Rising Five

SUMMARY

"I'm almost five years old," he said, "not four," and his small curls messed themselves up on his head. His glasses, full of his huge eyes that stared at me and the meadow, reflected points of light above his cheeks, which were filled with toffee. He had been alive for fifty-six months, or maybe a week longer: not four years old, but almost five years old.

Around him in the meadow, it was springtime, meaning plants and animals were reproducing. Buds opened; leaves opened up on shoots and twigs, and all the trees overflowed with greenery. It was the season after the blossoms come out, but before fruit grows: not May, but almost June.

And in the sky, the dust divided the steeply-angled light into fragments: it wasn't day, but almost night; not right this moment, but almost soon.

New buds push old leaves off the tree branches. We drop our youth like a little boy throws away toffee-wrappers. We never focus on the flowers themselves, only the fruit that's to come; we never focus on the fruit, only the fact that it will soon rot. We look forward to babies' weddings when they're still in the cradle, and we look forward to the grave when we're in our marriage beds: we're not living, but almost dead.

THEMES

THE FLEETING NATURE OF TIME

In "Rising Five," a little boy insists that he's not four, but "rising five"—leading the speaker to reflect that people are always looking forward to the future, never quite living in the present. The human difficulty with staying put in time, the poem suggests, is why life slips through people's fingers so fast. And as the poem moves from the speaker's encounter with the little boy to broad, solemn pronouncements about human nature, it demonstrates the very habit it's describing: the speaker can't stay with the moment of the little boy in the spring meadow any more than the little boy can be four rather than "rising five."

The small boy who begins the poem by insisting that he's "rising five," not four, sets the scene: even little children are in the habit of looking ahead to what's next. The speaker vividly evokes the little boy's youth through images of his curling hair, his huge eyes, and his "toffee-buckled" cheeks. The boy is the picture of innocence, but he's already looking forward; even this little kid can't stay put in the present. This plays against clichés of children as being better at living in the moment than adults, and suggests that the inability to focus on the here and now is a *human* dilemma, not just a grown-up one.

The speaker looks from the little boy to the meadow they're standing in, and sees all the growing and blossoming plants as the little boy sees himself: as images of "rising June," not May. Even the richness of spring can be seen in the light of the future as *not-yet-summer*. Again, the speaker uses vivid images of new life and fertility that echo the earlier description of the little boy: the trees are "swilled with green," and even the "cells of spring" are on the move, busily reproducing. But the speaker sees all this brilliant life as "the season after blossoming, / Before the forming of the fruit." Even though the spring is real and right in front of them, then, the speaker depicts it as a between-time, less real than the past or the future.

The poem's gaze widens in the third and fourth stanzas as the speaker moves away from the moment of the encounter with the little boy. The speaker zooms out to see the present itself as "Not now, but rising soon," and finishes with broad pronouncements about how humanity as a whole is always looking forward to the next thing—a habit that means humans are "rising dead" even while they're alive. It's impossible to really experience life, the speaker suggests, if one is always looking forward. The images of rotten fruit replacing the spring green of the meadow parallels images of humans looking forward from their births to their graves.

This movement from a specific moment with a little boy in a field to a broad, solemn declaration about all of human life mirrors the poem's big idea. Even this poem about the difficulty of staying with what's right there doesn't stay with what's right there.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-31

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

"I'm rising five," ...
... his toffee-buckled cheeks.

"Rising Five" begins with a familiar scene: a little kid insisting that he's not four, but *almost five*. The speaker looks closely at this little boy and sees is at once an archetypal picture of childhood and something a little less familiar.

On the one hand, the portrait the speaker creates of the little boy touches on a lot of standard-issue images of children. This boy has a mop of curly hair, huge eyes, and cheeks full of toffee;

the reader can see him clearly, a figure at once solemn and a little silly in his solemnity.

But the *words* the speaker uses to paint this picture are strange and new. Rather than simply saying that the boy had a head of curls, the speaker describes how "the little coils of hair / Un-clicked themselves upon his head." This peculiar use of the word "un-clicked" makes meaning through sound: the sharp consonants of "clicked" give the reader an image of tight, crisp ringlets—which, if "*un*-clicked," must be loosening themselves, changing.

And this boy's eyes aren't merely big and wet: they're contained in old-fashioned "spectacles" which seem almost to overflow with eye. If his cheeks are "toffee-buckled," they're bulging with toffee, but maybe also glued together with toffee; the reader can hear him through his chewy mouthful as well as see him.

The simultaneous familiarity and strangeness of this little boy give the reader the feeling that the speaker is really *looking* at him, the way one looks when something has caught one's attention. The speaker is seeing something interesting in this little boy, something beyond the mere sweetness of a child's self-importance about his age. Both change (in the form of the "un-clicked" hair) and bodily decay (in the form of those premature "spectacles") are already here in this encounter with a child who seems too little to be linked to either. The rest of the poem will emerge from this encounter.

LINES 6-9

He'd been alive ...
... But rising five.

The speaker here turns from gazing at the little boy to thinking about him, in precise terms. If this little boy is "rising five," the speaker calculates, he must have "been alive / Fifty-six months or perhaps a week more"—that is, he must be a little over four-and-a-half.

Again, there's a sweetness to this calculation. Fifty-six months seems like a poignantly short time to an adult who's lived many, many more months than that, and that added "perhaps a week more" works on a child's timescale: to a person who's only been alive "[f]ifty-six months," a week makes a substantial difference.

Note how the speaker arranges space in this passage, with a large swath of white space appearing before the words "not four." These thoughts begin at a caesura, a break in the middle of the line after "cheeks." The speaker turns straight from the description of the boy to calculating his exact age, and then rushes the thought along in an enjambed line ("alive / Fifty six"). This feeling of an idea pulling the speaker quickly on connects to the poem's developing interest in time. As the speaker counts the boy's months of life, the speaker's thought speeds forward, leaping from one place to another just as the boy eagerly leaps from being four to "rising five."

Then there's that big, meaningful gap of space before the lonely words, "not four." This break gives a feeling of a drumroll, and again adds a touch of adult amusement at the boy's seriousness. It's *very important* that everyone should know he's almost five.

LINES 10-13

Around him in ...
... swilled with green.

Here, the speaker's perspective pulls back to take in the poem's surroundings. The speaker and the little boy are standing in a field, and that field is alive with the freshness and growth of spring.

The language in this passage is full of rich sounds. Take a look at the density of alliteration, assonance, and consonance here—with /b/, /d/, /l/, /s/, and /sh/ consonants and /uh/ and /ee/ vowel sounds repeating:

> Around him in the field, the cells of spring
> Bubbled and doubled; buds unbuttoned; shoot
> And stem shook out the creases from their frills,
> And every tree was swilled with green.

These energetic, interconnected sounds make this field seem to swell with harmonious life, suggesting that all the plants are different parts of the same fertile process. The speaker seems almost to have a god's-eye view here, able to see down into the very "cells of spring" and seeing growth everywhere.

It isn't just the sounds that connect to each other here. When the speaker says that the "buds unbuttoned" and the "shoot and stem shook out the creases from their frills," the speaker personifies them, imagining them as people getting out of old clothes or freshening up new ones. The aliveness of the field is like the aliveness of a person—and the aliveness of a person must therefore also have to do with the aliveness of nature. There seems to be a link here between the lively spring-green field and the vividly-painted youth of the little boy.

LINES 14-17

It was the ...
... But rising June.

In the second part of this stanza, the speaker starts to make the movement of the poem's thinking clear. The poem has suggested that the little boy and the field are alike in their youth and springy energy. Now, the speaker thinks that they may also be alike in the way they're placed in time.

From the speaker's immersion in luscious greenery in the first part of this stanza, the speaker turns to what *isn't* here:

> It was the season after blossoming,
> Before the forming of the fruit:
> not May,

But rising June.

The reader can spot a parallelism here. That "not [...] but" structure has returned from the first stanza, only now it's to do with the *season's* age, rather than the little boy's.

The speaker is seeing all the surroundings in terms of what they *aren't*, to the point that the speaker seems to contradict reality. It certainly *is* May, even though the speaker is seeing it as "rising June," and the little boy *is* four, though he insists he's really "rising five." In thinking of the blossoms that are gone and the fruit that isn't here yet, the speaker stops seeing what's right in front of them: all that green leafy life the poem evoked so vividly just moments ago.

LINES 18-23

...
... But rising soon.

The speaker has moved from looking carefully at the little boy to looking carefully at the field. Now, the poem's gaze widens even further as the speaker looks to the sky, and then to time itself.

Upon looking up, the speaker doesn't exactly see the sky, but rather the dust that's in it. That dust is doing something: the speaker recalls that it "dissected the tangential light." Like the little boy's "un-clicked" curls or the trees "swilled with green," this "dissected" light is a strange image, one that demands the reader's attention.

To "dissect" something is to take it meticulously apart—and it's most often used to describe scientifically taking apart a dead body. Thus, if the dust is "dissecting" the light, it's breaking it into tiny pieces (an image supported by the meticulous, crisp alliteration and consonance on /d/ and /t/ sounds here: "dust dissected the tangential light").

Here, the reader might see an image of dust floating in a sunbeam, made visible by the angle of light. And indeed, the light here is "tangential," coming in at a steep angle, suggesting that this poem is taking place in the late afternoon as the sun begins to set.

These images all point toward decline and endings. This suspended, dissecting dust makes the speaker think that this moment they're standing in is "not day, / But rising night; / not now, / But rising soon." Again, the speaker has become detached from the reality in front of then.

Of course, it's always "now"—it can never be anything *but* now. It's "now" at the exact moment that the reader reads this poem. But the speaker, in living in this "rising" world, isn't where the speaker is. The speaker's living in a paradox. And that paradox means that the speaker's always looking into the *future*—a step ahead of where things are, and a step closer to where they end.

The poem's iambic meter suddenly makes a lot of sense: those da-DUM beats that have marched all through the poem sound a lot like a ticking clock or a beating heart.

LINES 24-26

The new buds ...
... away his toffee-wrappers.

In the last stanza, the speaker lifts off from the scene they've been standing in altogether. From a specific story about meeting a specific little boy, the speaker turns toward big generalities that address all of humanity as one.

These generalities hearken back to all the poem's earlier images. The speaker starts by declaring, "The new buds push the old leaves from the bough." This is a plain old fact—spring buds do grow in the places that old leaves fall away from in autumn—but it's also symbolic. Spring and autumn are ancient symbols of birth and death; the speaker isn't just talking about what happens to plants here.

The speaker makes this even clearer in his next image: "We drop our youth behind us like a boy / Throwing away his toffee-wrappers." Here, the speaker builds a simile from experience, connecting the real little boy to a wider truth: youth goes fast, and humans discard it without thinking twice. Those "toffee wrappers" contained nuggets of real experience, sweet and temporary.

The speaker's tone here is world-weary. The speaker can see in the little boy's insistence that he's "rising five" a human habit that seems to start awfully young: the inclination to live in the future, and the inability to stay with what's right there in front of you, even though that's the only real thing there is. The percussive alliteration on /b/ sounds here (as in "behind us like a boy") falls like solid drumbeats, declaring an old, sad truth.

LINES 26-31

We never see ...
... But rising dead.

The speaker closes with an address to everyone living. Here as before, the patterns of sound fit in with the poem's meaning:

> [...] We never see the flower,
> But only the fruit in the flower; never the fruit,
> But only the rot in the fruit.

The diacope here (and the alliteration that goes with it, as well as the brisk consonance on /t/ sounds) feels insistent, as if the speaker is trying hard to warn readers of the all-too-human danger being talked about. And in lines 28-29, the enjambment means that the reader's eye leaps over the line break from the "marriage bed" back to the "cradle" just as people tend to leap to a baby's adulthood even while the baby is still in diapers:

> [...] We look for the marriage bed
> In the baby's cradle [...]

In the end, the speaker finishes, people spend most of their time "not living, / But rising dead." This is a pretty grim thought. Throughout the poem, the speaker has built a contrast between the beauty and strangeness of the present moment (through images of the boy, the field, and the light) and the way that anxious, forward-looking thought displaces people from that reality. Here, the speaker seems to conclude that people spend *most* of their lives detached from all that is lovely in the immediate moment.

But there's a touch of hope in this conclusion, too. One might read two meanings into the phrase "rising dead." In the context this poem has established, it means that the way people live makes them almost dead rather than alive. But "rising dead" could also suggest resurrection. In a poem full of images of springy rebirth, there's perhaps an encouragement not only to be in the present moment, but to find a rebirth *within* that moment. Being with the newness of things as they occur, "Rising Five" hints, is the fountain of life.

SYMBOLS

SPRING AND NATURE

Spring in "Rising Five" plays its ancient role as a symbol of new life and rebirth—but also of inevitable change (and, by extension, death).

The speaker evokes spring with joyful, rich language while looking around at the field; even on a cellular level, spring brings growth and refreshment. But all this abundance *also* brings with it thoughts of decline. Even as the speaker relishes the spring, the speaker starts to think ahead to summer. The image of flowers turning to fruit turning to rot likewise touches on how the newness of spring is only one part of the natural cycle.

The little boy of the first stanza is closely connected to spring, here. Newness and innocence, the spring symbolism suggests, are always temporary.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-17:** "Around him in the field, the cells of spring / Bubbled and doubled; buds unbuttoned; shoot / And stem shook out the creases from their frills, / And every tree was swilled with green. / It was the season after blossoming, / Before the forming of the fruit: / not May, / But rising June."
- **Line 24:** "The new buds push the old leaves from the bough."
- **Lines 26-28:** "We never see the flower, / But only the fruit in the flower; never the fruit, / But only the rot in the fruit."

LIGHT

Light, in "Rising Five," symbolizes the fleeting nature of time. Light is often symbolically connected to time because of the way light changes with the time of day, and that's certainly going on when the speaker remembers how "[t]he dust dissected the tangential light." If the light is "tangential," it's coming in at a low angle, suggesting that the afternoon is wearing on—until it's "not day, / But rising night."

Light here shows the speaker time in the progress of passing. In doing so, it also symbolizes his new understanding or realization about how hard it is to stay rooted in the present moment. (Just think of a lightbulb going off above a cartoon character's head.)

Because of the way light moves and changes across the day and night, it might also symbolize all that is fleeting here, including life itself. When "cones of light" reflect in the little boy's glasses in line 5, there's a sense that his experience is as temporary as these reflections.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "His spectacles, brimful of eyes to stare / At me and the meadow, reflected cones of light"
- **Lines 18-19:** "And in the sky / The dust dissected the tangential light:"

TOFFEE

Toffee turns up at the beginning and end of this poem: once as the little boy chews a huge mouthful of it, once as only a ghost of itself as he discards its empty wrappers. Toffee, then, might here be read as a symbol of life's pleasures, or even life itself: delicious but temporary, and all too easily discarded. When the speaker says of all humanity that "[w]e drop our youth behind us like a boy / Throwing away his toffee-wrappers," the poem evokes the transience of experience, and suggests how easy it is for people to discard what's in front of them.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "his toffee-buckled cheeks"
- **Lines 25-26:** "We drop our youth behind us like a boy / Throwing away his toffee-wrappers."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

In poems, alliteration often connects words and ideas, or helps to create a musical sound. Because it's not very common in everyday speech, alliteration makes a poem's language sound

elevated and distinctive. But it can also link meaningful words together, subtly strengthening a poem's meaning. Here it serves all these roles.

For an especially good example, take a look at the way alliteration works in the final stanza of "Rising Five":

> The new buds push the old leaves from the bough.
> We drop our youth behind us like a boy
> [...] We never see the flower,
> But only the fruit in the flower; never the fruit,
> But only the rot in the fruit. We look for the marriage bed
> In the baby's cradle; we look for the grave in the bed;

This dense alliteration on /b/ and /f/ fits right in with the poem's final, insistent points. All those initial /b/ sounds are blunt and heavy, landing like blows on a drum, demanding that the reader pay attention—and they link ideas of new and old, connecting the fresh bud to the generative bough, and the young boy to the toffee wrappers he leaves behind. Something similar happens with the softer /f/ alliteration, which connects flower and fruit as one follows after another, over and over.

Part of what's going on here is to do with the poem's secret undercurrent of hope. While these last thoughts feel despairing, there's also a potentially uplifting double meaning: "rising dead" could mean "almost dead," but it could also mean "the resurrected dead"!

Mirroring that complexity, the alliteration here links ideas of before and after, cause and effect, and past and future, suggesting that even though humans have a hard time staying in the present moment, there's always a quiet hope of renewal. Even dead ends might be connected to new life.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "me," "meadow"
- **Line 8:** "four"
- **Line 9:** "five"
- **Line 11:** "Bubbled," "buds"
- **Line 15:** "forming," "fruit"
- **Line 19:** "dust," "dissected"
- **Line 20:** "day"
- **Line 21:** "night"
- **Line 22:** "not," "now"
- **Line 24:** "buds," "bough"
- **Line 25:** "behind," "boy"
- **Line 26:** "flower"
- **Line 27:** "fruit," "flower," "fruit"
- **Line 28:** "bed"
- **Line 29:** "baby's," "bed"

ASSONANCE

Assonance, like alliteration, often helps a poem to sound musical and pleasing; patterns of repeated sound just fall nicely on the ear. But repeated patterns are also one of this poem's themes, and the assonance here supports the *ideas* of "Rising Five" as much as the melodies.

There's strong assonance even in the poem's title—and the long /i/ sounds of "Rising Five" don't end in the title, but repeat across the first stanza. The assonant /i/ draws attention to the poem's strongest theme: that people, even very small people, tend to live in the future rather than the present. That assonance also connects the little boy *himself* to his age through the strong /i/ in "I'm." (Think how differently the poem would sound if the little boy said, "I'm rising four" or "I'm rising eight.") Here, assonance ties together the little boy's identity, his place in time, and his disconnection from time—all in three short words.

Assonance also creates mood and texture in the evocative second stanza, where the speaker looks around at the spring meadow. Rich, round /uh/ sounds connect the "bubbling," "doubling" cells with the unbuttoning buds, and long /ee/ sounds link the "green" "tree[s]" with the "season" they grow in. Here, dense vowel sounds (as well as consonance and alliteration—see those devices' separate entries for more) help the reader to inhabit the lush growth of the meadow.

More sinisterly, at the very end of the poem, the /ay/ of the "baby's cradle" is linked with the /ay/ of the "grave." Sound, sense, and imagery all come together through the assonance here.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I'm rising five"
- **Line 7:** "more"
- **Line 8:** "four"
- **Line 9:** "rising five"
- **Line 11:** "Bubbled," "doubled," "buds unbuttoned"
- **Line 12:** "creases," "frills"
- **Line 13:** "every tree," "swilled with," "green"
- **Line 14:** "season"
- **Line 15:** "Before," "forming"
- **Line 21:** "rising night"
- **Line 29:** "baby's cradle," "grave"

CAESURA

The swing of caesura fits in with this poem's ideas about the ongoing rush of time. By breaking lines in their middles, the speaker often creates a feeling of momentum. Often, one idea will end in the middle of a line and another will pick up, so that the reader feels hurried on—just as the little boy, the speaker himself, and (by implication) all of humanity hurries on into the future.

A number of strong examples turn up in the last stanza. Take a look at the way these caesuras work:

> Throwing away his toffee-wrappers. We never see
> the flower,
> But only the fruit in the flower; never the fruit,
> But only the rot in the fruit. We look for the marriage
> bed
> In the baby's cradle; we look for the grave in the bed;

Here, the caesuras track closely with the speaker's ideas. Just as the poem describes "a boy / Throwing away his toffee wrappers," the speaker throws away the image of that boy to turn back to the flower—and then breaks at a semicolon to move onto the fruit—and then breaks at a period to move onto the completely new image of the marriage bed, and from there to the baby's cradle. Caesura here helps the poem to move in tandem with the ideas it presents.

There's a related effect in lines 10-11 ("Around him [...] shoot"), where the lushness of blossoming spring comes in a sequence of images connected by closely-woven sounds. Here, the energy of caesura helps to evoke spring's abundance—which, just like the ideas in the last stanza, comes on almost too fast to hold.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** ""Not four," and"
- **Line 4:** "spectacles, brimful"
- **Line 5:** "meadow, reflected"
- **Line 6:** "cheeks. He'd"
- **Line 10:** "field, the"
- **Line 11:** "doubled; buds"
- **Line 26:** "toffee-wrappers. We"
- **Line 27:** "flower; never"
- **Line 28:** "fruit. We"
- **Line 29:** "cradle; we"

CONSONANCE

Consonance, like assonance and alliteration, can weave patterns of sound and sense, linking related words and making a poem musical. Here, it plays an especially important role in the rich sounds of the second and third stanzas.

There's some especially dense consonance in lines 10-13 ("Around him [...] swilled with green"). Here, the speaker is evoking the joyous, abundant, overwhelming richness of spring, and he does so with a joyous, abundant, overwhelming richness of sound. Take a look at all the connected internal /b/, /d/, /t/, and /l/ sounds (among others!) here:

> Around him in the field, the cells of spring
> Bubbled and doubled; buds unbuttoned; shoot
> And stem shook out the creases from their frills,
> And every tree was swilled with green.

All those bubbling /b/ and /d/ sounds feel rich and earthy, while the crisper /t/ and softer /l/ sounds are fresh and breezy. (There's also plenty of alliteration and assonance here—see "Line-by-Line" for more on this passage's richness.)

There's a differently important bit of consonance in line 19, where the speaker remembers that "[t]he dust dissected the tangential light." Alongside those alliterative /d/ sounds, the /t/ and /s/ sounds here fit in with the action the speaker is describing: the dust is precisely separating the angled light into pieces, and the sharpness of the /t/ sounds mixed with the hush of the /s/ matches the dusty image at hand.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "five"
- **Line 2:** "four," "little coils"
- **Line 3:** "clicked"
- **Line 4:** "spectacles"
- **Line 5:** "me," "meadow," "reflected cones"
- **Line 6:** "buckled cheeks"
- **Line 8:** "four"
- **Line 9:** "five"
- **Line 10:** "field," "cells," "spring"
- **Line 11:** "Bubbled and doubled; buds unbuttoned; shoot"
- **Line 12:** "And stem shook," "creases from their frill"
- **Line 13:** "tree was swilled with green"
- **Line 14:** "season," "blossoming"
- **Line 15:** "Before," "forming," "fruit"
- **Line 19:** "dust dissected," "tangential light"
- **Line 22:** "not now"
- **Line 24:** "buds," "old leaves," "bough"
- **Line 25:** "drop," "behind," "boy"
- **Line 26:** "Throwing away," "toffee-wrappers. We," "flower"
- **Line 27:** "fruit," "flower," "fruit"
- **Line 28:** "rot," "fruit," "bed"
- **Line 29:** "baby's cradle," "bed"

IRONY

There's a painful irony in the very first image of the poem. The little boy the speaker meets is the picture of innocence: he's wearing glasses that magnify his already-big eyes until they seem to overflow, he's got a messy mop of curls, and his cheeks are bulging with toffees. But this sweet little kid is already on a path that the speaker knows all too well. In insisting that he's "rising five," and absolutely "[n]ot four," he's getting caught up in the habit of living in the future, not the present. This isn't just a mistake that world-weary adults make, but part of the human condition.

The irony here is that even the youngest, freshest, newest

person lives in a rush toward the inevitable "grave" of the final stanza. The same is true of nature itself. For all that the speaker relishes the lively freshness of the spring meadow the poem takes place in, the speaker also perceives it not as May—which it is—but as "rising June," nearly June.

Setting the poem in spring and starting it off with a little boy, the speaker ironically juxtaposes images of newness and freshness with his theme of impermanence and ineffability.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-9:** ""I'm rising five," he said, / "Not four," and the little coils of hair / Un-clicked themselves upon his head. / His spectacles, brimful of eyes to stare / At me and the meadow, reflected cones of light / Above his toffee-buckled cheeks. He'd been alive / Fifty-six months or perhaps a week more: /
  not four, / But rising five."

METAPHOR

The metaphors of "Rising Five" link life and death, youth and adulthood, and spring and fall.

Other metaphors in the poem are a little deeper down. For instance, when the spring buds are said to have "unbuttoned" in line 11, the speaker asks the reader to think of those buds as people joyously discarding old clothes. In the next lines, the plants are getting dressed again: "shoot and stem" freshen up their wardrobe by shaking "the creases from their frills."

This is also an instance of personification, and connects youthful humanity to nature. When the trees are "swilled with green" in line 13, there's also the suggestion of spring's greenness as a watery rush—again linking nature back to humans by way of the little boy's glasses "brimful" with liquid eyes in the first stanza.

The metaphors here suggest that human beings and nature are more intimately connected than people are always aware of. The springy freshness of the plants is, like the little boy's youth, temporary. When the speaker thinks back to the symbolic "flower" and "fruit" in lines 26-28, this reminds readers that people, like spring blossoms, are destined for death—but also, perhaps, for rebirth.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "the little coils of hair / Un-clicked themselves"
- **Lines 10-13:** "Around him in the field, the cells of spring / Bubbled and doubled; buds unbuttoned; shoot / And stem shook out the creases from their frills, / And every tree was swilled with green."

REPETITION

In a poem that pays a lot of attention to seasonal cycles and the passage of time, repetitions play an important thematic role. Here, among repeated sounds (see the entries on alliteration, assonance, and consonance for more on those), the reader can find repeated words and repeated sentence structures all across the poem.

The most obvious kind of repetition here is the parallelism of the "not [...] but" refrain. Repeating this sentence structure again and again across stanzas, the speaker draws the reader's attention to how pervasive the little boy's habit of living in the future is: it's not just this boy who can't stay in the present, but all of humanity. As the parallel lines return, they move out into broader and broader circles of experience: from this specific boy's age, to the time of year, to the time of day, to time itself—and finally to literal matters of life and death. Using the same sentence structure for these ideas helps the speaker to show his readers how closely connected they are.

These repetitions are also an instance of anaphora, and their identical opening words always prepare the reader for a new idea to fit into the increasingly familiar pattern.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** ""I'm rising five," he said, / "Not four,""
- **Lines 8-9:** "not four, / But rising five."
- **Lines 16-17:** " not May, / But rising June."
- **Lines 20-23:** "not day, / But rising night; /
  not now, / But rising soon."
- **Lines 26-28:** "We never see the flower, / But only the fruit in the flower; never the fruit, / But only the rot in the fruit"
- **Lines 28-29:** "We look for the marriage bed / In the baby's cradle; we look for the grave in the bed;"
- **Lines 30-31:** "not living, / But rising dead."

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment works alongside caesura to give "Rising Five" an onward-rushing momentum. That energy matches the poem's ideas: just as the poem's lines rush along like a river, so do human lives rush past as people fail to stay in the moment.

The first stanza is a great example. There's a ton of enjambment here, urging the poem on smoothly from line to line. In contrast, the two lonely end-stopped lines here create little pauses for readers to take in the poem's first image (in line 3) or to prepare for the poem's big idea (in line 7, just before the speaker repeats, "not four, / But rising five"). Between these pauses, sentences overflow and create a feeling of continuous motion—like the inescapable, unstoppable motion of time.

Enjambment serves a pointed thematic purpose in the last stanza, too. Here, enjambments mimic the movement not just of time, but of the human mind. When the speaker remarks that "We look for the marriage bed / In the baby's cradle," the way the sentence leaps over the line break mirrors the way that

people leap over babies' whole young lives as they look forward to their adulthoods. (See the devices entry on caesura for more on the way the poem's shape matches its ideas.)

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "hair / Un-clicked"
- **Lines 4-5:** "stare / At"
- **Lines 5-6:** "light / Above"
- **Lines 6-7:** "alive / Fifty-six"
- **Lines 10-11:** "spring / Bubbled"
- **Lines 11-12:** "shoot / And"
- **Lines 18-19:** "sky / The"
- **Lines 25-26:** "boy / Throwing"
- **Lines 28-29:** "bed / In"

IMAGERY

"Rising Five" is lush with imagery—and that imagery serves a curious double purpose. By creating vivid word-pictures of the little boy and the field they're standing in, the speaker evokes the very moment of this conversation. But this is a poem about how difficult it is to stay in the present, and the richness of the imagery here only underscores the way the speaker turns from it to think of the future and the past.

In the first stanza, the speaker seems to be looking closely at the boy whose words are the germ of the poem. The images here are a little strange: to say that the boy's curls "un-clicked themselves" is not a totally standard use of English, and it draws attention to itself, asking the reader to imagine how tight those curls are with the crisp sounds of "clicked"—and to imagine how messy they are if they're coming "un-clicked"!

The little boy's "spectacles" are "brimful" of eyes, about to overflow, suggesting those eyes are both huge and wet (and maybe making a submerged pun—after all, spectacles are glasses, and glasses can brim over). And those "toffee-buckled cheeks," bulging with sweets, are similarly vivid and physical. All these images condense to form a solid picture of this little boy—a little boy who, no matter how solid he seems to the speaker, already can't stay in one point in time, but looks ahead to his next birthday.

Similarly, the speaker evokes the spring with curious images, looking down deep into the "cells" of the growing plants as they multiply, and imagining the trees getting dressed in new clothes, "unbuttoned" from their cases or shaking out "creases" from leaves. Again, the strangeness of the imagery draws the reader's attention to a vivid physical reality that the speaker can't stay with: while the speaker revels in all this fresh life, the speaker also experiences it as "not May, / But rising June."

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-6:** "the little coils of hair / Un-clicked themselves upon his head. / His spectacles, brimful of eyes to stare / At me and the meadow, reflected cones of light / Above his toffee-buckled cheeks."
- **Lines 10-13:** "Around him in the field, the cells of spring / Bubbled and doubled; buds unbuttoned; shoot / And stem shook out the creases from their frills, / And every tree was swilled with green."
- **Lines 18-19:** "And in the sky / The dust dissected the tangential light:"
- **Lines 24-29:** "The new buds push the old leaves from the bough. / We drop our youth behind us like a boy / Throwing away his toffee-wrappers. We never see the flower, / But only the fruit in the flower; never the fruit, / But only the rot in the fruit. We look for the marriage bed / In the baby's cradle; we look for the grave in the bed;"

ANTITHESIS

The distinctive refrain of "Rising Five" takes the form of an antithesis. The repeated "not [...] but" structure, recurring across the poem, sums up the speaker's whole philosophical point: people live *not* in the present, *but* in the future. The little boy is "not four, / But rising five"; the season is "not May, / But rising June"; in the end, everyone in the world trapped in this way of thinking is "not living, / But rising dead." The speaker's parallelism, which means that each of these lines uses the same structure, only underlines that point more firmly.

There's an irony in this antithesis, too. Everything the speaker says is "not" is in fact what *is* true: in the world of the poem, it really is May, the little boy really is four, it really is daytime. Most importantly, it really is *now*, no matter when one reads this poem.

Antithesis thus points to the human predicament this poem is all about. The insistent irony of the repeated antitheses here might quietly encourage readers to step outside the pattern the poem describes, reminding them that it is always now, and life is always right in front of one to be experienced.

Where Antithesis appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-9:** "not four, / But rising five."
- **Lines 16-17:** "not May, / But rising June."
- **Lines 20-21:** "not day, / But rising night;"
- **Lines 22-23:** "not now, / But rising soon."
- **Lines 30-31:** "not living, / But rising dead."

SIMILE

There is one simile in the poem and it comes in lines 25-26, when the speaker laments:

> We drop our youth behind us like a boy

Throwing away his toffee wrappers.

This image of youth as a discarded toffee-wrapper reconnects the reader to the beginning of the poem, where the speaker met a literal boy with cheeks full of toffee, and suggests that the speaker is reading his entire experience with the boy in a rather metaphorical light.

As noted in the "Symbols" section of this guide, the toffee in the poem seems to represent the fleeting pleasures of life, or even life itself. As a child, the speaker's cheeks are filled with toffee—filled with life; that he drops the wrapper carelessly behind him symbolically reflects the unthinking ease with which people cast their present lives aside by always looking toward the future.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 25-26:** "We drop our youth behind us like a boy / Throwing away his toffee-wrappers."

VOCABULARY

Un-clicked (Lines 2-3, Line 3) - In this context, "un-clicked" evokes the little boy's messy hair: his tight curls are disheveled.

Brimful (Lines 4-5, Line 4) - Overflowing (here used metaphorically).

Spectacles (Lines 4-5, Line 4) - Eyeglasses.

Toffee-buckled (Lines 6-6, Line 6) - Bulging with toffee.

Tangential (Lines 19-19, Line 19) - Steeply angled (with connotations of unimportance—"tangential" can mean both "to do with a geometrical tangent" and "unrelated to the major point").

Dissected (Lines 19-19, Line 19) - Delicately took apart.

Bough (Line 24) - A tree branch.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The four stanzas of "Rising Five" build outward from one incident, but always return to the same idea. In the first stanza, the speaker describes his encounter with a little boy, who insists he's "not four, / But rising five." In the second stanza, the speaker looks out toward the meadow around them, where the new leaves herald "not May, / but rising June." The third stanza expands its view even further, to light and time: "not day, / But rising night; / not now, / But rising soon." In the final stanza, the speaker has left the scene altogether, turning to solemn words about how all of humanity, in its inability to stay with the present moment, is "not living, / But rising dead."

The shape of this poem thus mirrors its ideas. Starting from a specific moment in time, the speaker's thoughts expand out to take a broader and broader view—leaving the present as he *describes* leaving the present. The third stanza in particular—much shorter and sparer than the first, second, or fourth—evokes the speaker's liftoff into the abstract world of thought.

All this is fitting for a poem that one might call an elegy, a lament. Here, the speaker seems to mourn not a death, but an unlived life: the kind of life that's divorced from what's right in front of it.

METER

The meter of "Rising Five" is impressionistic and changeable, giving the speaker plenty of room to shape the poem's rhythm to its thoughts.

There's one constant here: the metrical feet are mostly iambs, the foot that goes "da-DUM." Here's an example of how that looks in context in lines 14-17:

And in | the sky
The dust | dissect- | ed the | tangen- | tial light:
not day,
But ris- | ing night;
not now,
But ris- | ing soon.

While there's a little bit of variation, the strong beat here almost always falls on the even-numbered syllables. Iambic rhythm fits especially well with poems to do with the passage of time, like this one: it sounds a lot like a heartbeat, or like the unstoppable tick-tock of a clock.

The irregularity of the meter means that the speaker can set certain moments apart for special emphasis. Take a look at all those similar lines with only two or three words: "not May, / But rising June", "not living, / But rising dead." Set against the long, flowing phrases that tend to make up the earlier parts of the stanzas, these short, emphatic lines ask the reader to take a moment and turn their ideas over—in fact, to pause and observe, as this poem suggests it's often so difficult to do.

RHYME SCHEME

"Rising Five" plays with a lot of complex rhymes. While the poem uses rhyme throughout, however, its rhymes are inconsistent and unpredictable, often popping up to create surprise or emphasis.

The first stanza is the most predictable. The poem begins with a singsongy ABAB rhyme scheme, throws in a C rhyme, and closes with a DEED pattern:

[...] said, A
[...] hair B

[...] head. A
[...] stare B
[...] light C
[...] alive D
[...] more: E
[...] not four, E
[...] But rising five. D

The rhymes here are harmonious without being totally regular or predictable, suggesting both the natural rhythms of life and growth and the surprise of springy newness around the little boy and the speaker as they talk.

In the second and third stanzas, the rhymes get even less regular. The second stanza throws in a couple of rhyme words, but at unusual intervals: the pattern in lines 10-15 ("Around him [...] the fruit") goes ABCDAB, connecting words across the stanza without falling into a predictable pattern.

What's really interesting here is the way rhymes work *across* the second and third stanzas. Rhymes here give sudden emphasis to a few particular words. "June" in line 17 rhymes with "soon" in line 23, and "light" in line 19 both hearkens back to that earlier "light" in the first stanza and rhymes with "night" in line 21.

These rhymes link important words—and words that point the reader back to the poem's big theme of the ungraspable present. Linking "light" to "night" suggests that one follows on another with dizzying speed as people keep looking forward to what's next; the "June" that isn't here yet connects to the more general "soon" that people are always waiting for.

A similarly meaningful rhyme pattern turns up in the last few lines of the poem, where "bed" and "bed" rhyme with that final, shocking "dead." Connecting death to sleep suggests the inevitable end of all that forward-looking.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Rising Five" is an older person. All the reader knows about this person is that they have lived long enough to know what people generally are like. By keeping the speaker anonymous, the poem makes its message universal. Any reader can likely identify with the speaker's description of struggling to live in the moment.

This speaker also seems to be someone who sees a lot of beauty in the world, from the spring trees "swilled with green" to the sweetness of the little boy with his "toffee-buckled" cheeks. Perhaps it's for this reason that the speaker seems to suffer over how hard it is to really live life, rather than looking forward to whatever might be about to happen next.

The speaker is at once idealistic and realistic. While this person can feel the power and value of life in the present, they're also resigned to the human reality of forward-looking anxiety—seeing it even in an innocent child.

SETTING

"Rising Five" is set in a lush spring meadow. It's the month of May, and the new leaves are out on the trees, replacing the blossoms of early spring. Everything seems to be overflowing with new green life. This gorgeous landscape carries with it a darker undercurrent: even as the speaker looks around at all this beauty, they begin to feel the way that all life leads toward death (and all the faster because of how difficult it is for people to live in the present moment). Images of rotting fruit evoke this landscape's eventual decay. But there's also a hint of hope here; spring, after all, always returns.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Norman Nicholson (1914-1987) was, like Thomas Hardy before him, a writer whose work was intimately connected to the countryside where he spent his life. Nicholson almost never left the small town in the north of England where he was born, and his poetry's plain language and natural settings reflect his deep roots in English landscapes and culture.

Nicholson saw himself as an inheritor of the earlier Romantic tradition. Like Wordsworth, he was a Lake District writer interested in the influence of nature on the human soul, and he similarly believed that simple, colloquial language was the best way to communicate the deepest insight. He also shared Wordsworth's interest in childhood, and poems like "We Are Seven" could be read as direct ancestors of "Rising Five." Remote from the fantastical lyricism of Yeats or the stylized modernism of T.S. Eliot, Nicholson's work didn't really fit in with the dominant poetic movements of the time, though he did appreciate W.H. Auden's wit.

Like all too many poets, Nicholson was deeply influenced by illness. He contracted tuberculosis as a young man, and his long stay in a sanatorium intensified his Christian beliefs. A number of his poems set Bible stories in his hometown, in a style that might be compared to the paintings of his contemporary Stanley Spencer (who depicted scenes of prophecy and resurrection in the little town of Cookham).

A successful poet in his own lifetime, though never too widely known, Nicholson was awarded an OBE ("Order of the British Empire") for his contributions to literature.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Much of Norman Nicholson's poetry and life philosophy were developed in the context of hard rural lives. The people of the small English town where Nicholson was born made their living

from the coal-mining industry—an essential cog in the workings of the Industrial Revolution (which Nicholson was born at the tail end of), but almost defunct by the end of his life.

Coal mining was incredibly taxing and dangerous work. Aside from having to spend much of their lives in the dark underground, miners often died from cave-ins, explosions, or asphyxiation. (Nicholson's own uncle was killed in a mining accident.) But things got even worse for the miners as the 20th century progressed and the mining industry collapsed. Nicholson saw his community move from modest working-class prosperity to poverty and desperation. By the time he died, coal miners had become emblems of English class struggle.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Nicholson Society Newsletter — Visit the University of Lancaster's Nicholson website, with archives and resources. (http://wp.lancs.ac.uk/nns/about-norman-nicholson/)
- A Reading of the Poem — Hear "Rising Five" read aloud by the scholar Iain McGilchrist. (https://youtu.be/N79mapt3jqQ)
- A Short Biography — Read a brief overview of Nicholson's life and work. (https://poetryarchive.org/poet/norman-nicholson/)
- The Norman Nicholson Society — A website by and for Norman Nicholson enthusiasts, with more information about Nicholson's life and work. (https://www.normannicholson.org/)
- Interviews and Readings — Hear recordings of interviews with Nicholson and discussions of his poetry. (https://soundcloud.com/norman-nicholson-society)

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