The Applicant

SUMMARY

The speaker begins the interrogation of an unnamed applicant by asking if he is the type of person that the interviewer's organization is looking for. The interviewer then asks if any of the applicant's body parts are prosthetic, or if he relies on any devices for mobility.

The interviewer next asks the applicant if he has had anything removed, leaving stitches. The interviewer confirms the applicant's answer, "No," repeating it back to him in the form of another question. The interviewer wonders aloud how their organization is able to give him anything if that is the case. The applicant begins to cry, and the interviewer tells him to stop and open his hand. The interviewer asks the applicant to confirm that the applicant's hand is empty. Not bothering to wait for a reply, the interviewer confirms that it's empty. The interviewer offers the hand of the wife that the applicant is interviewing for.

The speaker becomes a salesperson, explaining that the wife can fill the applicant's empty hand. According to the speaker, she is also willing to bring the applicant tea, massage him to get rid of his headaches, and do anything else that the applicant asks of her. The speaker asks if the applicant will marry her.

The interviewer/salesperson promises that, when the applicant dies, the wife will close his eyes and be completely devastated. The speaker explains that his organization takes widows, which become salty piles of tears, and recycles them into something new, like boiling the bones and scraps of a piece of meat to create a stock. The speaker points out that the applicant is completely naked and offers him a suit.

Although it is a rigid and conventional black suit, it fits the applicant fairly well. The speaker urges the applicant to buy the suit, asking again if he will marry the potential wife. The speaker claims that the suit is indestructible—water won't ruin it, it won't break apart, not even a barrage of bombs and fire will destroy the suit. The speaker tells the applicant to trust that he will be buried in it.

Without trying to be *too* impolite, the speaker tells the applicant that he is brainless, and as a result, the speaker knows exactly what the applicant should buy. The speaker calls to the potential wife, coaxing her out of the closet that she has been confined to. The speaker asks what the applicant thinks of her.

Although she is currently an idle blank slate, the speaker claims that her value will appreciate over time—she will match the worth of silver after 25 years and that of gold after 50. The speaker also says that she will act like a doll brought to life, always at his beck and call. She can sew and cook for him, and she can also talk at length.

Speaking as if she is a machine, the speaker points out that the potential wife is functioning properly. The speaker amps up the sales rhetoric, claiming that the wife can fulfill whatever role the applicant chooses—if he has an injury, she will be his dressing; if he needs something to gaze upon, she will be his eye candy. Addressing the applicant as if he is an adolescent, the speaker tells the applicant that this wife is his last opportunity for a decent life. The interview-turned-sales-pitch ends with the speaker asking three times if the applicant will marry her, phrasing it as a command or a matter of fact, rather than a question.

THEMES

CONSUMERISM AND NEED

"The Applicant" is a dramatic monologue in which the speaker interviews a silent, presumably male subject to determine if he would make a proper husband for a particular woman. The poem parodies the transactional nature of modern courtship, with the interviewer acting as a salesperson who is eager to marry the pair off. To facilitate the deal, the speaker points out the applicant's supposed shortcomings and depersonalizes his potential wife, so that she appears to be the ideal solution to all the applicant's problems. As a stand-in for the marketplace, the speaker reveals that consumerism constantly *creates* and *exploits* superficial needs in order to encourage the consumption of products.

Throughout the poem, the speaker points out the applicant's alleged flaws to convince him that he desperately needs a wife. The speaker invokes terms associated with emptiness to suggest that the applicant is incomplete because he is unmarried. For example, the speaker has the applicant stretch out his hand and calls attention to the fact that it is empty, implying that the applicant does, in fact, have "something missing." This image of an empty, outstretched hand is associated with poverty and suggests that marriage will crucially increase his value.

The speaker later points out that the applicant is "stark naked," insinuating that he needs outward signifiers—specifically a wedding suit and ring—to prove his worth to society. Shortly thereafter, the speaker says that applicant's "head ... is empty," again creating need, this time by suggesting that the applicant's lack of a wife makes him brainless. The speaker also implies that the applicant's lack of a wife puts him in danger, claiming that marriage would protect him from "fire and bombs through the roof." The speaker exacerbates the pressure that the applicant

feels to marry by creating urgency with the phrase "last resort," a method consistent with sales tactics—language like "Act now!" and "Limited time offer!"

After building the illusion that the applicant is in dire need, the speaker profits by presenting the applicant's potential wife as the perfect solution to all of these newly minted "problems." In order to market the applicant's potential wife, the speaker dehumanizes her and strips her of all personality so that she is highly adaptable to the applicant's needs and desires. For instance, she is said to "fill" his empty hand and be "the ticket" to remedying his empty head.

In fact, the speaker purports that the wife will morph into whatever tool the applicant might need, remarking "You have a hole, it's a poultice. / You have an eye, it's an image." The speaker calls the applicant's potential wife "a living doll," which implies that she does not act of her own accord and is instead intended to be controlled by her husband, serving his needs. Language such as "It works, there is nothing wrong with it," reinforces the image of the applicant's potential wife is a machine, with her functionality determining her worth. Furthermore, the speaker refers to her as an investment that will accrue value over time through service to the applicant.

In this way, the poem's speaker parodies the idea that products can be trusted to solve all of one's problems—that products can radically change, and even save, one's life. Moreover, the speaker illustrates that consumerism thrives by constantly creating problems—often suggesting that people are unacceptable or incomplete—in order to sell products as solutions. When unchecked, such toxic market pressures will ultimately encourage people to see one another as products and judge others based on their perceived ability to serve their own so-called needs. As the theme below explores in more detail, gender roles aid consumerism by providing narrow but widely-accepted ideals that serve as the basis for what a person "needs" to be.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-40

GENDER AND FREEDOM

During the applicant's interview, the speaker measures him against a narrow definition of masculinity that prioritizes dominance in all areas of life. At the same time, the speaker presents the applicant's potential wife as the perfect archetype of a woman, in an attempt to sell her. In order to confine them within narrow gendered ideals, the speaker denies both the applicant and his potential wife their individual identities and right to self-determination. In this way, the speaker reveals that patriarchal gender roles restrict the freedom of both men *and* women.

The speaker disregards the applicant's individual needs and opinions, instead suggesting that he will only find success by adhering to the vision of manhood that the speaker lays out. While the speaker asks the applicant a series of questions, giving the *illusion* of choice, the speaker implies that there is *only one* proper answer. Indeed, the poem opens with the question "are you our sort of a person?" As the monologue portrays an interview, the applicant is keenly aware that he must be the interviewer's "sort of a person" in order to land the job.

The speaker also asks questions in rapid succession, leaving little room for response and in turn restricting the applicant's ability to disagree. In fact, the speaker bluntly denies the applicant's personality, thoughts, and opinions by telling him that his "head ... is empty." The only moment in which the applicant is asked his opinion—"Well, what do you think of *that*?"—requires him to judge the worthiness of his potential wife, yet it's phrased almost as a rhetorical question. The speaker is unveiling a product the applicant's clearly expected to admire.

Similarly, by telling the applicant that his wife will "do whatever you tell it," the speaker pressures him to order his wife around. Sometimes the speaker calls more overtly for the applicant to act "manly" and dominant, such as when the speaker brusquely tells the applicant to "stop crying." Finally, the speaker forces a plain, stiff suit onto the applicant, remarking that it's "not a bad fit." Thus, it is clear that speaker's goal isn't to find personalized ways for the applicant to express himself. Rather, the goal is to force the applicant to adopt a rigid, conservative attitude towards marriage that is consistent with that of his male peers and patriarchal society more broadly.

Throughout the monologue, the speaker objectifies and stereotypes the applicant's potential wife, denying her individuality and freedom in order to market her as the "perfect" woman. The speaker discusses the applicant's potential wife as a tool to serve him, rather than a person with inherent value. She is said to be "the ticket" to filling his empty head, and the speaker rattles off various services she can provide—she will "bring teacups and roll away headaches," "thumb shut your eyes," "sew," and "cook," for example.

Furthermore, the speaker encourages the applicant to invest in his wife, as her value will increase from "paper" to "silver" to "gold." And she can be recycled as "new stock" when the applicant dies, which will maximize her worth. In fact, the speaker repeatedly refers to the applicant's potential wife as "it" to downplay her humanity. Instead, the speaker emphasizes her sexuality by reducing her to her body parts ("a hand"), referring to her as "naked," and calling her "an image," to suggest that she has little purpose beyond being a sexual object. The speaker describes her personality only through sexist tropes, claiming that she drones on and on ("talk, talk, talk") and is overly emotional ("dissolve of sorrow"). By saying that "there is

nothing wrong with it," the speaker suggests that this is how a wife is supposed to behave.

The speaker denies both the applicant's and his potential wife's individuality by claiming that their value to society is directly proportional to their adherence to narrow gender roles. By enforcing these stringent standards, the speaker proves that patriarchal gender roles erode the freedoms of both men and women. Ultimately, gender roles facilitate consumerism by providing ideals for people to aspire to, creating a narrative that institutions like marriage will correct their shortcomings and increase their worth.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-40

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

First, are you ...
... show something's missing?

The poem opens with a flurry of questions, which indicate that the monologue is a transcript of a rather unconventional interview. The speaker establishes the purpose of the interview—to determine if the applicant is their "sort of a person"—before going on to list various factors that speak to the applicant's eligibility for some unspecified role. The vague collective "our" that the speaker invokes suggests that the interviewer is acting on behalf of a larger organization, or possibly should be interpreted as a satirical stand-in for society itself.

Almost all readers will have interviewed for a position at one point or another, allowing them to fill in the details of this nondescript setting and empathize with the applicant's position. The use of apostrophe allows the speaker to address readers directly, encouraging them to experience the poem's events from the applicant's perspective.

The speaker's first question comes across as direct and assertive, especially because it is neatly contained in a short line. It also contains a high concentration of stressed syllables, a technique that will persist throughout the rest of the poem, putting force behind the speaker's statements:

> First, are you our sort of a person?

As readers well know, the purpose of an interview is to vet candidates and decide who most closely matches the profile the interviewers are looking for. Indeed, the stresses on "our sort" emphasize that the speaker's singular task is to prove his worthiness on the speaker's terms.

However, this question immediately raises doubt, or employs aporia, to suggest that the speaker is skeptical of the applicant's suitability. This skepticism builds a power dynamic at the poem's outset, wherein the applicant is at the mercy of a rigorous interviewer.

The speaker goes on to list various prosthetics and other assistive devices, asking the applicant if he relies on any of them. The speaker frames these devices as evidence that "something's missing" and uses them to determine if the applicant is truly "in need" of a wife. Because the speaker callously suggests that people who rely on prosthetics are incomplete and thus needy, these devices can be interpreted as a symbolic representation of people's perceived shortcomings in a male-dominated, consumer-driven society.

The list of these devices employs polysyndeton, an abundance of conjunctions (in this case, "or"). This abundance extends the speaker's question, which sprawls out across 5 lines and spans the poem's first stanza break. Line 6 is relatively long and syntactically complex. It also employs sibilance, or repeating /s/ sounds ("Stitches to show something's missing"). All of these factors slow the reader down, making the speaker's subsequent statements appear exceedingly curt.

Throughout this initial passage, repetition in the form of polysyndeton ("or") and diacope ("Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch") contribute to a barrage of /r/ sounds, which suggest a growling sound and give the speaker's tone a harsh edge.

Furthermore, repetition creates metrical patterns that repeat briefly, helping to build momentum and draw the reader into the poem's rhythms. More specifically, polysyndeton results in a repeating unstressed-unstressed-stressed pattern (anapests), while diacope results in a repeating stressed-unstressed-stressed pattern, with the two overlapping in line 5:

> ... or a crutch,
> A brace, or a hook,
> Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch.

These interlocking patterns capture the forcefulness of the speaker's monologue.

LINES 6-10

No, no? Then ...
... Empty? Empty.

The insistent chain of questions set off by the poem's first line continues through the first half of stanza 2. Here, the speaker confirms that the applicant does not rely on prosthetics and indicates that this reality might hinder his eligibility for a wife, as the speaker frankly doubts the applicant's neediness.

However, the speaker frames all of these beliefs and conclusions as questions. In doing so, the speaker confronts the

applicant with his perceived flaw—a lack of demonstrated need— and asks him (the applicant) to answer for it, which ultimately causes him to cry. The speaker's use of rhetorical questions and the resulting aporia continue to raise suspicions about the applicant's worthiness. However, in line 10, the speaker is able to confirm that the applicant's hand is "empty," at once *reversing* the speaker's perception that the applicant is not needy and raising a whole *new* set of insecurities on the part of the applicant.

The speaker never pauses to allow the applicant to respond, revealing a lack of interest in the applicant's true experiences, opinions, and desires. Instead, the speaker shows an unwillingness—or perhaps inability—to engage in an equitable, reasoned exchange of ideas. This one-sided barrage of questions and suppositions reinforces an imbalanced power dynamic, which begins to expose the speaker's true goal—to apply relentless pressure on the applicant until the speaker is confident that he will comply with the recommended course of action.

The sentences in this passage are exceedingly short, creating a choppy rhythm, heightened by caesurae and end-stops. This series of short, straightforward questions and commands contrasts with the sprawling list that preceded it. Therefore, the abrupt statements that follow come across as particularly terse, due to the increasing turbulence of the speaker's cadence. The stressed syllables that fall on "No, no" and "Stop crying" put additional force behind the speaker's austere words.

Furthermore, the repetition of /n/ sounds throughout this stanza call attention to the applicant's disappointing answer:

> Stitches to show something's missing? No, no? Then
> How can we give you a thing?
> Stop crying.
> Open your hand.

These /n/ sounds call attention to key moments in this stanza, from the speaker's "No," to the applicant's "Open ... hand."

LINES 10-14

Here is a ...
... you marry it?

After pointing out that the applicant's hand is empty, the speaker offers him "a hand // To fill it"—presumably the hand of his potential wife. The speaker then lists various services that the wife would provide the applicant if he commits to her, and asks the applicant if he intends to do so. By referring to the potential wife as "a hand," the speaker reduces her to a body part—an example of synecdoche. In doing so, the speaker suggests that she is little more than a body, drawing attention to her sexuality and subtly indicating that access to her physical form is another advantage of marriage.

Furthermore, the meter of the statement "here is a hand" matches that of the speaker's command to "open your hand" in the previous line:

> Open your hand.
> Empty? Empty. Here is a hand

The decision to break stanza 2 after "here is a hand" visually detaches this phrase from the sentence that contains it. In doing so, the two phrases sit next to one another on equal footing, making the similarity of their rhythms more pronounced. Their identical meter and recurring /h/ sounds stylistically mirror the speaker's claim that the applicant's hand fits perfectly with that of his potential wife.

The list of charming services that the applicant's potential wife is promised to provide—soothing his aches, bringing him tea, and generally doing whatever he pleases—employs polysyndeton. The repeating conjunction "and" elongates the list and creates one unbroken string of text. As a result, the list appears lengthy and substantial, an effect aided by enjambment, which allows its continuous string of text to occupy several lines. The breadth of the list exaggerates the curt nature of the sentence that follows and increases the force behind the speaker's question, which is contained to one short line by an end-stop: "Will you marry it?"

Furthermore, this stanza contains consonance with its many repeating /l/ sounds as well as internal rhyme amongst words that contain "-ill"—as in, "fill," "willing," and "will." Plus, each instance of these sounds receives metrical stress:

> To fill it and willing
> To bring teacups and roll away headaches
> And do whatever you tell it.
> Will you marry it?

As a result, "Will you marry it?" receives a great deal of emphasis, drawing attention to the speaker's question, which will reappear later in the poem.

The repeating sounds also link the applicant's decision to marry with all of the pleasantries that the speaker describes, reminding the applicant that his future contentment hinges on his commitment to marriage. Similarly, internal rhymes between "do" and "you" reiterate the expectation that the applicant's potential wife will act at his direction.

LINES 15-18

It is guaranteed ...
... from the salt.

After asking the applicant if he will commit to marriage, the speaker lists several advantages of agreeing to do so. First, the speaker guarantees that the applicant's wife will be loyal to him until death, at which point she will close his eyes and be

overcome with sadness. The speaker "guarantee[s]" that she will act in this way, employing marketing language as if offering the applicant a lifetime warranty. The word "guaranteed" falls right before a stanza break (in yet another moment of enjambment), calling additional attention to the speaker's thinly-veiled sales tactics.

The speaker's tone softens in the coming lines, which chronicle the expected actions of the applicant's potential wife upon his death. The soft, sibilant /s/, /z/, /th/ and /sh/ sound that permeates lines 16-17 reflect the tenderness that the speaker describes:

> To thumb shut your eyes at the end
> And dissolve of sorrow.

By claiming that they "dissolve of sorrow," the speaker draws from a widely-held stereotype that women are emotional to the point of hysteria. This assertion also implies that women are nothing without men—reduced to helpless piles of tears.

The speaker's tone shifts again in the coming lines. Whereas enjambment allows lines 15-17 ("It is guarantee ... sorrow.") to share one continuous sentence, line 18 contains a short direct statement, punctuated with an end-stop. Accordingly, the speaker's cadence becomes much more abrupt and forceful: "We make new stock from the salt."

Here, the speaker compares widows to food scraps, explaining that the organization that the speaker works for recycles them into "new stock." This metaphor is dehumanizing on several levels. First, it is focused around maximizing the profit that can be derived from each woman. The term "stock" and its associations with merchandise and trade encourages this perspective, denying women a sense of personhood.

Moreover, this image implies that all women are more or less the same—easy to (literally) reduce, reuse, and recycle all together. Finally, stock is typically made by simmering bones, connective tissue, and scrap flesh. By comparing women to meat, this metaphor emphasizes their bodies and their sexuality, while also implying that widowed women are "used up"—carcasses of their former selves.

The corresponding stress pattern of line 18 underscores the unblinking brutality of the metaphor that the speaker spins:

> We make new stock from the salt.

The high concentration of stresses, particularly those that fall on "make new stock," lend the image increased emphasis.

LINES 19-25

> *I notice you ...*
> *... you in it.*

In this section, the speaker points out that the applicant is "stark naked" and offers him a suit. The speaker's assertion that the applicant is naked suggests that the applicant is bare, vulnerable, and exposed. As a result, the speaker raises doubt as to the applicant's credibility and manliness, allowing the speaker to swoop in and offer a solution, which is "this suit." The speaker proceeds to ask the applicant if he will commit to marriage, suggesting that the suit is a symbol of matrimony.

Thus, the applicant's nakedness presents him as a blank canvas—a young man primed and ready to adopt outward signals of identity that will increase his perceived value. Indeed, as the preferred uniform of businessmen, the suit projects an attainment of the two main indicators of a man's success, according to the speaker—his abilities to head a household and to make a decent living.

The fact that the suit doesn't fit the applicant quite right doesn't seem to bother the speaker. Suits are typically closely tailored to the body, and the two metrical stresses that "bad fit" receives calls attention to its imperfections:

> Black and stiff, but not a bad fit.

"Black" and "stiff" also receive stress, calling attention to the suit's generic appearance and rigidity, which can be interpreted as a reflection of the suit's rejection of individuality and self-expression.

Instead of waiting for the applicant's reaction, the speaker lists various features of the suit, giving the applicant the hard sell. The speaker points out its ability to repel water, its extreme durability, and its potential to protect the applicant from explosive violence until the day he dies. This rhetoric hyperbolizes and implicitly ridicules the idea that individual purchases can drastically improve and even save one's life.

Lines 23 contains asyndeton, which creates a repeating anapestic (unstressed-unstressed-stressed) metrical pattern and builds rhythmic momentum:

> It is wat- | erproof, shat- | terproof, proof
> Against fire | and bombs | through the roof.

As a result, the suit's features flow into one another. The repetition of variations on "proof" adds to the impression of a mounting pile of evidence of the suit's value. However, this repetition also gives this passage an undercurrent of desperation, as it appears to list every form of "proof" that the speaker can think up.

Furthermore, there are an abundance of both internal and end rhymes, (a combination of slant and perfect rhymes) which are unique to this stanza:

> Black and stiff, but not a bad fit.
> Will you marry it?

It is waterproof, shatterproof, proof
Against fire and bombs through the roof.
Believe me, they'll bury you in it.

Here, the end rhymes include "fit" with "it" and "proof" with "roof." Additionally, "stiff" has a slant rhyme with "fit," and the same goes for "through" and "you" with "roof." These give the poem musicality, almost as if the speaker is reciting a jingle. As a result, the list appears particularly extensive, while the statement that follows, "Believe me," comes across as direct and authoritative.

Plus, the consonance amongst "believe" and "bury," both of which receive metrical stress, give the statement increased rhythmic impact and credibility. As a whole, this passage lays bare the speaker's shady sales tactics and desperation to sell, as the speaker seems to throw every trick in the book at the applicant.

Finally, a few additional clusters of consonant sounds create a shift in mood. This section of the poem initially contains gentle, sibilant /s/ sounds, as well as /t/ sounds. Here is a look at lines 20-21:

How about this suit——
Black and stiff, but not a bad fit.

However, the sibilance tapers off, giving way to a proliferation of /r/ sounds, which recall animalistic growling and clash with harsh /t/ sounds. Note the shift that takes place in lines 22-23, which immediately follow the above passage:

Will you marry it?
It is waterproof, shatterproof, proof

Thus, as stanza 5 draws to a close, the poem becomes more turbulent sonically, contributing to a sinister atmosphere that corresponds with descriptions of violence and death.

LINES 26-29

Now your head, ...
... ?

Stanza 6 opens with the speaker's assertion that the applicant's "head ... is empty, insinuating that the applicant is brainless. The "emptiness" of the applicant's head also denies his individuality and ability to think for himself. Thus, the speaker plants new seeds of insecurity and doubt in the applicant's mind—allowing the speaker to offer a solution.

Indeed, the speaker immediately claims to have just the fix and calls out to the applicant's potential wife, coaxing her out of a closet. The remedy that the speaker offers—unsurprisingly, marriage—reinforces the idea that the applicant's bachelorhood is the source of his supposed shortcomings.

This is the only moment in which the speaker addresses the applicant's potential wife, calling her "sweetie" and cajoling her out of the closet to which she has been confined. So although, on its surface, this moment acknowledges her humanity, it also exposes the disturbing extent to which she has been degraded. The consonance among hard /k/ and /t/ sounds in the speaker's address contributes to the speaker's stern, unsympathetic tone. Similarly, the three stresses that land on "come here, sweetie" magnify the force and harshness behind the command. Here is a closer look at the sonic effects at play in line 28:

Come here, sweetie, out of the closet.

Moreover, the abundance of end-stops and caesura throughout this passage creates a choppy cadence that perpetuates the speaker's terse manner of speaking.

The fact that the applicant's potential wife has been locked up casts the speaker's term of endearment in a patronizing light—more akin to how one might refer to a pet than to another human being. Thus, the speaker's pathetic attempts at niceties—see also "excuse me" in line 26—reveal an utter inability to empathize. In fact, recognizing peoples' individuality and humanity is so inconsistent with the speaker's world view, that even convincingly feigning concern for others is an impossibility. This lack of empathy supports a reading of the poem in which the speaker is meant to be a satirical stand-in for a larger social structure, such as consumer culture or paternalism.

After the applicant's potential wife emerges, the speaker asks his opinion of her—the one direct solicitation of the applicant's opinion in the speaker's monologue. However, the speaker does not allow the applicant to respond. As discussed above, the speaker does not believe the applicant is capable of forming meaningful opinions. Thus, the speaker frames the question to suggest how the applicant *should* feel about her. To do so, the speaker diminishes the humanity of the applicant's potential wife by referring to her as "that" and speaking to her as if she is a pet. Furthermore, the speaker asks the applicant to judge her solely based on her appearance. In this way, the speaker manipulates the applicant's first impression of his potential wife in attempts to make a sale.

LINES 30-35

Naked as paper ...
... talk, talk, talk.

After asking the applicant for his opinion of his potential wife, the speaker lists several of her features in an attempt to guide his attitude towards her. The speaker claims that, while she is "naked as paper to start," she will accrue value over time. The assonance among "naked" and "paper," accentuated by the matching metrical pattern of these words

(stressed-unstressed), creates a strong association between them. These sonic similarities bolster the authority behind the comparison that the speaker draws.

This initial simile objectifies the applicant's potential wife twofold—"naked" draws attention to her body and in turn, her sexuality, while "paper" suggests that she is vapid and lacks depth. The reference to nakedness recalls the speaker's earlier charge that the applicant himself is "stark naked" in line 19. In both cases, the speaker denies their individuality and inherent worth, encouraging them to be "clothed" or molded by societal ideals. Here, the speaker presents the applicant's potential wife as a blank canvas, onto which *the applicant* is encouraged to project all of his needs and desires. Of course, the speaker provides commentary on the "proper" way for the applicant to go about doing this.

Indeed, in the next line, the speaker likens his potential wife to an investment, urging the applicant to evaluate her based on her ability to bring him wealth and prosperity. The stanza break after "to start" draws attention to the comparison discussed above, while visually and structurally reflecting the idea that it is a starting point. The anaphora that structures lines 31-32 ("But in … in") creates a comparison between the value of the applicant's potential wife at various points in time. Her transformation from paper to silver to gold over a period of 50 years signals to the applicant that she accrues value only through decades of dedicated service to her husband. It also indicates that the applicant is expected to commit to her indefinitely in order to "profit" off of her development into the perfect housewife.

Unlike the surrounding lines, line 30 ("Naked as paper to start") is enjambed, which reflects the idea that this process will unfold over a number of years. The relatively long length of line 31 and its lack of caesurae, which each subsequent line feature, contribute to this effect.

Lines 32-33 are unusually iambic (unstressed-stressed) as the rhythm of this poem tends to feature multiple stressed syllables and unstressed syllables in a row:

> In fif- | ty, gold.
> A liv- | ing doll, ev | erywhere | you look.

The overarching iambic meter creates an upbeat, bouncy rhythm, reflecting the idealized, unattainable nature of the archetype of femininity that these lines describe. The end rhymes "look" and "cook" contribute to the lighthearted mood. By comparing the applicant's potential wife to a doll, the speaker suggests that an exemplary woman is one who doesn't challenge her husband intellectually, instead submitting to his ownership and control. The phrase "everywhere you look" emphasizes the speaker's argument that women should be seen rather than heard. At the same time, it implies that the applicant's potential wife will be at his beck and call—ready to serve him at all times.

In lines 34-35, anaphora ("it can") links the act of sewing with that of cooking and speaking. This creates a neat, stereotypical image of a housewife who has basic domestic skills, but tends to talk at length without saying anything of substance. Furthermore, anaphora and asyndeton work together to create a repeating stress pattern (unstressed-unstressed-stressed):

> It can sew, it can cook,
> It can talk, talk, talk.

The repetitive meter builds rhythmic momentum, while the break subsequent from the established meter gives the appeal that line 35 drones on, as the speaker insinuates women are wont to do. The consonant /k/ and /t/ sounds that appear in this passage create another form of repetition and introduce a harsh edge to this supposedly picture-perfect scene. Each form of repetition suggests that a housewife's life is repetitive and monotonous. Overall, this stanza pressures the applicant to view his wife as a simple domestic servant. Therefore, if and when he ultimately agrees to the marriage, the speaker can be sure he will "treat her right."

LINES 36-40

> *It works, there …*
> *… it, marry it.*

As the poem nears its conclusion, the speaker's efforts to pressure the applicant into marriage intensify. First, the speaker emphasizes her functionality by pointing out that she "works" and giving two final examples of the services she can provide. Each of the corresponding lines (36-38) contains asyndeton, directly linking distinct images to help prove the speaker's assertion that the applicant's potential wife is exceedingly useful.

First, the speaker equates her ability to work with there being "nothing wrong with [her]." In doing so, the speaker implies that a woman who serves her husband is performing her proper role, and any failure to do so would indicate a "malfunction." The use of language typically associated with machinery, as well as the dehumanizing pronoun "it," keeps the focus on the potential wife's utility.

As evidence that she is working order, the speaker gives examples of various "tools" she can morph into at the applicant's command. Here, asyndeton creates a direct path from the applicant's potential needs to his wife's transformation, implying cause and effect. The repeating /oul/ sound within "hole" and "poultice" reinforces their association in line 37. In addition to asyndeton, assonance, and consonance, lines 37-38 contain repetition in the form of anaphora and parallelism—i.e. "You have a … it's a … You have an … it's an." The similarity of the two sentences draws a comparison between the needs and solutions that they

describe. The two very different needs—wound care and something to look at—illustrate that the applicant's potential wife is highly adaptable.

However, while at first glance both metaphors used to describe her—a poultice and an image—appear quite different, they both reference her physicality. Poultices are soft, wet, and typically warm masses of organic material, while referring to the applicant's potential wife as "an image" reduces her to her physical appearance. Thus, as elsewhere in the poem, these comparisons emphasize the speaker's corporeality and sexuality.

The various forms of repetition in lines 37-38 also create identical stress patterns:

> You have a hole, it's a poultice.
> You have an eye, it's an image.

The metrical repetition aids their comparison, while also building rhythmic momentum that drives the reader towards the poem's finish.

The speaker goes on to tell the applicant that his potential wife is his "last resort," implying that their marriage represents the final opportunity for a good life that he will receive. This line breaks from the repeating stress pattern of the previous two lines, drawing the reader's attention:

> My boy, it's your last resort.

The unexpected double stresses that land on "my boy" and "last resort" give this line rhythmic force. As a result, the speaker's epithet for the applicant comes across as particularly harsh and patronizing. It implicitly raises doubts about the applicant's ability to make mature, reasoned decisions. The doubt that this term brings about urges the applicant to follow the recommendations of the speaker, who communicates with great certitude.

Each line that comprises the final stanza is end-stopped and bisected by a caesura, creating a consistent, choppy rhythm. However, the poem's final line contains an additional caesura, calling increased attention to the concluding sentence. For the third and final time, the speaker confronts the speaker with, "Will you marry it." However, here, the speaker repeats "marry it" twice more, so that the phrase becomes a command and a matter of fact, rather than a question. In this way, as the illusion of choice falls away, the final appeal to the applicant plainly reveals what the speaker has been up to all along—exhorting, coaxing, and begging the applicant to agree to the marriage.

SYMBOLS

PROSTHETICS AND ASSISTIVE DEVICES

Within the poem, prosthetics and other assistive devices represent a person's perceived deficiencies in a patriarchal consumerist society—that is, a society in which men have structural power over women, and in which the excessive consumption of goods (i.e., buying things) is encouraged. The speaker lists such devices to determine if the applicant is "missing" anything. This language implies incompleteness and suggests that there is something "wrong" with people who rely on assistive devices.

When the applicant answers that he does not use any of the devices listed, the speaker asks, "Then / How can we give you a thing?" Thus, it becomes clear that the speaker exploits applicants' deviations from an invented norm or masculine archetype in order to sell them products that will "fix" them.

Of course, dominant political and social structures create ideals that go beyond the physical to include mental, sexual, psychological, economic, and other traits. Therefore, the assistive devices stand in for deviations from a larger set of societal standards. The poem reveals that making people believe they are flawed pressures them to purchase items that make them more "acceptable"—makeup, clothing, a college degree, or even a spouse.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "glass eye," "false teeth," "crutch"
- **Line 4:** "brace," "hook"
- **Line 5:** "Rubber breasts," "rubber crotch"

CLOTHING AND NAKEDNESS

The speaker presents the applicant and his potential wife as blank slates, or "naked," ready to be molded by societal ideals, or "clothed." Therefore, within the poem, *clothing* can be interpreted as a performative display of identity, while *nakedness* represents the belief that people are defined only by these superficial signifiers. Indeed, the speaker repeatedly denies both the applicant and his potential wife the opportunity to express themselves, disregarding their personalities, desires, opinions, and so on.

According to the speaker, such characteristics do not figure into their roles within society. Instead, they are valuable only insofar as they conform to strict social conventions. The applicant's potential wife is "naked as paper to start" but will accrue value by spending decades serving her husband's interests. Similarly, the applicant is "stark naked" until he puts on a wedding suit, which will protect him until his death as long as he accepts its plainness and rigidity.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 19:** "stark naked"
- **Line 20:** "suit"
- **Line 23:** "It"
- **Line 25:** "it"
- **Line 30:** "Naked"

POETIC DEVICES

ANAPHORA

The anaphora that appears in this poem is concentrated in its final two stanzas, working to build anticipation and momentum as the poem's conclusion nears. All three examples of this poetic device give structure to lists of services that the speaker claims a wife would perform for the applicant. In doing so, anaphora also allows the speaker to create links between the miscellaneous purported advantages of marriage.

In lines 31-32, anaphora sets up a comparison between "twenty-five years" and "fifty" as well as a comparison between "silver" and "gold":

> But **in** twenty-five years she'll be silver,
> **In** fifty, gold.

Thus, the repetition of "in" emphasizes the potential wife's accrual of value over time, indicating that she has little *inherent* value and it will take decades of dedicated commitment to prove her merit. This insinuation also signals to the applicant that he will be rewarded based on the longevity of *his* commitment.

Anaphora appears again in lines 34-35, which list three stereotypical qualities of the 20th-century housewife—she sews, cooks, and has a tendency to drone on without saying anything of substance:

> **It can** sew, **it can** cook,
> **It can** talk, talk, talk.

Anaphora unites these three clichés, creating a simple, compact image of the ideal stereotypical housewife. Furthermore, the anaphora, aided by asyndeton, creates a repeating metrical pattern (unstressed-unstressed-**stressed**) that gains momentum before being abandoned as line 35 trails off:

> It can **sew**, it can **cook**,
> It can **talk**, **talk**, **talk**.

This break from the anticipated rhythm causes the phrase "talk, talk, talk" to come across as very elongated due to its string of three stressed syllables, instead of the expected one. As a result, this line's rhythm reflects the droning that it describes and draws attention to the potential wife's penchant to go on and on. The various forms of repetition within this sentence match the idea that she will perform the same tasks over and over again. In this way, the repetitive meter is consistent with the monotony of her expected life.

The poem's third and final example of anaphora occurs in lines 37-38, where the speaker gives examples of the various roles that the applicant's potential wife would be able to fulfill.:

> **You have a** hole, it's a poultice.
> **You have an** eye, it's an image.

She is said to become a dressing when the applicant is wounded, and an image when he desires something to gaze upon. By setting these starkly different needs side-by-side, anaphora conveys that wives are expected to shape themselves around the needs of men and keep up with their ever-changing impulses. Additionally, the anaphora creates identical sentence structures (i.e. parallelism) and meter for lines 37 and 38, reflecting the consistency with which wives are expected to submit to their husbands' needs.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 31:** "in"
- **Line 32:** "In"
- **Line 34:** "It can," "it can"
- **Line 35:** "It can"
- **Line 37:** "You have a"
- **Line 38:** "You have an"

APORIA

The speaker uses aporia throughout the poem, raising (mostly feigned) doubt that the applicant is a suitable buyer or a proper man. By playing on the applicant's insecurities and reinforcing an imbalanced power dynamic that favors the speaker, aporia helps the speaker pressure the applicant into a marriage.

The speaker expresses uncertainty most directly through rhetorical questions. For example, the speaker opens the interview by asking "are you our sort of a person?" The purpose of an interview is typically to answer that question, and it is the applicants' task to prove their worthiness. Thus, the speaker is acutely aware that he must be their "sort of a person," but the speaker raises immediate doubt as to his eligibility.

In fact, by the middle of stanza 2, the speaker has disputed his eligibility through a series of questions so sternly that the applicant begins to cry. Even then, the speaker suggests that crying hurts the applicant's case and commands him to stop. The short questions "No, no?" and "Empty?" taunt the applicant by pointing out his perceived shortcomings and demanding that he acknowledge them.

Thus, from the get-go, the speaker uses aporia to set up a favorable power dynamic in two ways. First, the applicant is made to feel unsure of himself, while the speaker projects authority and certitude. Second, by suggesting that the applicant is inadequate, the speaker is able to swoop in and sell him the perfect solution to all of his problems. This dynamic satirizes the idea that salespeople and the products they peddle have all of the answers to one's problems.

The speaker also repeatedly asks the applicant if he will marry the wife he has applied for. However, the speaker never offers the applicant the opportunity to reply. Instead, the speaker provides reasons why the applicant *should* marry, pretending doubt in order to suggest that there is only one sensible answer. In fact, when the speaker says "will you marry it for the final time," it is phrased as a command rather than a question. These moments suggest that even when people think that their subscription to societal expectations is "a choice," there are larger forces at play, manipulating and pressuring people's decision-making to serve their own interests.

While rhetorical questions are the speaker's most direct tool for raising doubt, the monologue's overall rhetoric suggests that the applicant is insufficient. For example, the speaker tells the applicant that he is "stark naked" and his "head ... is empty." In both instances, the speaker offers up marriage as the proper solution to his new alleged problems. Thus, aporia ultimately benefits the speaker, who is—at the end of the day—a salesperson, by pressuring the applicant to marry.

Where Aporia appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-10:** "First, are you our sort of a person? / Do you wear / A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch, / A brace or a hook, / Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch, / Stitches to show something's missing? No, no? Then / How can we give you a thing? / Stop crying. / Open your hand. / Empty? Empty."
- **Line 14:** "Will you marry it?"
- **Line 19:** "I notice you are stark naked."
- **Line 22:** "Will you marry it?"
- **Line 26:** "Now your head, excuse me, is empty."
- **Lines 29-29:** "Well, what do you think of / that / ?"
- **Lines 39-40:** "My boy, it's your last resort. / Will you marry it, marry it, marry it."

APOSTROPHE

Apostrophe occurs throughout the poem, as the speaker addresses the applicant, who is never given the opportunity to respond. The one-sided conversation lays bare the power dynamics at play, as the applicant's inability to respond shows that he does not have a say in the direction and outcome of the interview.

Apostrophe is a central characteristic of the dramatic monologue, a poetic mode that allows the speaker's true character to emerge through impassioned, unchecked speech. Because the speaker is attempting to rigorously vet the applicant and pressure him into a marriage, the speaker's shady salesmanship tactics are in full force. Statements like, "now your head, excuse me, is empty" reveal that the speaker is incapable of displaying genuine sensitivity. Phrases like "sweetie" and "my boy" display the speaker's tendency to patronize and belittle. The hard sell that the speaker gives the applicant in stanza 5 when convincing him that he needs a suit has a whiff of desperation. Apostrophe enables each of these moments and their revelation of unsavory character traits by offering an unfettered account of the speaker's maneuvers.

Furthermore, the pronoun "you" puts the *reader* in the place of the applicant, inviting readers to empathize with him. This allows for a fuller understanding of just how outlandish the speaker's approach is, as well as how much pressure the applicant is under. Finally, the applicant's inability to respond suggests that the speaker is actually meant to be interpreted as representative of a larger structure (i.e., consumerism and/or patriarchy) rather than an individual person. Indeed, the speaker applies immense one-sided pressure that a single person is unable to challenge meaningfully.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-40

ASYNDETON

Overall, asyndeton heightens the speaker's aggressive tone and increases pressure on the applicant by creating a ceaseless onslaught of questions and claims. The absence of conjunctions gives the impression that the speaker takes no pauses, hurling one assertion at the applicant after another. The speaker's lack of hesitation gives off an air of certitude and authority. Plus, asyndeton results in a proliferation commas, which allow clauses and list items to flow into one another. In turn, this poetic device speeds up the poem's rhythms, creating a sense of urgency that magnifies the poem's tense atmosphere. As conjunctions are almost always unstressed, asyndeton gives rise to a higher concentration of stressed syllables, keeping the speaker's cadence forceful. Here is a closer look at line 23:

> It is waterproof, shatterproof, proof

Here, asyndeton yields a higher concentration not only of stresses, but also of forms of "proof," an example of polyptoton. The momentum that builds causes the various "proofs" to pile up, creating the illusion of an overwhelming mountain of evidence—"proof," if you will—as to why marriage will crucially protect the applicant.

In line 36, asyndeton directly links his potential wife's ability to

"work" with there being "nothing wrong" with her. This equation reflects the speaker's larger attitude that as long as a wife serves her husband, she is behaving properly and fulfilling her duty. In the two subsequent lines, asyndeton creates parallelism and a repeating metrical pattern:

> You have a hole, it's a poultice.
> You have an eye, it's an image.

The parallel sentence structure juxtaposes two very different needs and solutions to suggest that the applicant's potential wife will adapt to whatever he requires at a given moment. Meanwhile, the repeating rhythm helps build momentum, driving towards the poem's conclusion. Moreover, asyndeton directly links the applicant's needs to his wife's transformation into a new "tool," implying that she is expected to define herself in relation to him.

The asyndeton that appears in the poem's second half stands in contrast to the polysyndeton of the first three stanzas, where "or's" and "and's" create long, repetitive lists. The shift to asyndeton later in the poem corresponds with a higher concentration of end-stops and shorter sentences. As the drama and vigor of the speaker's tirade intensify, the lack of conjunctions builds momentum by controlling the poem's rhythms, as laid out above.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 23-24:** "It is waterproof, shatterproof, proof / Against fire and bombs through the roof."
- **Lines 31-32:** "But in twenty-five years she'll be silver, / In fifty, gold."
- **Lines 34-35:** "It can sew, it can cook, / It can talk, talk, talk."
- **Lines 36-38:** "It works, there is nothing wrong with it. / You have a hole, it's a poultice. / You have an eye, it's an image."

CONSONANCE

Various forms of consonance make brief appearances throughout the poem. Generally speaking, high concentrations of repeating sounds create sonic interest, slowing the reader down and drawing attention to important images and ideas. The sibilance in line 6 has this effect:

> Stitches to show something's missing? No, no? Then

This line is much longer and more structurally complex than the preceding lines, requiring that the reader slow down to parse it. As a result, the short sentences that follow come across as particularly brusque. Fittingly, these lines contain the speaker's first commands to the applicant, which are blunt and confrontational.

Consonance can also link related words, subtly encouraging the reader to contemplate their relationship with one another. In stanza 3, for example, repeating /l/ sounds link all of the advantages of having a wife that the speaker describes to the word "will":

> To fill it and willing
> To bring teacups and roll away headaches
> And do whatever you tell it.
> Will you marry it?

The repetition emphasizes the speaker's question, which will reappear later in the poem. Furthermore consonance ties the pleasant conveniences that the speaker lists to marriage, reminding the applicant that his future happiness hinges on this decision.

However, the main function of consonance in this poem is to set the mood for various lines of questioning. This effect can be observed from its very first lines, which feature /r/ and /k/ sounds heavily:

> First, are you our sort of a person?
> Do you wear
> A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch,
> A brace or a hook,
> Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch,

The repeating, guttural /r/ sounds and sharp /k/ sounds recall growling and snapping, indicating that the speaker is aggressive, intimidating, and somewhat antagonistic.

Something similar is achieved by the consonance in lines 18-21. These lines are filled with sibilance—an effect often associated with hissing and deception (this effect is further enhanced by the /f/ consonance, which is often characterized as sibilance as well). This is tied in with more sharp /k/and /t/ sounds, as well as the bold and resonant /b/ sound:

> We make new stock from the salt.
> I notice you are stark naked.
> How about this suit——
> Black and stiff, but not a bad fit.

Again, these lines feel at once teasing and biting, aggressive and antagonistic. The speaker seems to be taunting the applicant.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "First," "are," "our," "sort," "person"
- **Line 2:** "wear"
- **Line 3:** "or," "crutch"
- **Line 4:** "brace or," "hook"
- **Line 5:** "Rubber breasts or," "rubber," "crotch"

- **Line 6:** "Stitches to," "something's missing"
- **Line 10:** "Here," "hand"
- **Line 11:** "fill," "willing"
- **Line 12:** "bring," "roll"
- **Line 13:** "tell"
- **Line 14:** "Will"
- **Line 18:** "make," "stock," "salt"
- **Line 19:** "notice," "stark naked"
- **Line 20:** "this," "suit"
- **Line 21:** "Black," "stiff," "but," "bad," "fit"
- **Line 23:** "waterproof," "shatterproof," "proof"
- **Line 24:** "fire," "bombs," "roof"
- **Line 25:** "Believe," "bury"
- **Line 28:** "Come," "closet"
- **Line 32:** "gold"
- **Line 33:** "living," "doll," "look"
- **Line 34:** "can," "can cook"
- **Line 35:** "can talk, talk, talk"

END-STOPPED LINE

This poem contains a high proportion of end-stopped lines, particularly in its second half. In general, the end-stops create abrupt pauses that contribute to a brusque mood, especially because the average line in this poem is quite short. The punctuation at the end of line 1, for example, creates a concise, straightforward question that establishes the speaker's authority. The end stops in lines 7-9 similarly feel quite brusque and commanding, almost as if the speaker is barking orders at a child:

> How can we give you a thing?
> Stop crying.
> Open your hand.

Almost every line is end-stopped beginning in stanza 4. The rapid sequence of short sentences reflects the increasingly authoritative and pushy tenor of the speaker's monologue. Take, for example, lines 18-20:

> We make new stock from the salt.
> I notice you are stark naked.
> How about this suit——

Here, the speaker follows up two plain, direct statements of fact with what might, in another context, be a question. However, the succinctness of the line, its termination in a dash rather than a question mark, and the repetition of short, straightforward sentences that surround it cause this line to read like a certainty—something like, "This is a great suit."

From here, end-stops permeate the remainder of the poem, creating a string of concise, commanding sentences that drive towards the poem's conclusion. In the final stanza, caesurae and end punctuation work in tandem to create a repetitive rhythm. The lines are similar in length and a comma bisects each, while periods contain one compact sentence within each line. The consistent punctuation gives rise to a pattern of pauses, which the reader comes to anticipate. Therefore, the multiple caesurae within the poem's final line disrupt its flow, drawing the reader's attention. Furthermore, because it is preceded by a lengthy chain of succinct, authoritative statements, the final line reads like a command rather than a question. In this way, it openly exposes the speaker's true intentions throughout the interview—to demand that the applicant purchases a wife.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "person?"
- **Line 3:** "crutch,"
- **Line 4:** "hook,"
- **Line 5:** "crotch,"
- **Line 7:** "thing?"
- **Line 8:** "crying."
- **Line 9:** "hand."
- **Line 13:** "it."
- **Line 14:** "it?"
- **Line 17:** "sorrow."
- **Line 18:** "salt."
- **Line 19:** "naked."
- **Line 20:** "suit——"
- **Line 21:** "fit."
- **Line 22:** "it?"
- **Line 24:** "roof."
- **Line 25:** "it."
- **Line 26:** "empty."
- **Line 27:** "that."
- **Line 28:** "closet."
- **Lines 29-29:** "that / ?"
- **Line 31:** "silver,"
- **Line 32:** "gold."
- **Line 33:** "look."
- **Line 34:** "cook,"
- **Line 35:** "talk."
- **Line 36:** "it."
- **Line 37:** "poultice."
- **Line 38:** "image."
- **Line 39:** "resort."
- **Line 40:** "it."

METAPHOR

The speaker uses numerous metaphors to reference the applicant's potential wife throughout the poem. These comparisons dehumanize her by suggesting that she is an object. For example, she is likened to "a living doll," which insinuates that she is attractive and agreeable, but unable to think for herself and therefore meant to be owned. Such

comparisons deny her humanity and individuality, suggesting that she has little inherent value and a limited purpose.

The objectification of the applicant's potential wife is a larger trend within the monologue. While not a metaphor, the speaker also calls her "a hand," an example of synecdoche that reduces her to a body and emphasizes her sexuality. Furthermore, the speaker refers to her as "it" and "that" repeatedly. The speaker also says that she is "naked as paper," a simile that portrays her as vapid and uninteresting.

Metaphors also help the speaker create a generic, depersonalized version of the applicant's potential wife so that she appears to fit all of his needs. The speaker compares her to as a soft, soothing remedy for his wounds, an attractive picture for him to ogle, and currency—in the form of precious metals no less. In many ways, these reductive, superficial portrayals of the potential wife represent the female archetype in the speaker's mind—she lacks depth and intelligence, serves the needs of men, and is easy on the eyes. In essence, the metaphors function to reveal how the speaker—and by extension society—views women.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 18:** "We make new stock from the salt"
- **Line 31:** "she'll be silver"
- **Line 32:** "gold"
- **Line 33:** "A living doll"
- **Line 37:** "it's a poultice"
- **Line 38:** "it's an image"

REPETITION

Repetition appears in many forms throughout the poem and serves a variety of functions. The use of anaphora and consonance are explored in detail in their own entries, while the below discussion focuses on other forms of repetition, as well as the broader impact of repetition within the poem.

Sometimes repetition simply adds sonic interest to emphasize an important image or idea. For example, in line 5, the diacope of "rubber" adds force to the speaker's initial line of questioning and creates an abundance of /r/ sounds, which have a growling effect. Other times, repetition allows the text's rhythm to reflect its meaning, as in "talk, talk, talk," where epizeuxis causes line 35 to drone on repetitively, as the speaker claims women do. Furthermore, in lines 9-10 the speaker offers the applicant a hand directly after calling attention to the emptiness of the applicant's own hand, creating diacope. These lines also contain repeating /h/ sounds, while "open your hand" and "here is a hand" have the same meter. The layers of repetition reinforce the notion that their hands are perfectly matched for one another.

The speaker uses epizeuxis twice to taunt the applicant, feigning doubt in order to ask the applicant to confirm certain information about himself. In line 6, the speaker asks "No, no?," drawing attention to the applicant's lack of "something missing." The speaker doesn't bother to wait for an answer and instead suggests that this quality interferes with his eligibility to buy a wife. A similar effect occurs a few lines later when the speaker looks at the applicant's outstretched hand and remarks "Empty? Empty." The repetition makes clear that the speaker alone frames and responds to the questions raised, with no opportunity for the applicant to respond. In both cases, the speaker points out the applicant's perceived shortcomings and uses aporia to force him to confront them.

The speaker asks the applicant, "Will you marry it?" several times over the course of the poem. Instead of waiting for a response, the speaker lists off various reasons why the applicant *should* get married—she will soothe him when he's not feeling well and insulate him from violent attacks. The final time that this question is invoked, the speaker repeats "marry it" twice more, so that the question becomes a forceful statement or command. Thus, the repetition of this question throughout the poem exemplifies the speaker's salesmanship tactics—that is, framing questions as facts to give the illusion of choice while nudging the applicant to accept the only "proper" answer.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "Rubber," "rubber"
- **Line 6:** "No," "no"
- **Line 9:** "hand"
- **Line 10:** "Empty," "Empty," "hand"
- **Line 14:** "Will you marry it"
- **Line 22:** "Will you marry it"
- **Line 23:** "waterproof," "shatterproof," "proof"
- **Line 35:** "talk," "talk," "talk"
- **Line 40:** "Will you marry it," "marry it," "marry it"

ASSONANCE

In general, assonance draws attention to keywords throughout the poem. And the effects of assonance are even more pronounced when it is used to accentuate the poem's meter, as in line 21:

> Black and stiff but not a bad fit.

Here, assonant sounds (the short /a/ and short /i/ sounds) occur within stressed syllables ("black," "stiff," "bad," "fit"), exaggerating the poem's rhythm in this moment. And assonance also works with consonance to underscore to certain words. Notice that assonant short /a/ sounds are paired with consonant /b/ sounds (as in "black" and "bad"), while assonant short /i/ sounds are paired with consonant /f/ and /t/ sounds (as in "stiff" and "fit"). The pieces of the line itself seem to "fit" together, reflecting the quality of the suit being described. In order words, this stiff suit reflects all of society's

constricting expectations of the applicant, and the line itself appropriately feels rather artificial, its rhymes carefully constructed rather than natural and free-flowing.

A similar effect occurs in line 30, where two stresses land on syllables that contain long /a/ sounds:

> Naked as paper to start.

Furthermore, "naked" and "paper" are both trochaic (stressed-unstressed). By emphasizing the sonic similarities between these two words, assonance strengthens the comparison that the speaker draws between them—that is, the *sounds* of the line draw attention to the description of the wife as a rather flimsy blank slate.

Chains of similar sounds can also provide a sense of continuity within lines that are rhythmically all over the place. For example, consonant long /oh/ and short /i/ sounds unify line 6 (which contains fragments of three sentences as well as three caesurae):

> Stitches to show something's missing? No, no? Then

Again, assonance works with consonance, particularly among /n/ and /s/ sounds, aiding the line's flow despite all the pauses created by the caesurae.

Finally, assonant sounds echo throughout a few longer sections of the poem, giving them a musical quality that creates a lighthearted mood. This sonic harmony can either complement a pleasant, carefree atmosphere or provide contrast within a sinister atmosphere. Lines 11-18 are an example of the former effect, as they describe various kindhearted measures that the applicant's potential wife will take to benefit him. Here is a closer look at lines 11-13:

> To fill it and willing
> To bring teacups and roll away headaches
> And do whatever you tell it.

However, shortly thereafter in stanza 5, repetitive sounds yield a musicality that is at odds with its graphic imagery, as in lines 24-25:

> Against fire and bombs through the roof.
> Believe me, they'll bury you in it.

As a result, the speaker comes across as insensitive—unbothered by violence and listing features of the suit as if they are a jovial marketing jingle. Thus, in each instance and as a whole, assonance draws attention to certain words, manipulating the poem's mood and adding depth to its meaning.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "Stitches," "show," "something's," "missing," "No, no"
- **Line 7:** "give," "thing"
- **Line 11:** "fill it," "willing"
- **Line 12:** "bring," "away headaches"
- **Line 13:** "do," "whatever," "you," "tell," "it"
- **Line 16:** "thumb shut"
- **Line 17:** "dissolve," "sorrow"
- **Line 18:** "stock," "salt"
- **Line 21:** "Black," "stiff," "bad," "fit"
- **Line 22:** "Will," "it"
- **Line 23:** "waterproof," "shatterproof," "proof"
- **Line 24:** "through," "roof"
- **Line 25:** "Believe me," "you," "in it"
- **Line 30:** "Naked," "paper"
- **Line 33:** "look"
- **Line 34:** "cook"
- **Line 39:** "boy," "your," "resort"

ENJAMBMENT

While most of its lines are end-stopped, the poem's first half contains many examples of enjambment. In lines 10-13, for example, enjambment allows the speaker's list of various services that the applicant's potential wife is expected to provide to sprawl out over four lines and two stanzas:

> Here is a hand
> To fill it and willing
> To bring teacups and roll away headaches
> And do whatever you tell it.

As a result, the list appears very long. Such an illusion benefits the speaker, who seems to provide a mountain of evidence as to why the applicant should follow the path laid out.

Fittingly, enjambment and asyndeton later create a pile-up of various forms of "proof" within line 23:

> It is waterproof, shatterproof, proof
> Against fire and bombs through the roof.

This line describes several positive features of the suit that the speaker offers the applicant. The enjambment that lands on "proof" calls further attention to the repeated word twofold—first, it causes "proof" to linger at the end of line 23, and second, it creates an end rhyme with "roof" in the following line. Thus, the suit's various resistances—testimonies to its value—appear to accumulate within a very concentrated space, supporting the speaker's argument that the applicant should commit to it.

Furthermore, by exaggerating the appearance of long, drawn-

out sentences, enjambment can cause short, end-stopped lines to come across as severely abrupt. For example, because of enjambment, line 6 appears to linger out in space:

> Stitches to show something's missing? No, no? Then

This line contains fragments of three different sentences, which slows the reader down due to its structural complexity. Plus, the list of perceived deficiencies that ends in line 6 is very lengthy. Therefore, enjambment magnifies the drawn-out nature of line 6, which makes the following line—a direct, confrontational question—hit even harder:

> Stitches to show something's missing? No, no? Then
> How can we give you a thing?

The impact that enjambment places behind this curt question helps the reader understand why the applicant begins to cry—he is presumably feeling attacked and overwhelmed. Similarly, enjambment allows one sentence to occupy lines 15-17 across two stanzas, which makes the five short, end-stopped lines that follow appear very harsh and abrupt:

> It is guaranteed
> To thumb shut your eyes at the end
> And dissolve of sorrow.

Finally, enjambment can also enable the text's structure to mirror the images it describes. For example, the break that occurs after line 30 is both enjambed *and* marks a stanza break:

> Naked as paper to start
> But in twenty five years she'll be silver

As a result, the reader's eyes drift down the page, mirroring the passage of time that the lines discuss.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "wear / A"
- **Lines 6-7:** "Then / How"
- **Lines 10-11:** "hand / To"
- **Lines 11-12:** "willing / To"
- **Lines 12-13:** "headaches / And"
- **Lines 15-16:** "guaranteed / To"
- **Lines 16-17:** "end / And"
- **Lines 23-24:** "proof / Against"
- **Lines 30-31:** "start / But"

VOCABULARY

Stock (Line 18) - A broth created by simmering animal or plant material in water to impart flavor. Stocks serve as the base for many dishes and typically use the remnants of foods prepared for other purposes—think prawn shells, vegetable peels, and bones with bits of unused flesh. The term insinuates that women are little more than bodies that should be "recycled" to maximize their value. The speaker could be referring to widows remarrying, or mothers giving birth to children who are ultimately subject to the same systemic courting rituals as their parents. This term is also associated with merchandise (i.e. "we have it in stock") and corporate capital (i.e. "stock prices are rising").

Stark (Line 19) - In this context, "stark" indicates that the applicant is *completely* bare. The term usually denotes severe sharpness or contrast.

The ticket (Line 27) - An outdated idiom meaning "the perfectly suitable thing" or precisely what is needed.

Living doll (Line 33) - "Living Doll" is a song by Cliff Richard and the Shadows that describes a man's relationship with his "crying, walking, sleeping, talking" doll. It references her owner's "roaming eye" and his intention to "lock her up in a trunk." The demeaning phrase is meant to describe a woman who is beautiful and agreeable but unserious and unintelligent. "Living Doll" was the UK's best-selling single in 1959, so it is reasonable to assume that Plath, who spent a great deal of time in the UK, was familiar with the song and that this is an allusion to it.

Poultice (Line 37) - A dressing applied to ease inflammation and soreness. Poultices are soft, damp, and usually made of natural materials like herbs and clay. The speaker uses this medical term in attempts to convince the applicant that his potential wife can "cure" whatever ills he may have. By comparing her to a poultice, the speaker suggests that the applicant's potential wife is little more than a body (i.e. a soft mass of organic material) whose sole role is to assist her husband.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

This poem is broken up into eight cinquains/quintains, or stanzas containing five lines each. The length and number of stressed syllables vary greatly from one line to the next. Furthermore, stanza breaks almost always occur in the middle of sentences, creating unnatural divisions. The resulting tension between the irregularity of the poem's lines and the forced uniformity of its stanzas reflects the poem's commentary on conformity. More specifically, like the poem's lines, people are highly unique but feel pressure to present themselves in an orderly, socially acceptable way. Moreover, people are often divided into groups—such as "male" and "female"—that determine how they are expected to behave.

Overall, the poem's lines are very short, contributing to the terseness of the speaker's tone. Sometimes the abrupt line and stanza breaks visually and rhythmically reflect the corresponding text. For example, the speaker's first commands to the applicant—"Stop crying" and "Open your hand"—come across as especially blunt due to the relatively long length of the two preceding lines. The stanza break after "Naked as paper to start" causes the reader's gaze to drift down the page, mimicking the passage of time described in the sentence that spans stanzas 6 and 7.

METER

This poem does not follow a specific pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables, known as meter. It is instead written in free verse.

That said, this poem does contain a high concentration of stressed syllables, which are more drawn out, slowing the poem's cadence. Without so many stressed syllables, the rapid-fire nature of the speaker's questioning could become overwhelming and lead the reader to blow past important images and ideas. Furthermore, this poem does not contain many iambic or trochaic moments, in which syllables alternate between stressed and unstressed, creating a bouncy rhythm. Such a jaunty cadence would be out of step with the poem's aggressive mood. The poem's most iambic moment occurs in lines 32-33, which fittingly describe a perfectly domesticated woman:

> In fifty, gold.
> A living doll, everywhere you look.

The rhythm throughout the rest of the poem is very dynamic, gaining speed through short syllables and rhythmic force through long syllables, which work together to build momentum. Furthermore, there are often multiple stressed or unstressed syllables in a row, which creates greater contrast between the two, as in line 1:

> First, are you our sort of person?

Elsewhere, repetitive language creates repetitive metrical patterns, building anticipation. A list that uses anaphora has this effect in lines 34-35:

> It can sew, it can cook,
> It can talk, talk, talk

The two stressed syllables that break the above passage's anapestic rhythm make the line appear to drone on, as the speaker insinuates women do.

RHYME SCHEME

The rhymes that appear in this poem are relatively infrequent and unsystematic, following no set rhyme scheme. Rather, the poem uses rhyme to subtly link images and ideas, draw attention to important moments, and create sonic interest. Consonance has the latter effect in stanzas 1 and 4, creating the near-rhymes "crutch" with "crotch" and "stock" with "stark." The strings of rhymes in stanza 3—"fill" with "will" and "willing" as well as "do" with "you" and"you"—mimic the speaker's claim that the hand of the applicant's potential wife is the perfect match for his own empty palm. The slant rhyme between "new" and "suit" in stanza 4 reflects the suit's imperfect fit on the applicant.

However, each line of the following stanza contains perfect end rhymes, in addition to the internal rhyme between "marry" and "bury."

> Black and stiff, but not a bad fit.
> Will you marry it?
> It is waterproof, shatterproof, proof
> Against fire and bombs through the roof.
> Believe me, they'll bury you in it.

Here, the speaker insists that it is in the applicant's best interest to commit to the suit, pushing him to believe that it fits well enough. Furthermore, the playful use of rhyme indicates that the speaker is unmoved by the death and violence this stanza describes.

SPEAKER

Essentially no background information is revealed about the speaker over the course of this poem. The speaker's gender, age, and exact occupation remain a mystery. However, the speaker appears to be an executive of some sort, so it would be safe to assume that the speaker is an affluent adult.

"The Applicant" is an example of a dramatic monologue, or a poem whose speaker addresses someone (or something) who cannot respond. Dramatic monologues are known for their ability to reveal a speaker's true character without the speaker's own realization. Throughout this poem, the speaker is forceful and insistent—hell-bent on rigorously vetting the applicant and coercing him into buying a wife. The speaker also proves to be self-interested, disregarding the applicant's individual needs and opinions by giving him no opportunity to respond.

Due to an overarching lack of empathy and dearth of biographical information, the speaker hardly seems human and is more likely a satirical stand-in for something else. Indeed, the speaker openly represents a larger organization—one that puts immense pressure on people to conform to narrow gender roles and buy, buy, buy. In this way, the speaker can be interpreted as the embodiment of "the marketplace" in a

consumerist, patriarchal society—that is, a society that structurally privileges men over women and encourages the excessive purchase and consumption of goods.

Much of the speaker's language is consistent with this interpretation. For example, the speaker refers to the applicant's potential wife as an investment in stanza 7, tells the applicant to "stop crying" and act like a man in line 8, and is incapable of engaging in a back-and-forth exchange, which would require a degree of self-criticality and recognition of its interlocutor's humanity. The most consistent and compelling evidence that points to this interpretation, however, is the speaker's loyalty only to the "bottom line."

SETTING

This poem's setting is so ambiguous that it almost appears to take place in a vacuum. Aside from a brief reference to a closet in line 28, the poem is devoid of sensory details—sounds, sights, smells—that would point to its setting, providing depth and realism. However, as the poem is essentially the transcript of a one-sided interview, it is easy to imagine that it takes place in a generic office. As most people have interviewed for a job at one point or another, the shallow setting invites readers to fill in its details themselves. The ordinariness and universality of the presumable setting allow the reader to empathize with the applicant, which is consistent with the poem's message that *all* people come under pressure to conform.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

In addition to poetry, Plath wrote short stories, a novel, and even a lighthearted children's book during her lifetime. The posthumous publication of *Ariel* led to a dramatic uptick in Plath's popularity, which was formerly limited to poetry circles. It is considered a landmark work largely because of its groundbreaking voice—one that is proud, aggressive, impolite, and all-knowing, but also pointedly female. "Lady Lazarus" is one iconic example of this voice.

Plath famously used her personal experiences—complicated personal relationships, struggles with mental health, ambivalence about motherhood—to explore larger tensions within society. Rather than present life's horrors as subtle and insidious, Plath does away with pleasantries and coded language, instead holding up a mirror to the brutal world as it really is. She often wrote about the social restrictions that people—particularly women—come up against. The protagonist of her novel, *The Bell Jar*, is a young woman who searches for an identity beyond the entrenched expectations of femininity.

The highly autobiographical nature of Plath's work was radical at the time and helped to usher in the confessional mode, a poetic style characterized by the candid, graphic exploration of poets' personal experiences. The term "confessional poetry" was first used to describe the work of Robert Lowell ("For the Union Dead"), who mentored Plath as well as Anne Sexton ("The Kiss"). John Berryman ("Dream Song 14"), Randall Jarrell ("90 North"), and W. D. Snodgrass (" The Poet Ridiculed by Hysterical Academics") are also closely associated with the emergence of the confessional mode. Confessional poets tended to use plain speech, refer directly to real people, and dispense with flowery euphemisms used to discuss unsavory subjects in a traditionally "poetic" manner. While the confessional poetry movement trailed off in the 1970s, its preoccupations, stylistic elements, and techniques have informed countless poets since. Pulitzer Prize-winner Sharon Olds ("Satan Says") is one oft-cited example.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Plath wrote "The Applicant" during a period of intense productivity during the weeks and months leading up to her death by suicide in February 1963, when she was only 30 years old. The poems she wrote during this time ultimately comprised her posthumous collection *Ariel*, first published in 1965. However, "The Applicant" originally appeared in *The London Magazine* shortly before her death. Plath had a fraught relationship with her husband, poet Ted Hughes ("Hawk Roosting"), who was known to batter her. As a result of his infidelity, the two separated in 1962, leaving Plath to look after two small children. Plath's poems are known for being radically autobiographical, and *Ariel* often explores motherhood, marriage, and the role of women in society. The violence and obsession with death that characterize much of Plath's work (and creep into "The Applicant") can be traced back to personal experiences, such as Plath's suicide attempts and the horrors she witnessed as a child growing up during the Second World War, which spanned 1939 to 1945.

In the wake of World War II, men returned home and reentered the workforce, causing a restoration of traditional gender roles, wherein men were expected to be breadwinners and women were expected to be housewives. The Baby Boom was in full force from the war's conclusion in 1945 through the mid-sixties. The onset of the Cold War pitted democracy against communism, and identifying with free-market capitalism—a foil for communist economic ideology—was encouraged amongst Americans. Plus, with restrictive rationing lifted, men and women alike were eager to buy. The explosion of "new media" including radio and television caused a sudden increase in advertising, which targeted housewives and encouraged excessive consumption.

Plath satirizes these movements in American society, using the speaker of "The Applicant" as a hyperbolic embodiment of consumerism and patriarchy to show how far-reaching and

sinister their influence truly is.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Sylvia Plath Reads "The Applicant" — Listen to the author read the poem aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DQySAjflgnA)
- "1940s, Cold War and Consumerism" — An overview of the explosion of advertising and the "new media" in post-war America from Ad Age. (https://adage.com/article/75-years-of-ideas/1940s-war-cold-war-consumerism/102702)
- Sylvia Plath's Biography — A detailed look at the author's life and work, including links to her poems and other related resources from Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/sylvia-plath)
- A Brief Guide to Confessional Poetry — A concise account confessional poetry's emergence, including an explanation of what makes a poem "confessional." (https://poets.org/text/brief-guide-confessional-poetry)
- 50 Years of Ariel — A 21-minute podcast episode in which writers examine the legacy of Plath's book Ariel, the collection in which "The Applicant" appears. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/podcasts/89210/50-years-of-ariel)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER SYLVIA PLATH POEMS

- Daddy
- Fever 103°
- Lady Lazarus
- Mad Girl's Love Song
- The Arrival of the Bee Box

HOW TO CITE

MLA

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CHICAGO MANUAL

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