The Telephone Call

SUMMARY

A group identifying themselves as "Universal Lotteries" calls the speaker's phone and asks if they're sitting down (i.e., ready to hear major news). The callers claim the speaker has won the "Special" grand prize in their "Global" lottery. The callers ask how the speaker might spend the prize, which is a million British pounds. They clarify that it's *over* a million pounds, noting with amusement that the distinction doesn't matter much when the amount of money is so huge.

The callers ask if the speaker is feeling all right and if they're still on the phone. They urge the speaker to share their emotions. The speaker stammers that they're in disbelief. The callers say that everyone reacts that way and urges them to continue. The speaker says they're as lightheaded as if the crown of their head has flown off through the window, spinning like a spaceship.

The callers note that this is a strange feeling and ask the speaker to continue. The speaker says that they're getting choked up, that they have dry mouth, and that their nose itches as if they're about to sneeze or burst into tears. The callers assure the speaker that they shouldn't be embarrassed to let their feelings show; after all, it's rare to hear that you're about to become a millionaire.

The callers urge the speaker to let their tears flow for a minute. But the speaker tells them to wait, objects that it's been years since they entered a lottery, and skeptically asks the callers to repeat the name of their organization. Amused, the callers say it doesn't matter that the speaker hasn't entered a lottery lately. Their organization's name is "Universal," and they use a retroactive system ("Module").

Most people have entered a lottery at some point, and they're all eligible for Universal's prize, because Universal purchases all past lottery entries and uses a computer program to draw a winner from them. The speaker expresses wonderment but says they won't fully believe their luck until they've received their prize check.

The callers say they won't be sending any prize check. When the speaker asks about the monetary award, the callers say their lottery doesn't actually hand out money: it hands out "Experiences." The callers claim the phone call itself has been an incredible, thrilling, memorable experience; that's what the speaker has won. The callers congratulate the speaker, add a pleasant goodbye, and hang up.

THEMES

HOPE AND DISAPPOINTMENT

In "The Telephone Call," a group of mysterious callers claims that the speaker has won the lottery and become a millionaire. The speaker is skeptical, since they haven't entered a lottery recently, but they display some joy and hope even as they question the callers. Eventually, the callers admit it's all a hoax; instead of "money," they explain, they provide "Experiences," and they've given the speaker a memorable one. By this time, the speaker has fallen for the fantasy just enough to make the reality a bitter anticlimax. The poem illustrates, then, how easy it is to give into unrealistic hopes—and how doing so can make inevitable disappointment all the more crushing.

Even though the speaker suspects their amazing luck is too good to be true, they get partly swept up in hope—and correspondingly disappointed. On hearing that they've won "the top prize" in the lottery, the speaker's first response is, "I just… I can't believe it!" The stammering exclamation suggests they're already feeling happy, even if skepticism prevents them from being overjoyed. When the callers urge the speaker to "giv[e] way to your emotions," the speaker gets choked up and feels as if they might "cry." Throughout the call, the speaker remains a little doubtful—"I'll believe it when I see the cheque"—so when there turns out to be no cheque, they're at least partly prepared. Yet joy has started to overtake their rational doubts. The fact that they indulge in *some* irrational hope shows that even skeptics are liable to do so.

The poem casts this cycle of guarded hope and predictable disappointment as universal: part of the "experience" all humans share. When the speaker's initial reaction is "I can't believe it!" the callers reply, "That's what they all say." This might suggest that it's common to distrust amazing news, since most people know firsthand that such news is often false. But "I can't believe it!" is also a joyous exclamation that betrays some *desire* to believe—and this, too, is part of human nature.

Similarly, the hoaxers claim that the speaker must have entered a lottery *some*time: "Nearly everyone's bought a ticket / In some lottery or another, / Once at least." Metaphorically, this claim implies that we all indulge wild hopes at some point, and can feel stung by their failure to come true even when we're no longer young and optimistic. The company's name, "Universal Lotteries," hints at this same idea. The callers even say, "We're Universal," as if implying that everyone goes through the roller coaster of hope at some point.

Joyous hope followed by a letdown may not be "Exciting," as the

callers claim, but the poem suggests that it *is* a kind of universal "prize." It's something we're all dealt as players in the game of life—even if the circumstances are usually more boring than a prank call from a fake lottery.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-48

ILLUSIONS VS. EXPERIENCE

After revealing that the speaker hasn't won any money in the lottery, the callers in "The Telephone Call" claim that the real "prize" was "a great experience." This phrase evokes an age-old literary theme: the journey from ignorance, innocence, or illusion to *experience*, as in hard-won wisdom. In this case, however, experience is such an obviously anticlimatic "prize" (compared to the riches originally promised) that the poem ends up mocking its value. Experience, the poem implies, isn't inherently "great"; some illusions are even preferable to harsh lessons and painful memories.

Although the speaker never quite falls for the illusory lottery news, even their cautious hope clearly improves their mood. When asked to describe their emotions, the speaker feels as if their head has flown off "like a flying saucer," and the callers reply, "That's unusual." The news makes the speaker feel something remarkable, even if it's not full-blown euphoria. The callers then encourage the speaker to emote more, explaining: "It isn't every day you hear / You're going to get a million pounds." The speaker won't be getting that money, but just "hear[ing]" they will—just the brief illusion—has the power to produce an emotional high. In fact, while the speaker's better judgement continues to nag at them, they start to feel some giddiness ("that's incredible [...] It's marvelous") mixed in with their doubts.

By contrast, the "experience" the speaker wins as a "prize" is sourly anticlimactic—and reminiscent of more familiar forms of disappointment. After revealing their hoax, the callers ask: "You've had a great experience, right? / Exciting? Something you'll remember? / That's your prize."

The irony is clear: whatever innocent "Excit[ement]" the speaker may have felt has now been ruined by reality. And no one actually enjoys "remember[ing]" a major letdown! The "prize" of "experience" is not only far worse than a million pounds, it's worse than the speaker's unassuming pre-phone-call state. Rather than share their feelings about their supposed prize, the speaker says nothing to the callers, then flatly reports, "the line went dead." Metaphorically, this detail may suggest that their *emotions* have gone dead: whatever happiness they were feeling has evaporated. Experience hasn't left them happier or wiser, just numb and silent (the poem ends here).

Cruel as the letdown is, it's also, in a sense, perfectly ordinary. The disappointed speaker is no worse off financially than they were before the phone call and no worse off than millions of lottery losers. For most people, not winning the lottery—literally or metaphorically—*is* an "every day" event, even if they don't get the news via telephone! In that sense, the speaker's harsh "experience" is just a heightened or allegorical version of normal human experience.

In short, the poem's closing ironies show that "experience" has no inherent positive value. Though the callers chirp, "Have a nice day!" it's clear that the speaker's day would have been better *without* this "experience." If anything, the "Call" calls attention to the relative poverty of a life the speaker had been basically content with. (They mention that they "[hadn't] bought a lottery ticket / for years and years.") Even when experiences are memorable, they can be disappointing and deadening.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 9-48

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

They asked me ...
... Ultra-Super Global Special.

The opening of "The Telephone Call" grabs the reader's attention by jumping right into a dialogue. All but the last words of the poem will consist of a conversation between the callers, who identify themselves as "Universal Lotteries," and an unidentified speaker. As in fiction and other prose narratives, the dialogue in this narrative poem serves multiple purposes: it propels the story forward, provides exposition, and illustrates the personalities of the characters speaking.

There's no initial scene-setting, so it's not clear where the speaker is receiving this call. However, given the nature of the call (a notification about supposed lottery winnings), a home setting is likely. The pronoun "They" may indicate that there are multiple callers on the other end—a faux prize committee, perhaps—or "They" may refer to "Universal Lotteries" as a collective, to a single caller whose gender isn't known/revealed, etc. (This guide will refer to *callers* in the plural.)

The callers begin by asking if the speaker is sitting down—a common way of prefacing big news. (Presumably, the recipient of the news will need to steady themselves for a shock.) After identifying themselves as a lottery company, the callers claim that the speaker has won their "top prize," called "the Ultra-Super Global Special." Both "Universal" and "Global Special" suggest that this is a large, international company and that the speaker has won a huge prize out of a large field of

participants—in other words, the speaker has truly hit the jackpot.

These names will gain other implications, too, as the poem goes on. Since lotteries are symbols of chance and fortune, "Universal Lotteries" may suggest that the company symbolizes the cosmic workings of fate itself. The name may also hint that there's something "universally" relatable about the experience they give the speaker: a surge of hope followed by disappointment.

LINES 5-8

What would you ...
... millionaire." And they laughed.

Lines 5-8 seem to contain more good news for the speaker. The callers from "Universal Lotteries" suggest that the speaker has won "a million pounds" (i.e., pounds sterling, the currency of the UK). Then they correct themselves, suggesting that the speaker has "actually" won "more than a million" pounds. Laughing, they add that the distinction is trivial: "once you're a millionaire," as the speaker now allegedly is, a little extra money doesn't "make[] a lot of difference."

Eventually, all this turns out to be a hoax: the speaker hasn't won any money. But the callers aren't *technically* lying here. After claiming the speaker has "won the top prize" (line 3), they ask "What would you do with a million pounds?" (line 5)—strongly implying that the top prize *is* a million pounds. But the statement and the question don't necessarily have to be related! In the end, the callers reveal that the "prize" is the "experience" of the phone call itself, which led the speaker to *believe* they had become a millionaire. (Or at least *hope* they had, since the speaker remains a bit skeptical throughout.)

In light of the big reveal at the end, the callers' casual imprecision about the prize amount ("a million [...] / "Or, actually, [...] more than a million") looks like fudging. They're just pulling a number out of the air. Likewise, their technical avoidance of lying suggests a conscious attempt to manipulate the speaker.

Note that the poem was published in 1986, when one million pounds had the same purchasing power as roughly $3.8 million in 2022 U.S. dollars. That's certainly a life-changing sum of money!

LINES 9-13

"Are you OK?" ...
... us about it."

In lines 9-13, the callers urge the speaker to share some emotion. The speaker has apparently fallen silent after hearing the (false) lottery news, because the callers check to make sure they're "OK" and "Still there" on the line. Once they're able to talk, the speaker sputters: "I just... I can't believe it!" Notice how their response conveys an ambiguous mix of skepticism and excitement. They're in disbelief, but they're *exclaiming* their disbelief. This response will pretty much stay constant until the final stanza, although the speaker's excitement seems to grow as the poem goes along.

The callers reply, "That's what they all say"; in other words, *everyone* they call responds with excitement and disbelief. The unidentified speaker thus serves as a kind of Everyperson, a stand-in for humanity in general. It's human nature, the poem suggests, to react to overwhelming good news with some skepticism—but also an excited willingness to believe.

"That's what they all say" also suggests that these callers, who turn out to be pulling the speaker's leg, *repeatedly* make misleading phone calls. Maybe they're pranksters who play cruel tricks for fun; maybe, as a "Universal" lottery company, they symbolize the cosmic forces of fate (which end up disappointing most people!). Regardless, they again prompt the speaker to express some emotion: "Go on, tell us about it." Because they deal in "Experiences" rather than "money" (as lines 42-43 reveal), they may be trying to give the speaker a memorably intense—and maximally frustrating—emotional experience.

LINES 14-20

I said "I ...
... to sneeze—or cry."

In lines 14-20, the speaker gives in and shares their feelings. Hearing they've won the lottery, they report, makes them "feel the top of [their] head / has floated off, out through the window, / revolving like a flying saucer." In other words, they feel dizzy and lightheaded—overwhelmed in a bizarre, *alien* way.

Once again, the callers prompt the speaker to express their emotions: "'That's unusual' [...] 'Go on.'" The repetition of "tell us" and "Go on" (lines 10, 13, and 17) makes the callers start to sound pushy and insistent. It's as if they're trying to *intensify* the speaker's emotions, to make the phone call as "unusual" and memorable as possible. Or maybe they're just trying to make the speaker more aware of their own emotional experience. (After all, as lines 43-44 reveal, Universal Lotteries deals in "Experiences" rather than "money.")

And, in fact, the speaker's emotions seem to intensify. They get choked up ("I'm finding it hard to talk"), feel their nose "tingling," and think they might be about to "cry." Though they may still feel some nagging internal doubts, they're certainly starting to *act* like someone who's won the lottery. They're in a state of semi-shock, and they're almost ready to weep for joy.

LINES 21-26

"That's right" they ...
... you a moment..."

In lines 21-26, the callers sympathize—or pretend to sympathize—with the speaker's "emotions." In light of the

ending, of course, their words are cruelly ironic:

> "That's right" they said, "don't be ashamed
> of giving way to your emotions.
> It isn't every day you hear
> you're going to get a million pounds.

The callers know the speaker *won't* be getting a million pounds, but the speaker doesn't know that yet. Once again, the callers' language is slippery. Technically, they fall short of *promising* the money; they just strongly *imply* the money is on its way. And the speaker does "hear" they'll be getting a million pounds, even if that's a complete hoax. They have the unusual experience of hearing that dramatic news—and as the last stanza reveals, "Experiences" are what these callers "deal in."

One last time, the callers urge the speaker to give in to their emotions: "Relax, now, have a little cry; / we'll give you a moment..." Notice the patronizing tone here; after all, they're pranksters treating the speaker as a sucker. They seem to want the speaker "Relax[ed]" and off their guard, as opposed to suspicious and thinking critically. But as the following lines show, the speaker hasn't abandoned their skepticism just yet.

LINES 26-32

"Hang on!" I said. ...
... retrospective Chances Module.

In lines 26-32, the speaker gets suspicious. Suddenly, they sense that this "Telephone Call" doesn't quite add up. Rather than bursting into tears as the callers want, they exclaim "Hang on!" and start voicing their doubts: "I haven't bought a lottery ticket / for years and years. And what did you say / the company's called?" It occurs to them that there's no logical reason they would have won the lottery, since they haven't played the lottery in a very long time. Also, they don't seem to have heard of the company whose lottery they've supposedly won.

But the callers are ready with an explanation. Acting amused, they reassure the speaker: "Not to worry about a ticket. / We're Universal. We operate / A retrospective Chances Module." In the next stanza, they go on to explain this "Module" in more detail, but what's significant here is how prepared they are for the caller's objection. Either they've rehearsed carefully or they've made this kind of call before. The second possibility is all the more striking when they turn out to be not-so-funny prank callers.

The caller's doubts are serious enough that they could put an end to the whole charade: after all, how can you win a lottery you didn't enter? But the callers aren't fazed; they "laugh[]" and rattle off some polished patter. In fact, while they have an explanation for their "retrospective Chances Module," it sounds almost like a parody of technical language, much as "Ultra-Super Global Special" (line 4) sounded almost like a parody of corny lottery names. The callers' story is, at best, *just* plausible enough to convince someone like the speaker, who's got a skeptical streak. But it helps that they're telling the speaker—and any other victims of their prank—something most people deeply want to hear. The poem illustrates, then, how little it takes for irrational hope to get the better of a skeptic.

LINES 33-37

Nearly everyone's bought ...
... lucky person is."

In lines 33-37, "Universal Lotteries" explains how their "retrospective Chances Module" supposedly works. (In this context, "Module" might refer to computer hardware or part of a computer program, but as the ending of the poem suggests, it's really just fake, slick-sounding technical jargon.) According to the callers, there's a perfectly logical reason why the speaker has won the lottery without buying a ticket: they entered a *different* lottery, long ago. In fact, because "Nearly everyone's bought a ticket / in some lottery or another, / once at least," nearly everyone on earth is eligible for the "Universal" drawing. Their drawing is "retrospective," encompassing prior lotteries. Specifically, they "buy up the files" from prior lotteries, "feed the names into our computer," and pick a "lucky" winner. Today, that winner—supposedly—is the speaker!

It's a clever story, but on close examination, it's a bit suspicious. For example, the prize money in lotteries is usually pooled from the money people pay for lottery tickets. If Universal draws from entries in *past* lotteries, then nobody has paid any money into *this* game, and Universal shouldn't have any money to award. (Unless the "million pounds" or "more" is coming from a separate source.) Plus, pooling the "files" from past lotteries—across different years, countries, games, etc.—would pose major logistical obstacles.

These are the types of doubts that would occur to anyone carefully scrutinizing the callers' claims. And the speaker does feel *some* doubt, as the following lines show. But the speaker doesn't dismiss the explanation entirely; despite their skepticism, they still feel some irrational hope.

LINES 38-42

"Well, that's incredible" ...
... deal in money.

In lines 38-42, the poem's anticlimax arrives. For a moment longer, the speaker wrestles with hope and doubt: their lottery win seems "incredible" and "marvelous," but they "still can't quite" believe it's real. They conclude, "I'll believe it when I see the cheque," meaning the prize money. Finally, the callers casually admit that "there's no cheque," and when questioned, add that they "don't deal in money." The twist ending comes right at the beginning of the final stanza, as if this were the final paragraph of a short story.

This passage of dialogue neatly captures the nuances of the

speaker's emotional state. On the one hand, the speaker is still outwardly skeptical: they'll "believe" in their lottery win only when there's concrete proof ("when I see the cheque"). It would be unfair to say they've fallen for this hoax completely. On the other hand, their words betray some happiness and hope—some *desire* to believe that this impossible windfall is real. They call the news "incredible" and "marvelous," sounding joyful and lightheaded as they stumble over their words. And when they find out it was all a lie, they react with disappointment: "But the money?" Clearly, on some level, they hoped the money *was* real.

LINES 43-48

Experiences are what ...
... line went dead.

Lines 43-48 close the poem on a harshly ironic note, as "Universal Lotteries" reveals that they hand out "Experiences" rather than money. The only "prize" the speaker has won in this lottery is the memorable "experience" of the phone call itself. As the callers pressure the speaker to agree that this is acceptable, their rhetorical questions sound mocking or bullying:

> You've had a great experience, right?
> Exciting? Something you'll remember?
> That's your prize.

Naturally, the callers don't wait for the speaker to answer; they "congratulat[e]" the speaker and end with the patronizing cliché, "Have a nice day!" The irony is clear: the speaker's day was going fine *before* the call, but thanks to "Universal," it's become a major letdown. In fact, the speaker seemed reasonably content with their *life* before the call; for example, they hadn't "bought a lottery ticket / for years and years" (lines 27-28). Now the call has reminded them that they never hit the jackpot in life—and that they still secretly dream of doing so, no matter how skeptical they've become. The "experience" of the phone is memorable, but only because it's painful.

The poem's narrative thus ends in a melancholy anticlimax. The speaker doesn't comment on their "experience"; they simply report that the phone "line went dead" after the callers hung up. This closing image may hint that the speaker themselves *feels* "dead"; their previous hope and excitement are gone. The reader is left to sort out the meaning of this deceptive "Call," which at first seems inexplicable and cruel, but which may point to a more common (or "Universal") sense of disappointment with one's fate.

SYMBOLS

THE LOTTERY

Lotteries are games of chance, so they're often symbols of chance, luck, and fate in general. This poem's (fake) lottery is no exception. On receiving the phone call from "Universal Lotteries," the poem's confused speaker says, "I haven't bought a lottery ticket / for years and years." Symbolically, this suggests that they've long since accepted their fate in life; they've stopped taking risks or entertaining their wildest dreams. They no longer imagine themselves *winning the lottery* in the idiomatic, metaphorical sense: that is, stumbling into success and happiness by a stroke of good fortune.

"Universal Lotteries" holds out—and then withdraws—the hope that fate has somehow smiled on them anyway. Even the name "Universal" suggests that this is a *cosmic* lottery, representing the larger forces of fate. It's as though fate itself is promising the speaker an amazing life, only to admit in the end that the promise was an illusion; all the speaker has really gained is the wisdom of "experience." Figuratively speaking, fate disappoints most people in similar fashion—only without informing them by phone. To put it another way: mere "experience," as opposed to blissful happiness, is all that most of us ever win from the "lottery" of life.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-4:** "This is Universal Lotteries," / they said. "You've won the top prize, / the Ultra-Super Global Special."
- **Lines 27-37:** ""I haven't bought a lottery ticket / for years and years. And what did you say / the company's called?" They laughed again. / "Not to worry about a ticket. / We're Universal. We operate / A retrospective Chances Module. / Nearly everyone's bought a ticket / in some lottery or another, / once at least. We buy up the files, / feed the names into our computer, / and see who the lucky person is.""
- **Lines 42-47:** ""We don't deal in money. / Experiences are what we deal in. / You've had a great experience, right? / Exciting? Something you'll remember? / That's your prize. So congratulations / from all of us at Universal."

POETIC DEVICES

IRONY

The poem's narrative hinges on a simple situational irony. The protagonist is led to believe they've won the lottery, only to find out there's a major catch: the top prize awarded by "Universal

Lotteries" turns out to be the mere "experience" of a memorable phone call, not "more than a million" pounds (as the "Universal" callers initially imply). This ironic reversal of expectations ends the poem on a note of anticlimax and bitter disappointment.

Technically, the callers never lie; that is, they never directly promise the speaker a large sum of money. In the first stanza, they say, "You've won the top prize," then ask, "What would you do with a million pounds?" This strongly *implies* that the prize is monetary, but the statement and question don't *have* to be related—and in fact, the "prize" turns out to be very different.

Later, the callers remark, "It isn't every day you hear / you're going to get a million pounds"—but again, this is subtly different than stating that they *will* get the money. These technicalities make the irony even crueler; they suggest that "Universal" has misled the speaker on purpose.

Even the callers' wording at the end is loaded with irony:

> You've had a great experience, right?
> Exciting? Something you'll remember?

Clearly, the phone call was "great" until it wasn't! And it's "Something" the speaker will "remember" only because it's disappointing. No one would prefer a disappointing "experience" to a million pounds! The callers almost seem to be mocking the speaker, right down to their final "Have a nice day!"

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-12:** "I said "I just… I can't believe it!" / They said "That's what they all say."
- **Lines 41-48:** ""Oh," they said, "there's no cheque." / "But the money?" "We don't deal in money. / Experiences are what we deal in. / You've had a great experience, right? / Exciting? Something you'll remember? / That's your prize. So congratulations / from all of us at Universal. / Have a nice day!""

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The poem contains a number of questions, but most of these (e.g., lines 1-2, 9-10, and 28-29) are straightforward and non-rhetorical. That is, they're actually trying to solicit information. The questions in lines 44-45, however, are rhetorical: the questioners aren't really expecting an answer and, in fact, don't wait for one. Instead, their questions are intended to make a point:

> [...] "We don't deal in money.
> Experiences are what we deal in.
> You've had a great experience, right?
> Exciting? Something you'll remember?

The questioners (who supposedly represent "Universal Lotteries") take it as a given that the speaker *has* had a "great," "Exciting," memorable "experience." Of course, these questions are loaded with irony, deliberate or otherwise. The speaker probably *will* "remember" this phone call—which initially led them to believe they'd won the lottery—but not because it's been a "great" or "Exciting" experience. In fact, it's been an absurd letdown.

Thus, the rhetorical questions come off as presumptuous or cruelly mocking. They add to the strong sense of anticlimax at the end of the poem and raise the possibility that this "lottery" symbolizes the cruel absurdity of fate itself.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 44-45:** "You've had a great experience, right? / Exciting? Something you'll remember?"

REPETITION

The poem repeats a number of words and phrases, most of which directly relate to the (fake) lottery at the heart of its narrative. For example, the name of the supposed lottery company—"Universal Lotteries" or plain "Universal"—appears in lines 2, 31, and 47. The word "lottery" appears in lines 27 and 34; "ticket" in lines 27, 30, and 33; the related terms "million"/"a million pounds"/"millionaire" in lines 5, 6, 8, and 24; "cheque" in lines 40 and 41; and "money" twice in line 42. These repetitions emphatically underline the speaker's supposed good fortune; they're practically a neon sign blaring *Jackpot!*

The repetition of "tell us" and "Go on" (lines 10, 13, and 17) conveys the callers' pushiness; they *really* want the speaker to express excitement, as if to make the eventual disappointment that much worse. One last major repetition occurs in lines 42 and 43, as the callers reveal the real prize in this dubious game: "Experiences"/"experience." After so much talk of money, this sad substitute sounds especially anticlimactic.

Many of the poem's repetitions occur at the ends of lines. For example, "a million pounds" falls at the ends of lines 5 and 24; "cry" ends lines 20 and 25; "I said" ends lines 26 and 38; "ticket" ends lines 27, 30, and 33; and "cheque" ends lines 40 and 41. The placement of these repetitions adds extra emphasis to some key terms in the narrative (e.g., "a million pounds"). It also builds subtle connections between stanzas; though not as noticeable as rhyme, it's still a hint of continuity.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Universal Lotteries"
- **Line 5:** "a million pounds"
- **Line 6:** "a million"
- **Line 8:** "millionaire"
- **Line 10:** "tell us"

- **Line 13:** "Go on," "tell us"
- **Line 17:** "Go on"
- **Line 19:** "My," "my"
- **Line 20:** "cry"
- **Line 24:** "a million pounds"
- **Line 25:** "cry"
- **Line 26:** "I said"
- **Line 27:** "lottery ticket"
- **Line 28:** "years," "years"
- **Line 30:** "a ticket"
- **Line 31:** "Universal"
- **Line 33:** "a ticket"
- **Line 34:** "lottery"
- **Line 38:** "I said"
- **Line 40:** "cheque"
- **Line 41:** "cheque"
- **Line 42:** "money," "money"
- **Line 43:** "Experiences"
- **Line 44:** "experience"
- **Line 47:** "Universal"

DIALOGUE

Nearly the entire poem consists of a dialogue between the speaker and "Universal Lotteries." The heavy use of dialogue (which is found in stories more often than poetry) signals that this a narrative poem rather than a lyric poem. That is, it aims primarily to tell a story—in this case, one with multiple characters—rather than express individual feelings.

As in fiction, the dialogue here serves multiple purposes: it provides exposition, or backstory (the explanation of how "Universal Lotteries" supposedly operates), and also propels the story forward. It traces a simple, classic narrative arc: the protagonist experiences good fortune, only to have it anticlimactically snatched away in the end.

The poem uses other literary devices help make the dialogue sound genuinely conversational. One of these is cliché (explored elsewhere in this section). Another is asyndeton, which appears in line 19:

> My throat's gone dry, my nose is tingling.

Omitting coordinating conjunctions (in this case, "and") is something English speakers do all the time in casual speech.

The only element of the poem that's *not* part of the dialogue is the very last phrase: "And the line went dead." Shortly after the dialogue ends, the poem ends. The narrative, too, has gone "dead." Like the speaker, the reader is left to sort out the meaning of the odd exchange that's just occurred.

Where Dialogue appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-48

CLICHÉ

When the speaker reacts to their supposed lottery win by exclaiming, "I can't believe it!" the callers reply, "That's what they all say." In other words, the speaker has used a cliché. But "That's what they all say" is also a cliché! The dialogue between speaker and callers contains a number of common idioms and formulaic phrases; that's part of what makes it sound naturalistic. (People use clichés all the time in everyday speech.)

If anything, though, the callers use more clichés than the speaker. In fact, their side of the dialogue begins and ends with clichés: "Are you sitting down?" (line 1) is a conventional way of asking if someone's prepared to hear big news, and "Have a nice day!" (line 48) is a standard goodbye in many professional interactions. In between, they use stock phrases like "It isn't every day [that X happens]" and the slightly patronizing "have a little cry." These clichés lend the callers' banter a cheerful corniness or artificial friendliness, heightening the irony when the call turns out to be a cruel hoax. The last cliché is the most ironic of all: thanks to the callers and their hoax, the speaker is clearly *not* going to "Have a nice day!"

Where Cliché appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Are you sitting down?"
- **Line 11:** "I can't believe it!"
- **Line 12:** "That's what they all say."
- **Line 23:** "It isn't every day"
- **Line 25:** "have a little cry"
- **Line 48:** "Have a nice day!"

VOCABULARY

Universal Lotteries (Line 2, Line 31, Lines 46-47) - A fictitious organization that supposedly operates a giant lottery. According to the prank callers in the poem, it's "Universal" in that it collects tickets from other, past lotteries and picks a winner from that aggregated pool.

The Ultra-Super Global Special (Lines 3-4) - The fictitious "top prize" in the poem's fictitious lottery. Supposedly, the winner of this "Special" drawing receives over "a million pounds."

Pounds (Line 5) - The pound (a.k.a. pound sterling) is the official currency of the UK.

Flying saucer (Lines 14-16) - A slang term for a disc-shaped spaceship or UFO, as commonly depicted in science fiction and other pop culture.

Retrospective (Lines 31-32) - Covering a prior period or applying to past events (in this case, past lotteries).

Chances Module (Lines 31-32) - The fictitious system used by "Universal Lotteries" for its lottery drawings. A made-up term intended as a parody of technical language. (The word "module" can describe part of a computer system or program.)

Cheque (Line 40, Line 41) - Often spelled "check" in the U.S. A common mode of payment, including in lotteries; a document authorizing an amount of money to be drawn from the payer's bank account and paid to the recipient.

The line (Line 48) - The telephone connection.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem consists of six octaves, or eight-line stanzas. It's written in free verse, meaning that it has no meter or rhyme scheme, but its lines are of approximately even length (seven to ten syllables).

These formal choices make the poem extremely approachable and easy to read. The lack of rhyme and meter helps the language sound natural and conversational—well suited to a poem that mostly consists of dialogue. The equal-sized stanzas break this plain language into smaller, manageable units, much like paragraphs in a work of prose. (In general, this poem reads like a very short story; it's narrative rather than lyric.) The poem's form makes it easy to digest, even as the "experience" it describes leaves a bitter aftertaste.

METER

The poem is written in free verse; it doesn't follow a regular meter. At the same time, its line lengths stay very consistent, ranging between seven and ten syllables. (Line 6 might be eleven, depending on how you count.)

The lack of meter gives the poem a loose, conversational quality—after all, it describes a conversation. In general, the combination of unadorned speech, even stanza lengths, and fairly even line lengths makes the poem's language extremely smooth and approachable. The poem tells its story straightforwardly, in easily digestible segments, without any elaborate formal tricks getting in the way.

RHYME SCHEME

As a free verse poem, "The Telephone Call" has no rhyme scheme. It narrates a simple, colloquial conversation as straightforwardly as possible. Traditional poetic effects like rhyme and meter would detract from that conversational quality.

The phrase "million pounds" does occur at the ends of two lines (5 and 24), and the word "cheque" ends two consecutive lines (40 and 41). Though these aren't really rhymes, the repetition of these money-related terms helps drive home what's at stake in the narrative (a lot of money!).

A few other words/phrases recur at the ends of lines, too: "cry" (lines 20 and 25), "I said" (lines 26 and 38), and "ticket" (lines 27, 30, and 33). Again, these don't register as rhymes, but they provide subtle links between stanzas while drawing attention to some of the poem's key words. (For example, "cry" underscores the high emotion of the moment, and "ticket" recurs because the way this lottery supposedly works becomes an important point in the narrative.)

SPEAKER

The poem provides almost no identifying information about the speaker; their name, age, gender, etc. are never revealed. Presumably, they're an adult (someone old enough to buy lottery tickets) residing in the UK (or another country that uses "pounds" as its currency). They're not fabulously wealthy, since the prize of "more than a million" pounds would substantially impact their life. Also, they've apparently entered "some lottery or another, / once at least," since they accept this as their qualification for winning the grand prize.

Otherwise, they could be just about anyone—and that's the point! The poem presents a universally relatable scenario, as the name "Universal Lotteries" playfully suggests. All but the most hardened skeptics would feel *some* hope if they got a phone call claiming they'd won a fortune. And it's true that most adults have entered a lottery of some kind, at some point, in countries that offer them. ("Nearly everyone[]" might be an exaggeration, but for example, about 50% of American adults play state lotteries each year.) In a metaphorical sense, too, everyone hopes to *win the lottery*—that is, hopes their wildest dreams will come true.

The generic speaker makes this already relatable poem even easier to identify with. Unless they've already achieved all their dreams, any reader can picture themselves in the speaker's place.

SETTING

The poem doesn't specify a setting. However, it describes a "Telephone Call" in the age before cell phones, most likely made to a personal/home number. (Lotteries have sometimes contacted winners via home phone—as have scams pretending to be lotteries!—but it would be quite unusual for them to reach out via other numbers.) So this is almost certainly a domestic setting, complete with an old-school landline.

Like the generic speaker, the lack of a defined location makes the poem's scenario seem as "Universal" as the fake lottery itself. ("Universal Lotteries" claims to be a "Global" operation, drawing from lotteries played worldwide.) The poem spins a tale of raised hopes and stinging disappointment that almost

anyone, anywhere, can relate to.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"The Telephone Call" appears in *The Incident Book* (1986), one of Fleur Adock's mid-career poetry collections. Originally from New Zealand, Adcock (born 1934) has been based in the UK for much of her career and has gained an international audience as a poet and translator. She is also the editor of the *Faber Book of 20th Century Women's Poetry* (1987), a notable anthology published the year after *The Incident Book*.

Written in 1980s Britain, "The Telephone Call" reflects the broad poetic trends of its moment. During this time, a number of leading English poets were writing narrative poems (sometimes called "lyric narratives") in free verse. Even as they steered clear of traditional forms, they tended to avoid modernist-style experimentation, preferring to draw on everyday experiences and approachable language.

Accordingly, "The Telephone Call" is written in free verse, but its style is conversational; it doesn't radically challenge the reader's expectations about poetry. While its scenario is somewhat bizarre, it's anchored by a generic, domestic setting and an "Everyperson" type speaker. (Who *hasn't* dreamed of hitting it big, whether in a literal or a metaphorical "lottery"?) Using relatively simple materials, it explores complex, unsettling themes.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The "Universal Lotteries" organization (line 2) is fictitious, even within the world of the poem. There is no such thing as the "Ultra-Super Global Special," with its top prize of "a million pounds"—or "more than a million." However, Adcock's invention is loosely based on real-world lottery games, including those in countries that use pounds as their currency.

Adcock's home country of New Zealand—which used the "New Zealand pound" in her youth—did not have a national lottery until 1987, the year after *The Incident Book* was published. Her adopted country, the UK, didn't establish its National Lottery until 1994. However, smaller lotteries of the modern kind had been legal in the UK since the 1930s, and the first official English lottery of *any* kind took place in 1569, under the reign of Queen Elizabeth I!

The poem mentions a "computer" (line 36) used in the lottery drawing process. Lotteries became increasingly tied to computer systems in the 1970s; for example, the first computerized lottery games in the U.S. began in the middle of that decade. One other technology note: since the poem was written before the cell phone era, the titular "Telephone Call" would have been placed via landline and almost certainly received at home. In those days, the speaker would have heard a dial tone, not silence, after "the line went dead" (line 48).

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- An Interview with the Poet — Listen to an interview with Fleur Adcock about her life and career. (https://www.rnz.co.nz/audio/player?audio_id=2018682798)
- A Profile of the Poet — Read about Adcock at the Postcolonial Studies blog at Emory University. (https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/postcolonialstudies/2014/06/01/adcock-fleur/)
- A Retrospective — Read a retrospective on Adcock's career, published in The Guardian upon the release of her Collected Poems (2000). (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/jul/29/poetry.features?INTCMP=SRCH)
- The Poet's Life and Work — A brief biography of Adcock from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/fleur-adcock)
- More Adcock Resources — A biography, bibliography, and critical perspective on the poet, via the British Council Literature. (https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/fleur-adcock)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER FLEUR ADCOCK POEMS

- For Heidi With Blue Hair

HOW TO CITE

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