Skunk Hour

SUMMARY

The reclusive heiress of Nautilus Island in Maine still survives the winter in her austere little house, and her flock of sheep still eats grass on the shore. Her son is a senior church official, and her hired farmer is also the senior member of our small town's governing board. She's gotten senile.

Craving the privacy enjoyed by elites in the Victorian era, she purchases all the ugly buildings in sight of her beach and lets them go to ruin (or allows them to be demolished).

Something seems wrong this season. The rich man who used to spend summers here, and who looked like a model from a catalogue selling pricey outdoor wear, has gone away for good (or died). He left behind his sailboat, which could go nine nautical miles per hour, for lobster fishermen to bid on. The leaves on the local mountain called Blue Hill are the color of a red fox.

Now, the local decorator (a "fairy," an offensive/outdated term for a gay man) spruces up his store for autumn. He hangs up a fishermen's net and orange corks; his workbench and hole-punching tool are orange, too. His shop is unprofitable; he'd rather get married than keep running it.

On a dark night, I drove my old-fashioned Ford up to the crown of the hill and looked for people making out in cars. With their lights low, the cars sat side by side, near the cemetery that slopes down to the village. Something's wrong with my brain.

I hear a car radio bawling the blues song "Careless Love." My depression seems to make each of my blood cells weep, as if I were strangling it. Hell is my own mind. I'm all alone—

Except for the skunks who forage for food by moonlight. They pad in a line up Main Street, their white stripes and red eyes moonlit beneath the chalky-white, mast-like steeple of the Trinitarian Church.

At home, I stand on our back stoop and inhale the pungent air. A skunk and her brood of children are eating out of the garbage. She sticks her wedge-shaped head into a sour cream container, lowers her plumed tail, and won't be shooed away.

THEMES

DEPRESSION, DESPAIR, AND RESILIENCE

Robert Lowell's "Skunk Hour" is considered a classic of "confessional" poetry, in part due to its frank portrait of mental illness. Lonely and depressed, the poem's speaker feels with horror that his "mind's not right" and that his "hand" is strangling his "spirit." In this way, the poem conveys the torturous pain and self-loathing that can accompany severe depression, something that can make the world and one's own mind feel like an inescapable "hell." At the same time, the poem's ambiguous final image of garbage-eating skunks perhaps offers some hope: while the skunks might represent the ugliness of the speaker's situation, they might also represent a kind of fearless resilience under grim circumstances. In the end, the poem's complex symbolism suggests that while depression may feel inescapably hellish, the speaker *can* survive it.

The poem takes place in a dreary New England town whose desolation mirrors the speaker's inner turmoil. The speaker casts himself as the loneliest resident of this lonely, declining town, someone who voyeuristically watches young lovers while feeling his "ill-spirit sob in each blood cell, / as if my hand were at its throat." In other words, he feels his isolation acutely and senses his psychological agony throughout his body.

The speaker's allusions throughout the poem further suggest that he feels tormented and trapped by his own mind, imprisoned in a "hell" he can't escape. The poem takes place on a "dark night," for example, which is an allusion to the "dark night of the soul" in the Catholic tradition—and, more specifically, to a poem by St. John of the Cross. Like that poem's speaker, the speaker of Lowell's poem feels fevered, anxious, and in spiritual distress. The speaker also drives onto a "hill's skull," a reference to Golgotha (Hebrew for "skull"), the hill where Jesus was crucified in the Bible. The allusion suggests that for the speaker, his mental/spiritual crisis feels like physical torture. The speaker declares that "I myself am hell," almost directly quoting Satan in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, who declares that "myself am hell" as an expression of his inner pain.

The skunks at the close of the poem may be part of the hellish ugliness, but in their stubborn survival, they may offer some symbolic *comfort* as well. The speaker spies these skunks while walking through town and notes that they're "search[ing] / in the moonlight for a bite to eat." They're probably not pleasant to look at or smell, but like him, they're just trying to survive.

Back home, the speaker sees a "mother skunk" and her "kittens" eating sour cream out of his garbage can. As distasteful as this image is, it's also a strange scene of family togetherness. And as the speaker "breathe[s] the rich air" around him, the verb emphasizes that he's alive and breathing, even if the air smells funny. The fact that the mother skunk "will not scare," meanwhile, suggests both that she won't go away *and* that she is fearless. As a symbol, she might suggest that the "sour[ness]" or foulness of the speaker's mood won't go away. On the other hand, she might represent the kind of toughness

that will help him *survive* his mood.

Her resilience also ties back to that of the poem's other mother figure: the "heiress" who "still lives through winter in her Spartan cottage," with sheep who "still graze above the sea." Heiress, sheep, and skunk(s) all seem to prove that survival in a bleak setting is possible, even if one's circumstances are "Spartan" or unglamorous. The skunks may be meant to disgust and disturb, then, but they could also be emblems of hope. In his public remarks on the poem, Lowell suggested that both readings could be true!

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-48

LOVE AND LONELINESS

"Skunk Hour" never spells out the source of its speaker's sadness, but it strongly implies that the reasons involve loneliness and/or heartbreak. He perceives his surrounding community as full of loneliness, and the fact that he watches lovers like a peeping Tom suggests his own desire for love and connection. Likewise, the poem's closing image of a family of skunks suggests a strange kind of togetherness—a communion of sorts that the speaker lacks. Though it doesn't provide the speaker any kind of happy ending, the poem emphasizes the human need for loving connection and the horror of its absence.

The speaker portrays himself, and others in his community, as isolated and love-starved. There's the local "hermit heiress" who buys up and destroys neighboring properties just to avoid having neighbors; the community's "summer millionaire," who's either died or left town for good; and the local "decorator," who would "rather marry" than keep tending his unprofitable shop.

In different ways, these figures seem to reflect the speaker's own loneliness. His isolation might be partly self-imposed, but he also seems to yearn for connection. Voyeuristically, the speaker "watche[s]" the town's young people making out in "love-cars," as if desperate even for *proximity* to love. While doing so, he hears lyrics from a car radio: "Love, O careless love..." These come from the blues song "Careless Love," and they underscore the blues he's feeling himself, apparently due to loneliness and/or love troubles. (The song's lyrics involve betrayal and heartbreak and contain references to suicide and murder, so they're a direct reminder of his inner pain.)

Only the young lovers and the skunks the speaker watches experience some form of love or togetherness. The "mother skunk" and her "kittens" eating out of the garbage at first seem disturbing and distasteful, but they could also be seen as a strange image of maternal love and family connection: the mother has found food for her babies, and they're sharing a meal. The speaker watches this scene much as he watched the teenagers in their "love-cars": he's interested, but not part of it. The scene's meaning is thus ambiguous; if it offers a form of consolation, it doesn't alleviate the speaker's loneliness in any direct way. It suggests that connection is possible, but also that it may not be possible for *him*.

Of course, it could also be read as a disgusting mockery of communion and togetherness. In that case, the "Skunk Hour" would simply be one's low point, the point of absolute depression. Still, the speaker—who was isolated in his car—is now standing on "our" steps, suggesting that some kind of home, however imperfect, awaits him inside.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-36
- Lines 43-48

CIVIC LIFE AND DECAY

Robert Lowell described "Skunk Hour" as, in part, "a dawdling more or less amiable picture of a declining Maine sea town." The poem's details strongly stress the *decline* part of the equation. Set in an unnamed coastal "village" in Maine, it evokes an atmosphere of abandonment, isolation, and slow decay. The town's deterioration seems both to intensify and to reflect the speaker's own mental health crisis. The poem thus draws a subtle connection between the civic and the personal, suggesting that larger cultural maladies can manifest themselves as problems in one's individual psyche.

Although the speaker's portrayal of the town has charming aspects, it mostly conjures up a bleak and ominous atmosphere. The poem is inspired by the town of Castile, Maine, along with neighboring Blue Hill and nearby Nautilus Island. The "hermit heiress" of that island has connections to town, but she's both senile ("in her dotage") and determined to live in the kind of snobby "privacy" the speaker associates with the Victorian era. As the first character mentioned in the poem, she seems emblematic of the broader community's decay and stubborn isolation.

Meanwhile, the local "millionaire" has either died or moved away to seek greener pastures. The town, it seems, has lost some of its wealth and cachet. The local decorator is dissatisfied in his work and love life; the term "fairy" also implies that he's gay. (It's an offensive term in current culture, and Lowell was writing in a deeply homophobic era, but it's unclear how much judgement he intends by this description. The mainstream culture of his time viewed homosexuality as a mental illness, so Lowell may be implying as much. But this can also be read as a sympathetic portrait, stressing the loneliness and discontent that came of being a gay man—unable to legally "marry"—in small-town '50s America.)

In general, the speaker says, "The season's ill"—meaning the

summer season during which a beach town like this one would normally thrive. The town seems to be ailing or deteriorating due to unnamed, possibly irreversible causes.

The town's condition seems to reflect the speaker's own, and vice versa. If this village and its summer are "ill," so, too, is the speaker. His perception of this surrounding "ill[ness]" may be partly projection, of course, but his mental illness could also be partly triggered by dreary surroundings. Indeed, both things can be true at once: the poem suggests that individual life and civic/cultural life are interrelated, and the borderline between them is blurry. The speaker acknowledges that "My mind's not right." The local heiress is senile, so *her* "mind's not right," either. The millionaire who's left town was a caricature of himself (he looked straight out of a "catalogue"). The local decorator is lonely and frustrated, and perhaps closeted or constrained in expressing his sexuality. Even the town's young lovers make out next to a graveyard—a macabre choice! Not all of these issues are equally serious, but the speaker's sense of ill health and unease seems pervasive: *nothing* around him seems quite "right."

In all these ways, the poem suggests that individual suffering and social decay are closely linked. If "Skunk Hour" is a metaphor for one's low point or "dark night" of the soul, the poem suggests that a whole *society* can reach that point. The speaker knows he's depressed, but something also smells off about the culture around him.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-30
- Lines 37-42

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

Nautilus Island's hermit ...
... in her dotage.

"Skunk Hour" begins with a dedication to Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell's longtime friend and fellow American poet. Lowell acknowledged that Bishop's poem "The Armadillo," which she had dedicated to him, was the inspiration for "Skunk Hour." Both poems feature unsettling, symbolic animals that reflect human emotions and culture in ambiguous ways. (For more on the connections between the two poems, see the Context section of this guide.)

The first stanza of "Skunk Hour" starts to establish the poem's setting. It mentions Nautilus Island, a small private island off the coast of Maine, as well as "our village," which goes unnamed in the poem but is based on the town of Castine, Maine. (Robert Lowell had spent the summer of 1957 in Castine, which sits across the water from Nautilus Island.)

According to the speaker, a "hermit / heiress"—a reclusive woman with inherited wealth—lives on the island in a "Spartan cottage," or austere, simple beach home. She raises "sheep," who eat grass on the shore "above the sea," and employs a "farmer" to manage her land. The farmer also holds the position of "first selectman" (head of the town governing board, similar to mayor) in the village. Apparently, this is a very small town (Castine has never had more than about 1,400 residents) where even the senior politician has a second job.

Meanwhile, the heiress's "son" is "a bishop." If he's a Catholic bishop, he presumably won't have kids, and if he's an only child, he's the last of the heiress's family line. (His occupation is also an odd echo of Elizabeth Bishop's name—maybe Lowell's way of writing her into the poem!) The heiress herself is "in her dotage," meaning senile.

Already, then, there's an overhanging atmosphere of isolation, decline, and loss. These initial details suggest that even the most privileged residents of this place—its economic, political, and spiritual elite—are just getting by:

- The heiress "still lives through winter" in an unglamorous cottage, though she could probably afford better; her "sheep still graze" on what they can find. The repetition of "still" evokes a stubborn persistence and survival (Maine winters are harsh!).
- The head of the town's government is also a farmer, so most likely, neither job alone pays enough to live on.
- And in a town this small, how big could that "bishop['s]" congregation possibly be? Everyone seems to be making the best of things in this remote place, but there's no sense of growth or renewal to offset the slow decline.

This first stanza establishes the poem's form: rhymed sestets with no coherent meter or consistent rhyme scheme. This combination makes for language that's musical, but somewhat unstable and disorderly, evoking both the decay of the town and (later) the speaker's own instability.

LINES 7-12

Thirsting for ...
... lets them fall.

The second stanza continues to describe the elderly "heiress" of Nautilus Island.

Though she chooses to live in a "Spartan" (bare-bones) house, the heiress still seems pretty wealthy. Because she's a "hermit" who "Thirst[s] for" complete "privacy"—the kind of "hierarchic," or privileged, isolation that the elite enjoyed during "Queen Victoria's century" (the 1800s)—she purchases nearby properties solely in order to get rid of them. She "buys up all" the unattractive buildings, or "eyesores," visible from "her

shore," then "lets them fall" (either has them demolished or lets them go to ruin).

Since the poem was written in the late 1950s, it's implied that this woman is old enough to remember the Victorian era—and likely even lived in this area during that time. In trying to reclaim the "privacy" of that older age, then, she's trying to relive some version of her youth, as well as cling to her elite ("hierarchic") status. It's an expensive quest, but she pursues it with great thoroughness: she gets rid of "all" the buildings that threaten her cherished seclusion.

Lowell himself viewed the poem's opening stanzas (lines 1-24) as full of "Sterility" and "sad[ness]," described with "a tone of tolerance, humor, and randomness." The heiress, then, is meant to be a humorously eccentric character, but also a sad one. She seems to belong to an earlier era, marked by family wealth and strict social codes that are now disappearing. She apparently has no grandkids to inherit her money or carry on her legacy; instead, she spends her inheritance on a quixotic effort to bring back the past. Her isolation, mental instability ("dotage"), and yearning ("Thirsting") offer parallels to the speaker's situation later in the poem.

LINES 13-18

The season's ill— ...
... covers Blue Hill.

The speaker now shifts his focus to a new character, while noting, for the first time, that something seems *wrong* with this coastal town.

"The season's ill," he sighs, meaning that a malaise seems to hang in the air as "summer" turns to fall. For a tourist town like this one, summer is the boom season, when vacationers swell the local population and boost the local economy. But that high point is over now, and the trees are changing color: a metaphorical "stain," as "red" as "fox" fur, is spreading on nearby "Blue Hill."

Meanwhile, the town has "lost [its] summer millionaire." This phrasing is ambiguous: the millionaire might have died, or he might simply have left the area for good. (Maybe he found a ritzier summer destination, or maybe he's fallen on hard times and can't afford this one anymore.) In any case, he left behind a "nine-knot yawl": a sailboat that can travel nine nautical miles per hour. The boat "was auctioned off to lobstermen"; in other words, his luxury vessel was sold off to workers (lobster fishermen) who could use it for practical purposes. The general idea here is that the town has seen more glamorous days. Like the year turning from summer to fall, it's past its peak and entering a slow decline.

Even the millionaire wasn't the *height* of chic; in fact, he was a little corny. He dressed as if he had "leap[t] from an L. L. Bean / catalogue"—as if he were a model for a retailer that sells preppy clothing and outdoor gear. Even in its glory days, then, there was something a bit dispiriting about this small town. It wasn't totally pure, simple, and innocent: it had its tacky, excessive side.

Now, even though the changing leaves are part of nature and not the human world, their "stain" seems to symbolize some further loss of innocence. They may even hint at the prospect of violence/death (the stain is "red," like blood). Overall, the atmosphere is ominous, troubled, pervaded by an "ill[ness]" the speaker doesn't quite name.

LINES 19-24

And now our ...
... he'd rather marry.

In this last introductory stanza, the speaker describes one more local character: "our fairy / decorator." Like the "summer millionaire," this character is given the possessive "our," suggesting he's a figure known throughout the community. The word "fairy," considered offensive, connotes homosexuality; the speaker either knows or assumes that this man is gay. (It's debatable whether the speaker/poet intends to be demeaning here or whether he's simply using the outmoded language of his time.) As a professional "decorator," the man keeps a "shop" in town, which he's now "brighten[ing]" for the "fall" season.

The speaker describes some of the contents of this shop, including a "fishnet[]" that's filled with "orange cork" and an "orange [...] cobbler's bench and awl." It seems the shop owner has taken the practical tools of local working-class trades—the fishermen's net and floating corks, the cobbler's (shoe repairer's) workbench and leather-piercing tool—and converted them to decorative purposes. He has painted the cork, bench, and awl bright orange and set them out for display along with the net.

This imagery further reflects the gradual change that has overtaken the town. Tools that were once vital to the village's economy and manual-labor culture are now arty or kitschy items in a decorator's shop. The speaker seems to present these details as further evidence of local decline, as if the new village is a slight parody of the old. He notes that the decorator himself seems dissatisfied with his situation: "there is no money in his work, / he'd rather marry." The decorator wishes he could close his unprofitable shop and settle down—but, in the deeply homophobic America of the 1950s, there would have been no legal way for him to "marry" a romantic partner. If he were to "marry" someone, it would be for "money," not love. In any case, his prospects seem thin: like the "bishop" of line 4, he's unlikely to leave a family legacy.

All in all, the decorator comes off as lonely and stuck. This portrayal can be read as harsh and even disparaging, but it can be read as empathetic, too. The decorator's *unintentional* loneliness, like the heiress's *intentional* loneliness, seems emblematic of the town's overall sadness and isolation. It's also a reflection of the speaker's own condition, as the following

stanzas suggest. Plus, the decorator's "work" parallels the poet/speaker's in certain ways: both are artists who adapt and transform local materials in their art. By closely juxtaposing the decorator's situation and the speaker's, the poem suggests that the two men have much in common.

LINES 25-30

One dark night, ...
... mind's not right.

Lines 25-30 mark a significant shift. At exactly the halfway point, the poem turns from describing other residents of the village to zeroing in on the speaker's situation. Via juxtaposition, the lonely or failing characters of the first 24 lines become mirrors of the speaker's own loneliness and desperation.

Starting in this fifth stanza, the speaker recounts a "dark" and very unhappy "night." The phrase "dark night" here alludes to a famous 16th-century religious poem by St. John of the Cross, which is untitled but conventionally known as *La noche oscura del alma* (Dark Night of the Soul). The speaker of this older poem, who begins in an anxious, lovesick state, purges his soul en route to a mystical union with God. "Dark night of the soul" has since become a well-known term for an intense spiritual or psychological crisis.

Lowell himself confirmed this allusion:

> [A]ll comes alive in stanzas V and VI. This is the dark night. I hoped my readers would remember St. John of the Cross's poem. My night is not gracious, but secular, puritan, and agnostical.

In other words, the speaker of "Skunk Hour" experiences a crisis that he understands—mostly—in secular, psychological terms. He recalls driving his "Tudor Ford" (a make of automobile from the late 1940s/early 1950s) up a "hill's skull" to "watch[] for love-cars" in his little village. The phrase "hill's skull" alludes to the site of Jesus's crucifixion (the hill called "Golgotha," Hebrew for "skull").

For the speaker, this hill, too, is a place of torment. He's engaging in a sad act of voyeurism, seemingly desperate to be *near* "love" even if he can't experience it directly. As he spies on lovers making out in their "love-cars"—with their "Lights turned down" and their cars sitting almost adjacent (metaphorically "hull to hull," like boats)—he can't help noticing that they're all parked beside the town "graveyard." Even the lovers' passion seems somehow morbid, or maybe irrelevant in light of death's overwhelming reality.

The comparison of auto bodies to "hull[s]," and the sloping graveyard to a "shel[f]" (think of a coastal shelf), further underscores the poem's coastal setting. It might also evoke a feeling of unsteadiness or sinking: perhaps this speaker feels at sea even when he's on solid land. The graveyard "shelves" on the town as if encroaching on it, reminding the living residents that death is always near. (Indeed, many old New England towns were built with cemeteries right in their midst.)

At this point, the speaker interrupts his description by remarking: "My mind's not right." He senses that his actions (the voyeurism) and thoughts are those of a sick person. This blunt admission of mental illness, either in poetry or outside of it, was considered somewhat shocking in Lowell's day. It's one of the reasons Lowell's poetry was labeled "confessional."

LINES 31-36

A car radio ...
... nobody's here—

Lines 31-36 continue to describe the speaker's "dark night" of the soul.

Still in his Ford beside the graveyard, the speaker hears the "radio" of one of the "love-cars" he's peeping on. It's "bleat[ing]" (wailing) the words, "Love, O careless Love. . . ."

- These are lyrics from the song "Careless Love," a once-popular blues ballad recorded by Bessie Smith, Fats Domino, and other artists. The song has many versions; sometimes its lyrics are merely lovesick, other times dramatic and violent. (For example, one version contains the lines, "You see what careless love can do? You'll kill yourself and your lover too.")
- Thus, Lowell's allusion introduces heartbreak, melancholy, and perhaps even violent or suicidal ideas into the poem's psychological atmosphere.

As he listens to this song, the speaker has dramatic and violent thoughts of his own. He claims he can "hear / my ill-spirit sob in each blood cell, / as if my hand were at its throat." In other words, he's in so much agony, he feels as if each of his blood cells is weeping as he strangles it. This may be an indirect confession that he's considering self-harm or suicide. Tormented by his own brain, he cries that "I myself am hell," alluding to lines spoken by Satan in John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost* (1667):

> Me miserable! which way shall I fly
> Infinite wrath, and infinite despair?
> Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell;
> And, in the lowest deep, a lower deep
> Still threatening to devour me opens wide,
> To which the Hell I suffer seems a Heaven.

Milton's Satan feels unable to escape his own misery: he keeps plunging deeper into a "despair" that seems to have no bottom. Lowell's speaker feels every bit as miserable, and every bit as lonely. Even though he's just described a number of other

villagers, and is watching the lovers in their cars, he feels as if "nobody's here" with him in his time of crisis.

In context, then, his confession that "My mind's not right" seems to refer to an acute depressive episode—the kind Lowell, who had bipolar disorder, experienced periodically throughout his life. The repetition of "Love" in these two middle stanzas ("love-cars [...] Love, O careless Love") hints that some form of loneliness, heartbreak, or romantic conflict has helped fuel this particular episode.

LINES 37-42

only skunks, that ...
... the Trinitarian Church.

The previous stanza ended with the speaker lamenting that "nobody's here." But this statement ended with a dash, not a period, and the speaker now finishes his sentence with a qualification. He has no *human* company, but he does see *animals* roaming about the town: "skunks, that search / in the moonlight for a bite to eat."

He describes these unsettling creatures in richly musical language, full of alliteration, assonance, and consonance:

> They march on their soles up Main Street:
> white stripes, moonstruck eyes' red fire
> under the chalk-dry and spar spire
> of the Trinitarian Church.

Ordinarily, people try to avoid skunks as much as possible, but this combination of lyricism and striking imagery makes them seem weirdly compelling. They are moonlit, eyes aglow with "fire" (like lovers? demons?), and marching past the imposing backdrop of the "Trinitarian Church." (This is a reference to the Trinitarian Congregational Parish of Castine, Maine, which does indeed stand on "Main Street.") In fact, compared to the "chalk-dry" church steeple, rising like a "spar" or ship's mast, these skunks seem incredibly vivid and alive.

Meanwhile, the juxtaposition of the depressed speaker and the foraging skunks suggests possible parallels and contrasts between the two:

- Like the speaker, these skunks are in survival mode (they need "a bite to eat").
- Their nighttime "search" for food parallels his lonely search for love (or for the closest thing he can find in this tiny town). In fact, he describes the skunks as "moonstruck," a word that can mean "love-crazed" when used metaphorically.
- But whereas the speaker seems adrift, these critters are on a mission: they "march" like soldiers on the "soles" of their feet.

Notice the pun here on "soles" and "souls," which might hint at another contrast between the skunks and the speaker (or skunks and humans in general):

- Whereas people experience turmoil in their *souls*—which they may try to resolve by going to "Church" or taking lonely drives late at night—skunks are practical, unreflective creatures. Their only *soles* are on their feet, and they use them for getting from here to there.
- In that sense, these skunks might provide a healthy contrast to the speaker's morbid brooding.
- On the other hand, the skunks could be interpreted as demonic presences, with their fiery red eyes. In that case, they would be reminders of the speaker's inner "hell," his dark night of the *soul*.

This ambiguity carries over into the last stanza, too. The poem seems to ask readers: why does the speaker, in his moment of crisis, focus so closely on the skunks? Are they supposed to be beautiful or ugly? Terrifying or life-affirming? A little of both?

LINES 43-48

I stand on ...
... will not scare.

The final stanza finds the speaker back home after his late-night wandering. He's "stand[ing] on top / of our back steps": presumably the steps of a family home. He "breathe[s] the rich air"—so he's still alive and breathing; he hasn't killed himself in his despair. The word "rich" suggests that the air is smelly, but also that it's a powerful experience for the senses. By extension, the speaker's life may not be sweet at the moment, but he's still immersed in it and powerfully aware of it. He's also part of a family and community, an "our": he's not completely alone in the world.

He's still preoccupied with skunks, though. Some of them are now eating out of his garbage, as he reports with a flurry of /s/, /k/, and /sk/ alliteration:

> a mother skunk with her column of kittens swills the garbage pail.
> She jabs her wedge-head in a cup
> of sour cream, drops her ostrich tail,
> and will not scare.

This combination of soft /s/ and harsh /k/ sounds helps convey both the tenderness and the ugliness of the scene:

- On the one hand, this mother has led her children to food and is sharing it with them. The imagery here contains subtle hints of Christian, and particularly Catholic, iconography: the holy mother and child, communion "cup," etc. (Lowell was a lapsed Catholic who wrestled with belief and doubt throughout his

life; recall that this poem has already alluded to St. John of the Cross and his "dark night of the soul.")
- On the other hand, the imagery is pretty gross! This is a group of pests eating rancid sour cream out of the trash.

Thus, the reader is left to decide whether this scene epitomizes the speaker's private "hell" or whether it represents some sort of hope. The last lines, in particular, crystallize this ambiguity. The mother skunk "drops her [...] tail," which looks as plumed as an "ostrich" tail. She "jabs" her "wedge"-shaped "head" in the "cup / of sour cream," like the proverbial ostrich burying its head in the sand. (Perhaps this suggests that she's ignoring the ugly reality around her, or that she's totally focused on her own and her babies' survival.) As she eats, she "will not scare": the speaker can't shoo her off. In this way, she might symbolize the speaker's depression, which won't leave him despite his best efforts. Alternatively, she might be a symbol of fearless persistence: a quality he'll need to *survive* his depression.

As a "mother," she offers a contrast with the maternal figure at the start of the poem: the "heiress" who closes herself off from the world and insists that her surroundings must be beautiful. *This* mother is the head of an army-like "column" of kittens, "march[ing]" in the night. She seems powerful, wild, unafraid of ugliness, and indifferent to human society. For all these reasons, she may be a liberating image for the speaker, who feels trapped and depressed in his decaying town.

SYMBOLS

SKUNKS

The skunks in "Skunk Hour" carry a strong whiff of symbolism. There's not a lot of *traditional* symbolism associated with skunks, at least in Western literature, but in everyday life, their awful-smelling spray makes them symbols of the unpleasant, undesirable, disgusting, etc. Since their smell is also notoriously hard to wash off, they can also be associated with *lingering* unpleasantness.

Lowell seems to be drawing on these general associations here, while also turning the skunks into an ambiguous symbol all his own. It's not clear whether the speaker ever smells the skunk *odor*, though it's certainly possible. In any case, these skunks are like stubborn pests (from a human standpoint), overrunning "Main Street" and eating out of the speaker's "garbage." They "will not scare"—meaning that, like their scent, they won't go away just because humans want them to. For all these reasons, they seem symbolically linked with the speaker's depression, which is also highly unpleasant and persistent. Yet their persistence, or fearlessness, might also evoke the qualities the speaker will need to *endure* his depression.

In general, the "Skunk Hour"—an unpleasant phrase in its own right!—seems to represent a kind of low point, both in the speaker's life and the life of the culture around him. It's the kind of miserable phase one has to grit one's teeth and get through, as if waiting for a foul-smelling cloud to clear.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 37-40:** "only skunks, that search / in the moonlight for a bite to eat. / They march on their soles up Main Street: / white stripes, moonstruck eyes' red fire"
- **Lines 45-48:** "a mother skunk with her column of kittens swills the garbage pail. / She jabs her wedge-head in a cup / of sour cream, drops her ostrich tail, / and will not scare."

POETIC DEVICES

METAPHOR

Metaphors and similes—some original, others traditional—help the poem vividly render the speaker's state of mind and surroundings.

Some of these metaphors are very subtle in their connotations and allusive echoes. For example, when the speaker describes the "love-cars" in the fifth stanza, he compares them to adjacent ships:

> they lay together, **hull** to **hull**,
> where the graveyard **shelves** on the town. . . .

This comparison feels appropriate to the poem's setting (a beach town), but it's also eerie and potentially symbolic. Is the speaker imagining these ship-like cars "hull to hull" in port, or sunken onto an undersea "shel[f]"? Either way, the shelf-like graveyard seems to mark a border between life and death in the same way the continental shelf marks the border between land and sea. Love and death, in this image, also seem closely linked—just as they are in the song the speaker is hearing ("Careless Love").

Meanwhile, the way that song figuratively "bleats" from a radio links it back to the heiress's "sheep" in the first stanza. (*Bleating* in the literal sense describes the noise made by sheep and goats.) In this way, the heartbreak the song expresses seems to encompass not only the speaker/listener but his surrounding community—even the local recluse and her animals. Later, the "moonstruck" eyes of the skunks seem to reinforce the poem's heartsick mood: *moonstruck* is a traditional metaphor that can mean love-crazed or simply crazed.

Perhaps most importantly, metaphors help communicate the depth of the speaker's suffering. The combination metaphor/simile in lines 32-34 highlights the violence of his emotions:

> [...] I hear
> my ill-spirit sob in each blood cell,
> as if my hand were at its throat. . . .

In other words, he feels as sick and agonized as if he were strangling each of his blood cells, and each of those cells were "sob[bing]." He may also be implying that his depression brings thoughts of self-harm or suicide.

As if that weren't enough, he borrows a metaphor from Satan in John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost*: "I myself am hell." In other words, his own mind torments him as much as any divine punishment ever could. He also links his torment with that of Jesus in the Gospels: the "hill's skull" metaphor in line 26 alludes to the site of Jesus's crucifixion (a hill called "Golgotha," which is Hebrew for "skull").

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-9:** "Thirsting for / the hierarchic privacy / of Queen Victoria's century,"
- **Line 18:** "A red fox stain covers Blue Hill."
- **Line 26:** "my Tudor Ford climbed the hill's skull;"
- **Line 28:** "they lay together, hull to hull,"
- **Line 29:** "where the graveyard shelves on the town. . . ."
- **Line 31:** "A car radio bleats,"
- **Lines 32-34:** "I hear / my ill-spirit sob in each blood cell, / as if my hand were at its throat. . . ."
- **Line 35:** "I myself am hell;"
- **Line 40:** "moonstruck eyes' red fire"
- **Lines 41-42:** "under the chalk-dry and spar spire / of the Trinitarian Church."
- **Line 45:** "her column of kittens"
- **Line 46:** "She jabs her wedge-head"
- **Line 47:** "drops her ostrich tail,"

JUXTAPOSITION

The poem consists of a series of juxtapositions, which together provide a compact, multi-layered portrait of the speaker and his community.

The first four stanzas sketch a few notable people in the speaker's "village": the "heiress" (as well as her "son[]" and "farmer"), the "summer millionaire," and the "decorator." Cumulatively, these sketches conjure up a small New England beach town that used to be posh but is now in decline. The richest visitors (like the "millionaire" have gone off to trendier locations, with only a "hermit / heiress" remaining behind as a representative of the wealthiest elite. (But even she is in mental decline—"her dotage"—and no longer interacts with others in town.) The millionaire's flashy sailboat is now the property of a humble "lobsterm[a]n" and used for practical purposes, not luxurious indulgence. Meanwhile, the decorator's shop isn't profitable—especially, perhaps, because the town's wealthiest clientele have left.

All of this scene-setting provides important context for the mood of the speaker, who may be in the worst shape of all. He's in the throes of a mental health crisis, lonely and hungry for love. After he confesses as much in the fifth and sixth stanzas, the poem introduces the skunks that dominate the final two stanzas. Once again, the juxtaposition holds up a mirror to the speaker's mood: for him, the "Skunk Hour" (a phrase Lowell invented) seems to represent rock bottom. Though he's aware of his surrounding community, he also feels as if "nobody's here" *except* him and the skunks. In other words, he's alone with his depression and the stubborn, unpleasant animals who seem to reflect it.

Notice that the poem doesn't quite spell out any of these connections. He describes both "the season" and himself as "ill" (lines 13 and 33), so he's clearly drawing links between his internal and external world. But it's up to the reader to interpret the particular significance of the people, animals, and images he juxtaposes. Lowell did provide a few clues in his commentary on the poem: "Sterility howls through the scenery," he noted, and "the casual, chancy arrangements of nature and decay" provide a "sad" backdrop for the speaker's "dark night" of the soul.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-48

REPETITION

The poem repeats a number of words, often in order to underline key images and themes. The poem repeats its central image, for example, in the title ("Skunk Hour"), line 37 ("only skunks"), and line 45 ("a mother skunk"). These repetitions help stress how prominent and unignorable the skunks are, especially on the deserted nighttime streets of the village. At a certain "Hour," the town seems to belong to them!

The repetition of "love" is also thematically important. This word pops up once in line 27 ("I watched for love-cars") and twice in line 32 ("Love, O careless Love. . . ."). It's especially notable because love isn't otherwise an *explicit* theme in the poem; that is, the speaker never mentions anything about his own romantic or domestic situation. The repetition, then, hints that some kind of romantic disappointment, heartbreak, loneliness, etc. may be a factor in his depression. (The allusion to the tragic blues ballad "Careless Love" reinforces this idea.)

Similarly, there's a subtle, but significant, repetition of "ill" in lines 13 ("The season's ill") and 33 ("my ill-spirit"). Here, the two mentions suggest a relationship between the "season's" illness and the speaker's. Perhaps the malaise affecting this summer tourist town has dragged down the speaker's mood. Perhaps he sees his surroundings as "ill" only because *he* is (in other words, he's depressed, so the summer itself seems depressing). Either way, the repetition helps turn the poem from a merely private

account of depression into a commentary on a broader setting, or even a broader culture.

The semi-repetition of "moonlight" and "moonstruck" (lines 38, 40) also seems significant. Symbolically, the moon has long been associated with both love and madness; as a metaphor, "moonstruck" can mean both *infatuated* and *mentally unbalanced*. Hence, this repetition again points to the poem's core emotions and themes. The speaker is mentally unbalanced and apparently starved for love, so his word choices reflect his suffering.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "still," "her"
- **Line 3:** "her," "still"
- **Line 4:** "Her," "Her"
- **Line 6:** "her"
- **Line 13:** "ill"
- **Line 21:** "orange"
- **Line 22:** "orange"
- **Line 27:** "love-cars"
- **Line 28:** "hull," "hull"
- **Line 31:** "car"
- **Line 32:** "Love," "Love"
- **Line 33:** "ill-spirit"
- **Line 37:** "skunks"
- **Line 38:** "moonlight"
- **Line 40:** "moonstruck"
- **Line 45:** "skunk"

ALLITERATION

"Skunk Hour" is dense with alliteration, along with consonance, assonance, and of course, rhyme. These devices make the poem's language very musical, even in the absence of meter.

Notice all the /s/ words in the first stanza, for example:

> Nautilus Island's hermit
> heiress still lives through winter in her Spartan
> cottage;
> her sheep still graze above the sea.
> Her son's a bishop. Her farmer
> is first selectman in our village;
> she's in her dotage.

There are also a number of soft /sh/ sounds here, in words like "sheep," "bishop," and "she's." All this sibilance makes the opening lines sound hushed and subdued, like the quiet life of the "hermit / heiress." Heavy sibilance can also sound a bit sinister, like hissing—an effect that matches this description of isolation and decay.

In the fifth stanza, liquid /l/, muted /m/, and gentle /t/ sounds also create an eerie sense of quiet:

> I watched for love-cars. Lights turned down,
> they lay together, hull to hull,
> where the graveyard shelves on the town. . . .
> My mind's not right.

Notice that /l/s and /t/s occur not only at the beginnings but at the ends of words: "hull [...] hull," "not right." These quiet sounds again seem to fit the thing the speaker's describing: this time, a scene of lonely voyeurism near a graveyard.

Alliteration becomes extremely dense toward the end of the poem, intensifying the language even further as the poem reaches its climax. For just one example, notice all the /s/, /k/, and /sk/ alliteration in the closing lines:

> a mother skunk with her column of kittens swills the
> garbage pail.
> She jabs her wedge-head in a cup
> of sour cream, drops her ostrich tail,
> and will not scare.

The combination of soft, pleasant /s/ sounds and hard, unpleasant /k/ sounds feels appropriate to an image that's somehow both sweet and revolting. On the one hand, this is a mother sharing a meal with her babies, a group of soft creatures with feathery "ostrich tail[s]." They could be seen as fearless, life-affirming, even a little bit cute. On the other hand, they're foul-smelling pests eating discarded sour cream out of the garbage!

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "still," "Spartan"
- **Line 3:** "still," "sea"
- **Line 4:** "son's"
- **Line 5:** "selectman"
- **Line 11:** "facing"
- **Line 12:** "fall"
- **Line 13:** "season's"
- **Line 14:** "summer"
- **Line 15:** "seemed"
- **Line 16:** "nine-knot"
- **Line 21:** "fishnet's filled," "cork"
- **Line 22:** "cobbler's"
- **Line 23:** "money"
- **Line 24:** "marry"
- **Line 27:** "love-cars. Lights," "turned"
- **Line 28:** "lay," "together," "to"
- **Line 30:** "My mind's"
- **Line 33:** "spirit," "sob"
- **Line 34:** "hand"
- **Line 35:** "hell"
- **Line 36:** "here"
- **Line 37:** "skunks," "search"

- **Line 38:** “moonlight”
- **Line 39:** “They,” “march,” “their,” “soles,” “Main,” “Street”
- **Line 40:** “stripes”
- **Line 41:** “chalk-dry,” “spar spire”
- **Line 42:** “Church”
- **Line 43:** “stand”
- **Line 44:** “back,” “steps,” “breathe”
- **Line 45:** “skunk,” “column,” “kittens,” “swills”
- **Line 46:** “cup”
- **Line 47:** “sour,” “cream”
- **Line 48:** “scare”

VOCABULARY

Heiress (Lines 1-2) - A female inheritor, usually of a large estate or sum of money.

Nautilus Island (Lines 1-2) - A small private island off the coast of Maine.

Spartan (Line 2) - Austere; stripped of luxuries. (A quality conventionally associated with the ancient Greek city-state of Sparta.)

Graze (Line 3) - Feed on grass.

First selectman (Lines 4-5) - A position similar to mayor; specifically, the head of a *board of selectmen*, a form of governing council common in New England towns.

Her farmer (Lines 4-5) - In other words, a farmer she's hired to manage her land.

Dotage (Line 6) - Senile old age.

Hierarchic (Lines 7-8) - A product of class hierarchy; elite or elitist.

Queen Victoria's century (Lines 7-9) - The 1800s, a.k.a. the 19th century. Queen Victoria reigned in England from 1837-1901, and her reign is often known as "the Victorian era."

Eyesores (Lines 10-11) - Unsightly things (here meaning, specifically, ugly buildings).

L. L. Bean (Lines 15-16) - A high-end retail company (1912-present) specializing in clothing and outdoor gear.

Nine-knot yawl (Lines 16-17) - A *yawl* is a type of sailboat; "nine-knot" indicates that its top speed is nine nautical miles per hour.

Lobstermen (Lines 16-17) - Professional lobster fishermen.

Red fox stain (Line 18) - Referring to the spread of red (fox-colored) autumn leaves. Lowell's note on this line reads: "The red fox stain was merely meant to describe the rusty reddish color of autumn on Blue Hill, a Maine mountain near where we were living.”

Fairy decorator (Lines 19-20) - A professional decorator whom the speaker knows or believes to be gay. ("Fairy" is an outdated/offensive term for a gay man, common in mainstream heterosexual culture during Lowell's time. Though Lowell could technically mean it in some other, metaphorical sense, the homosexual connotations here are strong.)

Fishnet/orange cork (Line 21) - Fishing implements with practical uses, here hung and sold as decorations.

Cobbler's bench (Line 22) - A type of workbench traditionally used by cobblers (workers who make and repair shoes).

Awl (Line 22) - A small tool used for piercing holes in things (e.g., shoe leather).

Hill's skull (Line 26) - A metaphor comparing the rounded hill to a skull, while alluding to the hill ("Golgotha," the Hebrew for "skull") where Jesus is crucified in the Gospels.

Tudor Ford (Line 26) - A two-door Ford automobile manufactured in the late 1940s and early 1950s ("Tudor" is a play on "two-door").

Love-cars (Line 27) - Cars in which lovers are making out.

Shelves on (Line 29) - Slopes down toward. (The "graveyard" here is the Castine Cemetery in Castine, Maine.)

"Love, O careless Love" (Lines 31-32) - Lyrics from the blues ballad "Careless Love," which contains references to heartbreak, betrayal, suicide, and murder.

Ill-spirit (Lines 32-33) - Here meaning depression or mental illness.

Moonstruck (Line 40) - Struck by and shining in the moonlight. Metaphorically, can suggest "crazy" or "crazy in love."

Spar (Lines 41-42) - The mast of a ship (here used as an adjective to mean that the church's "spire" resembles a mast).

Spire (Lines 41-42) - The tall, tapered top of a building, here meaning a church steeple.

Trinitarian Church (Lines 41-42) - The "Trinitarians" are a Catholic sect that specially emphasizes the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. The church here is a reference to the Trinitarian Congregational Parish of Castine, Maine.

Column (Line 45) - A row or unit of soldiers (here used metaphorically to describe the line of baby skunks behind their mother).

Swills (Line 45) - Drinks from eagerly; guzzles.

Wedge-head (Line 46) - Referring to the wedge shape of a skunk's head/snout.

Ostrich tail (Line 47) - The plumed tail of the skunk (here compared to an ostrich's feathery tail).

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem consists of eight sestets, or six-line stanzas. It doesn't follow a consistent meter or rhyme scheme, but it's not quite free verse, either, since every sestet contains rhymes. In fact, each sestet ends on a full or imperfect rhyme, which helps bring it to a more or less resonant conclusion. (Similarly, all of the sestets conclude with end-stopped lines—though the sixth ends with a dash rather than a period, giving it a little extra tension and momentum as it leads into the following stanza.) Meanwhile, the lines vary considerably in length: the shortest contain three syllables apiece (lines 7, 25), while the longest contains sixteen syllables (line 45).

Overall, the form is an erratic mix of structured and unstructured. This instability gives the poem a somewhat tense, unpredictable quality, perhaps mirroring the speaker's mental instability. Lowell also modeled his form partly on Elizabeth Bishop's "The Armadillo," a debt he acknowledged in his dedication and public comments on the poem. In particular, he took inspiration from Bishop's "short line stanzas" (though "The Armadillo" uses quatrains, not sestets) and the "drifting description" with which she started her poem.

METER

The poem never settles into a regular meter, even though it features rhyme and (mostly) short lines. The looseness of its rhythms seems to mimic the unsettled, erratic quality of the speaker's thoughts. After all, this is largely a poem about mental illness.

"Skunk Hour" marked an important shift in Lowell's approach to meter in general. It was the first poem he completed as part of the book that became *Life Studies*, which, in turn, was his first book to incorporate free verse (and the kind of semi-free verse seen here). It even included a prose section! Previously, Lowell had worked almost exclusively in meter. During this period of his career, however, he sought a style that would reflect the broader changes taking place in American poetry—including the popularity of the Beat Poets, who worked almost entirely in free verse. He also sought a style that would convey the wildness of his own psyche (he battled severe bipolar disorder), as well as the instability and fractures he saw in American society as a whole.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem doesn't feature a regular rhyme scheme, but it does feature plenty of rhymes.

Each sestet ends with a rhyme, whether perfect or imperfect: "cottage"/"village"/"dotage," "all"/"fall," "ill"/"Hill," "fairy"/"marry," "night"/"right," "hear"/"here," "search"/"Church," "air"/"scare." There are many other end rhymes within sestets, too: for example, "privacy"/"century" and "for"/"shore" in the second stanza. There are even some subtle rhymes across sestets—for example, "yawl"/"fall"/"awl" in the third and fourth stanzas.

These rhymes, along with techniques like alliteration and assonance, make the poem sound densely musical despite its lack of meter. At this stage of his career, Robert Lowell was beginning to work in looser and more experimental verse forms, but he often liked to retain the musical qualities of the traditional forms he had worked in previously. Here, rhyme also helps each stanza end on a strong conclusive note, lending particular force to blunt phrases like "My mind's not right" and "will not scare."

SPEAKER

Robert Lowell was a leading figure of the mid-20th-century "confessional" poetry movement. Confessionalist poets exposed and processed personal struggles, traumas, etc. through their writing in a far more direct way than most previous poets had. "Skunk Hour" is a landmark example of this approach. Although its speaker is never named or gendered, readers have typically assumed that the speaker is Lowell himself: the poem is grouped with other autobiographical writing in *Life Studies* (1959), and its details map closely onto Lowell's experience.

Lowell spent the summer of 1957 in Castine, Maine, which is the implied setting of the poem (it's adjacent to "Blue Hill" and across the water from "Nautilus Island"). He also suffered from bipolar disorder (once known as manic depression), a condition for which he was periodically institutionalized throughout his life. While the speaker never uses the word *depression*, his anguished statements that "My mind's not right," "I hear / my ill-spirit sob in each blood cell," and "I myself am hell" evoke the kind of severe depressive state Lowell personally experienced.

Of course, some details in the poem may be altered or fictionalized; Lowell claimed, for example, that the lines about "watch[ing] for love-cars" were based on an anecdote about the 19th-century poet Walt Whitman. In general, though, the speaker seems to be a stand-in for Lowell and a spokesman for his very real suffering.

SETTING

Robert Lowell described the poem's setting as:

> a declining Maine sea town. I move from the ocean inland. Sterility howls through the scenery, but I try to give a tone of tolerance, humor, and randomness to the sad prospect.

This town, or "village," is Castine, Maine, which is adjacent to the community of "Blue Hill." Just off the coast of Castine is "Nautilus Island." Lowell spent the summer of 1957 in Castine and wrote the poem that year, so even though the speaker never names the town, its identity is clear from context. Several specific details in the poem, such as the sloping "graveyard" and "Trinitarian Church" (the Trinitarian Congregational Parish, which stands on "Main Street"), correspond to actual features of this town.

The seasonal setting is important, too. The speaker claims that "The season's ill," much as his own psyche is ill. The turn from the "summer" tourist season to the relative desolation of "fall," when the tourists go back home, seems to strike the speaker as emblematic of a deeper decline. He notices that a "millionaire" who used to frequent the town has taken his business, and his social cachet, elsewhere. Implicitly, too, the decorator "brighten[ing] his shop for fall" is making the best of a tough situation. (The population of the real-life Castine had shrunk somewhat since the 19th century, but it was actually climbing in the period when Lowell wrote "Skunk Hour." The village has always had under 1,400 residents.)

Finally, the "Tudor Ford" in line 26 helps pin down the poem's era: it refers to a line of cars produced from 1949 to 1951. This is a poem set in—and, in many ways, a commentary on the culture of—mid-20th-century America.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Robert Lowell (1917-1977) was one of the major American poets of the mid-20th century. He was a key figure in the confessional poetry movement, which emerged in the U.S. in the 1950s and '60s.

Confessional poetry was deeply personal and often touched on trauma, sexuality, and mental illness. Other famous figures often labeled "confessionalists" include Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath (both of whom studied under Lowell at Boston University), as well as Lowell's friend John Berryman. Lowell himself counted his friend Elizabeth Bishop and the modernist poet William Carlos Williams among his primary artistic influences.

Published in the *Partisan Review* in 1958, "Skunk Hour" became the final poem of Lowell's 1959 collection *Life Studies*, one of the most influential books of the confessionalist movement. The poem is dedicated to Bishop and inspired in part by her poem "The Armadillo," which she had dedicated to Lowell. The two poems form part of the longer literary dialogue these writers conducted, mainly in letters, over several decades. On the similarities between the poems, Lowell explained:

> The dedication is to Elizabeth Bishop, because rereading her suggested a way of breaking through the shell of my old manner. [...] "Skunk Hour" is modeled on Miss Bishop's "The Armadillo," a much better poem and one I had heard her read and later carried around with me. Both "Skunk Hour" and "The Armadillo" use short line stanzas, start with drifting description, and end with a single animal.

Lowell further commented on the premise and structure of "Skunk Hour":

> The first four stanzas are meant to give a dawdling more or less amiable picture of a declining Maine sea town. I move from the ocean inland. Sterility howls through the scenery, but I try to give a tone of tolerance, humor, and randomness to the sad prospect. The composition drifts, its direction sinks out of sight into the casual, chancy arrangements of nature and decay. Then all comes alive in stanzas V and VI. This is the dark night. I hoped my readers would remember St. John of the Cross's poem [often translated as "Dark Night of the Soul"]. My night is not gracious, but secular, puritan, and agnostical. An Existentialist night.

In other words, Lowell (a lapsed Catholic) hoped to dramatize a modern, secular version of what would once have been understood as a spiritual crisis. Writing in the age of modern psychiatry, Lowell recognizes the crisis as a depressive episode: his "mind," rather than his soul, is "not right."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Confessional poetry was, in part, a response to the many horrors of the 20th century. Events like the two World Wars, the Holocaust, and the Cold War pushed some artists to turn inward, focusing on deeply personal experiences of pain and anxiety. The confessionalists also often wrote in response to the stifling atmosphere of 1950s America, which romanticized domestic life.

Lowell himself lived with bipolar disorder and was institutionalized multiple times throughout his life. "Skunk Hour" is one of a group of poems in *Life Studies* that addresses Lowell's mental illness, either directly or indirectly. ("Waking in the Blue," which chronicles the poet's time in a mental institution, is another famous example.) This groundbreaking material was somewhat controversial in 1959, especially in the poet's upper-class New England environment. Medical treatments for bipolar disorder improved somewhat during Lowell's lifetime, but they were still in their infancy, making his illness exceptionally difficult to manage for him and those around him.

The "our" in the final stanza likely includes Lowell's wife

Elizabeth Hardwick, to whom he was married for 23 years, and their daughter Harriet. The setting here is the family's seasonal home in Maine, in the village of Castine (adjacent to "Blue Hill" and across the water from "Nautilus Island"). Though Hardwick and Lowell were one of the literary power couples of their time, their marriage was tumultuous and shadowed by Lowell's manic phases, which usually included bouts of infidelity. The poet's psychological volatility and rocky love life find their way into the atmosphere of "Skunk Hour," with its references to loneliness, voyeurism, suicidal thoughts, and even violence—this last via the allusion to the blues song "Careless Love."

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to Robert Lowell read "Skunk Hour." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hSlcc2b02yc)
- More on "Careless Love" — Some background on the classic song mentioned in "Skunk Hour." (https://campuspress.yale.edu/bsaw/bsaw-exhibition-start-here/careless-love-imagining-black-radio/)
- More About Confessionalism — An introduction to the movement with which Lowell was closely associated. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/151109/an-introduction-to-confessional-poetry)
- "Robert Lowell 101" — An introduction to Lowell's work, courtesy of the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/149197/robert-lowell-101)
- The Poet's Life and Work — A brief biography of Lowell at Poets.org. (https://poets.org/poet/robert-lowell)
- A Chat with Lowell — Lowell discusses and reads some of his poems in a 1966 documentary. (https://youtu.be/Em8fUK5Q3fg?t=665)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ROBERT LOWELL POEMS

- Night Sweat

HOW TO CITE

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