The Lesson

SUMMARY

The classroom was a scene of utter chaos as the brave teacher entered. The rowdy, misbehaving students didn't pay him any attention, and the teacher's voice couldn't be heard amid the racket they were making.

"Today's topic will be violence," the teacher announced, "and I'm going to assign you homework. This lesson will be unforgettable."

The teacher grabbed a noisy boy and strangled him to death on the spot before choking the girl with greasy hair who sat behind him.

Next, he swung a sword through entire rows of talking students, gleefully chopping off whatever body parts were in his way.

He hurled his sword at a boy who walked in late, striking him dead. Then he started using a gun to continue on with this massacre.

His first shot wiped out an entire row at the back of the classroom (the place where the lazy, delinquent students tend to sit). The students fell down, deflating like blow-up lifeboats whose plugs had been removed.

When a frightened student—one who'd misbehaved by drawing on things—politely asked to leave, the teacher granted his request by shooting him point-blank in the head.

Wondering what was making so much noise, the school's principal came by and peeked into the classroom. The principal nodded in approval at what was going on and then threw a bomb inside.

Once the teacher had run out of ammunition and every chair in the classroom had blood on it, silence itself seemed to come forward and surrender.

The teacher admired the slaughter before him: a classroom filled with students who were either dead or would be soon enough. He then shook a serious finger at the classroom, insisting that this massacre should teach them something.

THEMES

EDUCATION, DISCIPLE, AND VIOLENCE

Roger McGough's "The Lesson" is a darkly satirical poem in which a teacher murders an entire group of students to teach them a "lesson" about how to behave in class. In taking the idea of corporal punishment to an absurd, violent extreme, this gruesome fantasy makes a serious point: there is no role for physical discipline in the classroom. For one thing, the poem implies, corporal punishment is cruel. For another, it's ineffective: after all, when "the carnage" ends, there are no students left alive for the teacher to wag his "finger severely" at—that is, there are no students left to *teach*!

Teachers, the poem immediately makes clear, have their jobs cut out for them: classrooms can be hectic, even infuriating environments filled with misbehaving children. To illustrate this, the poem begins with a teacher "bravely" walking into a classroom where "chaos" reigns supreme. One boy is shouting, while another student arrives late; others are "chattering" away among themselves. No one, it seems, is listening to the teacher, whose own "voice" is "lost in the din." Getting any actual *teaching* in such an environment seems impossible.

In an effort to curb this disrespectful behavior (and to maniacally vent his own pent-up frustration), the teacher promises to give his students a lesson about "violence." He then proceeds to mercilessly kill them all—strangling a shouting boy and the dirty-haired girl behind him, "throwing a sword at a latecomer," and blasting a "shotgun" at the back row of desks where the delinquents "hang out." Even the principal gets involved, "toss[ing]" in a grenade" into the fray and implicitly giving his authoritative stamp of approval to the teacher's actions.

This is all an intentionally, ridiculously extreme version of corporal punishment in the classroom: the use of physical discipline to control students (think of teachers rapping one's knuckles with a ruler, for example). Clearly, none of the students' behaviors remotely merits the horror their teacher unleashes upon them, which might prompt readers to wonder if a student's behavior *ever* warrants the use of violence.

The poem further implies that such discipline might not just be unethical but also futile. After all, it clearly doesn't solve the issue of being able to *teach*! In the poem's ironic final line, the teacher smugly declares "Let that be a lesson" to a room full of "the dying and the dead"; while his voice was "lost in the din" of the student's chatter, now his voice falls on ears that literally can't hear at all. Thus while this unhinged outburst may have been darkly satisfying for the aggrieved teacher, it didn't do anything to improve students' ability to learn.

While the poem sympathizes with teachers' struggles to control their classrooms, it implicitly suggests there must be a method better than violence to keep students respectfully engaged. And if violence and terror aren't the answer, perhaps a better tack is one that helps students feel inspired by and excited about their lessons.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-40

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Chaos ruled OK ...
... in the din

The poem begins with an epigraph:

> *A poem that raises the question:*
> *Should there be capital punishment in schools?*

This announces that what follows will ask (and, potentially, answer) the question of whether schools should turn to physical punishment as a method of discipline.

The poem itself then begins by setting the stage for "the lesson" to follow. A teacher enters a classroom that is already a lost cause: it's "ruled" by disorder and filled with loud, unruly kids whose voices drown out the teacher's own.

"Chaos ruled OK," says the speaker in line 1, likely referring to an old-school graffiti tag (e.g., Roger rules OK!). In personifying disorder itself as a kind of king, the poem establishes just how little control the teacher actually has here; he's a mere subject of this chaotic ruler. And listen to how this line captures the noise of the room with alliteration and consonance of hard /k/ sounds: "Chaos [...] OK [...] classroom." Try saying the line out loud—it's a racket!

The teacher, for his part, walks in "bravely," like a soldier nobly entering the battlefield. The kids, meanwhile, ignore him. They're a bunch of "nooligans," the speaker says—a.k.a. troublemakers (other versions of the poem sometimes use the word "hooligans" or "havocwreakers"). The teacher's voice gets "lost in the din," as though his authority evaporates into thin air.

This stanza sets up the poem's colloquial language and playful rhyme scheme. In each stanza, the second and fourth lines rhyme (an ABCB pattern; here, "in" chimes with "din"), creating a humorous, light-hearted tone. And that's going to be needed, considering what follows is a massacre!

LINES 5-8

'The theme for ...
... you'll never forget'

In the second stanza, the teacher himself begins to speak. Of course, the poem just told readers that the students can't hear "his voice" over "the din" of their chatter—so they probably aren't listening! Still, the speaker declares (to himself, apparently) that the lesson's "theme" (the topic of discussion for the day) will be "violence" and that there's going to be homework. So far, things still seem relatively realistic.

But things take a turn toward the surreal in the poem's next two lines: "Teach you a lesson you'll never forget" is decidedly sinister, given that this phrase is usually used as a euphemism for physical punishment. This teacher, it seems, has reached the end of his tether. He appears to take glee in speaking these words, almost as if they are scripted for a film titled "The Teacher's Revenge!"

Note that, by the end of the poem, the final line of this stanza will ring out as particularly ironic: the students will effectively "forget" the day's lesson because they'll be dead—and thus won't be able to remember anything at all!

LINES 9-12

He picked on ...
... with grotty hair)

In the third stanza, the teacher's shocking killing spree begins. With apparent relish, the teacher grabs one of the "shouting" boys and "throttle[s] him then and there." Notice how these three alliterating /th/ sounds have a kind of breathy, harsh quality, evoking both the teacher's fury and the gasp of the boy choking in his grip.

The teacher then moves on to his next victim, a girl seated behind this "shouting boy" whose only blunder, it seems, is having dirty hair. The poem's language remains musical and playful while describing this horror, making the scene all the more disturbing and ridiculous. Listen to the alliteration and consonance here:

> then garrotted the girl behind him
> (the one with grotty hair)

The line simply *sounds* over the top, adding to the sense that this is a gruesome satire; it's not meant to be realistic. These are also notably harsh sounds, making it easy to imagine the teacher growling with rage (making "grr" noises) as he strangles this poor girl. Notice, too, how similar the words "garrotted" and "grotty" are: this suggests that the girl is killed *because* she doesn't take good care of her personal appearance. In other words, her standards fall short of what this teacher expects from his class; he feels disrespected.

Of course, this is all patently unfair—however frustrated the teacher may be, these children don't deserve to die. The teacher's punishments clearly don't fit the crime, and that's part of the point: the poem is satirizing the use of violence as a form of discipline by taking it to an absolutely absurd extreme.

LINES 13-16

Then sword in ...
... feet or toes'

Another stanza, another terrible series of murders! The

teacher suddenly has a "sword in hand" (the weapon's appearance seemingly out of nowhere adding to the surreal, satirical atmosphere of the poem). He proceeds to "hack[]" his way through throw rows of students as though cutting his way through a dense forest, indiscriminately chopping down any limbs that get in his way.

The poem again turns to alliteration to capture the frantic scene:

> Then sword in hand he hacked his way

Try saying this out loud and notice how those /h/ sounds create a sense of heaving breath (and perhaps even the whoosh of a big metal sword swinging through the air). As with earlier in the poem, such intense bursts of sound patterning add to the cartoon-like atmosphere and create a sense of suspended reality.

Indeed, this murderous teacher is clearly enjoying himself. He's even come up with his own witty catchphrase to go with this particular weapon:

> 'First come, first severed' he declared
> 'fingers, feet or toes'

Here, the teacher puns on the phrase "first come, first served" (meaning the first to arrive will be the first to receive what they've come for, e.g., food; school dinner halls would be a good example of a place that operates a "first come, first served" system).

The word "served" also relates to the teacher's normal purpose—to *serve* his pupils through educating them (not massacring them!). He gleefully adapts "served" to "severed," chopping body parts off (i.e., severing them) as he goes.

LINES 17-20

He threw the ...
... with his game

The "chattering rows" in stanza 4 aren't the only kids to die by the teacher's sword. It's as though the teacher is eliminating all the aspects of teaching that frustrate him one by one. Having cut down the noisy troublemakers and the girl with greasy hair, now it's time to wipe out another of his pet peeves: a student arriving to class late. The teacher, as if possessed by superhuman killing powers, throws that sword at this "latecomer"; it hits its target "with deadly aim."

Latecomer dispatched, the teacher pulls out his next deadly weapon: a shotgun, which he'll use to continue "with his game." In calling all this violence and murder a mere "game," the poem reveals that the teacher is having fun; it's immensely satisfying to him to release his frustrations with his students in this way. The poem is at once lambasting the horror of corporal punishment and creating a dark, satirical fantasy of a teacher's revenge.

The poem keeps up its musical rhyme scheme here: "aim" rhymes fully with "game." The meter remains chipper as well, continuing to consist mostly of iambs (da-DUMs) and anapests (da-da-DUMs):

> He threw | the sword | at a late- | comer
> it struck | with dead- | ly aim
> then pul- | ling out | a shotgun
> he contin- |ued with | his game

This galloping, rising rhythm—moving for the most part from unstressed beats to stressed beats—is bouncy and lighthearted, contrasting surreally with the poem's grisly subject matter.

LINES 21-24

The first blast ...
... plug's pulled out

In line 21, the teacher proceeds to use the shotgun he just pulled out to murder an entire row of children:

> The first blast cleared the backrow

Notice how that alliteration of plosive /b/ sounds evokes the blast of a shotgun as the teacher targets another source of his frustrations: those students on the back-row who tend not to do any work (to "skive" means to avoid work or shirk one's responsibilities).

The poem then uses its first and only simile to describe the shotgun victims falling to the ground "like rubber dinghies when the plug's pulled out." A rubber dinghy is a small, inflatable boat; the speaker is saying that the shotgun blast punctures holes in these children and makes them crumple to the floor. It's an image that is intentionally, horribly absurd and also darkly comic, heightening the poem's surreal atmosphere. The /p/ and /s/ sounds in "collapsed" and "plug's pulled out" bring this terrible, ridiculous image to life, mimicking the hiss of air escaping from a popped balloon.

(A quick reminder here that McGough is British, not American, and this poem was written before many of the horrific U.S. school shootings of the late 1990s and 2000s; the reference to such murders undoubtedly sounds less comically far-fetched today than it did when the poem first came out.)

LINES 25-28

'Please may I ...
... temple and fired

One of the teacher's (understandably) terrified students makes a quite reasonable request to leave the room. This request seems polite enough (the boy says "please," after all!) and the

child is "trembling" with fear. Yet the teacher clearly has no sympathy; he sees the student as a "vandal"—someone who destroys property (perhaps this boy has been scribbling on the desks!).

The teacher deliberately, cruelly misinterprets the boy, allowing him to metaphorically "leave" by shooting him in the head. Ironically, then, the teacher grants the boy his wish: the boy *does* exit the classroom, but only in the sense that he is no longer alive.

As with the punny "first come, first severed" line in stanza 4, these darkly witty moments make the poem at once funnier, more horrifying, and more absurd. It's like the speaker has pre-planned phrases deployed at just the right time, designed to make his killing spree even more fun (for himself, of course).

LINES 29-32

The Head popped ...
... in a grenade

If readers had been thinking that anyone would come by and stop this carnage, they learn in stanza 8 that they're sorely mistaken. Now, the school's "Head" (a.k.a. the headteacher, a.k.a. the principal) pokes his head into the classroom to see what's causing such a commotion. But instead of intervening and trying to save the children, the Head just nods approvingly at what's going on—and then adds to the chaos by "toss[ing] in a grenade" into the fray!

Consonance and assonance of popping /p/ and thudding /d/ sounds make a lot of noise in this stanza, representing the carnage of the classroom and the boom of that grenade:

> The Head popped a head round the doorway
> [...] din was being made
> nodded understandingly
> then tossed in a grenade

Also note the antanaclasis of line 29, with the repetition of "Head"/"head." Together, all these devices make the poem once again sound eerily lighthearted and gleeful. No adults here, it's clear, actually care about the students' well-being. They're treated like a bunch of hardened criminals rather than kids.

Though this is another darkly comic moment, it does implicitly take aim at the *system* of education itself. The headteacher is meant to ensure his teachers provide valuable lessons to the students, engaging their curiosity and sparking their imaginations. Here, the only sparks going off are the officially approved explosions.

LINES 33-36

And when the ...
... in the air

By the ninth stanza, the teacher's killing spree has finally come to an end. His ammo is "well spent," a phrase that puns on "spent" meaning both finished and used to good effect (just as money can be "well spent"). In other words, he's delighted with his work.

Now, the poem starts to disarm the reader, presenting images that are surprisingly solemn when compared to the rest of the poem. There is "blood on every chair," for one thing, showing that no student has escaped the carnage. The speaker continues:

> Silence shuffled forward
> with its hands up in the air

In other words, it's finally quiet, with no noisy kids left to irritate the teacher. It's a haunting image, the horror of what's just happened hanging in the air like a ghost.

Also note how the poem personifies "Silence" here, treating it like a terrified child coming forward with its "hands up in the air"—a gesture of surrender. Silence was, ultimately, what the teacher wanted, but readers are left to wonder if a terrified silence is really any kind of win. Surely, the teacher has failed his main purpose: the room may be quiet, but that's only because there's no one left to *teach*.

The whispery sibilance and muffled /f/ sounds here ("Silence shuffled") capture this eery, sudden emptiness. It's as if a space has opened for the reader to contemplate what they've just read.

LINES 37-40

The teacher surveyed ...
... lesson' he said

In the final stanza, the teacher looks out admiringly upon the "carnage" he's created. All of his students are either "dying" or "dead"; no one has escaped his wrath. The polyptoton of "dying"/"dead," with their repetition of that heavy /d/ sound, adds weighty solemnity to this moment.

The teacher then addresses the classroom one final time, wagging "a finger" seriously and saying, "Now that be a lesson." This is a deeply ironic moment: a "lesson" implies that students have learned something, but this "lesson" has left the students unable to learn anything at all (because they're dead). The speaker may have vented his frustration, but he certainly hasn't done his job!

If the poem, as the epigraph promised, is questioning whether corporal punishment belongs in the classroom, then this final stanza implies an answer: no, it doesn't. While the violence in this poem is taken to the extreme, it's meant to make readers uncomfortable with the idea of physical punishment for such minor transgressions as talking in class or arriving late. After all, these are just kids—not criminals! And in the end, the poem implies that the terror inherent to corporal punishment is not

conducive to actual *learning*. Bored, rowdy students and exasperated teachers are very real problems, but the poem suggests that violence is no way to fix things.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is part of what makes the language of "The Lesson" sound playful and, at times, almost cartoonish. This showy, musical alliteration is starkly at odds with the horror being described, and it thus adds to the poem's satirical tone.

Alliteration also helps bring the poem to life on the page. For example, the sharp /k/ sounds of "Chaos," "OK," and "classroom" in line 1 create lots of *poetic* noise to evoke the noisy classroom (note that the "K" of "OK" is a stressed syllable, and thus can be counted as an example of alliteration!).

Later, the harsh /g/ sounds of "garrotted," "girl," and "grotty" evoke the speaker's anger and aggression. Combined with the /r/ consonance ("garrotted," "girl," "grotty"), it sounds almost as if the teacher is growling in his frenzy.

The poem continues with this pattern, matching sound to weapon in line 13: "Then sword in hand he hacked his way." Thanks to all that breathy /h/ alliteration, it's not hard to hear a sword swishing through the air! Next, the fricative /f/ sounds of "First come, first severed [...] fingers, feet or toes" make these lines seem even more darkly comic and absurd; the teacher sounds like the bad guy in a cartoon. And in the sixth stanza, when the teacher has moved on to using a shotgun, the plosive /b/ alliteration of "blast" and "backrow" evoke the explosive boom of that gun.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Chaos," "classroom"
- **Line 10:** "throttled," "then," "there"
- **Line 11:** "then," "garrotted," "girl"
- **Line 12:** "grotty"
- **Lines 13-13:** "hand he hacked / his"
- **Line 15:** "First," "first"
- **Line 16:** "fingers," "feet"
- **Line 21:** "blast," "backrow"
- **Line 24:** "plug's pulled"
- **Line 38:** "dying," "dead"
- **Line 40:** "let," "lesson"

ASSONANCE

Assonance is a fairly rare feature of "The Lesson"—consonance and alliteration do most of the sound work.

When there is assonance, it helps bring the teacher's (imaginary) killing spree to life on the page. Take the chiming /o/ vowel in lines 11 and 12, for example:

> then garrotted the girl behind him
> (the one with grotty hair)

Though quite far apart, these two words are so similar that they seem interlinked (alliterating /g/s and consonant /r/s and /t/s help too). And, in fact they are, because the teacher seems to strangle the girl in part because of her "grotty hair" (her unkempt appearance).

In line 13, the teacher kills his next victim with a sword: "Then sword in hand he hacked his way[.]" These /a/ vowels are brash and loud, especially when combined with the alliterating /h/ sounds. This suggests violence and frenzied action.

Finally, check out the /o/ assonance in stanza eight:

> The Head popped a head round the doorway
> to see why a din was being made
> nodded understandingly
> then tossed in a grenade

These /o/s are breezy, playful and musical, which seems (intentionally) at odds with the sheer horror of what's happening. They mirror the principal's own casual attitude towards the massacre, which to him is perfectly reasonable.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "in," "din"
- **Line 11:** "garrotted"
- **Line 12:** "grotty"
- **Line 29:** "popped"
- **Line 31:** "nodded"
- **Line 32:** "tossed"

CONSONANCE

Consonance, like alliteration, makes the poem's language sound over-the-top and adds to its dark, playful sense of humor.

Listen, for example, to the crisp /k/, liquid /l/, and plosive /p/ sounds of lines 23-24:

> they collapsed like rubber dinghies
> when the plug's pulled out

This consonance combines with a couple /s/ and /z/ sounds to evoke the *pop* and *hiss* of a balloon (or rubber dinghy) being punctured. The bright, ear-catching sounds make the simile seem all the more silly and absurd. The speaker is describing something terrible, but using language that sounds positively chipper.

By contrast, the sibilance of line 35's "Silence shuffled forward" captures the surreal change in atmosphere. Once the teacher's massacre is over, an eery hush falls over the classroom.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Chaos," "OK," "classroom"
- **Line 3:** "nooligans ignored"
- **Line 4:** "voice," "lost," "in," "din"
- **Line 10:** "throttled," "then," "there"
- **Line 11:** "garrotted," "girl"
- **Line 12:** "grotty"
- **Line 13:** "hand he hacked his"
- **Line 14:** "between," "chattering"
- **Line 15:** "First," "first"
- **Line 16:** "fingers, feet"
- **Line 21:** "first blast," "backrow"
- **Line 22:** "skive"
- **Line 23:** "collapsed," "like"
- **Line 24:** "plug's pulled"
- **Line 29:** "Head popped," "head round," "doorway"
- **Line 30:** "din," "made"
- **Line 31:** "nodded understandingly"
- **Line 32:** "tossed," "grenade"
- **Line 33:** "was well"
- **Line 35:** "Silence shuffled," "forward"
- **Line 38:** "dying," "dead"
- **Line 40:** "let," "lesson"

ENJAMBMENT

Because "The Lesson" doesn't use punctuation at the end of its lines, it's not always clear whether certain lines are really enjambed or not. Many lines that *look* enjambed actually feature complete, independent clauses in terms of their grammar/syntax. Take lines 17-18:

> He threw the sword at a latecomer
> it struck with deadly aim

There's no comma, semicolon, or period to indicate a pause after "latecomer," but both lines here are complete, standalone sentences—and thus not truly enjambed. The lack of punctuation here and elsewhere, however, gives the poem a sense of frenzied panic overall. There's a sort of tense confusion throughout the poem: having no terminal punctation suggests that readers should barrel onward, even as the actual grammar of many lines implies that readers should pause before jumping to the next line. Readers might not be sure what to do, at once feeling frozen in place and like they have to move (perhaps like the terrified students themselves).

There are some clearer moments of enjambment in the poem as well, which we've highlighted in this guide. Take the first slaying, for example, which happens in lines 9-10:

> He picked on a boy who was shouting
> and throttled him then and there

This enjambment creates an element of surprise, a moment of anticipation as readers wonder what the teacher is going to do to this shouting boy.

Elsewhere enjambment creates a sense of swift, horrible momentum, as in lines 13-14:

> Then sword in hand he hacked his way
> between the chattering rows

And lines 23-24:

> they collapsed like rubber dinghies
> when the plug's pulled out

In both instances, the poem pushes readers across the line break in a way that might mimic the unstoppable hacking of the teacher's sword of the terrible deflation of those collapsing students.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "classroom / as"
- **Lines 9-10:** "shouting / and"
- **Lines 13-14:** "way / between"
- **Lines 19-20:** "shotgun / he"
- **Lines 23-24:** "dinghies / when"
- **Lines 29-30:** "doorway / to"
- **Lines 35-36:** "forward / with"

IRONY

This is a darkly comic poem that uses irony throughout in order to make a serious point about the ineffectiveness of violence as a form of discipline.

Most obviously, there's an overarching situational irony to the poem: in his attempt to teach his students a "lesson," the teacher makes it impossible for these students to learn anything at all. The teacher becomes violent because he's frustrated at the disrespect and lack of attention in his classroom; he couldn't teach while his voice was once "lost in the din" of rowdy children, yet now that his voice can be heard, there's no one left to *listen* to it.

The teacher's language throughout the poem adds to this irony. When he says he's going to teach his students "a lesson" they'll "never forget," this line doubles as a euphemism for revenge. And in a way, he's right: the students will "never forget" this lesson because, in death, they'll never be capable of "forgetting" anything ever again (of course, they won't be able to *remember* anything ever again either). He repeats this sentiment in the poem's final line: "'Now let that be a lesson' he said." Whatever "lesson" he hoped to impart is short-lived; the dead can't learn.

In the end, this irony emphasizes that violence isn't an effective

tactic for this teacher. It may have let him vent his frustration, but it has resulted in there being no one left to teach (nor, for that matter, to grant him the respect he apparently desires). Taken as an allegory for the use of corporal punishment in schools, the poem suggests that violence only silences and terrifies kids, making them clam up in fear rather than open themselves up to actual learning.

(It's also worth noting that it was written in the 1970s, before the many high-profile school shootings of more recent years; the poem's events undoubtedly felt more far-fetched when the poem was written.)

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-8:** "'The theme for today is violence / and homework will be set / I'm going to teach you a lesson / one that you'll never forget'"
- **Lines 25-28:** "'Please may I leave the room sir? ' / a trembling vandal enquired / 'Of course you may' said teacher / put the gun to his temple and fired"
- **Lines 37-40:** "The teacher surveyed the carnage / the dying and the dead / He waggled a finger severely / 'Now let that be a lesson' he said"

PERSONIFICATION

The poem features one example of personification. In the second-to-last stanza, after the teacher's horrific killing spree is complete, the speaker says:

> Silence shuffled forward
> with its hands up in the air

The room is completely quiet for once, now that all the loud, unruly children are either dead or dying. The speaker personifies this silence, treating it like any other student ambling forward with "its hands up in the air" in a gesture of surrender. The teacher has effectively won: silence is what he wanted. And yet, treating silence like a living being might remind readers that there are no *actual* students left alive in this classroom. The room is quiet, but there's no one around to listen to the teacher's lesson.

Personifying silence also makes it seem almost like a hostage, as though even silence itself is now terrified of the teacher and what he might do. In this way, this image suggests that corporal punishment turns school into a kind of war zone that leaves students terrified and on edge rather than ready to learn.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 35-36:** "Silence shuffled forward / with its hands up in the air"

PUN

Roger McGough's poetry is full of puns and play-on-words, and "The Lesson" is no exception. These puns add levity and absurdity to the poem, reminding the reader not to take the poem—and the terrifying events it describes—too seriously.

The first pun appears in the fourth stanza, as the teacher is hacking "his way / between the chattering rows" of students:

> 'First come, first severed' he declared
> 'fingers, feet or toes'

The teacher is punning on the phrase "first come, first served," which means whoever arrives first will get served first (e.g., at a school cafeteria). In his own murderous twist, the teacher changes "served" to "severed," ironically acting as if he is doing the students a favor by slicing off their limbs. The pun highlights the unhinged glee the teacher takes in getting revenge on his unruly class.

There's another subtle pun (technically, an example of antanaclasis) when the school principal arrives. "The Head popped a head round the doorway," the speaker says, playing on the British nickname for "headteacher" ("Head"). That is, "The Head" pops his literally "head" in the room to see what's happening. It's an intentionally silly bit of wordplay that highlights the absurdity of the scene. At the same time, it subtly adds to the poem's grotesque focus on violence and severed body parts.

Once the massacre is over, the poem describes the ammo as "well spent" (line 33). This is a bit of a pun as well: the ammo is "spent" as in *finished*, and "well spent" as in *used to good effect*. It's another absurdly lighthearted moment in the midst of sheer horror, demonstrating the teacher's approval of his own work.

Where Pun appears in the poem:

- **Line 15:** "'First come, first severed' he declared"
- **Line 29:** "The Head popped a head round the doorway"
- **Line 33:** "And when the ammo was well spent"

SIMILE

There is just one simile in the poem, falling in the sixth stanza after the teacher takes out an entire row of children with his shotgun blast:

> they collapsed like rubber dinghies
> when the plug's pulled out

The speaker is describing what the students looked like as they crumple to the floor after being shot. A rubber dingy is a small, inflatable boat, one that will quickly deflate if its airtight plug is "pulled out." The plosive /p/ consonance here evokes the pop as these "dinghies" suddenly lose their air.

This is an intentionally strange, surreal simile—one that's meant to be funny, both shocking the reader and reminding them that the whole poem is a satirical fantasy. It's also worth noting that dinghies are often used as emergency vessels, so mentioning them here might make the scene feel more drastic and frantic too.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 23-24:** "they collapsed like rubber dinghies / when the plug's pulled out"

VOCABULARY

Ruled OK (Line 1) - Was in charge. Reference to old graffiti trope (e.g., "Joe rules OK!").

Nooligans (Line 3) - Troublemakers; hooligans.

Din (Line 4) - Loud noise or commotion.

Throttled (Lines 9-10) - Choked.

Garrotted (Line 11) - Choked with a wire or rope.

Grotty (Line 12) - Unkempt/dirty.

Hacked (Line 13) - Cut forcefully or wildly.

Chattering (Line 14) - This can refer to talking casually or teeth knocking against each other (as in fear).

Those who skive (Lines 21-22) - Those who avoid doing any work/paying attention.

Rubber dinghies (Line 23) - Small, inflatable boats.

Vandal (Line 26) - Someone who destroys or defaces someone else's property.

Temple (Line 28) - The side of the head.

The Head (Line 29) - The headteacher (a.k.a the principal).

Surveyed (Line 37) - Looked out upon.

Carnage (Line 37) - Death and destruction.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Lesson" has a simple, steady form: its 40 lines are broken up into 10 quatrains (a.k.a. four-line stanzas). Quatrains are very common in poetry, and this regular form adds to the poem's light, breezy feel.

These quatrains also resemble imperfect ballad stanzas (in that they use a common ABCB rhyme scheme and alternating lines of rough trimeter and tetrameter; more on that in the Rhyme Scheme and Meter sections of this guide). Such stanzas are traditionally used to tell stories and are also linked with nursery rhymes and hymns.

Thus even as the speaker is describing something utterly horrific, the poem itself remains normal and predictable. That creates a surreal tension between form and subject.

METER

"The Lesson" uses a loose rising meter. That means, for the most part, the poem tends to use feet that move from unstressed syllables to stressed syllables—feet like the iamb (da-DUM) or anapest (da-da-DUM). While there are occasionally other kinds of feet in the poem, this generally lends things a sense of lighthearted, forward momentum.

The odd-numbered lines are also usually a beat or two longer than even-numbered lines, creating a kind of see-sawing, back and forth feel. Finally, most (but not all) odd-numbered lines have feminine endings (they end with a dangling unstressed beat), whereas most (but not all) even-numbered lines have masculine endings (they end with a stressed beat).

Overall, one might call this a very loose mixture of iambic trimeter and tetrameter (lines with three or fours iambs a piece). It looks a bit like it's using ballad meter (albeit irregularly).

As an example of all this, check out the meter of stanzas 2 and 3—note that most of the feet are iambs, with a fair number of anapests tossed in:

'The theme | for today | is vio- | lence
and home- | work will | be set
I'm go- | ing to teach | you a les- | son
one that | you'll ne- | ver forget'
He picked | on a boy | who was shout- | ing
and throt- | tled him then | and there
then garrot- | ted the girl | behind | him
(the one | with grot- | ty hair)

There's a strong sense of forward momentum here, as well as a generally playful, musical sound. The bouncy cadence contrasts with the poem's grisly subject matter, reminding readers that this is satire.

RHYME SCHEME

"The Lesson" has a regular rhyme scheme, with each stanza running ABCB. In other words, the second and fourth lines of each stanza rhyme, as in stanza 1:

[...] classroom A
[...] in B
[...] him C
[...] din B

This is the rhyme scheme of a ballad stanza (though the meter of this poem is very irregular), and it thus might call to mind the musical cadence of folk tales and hymns. The steady,

predictable pattern adds to the poem's light-hearted and jokey tone.

SPEAKER

The speaker in "The Lesson" is an anonymous narrator, relaying the story of this frustrated, maniacal teacher without comment. This is part of what makes the poem sound so absurd: the speaker describes what's happening during the teacher's massacre while remaining unobtrusive and detached. There's a notable *lack* of any moralizing on the speaker's part, which makes the poem all the more shocking (and, for many readers, darkly funny).

SETTING

The poem takes place in a classroom, perhaps somewhere in England (given the use of the word "Head" to refer to the school principal). The poem takes place in the modern day, or close to it, at least; the teacher's weapons span the ancient (the sword) to the contemporary (the shotgun), and the poem was written in the 1970s.

Readers can also gather that this classroom is a rowdy place, filled with students who chit-chat through lessons, show up late, or shirk their studies in the "backrow." On the one hand, the setting is totally normal: classrooms are often noisy places filled with rambunctious students.

At the same, the poem's language heightens this setting for comic effect: "Chaos rule[s]" the classroom like a ruthless king, while the fact that that teacher must "bravely" enter this space makes it sound like a dangerous warzone. The teacher's massacre is, of course, another example of heightening something comparatively mundane: he's taking corporal punishment to an absolutely absurd extreme. The poem is intentionally ridiculous in order to make a point: in reality, classrooms are far from warzones, and violence has no place in them.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Roger McGough is a contemporary British poet, playwright, children's author, and former school teacher known for his distinctive sense of humor and playful use of language. Born in 1937 in the outskirts of Liverpool, a port city in England, McGough was also a leading member of the Liverpool Poets. This group, which included Brian Patten and Adrian Henri, was strongly influenced by the American Beat poets of 1960s, particularly in their irreverence, humor, free-flowing verse, and references to everyday life in their work. The Liverpool Poets achieved considerable success with the publication of the group collection *The Mersey Sound* in 1967.

"The Lesson," comes McGough's 1973 book *In the Glassroom*. Primarily aimed at children, the collection is full of the dark, absurdist humor and wit on display in "The Lesson." McGough has written numerous other books for children, as well as a number of poems focused on the dynamic between kids and adults.

"The Lesson" has been the subject of occasional controversy since publication and even banned from some schools. In 2002, for example, a group of parents in New South Wales, Australia, demanded the poem be removed from textbooks; the government refused.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Britain in the 1970s was marked by class tensions, workers' strikes, and protest movements. 1970s Liverpool was particularly poverty-stricken, suffering from economic decline and joblessness. On the other hand, it was also a city rich in wit and culture, famously birthing the Beatles in the decade prior.

There was also a fierce debate raging throughout this decade about the goals and methods of education. Some favored a return to stricter methods of discipline in schools, while others argued for more modern, even experimental approaches. An estimated 10,000 students staged a protest in 1972 outside the Houses of Parliament, marching through the streets with placards reading "No to the Cane" (the cane was one of the preferred methods of administering punishment). Corporal punishment (the use of physical violence as a way of disciplining misbehaving pupils) wasn't fully outlawed until 1986, and privately funded schools didn't banish the practice for another 10 years or so.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- "British End School Caning" — A 1986 New York Times article discussing Britain's passage of a ban on corporal punishment in schools. (https://www.nytimes.com/1986/07/24/world/british-end-school-caning.html)
- "No to the Cane" Protest Photos — Take a look at images from the day 10,000 British students protested against the use of capital punishment in the classroom. (https://vintagenewsdaily.com/no-to-the-cane-pictures-of-british-school-children-went-on-strike-in-london-may-1972/)
- McGough's Advice for Young Poets — Watch the poet talk about his own craft and how young people might find a way into writing poetry. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tCuxM-YtHkI)

- School in 1970s Britain — Check out some documentary footage of the education system around the time the poem was written. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tabin-9v6S4)
- "A Life in Poetry: Roger McGough" — The poet looks back on his life and literary career for The Guardian newspaper. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/aug/22/poetry-roger-mcgough)

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