The Gun

SUMMARY

The presence of a gun completely alters the feeling of a house.

You, my partner, place the gun on the kitchen table as if it's a dead animal. The polished butt-end of the gun hangs over the edge of the table, and its metal barrel throws a shadow on the colorful tablecloth.

Initially, you just use the gun for target practice, shooting holes in tin cans hung by orange string from trees in the garden. Before long, though, you shoot a rabbit in the head.

Soon enough, the refrigerator is packed with dead animals—animals that used to run and fly before you killed them. Your hands smell strongly of gun oil and the animals' guts. You stomp all over fallen animal hair and bird feathers. But there's a new liveliness to your movement, and your eyes shine like they did when our relationship was new and having sex with each other felt novel and exciting.

A gun breathes new life into a house.

I help cook the animals you kill, cutting them into segments, severing them, stirring them in a pot and tasting them as I go. The whole process makes me feel so excited that it's as if the King of Death himself has come to dinner, walking out of the wintry woods with bright spring flowers blossoming from his dark mouth.

THEMES

THE INTOXICATION OF POWER

"The Gun" is a poem about the intoxicating nature of power. When the speaker's partner brings home a gun, she at first sees it as a threat. Ultimately, however, the speaker doesn't just get used to the gun, but enjoys watching her husband disembowel the animals he kills with it (and then enjoys cooking those animals when he's done). The gun gives the couple domination over their surroundings, and even over life itself. Such power, the poem implies, can prove irresistible, even for those initially hesitant to embrace it.

"Bringing a gun into a house / changes it," the speaker says, arguing that guns inevitably transform their surroundings. Given that guns are dangerous weapons, the presence of one in the speaker's kitchen immediately feels jarring. Kitchens, after all, are places of comfort, warmth, and domestic safety. When the speaker's partner puts the gun on the table, it creates "a grey shadow" on the tablecloth—an ominous image, as if the gun has cast a pall over the entire household. In other words, the gun transforms the comfortable world of the kitchen, making it feel suddenly tense and full of dread.

But the speaker's discomfort with the gun doesn't last long, and this hints at how quickly people can get used to the idea of power and dominance. The speaker's partner doesn't immediately start killing animals, but first practices marksmanship by shooting at cans. This means that by the time the partner starts hunting—killing real, living creatures—it doesn't seem like such a big deal. A little taste of power, the speaker suggests, may lead to a longing for more.

In fact, the speaker doesn't just get used to the power that the gun symbolizes, but begins to *revel* in it. Cooking the animals her partner kills, the speaker experiences a primal delight, as if the gun has given her and her partner command over the natural world. Both of them find this exhilarating; the partner even walks around with eyes "gleam[ing]" "like when sex was fresh" (that is, when sex felt new and exciting). This moment links the feeling of dominion over the natural world to intense lust and desire.

Power here is something enticing and intoxicating. And the fact that the speaker was initially skeptical of the gun only emphasizes how alluring—and perhaps even addictive—this power can feel, since by the end of the poem the speaker unabashedly enjoys the spoils of the partner's hunting.

Though the poem doesn't explicitly present this power-lust as a good or a bad thing, the imagery of the speaker "slicing, stirring and tasting" the dead animals *is* uneasily visceral. Her newfound enjoyment of power, it seems, has done away with her aversion to death and violence.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-30

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

Bringing a gun ...
... itself:

Simply "bringing a gun into a house," this poem's speaker begins, "changes" the entire atmosphere. That's because guns have power. Everyone knows that a gun has the potential to injure and kill. So when the speaker's husband brings a gun into the house and lays it out on the kitchen table "like something dead," its mere presence feels threatening.

That threat feels all the more acute because kitchens are typically seen as safe, inviting places. The gun's raw, frightening power forms a sharp juxtaposition with the kitchen's domestic

calm. And when the speaker compares the gun itself to a dead animal, her simile suggests that the gun isn't just a scary weapon, but a symbol of death itself.

It's also startling that the speaker's partner chooses to put the gun on the kitchen table. After all, this isn't a very discreet or safe spot to put down a gun. The fact that the partner lays it out in the open feels confrontational or provocative. It's as if he's proud of the gun and doesn't mind that its presence unsettles the speaker. Maybe he's even enjoying the power the gun gives him to make her uncomfortable. This, in turn, hints at the complicated power dynamics that guns often bring up, proving the speaker's point that "bringing a gun into a house / changes it."

LINES 5-9

the grainy polished ...
... the green-checked cloth.

As the speaker observes the gun lying threateningly on the table, her visual imagery becomes detailed and vivid. She notices the "grainy polished wood stock" and the "long metal barrel"—descriptions that present it as a solid, heavy, serious piece of craftsmanship. The "grey shadow" it casts on the cheery "green-checked" tablecloth darkens the kitchen's cozy, welcoming atmosphere—another sharp juxtaposition between the gun's primal violence and the kitchen's domestic coziness. All of these detailed observations suggest that the speaker feels wary—but maybe also fascinated, against her will.

The speaker's consonance hints that she might be a little more interested in the gun than she's totally comfortable with:

> jutting over the edge,
> the long metal barrel

The forceful, energetic /j/ sounds of "jutting" and "edge" hint at the gun's dangerous potential. But the drawn-out /l/ sound that describes the "long metal barrel" feels strangely elegant. It's clear that the speaker is picking up on both the gun's danger and its weird beauty.

The enjambments here also suggest that the speaker feels not just frightened, but fascinated. Lines 7 and 8 both flow seamlessly toward the end-stop in line 9:

> the long metal barrel
> casting a grey shadow
> on the green-checked cloth.

This continuous flow makes it feel as if the language is building up to something. With the gun in the kitchen, something dangerous or frightening might happen any minute—and the speaker can't tear her eyes away.

LINES 10-15

At first it's ...
... through the head.

The gun's mere presence has already changed the atmosphere of the speaker's home. Now, though, her partner begins to actually *use* the gun.

Instead of immediately going out hunting, the partner starts with target "practice," shooting at tin cans hanging from the trees in the garden. While the gun at first seemed like a frightening, ominous object, for a moment it doesn't seem all that menacing anymore. After all, there's nothing terribly scary about practicing marksmanship as a sport: those "perforat[ed]" tin cans can't bleed or scream. The tone here at first feels a lot calmer and milder; there's even something almost cozy about the partner taking pot-shots at the recycling.

However, the partner swiftly goes from shooting inanimate objects to shooting a rabbit "clean through the head." This unsentimental phrasing suggests that the partner goes from zero to sixty, immediately seeing killing as a matter of course: that "clean" shot overlooks the gruesome, bloody reality of the rabbit's bullet wound. But the speaker doesn't seem particularly unsettled by either her husband's new hobby or the rabbit's corpse: she simply notes this new development without further comment.

The speaker's calm, matter-of-fact reaction suggests that it's pretty easy to get swept up in a gun's alluring power. This speaker—originally so wary of the gun—can already watch her partner shoot a rabbit "clean through the head" without even showing any emotion.

LINES 16-20

Soon the fridge ...
... fur and feathers.

After shooting his first rabbit, the partner plunges bloodthirstily into the world of hunting, and the couple's fridge "fills with creatures / that have run and flown." Imagining all the carcasses in the fridge as "creatures" that once moved (and tried to escape!), the speaker acknowledges that the things in her fridge were once living beings—not just hunks of meat.

But she doesn't seem at all upset by this thought. Instead, she passively observes her partner, noting that his hands "reek of gun oil" and "entrails" (that is, guts). This evocative smell imagery makes the partner seem ruthless and primal. "Trampl[ing] / fur and feathers" as he guts his prey, he's become a powerful, merciless force that stomps on nature without a second thought. And the speaker's tone suggests that she doesn't altogether disapprove! She was right all along that the gun would change her home, but she doesn't seem to dislike that change nearly as much as she expected to.

The alliteration in these lines suggests just how many carcasses the husband has piled up:

Soon the fridge fills with creatures
that have run and flown.
[...] You trample
fur and feathers.

The densely repeated /f/ sound suggests that there are absolute heaps of "fur" and "feathers" in that overflowing "fridge"—now running and flying no more.

LINES 20-25

There's a spring ...
... stirring and tasting—

As the speaker describes the effect hunting has had on her partner, the poem's tone begins to change.

The gun, it seems, has given the speaker's partner a whole new lease on life. He's lively and energetic, and his eyes "gleam / like when sex was fresh." This simile suggests that there's something more than a little erotic about the power the partner has found in the gun. It also implies that sex had become a little less "fresh" for this couple. But the gun's intoxicating power seems to have brought their libidos roaring back to life. The "spring" in the partner's step isn't just a bounce: there's also a pun on the season here. It's as if the partner, the speaker, their marriage, and their home are all enjoying a fresh infusion of new life—all brought about by their daily involvement with death.

It makes sense, then, that the speaker should say that "A gun brings a house alive." This parallels the speaker's opening assertion that "Bringing a gun into a house / changes it." Back then, the "change" a gun brought felt ominous. Now, the speaker seems delighted with the gun's energy, unexpectedly thrilled by her and her partner's newfound power over the natural world.

Acting on this electrifying, surprisingly sexualized sense of excitement, the speaker takes pleasure in cooking the animals her partner kills, "jointing / and slicing, stirring and tasting" as she goes. This description is vivid and a little gruesome, as the imagery of cutting up a dead animal ("jointing") is very visceral. Not only does the speaker pull these carcasses apart, she also *eats* them, seemingly unperturbed by the intense experience of "slicing" through their bodies. She, like her partner, feels nourished by all this death.

Although the speaker was originally frightened of the gun's violent power, now she actively appreciates the way it has breathed life into her house—an ironic thing, considering that this new sense of life and vitality came from *killing* other living creatures.

LINES 26-30

excited as if ...
... sprouting golden crocuses.

In the poem's last five lines, the speaker introduces an intense, mythic simile: cooking the dead animals makes her feel so excited that it's "as if the King of Death / had arrived to feast." In other words, she feels like she's cooking for the personified figure of Death itself.

The King of Death emerges from "winters woods," calling up imagery of a cold, bleak forest. He also seems pretty scary—he has a "black mouth," wide open like a grave. And yet, "golden crocuses" (a kind of bright spring flower) grow out of that "black mouth."

This juxtaposition of death and life encapsulates exactly what the speaker and her partner have discovered: bringing death into the house also means bringing life into the house. Death and life are intimately connected, and the gun has helped them to feel that deep and frightening truth. Killing and eating animals, the couple feel more deeply aware of their own aliveness.

Of course, the gun *still* symbolizes violent power and the threat of death, and its power is still intoxicating and dangerous. But the speaker isn't frightened of it anymore. Instead, she's ready to welcome the King of Death to dinner—and with him, all the vibrant new life that puts a literal and figurative "spring" in her partner's step.

SYMBOLS

THE GUN

The entire poem is structured around the idea that guns symbolize power—and more specifically, the power to deal out death. If the speaker is slow to warm up to the gun, perhaps it's because she's not totally comfortable with that kind of power.

But once she's used to the gun, she starts to *enjoy* the intoxicating power it represents. Her cozy, domestic home feels more "alive" with the gun around: being this close to its potent energy completely changes the way she looks at her surroundings. The world even becomes mythic to her, stalked by the "King of Death" himself. Life, the poem's gun symbolism suggests, feels more real and more vibrant when death's power is nearby.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 3-9
- Lines 10-13
- Lines 16-19
- Line 23
- Lines 24-27

POETIC DEVICES

SIMILE

The similes in "The Gun" help to create the poem's vivid, unsettling mood.

When the speaker first describes the gun, she says that the partner puts it on the kitchen table as if it's a dead animal "stretched out" on the tablecloth. This simile both calls attention to the gun's violent potential and foreshadows the many dead animals that will one day lie in the same spot.

Later, the speaker suggests that her partner's eyes "gleam / like when sex was fresh." This simile suggests that killing wild animals gives the partner the thrill of sex with a new partner—with the implication that sex no longer seems all that new and exciting to this couple! Hunting, on the other hand, gives the partner an intoxicating, visceral sense of power. This simile suggests (perhaps uncomfortably) that sex, death, and power all sit pretty close to each other in people's psyches.

This morbid combination of pleasure and violent power is an integral part of the poem. It returns in the speaker's final simile, in which she says that she's so "excited" by all this carnage that it's as if "the King of Death / had arrived to feast." This vivid simile personifies death itself, and makes it feel as if the gun has brought the speaker and her partner into a relationship with the world's darkest, earthiest powers. There's something both frightening and beautiful about this "King": he might "stalk[]" out of "winter woods," but his mouth also "sprout[s] golden crocuses," suggesting that cold death and vibrant new life are only a hair's breadth apart.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "stretched out like something dead / itself"
- **Lines 21-22:** "your eyes gleam / like when sex was fresh"
- **Lines 24-30:** "I join in the cooking: jointing / and slicing, stirring and tasting— / excited as if the King of Death / had arrived to feast, stalking / out of winters woods, / his black mouth / sprouting golden crocuses."

IMAGERY

The poem's imagery helps to make the speaker's confrontation with power, violence, and death feel visceral and concrete.

A lot of the poem's power comes from the vivid, specific description of the gun itself:

> [...] the grainy polished wood stock
> jutting over the edge,
> the long metal barrel
> casting a grey shadow
> on the green-checked cloth

These descriptions give readers a clear picture of the gun's elegance and danger: with its "polished" stock and its "jutting" energy, it seems both tempting and menacing. As it "cast[s] a grey shadow / on the green-checked cloth," it seems already to be "chang[ing]" the house, throwing the symbolic shadow of death over the kitchen's cozy domesticity.

The speaker's imagery invites the reader to imagine the scene with the nose as well as the eyes. After the partner starts hunting, filling the fridge with "creatures," his hands "reek of gun oil / and entrails." These (literally!) visceral smells make it impossible for readers to ignore how primally intense the partner's new hobby is: he now smells both of his weapon and of death.

But the speaker doesn't seem to find these smells disturbing. Instead, she gravitates toward them, taking delight in cooking her husband's victims. The image of her "jointing and slicing" the animals, cutting and pulling apart their carcasses, is as primal as her husband's smell. The speaker even tastes the dead animals as she goes, and though she doesn't describe their flavor, there's something barbarous about the idea of her putting these dead bodies in her mouth. The imagery here never quite lets these animals become plain old dead meat: they're always "creatures."

The poem ends with a final burst of imagery as "golden crocuses" burgeon from the King of Death's "black mouth." This image associates the shining new life of spring with death itself, suggesting that the speaker has come to find the violence the gun represents oddly alluring. Coming close to death, the poem suggests, really makes you feel alive.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "the grainy polished wood stock / jutting over the edge,"
- **Lines 7-9:** "the long metal barrel / casting a grey shadow / on the green-checked cloth."
- **Line 12:** "dangling on orange string"
- **Lines 18-19:** "Your hands reek of gun oil / and entrails."
- **Lines 24-25:** "jointing / and slicing, stirring and tasting—"
- **Lines 29-30:** "his black mouth / sprouting golden crocuses."

IRONY

It's ironic that killing other creatures gives the speaker and her partner a renewed sense of vitality. Although the speaker seems skeptical of the gun's threatening power when the partner first brings it into the kitchen, she embraces it by the end of the poem, clearly intoxicated by its power. Getting involved with death, the poem suggests, can unexpectedly make people feel a lot more alive.

When her partner starts killing things, the speaker notices a profound difference in him. "There's a spring / in your step," she

tells him; "your eyes gleam / like when sex was fresh." Hunting seems to give him a renewed feeling of youth and life. The speaker shares in this resurgence of energy, saying:

> A gun brings a house alive.

Killing animals, ironically, brings this couple's home to vibrant life, making them feel more viscerally alive and present. Everything seems so new that it's as if they've once again discovered the thrill of sex—a meaningful comparison, considering that sex often leads to new life in a very literal sense.

But while the irony here might feel surprising, it also points to a deep truth about life. When the "King of Death" turns up for dinner in the last stanza, spring flowers sprouting from his mouth, the poem seems to suggest that life *itself* is ironic this way. Life and death, seemingly opposite, in fact are intimately connected.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Lines 20-23:** "There's a spring / in your step; your eyes gleam / like when sex was fresh. / A gun brings a house alive."

JUXTAPOSITION

The poem begins with a juxtaposition between a cozy, domestic kitchen and a sinister, ominous gun. The speaker even announces the contrast between these two things by saying, "Bringing a gun into a house / changes it"—a line that prepares readers to look for the differences between the poem's setting and everything the gun symbolizes.

The poem's first image throws this contrast into relief:

> [...] the grainy polished wood stock
> jutting over the edge,
> the long metal barrel
> casting a grey shadow
> on the green-checked cloth.

The "green-checked" tablecloth brings a classic domestic scene to mind—one most people would sooner associate with warm pies and hot cups of coffee than with guns. The gun also casts a "grey shadow" over this cozy tablecloth, suggesting that in the gun's presence, the threat of death and violence hangs ominously over the speaker's house.

The poem later juxtaposes the piles of dead animals in the refrigerator with the way the partner's eyes "gleam" with power and excitement. While the fridge is full of carnage and death, the partner—who *created* this carnage—seems vibrantly alive. This juxtaposition suggests that the gun has given the speaker and her partner an intoxicating sense of power: the more critters they kill, the more alive they feel.

The poem's final sharp juxtaposition—an image of "golden crocuses" blossoming from the King of Death's "black mouth"—suggests that, through their gleeful violence, the speaker and her partner have come a little bit closer to a deep (and not totally comfortable) truth: there's no such thing as life *without* death. And life and liveliness spring right out of death's mouth.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-9:** "You lay it on the kitchen table, / stretched out like something dead / itself: the grainy polished wood stock / jutting over the edge, / the long metal barrel / casting a grey shadow / on the green-checked cloth."
- **Lines 16-22:** "Soon the fridge fills with creatures / that have run and flown. / Your hands reek of gun oil / and entrails. You trample / fur and feathers. There's a spring / in your step; your eyes gleam / like when sex was fresh."
- **Lines 29-30:** "his black mouth / sprouting golden crocuses."

CONSONANCE

Consonance helps the speaker to evoke the energy and danger of life with a gun in the house.

For instance, take a look at the /j/ and /l/ consonance in lines 6-7:

> jutting over the edge,
> the long metal barrel

The hard /j/ sounds in "jutting" and "edge" feel energetic and forceful, suggesting the gun's dangerous potential energy. The /l/ sound, meanwhile, evokes the gun's shape: like the "metal barrel" itself, the /l/ sound is "long"—and strangely elegant. Together, these sounds conjure up both the gun's menace and its sinister allure.

Later on in lines 19-21, a strong passage of consonance and sibilance makes a gruesome scene feel even more vivid:

> and entrails. You trample
> fur and feathers. There's a spring
> in your step; [...]

The sounds here evoke the husband's gleeful brutality as he skins and guts the animals he's shot. All those rough /r/ sounds almost sound like a growl, as if the husband has become a beast of prey. And the /tr/ sounds in "entrails" and "trample" connect those two violent and visceral words, suggesting that the floor is swimming in offal—and that the husband cheerfully stomps right through the blood.

But the sibilance of "spring / in your step" also suggests that the

speaker finds this bloody scene a bit seductive. Whispery /s/ sounds can feel both dangerous and sexy—and that's exactly how the speaker feels about the carnage in her kitchen! These sibilant words also draw attention to an important pun: the "spring" in the husband's step isn't just bouncy energy, but a whole new season of his life.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "gun into"
- **Line 3:** "lay," "table"
- **Line 4:** "stretched," "like," "something"
- **Line 5:** "itself," "polished," "stock"
- **Line 6:** "jutting," "edge"
- **Line 7:** "long metal barrel"
- **Line 8:** "casting," "grey"
- **Line 9:** "green," "checked cloth"
- **Line 10:** "first it's just practice"
- **Line 11:** "perforating"
- **Line 12:** "orange string"
- **Line 13:** "from trees," "garden"
- **Line 14:** "rabbit shot"
- **Line 16:** "fridge fills"
- **Line 17:** "run," "flown"
- **Line 18:** "Your," "hands," "reek," "gun," "oil"
- **Line 19:** "entrails," "trample"
- **Line 20:** "fur," "feathers," "There's," "spring"
- **Line 21:** "your," "step," "gleam"
- **Line 22:** "like," "sex"
- **Line 24:** "join in," "cooking: jointing"
- **Line 25:** "slicing," "stirring," "tasting"
- **Line 26:** "excited," "King," "Death"
- **Line 27:** "had arrived," "feast, stalking"
- **Line 28:** "winters woods"
- **Line 30:** "sprouting," "crocuses"

ASSONANCE

Like consonance, assonance helps to create the poem's atmosphere. For instance, take a look at the vowel sounds in lines 1-5:

> Bringing a gun into a house
> changes it.
> You lay it on the kitchen table,
> stretched out like something dead
> itself [...]

The evolving sounds here hint at the way the house is "change[d]" when the gun arrives. The poem starts by stringing together three long /ay/ sounds: "changes," "lay" and "table." Then once the gun is in the kitchen, the flat /eh/ sounds of "stretched," "dead," and "itself" take over. This shift subtly mirrors what the speaker describes: the house's whole atmosphere altering around the gun as it casts its menacing "grey shadow" on the tablecloth.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "changes"
- **Line 3:** "lay," "table"
- **Line 4:** "stretched," "dead"
- **Line 5:** "itself," "polished," "stock"
- **Line 6:** "edge"
- **Line 7:** "metal"
- **Line 8:** "casting," "shadow"
- **Line 10:** "first"
- **Line 11:** "perforating"
- **Line 16:** "fridge fills with"
- **Line 19:** "entrails," "trample"
- **Line 21:** "step"
- **Line 22:** "sex," "fresh"
- **Line 24:** "join," "jointing"
- **Line 25:** "slicing," "stirring," "tasting"
- **Line 29:** "mouth"
- **Line 30:** "sprouting," "golden crocuses"

SIBILANCE

Like the other forms of consonance in "The Gun," sibilance helps to create the poem's menacing-yet-seductive atmosphere.

For instance, take a look at the way the sibilant /s/ works its way through lines 20 through 22:

> [...] There's a spring
> in your step; your eyes gleam
> like when sex was fresh.

The /s/ sounds here evoke the speaker's relish as she observes how hunting has invigorated her husband: it's like she's addressing him in a sultry whisper as she notes his new energy and remembers when "sex was fresh."

That sibilant relish appears again when the speaker cooks up her husband's prey:

> I join in the cooking: jointing
> and slicing, stirring and tasting—

Again, there's a sense that there's something delicious and seductive in all this carnage: the /s/ sounds here evoke the mouthwatering simmering and sizzling of all that meat.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "stretched," "something"
- **Line 5:** "itself," "stock"

- **Line 10:** "first it's just practice"
- **Line 20:** "spring"
- **Line 21:** "step"
- **Line 22:** "sex"
- **Line 25:** "slicing, stirring," "tasting"
- **Line 26:** "excited"
- **Line 27:** "feast, stalking"
- **Line 30:** "sprouting," "crocuses"

ENJAMBMENT

The many enjambments in "The Gun" help to shape the poem's pace and mood.

For instance, take a look at the poem's very first enjambment:

> Bringing a gun into a house
> changes it.

The sudden line break here moves the reader from a longer line to a short, abrupt conclusion. This enjambment creates a creates a choppy, jolting pace that reflects the speaker's unsettled feeling about having a gun in the house.

But as the speaker gets used to the gun, her enjambments start to suggest just how seductive its power has become:

> Your hands reek of gun oil
> and entrails. You trample
> fur and feathers. There's a spring
> in your step; your eyes gleam
> like when sex was fresh.

Enjambments make this passage feel continuous and flowing. The speaker's sentences never come to a conclusion at the end of a line, here. Instead, her thoughts spill over the ends of lines, break at mid-line caesurae, and then pick right back up again. This speedy onward momentum evokes the speaker's escalating enthusiasm: it's as if she's getting caught up in her husband's excitement, falling under the gun's spell.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "house / changes"
- **Lines 4-5:** "dead / itself"
- **Lines 5-6:** "stock / jutting"
- **Lines 7-8:** "barrel / casting"
- **Lines 8-9:** "shadow / on"
- **Lines 11-12:** "tins / dangling"
- **Lines 12-13:** "string / from"
- **Lines 14-15:** "shot / clean"
- **Lines 16-17:** "creatures / that"
- **Lines 18-19:** "oil / and"
- **Lines 19-20:** "trample / fur"
- **Lines 20-21:** "spring / in"
- **Lines 21-22:** "gleam / like"
- **Lines 24-25:** "jointing / and"
- **Lines 26-27:** "Death / had"
- **Lines 27-28:** "stalking / out"
- **Lines 29-30:** "mouth / sprouting"

PARALLELISM

Parallelism draws attention to how the speaker's feelings about the gun change from apprehension to glee.

The poem begins with the lines,

> Bringing a gun into a house
> changes it.

At first, the speaker doesn't seem too happy about that change, seeing the gun as a menacing presence that casts a "grey shadow" on her cheerful tablecloth.

But by the end of the fourth stanza, the speaker has changed her tone. She's started to *enjoy* the way the gun has changed her house. More than just getting used to its presence, she's started to revel in its intoxicating power.

Here, in a stand-alone one-line stanza, she says:

> A gun brings a house alive.

This line echoes those first lines about how a gun changes a house. Back at the beginning of the poem, the speaker seemed worried about that "change[]," fearing that the gun would bring violence and death into her life. Now, she finds it's brought a strange aliveness instead.

This moment of parallelism doesn't just show how the speaker's views on the gun have changed. After all, her initial concerns were totally justified: the gun *has* brought violence and death into her home. It's really her views on *death* that have changed. These parallel passages suggest that the speaker has learned that she feels most alive when she's regularly engaging with death.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Bringing a gun into a house / changes it."
- **Line 23:** "A gun brings a house alive."

VOCABULARY

Grainy (Line 5) - Patterned with wood grain—the natural arrangement of rings and streaks in wood.

Stock (Line 5) - The butt-end of a rifle.

Jutting (Line 6) - Pushing out or hanging over the edge of something.

Casting (Lines 7-8) - Throwing.

Perforating Tins (Lines 11-12) - Shooting holes in tin cans.

Reek (Line 18) - Stink.

Entrails (Lines 18-19) - Intestines or other internal organs.

Gleam (Line 21) - Shine, glint.

Crocus (Lines 29-30) - Small, bright spring flowers.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Gun" is a 30-line poem broken up into six stanzas of different lengths. Written in free verse, it has a loose, unstructured feel, and its shape evolves along with the speaker's thoughts.

For instance, the two-line first stanza makes a bold opening statement: "Bringing a gun into a house / changes it." Right away, it's clear that the rest of the poem will illustrate how, exactly, a gun changes a house.

And this is exactly what happens. Each of the following stanzas illustrates a different way that the gun alters the speaker's house and, eventually, her life. Because the speaker isn't tied to a rigid poetic form, these stanzas can change shape to fit the shape of her thoughts, ranging from seven-line stanzas of vivid description to a one-line stanza that makes a bold, punchy statement: "A gun brings a house alive."

This poem's fresh, engaging, free-flowing form thus evokes the speaker's mood as she begins to enjoy the gun's power, letting her fit her language to her thoughts and feelings.

METER

The poem is written in free verse, meaning it doesn't use a set meter or rhyme scheme. Instead, the poem varies its rhythms in a way that makes the language sound flexible and fresh. For example, consider the rhythmic differences between the first two lines:

> Bringing a gun into a house
> changes it.

This movement from a longer to a shorter line calls a lot of attention to the phrase "changes it," emphasizing the idea that the mere presence of a gun can profoundly alter a house's entire atmosphere.

Free verse thus lets the speaker subtly alter the poem's flow and pacing, shining a spotlight on important moments. But it also gives the language an unfussy, relaxed tone. Perhaps that sense of ease reflects the speaker's newfound power and pleasure as she starts to enjoy having the gun around.

RHYME SCHEME

"The Gun" doesn't follow a rhyme scheme, and the lack of rhyme gives the poem an unconstrained, conversational sound. But there's still plenty of strong poetic flavor here: the speaker's language sounds far from everyday. The poem's musicality and intensity come not from rhyme, but from internal patterns of sound (like assonance and consonance) and vivid imagery.

SPEAKER

Because Vicki Feaver has spoken publicly about the experience that inspired this poem, it's safe to assume that she's the speaker. When she moved from urban England to rural Scotland, she was surprised to see so many people carrying around hunting rifles. Soon enough, though, her own husband bought one, and though she was skeptical at first, she eventually took an interest in the gun.

This, of course, is exactly what happens in "The Gun." But with or without this background, it's clear that the speaker is someone who is—at first—frightened of guns and worried about having one in the house. By the end of the poem, though, the speaker's entire outlook changes, as the power of gun ownership starts to feel irresistible and thrilling.

SETTING

"The Gun" takes place in the speaker's home: as the speaker announces at the very beginning of the poem, "bringing a gun into a house / changes it." More specifically, the poem centers on the kitchen, since this is where the partner first brings the gun, placing it "on the kitchen table" in a way that feels ominous and vaguely threatening. The gun even casts a "grey shadow / on the green-checked cloth"—an image that juxtaposes the violent power the gun symbolizes and the kitchen's domestic coziness and safety. Playing with this contrast between danger and comfort, the speaker slowly comes to feel that a "gun brings a house alive," as if the presence of this weapon has breathed new life into an otherwise sleepy, boring, everyday environment.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"The Gun" was published in Vicki Feaver's collection *The Book of Blood* in 2006. Feaver has spoken publicly about the origins of the poem, saying that it was inspired by her experience of moving from London to the Scottish countryside. In her London

neighborhood, Feaver often *heard* guns, but she never really encountered them; they were, in other words, nothing more than abstract ideas of violence.

But when she moved to Lanarkshire in Scotland, she saw guns everywhere, since so many of her neighbors were hunters. Feaver's husband eventually bought a gun, too, and though Feaver found it unsettling at first, she soon became accustomed to it and even came to appreciate it—the exact transformation that the speaker of "The Gun" goes through.

Stylistically, "The Gun" fits right into the world of contemporary poetry: like a lot of 21st-century poems, it uses free verse and a casual, everyday vocabulary. Gun ownership is also a very contemporary concern, though "The Gun" differs from a lot of recent poems on the subject. Unlike anti-gun poems like "The Undertaker" by Patricia Smith or "Shotguns" by Yusef Komunyakaa, "The Gun" focuses not on the dread of violence, but the allure of power.

Some might see this as a clever, subtle way of writing an anti-gun poem. But the speaker doesn't fully resolve the tension between her initial unease and her later excitement into any one statement about gun ownership: this poem isn't polemical, but observational.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

It's harder to legally own a gun in the United Kingdom, where Vicki Feaver lives, than it is in many other countries (like the United States, just for instance). The purchase of handguns, in particular, was stringently controlled in the United Kingdom after the Dunblane Massacre of 1996. In this terrible mass murder, a man shot and killed 17 people at Dunblane Primary School in Scotland. Because the shooter legally owned the pistols he used, the event sparked debate about gun control in the United Kingdom, as people called for a ban on the purchase and ownership of handguns. This eventually led to two amendments to the Firearms Act of 1968, making it illegal to purchase or own virtually any kind of handgun in the United Kingdom.

However, these amendments didn't apply to hunting rifles, which is why Vicki Feaver's husband was able to purchase one when they moved to Scotland—an experience that inspired Feaver to write "The Gun." This distinction might point to bigger cultural ideas about gun ownership: while hunting guns and handguns are used and thought of in different ways, they're similarly dangerous!

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Hear the Poem — Listen to Vicki Feaver read "The Gun" and briefly discuss the experience that inspired the poem. (https://poetryarchive.org/poem/gun/)
- More About Feaver — To learn a little more about Vicki Feaver, check out this short overview of her life and work (including several audio clips of her poems). (https://poetryarchive.org/poet/vicki-feaver/)
- An Interview with Feaver — Check out this interview with Vicki Feaver, in which she discusses the themes of murder and sex in her poems (among other things). (http://poetrymagazines.org.uk/magazine/recordee58.html?id=3900)
- Film of "The Gun" — A short cinematic interpretation of "The Gun" (content note: includes some shaky/flashing images). (https://vimeo.com/97703294)

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Lannamann, Taylor. "*The Gun.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 9 Mar 2021. Web. 30 Mar 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Lannamann, Taylor. "*The Gun.*" LitCharts LLC, March 9, 2021. Retrieved March 30, 2021. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/vicki-feaver/the-gun.