

The Dolphins



SUMMARY

The poem is spoken in the voice of a dolphin, or a group of dolphins, living in captivity. This voice says that whatever environment you're swimming or dancing in becomes your entire world, and that's all there is to it. The dolphins might be living in water, but they're still trapped. They can't breathe outside of this pool. The speaker refers to an ambiguous "other" that mirrors them and shapes their thoughts, by which they might mean other dolphins in this pool, whose movements mirror and influence each other; alternatively, this "other" refers to the ocean (as in, the dolphins' "other" world, which they keep thinking of). There's a man outside the pool and rings made for jumping through. There is also a pervasive feeling that some grave wrong has been committed.

There's nothing honest about this environment, nor has any reason been given as to why the dolphins have been put in this situation. They used to be fortunate to live freely in the ocean, and now they're not. They swam around their new environment for a few days before starting to make sense of it. Their surroundings never changed. They never change, and the same man always stands above them.

The dolphins aren't fortunate anymore because the pool is too shallow to dream in. Another dolphin (or, perhaps, the first dolphin's reflection) understands this and lovingly mirrors the speaker. The dolphins glimpse their silver reflections darting past, the sight of which reminds them of some other place. They are expected to perform tricks like holding up a colorful ball until the man leaves.

They can't see the moon anymore. They swim around the same old, monotonous paths, like a record on a turntable where the needle is stuck in a single groove that plays only a single note. Sad music always emanates from the other's heart, which makes the speaker's own heart harden. There's a synthetic toy. They've lost all hope. The dolphins descend to the bottom of the pool until they hear the whistle signaling them to perform. The man is still there, and the dolphins know that they won't make it out of this place alive.

reality of life inside a cage. The dolphins swim "circle[s]" around the same limited space day in and day out, jumping through "hoops" and "balanc[ing]" a "ball" for a "man" who's always hovering above. The poem concludes with the dolphins stating that "There is no hope" inside this unchanging, claustrophobic world, suggesting that confinement has robbed them of everything that makes life worth living. Although the poem is specifically describing the lives of aquarium dolphins, its concerns are broadly applicable to confinement and exploitation of any kind, suggesting that the removal of freedom and choice is soul-crushing and cruel.

The dolphins have been forced to live inside a tank in order to entertain human audiences, leaving the freedom of the ocean behind. Now, they "are no longer blessed, for the world / will not deepen to dream in." In other words, without the dark depths of the ocean, the dolphins have nothing to look forward to, discover, or imagine. "World is what you swim in," the dolphins say, and confinement has made their world frightfully small.

Indeed, it's clear the dolphins' lives inside this tank are monotonous and depressing. Their environment never changes, and they "circle" the same "well-worn grooves" over and over. Their days consist of jumping through "hoops" and balancing "a coloured ball" for a trainer. That this man is always "above" them reflects his complete power over their lives; they have to please him in order to earn food, presumably, and also because this is the only stimulation they get; dolphins are known for being one of the most intelligent species on earth, so they're undoubtedly deeply bored.

There is no "moon" in this artificial environment, signaling their complete separation from the natural world to which they belong. And while there are multiple dolphins in the tank, their companionship isn't exactly comforting; they only reflect their own suffering back to one another.

The dolphin's lack of freedom results in a profound loss of hope and an overwhelming sense of despair. They say, "There is a plastic toy. There is no hope." This highlights the brutality of replacing the endless intrigues of the ocean with cheap distractions. Wild dolphins travel widely in vast schools, playing and exploring and navigating danger and the hunt for food and mates. These captive dolphins have only "the limits of this pool" and the man's "whistle" telling them when and where to move. Their lives contain no mystery or possibility, and they understand that they "will die here."

The poem's devastating portrayal of captivity ultimately reflects the cruelty of confinement, oppression, and exploitation in general, suggesting that no living creature ought to be denied control over their bodies and lives.



THEMES



CONFINEMENT, EXPLOITATION, AND DESPAIR

"The Dolphins" critiques the exploitation of wild animals for human entertainment. Told from the perspective of dolphins living in captivity, the poem depicts the depressing

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-6
- Lines 10-12
- Lines 13-14
- Lines 17-18
- Lines 19-24

**HUMANITY VS. NATURE**

In addition to commenting on the cruelty of captivity and the necessity of freedom, "The Dolphins" also presents the natural world as something worthy of deep respect and admiration. Humanity, the poem illustrates, often fails to treat nature with the reverence it deserves.

The poem presents the dolphins of the title as intelligent, emotional creatures forced to endure horrible mistreatment for human beings' entertainment. In anthropomorphizing the dolphins, the poem pushes readers to identify with them—to see them as more than some unthinking, unfeeling toys. These dolphins are thoughtful, emotional creatures, just like people.

They experience "guilt," "loss" of "hope," and "love" for one another. They look for "truth" and "explanations" for the sudden shrinking of their world, suggesting that they understand what has been taken from them. They have "memor[ies]" of the vast seas they once swam through, and of the other dolphins they once swam alongside. They miss the "moon" and they conceive of the future, understanding that they "will die" in this restricted place. In other words, humans aren't the only beings with inner worlds, desires, sadness, and so on. People aren't as separate from—or superior to—other creatures as they may like to think.

That the dolphins were "blessed" before they were brought to the aquarium further implies that the natural world is harmonious, beautiful, and worthy of preservation. The dolphin says that "World is what you swim in, or dance, it is simple." This highlights the hubris of people thinking they can recreate the splendor of nature in manmade pools. Humanity tries to subdue, make use of, or mimic the natural world rather than just existing in it in the "simple" way that animals do. "The Dolphins" condemns humans' short-sighted, selfish desire to dominate and control their environments, suggesting that nature should be revered and protected.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 5-6
- Lines 7-14
- Lines 19-24

**LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS****LINES 1-3**

*World is what ...
... breathe for long.*

"The Dolphins" is told from the perspective of dolphins living in captivity. The speaker alternatives between what sounds like the individual voice of one dolphin and a collective voice for all of the dolphins living in this pool.

This voice begins the poem by pointing out that your "world" is the place where you "swim" or "dance." In other words, the environment you're in creates your reality. Notice that the speaker doesn't say "**the** world," perhaps hinting at the pure, "simple" way that dolphins experience things.

The mention of dancing, meanwhile, implies that these dolphins, like human beings, are capable of joy and play. This makes the following line more devastating, as it reveals that these emotional creatures feel trapped by their captivity. They might be in their "element," but they're "not free."

The word "element" here is a [pun](#): on one level, it refers to the fact that the dolphins are in the water, one of the four classical "elements" of matter (earth, air, water, and fire). But to be "in one's element" also means to be thriving in one's conditions—which is clearly not the case for these dolphins. Their "world" has drastically shrunk now that they're confined to an extremely limited space from which they can't escape. The [parallelism](#) of "**We are** in our element" and "**we are** not free" underscores the cruel [irony](#) of the dolphins' situation: they need water to survive, but the water of this manmade habitat has become their prison.

These lines, like the rest of the poem, are written in [free verse](#). The lack of a regular [meter](#) or [rhyme scheme](#) makes it sound more like readers are right there with the dolphins in the moment, hearing their deepest, unfiltered thoughts. Note, too, that these opening lines each end with a firm [end-stop](#). The poem immediately sounds straightforward and to the point, as though the dolphins fully understand the dismal reality of their situation.

LINES 4-6

*The other has ...
... constant flowing guilt.*

The speaker mentions an "other," which might refer to another dolphin in the pool. [Anaphora](#) (the [repetition](#) of "The other") and general [parallelism](#) ("The other [...] my [...]") emphasize that the speaker isn't alone; they have a companion whose motions through the water affect the way they think:

The other has my shape. The other's movement forms my thoughts. And also mine.

The phrase "And also mine" might be the speaker saying that their own movement "forms" the "other's" thoughts. Alternatively, this phrase belongs to a *different* dolphin piping into the conversation. It's purposefully ambiguous, emphasizing the fluid connection between these animals. (It's also possible that the "other" refers to the dolphins' other *world*—that is, the ocean. Perhaps the dolphins keep returning to their memories of the ocean, whose "movements" once dictated the course of their lives.)

The speaker then reveals more detail about the dolphins' current environment: outside the pool is a man and "hoops." The dolphins are likely in a marine mammal park of some sort (such as Sea World), where they're trained to perform tricks—like jumping through hoops—for human audiences. The dolphins sense a "constant flowing guilt," though it's not clear where this comes from; perhaps the man feels bad for having to make them perform, or perhaps the dolphins themselves feel guilty for acquiescing. What's clear, yet again, is that these are deeply emotional creatures capable of complex feelings.

The anaphora of "There is a" evokes the monotony of the dolphins' captive life. Notice, too, the use of [parataxis](#) (all those short, blunt sentences) and frequent [caesurae](#) in these lines:

The other has my shape. The other's movement forms my thoughts. And also mine. There is a man and there are hoops. There is a constant flowing guilt.

The dolphins are clearly emotional creatures, but their voice comes across as flat and dull. This suggests how deeply unhappy they are and also hints that they've lost all hope of anything changing.

LINES 7-12

*We have found ...
... is the man.*

The poem's speaker now uses the plural pronoun "we," seeming to represent a collective voice for all of the dolphins in this pool. They say that there's "no truth in these waters," alluding to the fact that this is a manmade pool (which feels like a fake, empty home compared to the ocean). The lack of "truth" also suggests that captivity has stripped the dolphins' lives of authenticity and meaning.

Adding insult to injury, the dolphins have been given "no explanations" as to why this has happened to them. These lines and the following imply that the dolphins were not born in this manmade environment but rather were taken from their natural habitat. The [repetition](#) in line 9 emphasizes the stark contrast between the dolphins' previous lives in the ocean and their lives now:

We were blessed and now we are not blessed.

The word "blessed" makes it sound as though they've fallen from grace or are being punished, but they don't know why.

The next lines describe what it was like when the dolphins first came to this pool. It only took them a few days to understand the limits of this artificial world. The intense [diacope](#) in lines 10-12 evokes the dolphins' boredom and frustration upon realizing that there's nowhere for them to go:

After traveling such space for days we began to translate. It was the same space. It is the same space always and above it is the man.

The "sameness" of the language mirrors the sameness of this "space"—this enclosed pool that never changes no matter how much the dolphins swim; they can only go in circles.

These lines are also filled with sonic devices, the repetitive sounds of the poem further evoking the unchanging monotony of the dolphins' environment. There's [alliteration](#) ("traveling," "translate," "such space," "same space"), [sibilance](#) ("space always"), and [assonance](#) ("space for days," "translate," "same space always"). Altogether, the flurry of repeated sounds and words conveys the suffocating smallness of the dolphins' home.

The continued use of short, blunt phrases and frequent [caesurae](#) also ensures that the poem's [tone](#) remains flat and disappointed. The dolphins seem resigned to their life under the relentless control of "the man" who presides over every minute of their days. That "the man" is always "above" the pool might further [symbolize](#) humanity's desire to dominate the natural world.

LINES 13-18

*And now we ...
... man has disappeared.*

The speaker repeats that they "are no longer blessed," this time explaining that "the world / will not deepen to dream in." Basically, the speaker is saying that their tank is too small for them to have anything to look forward to or aspire to; the pool is too shallow for real beauty and mystery. Captivity robs the dolphins of the vast possibilities and delights of the ocean. Note, too, how "deepen" and "dream in" form a subtle [internal rhyme](#), emphasizing the importance of having a deep, vast world in which to "dream."

The speaker says that the other dolphin is aware of this as well and "out of love reflects me for myself." On the one hand, this passage reflects the communal nature of the dolphins, who seem to feel each others' pain. At the same time, these lines imply that this companionship is not enough to make up for what the dolphins have lost; all they can do is *reflect* such pain and misery, not heal it.

Indeed, the speaker says that in each other, and perhaps in their reflections on the pool's glass walls, they catch glimpses of their

own "silver skin," which "flash[es] by like memory / of somewhere else." This [simile](#) implies that the dolphins are a constant reminder to one another of the world they were taken from and of all the other dolphins they once swam alongside in the ocean. That silvery flash might also make the dolphins recall sunlight glinting off waves, reminding them of their former freedom. At the same time, these reflections are mere "flashes"; the dolphins' memories of their time before captivity are fleeting.

These lines are marked by intense [sibilance](#):

We see our silver skin flash by like memory
of somewhere else.

The smooth, whispery /s/ sounds cast a somber hush over the poem. These fluid sounds also subtly evoke the poem's watery setting.

The dolphins' misery is compounded by the fact that they have no real control over their bodies. They've been brought to this pool to perform for people: to jump through "hoops" and "balance" a colorful "ball" until "the man" who controls their lives "has disappeared." Dolphins are one of the most complex, intelligent creatures on the planet, but in dolphinariums and marine mammal parks, they're treated as mere entertainment for human beings.

LINES 19-21

*The moon has ...
... own to stone.*

The poem's final stanza begins with the dolphins saying that "the moon has disappeared," creating [epistrophe](#):

we have to balance till the man has disappeared.
The moon has disappeared. [...]

This [repetition](#) directly links the presence of "the man"—the human world—with the dolphins' being cut off from their natural habitat. Even when they're not being forced to perform, they can't see the moon that rises over the ocean. They've been utterly severed from the world to which they truly belong.

Now, they can only swim in circles, creating "well-worn grooves / of water on a single note." This [metaphor](#) compares the dolphins' circling around the pool to a vinyl record spinning on a turntable. A device called a stylus, or needle, falls into a record's tiny grooves as it spins on a turntable in order to play music. The dolphins' course is like a stylus stuck in a single groove, playing "a single note" rather than a whole song, as the record spins over and over again.

Essentially, the pain of captivity is a never-ending, single-note song that plays on a loop. This note represents "Music of loss": a song conveying the dolphins' immense pain at losing their

home, their connection to nature, and even their will to live. This music hardens the dolphins' hearts, deadening their senses and crushing their spirits.

LINES 22-24

*There is a ...
... will die here.*

Line 22 begins:

There is a plastic toy. There is no hope. [...]

These two short sentences have a powerful effect. [Anaphora](#) (the repetition of "There is") and [parataxis](#) makes the speaker sound flat and utterly resigned, echoing the idea that these dolphins have given up all "hope" of ever seeing the ocean or living a pleasurable and meaningful life again.

The dolphins can only "sink / to the limits of the pool until the whistle blows." Readers can assume that this "whistle" is what the man uses to direct the dolphins in their performances, a reminder that their entire existence has been reduced to being entertainment for human beings. The image of them "sink[ing]" to the bottom of the tank is also a reminder of how boxed in their lives are. They can't escape the constant demands placed on them by the man; there's nowhere to hide.

The poem's final line places the man (and by implication, humanity itself) in direct opposition to the dolphins, suggesting the harmful consequences of humanity's obsession with acquiring wild animals for entertainment. The presence of the man is linked with the fact that the dolphins know they won't get out of this place alive. The dolphins' resignation to dying in the aquarium is devastating; the poem doesn't hint at a happy ending, but rather asks the reader to ponder this violence against the natural world.



SYMBOLS



THE DISAPPEARING MOON

The disappearance of the moon in the poem's final stanza [symbolizes](#) the loss of the dolphins' connection to the natural world that was once their home. They can no longer see the moon that shines over the ocean each night. Held captive in an artificial pool, they've been completely cut off from their natural habitat and others of their kind.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 19:** "The moon has disappeared."



THE MAN

The poem repeatedly mentions a man who looms over the dolphins' pool. This is presumably the dolphins' trainer, someone who works at this park and makes the dolphins perform for audiences. His constant presence "above" the pool [symbolizes](#) humanity's domination of the natural world—the way human beings so often seek to control and exploit their environments. The poem links this man directly with the dolphins' knowledge that they will die in the pool, symbolically suggesting that humankind's desire to use nature for its own ends leads only to devastation.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "There is a man / and there are hoops."
- **Lines 11-12:** "It is / the same space always and above it is the man."
- **Lines 17-18:** "There is a coloured ball / we have to balance till the man has disappeared."
- **Line 24:** "There is a man and our mind knows we will die here."

- Lines 4-18
- Lines 19-21
- Lines 22-24

ANAPHORA

The poem is filled with [anaphora](#), this repetitive language creating a kind of tonal flatness that evokes the dull monotony of the dolphins' shrunken world. The device often overlaps with [parataxis](#): the dolphins generally speak in blunt, brief phrases that could be rearranged without altering the poem's meaning. Take lines 5-6:

[...] There is a man
and there are hoops. There is a constant flowing
guilt.

Despite the sadness of the dolphins' captivity, these lines sound dull, as though these creatures lack the energy to do much more than point out the basic facts of their situation. The repetition doesn't feel charged, just tedious. The lines feel devoid of excitement or surprise, just like the dolphin's environment.

In line 22, the poem uses anaphora and parataxis to devastating effect:

There is a plastic toy. There is no hope. [...]

The dull repetition of "There is" as the dolphin observes its environment culminates in a complete lack of "hope." For these lively, intelligent creatures, the absence of novelty, intrigue, and possibility strips life of meaning and joy.

The anaphora of lines 11-12 works similarly:

It was the same space. It is
the same space always [...]

The speaker is saying almost exactly the same thing twice in a row, this linguistic sameness mirroring the unchanging nature of the dolphins' world. The implication is that is simply the way things are now; the dolphins are utterly defeated, knowing that it's impossible to change anything.

In lines 4-5, the speaker says:

The other has my shape. The other's movement
forms my thoughts. And also mine. [...]

Here, anaphora emphasizes the dolphins' relationship to each other: they are in sync, mirroring each other to the point that one's "movement" shapes the way the other one thinks. The repetition also suggests the limitations put on their movements by the pool; if their bodies can only swim circles, then their



POETIC DEVICES

ANTHROPOMORPHISM

The poem [anthropomorphizes](#) the dolphins from the poem's title, granting the reader an intimate glimpse into their lives in captivity. Giving the dolphins the ability to speak for themselves and express their feelings makes their suffering more immediate and tangible. It invites the reader to see the dolphins as being not all that different from human beings, thereby making their exploitation all the more deplorable.

The poem presents the dolphins as being able to conceptualize the future—which, in the absence of freedom, is devoid of "hope." They can also remember the past, which took place "somewhere else." In the present, they're aware of their misfortune ("And now we are no longer blessed"). They feel "love" for one another and recognize that they've lost the space "to dream in."

All this anthropomorphizing emphasizes that the dolphins are thoughtful, sensitive creatures—not toys built for human entertainment. It's an effective rhetorical device in that it creates [pathos](#), appealing to readers' emotions.

In reality, of course, human beings can't know exactly what dolphins are thinking. But by imagining what goes on in their heads, the poem prompts the reader to be more curious and empathic towards these (and any other) captive animals.

Where Anthropomorphism appears in the poem:

- Line 2

thoughts must also be repetitive and unchanging. (Note that it's possible that the "other" doesn't refer to another dolphin, but rather to the ocean—the other "world"; regardless, the repetitive language hammers home the monotony of the dolphins' existence.)

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "The other has," "The other's movement"
- **Line 5:** "There is a man"
- **Line 6:** "There is a constant flowing guilt."
- **Line 7:** "We have found"
- **Line 9:** "We were blessed"
- **Lines 11-12:** "It was the same space. It is / the same space"
- **Line 22:** "There is a plastic toy. There is no hope."
- **Line 24:** "There is a man"

REPETITION

In addition to frequent [anaphora](#), the poem features lots of broader [parallelism](#) and [repetition](#), which likewise contribute to the overall sense of tedium. Repetition also emphasizes important words and ideas. Take the repetition of "world" in lines 1, 3, and 13, which draws the reader back to the idea of life being only as big, beautiful, or interesting as the environment in which one lives. The word "man" is also repeated near the end of all four stanzas, emphasizing the role that human beings play in the dolphins' suffering. The dolphins didn't just end up at this pool on their own, this repetition insists; they were forcibly removed from their natural environment.

The [diacope](#) of "no" in lines 7-8 hammers home that the dolphins had no say in their relocation, as well as the fact that the people who took them from the ocean didn't meaningfully consider the animals' feelings on the matter:

We have found no truth in these waters,
no explanations [...]

The repeated mention of being "blessed" across stanzas 2-3, meanwhile, highlights the [juxtaposition](#) between the dolphins' former freedom and their new, confined reality. It's clear that the dolphins are acutely aware of what they've lost:

We were blessed and now we are not blessed.
[...]
And now we are no longer blessed, [...]

The diacope of line 2 works similarly, also calling readers' attention to the [pun](#) on the word "element":

We are in our element but we are not free.

If someone is "in their element," it means that they're thriving. Here, the word "element" refers to the literal water that surrounds the dolphins; they're in what they need to survive, but they're decidedly *not* doing well. Repetition highlights the fact that dolphins need more than just a tank to be happy; they need freedom.

There's yet more evocative diacope in lines 10-12:

After traveling such space for days we began
to translate. It was the same space. It is
the same space always [...]

The repetition evokes the feeling of things always being "the same" inside the aquarium. Where wild dolphins can swim up to 80 miles a day searching for food or mates or simply exploring the vastness of the ocean, these captive dolphins can only swim circles around their small, unchanging pool.

Finally, listen to the [epistrophe](#) in lines 18-19

we have to balance till the man has disappeared.
The moon has disappeared. [...]

The repetition emphasizes how much the dolphins have lost. Even when their trainer leaves for the day, they're not free; they can no longer see the moon, which represents the severing of their connection to the natural world.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "World"
- **Line 2:** "We are in our element but we are not free."
- **Line 3:** "world"
- **Lines 4-5:** "The other has my shape. The other's movement / forms my thoughts."
- **Line 5:** "There is a man"
- **Line 7:** "no truth"
- **Line 8:** "no explanations"
- **Line 9:** "We were blessed and now we are not blessed."
- **Lines 11-12:** "It was the same space. It is / the same space always and above it is the man."
- **Line 13:** "And now we are no longer blessed," "world"
- **Line 14:** "The other knows"
- **Line 18:** "till the man has disappeared."
- **Line 19:** "The moon has disappeared."
- **Line 21:** "the other's heart"
- **Line 24:** "There is a man and our mind knows we will die here."

SIMILE

The third stanza contains a [simile](#):

[...] The other knows

and out of love reflects me for myself.
We see our silver skin flash by like memory
of somewhere else. [...]

The phrasing here is ambiguous: this passage might be describing the dolphins seeing/reflecting *each other*, or it might be referring to the dolphins seeing their reflections on the glass walls of the pool—or both!

Either way, such reflections are "like memory"; they stir up recollections of "somewhere else." This almost certainly refers to the ocean, where sunlight can create silver flashes on the waves, or where they were once surrounded by flashes of their own kind. (These captive dolphins may not be entirely alone in the pool, but their community is a far cry from the large pods they would be part of in their natural habitat.)

The simile also suggests that the dolphins don't have very much to live for in the present, seeing as these reflections only remind them of what they've lost. That these memories "flash by" further suggests that they are fleeting and faint; inside this static world, even the past seems to be slowly disappearing.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 16-17:** "We see our silver skin flash by like memory / of somewhere else."

ALLITERATION

[Alliteration](#) emphasizes certain images and ideas in the poem while also helping to bring its quiet, watery world to life for readers.

For example, the heavy /b/ and /d/ sounds of "ball"/"balance" and "deepen"/"dream" call readers' attention to two important images in the poem: the dolphins being forced to perform for human audiences, and their inability to even imagine a different life for themselves.

Elsewhere, alliteration (as well as the related devices [consonance](#), [assonance](#), and [sibilance](#)) makes the poem's setting itself more vivid. Take the droning /m/ alliteration at the close of the first stanza, which subtly helps to convey how this small, enclosed space muffles the shine of these bright, playful creatures:

The other has my shape. The other's movement
forms my thoughts. And also mine. There is a man

Similarly, the persistent /w/ alliteration in lines 19-20 mirrors the redundancy of the dolphins' movements:

[...] We circle well-worn grooves
of water [...]

The second stanza is particularly packed with sonic devices,

especially the alliteration of /tr/ and /s/ sounds:

[...] no truth in these waters,
no explanations tremble on our flesh.
After traveling such space for days we began
to translate. It was the same space. It is
the same space always [...]

These lines are also filled with assonance ("tremble," "flesh"; "space," "days," "translate," "same," "always"). Altogether, the frequent repetition of sounds combines with the repetition of entire words to hammer home the dreary monotony of the dolphins' lives in captivity.

Notice that there's general [sibilance](#) here and throughout the poem as well, as with the /s/ and /z/ sounds in "same space," "days," "translate," and "always." These slippery sounds again help to evoke the poem's watery setting. There's more sibilance (as both alliteration at the start of words and internal consonance) in lines 16-17:

We see our silver skin flash by like memory
of somewhere else. [...]

Those quiet, slippery /s/ sounds might bring to mind the smooth, silent movements of the dolphins in the water.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "World," "what," "swim," "simple"
- **Line 4:** "movement"
- **Line 5:** "mine," "man"
- **Line 7:** "truth"
- **Line 8:** "tremble"
- **Line 10:** "traveling," "such," "space"
- **Line 11:** "translate," "same," "space"
- **Line 12:** "same," "space"
- **Line 14:** "deepen," "dream"
- **Line 16:** "see," "silver," "skin"
- **Line 17:** "somewhere," "ball"
- **Line 18:** "balance"
- **Line 19:** "We," "well," "worn"
- **Line 20:** "water"
- **Line 24:** "man," "mind"



VOCABULARY

Element (Line 2) - This is a pun playing on two meanings of the word "element." On the one hand, the speaker is referring to one of the four *elements* that make up the world: earth, fire, air, and in this case, water. The dolphins are literally in their element in the sense that they are surrounded by water, which they need to survive. On the other hand, to "be in one's

element" means to be in an environment one likes and thrives in. The dolphins might be in water, but they're definitely not happy or thriving.

Translate (Lines 10-11) - Here, meaning interpret or make sense of.

Well-worn (Lines 19-20) - Used many times.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Dolphins" can be considered a kind of dramatic monologue, a poem it is told from the point of view of a particular character who is *not* the poet: in this case, a dolphin (and, at times, a group of dolphins). The poem contains 24 lines of [free verse](#) arranged in four [sestets](#), or six-line stanzas. Free verse allows the poet to create an intimate and direct [tone](#), as if the reader is listening in on the dolphins' innermost thoughts. Since these captive dolphins are unhappy in their manmade environment, it also makes sense that the poem isn't overly musical; its short, bare sentences and predictable stanza length help to evoke the monotony of the dolphins' suffocating world.

METER

As a [free verse](#) poem, "The Dolphins" doesn't follow a set [meter](#). The absence of meter adds to the poem's intimacy and directness, helping to eliminate the distance between the reader and the dolphin; it sounds like readers are listening to the dolphins' thoughts in real-time.

RHYME SCHEME

As a [free verse](#) poem, "The Dolphins" doesn't follow a [rhyme scheme](#). As with the lack of [meter](#), the absence of a steady rhyme scheme creates a more natural and conversational-sounding poem. Given that these dolphins are forced to perform for a human audience, the fact that their *thoughts* don't feel performative seems important. The disconnect between their non-rhyming, non-performative thoughts and the "balanc[ing]" act they have to put on for "the man" highlights how unnatural and insulting their captivity is.

Note, too, that the poem's voice never uses the word "I" but rather bounces between singular and plural pronouns and possessive adjectives: "our mind knows **we** will die here," "reflects **my** for **myself**," "**We** see **our** silver skin," and so on. Lines 4 and 5 might also suggest two different dolphin voices:

The other has **my** shape. The other's movement forms **my** thoughts. And also **mine**. [...]

That "And also mine" might come from the first speaker (the one who says "my shape" in line 4) or it might come from a different dolphin joining in the conversation. The ambiguity throughout the poem reflects just how connected and communal the dolphins, in turn highlighting the cruelty of cutting them off from the rest of their kind for human entertainment.



SETTING

The poem takes place inside a "pool," presumably in a marine mammal park, where captive dolphins live and perform for a human audience. The poem explores what such a setting feels like entirely from the dolphins' perspective. The dolphins weren't born in captivity, but once were "blessed" to swim the open seas. Compared to the ocean, with its seemingly endless depths, the shallow pool feels intensely claustrophobic. They can no longer see the "moon," a fact that represents just how cut off they are from the mystery, wonder, and freedom of the natural world.

When the dolphins were first brought to this pool, it took them a few days to realize that there was nowhere to go. Now, they understand that no matter how much they "travel[]," the "space" around them never changes; they can only swim in monotonous "circles" and "sink" to the bottom of the tank until they "die." They might be in their "element" in the sense that they're living in water, but they're definitely not thriving. On the contrary, they feel their loss of freedom acutely and mourn the "memory" of the other world they once roamed. They're not entirely alone, but all they can really do is "reflect[]" one another's misery.

The pool isn't just small, either: it's also controlled by human beings. The dolphins must respond to a "whistle," jump through "hoops," and balance a big, colorful "ball" on their noses to entertain onlookers. There is also a "man" who presides over the pool and tells the dolphins what to do. The man's constant, looming presence above the dolphins represents humanity's cruel domination of the natural world.



SPEAKER

The speaker of the poem is a dolphin, or a voice for a group of dolphins, living in a "pool." By telling the poem from the dolphins' point of view, Duffy draws attention to the cruelty of the animals' captivity. The dolphins of the poem are clearly capable of deep thought and complex emotion. They sense "guilt," recognize "truth" (or its absence), express "love" for other dolphins in the pool, remember their lives before captivity, and experience "loss."



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Carol Ann Duffy is one of the most famous contemporary poets in the United Kingdom. Having served as the UK's Poet Laureate from 2009 to 2019 (as both the first woman and the first openly LGBTQ+ person to hold the position), she has had a remarkable impact on contemporary poetry. She writes in accessible language while tackling a wide range of topics, often using deceptively casual [free verse](#) to make scathing political and social critiques.

"The Dolphins" was published in Duffy's first full-length poetry collection, *Standing Female Nude*, in 1985. The poems in this collection range from intimate portraits of childhood to overtly political poems about gender and class. Other well-known poems from this collection include "[Education for Leisure](#)," "[Head of English](#)," and "[War Photographer](#)."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Dolphins" implicitly criticizes the existence of marine mammal parks (think: Sea World) and dolphinariums, spaces where dolphins are kept and trained to entertain audiences. Research has shown that dolphins (and whales) are deeply traumatized by captivity; boredom and anxiety lead to neurotic behavior, depression, and dramatic decreases in longevity.

While the first commercial dolphinarium was opened in the United States in 1938, they soon exploded in popularity; by the 1960s there were hundreds of these aquariums across the world, including a large number in Britain. Their number had dwindled by the time Duffy wrote this poem due to extensive research and increased pressure from animal rights groups, and the last UK dolphinarium closed down in 1991. Elsewhere around the world, however, dolphins remain subjected to these cruel conditions.

[aquarium-shows-are-deeply-cruel/](#)

- [A Short Documentary on Dolphins](#) – A National Geographic feature exploring the intelligence of dolphins. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XZ4hZx6K85Y>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER CAROL ANN DUFFY POEMS

- [A Child's Sleep](#)
- [Anne Hathaway](#)
- [Before You Were Mine](#)
- [Circe](#)
- [Death of a Teacher](#)
- [Demeter](#)
- [Education For Leisure](#)
- [Elvis's Twin Sister](#)
- [Eurydice](#)
- [Foreign](#)
- [Head of English](#)
- [In Mrs Tilscher's Class](#)
- [In Your Mind](#)
- [Little Red Cap](#)
- [Mean Time](#)
- [Medusa](#)
- [Mrs Aesop](#)
- [Mrs Darwin](#)
- [Mrs Faust](#)
- [Mrs Lazarus](#)
- [Mrs Midas](#)
- [Mrs Sisyphus](#)
- [Originally](#)
- [Penelope](#)
- [Pilate's Wife](#)
- [Prayer](#)
- [Quickdraw](#)
- [Recognition](#)
- [Stealing](#)
- [The Darling Letters](#)
- [The Good Teachers](#)
- [Valentine](#)
- [Warming Her Pearls](#)
- [War Photographer](#)
- [We Remember Your Childhood Well](#)
- [Work](#)



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [The Poem Aloud](#) – Watch a short, animated reading of "The Dolphins." (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xF4JmZ5A7Jk>)
- [Learn More About Carol Ann Duffy](#) – A biography of the poet from the Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/carol-ann-duffy>)
- ["How Dolphinariums, Marine Parks, and Aquariums Shows Are Deeply Cruel"](#) – Read an article which explains why dolphins and other big, intelligent marine animals don't belong in captivity. (<https://www.humanedecisions.com/how-dolphinariums-marine-mammal-parks-and->



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