Rhyme of the Dead Self

SUMMARY

Just this evening, the poem's speaker says, he grabbed his past self and choked the life out of the pale, frail little guy. He strangled him with his very own claw-like hands; he caught him while he was asleep and dreaming.

Then, laughing, he scooped out his brains, which were full of love songs (songs the speaker dismisses by quoting a line from a cynical song against love in *As You Like It:* "heigh-ho, the holly!"). He flung the whole mess down the drain, crying: oh, those youthful ideals about love, what destructive nonsense.

The speaker rejoices over his younger self's murdered body, declaring: he's dead, the bloodless twerp, and he's not getting up again—not on the third day after his death (like Christ) or any day after, either. I've shed him like a snake sheds its skin: there he lies dead, and he'll never bother me ever again.

THEMES

YOUTHFUL IDEALISM VS. CYNICAL DISILLUSIONMENT

"Rhyme of the Dead Self" depicts the pain of disillusionment with dark humor. The poem's speaker, fed up with his own youthful idealism about love and life, decides he's going to murder his younger self. He triumphs over his former body, describing it as a cast-off "snakeskin" that was only ever good for dreaming silly "dreams of love." However, the poem hints that there's something terribly sad about the speaker's rejection of this side of himself. Youthful innocence and hope might be naïve, the poem suggests, but killing them off altogether means resigning oneself to bleak cynicism.

As the speaker crows that he's killed his innocent younger self off at last, it seems he's hoping to leave all sorts of errors and pains behind with that self's body. This "pale lily-white lad," believed in "dreams of love" that the speaker can only see as "ruinous folly" now—words that imply the speaker's idealism about love was crushed by painful experience. He gestures at that pain, not only when he rejects "pretty love-tales," but when he sings "heighho the holly" in the second stanza. This is a quotation from a cynical song in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, which declares that "most friendship is feigning, most loving mere folly." Life's disappointments, it seems, have made this speaker feel that he's better off without his youthful hopes and dreams.

In spite of the speaker's murderous glee, the poem also suggests his complete rejection of his idealism is a tragedy and a loss. While the speaker sneers at the poetic "pale youth" he once was, rejoicing that "he shall not trouble me again," he also seems to have lost a broader capacity for hope and humanity. He comically describes his own throttling hands as "these claws"—but this melodramatic image also sincerely suggests that his desperation to do away with his younger self makes him into something more like an animal than a person. And when he declares that his dead younger self "shall not rise," not "on the third day or any other day" (alluding to the Christian story of Jesus's death and resurrection), it seems that his rejection of this idea of rebirth also means giving up on the hope that life might change, get better, or be redeemed more generally.

Murdering his younger self seems to be the only protection the speaker can find from the pain of disappointed love—but that protection comes at a cost. There's no way around it, this darkly funny poem concludes: embracing a cynical adult disillusionment might protect one from certain kinds of unhappiness, but it cuts off a lot of beauty, hope, and possibility, too.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Tonight I have ...
... in his bed.

As "Rhyme of the Dead Self" begins, the speaker is rejoicing over the murder he just committed. This isn't a literal killing, though: rather, he's symbolically slaughtered a former version of himself, "all that [he] was" and no longer is. This will be a poem about doing away with all the ideals of one's youth.

The speaker depicts his self-murder with dark humor. Listen to the metaphor in line 3, for instance:

I have choked him with these my hands these claws

Both the image of the speaker's hands as dreadful "claws" and the melodramatic anaphora of "these my hands these claws" feel way over the top: the speaker is behaving as if he's a bad actor performing *Macbeth*, holding those dreadful bloodstained "claws" up for the audience to gasp at.

His picture of his younger self is similarly comic. The poor sap was a "pale lily-white lad," a boy too frail, too poetic for this world; he "lay a-dreaming in his bed" with, readers might

imagine, visions of sugarplums dancing in his innocent head.

The speaker has clearly had enough of such delicacy. His frantic, unpunctuated free verse, combined with the taunting, singsong ABAB rhyme scheme, makes it sound as if he's finally snapped: he hasn't just murdered his former self, he's mocking the dead body.

All around, then, there's a sense of hyperbole here: this dreadful tale of murder most foul is also just the story of something everyone goes through, the story of outgrowing a former self and its beliefs. But the violence, rage, and scorn the speaker depicts here might suggest genuine tragedy as well as comical overstatement. The rest of this poem will explore both why the speaker might be so eager to get rid of that "lily-white lad" and what he might lose by doing so.

LINES 5-8

Then chuckling I ...
... what ruinous folly.

The second stanza unveils the speaker's motives for self-murder. The "pale lily-white lad" he once was, he says, was full of "pretty love-tales"—idealistic dreams of love that the speaker can now only see as "ruinous folly."

In other words, this is a revenge killing, not pure spite! The speaker's younger self believed in love, and that belief proved "ruinous" (that is, both destructive and costly); the reader can guess that this speaker has gotten his heart broken. It's only in the speaker's best interests to kill his younger self before his "dreams of love" can get him into another painful mess.

The speaker seems to take sadistic pleasure in murdering his former self: he's "chuckling" as he relieves the poor young fellow of his "foolish brains." The allusions he makes in the course of the murder similarly suggest just how completely done he is with naive dreams of love:

> [...] I dragged out his foolish brains
> that were full of pretty love-tales heighho the holly
> and emptied them holus bolus to the drains

When the speaker "emptie[s]" those brains "to the drains," he's paraphrasing a line from John Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," in which a melancholy speaker feels as numb as if he'd "emptied some dull opiate to the drains" (that is, drunk a sedative) as he listens to the song of the titular night bird.

That reference both mocks the dreams of gentle poets—people, that is, like both Keats and the speaker's former self—and suggests that the younger self's "brains" were themselves opiated, lost in druggy visions of love. The comical addition of "holus bolus," which means "all at once" and sounds like great lumps of brain tumbling into the gutter, makes the scornful picture complete.

There's even more cheery derision in the speaker's cry of "heighho the holly"—a quotation from the chorus of a cynical anti-love song in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*:

> *Heigh-ho, sing heigh-ho, unto the green holly.*
> *Most friendship is feigning, most loving mere folly.*
> *Then heigh-ho, the holly.*
> *This life is most jolly.*

While the speaker's allusions might seem like a wholesale rejection of his younger self, there's also something a little sad about the way he uses them. After all, there's nothing a "pale lily-white lad" loves more than Keats and Shakespeare. Poetic sensitivity here becomes a stick for the speaker to beat his own former self with.

Perhaps these allusions even hint that the speaker can't kill his younger self off so completely as he might wish to. Romantic disillusionment might mean that one leaves a lot of one's former beliefs and ideals behind—but the speaker can't help but still reach for his young self's favorite poets.

LINES 9-12

He is dead ...
... again for aye.

The speaker wraps up his murderous tale with a little comical irreverence:

> He is dead pale youth and he shall not rise
> on the third day or any other day

This allusion to the death and resurrection of no lesser figure than Jesus Christ (said to have risen from the dead after his third day in the tomb) makes it clear just how *done* the speaker is. The death of his young, idealistic self is also the death of his belief in anything that resembles hope, joy, or redemption, let alone reverence. The speaker, in other words, is now a hard-bitten cynic.

While the *speaker's* attitude toward the death of the "pale youth" seems to be an uncomplicated "good riddance," the *reader* might feel that this murder is tragic. Clearly, the speaker can't bear the pain of the heartbreak he hinted at in the second stanza. In pushing that pain away, he's also pushing away a lot of sweetness, gentleness, and hope.

But then, perhaps that "pale youth" that represents all these qualities isn't so thoroughly dead as the speaker wants him to be. Listen to the simile here:

> sloughed like a snakeskin there he lies

To shed a former self like a snakeskin is a very different thing than to kill it: when a snakeskin is shed, there's still a snake! This speaker, who still turns to poetry in his time of trial, may still carry a lot of that disavowed, brainless youth inside him,

whether he knows it or not.

The last line of this stanza echoes its first. In line 9, the speaker declared "he shall not rise"; in line 12, he reiterates that "he shall not trouble me again for aye." Maybe this insistent anaphora actually reveals the speaker's uncertainty that he really has done the deed for good. Even his very last words on the matter—"for aye," a poetically old-fashioned way of saying "ever" or "forever"—suggest that the romantic, literary "pale youth" is still there, even as the speaker chants about his demise. Throttle though he might, the speaker has only rejected a part of himself, not fully destroyed it.

SYMBOLS

MURDERING THE PALE YOUTH

The speaker's self-murder symbolizes rejecting youthful illusion.

When the poem's speaker decides he's had it with the "lily-white lad" who is his younger self, he murders him without a second thought. In doing so, he also murders this sweet young fellow's "dreams of love"—dreams the speaker has decided are too useless, silly, and painful to hang on to.

This murder thus represents the end of innocence and idealism: the speaker is giving up on the hopes of his youth.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

This poem's allusions to everything from folk songs to poetry to Christianity set the stage for the speaker's thorough rejection of his youthful hopes and dreams.

When the speaker sneers at the "lily-white lad" he once was, he's quoting an old folk song, "Green Grow the Rushes, O." But he's also alluding to a more general stereotype of the "pale youth"—a dreamy, poetic fellow who believes wholeheartedly in "pretty love-tales." Such pale youths, the speaker feels, are uniformly deluded.

He underscores that point in line 7, where he describes "empt[ying]" his former self's brains "holus bolus to the drains." Here, he's paraphrasing a line from the poet John Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale": in the first lines of that poem, the speaker, listening to the song of a nightingale, feels so numb it's as if he'd "emptied some dull opiate to the drains" (in other words, gulped down a sedative). Keats and his poetry are often associated with a kind of romantic, dreamy, pale-youth attitude.

By appropriating Keats's melancholy words for a tale of grisly murder, the speaker suggests two things:

- His "brains," "full of pretty love-tales," were themselves "opiates," numbing him to the hard truth.
- He's well and truly done with his days of sighing over love and birdsong.

He makes his position even clearer with an allusion to Shakespeare. When he sings "heighho the holly," he's quoting an anti-love song from *As You Like It*. Its chorus runs like this:

> *Heigh-ho, sing heigh-ho, unto the green holly.*
> *Most friendship is feigning, most loving mere folly.*
> *Then heigh-ho, the holly.*
> *This life is most jolly.*

This cheery cynicism perfectly matches the speaker's own attitude toward love. All this poetry-quoting, though, also suggests what the speaker might be losing in murdering his own "pale youth." In both "Ode to a Nightingale" and *As You Like It*, some redemptive beauty survives all the world's sadnesses and disappointments; the speaker in "Nightingale" is transported far from the cruel world by the sound of birdsong, the lovers in *As You Like It* marry.

For this speaker, though, the hope of such consolation is only more "ruinous folly." He makes that clear with a final allusion in lines 9-10:

> He is dead pale youth and **he shall not rise**
> **on the third day** or any other day

Here, the speaker invokes the Christian story of Jesus's resurrection: Jesus is said to have risen from the dead after three days in the tomb. By categorically rejecting the idea that his younger self might "rise" again, the speaker makes it clear that he is altogether done with the hopes, dreams, and ideals of his past; his disillusionment is complete.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "that pale lily-white lad"
- **Line 6:** "heighho the holly"
- **Line 7:** "emptied them holus bolus to the drains"
- **Lines 9-10:** "he shall not rise / on the third day or any other day"

EXTENDED METAPHOR

The poem's sole metaphor suggests that the speaker's rejection of his youthful idealism has consequences.

In line 3, the speaker describes his murder of his own younger self like this:

I have choked him with these my hands **these claws**

This melodramatic image is meant to be a little funny: it's as if the speaker is holding his cursed "claws" up like the villain in a pantomime, crying, *Behold my evil!* But these words also get at something sadder and more serious. In murdering his younger self, the speaker is murdering part of his humanity. Those beastly "claws" suggest that the speaker can't leave his idealistic self behind without becoming something a little lower, a little worse, than he was before.

This metaphor thus grows right out of the heart of this poem's complicated emotions. On the one hand, this is a comic poem about doing away with a goofy, dreamy, rather silly innocence: facing facts, growing up, and rejecting a false idealism. On the other hand, it's a tragedy about the loss of a sweet, beautiful, hopeful perspective. Growing up, this metaphor suggests, doesn't necessarily mean becoming better or wiser; perhaps it might even mean becoming a grim and beastly cynic.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "these my hands these claws"

SIMILE

A lone simile hints that the speaker's victory over his innocence and naivety might not be as complete as he hopes. After crowing in triumph over the corpse of the "lily-white lad" that is his former self, the speaker declares:

sloughed like a snakeskin there he lies

If the speaker's former self is like a snakeskin, it's just a dried-out husk, without life or motion; he's done with it and it can't hurt him. However, there's a difference between a shed skin and a dead snake!

All along, the speaker has been delighted by the idea that he's strangled his former self, getting rid of him for good. Here in the last lines, though, it seems as if something else has happened. Rather than killing his past self completely, the speaker has only *shed* that self: he might have gotten rid of an old skin, but he's still the snake who grew it.

This final simile thus suggests that the speaker's declaration of victory might be premature. Much as he might wish to be completely rid of his own "folly," cynically hardened against the world and untouchable, it seems fairly likely he'll have to shed another "dead self" somewhere down the line. Perhaps it's just another kind of naivety to believe that one *can* be totally free of one's illusions.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "sloughed like a snakeskin there he lies"

REPETITION

The poem's repetitions help to make the speaker sound comically crazed and emphasize his complete rejection of his own youthful dreams.

Take a look at his parallelism in these lines from the first stanza, for instance:

and **strangled him** that pale lily-white lad
I have **choked him** with **these my hands these claws**

The speaker can't stop at saying he "strangled" his former self: he has to reiterate that he "choked him," too, like Macbeth obsessing over King Duncan's murder. His repetition in "**these** my hands **these** claws" similarly makes him sound like a villain in a play. The high drama of these repetitions helps to give the poem some dark humor, hyperbolically presenting the ordinary (if depressing) process of disillusionment as murder most foul.

Other forms of repetition suggest the speaker's disgust with his former self. He twice describes him as "pale," once at the beginning of the poem and once at the end, stressing the poor silly kid's delicacy. And his polyptoton in the second stanza, in which he first refers to his younger self's "**foolish** brains" and then decries his "ruinous **folly**," makes his disdain no mystery. He also rejects love itself more than once: "dreams of **love**" and "pretty **love**-tales" are both flung aside.

In the final stanza, emphatic anaphora suggests just how done with this whole mess the speaker feels. Speaking of his dead self, he declares, "**he shall not** rise"; a few lines later, he insists "**he shall not** trouble me again." Perhaps, however, this repetition hints that the speaker isn't quite so sure he really *is* free of his past illusions: maybe he protests just a little too much.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "strangled him," "pale lily-white lad"
- **Line 3:** "choked him," "these my hands these claws"
- **Line 4:** "dreaming"
- **Line 5:** "foolish"
- **Line 6:** "pretty love-tales"
- **Line 8:** "dreams of love," "folly"
- **Line 9:** "pale youth," "and he shall not rise"
- **Line 10:** "day," "day"
- **Line 12:** "and he shall not trouble me"

ALLITERATION

Punchy alliteration supports the poem's cutting, comical tone.

For instance, listen to the repeated sounds in the poem's first two lines:

Tonight I have **t**aken all **t**hat I was

and strangled him that pale lily-white lad

The sharp /t/ sounds of "tonight I have taken" evoke the speaker's own sharpness: he's completely done with that poor "lily-white lad," whose gentle, lilting /l/ sounds suggest his frail sweetness.

Later on, a rough /dr/ sound scrapes all the way through the second stanza: first, the speaker "drag[s] out" his younger self's "foolish brains," then he washes them down the "drains," then he decries the pathetic "dreams" that made those brains so foolish in the first place. That grating sound fits right in with the speaker's merciless, murderous cynicism.

Down in the third stanza, the speaker uses the alliterative sibilance of "sloughed like a snakeskin" to evoke that discarded skin's whispery crackle. Perhaps that hissing sound also reminds readers that a shed snakeskin implies a living snake: the speaker seems to have emerged from his self-murder as something beastly and treacherous. He seems content with his position, though. The thudding /d/ sounds he uses when he declares that his "dead" self will not rise, Christlike, "on the third day" feel like the last nails being driven into his younger self's coffin.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Tonight," "taken"
- **Line 2:** "lily," "lad"
- **Line 3:** "claws"
- **Line 4:** "catching"
- **Line 5:** "dragged"
- **Line 6:** "heighho," "holly"
- **Line 7:** "holus," "drains"
- **Line 8:** "dreams"
- **Line 9:** "dead"
- **Line 10:** "day"
- **Line 11:** "sloughed," "like," "snakeskin," "lies"

VOCABULARY

Holus bolus (Line 7) - All at once, all together.

Ruinous folly (Line 8) - Destructive, costly foolishness.

Sloughed (Line 11) - Shed, cast off.

For aye (Line 12) - Ever, forever.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

Written in free verse (with hints of a rough, irregular four-beat rhythm), "Rhyme of the Dead Self" is neatly organized into three four-line stanzas (or quatrains) rhymed ABAB. The mixture of crisp stanzas, steady rhyme, and herky-jerky, unpunctuated rhythms suggests that the speaker is just about sane enough to organize his thoughts in a traditional form—but maddened enough to rant and ramble.

The poem thus reflects the speaker's predicament. Through its mixture of order and disorder, the poem suggests that it's perfectly sensible to reject an innocent younger self whose idealism has gotten one in trouble—but that such rejection might also be a crime against oneself.

METER

Written in free verse, "Rhyme of the Dead Self" doesn't use any regular meter. That said, it does roughly stick to a loose accentual tetrameter (that is, there are generally four strong stresses per line but no predictable number of syllables). Here's how that sounds in the first two lines:

Tonight I have taken all that I was
and strangled him that pale lily-white lad

Those stresses don't land in any predictable place, but they do give the poem a kind of rambling rhythm. Such irregular, unpunctuated lines make the speaker sound maddened—perhaps with murderous glee, perhaps with sorrow, perhaps with a mixture of both!

RHYME SCHEME

The poem's orderly rhyme scheme follows this alternating pattern, familiar as a nursery rhyme:

ABAB

This neat pattern pushes back against the poem's free meter, giving the poem a feeling of crazed logic. However, a lot of these rhymes are slant—*lad* and *bed*, *was* and *claws*, *day* and *aye*. The combination of an orderly rhyme scheme and imperfect rhymes reflects the speaker's hard-earned sense that reality is always disappointing: just as there's no perfection in the world, there's no perfection in this poem's sounds.

Something particularly tricky happens in the poem's final lines, in which the final B rhyme, *aye*, also forms a slant rhyme with the A rhyme just before it, *lies*. This makes the poem's last lines feel especially final, forming a slanted one-two couplet that makes it sound as if the speaker is slamming the book closed on his past life.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is an embittered man. Scarred by disappointment in love, he's prepared to throttle the younger self who got him into this predicament—a sweet "lily-white lad" who believed in the "pretty-love tales" the speaker now feels were only ever illusions.

The speaker's brisk, maniacally cheerful tale of coldblooded self-murder suggests that there's something at once comical and sad about leaving youthful dreams behind. Perhaps that poor "pale youth" was a little silly, but his idealism also had its beauty. Alas, the speaker suggests, such idealism only gets you into trouble.

SETTING

There's no clear setting in this poem. While the speaker imagines throttling his younger self while he lies "a-dreaming in his bed," that bed could be anywhere. This nonspecific setting might help readers to imagine themselves in the speaker's place: the experience of cursing one's own youthful naivety, the poem suggests, isn't limited to this speaker!

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

A. R. D. Fairburn (1904-1957) was one of New Zealand's most prominent poets. Not only a writer, but a designer, a critic, a teacher, and a general man about town, Fairburn is remembered as much for his role as a noted New Zealand personality as for his poetry.

Besides taking inspiration from the English Modernists (especially T.S. Eliot and D.H. Lawrence), Fairburn found an influence closer to home in his good friend R. A. K. Mason, a fellow poet whom he met when they were both students at Auckland Grammar School. The precocious pair spurred each other on to publish poetry that reflected their native landscape. Much of Fairburn's most famous work set classic poetic themes—love, loss, and death—against a New Zealand backdrop.

"Rhyme of the Dead Self," on the other hand, could be set anywhere in the world: its tale of a man rejecting the illusions of his youth in favor of hardbitten, self-protective cynicism is a universal one. The poem's final stanza lent a title to Fairburn's first collection of poetry, *He Shall Not Rise* (1930).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In 1930, when this poem was published, New Zealand—and the rest of the world—was in the grips of the Great Depression, which began when the New York Stock Exchange dramatically crashed in 1929. The knock-on effects of the crash created worldwide poverty, unemployment, and desperation. By 1932, unemployment in New Zealand had gotten so bad that violent riots broke out in many of the country's major cities.

Fairburn himself struggled to find work in the '30s, and had to take a job in a "relief gang"—a government scheme in which unemployed men were given jobs improving the country's infrastructure (for instance, by building roads and rewiring streetlights). He described his not-altogether-pleasant experiences with this backbreaking work in a book-length poem, *Dominion*, which details both his disillusionment with his country's government and his hopes that New Zealand might one day live up to its promises of fairness and goodness.

While "Rhyme of the Dead Self" shows familiarity with total, bleak disillusionment, Fairburn never quite gave up on his own ideals; his later poetry always clung to the hope that beauty can endure even dark times.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- An Interview with Fairburn's Daughters — Listen to an interview in which Fairburn's daughters discuss his legacy. (https://culturalicons.co.nz/05-daughters-of-ard-fairburn/)
- Fairburn's Poetic Career — Read about Fairburn's development as an artist. (https://www.read-nz.org/writer/fairburn-ard)
- More Fairburn Resources — Read more of Fairburn's poetry and learn about his other artistic pursuits via the New Zealand Electronic Poetry Center. (https://www.nzepc.auckland.ac.nz/authors/fairburn/index.asp#online)
- A Brief Biography — Learn more about Fairburn's life and work. (https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/4f2/fairburn-arthur-rex-dugard)

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Nelson, Kristin. "*Rhyme of the Dead Self*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 29 Mar 2022. Web. 31 Mar 2022.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Nelson, Kristin. "*Rhyme of the Dead Self*." LitCharts LLC, March 29, 2022. Retrieved March 31, 2022. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/a-r-d-fairburn-f5bcfe30-5f81-43a0-84ed-da416b3ac3e2/rhyme-of-the-dead-self.