

Stealing



SUMMARY

Talking to an unseen listener, the speaker declares that the weirdest thing they ever stole was a snowman in the middle of the night. The snowman was impressive-looking: big, white, and unspeaking in the winter moonlight. The speaker says that they wanted a friend whose mind was as icy and unfeeling as the speaker's own, and they took the snowman's head first.

There's nothing's worse than not taking the things that you want, the speaker continues. The snowman was really heavy, and, hugging his frozen body close, the speaker felt a powerful cold pierce right into their stomach. Part of the excitement of stealing the snowman was knowing that the kids who'd made him would cry in the morning, seeing that their snowman was gone, but, the speaker says, life's hard.

Sometimes the speaker takes things that they don't need, stealing cars and driving them nowhere just for the fun of it and breaking into houses just to see what's inside. The speaker is messy, leaving disorder behind them and maybe stealing a camera if they feel like it. They watch their hands, gloved to avoid leaving fingerprints, turning a doorknob, and, once inside a stranger's bedroom, will look into the mirror and sigh.

Stealing the snowman took a while. He didn't look right after the speaker put him back together in their yard, so the speaker ran at him and kicked him over and over until the speaker's breath grew painful and ragged. It seems silly now. Then the speaker was just standing by themselves among the chunks of snow, sick of everything.

The speaker is so deeply bored that they'd steal just about anything. They stole a guitar once, thinking maybe they'd learn how to play. They stole a statue of Shakespeare once and sold it. But the snowman was the weirdest thing. The speaker insists that the person they're telling all this to doesn't understand anything that the speaker's saying at all.

their isolation. The speaker's selfishness is actually self-destructive, further alienating the speaker from others and even from themselves.

While the speaker *seems* to steal out of pure "boredom," the poem emphasizes the speaker's isolation throughout—and, in doing so, might suggest that the speaker steals *because* they feel so disconnected from others. The speaker compares themselves to a "ghost" and even declares that they're "sick of the world," for example, revealing that they feel profoundly cut off from and resentful of society. Even at the end of the poem, when it becomes clear that the speaker is *trying* to communicate to a listener, it's also clear that the speaker is failing. Whoever's listening to the speaker's story doesn't "understand a word [the speaker is] saying."

It's possible that the speaker steals to express anger at this sense of disconnection, but their actions display a profound sense of self-absorption and lack of concern for others. The poem is full of "I" statements, for instance, which repeatedly center the speaker's experience, and the speaker mentions taking pleasure in looking into mirrors (that is, in looking at themselves). The speaker also apparently takes the snowman because it's just as "cold" as the speaker. In other words, the speaker laments their isolation yet can't seem to focus on the feelings of anyone else! The speaker even says that "[p]art of the thrill" of stealing the snowman was knowing that "children would cry in the morning."

It's unclear whether the speaker's selfishness *caused* their isolation or *resulted from* it, but, either way, it just makes things worse. The speaker might steal to attempt to forge *some* kind of relationship with other people or get some kind of attention—even if this attention is children crying in the morning because the speaker stole their snowman—yet the speaker's selfishness only pushes other people further away. And in the end, the speaker destroys the snowman, "boot[ing]" or kicking it apart. Since the snowman is a mirror of the speaker, this suggests that the speaker is also destroying *themselves* through their self-absorption and cruelty to others.

Ultimately, then, while the speaker is clearly dislikable and self-interested, the poem suggests that this person is also profoundly alienated from society and filled with self-loathing. The speaker expresses this sense of alienation, emptiness, and anger the poem suggests, by stealing—yet this stealing only leaves them more alone.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-25



THEMES



SELFISHNESS, ISOLATION, AND ALIENATION

The speaker of "Stealing" is a compulsive thief—someone who routinely nabs anything from cameras to cars for the fun of it. The poem inspires a bit of sympathy for the speaker, implying that this person feels cut off from society and is seeking some form of attention and connection by acting out. At the same time, the speaker comes across as totally self-absorbed and lacking in the empathy required to overcome



GREED, MATERIALISM, AND MEANING IN MODERN SOCIETY

It's possible that "Stealing" is meant to evoke the specific world in which the poem was composed: Carol Ann Duffy wrote in the poem in the 1980s, when there were record levels of unemployment and crime in the UK and many people felt marginalized and ignored by their government. With this in mind, "Stealing" can be read as exploring the lack of purpose and opportunity—and the resulting rise in crime—many experienced in the UK when the poem was written. In this reading, the poem expresses the sense of meaninglessness, anger, and powerlessness that results when society promotes personal profit and materialism at the expense of less tangible things like human connection and art.

The poem's speaker seems to act out of self-interest yet has also clearly lost any sense of purpose. For example, the speaker proclaims, "[b]etter off dead than [...] not taking / what you want." In other words, the speaker acknowledges that they steal simply because they "want" to. At the same time, perhaps the speaker steals to assert *some* kind of power or agency in a society that has made the speaker feel alienated, isolated, and marginalized.

There's no real rhyme or reason to the things the speaker actually steals, either; the speaker doesn't "need" many of the things that they take, and these items don't add anything meaningful to the speaker's life. The speaker steals cars and rides them "to nowhere," for example, and "break[s] into houses just to have a look." The speaker seems to be searching for some sort of purpose or fulfillment, but the poem implies that the speaker won't find either through materialism, selfishness, and greed.

In a world like this, the poem suggests, even art is just another commodity to be bought, sold, or stolen. Note how one of the things the speaker steals is a "bust of Shakespeare," an object that can be read as representing art and literature more broadly. Yet in the world of the poem, this figure of Shakespeare is simply a devalued object, an item to be "flogged" rather than admired. Similarly, the speaker says that they once "stole a guitar and thought [they] might / learn to play." But the poem implies that the speaker never *did* learn.

Instead, the speaker's stealing seems only to lead to a deeper sense of emptiness. The speaker ends the poem seemingly just as angry, bored, and isolated as they were when the poem began. None of the speaker's small acts of defiance have brought them real power or fulfillment in a society that seems to be passing them by.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-25



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

*The most unusual ...
... the winter moon.*

The poem opens with the speaker repeating a question that apparently has just been asked: what is the "most unusual thing" that the speaker ever stole? The speaker's opening question is more specifically an instance of [aporia](#): the speaker poses this question *in order to answer it*—to tell whoever the speaker is addressing about this "most unusual" theft.

The fact that a snowman is the "most unusual thing" the speaker stole implies that the speaker has stolen many *other* things as well. And a snowman is, indeed, a rather strange thing to steal. After all, a snowman has no material value; it's not something that the speaker could sell, and it seems like a tricky thing to move from one place to another. The snowman also evokes childhood, innocence, and joy. The fact that the speaker *stole* the snowman, then, alerts the reader to the speaker's cynicism and lack of empathy.

The speaker took this snowman in the middle of the night, and describes it as looking "magnificent" while standing alone, "tall" and "white," under the "winter moon." The speaker [personifies](#) the snowman as "he" and also represents him as a "mute," or a person who is unable to speak or communicate. This personification is important, since the poem will go on to suggest that the speaker identifies with the snowman and that the snowman—which is isolated, cold, and unable to communicate—is essentially a mirror of the speaker.

The poem is written in [free verse](#), without a regular [meter](#) or [rhyme scheme](#), and it feels casual and conversational as a result. At the same time, several sonic devices fill these lines with music.

For example, [sibilant alliteration](#), as well as [assonant](#) long /oh/ sounds, link "stole" and "snowman," while /m/ and /w/ sounds appear in "snowman," "midnight," "magnificent," "mute," "moon," "white," and "winter." All these shared sounds might subtly evoke the speaker's fondness for the memory of the snowman theft.

LINES 3-5

*I wanted him, ...
... with the head.*

The speaker stole the snowman because they wanted a friend (in British English, "mate" is a [colloquial](#) term for a friend, like "buddy" or "pal"). The speaker wanted the snowman in particular because the snowman resembled the speaker: he, too, had "a mind as cold" as the "slice of ice" within the speaker's own "brain."

Here, the speaker uses the image of a "slice of ice," as well as the

literal coldness of the snow, as [metaphors](#) for *emotional* coldness. The speaker, the poem suggests, is unfeeling and cold, just like the snowman. The [internal rhyme](#) of “slice” and “ice” draws attention to the image and, in doing so, to the idea that the speaker lacks the capacity for warmth or connection. The fact that the speaker mentions their own “brain” and the snowman’s “head” in quick succession further emphasizes the likeness between them.

The fact that the speaker stole the snowman to have a “mate” implies that the speaker is quite lonely and isolated. And yet, it’s also clear that the speaker isn’t seeking genuine connection; instead, the speaker wants a friend who is unable to communicate, and who mirrors all of the speaker’s own qualities.

The speaker, then, seems to steal the snowman to overcome a sense of isolation, yet this snowman theft also reveals the speaker’s underlying self-absorption. The [repetition](#) of “I” and [parallel structure](#) of “I wanted” and “I started” reinforce the fact that the speaker is entirely focused on themselves and on what they “want.”

These lines continue the use of [alliterative](#) /m/ sounds that appeared at the poem’s beginning. Here, /m/ sounds appear in “mate” and “mind.” These /m/ sounds link the idea of the snowman as the speaker’s “mate” to the earlier images of “midnight” and the “mute[ness]” of the snowman, reinforcing the connection of the speaker to the snowman and implying that the speaker, too, is “mute” or fundamentally unable to communicate with others.

The poem continues to alternate between longer and shorter sentences here as well, and between [end-stopped lines](#) and moments of [enjambment](#). Here, the enjambments after “mate” and “ice” move the reader forward quickly, perhaps conveying the speaker’s uncontrollable impulse to steal the snowman. Then, the short, end-stopped “I started with the head” shows the speaker’s calculated approach to the theft, as the speaker begins to steal the snowman piece by piece.

LINES 6-7

*Better off dead ...
... what you want.*

The speaker interrupts this snowman story to proclaim what seems to be a kind of life motto: “Better off dead,” the speaker asserts, “than giving in, not taking / what you want.” In other words, the only thing worth living for is “taking / what you want,” and if you don’t do this, then you’re “giving in” or weak.

The [colloquial](#) phrase “[b]etter off dead” makes the speaker’s statement sound casual and offhand, but this is a pretty striking and cynical attitude towards life. This remark also suggests that the speaker is entirely self-interested and focused on their own wants/material gain. It also suggests that perhaps the speaker steals to exert *some* kind of power or agency in a world that, to

the speaker, might feel meaningless. [Ironically](#), the speaker seems neither truly happy nor fulfilled even when taking whatever they “want.”

Also note the subtle [internal rhyme](#) of “head” and “dead.” Essentially, the speaker has beheaded the snowman in order to steal it, and since the snowman is a mirror of the speaker, the poem suggests that the speaker is dismantling not only the snowman but also *themselves* through their selfish actions. And yet, the speaker also says they would be “better off dead” than *not* doing this! The speaker selfishly does what they want, but the poem implies that the speaker isn’t really *gaining* anything in the process of *taking* from others.

LINES 7-10

*He weighed a ...
... morning. Life's tough.*

Actually stealing the snowman, the speaker says, wasn’t all that easy. Having already moved the snowman’s head, the speaker now describes what it was like to carry the snowman’s “torso” (the middle part of his body). The continued [personification](#) here—in which the speaker treats the snowman like a human being, using male pronouns and describing body parts—makes this process seem deeply creepy.

The speaker also notes how heavy and cold the snowman was, and how “hugg[ing]” him caused an intense “chill” to go through the speaker’s stomach. Hugs are usually comforting, but the fact that this “hug” feels piercing just reinforces how isolated the speaker is. The image suggests that the speaker seeks some kind of intimacy or closeness with the snowman, but all that the speaker can feel is the intense cold of the snow.

Even so, the speaker gets a “thrill” out of this theft—and especially out of knowing that “children would cry in the morning.” This further suggests that the speaker not only lacks empathy but also that this person actively enjoys hurting other people.

The speaker’s cruel remark “Life’s tough,” a common [colloquialism](#), then suggests that the speaker is stealing the snowman to *teach* the children a painful lesson—a lesson, the poem suggests, that the speaker has already learned. Apparently, the speaker feels that the world is cruel and meaningless, so they might as well “take what they want”—and all the better if others are hurt in the process. The speaker might also be stealing to get some kind of attention or response, yet their cruel, selfish impulses only push others further away.

The [asyndeton](#) the speaker uses while describing stealing the snowman—omitting conjunctions that might ordinarily appear between the phrases “hugged to my chest” and “a fierce chill / piercing my gut”—speeds up the poem, conveying the speaker’s “thrill” upon stealing. The [enjambments](#) at “chill / piercing” and “knowing / that” work similarly, ramping up the poem’s

momentum.

The sounds of these lines add to their meaning and music as well. For example, [alliterative](#) /t/ sounds link “ton,” “torso,” and “stiff,” creating a harsh “tsking” sound as the speaker describes the process of stealing the snowman. These lines are filled with sharp, biting sounds in general, as in “chest,” “child,” “piercing,” “part,” “children,” and “tough.” All these harsh sounds reflect the harshness of the speaker’s worldview.

LINES 11-13

*Sometimes I steal ...
... pinch a camera.*

The speaker steals plenty of things besides snowmen and doesn’t so out of necessity (if the speaker were stealing out of economic need, readers might feel a bit more sympathetic). In fact, the speaker asserts that they “steal things [they] don’t need.”

For example, the speaker steals cars just to “joy-ride” them “to nowhere.” They steal for the fun of it, but there’s no real purpose here. The fact that the speaker drives these cars to “nowhere” might also suggest that, in a larger sense, the *speaker* is going nowhere: their selfish actions don’t bring them a sense of meaning or fulfillment.

The speaker also says that they “break into houses” just to look around. They compare themselves [metaphorically](#) to a “ghost,” suggesting that they feel cut off from other people and even from the entire living world. Yet they specify that they are a “mucky” or messy ghost, leaving disarray behind. The speaker says, too, that they “maybe pinch,” or steal, a “camera” if they feel like it. People typically use cameras to capture memories and create art, so this left feels particularly callous—a way of robbing people of their way of making meaning within their own lives.

The speaker again uses [asyndeton](#) throughout these lines, leaving out conjunctions that would ordinarily link list items on the list together. This asyndeton adds to the poem’s flippant tone, as the speaker casually jumps from one theft to the next. To the speaker, these items seem pretty much interchangeable; none has more essential value or meaning than another, and all just objects for the speaker to steal.

The [alliteration](#) and [assonance](#) in words like link “mucky,” “messy,” and “maybe” add to the sense that nothing the speaker feels adds meaning to the speaker’s life; it’s all the same.

LINES 14-15

*I watch my ...
...*

There’s a strange tension here, as the speaker remains deeply self-absorbed yet also disconnected from their own body. Saying “I watch my gloved hand twisting the doorknob” makes it seem like the speaker’s hand is acting all on its own—that the

speaker isn’t controlling it. The speaker here comes across as a person who is profoundly alienated from *themselves*. Perhaps, deep down, they don’t like themselves very much at all.

At the same time, the continued [repetition](#) of “I watch,” “I sigh,”) yet again emphasizes the fact that the speaker seems capable of thinking only about themselves and their own perspective. Bolstering this idea, the speaker likes to look into mirrors when in a “stranger’s bedroom”—that is to look at their own reflection—and to “sigh” with pleasure when doing so. (Note how even that “Aah” might sound like a lazy, drawn-out “I.”)

Note, too, that a bedroom is typically a deeply private, personal space. On a [symbolic](#) level, the act of entering a stranger’s bedroom might thus represent the speaker seeking out intimacy and connection with another person. And yet, the speaker’s selfishness gets in the way; even while standing in someone else’s most personal of spaces, the speaker is busy looking at themselves in the mirror.

LINES 16-18

*It took some ...
... him. Again. Again.*

The speaker goes back to describing the snowman theft, now explaining the process of putting the snowman back together in the speaker’s own yard (recall that the speaker had to move the snowman piece by piece). Because the snowman “didn’t look the same” after this reassembly, the speaker violently kicked him to pieces.

Earlier in the poem, the speaker emphasized that they stole the snowman because he (the snowman) was just like the speaker. [Symbolically](#), then, kicking the snowman apart represents the speaker lashing out at *themselves*. On a formal level, the [repetition](#) of “Again. Again” (an instance of [epizeuxis](#)) emphasizes the depth of the speaker’s anger and frustration, not only toward the snowman but toward themselves.

Again, the speaker comes across as a person who is at once deeply selfish and filled with self-loathing, alienated from the world and from themselves. The image of the speaker kicking the snowman also implies that the speaker’s behavior—all their callous stealing—is ultimately self-destructive; it doesn’t do anything to bring the speaker a sense of purpose or connection.

LINES 18-20

*My breath ripped ...
... of the world.*

The speaker attacked the snowman with such vigor that it felt as though the speaker’s “breath [was] ripped out / in rags.” This striking [metaphor](#) conveys the painful feeling of breathing hard in the cold. It’s a violent image as well, one that evokes the depth of the speaker’s pain and anger.

“It seems daft now,” the speaker goes on to say, meaning that

this outburst seems stupid and silly in hindsight. Next, the speaker says that they were left “standing / alone among lumps of snow,” and feeling “sick of the world.” In other words, having destroyed the snowman—again, a kind of a mirror for the speaker themselves—the speaker was left alone again, “among” the remnants of their “mate.” The speaker sought out a friend, but selfishness and self-hatred got in the way.

The phrase “sick of the world” is a [colloquialism](#) like the earlier “life’s tough,” but it has a different feeling to it. Rather than being offhand or dismissive, this statement reveals the depth of the speaker’s sense of alienation and disillusionment. The speaker is done with the meaningless, cold world. The hissing, [sibilance](#) in “standing,” “lumps,” “snow,” and “sick” adds a hush to these lines, evoking the image of the speaker standing alone in the silence in the middle of the night.

LINES 21-24

*Boredom. Mostly I'm ...
... flogged it,*

The speaker has just revealed a deep sense of isolation and loneliness, yet here seems to dismiss those feelings. The speaker says now that they're just “bored” and steal casually as a result of this “[b]oredom.”

On the one hand, the [repetition](#) of the word “[b]oredom” in the slightly different form of “bored” (an instance of [polyptoton](#)) adds emphasis to the speaker's listlessness. At the same time, this repetition suggests that the speaker is *trying* to seem casual, cold, and callous. Despite having just had a moment of introspection, or near introspection, the speaker changes the subject.

The speaker says that they're so bored, in fact, that they could eat themselves, a [colloquialism](#) meaning they're so bored they would do anything. They then go on to describe other things they've stolen, including a “guitar” and a “bust,” or statue of the head and shoulders, of Shakespeare. The speaker uses casual language here, defaulting to slang like “nicked” and “flogged” to describe the process of stealing and selling these items. The items themselves, however, might speak to the way that art gets devalued in a world that focuses on profits and materialism above all else:

- The guitar and the bust of Shakespeare bring art into the poem for the first time. Music and literature are the kinds of things that can add meaning and value to life, yet don't have a price; they aren't material goods to be bought and sold.
- The fact that the speaker stole two items [symbolically](#) linked with art might suggest that, at some level, the speaker was searching for the kind of fulfillment associated with art. Perhaps the speaker hoped to connect with others through music or beautiful language.

- And yet, the speaker got rid of these things; the speaker *didn't* learn to play the guitar and simply “flogged,” or sold, the bust. This might suggest that, for the speaker—and, perhaps, the entire society in which the speaker lives—art has lost its value. Art is just another thing to be bought and sold.

LINES 24-25

*but the snowman ...
... saying, do you?*

Finally, the speaker concludes that the “snowman was the strangest” thing that they ever stole, coming full circle to how the poem began. The [sibilant](#) sounds in “snowman” and “strangest” echo the sibilant sounds in the preceding lines, sustaining that sense of hush and quiet, and the speaker alone in the middle of the night. And even though, here, the speaker *seems* to return to how the poem began, they have revealed a lot in the interval—including their own selfishness and lack of empathy, but also how profoundly alienated they are from the world and from themselves.

In the last line of the poem, the speaker once again asks a [rhetorical question](#), of the reader or another person they are addressing. “You don’t understand a word I’m saying, do you?” the speaker asks, and the reader might realize at this point that what the speaker has said doesn’t really make much sense at all. This question also reveals that the speaker *has* been trying to communicate to someone else—perhaps to *overcome* their isolation—but that they have failed. (Interestingly, the reader might *actually* understand more about the speaker than the speaker understands about themselves, a form of [dramatic irony](#). But ultimately, the speaker still feels misunderstood and alone.)

The speaker’s selfishness and lack of empathy, then, have only reinforced their alienation and aloneness. The closing question, suggests, finally, that the speaker's selfishness and materialism are in a certain sense meaningless: the speaker doesn’t even understand themselves, and is unable to make meaning out of their own life.



SYMBOLS



THE SNOWMAN

The snowman [symbolizes](#) the speaker themselves, and, more specifically, the speaker's emotional coldness, isolation, and cynicism.

Notice how the snowman's *physical* characteristics reflect the speaker's *emotional* characteristics: the snowman is cold and “mute,” or unable to speak, while the speaker lacks emotional warmth and fails to meaningfully communicate or connect with others. The fact that the speaker wants the snowman for a

"mate" also emphasizes the speaker's selfishness and self-absorption: the speaker wants a mirror of themselves for a companion and is happy that this companion can't talk.

The speaker taking the snowman apart piece by piece might represent the speaker trying to understand *themselves*, to break themselves down and see what's inside. Yet the snowman doesn't "look the same" when put back together, which suggests the speaker's sense of alienation even from their own self; the speaker can't understand themselves, and this makes the speaker angry. When the speaker then violently destroys the snowman, this symbolically represents the speaker attacking themselves—expressing their own self-loathing and aggression.

It's also worth noting that snowmen are traditionally linked with childhood innocence and joy. The fact that the speaker *steals* the snowman, then, reveals the speaker's own cynicism; the speaker delights in knowing that the kids who made the snowman "would cry in the morning" when they realized he'd been taken away.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "snowman"
- **Lines 2-3:** "a tall, white mute / beneath the winter moon"
- **Lines 3-5:** "a mate / with a mind as cold as the slice of ice / within my own brain"
- **Lines 7-9:** "his torso, / frozen stiff, hugged to my chest, a fierce chill / piercing my gut."
- **Lines 17-18:** "I took a run / and booted him. Again. Again."
- **Line 20:** "lumps of snow"
- **Line 24:** "snowman"



MIRRORS AND DOUBLING

The poem is filled with images of doubling and reflection: the snowman is a mirror image of the speaker, the speaker steals a camera (a tool to capture moments to look at later), the speaker gets "so bored" that they could "eat" themselves, and, of course, the speaker notes that they take pleasure in looking into mirrors in other people's houses. All of these images of reflection and doubling [symbolize](#) the speaker's self-absorption, self-obsession, and self-loathing—and the way that such emotions are also self-destructive and prohibit the meaningful connection with other people.

Note, for example, how hugging the snowman close makes the speaker feel "a fierce chill piercing [their] gut." This image suggests the simultaneous pain and thrill that the speaker gets from carting the snowman around. The snowman represents the speaker; the speaker thus feels both pain and excitement from [metaphorically](#) hugging *themselves* close, from embracing *themselves*, even though—or because—doing so hurts others

(makes children "cry").

Also note how the mirrors the speaker looks into are more specifically located in stranger's *bedrooms*—in other words, in personal, intimate spaces that generally represent the character of their inhabitants. The fact that the speaker looks at themselves in such spaces, instead of trying to learn more about the rooms' owners, might suggest that the speaker's selfishness is what cuts them off from meaningful connection with other people. That is, the speaker is too busy looking in the mirror to look around.

Note that this self-*obsession*, however, isn't the same as self-*awareness*. The speaker comes across as a person who lacks the ability for meaningful introspection. As the speaker's destruction of the snowman makes clear, the speaker doesn't want to, or perhaps genuinely can't, confront who they *really* are. Selfishness here doesn't lead to self-understanding or self-love. Instead, it leads to the speaker wanting to "eat" themselves—to destroy themselves.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-5:** "I wanted him, a mate / with a mind as cold as the slice of ice / within my own brain."
- **Lines 7-9:** "He weighed a ton; his torso, / frozen stiff, hugged to my chest, a fierce chill / piercing my gut."
- **Line 13:** "maybe pinch a camera."
- **Lines 15-15:** "A stranger's bedroom. Mirrors. I sigh like this — / Aah /"
- **Line 21:** "Mostly I'm so bored I could eat myself."



THE GUITAR AND BUST OF SHAKESPEARE

Toward the end of the poem, the speaker says that they once stole both a guitar and a bust (a statue of the head and shoulders) of Shakespeare. Both of these objects [symbolize](#) art and creativity—two intangible things that the poem implies have been devalued by modern, materialistic society. Both objects also speak to the capacity to communicate and emotionally connect with others and with oneself (think of how music or poetry can move people).

The speaker's casual disregard for these objects is thus revealing. The speaker swiftly disposes of both; the poem implies that the speaker doesn't learn to play the guitar after all and that they "flogged," or sold, the bust. This implies that there's no place for art, and the meaning and connection it can foster, in the speaker's world.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 22-24:** "I stole a guitar and thought I might / learn to play. I nicked a bust of Shakespeare once, / flogged it"



POETIC DEVICES

REPETITION

The poem uses [repetition](#) to emphasize the speaker's selfish and self-destructive actions. For example, the root word "steal" appears three times in the poem (four including the title). The poem also includes slang synonyms for "steal," such as "pinch" and "nicked." The repetition of the word "steal," along with its synonyms, suggests how habitually and casually the speaker takes from other people.

The poem also repeats the word "I" throughout, in statements like "I wanted," "I started," and "I watch." The repetition of "I" and the [parallel structure](#) of these statements emphasize just how self-absorbed the speaker is, centering the speaker's perspective and experience throughout.

The speaker uses more direct moments of repetition as well. Note the [polyptoton](#) in line 21, for example:

Boredom. Mostly I'm so bored I could eat myself.

This repetition emphasizes the speaker's "boredom," adding a sense of monotony to the line itself.

Finally, the speaker uses [epizeuxis](#) when describing kicking the snowman apart:

and booted him. Again. Again. My breath ripped out

This repetition evokes the speaker's intense anger and aggression. Given that the snowman is a mirror of the speaker themselves, this moment more broadly implies that the speaker feels a great deal of self-loathing.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I," "stole"
- **Line 3:** "I"
- **Line 5:** "I"
- **Line 11:** "I," "steal," "I"
- **Line 13:** "I'm"
- **Line 14:** "I"
- **Line 17:** "I"
- **Line 18:** "Again. Again."
- **Line 19:** "I"
- **Line 21:** "Boredom," "I'm," "bored," "I"
- **Line 22:** "I," "stole," "I"
- **Line 23:** "I"
- **Line 25:** "I'm"

COLLOQUIALISM

The speaker uses [colloquial language](#) and British slang throughout the poem. This casual language demonstrates the

speaker's nonchalant attitude toward the world and adds to the feeling that the speaker is simply addressing someone in regular conversation. The poem's colloquialisms could also be read as an indicator of the speaker's socioeconomic class.

Two kinds of colloquialisms appear in the poem. First, the speaker makes off-hand, colloquial remarks like "Better off dead than giving in," "Life's tough," and "sick of the world." These colloquial phrases express the speaker's outlook on life: the speaker views the world as fundamentally boring, cruel, and empty of meaning and purpose. The only kind of purpose or agency the speaker feels they *can* have, the poem suggests, is in "taking what [they] want"—in other words, being cruel and self-interested in return.

The speaker also uses British slang terms throughout, like "mate" (which means "friend"), "joy-ride," "booted" (which means "kicked"), "daft" (which means "stupid"), "flogged" (which means "sold"), and "pinch" and "nicked," which are slang words for "steal" and "stole." Since slang is traditionally associated with subcultures or people of a lower socioeconomic class, the speaker's use of slang contributes to the feeling that the speaker has been rejected or alienated by the dominant culture. The speaker reinforces this alienation through their callous attitude, and their casual, colloquial language also conveys their disregard for other people.

Where Colloquialism appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "mate"
- **Lines 6-7:** "Better off dead than giving in, not taking / what you want."
- **Line 9:** "gut"
- **Line 10:** "Life's tough."
- **Line 11:** "joy-ride"
- **Line 13:** "pinch"
- **Line 18:** "booted"
- **Line 19:** "daft"
- **Line 20:** "sick of the world."
- **Line 21:** "Mostly I'm so bored I could eat myself."
- **Line 23:** "nicked"
- **Line 24:** "flogged"

PERSONIFICATION

The speaker [personifies](#) the snowman throughout the poem. This personification establishes the snowman as a kind of mirror of the speaker, and in doing so reveals the extent of the speaker's isolation and lack of empathy.

The speaker begins to personify the snowman by referring to it as "he," and then goes on to describe the snowman as "mute," a word that usually refers to a person who is unable to talk. The speaker also says that the snowman has a "mind" that is as "cold" as the speaker's own mind. Because of this similarity, the speaker says that they want the snowman to be their "mate" (a

British slang word for a friend).

This personification makes clear that the speaker views the snowman as a reflection of *themselves*:

- Like the snowman, the speaker is emotionally cold and lacks empathy.
- The speaker is also isolated, like the snowman, and is unable to communicate with others.

The speaker again uses personification when referring to the snowman's "head" and "torso." On one level, this makes the theft of the snowman feel all the more disturbing (as though the speaker were taking apart a human being). This personification also might speaker to how disjointed and disconnected the *speaker* feels, since the speaker views the snowman—again, a mirror of the speaker themselves—as a series of disjointed parts.

When the speaker *destroys* the snowman, the poem implies that the speaker is also directing this anger and aggression toward *themselves*. The personification of the snowman, then, reveals a lot about the speaker: this person is self-absorbed, wanting a "mate" who mirrors them and is unable to communicate, yet also filled with self-loathing and ultimately self-destructive.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "He looked magnificent; a tall, white mute"
- **Lines 3-4:** "a mate / with a mind"
- **Line 5:** "the head."
- **Lines 7-8:** "He weighed a ton; his torso, / frozen stiff, hugged to my chest,"
- **Lines 17-18:** "he didn't look the same. I took a run / and booted him."

METAPHOR

The poem contains several [metaphors](#). First, the speaker metaphorically describes their brain as a "slice of ice." This metaphor emphasizes how emotionally cold and distant the speaker is: they lack empathy, warmth, and the ability to connect with others. The speaker then builds on this metaphor with a [simile](#), saying that the snowman's mind is "as cold as the slice of ice" in the speaker's own "brain."

The speaker goes on to compare themselves metaphorically to a "mucky," or messy, "ghost." Through this metaphor, the speaker reveals that they feel disconnected from the living world. They are alienated not just from others, but from their own life (or maybe even life itself). The only presence they exert is a "mucky" or destructive one.

Finally, after the speaker destroys the snowman, they describe their breath as "ripp[ing] out / in rags." This metaphor conveys the painful feeling of being out of breath in the cold. At the same time, the metaphor also subtly conveys the speaker's

internal state: they feel torn or "ripped" apart upon destroying the snowman. In other words, the speaker's actions are only destroying *themselves*. The fact that the speaker compares their breath to "rags" might also suggest that despite everything they steal, the speaker feels fundamentally impoverished and lacking.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "the slice of ice / within my own brain."
- **Line 13:** "I'm a mucky ghost"
- **Lines 18-19:** "My breath ripped out / in rags."

IMAGERY

The poem contains vivid [imagery](#) that conveys the speaker's dark, isolated, and alienated internal world. In particular, the poem is full of images of snow, ice, cold, and darkness. These images convey the speaker's *internal* coldness and lack of empathy, as well as their fundamental loneliness. The way the speaker presents these images also changes over the course of the poem, as the speaker gradually reveals more about themselves.

At first, the speaker describes the snowman as a "tall white mute" beneath the "winter moon." This imagery glorifies the snowman as well as the speaker, who identifies with the snowman. It suggests that the snowman, like the speaker, stands alone, but does so proudly, "magnificent[ly]."

As the poem goes on, though, the imagery begins to subtly change. For example, when the speaker describes stealing the snowman, they emphasize the "fierce chill" that they feel in their "gut" from "hugging" the snow to their "chest." This sensory image shows how intensely cold the speaker feels, and also shows that the speaker bizarrely seeks some kind of intimacy or closeness with the snowman. Yet the snowman has already begun to come apart; the speaker has dismantled him to carry first the "head" and then the "torso." This image subtly conveys the way that the speaker's actions are also dismantling the speaker's *own* life.

Ultimately, nothing is left of the snowman: by the end of the poem he's just "lumps of snow" and the speaker is left standing alone, seemingly aware of their isolation. These "lumps of snow" are dramatically different from the "magnificent" figure at the poem's opening, suggesting that the speaker has been made uncomfortably aware that they are not truly "magnificent" either.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "a tall, white mute / beneath the winter moon."
- **Line 4:** "slice of ice"
- **Lines 7-9:** "He weighed a ton; his torso, / frozen stiff, hugged to my chest, a fierce chill / piercing my gut."

- **Line 14:** “I watch my gloved hand twisting the doorknob.”
- **Line 20:** “lumps of snow”

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The poem begins and ends with [rhetorical questions](#). First, the speaker asks, “The most unusual thing I ever stole?” While this is a rhetorical question—the speaker doesn’t seem to expect anyone other than themselves to answer it—it is also an instance of broader [aporia](#), since the question is simply a way into the speaker’s explanation. The question does draw the reader into the poem, creating the sense that the speaker is simply addressing the reader (or someone else) in a casual conversation.

The poem ends with another question, as the speaker asks the reader (or whoever they have been addressing), “You don’t understand a word I’m saying, do you?” This question is rhetorical, since the speaker seems to already have come to the conclusion that the reader *doesn’t* understand them. ([Ironically](#) enough, by this point in the poem, the reader might actually understand more about the speaker than the speaker understands about themselves!) This question at the poem’s ending reveals that the speaker actually has been trying to communicate and explain their experience. At the same time, though, the question shows that the speaker lacks the *ability* to truly communicate; they feel more alienated and misunderstood than ever.

These questions, since they are rhetorical, also reveal the speaker’s profound self-absorption. Even though the speaker *seems* to be addressing the reader or someone else in conversation, the conversation is clearly one-directional; the speaker isn’t *actually* asking the other person anything and expects to answer their own questions themselves.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “The most unusual thing I ever stole?”
- **Line 25:** “You don’t understand a word I’m saying, do you?”

ENJAMBMENT

The poem uses a combination of [enjambment](#) and [end-stopped lines](#) to vary its pacing and, in doing so, evoke the speaker’s mindset. For example, in the first stanza, lines 2, 3, and 4 all end on moments of enjambment:

[...] a tall, white **mute**
beneath the winter moon. I wanted him, a **mate**
with a mind as cold as the slice of **ice**
within [...]

These enjambments propel the reader forward and convey the

speaker’s excitement and anticipation. The enjambments in the next stanza (at “taking / what,” “chill / piercing,” and “knowing / that”) work similarly, again quickening the poem’s pace and suggesting the “thrill” that the speaker gets out of taking things.

Later, when the speaker describes violently destroying the snowman, the rush of enjambed lines conveys the speaker’s underlying aggression and frustration. As phrases fall across line breaks without a pause, readers might get the sense that the speaker’s anger is uncontrollable:

[...] I took a **run**
and booted him. Again. Again. My breath ripped **out**
in rags. It seems daft now. Then I was **standing**
alone [...]

In contrast, the poem’s many end-stopped lines suggest the speaker’s unnerving sense of detachment. For instance, stanza 3 is almost entirely end-stopped:

[...] just to have a **look**.
[...] maybe pinch a **camera**.
[...] twisting the **doorknob**.
[...] I sigh like this — **Aah**.

While the speaker has moments when their selfishness and self-loathing break through, for the most part they come across as cool and collected. They aren’t committing crimes out of passion, after all, but “boredom.”

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** “mute / beneath”
- **Lines 3-4:** “mate / with”
- **Lines 4-5:** “ice / within”
- **Lines 6-7:** “taking / what”
- **Lines 8-9:** “chill / piercing”
- **Lines 9-10:** “knowing / that”
- **Lines 11-12:** “cars / to”
- **Lines 17-18:** “run / and”
- **Lines 18-19:** “out / in”
- **Lines 19-20:** “standing / alone”
- **Lines 22-23:** “might / learn”

CAESURA

The poem is written in [free verse](#) and follows regular speech patterns. As such, many phrases end or pause right in the middle of lines. Where and when these pauses, or [caesurae](#), fall affects the poem’s rhythm and tone. Like [enjambment](#) and [end-stopped lines](#), caesurae can create a sense of flowing language or harsh chopiness.

For example, in the first stanza, the speaker describes why they want to steal the snowman in a long sentence that extends over

three lines (from “I wanted him” to “within my own brain”). Yet this sentence then comes to an abrupt halt right in the middle of line 5, with a full stop before the speaker says, “I started with the head.”

Similarly, after saying in an apparently relaxed way in the next stanza that “Part of the thrill was knowing / that children would cry in the morning,” the poem comes to a sudden stop before the speaker asserts, “Life’s tough.” These abrupt pauses create an uncomfortable, disjointed feeling; despite the speaker’s calm demeanor, the language itself seems a bit off kilter.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “stole? A”
- **Line 2:** “Midnight. He,” “magnificent; a”
- **Line 3:** “moon. I,” “him, a”
- **Line 5:** “brain. I”
- **Line 6:** “in, not”
- **Line 7:** “want. He,” “ton; his”
- **Line 8:** “stiff, hugged,” “chest, a”
- **Line 9:** “gut. Part”
- **Line 10:** “morning. Life’s”
- **Line 11:** “need. I”
- **Line 12:** “nowhere, break”
- **Line 13:** “ghost, leave,” “mess, maybe”
- **Line 15:** “bedroom. Mirrors. I”
- **Lines 15-15:** “this — / Aah”
- **Line 16:** “time. Reassembled”
- **Line 17:** “same. I”
- **Line 18:** “him. Again. Again. My”
- **Line 19:** “rags. It,” “now. Then”
- **Line 20:** “snow, sick”
- **Line 21:** “Boredom. Mostly”
- **Line 22:** “time, I”
- **Line 23:** “play. I”
- **Line 24:** “it, but”
- **Line 25:** “saying, do”

ALLITERATION

“Stealing” doesn’t have a steady [rhyme scheme](#) or [meter](#), but it’s still a very musical poem. That’s thanks to devices like [alliteration](#), which makes the speaker’s language all the more vivid and colorful.

Note all the /m/ and /w/ sounds in the first stanza, for example: “[m]idnight,” “magnificent,” “mute,” “moon,” “mate,” “mind,” “white,” “winter,” “wanted.” All these shared sounds intensify the speaker’s language, and in doing so convey the speaker’s building excitement upon remembering the snowman theft. The breathy /w/ sounds also subtly evoke the speaker’s chilly, wintry environment.

Alliteration works like this throughout the poem, essentially turning up the volume of the speaker’s story. Take the second stanza, where alliteration (and more general [consonance](#))

makes the lines sound striking, forceful, and unforgettable:

Better off dead than giving in, not taking
what you want. He weighed a ton; his torso
frozen stiff, hugged to my chest, a fierce chill

The sharpness of all those /t/ and /ch/ sounds combines with [sibilance](#) here (all those hissing /s/ sounds) to give the stanza as a whole a decidedly sinister feel. Later, in another striking moment of alliteration, the /m/ sounds of “mucky,” “mess,” and “maybe” feels almost sticky, drawing attention to the speaker’s casual sowing of disorder.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “stole,” “snowman”
- **Line 2:** “Midnight,” “magnificent,” “white,” “mute”
- **Line 3:** “winter,” “moon,” “wanted,” “mate”
- **Line 4:** “mind”
- **Line 6:** “taking”
- **Line 7:** “what,” “want,” “weighed,” “ton,” “torso”
- **Line 8:** “frozen,” “chest,” “fierce,” “chill”
- **Line 10:** “children”
- **Line 11:** “Sometimes,” “steal”
- **Line 13:** “mucky,” “mess,” “maybe”
- **Line 18:** “ripped”
- **Line 19:** “rags,” “standing”
- **Line 20:** “snow,” “sick”
- **Line 24:** “snowman,” “strangest”
- **Line 25:** “saying”

CONSONANCE

Consonance works just like [alliteration](#) in the poem, making the speaker’s language more musical and intense.

Sometimes this consonance combines with [assonance](#) to make the language more striking still, as in the [internal rhyme](#) of “slice” and “ice” in line 4. The rhyme (and that hissing /s/) draws readers’ attention to just how cold and unfeeling the speaker is. Meanwhile, in stanza 2, consonant /l/ sounds link “chill” and “thrill” (which create another internal rhyme), along with “children.” Not coincidentally, there’s a thematic link between these similar-sounding words: the speaker takes pleasure in stealing the snowman because the speaker knows it will make children cry.

Later, the echo between “fierce” and “piercing” again simply makes the image at hand more vivid, that sharp, ominous /s/ conveying the icy “chill” that flows through the speaker in this moment.

As these examples might suggest, much of the poem’s consonance is more specifically [sibilance](#)—the repetition of /s/ sounds. This sibilance conveys the sinister hush of the night when the speaker steals the snowman. The ominous hiss of

sibilance echoes through the poem in words like "twisting," "strangers," "sigh," "standing," "snow," "sick," "strangest," "understand," "bust," "Shakespeare," and, of course, "stole" and "snowman." All this sibilance—which often gets paired with biting, spitting /t/ sounds—subtly evokes the harshness and bitterness of the speaker's inner world.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "stole," "snowman"
- **Line 2:** "Midnight," "magnificent," "white," "mute"
- **Line 3:** "winter," "moon," "wanted," "mate"
- **Line 4:** "mind," "slice," "ice"
- **Line 6:** "taking"
- **Line 7:** "what," "want," "weighed," "ton," "torso"
- **Line 8:** "chest," "fierce," "chill"
- **Line 9:** "piercing," "thrill"
- **Line 10:** "children"
- **Line 11:** "Sometimes," "steal"
- **Line 13:** "mucky," "ghost," "mess," "maybe"
- **Line 14:** "twisting"
- **Line 15:** "stranger's," "Mirrors," "sigh," "this"
- **Line 18:** "ripped"
- **Line 19:** "rags," "standing"
- **Line 20:** "lumps," "snow," "sick"
- **Line 23:** "bust," "Shakespeare," "once"
- **Line 24:** "snowman," "strangest"
- **Line 25:** "understand," "saying"

ASSONANCE

Assonance works just like its cousins [alliteration](#) and [consonance](#), filling the poem with music and adding emphasis to certain words, images, and ideas. As noted in the prior entry in this guide, sometimes this assonance creates [internal rhymes](#) (as in "slice of ice," "chill" and "thrill," "fierce" and "piercing"). The shared sounds of these words draw readers' attention to them and, it follows, to the icy, harsh sensations they evoke.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "slice," "ice"
- **Line 5:** "head"
- **Line 6:** "dead"
- **Line 8:** "fierce," "chill"
- **Line 9:** "piercing," "thrill"
- **Line 20:** "alone among lumps"
- **Line 23:** "bust," "once"

American English.

Ton (Line 7) - A huge amount.

Mucky (Line 13) - Messy or filthy.

Pinch (Line 13) - A slang word meaning to casually steal.

Booted (Line 18) - Kicked.

Daft (Line 19) - British slang meaning "stupid" or "silly."

Bust (Line 23) - A sculpture of someone's head and shoulders.

Nicked (Line 23) - "Nicked" is the past tense of "nick," a slang word meaning "steal."

Flogged (Line 24) - Sold.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem's 25 lines are divided into five [cinquains](#), or five-line stanzas. Each stanza is firmly [end-stopped](#), meaning that the ending of each stanza coincides with the ending of a sentence.

This form gives the poem a measured, even quality, reinforcing the idea that the speaker is simply recounting their experiences in a casual, detached manner. The stanza breaks also feel like pauses in conversation, signaling slight shifts in what the speaker describes. Overall, the regularity of the form and the stanza breaks, then, convey the feeling of the speaker simply addressing the reader in a natural conversation.

At the same time, the poem includes other elements that convey the speaker's alienation and disjointedness. Each stanza is an odd number of lines (five), and the poem also includes multiple instances of [enjambment](#), which work in tension with the containment of the end-stopped lines and stanzas. These elements create a quality of instability and suggest that the speaker, too, is unstable and at odds with themselves, despite their casual, even presentation.

In addition to these formal elements, the poem is written in the mode of a persona poem, a type of poem that explores the perspective of someone other than the writer. The poem is also a dramatic monologue: through the poem the speaker *seems* to simply describe their theft of the snowman, but they also reveal a great deal about their character along the way.

METER

"Stealing" is a [free-verse poem](#), meaning that it has no set [meter](#).

This *absence* of meter is important to the poem: it helps to convey the sense that the speaker is addressing the reader directly in casual conversation, without any kind of pre-meditation. This sense of spontaneity becomes especially important as the poem progresses, and the speaker (inadvertently) reveals more and more about themselves and



VOCABULARY

Mute (Line 2) - Unable to speak or communicate.

Mate (Line 3) - British slang for "friend," like "buddy" or "pal" in

the alienation they truly feel.

The absence of meter, along with the speaker's use of [colloquialisms](#) and slang, might also help to convey the speaker's socioeconomic class and relationship to society. If meter is associated with traditional poetic forms and a kind of literary upper crust, then the speaker of this poem is clearly someone who is *not* part of that elite. Instead, the poem gives voice to someone alienated from society as a whole, who further alienates themselves through their actions.

RHYME SCHEME

As a [free verse](#) poem, "Stealing" has no set [rhyme scheme](#). The lack of rhyme scheme helps to create the poem's conversational quality, conveying the feeling of the speaker directly and casually talking to the reader.

At the same time, the poem *does* include several instances of [internal rhyme](#) and [slant rhyme](#), which create music and emphasis. For example, the speaker refers to their own "brain" as a "slice of ice." The internal rhyme of "slice" and "ice" reinforces the sense of the speaker's mind as being ice-cold—lacking in empathy, feeling, and human connection.

Two instances of slant rhyme also appear toward the ending of the poem. First, the word "same" creates a slant rhyme with the British pronunciation of "[a]gain." This slant rhyme creates emphasis, heightening the sense that the speaker is kicking the snowman apart because it doesn't look the "same." In effect, the speaker is unable to recreate the quality of innocence and joy the snowman originally had, so they destroy the snowman—and implicitly, also direct that anger and aggression toward themselves.

Finally, in the last stanza, "bust" creates a slant rhyme with "once," calling attention to the fact that the speaker once stole a "bust"—a statue of the head and shoulders—of Shakespeare. This particular theft suggests that perhaps the speaker does steal to try to acquire or find some kind of meaning—in this case, through the meaning of literature and art. Yet here, once again, the speaker simply gets rid of the bust, viewing it, like everything else, as empty of meaning.



SPEAKER

The speaker of "Stealing" remains anonymous and ungendered throughout the poem. While the poem doesn't reveal these details about the speaker's *identity*, it does reveal a lot about the speaker's *character*.

First, the speaker makes clear that they routinely steal from other people, apparently just for the fun of doing so, or because they are bored. They refer to their own mind as a "slice of ice," suggesting that they lack empathy or a sense of connection to other people. The speaker also goes on to reveal that they even take pleasure in causing suffering; they say that part of the

"thrill" in stealing the snowman was knowing that "children would cry" when they saw that their snowman was gone.

The speaker also reveals things about themselves indirectly. For instance, the constant repetition of "I" statements, and the fact that the speaker wants a "mate" (a friend) who is "mute" and can't speak, show how self-involved the speaker is. Despite the fact that they are isolated and seem to *want* a friend, they also only want a friend who is a mirror of themselves. The speaker's selfishness and inability to empathize make it impossible for them to form the connections they seem to crave.

Despite their apparently casual, callous manner, the speaker also reveals that they are fundamentally lonely and dislike not only other people, but themselves. For example, when the speaker violently destroys the snowman, they also direct this aggression toward themselves, since they have identified with the snowman all along.

The poem as a whole creates a portrait of someone who is profoundly alienated from society, but who also seems to compulsively reinforce this alienation through their selfish, destructive behavior.



SETTING

While the poem never names its setting directly, several details suggest that the poem is set in a fairly ordinary, suburban location in the United Kingdom. The speaker uses British slang, like "booted" (a slang word for "kicked"), "nicked" (a slang word for "stole"), and "daft" (a slang word for "stupid"). The speaker also steals a snowman, which seems to be in the yard of a family home, and then tries to reassemble the snowman in their own yard—details which imply that the speaker lives in an average suburban setting.

Within this setting, much of the poem centers around the speaker's experience stealing the snowman, an event that took place in winter and at "midnight." This setting of cold, snow, and darkness is important to the poem, as it subtly conveys the speaker's internal state: they are emotionally cold or disconnected, lack purpose or meaning in a kind of spiritual "darkness," and are also fundamentally alone.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Carol Ann Duffy included "Stealing" in her second poetry collection, *Selling Manhattan*, which was published in 1987. *Selling Manhattan* won the 1988 Somerset Maugham Award, a major UK award for young authors. The book includes multiple dramatic monologues, including "Stealing," and as the publisher, Pan Macmillan writes, the collection "[give\[s\] voices to those](#)

[who are usually voiceless.](#) “Stealing” reflects this intention, since the speaker—dislikable and cruel as they are—is also someone alienated and isolated from society.

While Duffy published “Stealing,” and the collection in which it appeared, early in her career, she has gone on to publish dozens of other books, including collections of poetry, plays, and children’s literature. She would also go on to write many other well-known persona poems and dramatic monologues, including those in the collection [The World’s Wife](#), which gives voice to female characters often left out of traditional myths and fairy tales. Her work often deals with issues of gender, different kinds of oppression, and love, and is written in clear, accessible language.

Duffy has cited numerous poets as early influences for her own work, including canonical Irish and English poets like [W.B. Yeats](#) and [John Keats](#), as well as Modernist poets including [Aimé Césaire](#). Duffy herself has had a major impact on literature within the UK. Born to working-class parents in Scotland, in 2009 Duffy became the first woman, the first Scottish poet, and the first openly LGBTQ person to become Poet Laureate of the UK. Along with Seamus Heaney, she is now one of the most widely taught poets in UK schools and her work is renowned for its empathy and sharp-edged insights into contemporary life.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Carol Ann Duffy wrote “Stealing” in 1987, when Margaret Thatcher, the former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, was re-elected. During this time, known as Thatcherism in the UK, the government implemented a range of policies that many saw as prioritizing profit over public welfare. For example, the government privatized what had previously been public services and dismantled regulations for a variety of industries. Both unemployment and crime reached record levels throughout the country during this era, and many people felt despair at what they viewed as a culture valuing profits over people.

The poem can be read as a response to this larger situation. The speaker is selfish and materialistic, stealing things for no real reason. Within this reading, the speaker’s proclamation that life is all about “taking what you want” can be read as reflecting the ethos of a society in which individual profit is prioritized over all else. The fact that the speaker is left alone and isolated, in turn, implies that such a focus on selfishness and greed erodes the very things that give life meaning, including art and human relationships.

The Guardian to learn more about Thatcherism in the UK, and how the policies of the Thatcher government led to a rise in crime around the country. (<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/apr/27/margaret-thatcher-industrial-collapse-led-to-crime-rise>)

- [Essay on “Stealing” and Margaret Thatcher’s UK](#) — Read more about how “Stealing” explores the alienation, anger, and loss of meaning experienced under Thatcherism in this essay that examines the poem alongside Patrick Keiller’s 1994 film, *London*. (The poem is examined in the second half of the essay.) (<https://msufilemandarchitecture.wordpress.com/2015/11/22/the-failures-of-modernity-in-keillers-london-and-carol-ann-duffys-stealing/>)
- [Carol Ann Duffy’s Biography](#) — Read more about Carol Ann Duffy’s life and work on this biographical page from the Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/carol-ann-duffy>)
- [Animated Video of “Stealing”](#) — Watch an animated version of “Stealing,” and listen to the poem read aloud, in this student-made video. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EuP8BINVckQ>)
- [Selling Manhattan](#) — Read more about *Selling Manhattan*, the 1987 collection in which Carol Ann Duffy first published “stealing,” at the website of the book’s publisher, Pan Macmillan. (<https://www.panmacmillan.com/authors/carol-ann-duffy/selling-manhattan/9781509824984>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER CAROL ANN DUFFY POEMS

- [Before You Were Mine](#)
- [Death of a Teacher](#)
- [Education For Leisure](#)
- [In Mrs Tilscher’s Class](#)
- [Little Red Cap](#)
- [Medusa](#)
- [Mrs Midas](#)
- [Originally](#)
- [Prayer](#)
- [Valentine](#)
- [Warming Her Pearls](#)
- [War Photographer](#)
- [We Remember Your Childhood Well](#)



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Thatcherism and Crime in the UK](#) — Read this article at



HOW TO CITE

MLA

Little, Margaree. "Stealing." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 18 May 2021.
Web. 3 Jun 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Little, Margaree. "Stealing." LitCharts LLC, May 18, 2021.
Retrieved June 3, 2021. <https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/carol-ann-duffy/stealing>.