The Man-Moth

SUMMARY

The phrase "Man-Moth" was a typo that appeared in a newspaper instead of the word "mammoth."

Seen from above, worn, threadbare moonlight illuminates cracks in the buildings. Man's entire shadow is barely the size of the bowler hat he's wearing; it has shrunk down to his feet, looking like a little display platform for a doll. He is like a pin standing up on one end, and it's as if the moon were a powerful magnet keeping him upright. He can't see the moon, but he notices the strange effect it has. He can feel the moon's strange light on his hands even though that light isn't hot or cold (it has no temperature a thermometer could pick up, anyway).

But whenever the Man-Moth comes to the surface (which he doesn't do often), he sees the moon differently. He crawls up from under the lip of the sidewalk and nervously begins to climb up the sides of buildings. He believes that the moon is actually a small opening, like a porthole or a manhole, and, as a result, thinks the sky can't really keep him safe. The Man-Moth is frightened, but he has to get as close as he can to check things out for himself.

He climbs, anxiously, up the side of the buildings, his long shadow following behind him like the cloth used by an old-school photographer, all along believing that *this time* he will be able to poke his small head through the crisp hole of the moon and then squeeze through, like ribbons of black being squeezed from a tube. (Man, who keeps both his feet on the ground below the Man-Moth, doesn't imagine any of this.) Even though the Man-Moth is afraid, he has to persevere—in fact, he has to keep going *because* he is afraid. Naturally, though, he falls short and tumbles back down to the ground. He's shaken, but not injured.

The Man-Moth goes back underground into the cement subway tunnels, where he lives. He darts here and there, but it still feels like he's moving too slowly as he climbs into the silent subway car. The doors shut quickly. The Man-Moth always chooses to sit backwards (ie., facing away from the direction the train is moving in), and the train hurtles forward from a standstill, without having to gradually speed up at all. Sitting backwards, the Man-Moth can't tell how fast he's going.

Every night he has to let the train carry him through the manmade subway tunnels and dream the same dreams. These dreams come to him again and again, like the train tracks repeating underneath the train. He can't look out the window: the electrified third rail is always there beside him, like a drink of poison. He thinks he's inherited a vulnerability to thoughts like these, the way that some people are vulnerable to certain diseases. He has to keep his hands in his pockets just in case, the way the other people keep their hands inside of mufflers.

If you find the Man-Moth, shine a flashlight in his eye. There's no iris; it's all black, like the night sky, his lid like the horizon, which constricts as he squints back at you and then shuts his eye. Then, a single tear slips out—it's the only thing he owns, just as a stinger is all a bee has to offer. He craftily hides it in his hand, and if you're not watching closely, he'll eat it. But if you are paying attention, he'll give it to you; it's like cold, fresh spring water.

THEMES

THE ISOLATION AND LONELINESS OF URBAN LIFE

Bishop's poem, which tells the story of a shy creature called the "Man-Moth," comments on the hollowness and alienation of modern urban life. The Man-Moth lives a lonely life underground and creeps out from underneath the sidewalk at night, drawn by a futile desire to climb up to the moon. Life on the surface, however, seems no more vibrant or welcoming than the subterranean home to which the Man-Moth inevitably retreats alone in failure. The poem suggests that this desolation and repetitiveness are typical of modern cities, which push people to disengage from the world and from each other.

The poem describes a city that seems desolate and decrepit. Despite its modern features (tall buildings, fast underground trains, "artificial tunnels") the city itself seems "battered" and worn; the buildings are laced with "cracks." The poem's imagery suggests that this metropolis, and perhaps urban life in general, is uninspiring and depressing—a crumbling facade covering up a meaningless existence. This isn't an inspiring city of the future but rather a place that has ground down its residents; "Man," unlike the Man-Moth, harbors no "illusions" and makes no attempt to escape.

The Man-Moth's visits to the surface are "rare," and he spends his nights riding "silent trains" through the "pale subways of cement he calls his home." The train's silence and pallor again suggest that this city is cold, lifeless, and unfriendly. The Man-Moth doesn't hear the voices of the other passengers or of the train announcer; it's as if he lives in a bubble and is used to going unnoticed and unseen. Indeed, the Man-Moth intentionally "seats himself facing the wrong way," cutting himself off from his surroundings. His solitude might suggest that the pace and technologies of the modern world discourage reflection and connection.

The fact that the train also moves "swiftly" and with "full, terrible speed" supports this idea. Like the train, modern life

doesn't allow for "a shift in gears or a gradation of any sort." It barrels forward regardless of one's comfort or ability to adapt. And outside the subway windows, the underground tunnels are a rushing blur and the Man-Moth cannot tell how fast he is traveling "backwards." Literally, he's backward because he's sitting in the wrong direction; symbolically, however, this implies that he's not making any *progress*, not moving towards any meaningful destination. His rushed yet pointless journey might evoke the hollowness of busy urban existence, in which people rush to and from jobs that don't matter day in and day out.

Because the city offers neither purpose nor connection, the Man-Moth withdraws. Perhaps the modern world actually *encourages* people to retreat further from the world like the Man-Moth, to the point that they, too, begin to seem not quite human.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8
- Lines 11-13
- Lines 17-22
- Lines 25-32
- Lines 33-40

FAILURE, DESPAIR, AND SELF-DESTRUCTION

The Man-Moth believes that the moon is actually a hole in the sky, and he repeatedly tries—and fails—to reach it. On one level, the Man-Moth's persistent attempts to climb to the moon might be read as an inspiring testament to the power of hope. At the same time, however, these attempts might represent a futile desire for fulfillment or escape that leaves the Man-Moth trapped in a self-destructive cycle of disappointment and despair.

If the Man-Moth could just reach the moon, he thinks he'll be able to see beyond, and perhaps even leave, the grim city in which he lives. He's never even come close, but that doesn't matter. Although he has failed many times before, the Man-Moth believes that "this time, he will manage / to push his small head through that clean round opening" and break through to the other side. The speaker notes that "he fails, of course," highlighting both the futility and the relentlessness of his efforts.

Each night, after failing to reach the moon, the Man-Moth rides the subway plagued by thoughts of self-destruction, suggesting that his disappointment makes him want to disengage with life altogether. He gets on the train as fast as he can, apparently eager to leave the surface world behind. He "dares not look out the window," acutely aware of the deadly "third rail, the unbroken draught of poison," that "runs there beside him." These lines suggest that he feels drawn to the rail and the possibility of death it represents. (The mention of "poison" might also allude to Elizabeth Bishops's own self-destructive habits—namely, alcoholism—and convey the overwhelming urge to escape or numb the pain of disappointment.)

Afraid of risking self-destruction, the Man-Moth doesn't allow himself to touch or interact with his surroundings: "He has to keep / his hands in his pockets." Doing so might stop him from hurting himself, but it further limits his opportunities for connection and makes his loneliness even more complete.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 9-16
- Lines 17-24
- Lines 25-32
- Lines 33-40

AMBITION AND PERSEVERANCE

Whenever he visits the surface, the Man-Moth "must investigate" the moon. Although it frightens him to climb so high, he keeps pursuing his dream and picking himself back up after he (inevitably) fails. In this way, the poem can be taken as a commentary on ambition, perseverance, and the elusiveness of success. The Man-Moth's actions illustrate the courage, foolishness, and loneliness of dreamers—those who seek unreachable goals, and who persist in trying to achieve the impossible.

The poem presents the moon as a mysterious and distant figure whose pull is like a magnet, tugging "Man" upright like "an inverted pin." Even though Man "does not see" it, the moon has an undeniable power over him. Her "vast properties" are intangible and defy thermometers, but Man can still feel "the queer light on his hands." The moon might represent some great unreachable goal that ordinary people are only dimly aware of but can't conceptualize, let alone try to reach.

The Man-Moth, however, *does* see the moon, and it "looks rather different to him." He may be an outcast, but it seems that his separation from the regular world allows him to see the ordinary world in a "different" light.

Thinking that the moon is a hole in the sky, he has a fantastical idea of what will happen when he finally is able to "push his small head through that round clean opening." He "trembles" as he "nervously" scales the buildings but "must investigate as high as he can climb." For dreamers like the Man-Moth, ambition is greater than fear. In fact, fear can be a sign that they're honoring their deepest desires. As the speaker says, "what the Man-Moth fears most he must do."

Failure, however, is inevitable: "of course," the speaker says, the Man-Moth always falls back to earth. But the Man-Moth is relentlessly hopeful and begins each climb believing "that this time he will manage" to reach the sky.

The speaker isn't necessarily making a value judgment, and the poem neither celebrates nor condemns the Man-Moth's quest. His ambition seems both admirable and foolish, and he's also a lonely figure. Perhaps the poem suggests that being a dreamer or idealist isn't just endlessly self-defeating, then, but also isolating; there's no one to share in the Man-Moth's dream. "Man," for instance, "has no such illusions"—no time for toying with fantasies or impossible goals. The Man-Moth is in this by himself.

The poem thus dramatizes the poignant beauty, pain, and disappointment of trying to achieve the unachievable—of dreaming the impossible dream. Readers and critics have taken the moon to represent all kinds of things: art, love, spirituality, self-realization. But however readers decide to interpret the moon as a symbol, the poem illustrates the alienation of longing for something that's forever out of reach.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 3-8
- Lines 9-16
- Lines 17-24

ARTISTIC CREATION AND COMPULSION

Parts of "The Man-Moth" seem to represent the fraught process of artistic creation. Readers might think of the Man-Moth and his compulsion to climb toward the moon as a stand-in for the artist who attempts to achieve something great, meaningful, and lasting. Being an artist, in this reading of the poem, requires overcoming fear ("what the Man-Moth fears most he must do") and persevering in the face of certain failure (falling short of one's artistic vision, say). The Man-Moth commits to his task over and over again; although it seems he has no other choice, he still believes that this time, "he will manage."

The Man-Moth's persistent attempts to reach the moon might represent the desire to achieve an artistic goal—perhaps to write something meaningful or create something new. The Man-Moth, like many an artist, is a societal outsider with a unique point of view ("the moon looks rather different to him"). The speaker even compares him to an old-school photographer as he climbs, "his shadow dragging like a photographer's cloth behind him." The Man-Moth believes that the moon is like a porthole he can look through to see beyond what is known and accepted. He wants to push past the limits of his own imagination and glimpse the other side.

The climb is also something the Man-Moth has to do alone—a fact that could reflect the inherent vulnerability of making art. Perhaps reflecting on your thoughts and desires, or exploring the dark corners of your psyche, and confronting the likelihood of failure aren't so different from scaling a skyscraper.

The process isn't easy. If anything, it's a test of courage and resolve as well as skill. And given that the reader knows the moon is not, in fact, a hole in the sky, the whole endeavor seems downright foolish and delusional—but the Man-Moth/artist does it anyway. In saying that "Man, standing below him, has no such illusions," the poem perhaps suggests that being an artist is a delusional, frightening prospect, yet it's also something that artists can't help but pursue. The Man-Moth doesn't just decide, again and again, to climb toward the moon. It's something he "**must** do"; he "must investigate as high as he can climb," pushing himself to the edge of his abilities.

Maybe there's something admirable about the Man-Moth, or maybe his quest is ridiculous and even self-destructive. But the poem suggests that for an artist, their calling is inescapable. And while the Man-Moth will never reach the moon, he does produce something rare and clear: a single tear, "cool as from underground springs and pure enough to drink." Though the Man-Moth is alone, he inspires intimacy and connection when he willingly hands over that tear, "his only possession," for others to sip.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 6-8
- Lines 9-16
- Lines 17-24
- Lines 41-48

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

BEFORE LINE 1

Man-Moth: Newspaper misprint for "mammoth."

This epigraph provides interesting context about the poem's title and its mysterious subject. The strange phrase "Man-Moth," this epigraph reveals, came from a typo in a newspaper for the word "mammoth."

The word "Man-Moth" is thus the result of a mistake, a simple error that radically changed the meaning of a word. Perhaps the Man-Moth himself is also a mistake, a kind of mutant. The typo foreshadows his isolation, separate as he is from the world of both men and moths.

The absurdity of the typo might also hint at the absurdity of modern life in general; a presumably serious article was undercut by this rather hilarious typo. The silliness of this misprint also threatens to cast the Man-Moth's whole endeavor in a ridiculous light: he's essentially a parody of a superhero, a creature whose power isn't fighting crime but rather reflecting the loneliness of existence. By the poem's end, however, readers will likely empathize with this enigmatic creature and his futile yet brave and heartfelt quest to do something impossible.

LINES 1-5

Here, above, ...
... to the moon.

The first lines of the poem position the speaker (and the reader) somewhere up high: "Here, above." Note how this opening line itself is much shorter than those that follow, making it seem suspended "above" the rest of the stanza.

Right away, the poem's rich imagery plunges the reader into a nameless city after dark. The speaker points out that "the buildings," seen from up "above," are cracked, possibly in disrepair. The moonlight that pours down into those cracks is "battered," suggesting that the soft light of the moon is as worn and damaged as the buildings themselves. There's something depressing about this place, its hollowness or brokenness reflected by the condition of its buildings.

From up high, looking down, "Man" casts a shadow that's about the size of a small hat. (Note that the speaker isn't *really* talking about one single man; they're using this one, capital-M "Man" to stand in for all humankind.) The sight of the small, circular shadow beneath his feet makes it look like he's a doll propped up on a little stand.

This imagery suggests that (from the speaker's high-up perspective, at least) humanity's influence (Man's "shadow") has shrunk. Wherever "here" is, people seem to have little agency. Their world is circumscribed, and they have little freedom and nowhere else to go. It's as if, metaphorically, Man is an upside-down pin balancing on one end, with its "point magnetized to the moon." (In line 5, "makes" is used to mean "becomes like"; Man isn't literally crafting a pin.) The moon is like a giant magnet pulling the "point" of this pin upright.

In addition to being a beautiful and eerie image, this phrase first introduces the idea of the moon having a powerful attractive force, its own kind of gravitational pull. In line 5, that pull or attraction is simply the result of magnetism. Man isn't drawn to the moon because it's alluring or beautiful. In fact, as line 6 will reveal, Man doesn't even see the moon at all. Instead, the moon is exerting a force over Man that he doesn't even recognize or understand.

LINES 6-8

He does not ...
... record in thermometers.

In lines 6-7, the speaker sketches the limits of what "Man" can perceive. While he either doesn't notice or can't physically glimpse the moon, he can indirectly "observe" the moon's "properties." Man is bathed in moonlight and can sense its "queer," or strange, "light on his hands."

This is a strange idea: that moonlight might be something a person can touch or sense on their skin. What exactly moonlight feels like is difficult even for the speaker to explain. It has a "temperature" of some sort, but it's neither hot nor cold; its quality defies measurement—at least, measurement by human-made "thermometers."

Note that the speaker personifies the moon as female in these lines: rather than refer to "its vast properties," the speaker says "her vast properties." The moon is frequently invoked in literature as a symbol of mystical, even divine femininity. Here, the speaker implicitly contrasts that version of the moon with the male pronoun "he." That is, the poem positions Man and the moon as *opposites*. Man is earthbound and incurious. He can only indirectly appreciate, in some limited way, the moon's beauty and mystery. This, in turn, sets up the speaker to introduce the Man-Moth, and juxtapose the way that *he* (that is, the Man-Moth) perceives the moon.

LINES 9-16

But when the ...
... he can climb.

The speaker introduces the Man-Moth himself here, saying that he makes "rare, although occasional visits to the surface." This means that he visits on certain *occasions*. And when he does, "the moon looks rather different to him."

The speaker is juxtaposing the Man-Moth's perspective with Man's here. Man does not actually see the moon and can "only" experience its mysteries indirectly; the Man-Moth, by contrast, can see the moon—and it "looks rather different to him."

Interestingly for a poem with no standard meter, this phrase is perfectly iambic:

the moon looks rather different to him.

Iambic meter is like a heartbeat: a regular da-DUM, da-DUM. In a poem without a consistent meter, an iambic line or phrase can feel steadying. Here, it subtly grounds the reader and grants this phase a sense of certainty or truthfulness.

The speaker goes on to describe what happens on these "occasional visits." The Man-Moth slips through "an opening under the edge of one of the sidewalks," and immediately begins to climb up the outside of the buildings. He really does seem to be part man, part moth. He behaves like an insect, able to crawl up through tight spaces and scale buildings, but has the thoughts and feelings of a person.

Climbing up the faces of the buildings makes him "nervous," and he "trembles," but it's something he has to do. The Man-Moth believes that the moon is actually a small hole or the opening of a tunnel. To him, this signifies that the sky is permeable—that things can get in and out, making it "quite useless for protection." He thinks of the sky as something solid, like a ceiling or a dome. If there's a hole in it, then the sky can't stop things from falling through—or, maybe, can't catch the Man-Moth if he were to somehow fall through it.

A hole in the sky also means that something lies *beyond* the

world the Man-Moth knows, and he's compelled to "investigate as high as he can climb." In climbing up the sides of buildings, the Man-Moth seems like a comic book superhero—albeit one with an entirely futile goal.

The final phrase of stanza 2, "but must investigate as high as he can climb," is iambic once again. The steady rhythm of this phrase is driven and methodical, like the Man-Moth resolutely scaling the skyscraper.

LINES 17-21

Up the façades, ...
... on the light.

The Man-Moth continues his ascent up buildings' "façades." This is an architectural term for the outer faces of buildings, but a "façade" also refers more generally to a deceptive, misleading appearance. The speaker's word choice implies that there may be something superficial, or even fake, about this city. The skyscrapers, for example, might seem awe-inspiring, but life in this place certainly isn't.

The speaker uses a simile to liken the Man-Moth's long shadow, flowing behind him as he climbs, to a photographer's cloth. (Early photographers would duck underneath a dark sheet in order to block out extra light while they focused the camera.) The image of the Man-Moth climbing higher and higher as his shadow stretches out in the moonlight behind him has a kind of heroic quality to it. It's the sort of image one can picture in a comic book of a caped superhero scaling a building.

The Man-Moth is nervous, climbing "fearfully." But he's compelled to push through his fear, driven by a belief that "this time he will manage" to complete his goal: to reach the "hole at the top of the sky," poke his head through, and climb out the other side.

The phrase "this time" tells the reader that this is not the first attempt the Man-Moth has made to reach the moon, and there's something admirable about his determination to keep going. Readers might even find the Man-Moth a little inspiring! Since the speaker has already linked the Man-Moth with the figure of a photographer, the opening lines of this stanza 3 might suggest that there's something noble about the artist's pursuit of beauty and truth.

The image of the Man-Moth forcing his body "through" the moon "as from a tube, in black scrolls on the light," might also make readers think of an artist squeezing thick, black paint from a tube. This again suggests that the Man-Moth's quest represents artistic creation.

LINES 22-24

(Man, standing below ...
... but quite unhurt.

It's clear that the Man-Moth fervently believes that something else waits on the other side of the sky. Perhaps he believes that, if he could just reach that bright opening, he could escape the dreary city and discover something new.

But Man, the speaker notes in a parenthetical, "has no such illusions." Once again, the speaker juxtaposes the Man-Moth's perspective with an ordinary person's. The Man-Moth might be naïve and overly optimistic, sure, but Man is cynical and worn down from experience. Man's lack of "illusions" is more realistic and rational, but it's also less hopeful. Man can't let himself even *imagine* that there might be something new and different up in the sky.

The Man-Moth, by contrast, sounds like a dreamer. His behavior seems downright compulsive—he's committed to his impossible dream. He's scared, but that doesn't stop him. In fact, his fear is what pushes him; he must pursue precisely what he "fears most." This might make readers again think of an artist: someone who digs into their pain and who lays bare their vulnerabilities in pursuit of creating something great. Again, though, the Man-Moth's goal is impossible: readers, being human like the "Man" in the poem, have no "illusions" that the Man-Moth can ever reach the moon.

As such, the speaker notes in line 24 that the Man-Moth's failure is unavoidable: "of course" he fails. The consonance in lines 23 and 24 hammer home that sense of inevitability: the /f/ sounds at the start of the verbs "fears," "fails," and "falls" link together this disheartening chain of events. The Man-Moth tumbles back down to the ground, shaken and afraid. But this the not the first time the Man-Moth has fallen short of his goal, and, judging by this stanza, it won't be the last.

LINES 25-28

Then he returns ...
... doors close swiftly.

Having failed in his quest to reach the moon and tumbled back down to earth, the Man-Moth retreats underground, "to the pale subways of cement he calls his home." Note that the Man-Moth only *calls* the subway tunnels his home—it doesn't sound as if there's actually anything very homey about it. The paleness of the subways, as well as the fact that they're made of cement, echoes the visual imagery in stanza 1 that first set the scene: this is a grim and artificial place.

The Man-Moth seems agitated by his failure and is anxious to get off the platform and onto the "silent trains." Consonance evokes the Man-Moth's flapping and fluttering, the soft, muffled /s/, /f/, /l/, and /z/ sounds in lines 26-28 mimicking the soft shushing of his wings:

> to the pale subways of cement he calls his home. He flits,
> he flutters, and cannot get aboard the silent trains
> fast enough to suit him. The doors close swiftly.

The Man-Moth's world accelerates underground. He was

tentative in scaling the buildings, frightened of falling, but down here, it seems he can't stand being stuck in one place. Even boarding the train seems to take too long.

The enjambment of line 27 reflects the Man-Moth's impatience. The line breaks off in the middle of a phrase and continues breathlessly onto the next:

> he flutters, and cannot get aboard the silent **trains**
> **fast** enough to suit him. [...]

The doors then close "swiftly," shutting behind the Man-Moth right after he boards. The pace of modern life, reflected in the city's rhythms and the speed and efficiency of its trains, is relentless.

LINES 29-32

The Man-Moth always ...
... he travels backwards.

The Man-Moth makes sure to sit facing backward on the subway train, intentionally disorienting himself. (The Man-Moth, apparently, doesn't suffer from motion sickness!) The train then zips out of the station "at once at its full, terrible speed." That is, it doesn't slowly and steadily increase in velocity but pounces out of the station all "at once," no doubt jolting those on board. There's no gradual uptick in speed, no "gradation of any sort" that would grant people a moment to get settled. The train's jarring speed again evokes the hectic, relentless pace of urban life, which the poem implies barrels onward without regard for individual comfort.

The Man-Moth can't keep track of how fast he's going or how far. Perhaps, having once again failed in his mission to reach the moon, he doesn't care to know. The phrase "travels backwards" further suggests that he has no real destination or that he's not making any progress. He is traveling through empty space, stuck in a closed system that keeps him trapped in a loop underground. His dismal, disorienting journey might make readers think of the drudgery of long work commutes.

LINES 33-36

Each night he ...
... his rushing brain.

Now, things really seem to be outside the Man-Moth's control. Every night, he has to, or "must" passively allow himself to be "carried through" the winding underground subway tunnels and dream the same dreams.

What happened to the Man-Moth who, earlier in the poem, summoned the courage to climb skyscrapers to try to reach the moon? Below the city, the man moth seems pretty pathetic—and pretty sad. He no longer seems in control of his own destiny. It's like he's resigned himself to just being a passenger in his own life.

Note how much of the Man-Moth's life involves repetition or cycles. For example, earlier in the poem, he repeatedly scaled the exterior of the buildings and then fell back down. Now, he "must" travel the same route night after night. The Man-Moth does things on repeat, and he doesn't seem to learn any lessons from his failures. In fact, he seems trapped inside those cycles (and perhaps that's what he's trying to escape by crawling through a hole in the top of the sky).

The diacope of line 34 mimics the repetitiveness of the Man-Moth's dreams:

> be carried through artificial tunnels and **dream**
> recurrent **dreams**.

Similarly, the perfect internal rhyme between "train" and "brain" creates an echo, like a sound volleying through the dark, underground tunnels. Perhaps the Man-Moth is actually a victim of his own desire for escape. That is, his ambitious, impossible goal traps him in an endless cycle of hope and disappointment. (Taking him as a symbol for the artist, this might suggest that the artist is never satisfied; they will forever be striving and failing to create what they want to create.)

Finally, note how the mention of "artificial tunnels" underscores the hollowness of city life. These dark, dreary tunnels aren't natural; they were dug up by human beings. Humanity *created* this terrible environment, the poem suggests, trapping itself in a cycle of disappointment and despair.

LINES 36-40

He does not ...
... must wear mufflers.

Following the full stop caesura in line 36 (the period after "brain"), the poem really starts to take a dark turn. The Man-Moth's despair becomes even more acute and almost too painful. He can't allow himself to look out the window, because if he did, he would catch sight of the third rail—the very dangerous electrified track that runs alongside the train.

The third rail represents the untouchable; to the Man-Moth, it seems to be a reminder of the allure of suicide or self-destruction, like a long "draught," or drink, "of poison." The third rail seems to call to him, and the Man-Moth believes that he is especially susceptible to its song, the same way he might be predisposed to an illness or disease. That is, he senses that something about his nature makes the third rail—self-destruction—seem especially enticing. (The word "draught," or draft, "of poison" might also allude to Elizabeth Bishop's struggles with alcoholism—her own tempting yet self-destructive "third rail.")

Perhaps the Man-Moth is so desperate to escape his bleak life in this grim place that dying doesn't sound all that bad. Touching that third rail would be an extreme way of breaking the cycle of hope and disappointment in which the Man-Moth

seems trapped. But the Man-Moth doesn't really want to do anything so drastic. Knowing this about himself, he takes precautions. He keeps his hands in his pockets at all times so he won't be tempted to reach over and touch the electrified track. He "has to" do this, as if the action has been prescribed to him, the same way that people who get chilly hands take care to wear mufflers.

In the process, however, the Man-Moth basically retreats further into himself. He seals himself off from his surroundings, and from anyone else who might be on the train. His isolation becomes even more complete.

LINES 41-44

If you catch ...
... up the eye.

For the first time in the poem, the speaker addresses the reader—"you"—directly. "If you catch him," the speaker instructs, "hold a flashlight to his eye."

That "If" implies that "you" are unlikely to track the Man-Moth down—unsurprising, since he seems like a shy, elusive creature. But if you *were* able to get a hold of him, the speaker says, then you'd see that his eye is "all dark pupil," without any other color, and very dilated (he is nocturnal, after all). The speaker says the eye is "an entire night itself": dark, vast, and self-contained. It appears bottomless.

Like the moon, the Man-Moth's eye is an inscrutable portal, a gateway into the unknown. The Man-Moth seems to contain a world unto himself. The eye-as-the-night-sky comparison becomes an extended metaphor as the speaker references its "haired horizon," a reference either to his eyelashes or to the little dark filaments around the edge of the pupil. This "horizon" contracts as the Man-Moth squints and focuses on the imaginary inquisitor. It's an eerie moment of recognition—the Man-Moth seems to *see* the reader!

This whole time, the poem's omniscient speaker has been describing the Man-Moth's actions from some high-up spot, presumably a bit removed from the action. Likewise, the reader has been observing the Man-Moth's activities from afar. But now, the poem's subject "stares back" at "you." The Man-Moth hijacks the reader's gaze. It seems he isn't totally passive after all.

Then, the Man-Moth "closes up the eye," an action that seems almost mechanical in part because the speaker says "the eye" rather than "his eye." It sounds like the Man-Moth's eye is not just an entire world unto itself, but like it's also not really part of the Man-Moth; it's something separate. (Going back to the idea of the Man-Moth as a symbol for the artist, this suggests that an artist's "eye" is in some way separate from the rest of their being.)

LINES 44-48

Then from the ...
... enough to drink.

The speaker continues to describe what would happen were "you" to get a hold of the Man-Moth and shine a flashlight in his eye. First, you'd notice how dark his eye is—as deep and vast as the night sky itself. Next, he'd close his eye. And finally, a single "tear" would slip from between the Man-Moth's eyelids.

The speaker informs the reader that this tear is the Man-Moth's "only possession," the only thing he owns—"like the bee's sting." He "palms it," like a magician about to perform a sleight-of-hand trick. Then, one of two things might happen. If "you're" not watching closely, the Man-Moth will swallow the tear. But if "you" keep looking at him, the Man-Moth will give "you"—the reader!—his precious tear. The tear, the speaker tells us, is cold and clear, like fresh spring water.

What does this mean? It's hard to say. Critics have been arguing about the final lines of this poem for decades. The act of seeing, and of being seen, is crucial here. The Man-Moth wants—needs—to be seen, not just *observed*, like an insect. The tear might appear to be a strange gift, but it's actually a trade made in exchange for the readers' close attention, which "you" literally "pay" to the Man-Moth.

The earlier simile comparing the tear to a bee's stinger conveys just how much the Man-Moth is willing to give up in exchange for being seen. After a honey bee stings someone, it dies; it can't pull its stinger back out without literally tearing itself apart. Once the Man-Moth gives away this tear, the simile suggests, he can never get that part of himself back.

But perhaps it's worth it. While tears are usually quite salty, this one seems to be vital and refreshing, as though it came from a crystal clear "underground spring." Maybe the Man-Moth recognizes in the reader a dreamer like himself. Accept his tear, and the Man-Moth is no longer so totally alone. He may not be able to escape his circumstances or ever reach the moon, but he is able to share something vital with the person who meets his gaze.

SYMBOLS

CLIMBING TO THE MOON

Readers might interpret the moon as a symbol of an unreachable or inaccessible goal.

The moon is distant—so far away, in fact, that to the Man-Moth it looks like "a small hole at the top of the sky." The Man-Moth longs to reach that "hole" and peer through it. But the reader knows that even if the Man-Moth managed to climb all the way up the tallest building in the world, he wouldn't be any closer to "push[ing] his small head through that round clean opening."

Even if the Man-Moth could catapult himself into space, he'd simply discover that the moon isn't a tunnel or an opening at all. The Man-Moth's dream is utterly impossible, but he remains resolute. Really, he has no choice; he "must investigate," compelled by his curiosity, fear, and ambition.

Climbing toward the moon again and again symbolizes the foolish or naïve—but relentless—drive to achieve the impossible. This might refer to any number of things: the *impossible* might be great artistic achievement or escape from a bleak, stultifying reality. But just as the Man-Moth compulsively pursues the moon, the poem suggests that dreamers can't help but chase their own far-off, elusive goals.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "the moon looks rather different to him"
- **Line 16:** "He trembles, but must investigate as high as he can climb"
- **Lines 19-21:** "he climbs fearfully, thinking that this time he will manage / to push his small head through that round clean opening / and be forced through,"
- **Line 23:** "But what the Man-Moth fears most he must do"

THE THIRD RAIL

To the Man-Moth, the third rail symbolizes the persistent allure of self-destruction. The third rail is electrified and extremely dangerous. Since it runs continuously beside the train and is visible to anyone looking right out the window, the presence of the third rail becomes a constant reminder of death. The Man-Moth is anxious to avoid looking out the window because the third rail is a kind of invitation, a tantalizing suggestion. After failing to reach the moon and returning to his grim underground home, the poem suggests that Man-Moth is tempted to escape his sad life by any means necessary.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 37-38:** "for the third rail, the unbroken draught of poison, / runs there beside him."

THE MODERN CITY

The city's emptiness and decrepitude might symbolize the hollowness of modern life. Although cities are often associated with the promise of progress, here the buildings are riddled with cracks and even the moonlight seems "battered" and worn. The speaker also calls the sides of the buildings "façades," which, in addition to being an architectural term for outside-facing surfaces, refers to false or misleading appearances. The implication is that size and scale of the buildings in this city belie their emptiness. That is, the city might seem impressive, but life within it is lonely and meaningless.

Note, too, that the city extends underground into "artificial tunnels" where "pale subways run." The words "artificial" and "pale" further suggest that contemporary urban life, and modern life in general, is fake and sterile. It is characterized by a lack of human connection and profound loneliness and isolation.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "cracks in the buildings are filled with battered moonlight"
- **Line 17:** "the façades,"
- **Line 26:** "the pale subways of cement"
- **Line 27:** "the silent trains"
- **Line 30:** "the train starts at once at its full, terrible speed"
- **Line 34:** "artificial tunnels"

THE TEAR

Critics have debated for decades what the Man-Moth's tear signifies. As a symbol, it's very ambiguous and open to interpretation.

One might think of it as representing the Man-Moth's hope or innocence. Despite his failures, he still believes that if he just tries again, he'll reach the moon. Even when retreats back underground, discouraged, he hasn't given up on the possibility of finding some form of escape. The tear is refreshing, "cool" and "pure"; hope is rejuvenating and invigorating, even for onlookers. It's also endlessly renewable: the Man-Moth swallows it but can reproduce it at will.

The fact that the tear is regenerative may link the Man-Moth to the figure of the artist or dreamer. His tear, like a precious work of art, must be shared with the right audience, but can't be used up.

The literary critic Helen Vendler has a slightly different interpretation. She sees the tear as a symbol of the poem itself. In this sense, poetry is the writer's rare and mysterious "sole possession." It's affecting and profound—one could even say it stings (hence the simile comparing the tear to a bee's stinger). Perhaps the Man-Moth himself is a personification of the artist's imagination, and the tear is the hard-won work of art.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 44-48:** "Then from the lids / one tear, his only possession, like the bee's sting, slips. / Slyly he palms it, and if you're not paying attention / he'll swallow it. However, if you watch, he'll hand it over, / cool as from underground springs and pure enough to drink."

POETIC DEVICES

SIMILE

Similes add to the poem's eerie visual imagery while also telling readers quite a bit about both "Man" and the Man-Moth. Take lines 3-4, which feature two similes:

> The whole shadow of Man is only as big as his hat.
> It lies at his feet like a circle for a doll to stand on,

To the speaker, situated somewhere "above," the Man's "whole shadow" appears constricted, appearing below his feet in a circle no bigger than "his hat" and looking like a little platform meant "for a doll."

These similes reinforce the omniscient speaker's perspective: the speaker is looking at this man from *above*, and at a distance. Note, too, that the "whole shadow of Man" refers not just to this one man's literal shadow, but, metaphorically, to the influence of humanity itself—to the "shadow" that humankind casts. The similes thus further suggest to the reader that even in a man-made setting—a city—Man's control is limited. He is not quite as free as he thinks he is. He's like a toy, a prop, with little agency. Unlike the Man-Moth, who keeps trying to reach the moon, Man is passive and resigned, stuck in one place.

In stanza 3, another simile helps connect the Man-Moth to the figure of the artist or dreamer. As the Man-Moth climbs up the side of the building, his shadow stretches out behind him "like a photographer's cloth." This is another bit of striking imagery: readers can picture that Man-Moth's shadow flowing behind him like a dark cape, the kind a superhero in a comic book might wear.

And think about how different this is from Man's shadow, which just makes a little circle underneath his feet. The Man-Moth's shadow is elongated and "dragging." And while Man gets reduced to a mere "doll," the Man-Moth gets compared to a photographer, an artist who tries to capture or reveal something new about their surroundings. The Man-Moth is trying to do something that has never been done before. He has a unique vision, the simile suggests.

Another simile in the same stanza links the Man-Moth with the world of art, as the speaker describes the Man-Moth's dream of pushing "his small head through that round clean opening [the moon] / and be forced through, as from a tube, in black scrolls on the light." While an ambiguous image, this might bring to mind black paint being squeezed from a tube onto white canvas (or even the "black scrolls" of handwriting from a pen onto a blank page).

Finally, there are two similes in the last stanza that both relate to the Man-Moth's "tear." First, the speaker compares this tear, "his only possession," to "the bee's sting." The simile relays just how vital this tear is to the Man-Moth. A bee uses its stinger when it feels threatened. And, when it comes to honey bees at least, stinging something will kill the bee: the bee will literally rip its body apart when trying to pull the stinger back out. The Man-Moth, like its fellow insect, suffers when deploying this "tear," which the speaker goes on to say is "cool as from underground springs." In other words, it's as refreshing as cool spring water.

The tear might symbolize any number of things, including the Man-Moth's hope or perhaps a piece of artwork. Perhaps it even represents the poem, with the stinger simile conveying the deep vulnerability and pain that may accompany the creation of meaningful art.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "The whole shadow of Man is only as big as his hat. / It lies at his feet like a circle for a doll to stand on"
- **Line 18:** "his shadow dragging like a photographer's cloth behind him"
- **Line 21:** "be forced through, as from a tube, in black scrolls on the light"
- **Line 45:** "one tear, his only possession, like the bee's sting, slips"
- **Line 48:** "cool as from underground springs and pure enough to drink"

END-STOPPED LINE

End-stopped lines force the reader to pause, controlling the pace at which the poem's images unfold. End-stopping also makes certain strong statements even stronger. Take line 16: "He trembles, but must investigate as high as he can climb." The statement is settled and final. The Man-Moth *must* investigate, and that is that.

Similarly, even the Man-Moth's more outlandish (or even ridiculous) ideas seem possible when an end-stopped line lends them gravitas. This is the case in stanza 21. The Man-Moth believes, fervently, unquestioningly, that if he can just reach the moon, he'll be able to climb through the "opening" to the other side:

> and be forced through, as from a tube, in black scrolls on the light.

The reader knows this is impossible. But instead of seeming silly, the period gives the line a sense of finality and makes the statement feel confident and true.

By contrast, occasional enjambment keeps the poem from sounding too stodgy or stiff and often mimics the movements being described. Take the enjambment between lines 11-12:

> the moon looks rather different to him. He emerges
> from an opening under the edge of one of the

sidewalks

Enjambment pushes the reader smoothly down the page, evoking the smoothness with which the Man-Moth slips out from under the sidewalk. Similarly, the long string of enjambments in the third stanza creates a sense of building momentum as the Man-Moth scales the side of a building:

> he climbs fearfully, thinking that this time he will
> manage
> to push his small head through that round clean
> opening
> and be forced through, as from a tube [...]

The speed of the lines created through enjambment makes the poem feel more dramatic and exciting, creating a crescendo that sweeps the reader up in the Man-Moth's hope. The firm end-stop of line 22 then lands like a thud:

> (Man, standing below him, has no such illusions.)

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "above,"
- **Line 2:** "moonlight."
- **Line 3:** "hat."
- **Line 4:** "on,"
- **Line 5:** "moon."
- **Line 6:** "properties,"
- **Line 7:** "cold,"
- **Line 8:** "thermometers."
- **Line 10:** "surface,"
- **Line 13:** "buildings."
- **Line 14:** "sky,"
- **Line 15:** "protection."
- **Line 16:** "climb."
- **Line 17:** "façades,"
- **Line 21:** "light."
- **Line 22:** "illusions.)"
- **Line 24:** "unhurt."
- **Line 26:** "flits,"
- **Line 28:** "swiftly."
- **Line 30:** "speed,"
- **Line 31:** "sort."
- **Line 32:** "backwards."
- **Line 34:** "dreams."
- **Line 36:** "window,"
- **Line 37:** "poison,"
- **Line 40:** "mufflers."
- **Line 41:** "him,"
- **Line 42:** "pupil,"
- **Line 45:** "slips."
- **Line 47:** "over,"
- **Line 48:** "drink."

ALLITERATION

Alliteration intensifies the poem's imagery and adds to its drama.

Take line 2, for example, where the booming /b/ sounds of "buildings" and "battered" convey the beating that this crumbling city has taken. The sharp /p/ sounds of "pin" and "point" (as well as the nasally /n/ consonance of these words) evoke the very pointiness described. In the same line, the /m/ sounds of "magnetized to the moon" suggest the alluring hum of that moon, which pulls both "Man" and Man-Moth toward itself.

Later, soft, muffled /f/, /l/, and /s/ alliteration help to evoke the rustling sounds of the Man-Moth's wings as he "flits" about:

> to the pale subways of cement he calls his home. He
> flits,
> he flutters, and cannot get aboard the silent trains
> fast enough to suit him.

The broader consonance and sibilance of these lines add to the effect, the /s/ and crisp /t/ sounds suggesting the twitchy flutters of the Man-Moth's wings:

> to the pale subways of cement he calls his home. He
> flits,
> he flutters, and cannot get aboard the silent trains
> fast enough to suit him.

Elsewhere, alliteration calls readers' attention to important moments. Take the hard /g/ alliteration in line 31, which emphasizes the jarring speed with which the subway barrels forward:

> without a shift in gears or a gradation of any sort.

Similarly, the thudding /d/ sounds of "does not dare look out the window" adds heaviness to this declaration. The biting /p/ sounds of "proving the sky quite useless for protection," meanwhile, help to convey the Man-Moth's disappointment in the sky. In fact, the mixture of sharp and hissing consonance throughout the line makes it sounds like the speaker is tsk-tsking the sky for failing to protect those below it:

> proving the sky quite useless for protection.

In the next stanza, alliteration adds drama to the Man-Moth's attempt to scale the building and reach the moon:

> Up the façades,

his shadow dragging like a photographer's cloth
behind him
he climbs fearfully [...]

Consonance ("photographer's," "fearfully") and assonance ("shadow dragging," "photographer's cloth") ramp up the drama further still.

Finally, pay attention to how often /p/, /f/, /k/, and /t/ sounds appear throughout the poem. These are something called "voiceless consonants" (for comparison, try pronouncing /m/ or /l/, which are voiced). They're quiet consonants—fitting for a poem that takes place in a city so muted that even the trains are "silent." One could even say that those voiceless little puffs of air make a noise like the frantic fluttering of moth wings.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "buildings," "battered"
- **Line 5:** "pin," "point," "magnetized," "moon"
- **Line 9:** "Man-Moth"
- **Line 15:** "proving," "protection"
- **Line 17:** "façades"
- **Line 18:** "photographer's," "cloth"
- **Line 19:** "climbs," "fearfully"
- **Line 23:** "Man-Moth," "fears"
- **Line 24:** "fails," "falls"
- **Line 26:** "subways," "cement," "flits"
- **Line 27:** "flutters," "silent"
- **Line 28:** "fast," "suit," "swiftly"
- **Line 29:** "Man-Moth"
- **Line 31:** "gears," "gradation"
- **Line 36:** "does," "dare"
- **Line 40:** "must," "mufflers"
- **Line 43:** "haired horizon"
- **Line 45:** "sting," "slips"
- **Line 46:** "palms," "paying"

SIBILANCE

Like alliteration, sibilance shapes the poem's mood and brings its imagery to life. The repetition of soft /s/ sounds is particularly fitting for "The Man-Moth," which takes place in a lonely city at night. The sibilance might even evoke the gentle flutter of moth wings, as when the Man-Moth "nervously begins to scale the faces of the buildings." Note that the /f/ sound is often considered sibilant, and it certainly adds to the poem's hush throughout.

Sibilance is particularly strong in the fourth stanza, evoking the eerie, isolating silence of this city. Just listen to all the muffled sounds throughout lines 26-30:

to the pale subways of cement he calls his home. He flits,
he flutters, and cannot get aboard the silent trains
fast enough to suit him. The doors close swiftly.
The Man-Moth always seats himself facing the wrong way
and the train starts at once at its full, terrible speed,

Muted /s/, /f/, and /th/ sounds convey the eerie quiet of the underground, where the "silent trains" race through cold, sterile subway tunnels. (Anyone who has ridden the subway knows that those trains are anything but silent. What happened to the rattle of the cars and the scream of the breaks?)

Sibilance also contributes to the fluidity of a line, since /s/ sounds tend to blur together when they come one after another. That's fitting for stanza 4 as things speed up and the Man-Moth urgently tries to board a train before being whisked away into the dark tunnels.

Finally, the Man-Moth's precious tear is described with gentle, sibilant language. It's "like the bee's sting" as it "slips" from his "lids" and "Slyly he palms it." Slippery /s/ sounds combine with fluid /l/ sounds here to convey just how delicate this tear is and how deftly the Man-Moth maneuvers it.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "visits," "surface"
- **Line 12:** "sidewalks"
- **Line 13:** "nervously," "scale," "faces"
- **Line 14:** "small," "sky"
- **Line 15:** "sky," "useless"
- **Line 17:** "façades"
- **Line 18:** "shadow," "photographer's"
- **Line 19:** "fearfully"
- **Line 20:** "push," "small"
- **Line 26:** "subways," "cement," "flits"
- **Line 27:** "flutters," "silent"
- **Line 28:** "fast," "enough," "suit," "swiftly"
- **Line 29:** "Moth," "seats," "himself," "facing"
- **Line 30:** "starts," "once," "its," "full," "speed"
- **Line 45:** "sting," "slips"
- **Line 46:** "Slyly"

ANAPHORA

The speaker of "The Man-Moth" starts many sentences and phrases in a row with the word "he," creating subtle anaphora. In the first stanza, for example, the speaker says:

He does not see the moon; he observes only her vast properties,

This repetition underscores the limits of Man's perception. Most of the anaphora in the poem, however, refers to the Man-Moth himself:

- "He emerges / from an opening under the edge of

one of the sidewalks"
- "He thinks the moon is a small hole at the top of the sky,"
- "He trembles, but must investigate as high as he can climb."
- "He flits, he flutters"

And so on. This keeps the poem's focus on the Man-Moth and makes the poem more cinematic, filling it with action and creating some subtle momentum.

The clearest anaphora appears in the fifth stanza, as the poem nears its end. This anaphora follows a turning point in the poem: the Man-Moth has retreated underground, and the speaker describes his anxious, aimless nighttime routine aboard the rushing trains. Up until this point, the phrase "the Man-Moth" has appeared at least once in every stanza after stanza 1 (that is, every stanza in which the Man-Moth himself has actually been present).

But then something curious happens in stanza 5: the phrase "the Man-Moth" disappears. Instead, the speaker only refers to the Man-Moth as "he," over and over again:

- "He does not dare look out the window"
- "He regards it as a disease"
- "He has to keep / his hands in his pockets"

These sentences build on each other, each revealing a little bit more about the Man-Moth's alienation and his tendency towards self-destruction. The stanza escalates to the point where the Man-Moth is so afraid of losing control and reaching for the third rail, that he must be careful to "keep / his hands in his pockets." Anaphora contributes to that sense of things stacking up. In this particular instance, it also has the effect of erasing something important about the Man-Moth: his name. The Man-Moth is just another "he," a nameless, faceless commuter on the night train. Underground, dejected, out of sight of the moon, is he all that different from "Man" in stanza 1?

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "He does not see the moon; he observes only her vast properties"
- **Lines 11-12:** "He emerges / from an opening under the edge of one of the sidewalks"
- **Line 14:** "He thinks the moon is a small hole at the top of the sky"
- **Line 16:** "He trembles, but must investigate as high as he can climb."
- **Lines 26-27:** "He flits, / he flutters"
- **Line 32:** "He cannot tell the rate at which he travels backwards."
- **Line 36:** "He does not dare look out the window"
- **Lines 38-40:** "He regards it as a disease / he has inherited the susceptibility to. He has to keep / his hands in his pockets"

VOCABULARY

Battered (Line 2) - Bruised or defaced, often from repeated blows or hard use. Here, "battered" is used figuratively to describe the buildings' worn surfaces.

Inverted (Line 5) - Upside-down.

Queer (Line 7) - Strange, unusual, or otherworldly.

Scale (Line 13) - Climb up and over a tall surface (like a wall or a skyscraper).

Façades (Line 17) - The front or outside faces of a building. "Façade" is an architectural term, but it is also be used figuratively to describe a false or misleading appearance. Here, Moore plays on the double meaning of the word to suggest that there's something desolate or fake about this city.

Photographer's cloth (Line 18) - Early photographers used a dark cloth, or focusing cloth, to block out light when setting up and framing an image on a view camera. They would duck underneath it or wear it like a hood when taking a picture.

Scrolls (Line 21) - Ribbons or strips.

Flit (Lines 26-27) - Moves lightly or quickly from one spot to another; darts about.

Gradation (Line 31) - A change that progresses or occurs in steps, gradually.

Recurrent (Line 34) - Happening or occurring again and again.

Ties (Line 35) - Long beams connecting railroad tracks.

Third rail (Lines 37-38) - Also called a "live rail," the third rail is electrified and supplies power to a train. The third rail is extremely dangerous, since touching it can result in electrocution.

Draught (Line 37) - A "pull" or mouthful of liquid.

Susceptibility (Lines 38-39) - Vulnerability to; capable of being influenced or affected by something.

Mufflers (Lines 39-40) - An accessory, often made of fur, for keeping one's hands warm.

Palms (Line 46) - Conceals in the palm of a hand; uses sleight of hand.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Man-Moth" is an unrhymed poem made up of six octaves,

or eight-line stanzas. Although "The Man-Moth" doesn't have a perfectly regular meter, the length of each line is relatively consistent: most have between 14-15 syllables. The first line of each stanza, however, is much shorter than the rest, as readers can see in lines 1-2:

> Here, above,
> cracks in the buildings are filled with battered
> moonlight.

This short line mimics the position of the Man-Moth as he climbs the buildings, placing him "above" the world below. Later, when he's returned underground, these short openings might evoke the Man-Moth's isolation—that is, the way he seems totally removed from the people around him.

Thanks to the relatively long lines and stanzas, the poem seems to unfurl slowly. The reader is drawn, bit by bit, into the Man-Moth's nocturnal world. And while the poem doesn't use a specific form, the consistent stanza pattern might evoke the repetitive nature of the Man-Moth's life. Like his "recurrent" dreams, the train tracks, and his failed attempts to reach the moon, the shape and length of each stanza are predictable.

METER

"The Man-Moth" uses free verse, for the most part. This means that there's no strict pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables, which keeps the poem sounding conversational and prose-like.

That said, the lines are fairly uniform in length and sometimes fall into a loose accentual meter. That is, many lines contain a similar number of stressed beats but those beats appear in any order. For example, the first line of each stanza is always shorter than the rest and usually has just two stresses, as in "Here, above," "Up the façades," and "If you catch him."

The rest of the lines generally contain five to seven stresses. For example, here's a closer look at lines 18-20, each of which contains six stressed beats:

> his shadow dragging like a photographer's cloth
> behind him
> he climbs fearfully, thinking that this time he will
> manage
> to push his small head through that round clean
> opening

This scansion isn't exact, as different readers might emphasize or accentuate different words. Still, there's a rough pattern here that keeps the poem feeling steady and controlled but never rigid.

There are also a few steadily iambic moments in the poem, as with the steady da-DUM march at the end of line 16:

> but must investigate as high as he can climb.

Here, the syllables are steady and sure; they forge ahead with certainty. It's no accident that when the Man-Moth is resolved or determined, the line becomes metrical.

RHYME SCHEME

"The Man-Moth" doesn't use a rhyme scheme. Bishop's diction is careful and a little formal, but the poem isn't particularly musical. This is fitting: even though the Man-Moth is a fanciful creature, there isn't anything musical about his life. Like the drab and "battered" city he lives in, his experiences are pretty bleak.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "The Man-Moth" is anonymous and, seemingly, omniscient—they seem to know everything there is to know about the mysterious Man-Moth despite the fact that he's quite elusive and only rarely visits the surface. They speak with authority, and at no point are readers led to question or doubt what they tell them.

The speaker is able to empathize with both Man the Man-Moth. They can report on what Man does and does not see and how the moonlight feels on his hands. Likewise, they're able to contrast how the moon appears to the Man-Moth because they know, somehow, what the world looks like to him. They not only have insight into the Man-Moth's fears, but also his resiliency and determination. Even though the Man-Moth is a somewhat fantastical character, the speaker doesn't seem amazed or alarmed by him. Instead, they describe the Man-Moth matter-of-factly and withhold judgment. Although they're unsurprised that the Man-Moth always fails to reach the moon, it's impossible to say whether the speaker finds the Man-Moth's actions foolish or heroic—or both.

It's up to the reader to guess or imagine how the speaker knows so much. Perhaps they once had their own run-in with the Man-Moth on a train and held a flashlight up to his eye, like they urge the reader to do in the final stanza. Maybe they've even tasted the Man-Moth's cold, clear, precious tear.

SETTING

"The Man-Moth" is set after dark in an unnamed metropolis. Worn, "battered" moonlight pours down onto buildings that are riddled with "cracks." This makes the city seem old or in disrepair, maybe even dilapidated. The tall buildings don't come across as grand, impressive, or futuristic—instead, they're barely described at all. They're as anonymous as the poem's speaker. And although cities are usually crowded places, it seems as if the Man-Moth is virtually alone. The poem mention

"Man," but the only living souls around seem to be the speaker, the Man-Moth, and, possibly, the reader.

The world of the poem extends underground, where trains race through a network of "artificial tunnels." As above, on the surface, life here is bleak and drab: the tunnels are "pale," and the Man-Moth can't stand waiting around on the platform. Far from portraying the subway as a marvel of engineering, or the trains as exciting and invigorating, it's as if the Man-Moth seems condemned to travel through this subterranean labyrinth since he can't escape through the "hole" in the sky. He's like the world's saddest commuter. Despite the dangerous allure of the third rail just outside the train window, his life underground is absolutely mundane.

This poem could theoretically be set in any city on earth, but it's likely that Bishop was writing about New York City. She moved to New York just after graduating college in 1935 and continued to live there off and on throughout her life. "The Man-Moth" was written a year after Bishop arrived in NYC; the "Newspaper" referenced in the poem's epigraph is often thought to be *The New York Times*. The reference to "pale subways" also ties the poem's setting to New York in particular.

Although the years in New York City would be formative for Bishop's career, she didn't like Manhattan at all. Ten years later, in "Varick Street," she'd write about the "wretched uneasy buildings" and the city's "soot and hapless odors." She felt incurably isolated there and wrote to her friend, the poet Robert Lowell, that the city made her unbearably lonely. The boredom, frustration, loneliness, and isolation that Bishop associated with New York City is baked into the setting of "The Man-Moth." The promise of artistic achievement and a love of travel might offer a way out, but for Bishop, like the Man-Moth, it must have seemed quite difficult, or even dangerous, to try and escape.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979) was a celebrated American poet, short story writer, painter, and translator. "The Man-Moth" appeared in her first poetry collection, *North & South* (1945).

The time frame of Bishop's career places her within the generation of Confessional poets. These poets—who included Bishop's peers Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, as well as her longtime friend Robert Lowell—emphasized the autobiographical in their poetry, often highlighting intense emotional and psychological experiences. Bishop, however, was critical of this mode of writing and resisted including such detailed or direct personal accounts in her poems. Though her poems often draw on her life, they often do so with a degree of distance and convey their feeling in indirect or ironic ways. This poem, for example, potentially makes a veiled reference to Bishop's alcoholism in the comparison of the subway's deadly "third rail" to a tempting "draught of poison."

Bishop traveled a great deal throughout her life. She was also a gay woman writer in the male-dominated 20th-century literary, and many of her poems explore the experience of being an outsider in a faraway or unfamiliar place.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Elizabeth Bishop had a difficult, traumatic early life: her father died when she was only a baby, and her mother was institutionalized not long after. She lived with her mother's parents in Nova Scotia until her father's family (whom she hardly knew) demanded custody, and at the age of six, she had to move to Massachusetts to live with them. She bounced between cold and often abusive households until she finally escaped to Vassar College, where she met Marianne Moore and, inspired, began to develop a whole new style of writing.

Bishop wrote "The Man-Moth" in 1936, a year after graduating from Vassar and moving to Manhattan. Bishop was never a big fan of New York, despite living there on and off throughout her life, and her distaste for the city informs the poem's dismal, dreary setting. The "pale subways" that the Man-Moth rides were almost certainly inspired by New York City's underground train system, which first opened in 1904. Bishop felt deeply isolated in New York, which she described in her later poem "Varick Street" as dirty, smelly, and cramped, filled with "soot" and "wretched uneasy buildings."

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Elizabeth Bishop in Manhattan — Read more about Bishop's literary legacy in New York City. (https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2013/06/18/some-realms-i-owned-elizabeth-bishop-in-manhattan/)
- New York in the 1930s and '40s — Learn more about the setting that inspired "The Man-Moth." (https://1940s.nyc/map#13.69/40.7093/-73.99397)
- Elizabeth Bishop's Life and Work — A short biography of Bishop via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/elizabeth-bishop)
- "The Man-Moth" Read Out Loud — Hear the poet Robert Pinsky read Bishop's "The Man-Moth." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gM4LW8e6ckU)
- Chasing the Man-Moth — One critic tries to track down the original misprint that inspired the poem. (https://newcriterion.com/issues/2021/11/chasing-the-man-moth)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ELIZABETH BISHOP POEMS

- Filling Station
- First Death in Nova Scotia
- One Art
- Sestina
- The Fish
- The Mountain

HOW TO CITE

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