an aspect of the natural world, and something most people have encountered. Yet the speaker's description of *how* the woman experiences this implies that in this particular moment, she perceives something mysterious and numinous. The Latinate word "minims," as well as the idea of the tree itself singing, reinforce this numinous, spiritual quality.

With the close of the opening quatrain, these lines also establish the poem's ABAB rhyme scheme (which is traditional for Shakespearean sonnets).

LINES 5-6

Some nights, although ...
... small familiar pain;

Stanza 2 begins in a way that echoes the opening of stanza 1. "Some nights, although we are faithless," the speaker says. The phrase "[s]ome nights" is a slight tweak of the phrase that began the poem, "[s]ome days." This creates a kind of rhythm in the poem that recalls that of Biblical psalms; it invokes, then, the sounds of a prayer. At the same time, the shift from "days" to "nights" implicitly deepens the poem's message, since within many faith traditions "nights" are understood as times of spiritual darkness or doubt.

Despite this shift, the speaker continues the line in a way that is parallel to that of the opening stanza. Here, instead of "although we cannot pray," the speaker says, "although we are faithless." In a way, this statement is stronger than saying that the "we" are unable to pray, since it implies that the "we" are

without faith altogether. Yet the parallelism between this and the poem's opening also suggests that the poem will offer a reply to this, a kind of answer to the struggle the speaker depicts.

The speaker does, then, go on to offer a kind of reply to this experience of being "faithless," saying that despite this, "the truth / enters our hearts, that small familiar pain." Here, the enjambment between "truth" and "enters" recalls that between "prayer" and "utters" in stanza 1. The enjambment propels the reader over the line ending to reach the verb, and also suggests that this experience (of "the truth / enter[ing] our hearts") is inevitable in some way.

Importantly, too, here the speaker uses a *kind* of religious language to describe this experience, even though the speaker has also implied that this experience emerges despite an underlying condition of being "faithless." The phrase "the truth" evokes the idea of religious truth, or the presence of God, and the idea of this truth "enter[ing] our hearts" also echoes the language of many religious narratives in which people who didn't believe in a divine presence suddenly became aware of the existence of this presence.

Here, the speaker doesn't specify what this "truth" is but describes it as "small" yet "familiar," and bringing a kind of "pain" or ache. The description of this ache as "familiar" implies that at some level this truth was already known to the people who experience it, as though it is restoring them to something that they knew in the first place. Meanwhile, the /ers/ ending of "enters" echoes the endings of "utters," "prayer," and "stare" in the opening stanza. This subtle assonance and consonance link the stanzas, and the experiences they depict, together, suggesting that despite the disparate moments they describe, they are all in some sense interconnected.

LINES 7-8

then a man ...
... of a train.

Following the pattern of stanza 1, the ending of stanza 2 goes on to offer a specific moment that illustrates what the speaker has just described—here, a moment of "the truth / enter[ing] our hearts." The speaker describes a "man [who] will stand stock-still, hearing his youth / in the distant Latin chanting of a train."

In this image, the speaker depicts a man standing motionless, as though suspended in time. The sound of a train has arrested his attention because it recalls the "Latin chanting" of his childhood. This "Latin chanting" could refer to the repetition with which many people traditionally learned Latin, and the conjugation of Latin verbs, in grammar school. It also, though, connotes the chanting of Latin prayers during Catholic mass. The image, then, integrates the secular with the spiritual, implying that *within* this familiar sound of a passing train is a quality that is both mysterious and divine.

Several details in these lines emphasize their meaning. First, the alliteration of "stock-still" reinforces the sense of this man as unmoving, poised with all of his attention on the sound he hears. Also, in keeping with other images in the poem up to this point, the speaker subtly personifies the train, since the train itself is described as "chanting."

This moment in the poem also make complex and nuanced use of metaphor. The sound of the train *could* be read metaphorically, in that the speaker is *comparing* the noise the train makes to the sound of "Latin chanting." Yet it is also important to note that the image is not *presented* metaphorically. The speaker implies that within this moment, the sound the train makes *is* a kind of Latin—a kind of other language that is both deeply familiar and otherworldly.

These lines conclude the second stanza, and with it, the rhyme scheme of this quatrain. Here, the line endings complete full rhymes, with "truth"/ "youth" and "pain"/ "train." In doing so, they imbue the poem with a sense of tradition and form, even though what the poem depicts is wholly contemporary.

LINES 9-11

Pray for us ...
... a Midlands town.

Line 9 marks the *volta*, or turn, in the sonnet. Within the sonnet form, this turn indicates the point at which the poem begins to "reply" to the problem, issue, or difficulty the opening lines have posed. In "Prayer," the turn is marked by the speaker now addressing the reader, or an outside audience, directly. "Pray for us now," the speaker says, using the imperative form of "pray" as a direction, or request, to the reader.

In a subtle way, this moment marks another instance of polyptoton, as the word "pray," which has repeated in the poem in the form of both a verb and noun, here recurs in a different verb conjugation: the imperative form. This repetition with slight variation implicitly suggests the many forms that prayer can take.

Up to this point, the speaker has been focused on the difficulties the "we" experience in trying to pray, and the unexpected forms of comfort, faith, and truth that this collective "we" can find in spite of this. Here, for the first time, the speaker implies that the "we" also need someone to pray for "us." In other words, the "we" need not only to be *able* to pray, or experience prayer, but also to be prayed *for*—and implicitly, to experience mercy in some way.

The speaker goes on to describe someone who might look for this kind of prayer and the comfort it could offer. The speaker depicts a "lodger," or visitor, who is implicitly alone in "a Midlands town"—a town in the central part of England. The poem describes this person "looking out across" the town, conveying an image of someone aware of their own solitude and gazing out over a town in which they are a stranger. The

alliterative /l/ sounds in "lodger looking" connect the visitor to this state of loneliness.

Yet the speaker also describes how, like the people described earlier in the poem, this "lodger" finds an unexpected source of comfort, here in the sound of "Grade 1 piano scales" that implicitly float through the window of a house. The sound of a first-grader practicing piano, then, reaches this person and "console[s]" them, as though they are no longer alone.

This description echoes the earlier moments the poem described. Like the woman comforted by the "music" created by the wind moving through the leaves of a tree, this "lodger" too is comforted by the unexpected sound of music, a sound traditionally associated with the approach of angels. It is worth noting, though, that this music is far from otherworldly—or at least what would traditionally be thought of as otherworldly. Instead, it is the familiar, ordinary sound of a child practicing the piano. Yet implicitly this sound comforts the "lodger" *because* of its ordinariness and the familiarity it evokes.

Importantly, too, the image of the "lodger" alludes to moments from the Bible. Specifically, in the story of the birth of Jesus, Joseph and Mary were traveling and were, in effect, strangers or lodgers looking for a place to stay. They were unable to find anywhere to stay, until they were allowed to stay in a manger, or an area of a barn where farm animals are kept. Within Christianity, this humble manger is considered sacred because it is where Jesus was born.

Similarly, in the poem, the speaker implies that this "lodger" is finally offered consolation in the humblest of ways—the sound of piano scales. These piano scales, then, function like a kind of prayer or mercy offered *to* the lodger, the visitor or outsider within this scene.

LINES 11-12

Then dusk, and ...
... named their loss.

The speaker goes on to depict another instant that could implicitly be from the same scene, the same evening in this "Midlands town." "Then dusk," the speaker says, "and someone calls / a child's name as though they named their loss."

Here, the speaker describes another ordinary moment, conveying an image of someone calling for their child to come back to the house when it is starting to get dark. Yet the speaker also depicts the mysterious, luminous quality within this "call," implying that the "call" could *convey* a whole range of feeling, one of both loss and also "nam[ing]" that loss. Implicitly, the loss itself being named offers a kind of relief or comfort to the one hearing it.

Like the image of the piano scales, this moment implies that people can experience prayer and faith in many ways and can even experience the ordinary actions of other people as a kind of mercy. Both images in these lines convey a kind of loneliness and melancholy, as well as unexpected relief from this loneliness. It is as though, simply through hearing and witnessing these familiar moments from other people's lives, the people within the poem are comforted and restored to some aspect of themselves.

Several elements in these lines work to reinforce their meaning and the feeling they create. First, the enjambment at "calls / their child's name" stretches this moment across two lines, conveying the way in which someone calling outside in the evening might create an echo or lasting impression.

It is also worth noting that the speaker describes the "call" through a simile, saying that this person "calls / a child's name *as though* they named their loss." This simile builds a kind of ambivalence or mystery into the moment. It suggests that the person listening knows that the one calling is actually calling for their child to come in—an ordinary, familiar, everyday thing. Yet at the same time, the simile creates the sense of how the person listening *experiences* this—as though the call named the loss of the one who is *listening*. This complexity suggests that such ordinary moments can be both ordinary and numinous at the same time.

Finally, after the full end rhymes in the second quatrain, this quatrain is marked by slant rhymes in the first and third lines that seem to *allude* to the sonnet's rhyme scheme while also transforming it. "Scales" is a close, but not complete rhyme with "calls," as the long /ay/ shifts to an /aw/ sound. The second and fourth lines of the stanza end with full rhymes, in "across" and "loss." Yet the inclusion of slant rhymes has an important effect at this moment of the poem. The speaker, here, seems to describe how doubt—in the form of loneliness and loss—can be experienced *simultaneously* with a kind of unexpected comfort, faith, or spiritual presence. The rhyme scheme, in a sense, reflects this, as it both adheres to and departs from the traditional rhyme scheme of a sonnet.

LINES 13-14

Darkness outside. Inside, ...
... Malin. Dogger. Finisterre.

In the closing couplet, the speaker describes a scene in which it is now completely night. "Darkness outside," the speaker says, in a short sentence that signals a shift from the longer sentences that came before. Darkness and night traditionally symbolize times of spiritual doubt or difficulty, so implicitly here the speaker is depicting what prayer or faith can mean in such times of intense doubt.

Yet, importantly, the poem also conveys this as a *literal* night, and an ordinary one. "Inside," the speaker says, "the radio's prayer." This conveys an image of the speaker—and implicitly other people as well—indoors at night, listening to the radio. The speaker then goes on to recount what is said over the radio: "Rockall. Malin. Dogger. Finisterre."

This list of names, and what they allude to, might be unfamiliar to readers in the U.S., but it would be familiar to British readers. Each of these words is the name of a place on the coast, and traditionally the British shipping forecast—broadcast each night on the radio—would name the places along the coast to let sailors know of any potential danger. Each of these places, then, and the list as a whole, is both familiar and ordinary. Yet within the poem, the list *sounds* mystical, mysterious, almost like a kind of Latin.

Importantly, then, this moment could be read as the speaker describing this broadcast on the radio *metaphorically* as a prayer, suggesting that this sounds *like* a prayer. Yet at the same time, the poem implies that this is not intended metaphorically. Instead, the poem suggests that this most ordinary of things—the nightly shipping broadcast, recounted to try to keep people safe, and a familiar part of the night to all British listeners—*is* a kind of prayer.

At the same time, though these are names of places, it is worth noting the layers of meaning in the last place evoked, "Finisterre." Cape Finisterre is the name of a peninsula on the coast of Spain and has been included in the British shipping broadcast. But the word "Finisterre" also comes from the Latin "finas terrae," which means "the end of the earth." The last word in the poem, then, is a Latin word, evoking the Latin of prayers and mass. At the same time, it is a word that conveys the end of the earth, calling to mind the Christian ideas of both the end of the world in Revelations, and a spiritual world *beyond* the earthly one. Both ideas are present in the last word of the poem, which is also, and simultaneously, a familiar word from this most practical of things—a broadcast for ships off the coast.

With its ending, then, the poem encapsulates the feeling and meaning it has evoked up to this point. It conveys an earthly world, and also the ways in which forms of prayer and faith can be experienced *through* this world, and within the most familiar aspects of it.

SYMBOLS

MUSIC

At several points in "Prayer," the people in the poem are described as suddenly hearing music that comforts and consoles them. In the first stanza, the woman who has had her head in her hands lifts her head at the sound of wind moving through the leaves, which she sees as "the minims," or musical notes, "sung by a tree." Later, the "lodger," or visitor, who is alone in "a Midlands town" is comforted by the sound of "Grade 1 piano scales," or a child practicing a piano in a nearby house.

Within religious tradition, music often accompanies the approach of angels, God, or another kind of spiritual presence. This music, which seems to come out of nowhere, alerts people to the approach of a sacred, mysterious presence. Music, then, can symbolize a connection between the earthly world and the spiritual or divine one.

Importantly, the people within the poem do seem to experience the music they hear this way. The woman in the first stanza experiences this "song" as "a sudden gift." And the isolated lodger is "console[d]" by the sound of piano scales. They too, then, seem to experience this unexpected sound of music as a kind of spiritual presence, comforting them.

Yet just as importantly, the music each of these people hears is both familiar and ordinary. Most people have heard wind moves through the leaves of a tree, and the piano scales the lodger hears later in the poem are implicitly scales that would be practiced daily, by many children around the country and around the world. At the same time, it seems to be precisely this familiarity—this ordinary quality—that consoles both people in the poem, as they suddenly seem to hear, within the familiar, something holy.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "the minims sung by a tree, a sudden gift."
- **Lines 9-10:** "Grade 1 piano scales / console the lodger"

DARKNESS AND NIGHT

"Prayer" evokes different times of day. While the opening stanza describes "[s]ome days," and depicts a scene that could take place in daytime, other moments of the poem are set in the evening or at night. For example, the speaker mentions the man listening to the sound of the train in the context of what can happen "[s]ome nights," and the person who calls their child's name does so at "dusk." Finally, in the closing couplet, the speaker emphasizes the state of night, saying, "[d]arkness outside."

It is clear, within the poem, that these times of day are meant literally. The "darkness" at the end of the poem, for instance, is partly defined by the nightly shipping broadcast on the radio—an ordinary and practical part of nighttime for many people in the UK. Yet it is also important to note that both darkness and night are highly symbolic within religious traditions, with both symbolizing a state of spiritual "darkness," or doubt.

This symbolism has several effects in the poem. First, the speaker *does* seem to depict people who are struggling with doubt in some way. They all seem to be essentially alone and struggling in some sense to find faith or connection. Yet as the poem describes, forms of prayer emerge unexpectedly from the world around them, offering comfort through the most familiar aspects of their lives. The poem's ending, then, reaffirms this

sense of comfort even in a time of "darkness," by showing how the regularity and routine of this radio broadcast is itself a kind of nightly "prayer," offering its own form of consolation and faith.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "Some nights"
- **Line 11:** "Then dusk,"
- **Line 13:** "Darkness outside."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

"Prayer" makes several allusions to British geography and culture. First, the speaker describes a "lodger," or visitor, "looking out across / a Midlands town." The Midlands is a region in central England. Additionally, in the last line, the speaker's list of "Rockall. Malin. Dogger. Finisterre" alludes to the British shipping forecast. Broadcast nightly on the radio, this shipping broadcast would describe weather conditions along the coast to warn ships of potential dangers.

These allusions make it clear that the poem is set in an actual place—the UK—in a contemporary timeframe. This is important, because it means that the people within the poem experience prayer and faith within all the specificity and familiarity of their daily lives. Their experiences of faith don't occur *outside* their immediate world, but *within* it.

At the same time, the poem *also* alludes to language and imagery from traditional religious narratives. For instance, when the speaker says, "the truth / enters our hearts," this statement clearly calls to mind the idea of religious "truth" and a divine presence "enter[ing] our hearts." Similarly, the speaker's description of the sound of the train as "Latin chanting" alludes to the Latin of prayer and Catholic mass.

Finally, the image of the "lodger" in stanza 3 subtly alludes to the Biblical narrative in which Joseph and Mary are traveling and searching for a place to stay. Ultimately, they are allowed to stay in a humble manger, where Mary gives birth to Jesus. Similarly, the "lodger" in the poem seems alone and is unexpectedly comforted by the humble sound of piano scales.

These allusions to contemporary British life, on the one hand, and religious language and imagery, on the other, balance the poem and help to convey its meaning. They imply that the oldest forms of faith still underlie modern life, but that people can experience prayer and faith in different ways beyond the bounds of traditional religious conventions.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "the truth / enters our hearts"
- **Line 8:** "Latin chanting"
- **Line 10:** "the lodger"
- **Line 11:** "a Midlands town"
- **Line 14:** "Rockall. Malin. Dogger. Finisterre."

PARALLELISM

Parallelism works in the poem's first two quatrains to create rhythm and emphasis. "Some days" opens stanza 1, while "Some nights" opens stanza 2. In each stanza, the speaker goes on to describe how, despite an experience of being unable to pray or being "faithless," the collective "we" in the poem can still experience prayer and faith in unexpected ways.

The repetition of "Some" (itself arguably subtle anaphora, though there is a bit of space between the word's appearances) emphasizes this ongoing reality and presence of prayer, in spite of the doubt and difficulty the people in the poem experience. At the same time, the word "some" lets the reader know that these unexpected experiences of faith don't happen all the time. Instead, they are all the more precious for coming as they do, *sometimes*.

The change in this phrase also contributes to the poem's meaning. Where the speaker begins by describing "Some days," in the second stanza this changes to "nights." Within many religious traditions, night symbolizes a time of intense spiritual doubt or difficulty. This shift, then, heightens the intensity of the poem—even as it helps to convey the ongoing presence of a different kind of spirituality, even in the midst of these kinds of "nights" or spiritual darkness.

In both stanzas, this opening phrase is then followed by clauses with parallel grammatical structures:

> Some days, although we cannot pray, a prayer
> utters itself [...]

And:

> Some nights, although we are faithless, the truth
> enters our hearts [...]

In each of these parallel sentences, the opening phrase begins with the "Some"—letting the reader know that this happens sometimes. Then, the speaker acknowledges a condition of the "we" in the poem: "although we cannot pray," "although we are faithless." Finally, in each sentence the speaker describes what the "we" experience *in spite* of being unable to pray or "faithless": "a prayer / utters itself," and "the truth / enters our hearts." The placement of the line ending emphasizes the parallelism of these sentences, as in both cases the enjambment divides the noun ("prayer," "truth") from its verb ("utters," "enters").

Notably, the second sentence diverges slightly from the parallel structure at its ending, as it goes on to include the modifier, "that small familiar pain." Yet the overall effect of these sentences is one of parallel structure, creating syntactical repetition and pattern within the poem.

After this, there is yet more parallelism in the description of the woman and man who hear music in their surroundings:

> [...] a woman will lift
> her head [...]

And:

> [...] a man will stand stock still [...]

All this parallelism works to imbue what the speaker says with authority. Each of the two opening quatrains follows a similar structure, which reinforces what the speaker says—that despite the condition of being unable to pray or experience traditional religious faith, prayer still emerges, as though on its own, from the surrounding world. Importantly, too, the parallel structure calls to mind the parallel structure and repetition of Biblical psalms. In its rhythms, then, the poem evokes the rhythms of prayers.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Some days, although we cannot pray, a prayer / utters itself."
- **Lines 2-3:** "a woman will lift / her head"
- **Lines 5-6:** "Some nights, although we are faithless, the truth / enters our hearts,"
- **Line 7:** "a man will stand stock-still"

REPETITION

Apart from its use of anaphora and parallelism, "Prayer" makes use of repetition in the form of both diacope and polyptoton.

Most prominently, the words "pray" and prayer" repeat throughout the poem. The word "prayer," a noun, is the poem's title and also appears at the end of lines 1 ("Some days [...] a prayer") and 13 ("Darkness outside [...] prayer –"). The word then, both begins and ends the poem, implying that the poem *itself* is a prayer, and is also about these forms of prayer that emerge unexpectedly from the familiar aspects of daily life.

More subtly, the poem also makes use of polyptoton. When the speaker says, in the opening line, "we cannot pray," here "pray" appears as a verb. Then, the speaker goes on to say that despite this, "a prayer / utters itself." This shift from the verb to the noun reinforces what the speaker says. It suggests that despite this *inability* to pray, "prayer" still can emerge, as though of its own accord.

Later, the speaker uses another form of the word, saying, "[p]ray for us now." Here, "pray" takes the imperative form as the speaker reaches out to the reader and requests that the *reader* pray for the "us" within the poem. This shift marks a turn in the poem, as the speaker suggests that the "we" within the poem are in need of the experience of prayer, and also in need of being prayed *for*—or experiencing something like mercy.

This stanza then ends with another instance of repetition—in this case, of "name" and "named." This reinforces what the speaker describes. It suggests that while the person calling might simply be calling their child's name, this call really does sound to one listening as though something else has been "named"—a kind of loss.

Finally, in the closing couplet, the speaker returns to the noun form of "prayer" with which the poem began. These different iterations of the word emphasize the poem's exploration of what prayer is and can be, and what it can mean to "pray" or experience faith outside traditional religious conventions. At the same time, the different iterations of the word imply that many forms of prayer are possible, and that forms of faith can emerge unexpectedly from many aspects of daily life.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Some," "pray," " prayer"
- **Line 5:** "Some"
- **Line 9:** "Pray"
- **Line 12:** "name," "named"
- **Line 13:** "prayer"

IMAGERY

Imagery occurs in every stanza of "Prayer," as the speaker describes the specific moments in which people can unexpectedly experience faith and consolation. In the opening stanza, for example, the speaker depicts a woman who has been holding her head in "the sieve of her hands" and suddenly lifts her head to look at the wind moving through the leaves, which she perceives as "minims," or musical notes, "sung by [the] tree." This image implies that the woman was holding her head in a gesture of despair before suddenly looking up at the sound of the wind. Additionally, the description of the leaves as actual "minims"—musical notes—makes the woman's experience all the more mysterious and unexpected.

The second stanza also contains an important image, as the speaker describes "a man [...] stand[ing] stock-still," listening to the sound of a passing train. The precision with which this man is described makes his stillness and presence palpable within the poem; readers can picture him motionless as the sound of a train passes by.

In the third quatrain, the speaker describes two images in close succession: first a "lodger," or visitor, who hears piano music, and then the sound of someone calling for their child to come in at dusk. These images can be read as temporally connected, as

part of the same scene.

Finally, in the closing couplet, the speaker describes a dark outdoor and then the sound of the radio inside, as it recounts its broadcast as a kind of "prayer."

Importantly, at each stage of the poem, the speaker describes *visual* imagery—what can be seen—with some kind of *sound* imagery—emphasizing what is heard. In each instant, the two seem connected, as each person in the poem seems to become aware of some kind of spiritual presence. These images work to ground the poem. They suggest that these experiences of prayer and faith are real, and not abstract. They show that the people within the poem experience these moments of prayer not in spite of, but within, all the familiarity of their lives.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-4
- Lines 7-8
- Lines 9-12
- Line 13

METAPHOR

Metaphors appear in several places in "Prayer." First, in the opening stanza, the speaker describes a woman holding her head in her hands, and metaphorically compares the shape of this woman's hands to a "sieve," a kind of wire mesh strainer used for draining liquid. This metaphor suggests that the woman might be holding her head in despair, but she can't really contain her feeling or sadness. Implicitly, the poem suggests that the woman's tears might fall through the cracks in her fingers as they would fall through sieve.

It is only when the woman is made aware of something *outside* herself, in the surrounding world, that she suddenly "lift[s] / her head" and seems to be relieved or consoled. The speaker says that the woman "stare[s] / at the minims sung by a tree." "Minims" are musical notes, so implicitly the poem suggests that the wind is moving through the branches of the tree and making a kind of "song" as it touches the leaves. In a certain sense, leaves *could* be seen as resembling musical notes, with a stem and circular shape at the end of the stem. Yet the Latinate word "minims" also imbues the metaphor with a mysterious, holy quality. Finally, the metaphor suggests that while the woman is seeing the wind in the tree, she is also seeing something *else* within or beyond that, which comforts her.

Similarly, in the second stanza, the speaker describes a man who "stand[s] stock-still, hearing his youth / in the distant Latin chanting of a train." This complex image describes the sound of the train as a kind of "Latin chanting." Metaphorically, then, the poem compares the train's sound to the sound of a language traditionally used in Catholic prayer.

At the same time, the speaker says that the man "hear[s] his youth" in this sound. Perhaps the man grew up learning Latin in school, and he also may have grown up attending Catholic mass. Either way, the poem suggests that the man *experiences* the sound of this train as a kind of memory, calling him back to his childhood.

Finally, at the ending of the poem, the speaker describes the shipping broadcast over the radio metaphorically as "the radio's prayer." This metaphor suggests that the speaker—and perhaps others—experience the familiarity of this broadcast as a kind of nightly prayer, a sort of stability and comfort.

It is worth noting, though, that in each of these instances, the poem doesn't actually *present* these descriptions as metaphors. Instead, the speaker implies that the woman really does hear a kind of singing in the tree, and that the man really does hear the "Latin chanting" of the train. Finally, the speaker suggests that the nightly broadcast isn't *like* prayer; it is a kind of prayer. This is important, because in each of these moments the speaker describes images that are both familiar and mysterious at the same time. The metaphors in the poem work to convey this mysterious quality, even if, at some level, the poem implies they aren't intended as metaphors at all.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "the sieve of her hands"
- **Line 4:** "the minims sung by a tree"
- **Line 8:** "the distant Latin chanting of a train."
- **Line 13:** "the radio's prayer"

PERSONIFICATION

In addition to the metaphors that appear throughout the poem, "Prayer" also uses personification to suggest that prayer and faith can emerge on their own. For instance, the speaker says that "[s]ome days […] a prayer / utters itself," and "[s]ome nights […] the truth / enters our hearts." In both of these cases, the speaker subtly personifies "prayer" and "the truth," suggesting that both can make themselves present of their own accord.

Similarly, the speaker personifies inanimate things when describing specific *moments* in which these kinds of prayers emerge. For example, in the opening stanza the speaker describes a woman who lifts her head to "stare / at the minims sung by a tree." Here, the speaker personifies the tree, suggesting that the tree is actually "singing" those "minims," or musical notes. Likewise, the speaker subtly personifies the train in stanza 2, suggesting that the train itself is chanting the Latin words of prayers.

Finally, the speaker personifies the radio at the poem's ending, suggesting that the radio itself is praying through the broadcast which comes through it.

All of these instances of personification are important to the poem's meaning. They suggest that a kind of spiritual presence exists within the world of the poem, which makes itself known

in different ways. This can be understood as a kind of "animation," an idea from religious traditions in which all living things are animated, or given life, by a divine presence.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "a prayer / utters itself"
- **Line 4:** "the minims sung by a tree"
- **Lines 5-6:** "the truth / enters our hearts"
- **Line 8:** "the distant Latin chanting of a train"
- **Line 13:** "the radio's prayer"

SIMILE

In addition to the metaphors and personification that appear throughout, one crucial simile also appears in the poem. In the third quatrain, the speaker describes how "someone calls / a child's name as though they named their loss."

In these lines, which are set at "dusk," the speaker seems to be describing someone calling their child to come back to the house as it is getting dark. Yet the speaker uses a simile in this description, saying that in calling this child's name, it is "as though they named their loss."

Interestingly, the pronoun, "they," is left ambiguous here. Within the context of the stanza, the "they" could also refer to the "lodger" looking out across this town. In this reading, when the visitor hears the sound of this calling voice, they experience this as though the person calling has named their (the visitor's) personal loss. Yet these lines could also refer to the loss of the person calling; when this person calls their child's name, it sounds as though the person is naming their *own* loss.

The ambiguous, open-ended quality of the description contributes to its mysterious nature, as though that "call" connects to some shared human experience of loss and grief.

At the same time, the use of the simile is also important. In a sense, by using a simile the speaker acknowledges that the person calling isn't *literally* naming their loss; instead, they are just calling a child's name. The "as though," then, bridges the gap between this familiar, everyday occurrence and how the one who is listening *experiences* this ordinary thing, which is as something full of feeling, meaning, and even spiritual presence.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-12:** "someone calls / a child's name as though they named their loss."

ENJAMBMENT

"Prayer" uses enjambment to create rhythm and emphasis within the poem, and also to vary the poem's pacing. The opening quatrain begins with three instances of enjambment, between "prayer / utters," "lift / her head," and "stare / at the minims." In the first instance, the enjambment divides the noun ("prayer") from its verb ("utters"). This propels the reader over the line ending to reach the completion of the phrase, even as it emphasizes the fact that the prayer is uttering *itself*, as though of its own accord.

Similarly, in the second two moments of enjambment in this stanza, the line ending divides the verb ("lift" and "stare") from the indirect object of the verb: "her head" and "at the minims" (with the second iteration also including the preposition "at"). These three moments of enjambment in the opening lines create urgency at the outset, moving the reader quickly into the poem.

Then, in stanza 2, the pacing of the poem slows down. This quatrain contains two instances of enjambment rather than three, the first being the line break between "truth / enters." Notably, this moment of enjambment echoes that in the first stanza, where the noun (in this case, "truth") is followed, after the enjambed line ending, by its verb, in this case "enters." This enjambment helps to reinforce the parallel structure of the first two quatrains.

The third quatrain echoes the structure of the first. Here, the first three lines are again enjambed, with "scales / console," "across / a," and "calls / a." In the first case, the enjambment divides the noun ("scales") from its verb ("console"). Then, enjambment divides the adverb, "across," from the indirect object— the "Midlands town." Similarly, the third moment of enjambment divides the verb, "calls," from the indirect object, "a child's name." These moments of enjambment recall the forward motion of the first stanza, sustaining the sense of urgency within the poem.

Throughout, then, the poem uses enjambment strategically in its pacing. These moments of enjambment speed the poem up. They also create subtle kinds of instability that are then balanced and resolved—just as the poem describes the way in which faith can unexpectedly emerge, consoling people's inner experiences of loneliness and doubt.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "prayer / utters"
- **Lines 2-3:** "lift / her"
- **Lines 3-4:** "stare / at"
- **Lines 5-6:** "truth / enters"
- **Lines 7-8:** "youth / in"
- **Lines 9-10:** "scales / console"
- **Lines 10-11:** "across / a"
- **Lines 11-12:** "calls / a"

END-STOPPED LINE

Alongside the instances of enjambment that occur throughout, "Prayer" also makes use of end-stopped lines. It is worth noting, for example, that all the quatrains are end-stopped and also full stopped, coinciding with the ending of a sentence.

These full stops are important to the poem's pacing and its meaning. Each of the first two quatrains, for instance, is actually a complete sentence, extended over four lines. This long sentence length speeds the reader up within the stanzas. Yet the full stops at the end of all the stanzas require the reader to pause before moving on to the next section of the poem. These full stops imbue the poem with a sense of classical balance.

Additionally, end-stopped lines within the stanzas work against the moments of enjambment to create variation in the poem's pacing. For instance, in stanza 2, the end-stopped line at "pain; / then" slows the reader down. The use of the semi-colon at the line ending reinforces this pause and varies the movement from the first stanza (which contained mostly enjambed lines) to the second.

Similarly, at the end of the poem, a dash divides the transition from "the radio's prayer" to what is being *said* over the radio: "Rockall. Malin. Dogger. Finisterre." This end-stop forces the reader to slow down right before the poem's ending, to pause over the idea of "prayer" before *hearing* a form of prayer in the words from the radio's shipping broadcast.

Throughout, then, the poem uses end-stopped lines alongside its instances of enjambment to create variation, emphasis, and also a kind of tension, as the poem shifts back and forth between the two. This tension subtly enacts the tension at the heart of the poem, as the speaker describes what it is like to look for and experience faith beyond the bounds of traditional religious convention.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "gift."
- **Line 6:** "pain;"
- **Line 8:** "train."
- **Line 12:** "loss."
- **Line 13:** "prayer -"
- **Line 14:** "Finisterre."

ALLITERATION

"Prayer" contains a few notable moments of alliteration. In the second stanza, for example, the speaker describes a man who "will stand stock-still" listening to the sound of a train. The alliteration of /st/ sounds in "**st**and **st**ock-**st**ill" reinforces this image and the motionless quality of this man, as he stands, as though arrested in time, by the sound he hears.

Similarly, in the next stanza, alliterative /l/ sounds connect the description of the "lodger looking." This alliteration links the person being described to the action of "looking," and implicitly connects this visitor to what can be read as a gesture of solitude or separateness, as the visitor looks over this town in which they are a stranger.

Both instances of alliteration create music in the poem. They also emphasize the crucial moment of "prayer" in each stanza. In the first case, the alliteration appears just before the description of the "distant Latin chanting of the train," in which the listening man can hear his own "youth." In the second case, the alliteration comes in the midst of the sound of "piano scales," and just before the second moment in the scene, when "someone calls / a child's name"—and in doing so seems to have "named their loss." These instances of alliteration, then, help to convey the mysterious presence the poem describes.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "woman will"
- **Line 3:** "her head," "sieve," "her hands," "stare"
- **Line 4:** "sung," "sudden"
- **Line 7:** "stand stock-still," "hearing his"
- **Line 9:** "Pray," "piano"
- **Line 10:** "lodger looking"
- **Line 13:** "radio's"
- **Line 14:** "Rockall"

CONSONANCE

"Prayer" uses consonance to create music and meaning, imbuing the poem with a sense of lyricism while also drawing subtle connections between words. For example, the /r/ sounds in "prayer / utters" reinforces the idea that prayer can "utte[r] itself." The same thing happens in stanza 2, with both the /t/ and /r/ sounds echoing in "**t**ruth / en**t**e**r**s."

Later, in line 6 ("enters [...] pain"), soft /m/ and /l/ sounds cluster together in the phrase "**sm**a**ll** fa**m**i**l**iar pain." These consonant sounds shift the idea of the truth as a kind of "pain" or ache to something softer. Then, in the final line of this stanza, spiky, persistent consonance evokes the "chanting" of the train itself:

> in the distant Latin chanting of a train.

The next stanza is filled with intense consonance as well. For example, note all the plucky hard /k/ sounds, hard /d/ sounds, and gentle /l/ and /s/ sounds:

> [...] piano scales
> console the lodger looking out across
> a Midlands town. Then dusk, and someone calls

Nearly every word in this stanza features consonance, and the result is a rich, intense swirl of language. This adds to the mystery and sensuousness of the setting, imbuing the ordinary scene with a sense of beauty and wonder.

The same could be said of the low /r/ sounds in the poem's final lines, which link "radio's prayer" to "Rockall [...] Dogger. Finisterre." Combined with the end rhyme here, the poem closes on a musical, satisfying note.

Also note that the entire poem is filled with frequent sibilance,

discussed separately in this guide.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "prayer"
- **Line 2:** "utters itself," "woman will lift"
- **Line 3:** "her head," "sieve," "her hands," "stare"
- **Line 4:** "sung," "sudden"
- **Line 5:** "Some nights," "faithless," "truth"
- **Line 6:** "enters," "hearts," "small familiar"
- **Line 7:** "will stand stock-still"
- **Line 8:** "in," "distant Latin chanting," "train"
- **Line 9:** "Pray," "piano scales"
- **Line 10:** "console," "lodger looking," "across"
- **Line 11:** "Midlands town," "Then dusk," "someone calls"
- **Line 12:** "child's," "loss"
- **Line 13:** "Darkness outside," "Inside," "radio's prayer"
- **Line 14:** "Rockall," "Finisterre"

ASSONANCE

Assonance appears throughout the poem, adding subtle moments of melody and creating connections between words. For example, note the assonance (and alliteration) between "sung" and "sudden" in line 4, which fittingly creates music in a line about "minims" (or musical notes) being made by "a tree."

Assonance does a similar thing in stanza 2, again imbuing lines that talk about music with music themselves. Note how assonance and consonance combine in "man will stand" and "in the distant Latin chanting" (and depending on the reader's accent, that "a" in Latin may feel assonant as well). This emphasizes the sound that the train generates; it almost *creates* a kind of chanting within the poem, enacting what the man within the poem can hear.

Long /ay/ sounds also repeat throughout the third quatrain and into the closing couplet, in "pray," "grade," "scales," "name," "they named," "radio's," and "prayer." These long /ay/ sounds implicitly connect all the things the speaker describes—the piano scales, the name of the child, and the sound of the radio—to the idea of "prayer" and of praying. This assonance emphasizes the poem's meaning, implicitly suggesting that prayer can exist within all of these aspects of daily life.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "will lift"
- **Line 3:** "hands and"
- **Line 4:** "sung," "sudden"
- **Line 7:** "man," "stand"
- **Line 8:** "in," "distant Latin chanting"
- **Line 9:** "Pray," "Grade," "scales"
- **Line 12:** "name," "they named"
- **Line 13:** "prayer"
- **Line 14:** "Finisterre"

SIBILANCE

The most common type of consonance in the poem is more specifically sibilance. Gentle /s/ sounds appear throughout the entire poem. Take lines 2-3:

> [...] the sieve of her hands and stare
> at the minims sung by a tree, a sudden gift.

Or lines 5-7 (which also contain many soft /th/ sounds, both voiced and unvoiced, which are often considered a form of sibilance in their own right; ditto /f/ sounds):

> Some nights, although we are faithless, the truth
> enters our hearts, that small familiar pain
> then a man will stand stock-still, hearing his youth

Or lines 9-11:

> [...] piano scales
> console the lodger looking out across
> [...] Then dusk, and someone calls

And, finally, the poem's final couplet, which is particularly sibilant:

> Darkness outside. Inside [...]
> [...] Finisterre.

All this intense sibilance fittingly imbues the poem with a kind of reverential hush. The /s/ is a soft, quiet sound, the sound of a whisper. Prayers themselves are often whispered or said silently, so the poem's use of sibilance makes sense. It creates an atmosphere of mystery and holiness.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "sieve," "stare"
- **Line 4:** "sung," "sudden"
- **Line 5:** "Some nights," "faithless"
- **Line 6:** "hearts," "small"
- **Line 7:** "stand stock-still"
- **Line 8:** "distant"
- **Line 9:** "us," "scales"
- **Line 10:** "console," "across"
- **Line 11:** "dusk," "someone"
- **Line 12:** "loss"
- **Line 13:** "Darkness outside. Inside"
- **Line 14:** "Finisterre"

VOCABULARY

Sieve (Line 3) - A sieve is a mesh strainer, usually made out of

wire, used to drain liquid. In the poem, the word is used to describe a woman's hands. The metaphor suggests that just as liquid can drain through a sieve, the woman's tears could slip through the cracks between her fingers.

Minims (Line 4) - A minim is a British term for a musical note that has the length of half a whole note. In the poem, the speaker subtly compares the leaves on a tree to "minims"; like musical notes, the leaves have stems and some kind of rounded or larger shape at the end of the stem. The wind moving through the leaves creates a kind of music that sounds like the tree is singing.

Lodger (Line 10) - A lodger is a visitor, and the word sometimes refers to a longer-term boarder in someone else's home.

Midlands (Line 11) - The name of the central region of England.

Rockall. Malin. Dogger. Finisterre. (Line 14) - Names of places in the seas around the British Isles. These are among the places included in the British shipping forecast, broadcast nightly over the radio to warn ships off the coast of any potential dangers. The British shipping broadcast is a traditional part of British culture that has aired for over 150 years.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Prayer" is written in the form of a Shakespearean sonnet. In accordance with this form, the poem has 14 lines broken up into three rhyming quatrains (four-line stanzas) and a closing couplet (a two-line stanza).

The fact that the poem is written in this form aligns it with classical traditions in poetry. Just as the poem explores the ways in which faith and prayer can still be experienced in new ways in contemporary society, the sonnet form subtly implies that poetic traditions still underlie modern poems, even if these poems reinterpret or transform traditional modes of writing.

Importantly, the poem *does* reinterpret the sonnet form, changing it slightly when it comes its *volta*, or turn. This is the moment in a sonnet that responds in some way to the question/issue/dilemma posed by the first half of the poem.

Though this poem is written in the form of a *Shakespearean* sonnet, the placement of the poem's *volta* connects it to the tradition of the *Petrarchan* sonnet.

Petrarchan sonnets are traditionally marked by an opening eight lines (or octave) followed by a closing six lines (or sestet). The turn in these sonnets occurs at the shift between the octave and sestet. Traditionally, the *volta* in Shakespearean sonnets is thought to come at the closing couplet—though Shakespearean sonnets can also contain turns in different places. The turn in "Prayer" can be found at line 9, when the speaker moves to addressing the reader directly: "Pray for us now," this stanza begins. In a sense, then, the poem alludes to *both* Shakespearean and Petrarchan sonnets, creating a contemporary poem that reimagines traditional forms.

METER

One crucial way in which "Prayer" reinterprets the sonnet form is through its lack of meter. Traditionally, sonnets use a fixed meter of iambic pentameter—five metrical feet, with each foot containing an iamb (an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable). However, "Prayer" has no set meter. Instead, the language sounds spoken, natural, and contemporary.

This absence of meter is important to the poem's meaning. In a sense, the poem's use of the sonnet form implies that classical forms—of both poetry and faith—still underlie modern society. At the same time, the poem shows that prayer and faith can be experienced in ways *outside* traditional religious conventions, and in the most familiar and ordinary aspects of daily life. Similarly, the poem's natural, colloquial language and rhythms—its *absence* of a fixed meter—imply that traditional poetic forms can be made new, to embody and convey contemporary experiences.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem follows the rhyme scheme of a traditional Shakespearean sonnet pretty closely:

ABAB CDCD EFEF AA

For the first two stanzas, the rhymes are all full. The rhymes in the first stanza, for example, are "prayer"/"stare" and "lift"/"gift." The third quatrain has a subtle slant rhyme between "scales" and "calls." Some readers might actually take "prayer" and "stare"/"Finisterre" to be subtle slant rhymes as well, depending on their accent. Slant rhymes aren't all that uncommon in sonnets, however.

What's more interesting is that usually the final couplet in a Shakespearean sonnet will introduce a *new* rhyme sound, a "GG." Here, however, the poem *repeats* a sound—and, indeed, even one of the rhyme *words*—from the first stanza: "prayer," that initial "A" rhyme, gets rhymed with "Finisterre."

This creates an almost circular movement in the poem, as the "Finisterre" (which, in Latin, basically means "the end of the earth") that ends the poem brings the reader back to the beginning, and to the idea of "prayer." These slight divergences from the traditional rhyme scheme, then, help to create the poem's meaning. They convey an experience of contemporary life in which faith can be felt and experienced, but not necessarily in conventional, fixed, or expected ways.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Prayer" remains unidentified within the poem. This helps its message feel universal and accessible to anyone.

Adding to this effect is that fact that the speaker uses the word "we" throughout, which can be interpreted as the "we" of contemporary British society (more on that in a moment).

And yet, while the speaker speaks in the collective first person, there are aspects of the poem that imply the speaker is an *individual* expressing a collective experience. All the people described in the poem—the woman in the first stanza, the man in the second, the lodger in the third—seem to be alone, at least within the moment of the poem. The reader could infer that the speaker is, likewise, isolated—yet aware of a shared experience with the other people the poem describes.

The speaker also references aspects of contemporary British life and culture. The Midlands is a region in central England, and the radio broadcast to which the speaker alludes in the last line is the traditional British shipping forecast, recounted each night on the radio to alert ships off the coast to potential dangers.

The speaker, then, can perhaps be interpreted as a single person who, at the same time, identifies a shared experience within contemporary British society. The speaker speaks, within the poem, from this "we," bringing each isolated person together in the poem as a whole.

SETTING

"Prayer" is set in the contemporary UK. Several elements of the poem help to establish this setting. First, the poem alludes to aspects of British geography and culture. The Midlands is a region in the central part of England. At the end of the poem, the speaker's list of "Rockall. Malin. Dogger. Finisterre" alludes to the British shipping forecast, broadcast every night on the radio in order to warn ships off the coast of potential dangers.

Several other details imply that the poem is set in the modern world as well. The people in the poem seem to look for some kind of faith, but not to have faith of a traditional religious kind, implying that they live in a secular society of modern times. Additionally, details like the sound of the train, the piano scales, and even the radio at the end of the poem suggest that though the poem is written in the classical form of a sonnet, it is set in a contemporary world.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Prayer" was first published in *The Times Saturday Review* in 1992, and also included as the final poem in Carol Ann Duffy's 1993 collection *Mean Time*. This collection won the 1993 Whitbread Poetry Award as well as the Forward Prize for Poetry. Its title refers to Greenwich Mean Time, a measurement of time taken from the Royal Observatory in Greenwich, London. Yet it carries another meaning as well—that of the cruelty of the passage of time and the changes it can bring. "Prayer" can be understood within the context of this book as a whole, as it explores how faith and prayer can be experienced within a contemporary setting.

More broadly, "Prayer" can also be understood within the larger literary tradition of the sonnet. Originally developed in 13th-century Italy, the sonnet was revitalized by Shakespeare and other poets during the Renaissance. "Prayer" is a Shakespearean sonnet, and its adherence to this form places the poem within a classical, longstanding literary tradition.

At the same time, the poem is also distinctly contemporary—in its references, its lack of meter, and, in certain ways, its subject, as it considers how prayer can emerge within the secular and everyday aspects of life. In this sense, the poem is also in conversation with other contemporary sonnets, which attempt to reinterpret the form in different ways.

Carol Ann Duffy is the author of numerous books of poetry, children's literature, and plays. *Mean Time* was her fourth poetry collection and helped to establish her reputation as a major poet. She went on to publish dozens of other collections and has become known for exploring issues of gender, sexuality, love, and loss in work that is both humane and experimental. In 2009, she became the first woman and first openly LGBTQ poet to be Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom, an office she held until 2019.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Prayer" explores what faith and spirituality can mean in modern life. In certain ways, the poem invokes religious traditions that once defined UK culture. For example, when the speaker describes the man who hears his "youth / in the distant Latin chanting of the train," this can be read as an allusion to experiences of people who grew up attending Catholic mass in Latin. Yet it is clear that within the time frame of the poem, the culture the speaker describes is largely secular. The people within the poem seem to *search* for faith and the ability to pray, but find themselves unable to pray and "faithless"—until some unexpected, numinous experience emerges from the surrounding world.

This historical context is important to the poem. "Prayer" situates itself in a time frame when religious traditions are still somewhat present in British society, but not as pervasive and all-encompassing as they once were. Instead, the people in the poem find faith in the ordinary, familiar aspects of their lives.

Another important element of historical context is the poem's reference to the British Shipping Forecast. At the end of the poem, the speaker describes "the radio's prayer" and then lists, "Rockall. Malin. Dogger. Finisterre." These words are names of places in the seas around the British Isles, recounted in the Shipping Forecast, which is broadcast nightly in the UK to warn ships of potential dangers along the coast. The Shipping

Forecast has been broadcast for over 150 years, and many British listeners view it as a crucial element of UK culture, to the extent that it has made its way into numerous representations in music, literature, and visual art. These words at the end of "Prayer," then, allude not only to the British Shipping Forecast in the *present*, but also to its historical importance, and to its fundamental familiarity within British life.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Audio of Carol Ann Duffy Reading "Prayer" — Listen to Carol Ann Duffy read "Prayer" in this video created by the University of Lincoln in the UK. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MaymvwSp1Nw&list=LLW9dyqZXXDnrL_szOipL79g&index=155)
- Biography of Carol Ann Duffy — Learn more about Carol Ann Duffy's life and work in this article from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/carol-ann-duffy)
- Carol Ann Duffy on Poetry — Learn more about the personal experiences underlying Duffy's poetry and why she understands poetry as a vocation. (https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/interviews/carol-ann-duffy-i-was-told-to-get-a-proper-job-1739622.html)
- Interview with Carol Ann Duffy — Duffy discusses what it means to be the first woman and first openly LGBTQ writer to be Poet Laureate, and why she regards poetry as the "music of humanity." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wnt5p1DGD9U)
- The British Shipping Forecast — Learn more about the British Shipping Forecast—referenced at the end of "Prayer"—and what it means, in this short video from the BBC. This video was created in 2017, the year that marked the 150th anniversary of the Shipping Forecast. (https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p057nvw1)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER CAROL ANN DUFFY POEMS

- Education For Leisure
- In Mrs Tilscher's Class
- Little Red Cap
- Mrs Midas
- Valentine
- Warming Her Pearls
- War Photographer

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