This Be The Verse

SUMMARY

Your parents inflict profound emotional damage on you. Even if they aren't trying to harm you, this is inevitably what they do. This is because your parents pass their personal flaws on to you, and they'll even behave in ways that force you to develop flaws of your very own.

However, parents only do this to their children because they were emotionally damaged when they themselves were kids by their own foolish, old-fashioned parents, who spent half their time being unreasonably strict and the other half viciously arguing with one another.

People pass their sadness and suffering on to each other, and this discontent gradually sinks into people in the same way that the earth slopes into the ocean. The only way to avoid this fate is to die as soon as possible and to make sure you don't have any children of your own.

THEMES

PARENTING AND EMOTIONAL DAMAGE

"This Be The Verse" suggests that all parents inevitably cause their children lasting emotional damage. This, the speaker suggests, is unavoidable. After all, even parents who don't *intend* to harm their children end up passing their character flaws to them while also forcing their children to develop *new* flaws. Seeing this process as a never-ending cycle, the speaker suggests that parents tend to "fuck up" their children precisely because *their* parents did the same thing to *them*. In this regard, the poem frames emotional damage as cyclical and generational, something that people can't help but inherit from their parents and then unwittingly inflict upon their own children.

One of the most important sentiments in the poem is the idea that parents "may not mean to" saddle their kids with their emotional baggage—even if this is exactly what they end up doing. This implies that even the most well-intentioned parents can't help but perpetuate tense dynamics that ultimately interfere with their children's lives. By unintentionally forcing their flaws onto their children, the speaker maintains, all parents inflict emotional damage on their kids, regardless of their best efforts to avoid this.

The idea that everyone inflicts emotional damage on their children suggests that this is a cyclical problem. To that end, the speaker notes that parents themselves have been "fucked up" by *their* parents and that the only way to break out of this endless sequence of emotional damage is to die without having children, thereby making it impossible to pass emotional baggage on to a new generation of family members.

Needless to say, this is a very pessimistic outlook, since it suggests that there is no reasonable solution to this problem. However, it's worth noting that the poem isn't just a bitter complaint about how parents negatively impact their children's lives. Rather, the poem is also an acknowledgment that everyone inevitably inherits flaws from their parents. And for this reason, it's perfectly normal for people to feel like their parents messed them up—this, after all, is simply part of growing up and experiencing the kind of imperfection that is central to being a human being.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

MISERY AND SUFFERING

One message that can be drawn from the poem is that misery and suffering are inescapable. This, the speaker upholds, is because misery itself can be passed from one person to the next, which is why children are so profoundly affected by their parents. Of course, this idea sounds quite depressing, but it's worth keeping in mind that "This Be The Verse" has a surprisingly lighthearted tone. To that end, the speaker's solution to the never-ending problem of human misery is that people should "get out" of life (which is to say *die*) before having children—a suggestion so ridiculous that it reads as sarcastic, since few people would take this advice seriously. In turn, the poem suggests that there is virtually nothing a person can do to prevent unhappiness.

According to the speaker, to be alive is to be miserable. This, of course, is because parents pass on their discontent to their children, and this discontent "deepens like a coastal shelf" as time goes on and generation after generation inherits such misery. It is for this reason, then, that the speaker says, "Get out as early as you can, / And don't have any kids yourself." In other words, the only way that humans could ever escape their own misery is if humankind ceased to exist at all—indeed, people can't be unhappy if they dead.

And yet, this supposed solution is so absurd that it comes to seem like little more than a tongue-in-cheek joke. After all, suggesting that somebody die in order to avoid unhappiness is like telling someone to jump into a fire because they're cold: the solution technically solves the original problem but also creates a much bigger one!

With this dynamic in mind, it becomes clear that the speaker

doesn't truly know how to avoid misery because there *isn't* a way to do this. By suggesting such a ludicrous way of putting an end to this kind of happiness, then, the speaker subtly demonstrates that humans have no choice but to accept suffering as a basic fact of existence.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 9-12

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

They fuck you ...
... but they do.

The poem has a very informal tone from the start, when the speaker insists that parents will "fuck you up." In contrast with the antiquated, rather lofty title ("This Be The Verse"), the informality and bluntness of the first line is striking, perhaps catching readers off-guard and encouraging them to connect with what the speaker says on a more immediate, personal level. After all, the speaker is concerned with what the poem presents as a universal problem—namely, that parents always end up causing their kids some kind of emotional harm.

If the poem's opening line seems harsh, it's worth noting that the speaker softens this initial statement by saying, in the second line, that many parents "may not mean to" cause their children harm. In doing so, the speaker makes it clear that this poem is not supposed to be read as an attack on bad parents. Rather, the poem simply sets forth the idea that *all* parents unavoidably complicate their children's lives, regardless of their intentions. In this way, the speaker highlights the cyclical nature of this kind of unhappiness, ultimately suggesting that it's difficult, if not impossible, to escape childhood without having experienced some form of emotional damage inflicted by one's parents.

This idea sounds quite pessimistic, and that's because it *is* pessimistic. At the same time, though, it might be helpful to bear in mind that the speaker's use of profanity in the opening line undercuts the seriousness of this otherwise grand assertion. After all, most people would probably give a little knowing chuckle after hearing the phrase, "They fuck you up, your mum and dad." Accordingly, the poem takes on a certain dry humor, even as the speaker makes such bleak claims. In this tongue-in-cheek manner, the speaker uses anaphora to repeat the word "they" at the beginning of the first two lines. In doing so, the speaker highlights the human tendency to constantly blame others for everything that has gone wrong in one's life. Indeed, parents are especially vulnerable to this kind of criticism, since so many people feel the same way the speaker does, believing that their parents have "fucked" them up.

Both lines 1 and 2 feature caesuras, which establish a distinct rhythm that is self-contained and terse. This is further accentuated by the fact that both lines are end-stopped, adding prominent pauses that, when combined with the meter of the poem, create a very musical effect.

To that end, these first two lines establish the poem's meter, since they are both in iambic tetrameter. This means that each line consists of four iambs, which are metrical feet consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (da-DUM). The lines scan like this:

They **fuck** | you **up**, || your **mum** | and **dad**.
They **may** | not **mean** | to, || **but** | they **do**.

The iambic rhythm in these lines gives the words a bouncy feel, one that is also created by the assonant sounds that pattern themselves throughout. For instance, the /uh/ sound repeats three times in the first line, appearing in the words "fuck," "up," and "mum." Similarly, the long /a/ sound repeats in the second line, appearing in the word "they" (which occurs twice) and the word "may."

All in all, this creates a satisfying sound that, when combined with the meter and pacing of the poem (in addition to the internal rhyme between "to" and "do" in the second line) ultimately gives the poem a sing-song quality. In this regard, the beginning of the poem sounds surprisingly cheerful despite the speaker's pessimistic outlook, thereby inviting readers to laugh at the sad notion that all parents mess up their children.

LINES 3-4

They fill you ...
... just for you.

These lines clarify how, exactly, parents emotionally damage their children even if this isn't their intention. According to the speaker, parents pass the flaws they've developed in their own lives on to their children. And this process, it seems, forces children to not only internalize their parents' faults, but also develop some of their *own*, so that by the time they are adults they suffer from a mixture of inherited emotional baggage and problems that are more specific to their own experiences. By spotlighting this dynamic, the speaker introduces the idea that certain flaws can be passed down from generation to generation, meaning that such discontent is cyclical.

Line 3 features several consonant sounds, including the /th/ sound and the /f/ sound:

They **f**ill you wi**th** **th**e **f**aults **th**ey had

The consonance of the /th/ sound pairs nicely with the alliteration of the /f/ sound in this moment, ultimately creating a soft effect that some readers might register as sibilance, since some people believe that the /th/ and /f/ sounds count as

sibilance along with the standard /s/ sound. According to this perspective, lines 3 and 4 are particularly sibilant:

> They fill you with the faults they had
> And add some extra, just for you.

The sibilance of these lines suggests a softness or even a sort of "tsk-tsk" on the speaker's part, reflecting the poem's critical yet light-hearted tone.

To that end, lines 3 and 4 establish the poem's ABAB rhyme scheme, since the word "had" in line 3 rhymes with the word "dad" in line 1, and "you" in line 4 rhymes with "do" in line 2. This adds to the song-like quality of the poem, as the speaker's tone remains light, pleasant, and playful despite the rather depressing subject matter. In turn, readers are subtly encouraged to approach "This Be The Verse" lightheartedly; taking cues from the speaker's playful tone, readers will perhaps sense that it's not worth getting upset about family-related emotional baggage, which is so unavoidable and, therefore, commonplace.

LINES 5-6

> *But they were ...*
> *... hats and coats,*

At the beginning of the second stanza ("But they ... throats"), the speaker clarifies that the reason parents tend to emotionally damage their children is that *they* were emotionally damaged by *their* parents, too. This further establishes the idea that the burdens parents place on their children are seemingly never-ending, as each generation passes on their flaws and emotional problems. In other words, discontent and misery don't simply disappear. Instead, they manifest themselves in new ways in generations to come.

It's worth paying attention to the speaker's use of the word "But" in line 5: "But they were fucked up in their turn." The word "but" signals a slight departure from the ideas the speaker has already laid out. Indeed, whereas the first stanza accuses all parents of emotionally damaging their children, the second stanza begins with the speaker's acknowledgment that this isn't necessarily their *fault*. In this sense, it becomes even more clear that the speaker isn't particularly bitter toward a certain generation, but simply aware that emotional baggage is passed down through the ages.

To further illustrate the fact that parents can't really be blamed for interfering with their children's happiness, the speaker points out that the current generation of parents were "fucked up" by the *previous* generation of parents, whom the speaker describes as "fools in old-style hats and coats." Although the poem isn't about style or clothing, the speaker highlights the older generation's outdated way of dressing to encourage readers to see them through the eyes of the younger generation of parents. In this way, the speaker makes the older generation seem out of touch, effectively making it easier to understand why some people might find them so unbearable.

These two lines are somewhat consonant, as the /t/ sound repeats several times:

> But they were fucked up in their turn
> By fools in old-style hats and coats

In addition to this consonance, these lines are also sibilant, especially if readers consider the /th/, /f/, and /z/ sounds as sibilant (alongside the /s/ sound):

> But they were fucked up in their turn
> By fools in old-style hats and coats

The plosive /p/ and /b/ sounds and the hard /k/ sounds echo through these lines as well, punctuating the sibilance and adding a sense of forcefulness. The assonant short /uh/ of "fucked up" and the long /o/ of "old" and "coats" adds to the lines' musicality. Once again, then, the sing-song quality of the poem subtly implies that readers shouldn't take these things too seriously, since such tensions are simply unavoidable parts of life.

LINES 7-8

> *Who half the ...*
> *... one another's throats.*

Lines 7 and 8 dive deeper into the circumstances that create generational discontent. Having established that parents who emotionally damage their children normally do so because they *themselves* have been emotionally damaged by *their* parents, the speaker frames the older generation of parents as temperamental and unpredictable. In some situations, the speaker suggests, these parents were "soppy-stern," a colloquial term that refers, more or less, to people who are both sentimental and strict.

As if this isn't enough to drive children to discontent, the speaker continues to illustrate why it would be difficult to live with this older generation of parents. To that end, it becomes clear that these parents were only "soppy-stern" *half* of the time. The *other* half of the time, they were "at one another's throats," meaning that they fought with each other in front of the children. This is a perfect example of something that would certainly interfere with a child's ability to lead a happy life, since witnessing conflicts between parents is quite distressing.

Furthermore, these two lines feature several instances of alliteration. First, the /h/ sound repeats three times:

> Who half the time were soppy-stern
> And half at one another's throats.

This soft /h/ sound complements the sibilance that subtly

weaves its way throughout the poem. In fact, that sibilance is once again present in these two lines, which make use of the /s/ sound along with the /f/ and /th/ sounds:

> Who half the time were soppy-stern
> And half at one another's throats.

This combination of sibilance and alliteration also supports the poem's meter, pairing nicely with the bouncy rhythm created by the speaker's use of iambic tetrameter. Again, this is a meter in which each line consists of four iambs, metrical feet consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (da-DUM). Indeed, the repeated /h/ sound and the sibilant /f/, /th/, and /s/ sounds flow nicely with the iambic da-DUM, da-DUM rhythm, giving the poem an effortless, relaxed feeling that it might otherwise lack, since its tone is rather pessimistic on the whole.

LINES 9-10

> *Man hands on ...*
> *... a coastal shelf.*

In these lines, the speaker shifts toward a more general observation on the nature of human misery. The first two stanzas ("They fuck you up ... another's throats") focus on the notion that parents inevitably inflict emotional damage on their children, and then the final stanza ("Man hands ... kids yourself") articulates this idea in an even broader way:

> Man hands on misery to man.

The idea that people hand their misery to other humans spotlights the cyclical nature of discontent, as parents make their children unhappy and then those children later make *their* children unhappy. This never-ending cycle is especially reflected by the speaker's use of epanalepsis in line 9, since the word "man" serves as both the beginning and the end of the sentence.

What's more, the alliteration of the /m/ sound is noteworthy because it creates a feeling of repetition that aligns with the speaker's point, which is that misery never simply goes away. Indeed, when the speaker says "Man hands on misery to man," readers will perhaps pick up on a feeling of recurrence that ultimately reflects the idea of suffering as cyclical.

And it is this never-ending cycle, the speaker suggests, that "deepens like a coastal shelf"—a simile that compares human misery to a stretch of land jutting out from a continent and covered by ocean water. Coastal shelves (typically referred to as "continental shelves") gradually get deeper the farther they are from land. It's also worth noting that coastal shelves were created long ago, during the glacial period of the Ice Age. In this way, then, the speaker's simile is yet another acknowledgment of the fact that human discontent is nothing new; rather, it is as old as one of the earth's oldest geographical features.

Like many of the lines in "This Be The Verse," lines 9 and 10 are both end-stopped. This gives them a decisive, declarative sound. In this way, they sound somewhat severe and serious, as if nobody could possibly argue against the notion that human misery is part of a never-ending cycle that goes back a long, long time.

At the same time, though, even this bleak idea doesn't detract from the poem's musicality, which is made apparent by the assonant /a/ sound that appears in line 9: "Man hands on misery to man." This assonance also creates an internal slant rhyme between the word "hands" and the word "man," giving the entire line a satisfying sound that is cohesive and musical despite the fact that the speaker's main point is about the inevitable suffering that defines the human condition.

LINES 11-12

> *Get out as ...*
> *... any kids yourself.*

For the first time in the entire poem, the speaker gives readers advice about how to break out of the cycle of misery that is central to the human experience. "Get out as early as you can," the speaker says, ultimately suggesting that dying is the only way to avoid misery. What's more, the speaker continues in the final line by saying that, in addition to "get[ting] out" of life as soon as possible, readers should also refrain from having children of their own, since this is the only way for people to make sure they won't contribute to the cycle of discontent that is passed down from one generation to the next.

Although these lines contain the only pieces of advice the speaker issues throughout the poem, it is hard to take the speaker seriously in this moment. After all, suggesting that people die in order to escape misery doesn't offer much of a solution! Accordingly, the speaker's advice actually reads more like a sarcastic, tongue-in-cheek joke than a legitimate proposal. This aligns with the poem's overall tone, which is light and humorous even though the speaker sets forth pessimistic ideas about generational emotional turmoil and the inescapable quality of human suffering.

Like most of the other lines in the poem, both lines 11 and 12 are end-stopped, though it's worth pointing out that the comma at the end of line 11 ("Get out as early as you can") creates a pause between the two lines that is slightly shorter or less prominent than the ones that arise after the use of a period. This, in turn, ties the two lines together. What's more, these lines conclude the poem's ABAB rhyme scheme, which readers will perhaps notice hasn't faltered once throughout the entire poem. Indeed, the word "can" at the end of line 11 rhymes with the word "man" in line 9 ("Man hands ... man"), and the word "yourself" in line 12 rhymes with "self" in line 10 ("It deepens ... shelf"). Because of this consistent rhyme scheme, the poem ends with the same musical tone it has exhibited from

the very beginning—one that contrasts the speaker's rather depressing perspective on life.

SYMBOLS

THE COASTAL SHELF

The reference to coastal shelves in the poem introduces the image of a very old and largely unseen geographical feature that slopes down into the depths of the ocean. This image is particularly relevant to the poem's acknowledgment that human misery works its way from generation to generation—after all, a coastal shelf is something that has been in existence for a long time, thereby embodying the same kind of persistence and longevity that suffering and discontent also have.

What's more, coastal shelves stretch deeper and deeper into the ocean the farther they are from land. This depth, it seems, represents the ways in which unhappiness is deeply ingrained in life itself. With this in mind, the speaker mentions coastal shelves to symbolize the fact that sadness is a fundamental feature of existence—a feature that has always been part of the human condition.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "coastal shelf"

POETIC DEVICES

ANAPHORA

The speaker's use of anaphora is subtle, since the words that repeat at the beginning of consecutive lines aren't particularly noticeable. For example, the speaker begins each of the first three lines ("They fuck you up ... they had") with the word "they," a word that more or less blends into the rest of the poem.

At the same time, this repetition creates a feeling of consistency that makes the speaker sound unwavering and predictable. In this way, the anaphora adds to the dry, cynical tone that the speaker uses, ultimately creating a matter-of-fact overall sound that reflects the speaker's pessimistic outlook. It's inevitable that parents will mess up their children's lives, the speaker thinks, and repeating "they" again and again draws attention to this inevitability. It also keeps the poem's resentment focused squarely on parents, at least for now.

The speaker also uses anaphora in the second stanza ("But they ... another's throats"), repeating the word "half" at the beginning of the two consecutive clauses that take up lines 7 and 8:

> Who **half** the time were soppy-stern
> And **half** at one another's throats.

This is a very straightforward example of anaphora, since the poetic device reflects the content of the line; it divides the parents' actions into two parts.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "They"
- **Line 2:** "They"
- **Line 3:** "They"
- **Line 7:** "Who half"
- **Line 8:** "And half "

ASSONANCE

The speaker sprinkles assonance throughout the poem to intensify its overall sound and call attention to important words. This is apparent right away, as the /uh/ sound repeats three times in the very first line:

> They f**u**ck you **u**p, your m**u**m and dad.

The assonant repetition of the /uh/ sound in this line is especially prominent because it emphasizes the speaker's use of the word "fuck"—a word that will perhaps startle certain readers, especially if they're expecting to encounter a more formal and austere kind of poetry (an admittedly understandable expectation, considering that the poem's title, "This Be The Verse," sounds so lofty and dignified!). In turn, the speaker uses assonance to accentuate the use of a curse word while also giving the first line a certain musicality, thereby making it sound poetic even though the word "fuck" doesn't align with conventional expectations surrounding the kind of language usually found in poetry.

In other moments, the speaker uses assonance to create internal slant rhymes. This is the case in line 9, when the speaker repeats an /a/ sound three times:

> M**a**n hands on misery to m**a**n.

In this line, assonance adds a satisfying sound to the line, since the words "man" and "hands" create a pleasing slant rhyme. As a result, the speaker's language sounds musical and light even though the overall message of the line is actually quite bleak, since the speaker's main point is that humans inevitably inherit unhappiness and discontent from one another. And yet, the assonance in this moment gives readers the impression that the speaker isn't all that upset by this otherwise unsettling idea—a sign that the speaker has embraced discontent as an unavoidable part of the human condition. By striking a light and musical tone while discussing such depressing topics, then, the speaker uses assonance to counteract the poem's cynical

subject matter.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "fuck," "up," "mum"
- **Line 2:** "They," "may," "to," "they," "do"
- **Line 3:** "you," "had"
- **Line 4:** "add"
- **Line 5:** "fucked," "up"
- **Line 6:** "old," "hats," "coats"
- **Line 7:** "half," "were," "stern"
- **Line 8:** "half," "at," "one," "another's"
- **Line 9:** "Man," "hands," "misery," "man"
- **Line 10:** "deepens"
- **Line 11:** "as," "as," "can"
- **Line 12:** "And," "have," "any"

ALLITERATION

"This Be The Verse" is a very musical poem. This is in part the result of its consistent use of meter and its adherence to an ABAB rhyme scheme, but the speaker's use of alliteration also adds to the sing-song quality of the individual lines. For instance, the repetition of the /m/ and /f/ sounds in lines 2 and 3 enhances the rhythm and flow of the speaker's words:

> They **m**ay not **m**ean to, but they do.
> They **f**ill you with the **f**aults they had.

The repetition of these alliterative sounds is especially noticeable because both of these lines are end-stopped. Indeed, that each line is separated from the next *could* create a choppy rhythm that would ultimately disrupt the poem's flow. However, the alliterative /m/ and /f/ sounds reinforce the overall musicality, saving the poem from sounding stilted and ultimately giving it a smooth, relaxed tone.

Alliteration also connects words thematically in the poem. Take the repetition of the /m/ sound in line 9:

> Man hands on **m**isery to **m**an.

This alliteration connects human beings ("man") to misery itself, and also reflects the cyclical nature of misery as the line begins and ends with an /m/ sound. Similarly, the shared /f/ sounds of the second stanza connect parents' tendency to mess up their kids to their own foolishness:

> But they were **f**ucked up in their turn
> By **f**ools in old-style hats and coats,

The many gentle /h/ sounds and the /s/ sounds in this stanza imbue the lines with a sense of lilting softness as well:

> By fools in old-style **h**ats and coats,
> Who **h**alf the time were soppy-stern
> And **h**alf at one another's throats.

The alliteration here words with the poem's steady rhyme scheme and bouncy rhythm to create a striking juxtaposition between the light-hearted tone and the dismal subject.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "may," "mean"
- **Line 3:** "fill," "faults"
- **Line 5:** "they," "fucked," "their"
- **Line 6:** "fools," "hats"
- **Line 7:** "Who," "half," "soppy," "stern"
- **Line 8:** "half"
- **Line 9:** "Man," "misery," "man"

CAESURA

The speaker uses caesuras in the first stanza ("They fuck you up ... just for you") as a way of establishing a measured, contemplative cadence. This is evident in the very first line, when the speaker pauses after the poem's opening clause:

> They fuck you up, || your mum and dad.

The caesura that divides this sentence in half is important because it gives readers a moment to more fully absorb the somewhat startling opening phrase. Instead of saying, "Your mum and dad fuck you up," the speaker has chosen to express this sentiment in a much more dramatic way by beginning with "They fuck you up"—a clause that is quite forceful in and of itself. Beginning with "They fuck you up" also creates a caesura in the middle of the line, as the speaker inserts a comma after this phrase and then clarifies that the subjects in question are "your mum and dad." In this way, the caesura heightens the drama of the opening statement, creating a pause that allows readers to fully absorb the speaker's blunt and cynical assertion.

The other two caesuras in the first stanza function similarly to the first one, though they aren't quite as dramatic. Instead, these caesuras simply break up lines 2 ("They may not mean to, || but they do") and 4 ("And add some extra, || just for you"). This is particularly noticeable because lines 2 and 4 are both end-stopped, giving the speaker's words a staccato rhythm. The caesuras, then, accentuate this clipped pace, making the speaker sound even more terse and matter-of-fact. In turn, the caesuras reflect the speaker's unsentimental tone and unflinching cynicism.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "up, your"
- **Line 2:** "to, but"

- **Line 4:** "extra, just"

CONSONANCE

"This Be The Verse" is a very consonant poem, since most lines contain several repeated consonant sounds. This repetition of sound combines with the poem's steady rhyme scheme, assonance, and alliteration to create a very musical, memorable poem. The poem feels almost like a nursery rhyme or an extended aphorism, with its message being some well-known and accepted knowledge. This musicality contrasts, of course, with the darkness of that message itself—a tension that makes the poem at once disturbing and funny.

For an example of consonance, take line 6. Here, the speaker clearly repeats /l/, /s/, and /t/ sounds:

> By fools in old-style hats and coats,

This consonance lends the line a sense of structure and cohesiveness, and perhaps make it sound almost like a tongue twister! The many shared sounds and bouncy rhythm make it easy to memorize the poem, again adding to the sense that this is some sort of standard lesson being passed down just as misery is passed down from "man" to "man."

The poem is also quite sibilant in certain moments, especially if readers consider the /f/, /sh/, and /z/ sounds to be sibilant alongside the standard /s/ sound. On the one hand, sibilance adds a certain gentleness and softness to the lines, tempering the poem's very dismal message. This is the case with lines 9-10:

> Man hands on misery to man.
> It deepens like a coastal shelf.

On the other hand, sibilance can also evoke the sense of sinister hissing or spitting disapproval. This seems to be the effect created by the /s/ sounds in the second stanza as the speaker describes parents' tendency to be either overly sentimental or fighting:

> Who half the time were soppy-stern
> And half at one another's throats.

The /s/ sounds work with the biting /t/ sound here to create a biting, bitter tone that implies the speaker's resentment towards parental failures.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "you," "your," "mum," "dad"
- **Line 2:** "may," "mean"
- **Line 3:** "They," "fill," "with," "the," "faults," "they," "had"
- **Line 4:** "And," "add," "some," "extra," "just"
- **Line 5:** "fucked"
- **Line 6:** "fools," "old," "style," "hats," "coats"
- **Line 7:** "Who," "half," "time," "soppy," "stern"
- **Line 8:** "And," "half," "one," "another's," "throats"
- **Line 9:** "Man," "hands," "on," "misery," "man"
- **Line 10:** "deepens," "coastal," "shelf"
- **Line 11:** "Get," "out," "early," "can"
- **Line 12:** "And," "don't," "any," "kids," "yourself"

END-STOPPED LINE

The entire rhythm of the poem is defined by the speaker's tendency to use end-stopped lines. This leads to a terse, staccato rhythm, since a clear pause can be felt between each line. In most cases, this pause is highlighted by the speaker's use of a period, which is the speaker's way of signaling that readers should come to a full stop at the end of the line.

However, there are other (more reliable) ways of discerning whether a line is end-stopped. Consider, for instance, the first two lines of the third stanza:

> Man hands on misery to man.
> It deepens like a coastal shelf.

In the first line of this section, the speaker notes that humans inherit discontent from one another. Then, in the second line, the speaker shifts to provide a simile that will better illustrate this idea. Of course, these two ideas are obviously connected to one another, but the speaker separates them by allowing each line to contain its own complete and independent phrase. Indeed, the simile of misery "deepen[ing] like a coastal shelf" enhances the overall idea, but the notion that "man hands on misery to man" doesn't depend upon this simile in order to make sense. Taking this into consideration, it's clear that the two lines are separate from one another and, thus, that line 9 ("Man hands ... man") is end-stopped.

We'd also argue that line 7—"Who half the time were soppy-stern"—is end-stopped despite the lack of final punctuation, since the following line introduces a new independent clause. However, it's worth noting the syntactical construction that the speaker uses in these two lines. By saying, "Who half the time were soppy-stern / And half at one another's throats," the speaker subtly connects the two lines to each other, since the use of the phrase "half the time" in line 7 indicates that the speaker will have to finish this thought by commenting on what these parents are like the *other* half of the time. Consequently, the two lines depend upon one another to make sense, and it's also possible to read them as being enjambed.

When it comes to the speaker's use of end-stops, this is the only ambiguous moment in the entire poem. In fact, every other line of the poem is end-stopped, including line 3 ("They fill you

with the faults they had") even though it doesn't include any punctuation (this line is end-stopped because it can stand on its own, even if the line that comes after it eventually deepens its meaning). With this dynamic in mind, the speaker's delivery comes to sound straightforward and clipped. The poem takes on a stop-and-start rhythm that is quite matter-of-fact, ultimately reflecting the speaker's unemotional approach to life's misery.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "dad."
- **Line 2:** "do."
- **Line 3:** "had"
- **Line 4:** "you."
- **Line 5:** "turn"
- **Line 6:** "coats,"
- **Line 7:** "soppy-stern"
- **Line 8:** "throats."
- **Line 9:** "man."
- **Line 10:** "shelf."
- **Line 11:** "can,"
- **Line 12:** "yourself."

EPANALEPSIS

The speaker uses epanalepsis in line 9, repeating the word "man" at both the beginning and the end of the line:

> Man hands on misery to man.

This creates a cyclical feeling that helps the speaker subtly illustrate the idea expressed in the line itself: that people pass misery and discontent to one another, and that this pattern repeats itself generation after generation. By using epanalepsis here, the speaker thus employs a poetic device that aligns with the subject, making it easier for readers to grasp just how unavoidable this dynamic is and, it follows, how central unhappiness is to the human condition.

On another note, the speaker's use of epanalepsis creates a cohesive sound. Both instances of the word "man" alliterate with the word "misery." They also create slant rhymes with the word "hands." In this way, epanalepsis contributes to the poem's song-like quality, which is peraps surprisingly satisfying given the speaker's overwhelming cynicism about the nature of life.

Where Epanalepsis appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "Man hands on misery to man."

SIMILE

To describe the way misery passes from one generation to the next, the speaker uses a simile that compares the history of human suffering to the downward slope of a continental shelf, saying, "It deepens like a coastal shelf."

To understand this simile, it's important that readers know what a continental shelf actually is (the speaker uses the misnomer "coastal shelf"). A continental shelf is a stretch of land that juts out from a large landmass and is submerged in the ocean. These "shelves" extend for a long way, gradually sloping into the water before abruptly plunging into the deepest reaches of the ocean.

To say that human misery "deepens like a coastal shelf," then, is to suggest that discontent gets more and more severe. This idea is also related to time, since the speaker notes that "man hands on misery to man," meaning that humans inherit discontent from previous generations. This, in turn, is yet another reason why the speaker compares human misery to continental shelves, since continental shelves have been in existence for an extremely long time. Likewise, misery and unhappiness have seemingly always existed alongside humanity, deepening and intensifying as time goes on. By using this simile, then, the speaker gives readers a new way to think about human suffering, ultimately framing discontent as something that is as elemental as the very geographical makeup of the earth.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "It deepens like a coastal shelf."

VOCABULARY

Faults (Line 3) - Flaws. The speaker means that parents pass their worst traits to their children.

Soppy-Stern (Line 7) - "Soppy-stern" is an uncommon term that is, it seems, a combination of two different adjectives: soppy and stern. The word "soppy" means overly sentimental, whereas the word "stern" is used to refer to somebody who is strict and serious. Bearing this in mind, to call one's parents "soppy-stern" would be to suggest that they're both corny *and* excessively boring or strict.

Misery (Line 9) - Intense emotional or physical discomfort. In this case, the speaker uses the word to refer to emotional suffering.

Coastal Shelf (Line 10) - A misnomer for "continental shelf," which is an area that juts from the shore and is submerged by the ocean. Continental shelves have existed since the Ice Age and gradually slope downward before eventually declining sharply into the abyss of the ocean.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The 12 lines of "This Be The Verse" are broken up into three quatrains, meaning they each have four lines. Although the poem closely follows an ABAB rhyme scheme and is written in iambic tetrameter (meaning that each line contains four iambs, or four da-DUMS), it is not associated with any specific poetic form. Nevertheless, the poem is neatly organized, never straying from its tight stanza formation or its rhythmic qualities. In this way, the unwavering form reflects the predictable cycle of misery that passes from one generation to the next.

METER

"This Be The Verse" is written in iambic tetrameter. This means that each line contains four iambs, which are metrical feet consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (da-DUM). On the whole, the poem adheres very closely to this rhythmic pattern, as is made clear by the fact that the entire first stanza is written in perfect iambic tetrameter:

They fuck | you up, || your mum | and dad.
They may | not mean | to, || but | they do.
They fill | you with | the faults | they had
And add | some ex- | tra, || just | for you.

The speaker's strict adherence to this iambic rhythm creates a bouncy sound that is very musical, especially when combined with the poem's steady ABAB rhyme scheme. The meter also enables the speaker to place extra emphasis on certain important words. This is especially apparent in the fourth line ("And add some extra, just for you"), when the caesura that appears in the third foot ("-tra || just") accentuates the stress that falls on the word "just," thereby emphasizing the notion that children develop their own unique emotional baggage in response to their parents' behavior. In this way, the speaker's use of meter adds musicality to the poem while also calling attention to important words.

RHYME SCHEME

"This Be The Verse" adheres closely to the following rhyme scheme in each of its three quatrains:

ABAB

This rhyme scheme creates a somewhat predictable sound, giving the poem a tight-knit feeling of consistency and musicality. This is important, considering that the poem otherwise advances such a cynical and bleak outlook on life and familial relationships. By sticking closely to an ABAB rhyme scheme, then, the speaker manages to keep the tone of the poem remarkably light even though the subject is rather dispiriting. In fact, it is this ability to keep the tone light that suggests the speaker is used to having these cynical thoughts, which are so ordinary that they no longer seem particularly upsetting.

SPEAKER

There is no identifying information about the poem's speaker, making it difficult to determine who, exactly, delivers these lines. Keeping the speaker anonymous—with no name, age, nor gender given—allows the poem to feel universal in its message. It's not just this *speaker's* parents who messed up, in other words, but *all* parents.

SETTING

"This Be The Verse" isn't set in any specific time or place, since it's a poem about a problem that, in the speaker's opinion, is both timeless and universal: the fact that children are inevitably affected by their parents' emotional baggage. Because the speaker of the poem frames this as central to the human condition, then, it's difficult to attach it to a specific setting.

However, the speaker does mention the "old-style hats and coats" that the older generation of parents used to wear, possibly referencing a time in the early to mid-1900s when it was common for people to wear hats on a regular basis. And yet, even this detail isn't quite specific enough to clarify the setting of the poem, since the term "old-style" doesn't actually reference an actual time period. As a result, readers are left to view the poem as a broad meditation on the nature of humanity that ultimately transcends time and place.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Philip Larkin is often associated with other poets who were, along with Larkin himself, part of The Movement in the 1950s, a group that included people like Ted Hughes, Kingsley Amis, Donald Davie, Thom Gunn, and Elizabeth Jennings, among others. Although it is somewhat difficult to articulate what, exactly, The Movement's defining principles were, it's safe to say that it was a particularly British literary ensemble, since all of its poets were English and were interested in advancing the ideals of British poetry. To that end, The Movement signaled a shift away from Modernism, as poets like Larkin gravitated toward using meter and form to write about quintessentially British matters.

Of course, "This Be The Verse" was written and published in 1971, long after The Movement faded from prominence. This,

however, only calls attention to the poem's adherence to meter and form, since the landscape of poetry in the 1970s was – at least in some schools of poetry – quite experimental. Many postmodern poets were no longer interested in writing metered verse, nor was rhyming poetry particularly popular at the time. Larkin, however, remained focused on his rather formal style, using both meter and rhyme while also striking a particularly cynical tone in "This Be The Verse" – a tone he assumed in many of his most famous poems.

Indeed, Larkin was often considered a rather bleak, pessimistic poet, a dynamic that is evident in poems like "An Arundel Tomb" and "The Whitsun Weddings." And though it's hard to pinpoint what, exactly, it would mean for someone to have a quintessentially British affect, it's certainly the case that dry, cynical humor is central to the stereotypical English disposition. In this regard, the tongue-in-cheek pessimism in "This Be The Verse" aligns with The Movement's general approach, despite the fact that Larkin wrote it long after the group's inception.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"This Be The Verse" is a poem about the universal and timeless ways in which parents pass on their discontent to their children. As such, many readers point out that Philip Larkin himself never married or had kids. Homeschooled until the age of eight, Larkin didn't have a particularly close relationship with his parents either, though they did support him in his various endeavors.

As for the time period in which the poem was published, the 1970s saw quite a bit of change, as counter culture movements rose to prominence and spread messages about the importance of equality, love, peace, and artistic freedom. In this regard, "This Be The Verse" was published during a time of cultural upheaval, as young people challenged powerful institutions and other figures of authority—including, of course, their own parents. In this way, the speaker's cynical thoughts about how parents "fuck up" their children align with the time period's general attitude toward older generations.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Zoe Wanamaker Reads the Poem — Watch the British actor Zoe Wanamaker read "This Be The Verse" aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5hnfiBj9png)
- Larkin's Life — For more information about Philip Larkin, take a look at this brief overview of his life and work. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/philip-larkin)
- The Poet's Voice — Listen to Philip Larkin himself read "This Be The Verse." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1rjRYSfCJvM)
- The Paris Review Interview — Check out Philip Larkin's interview with The Paris Review, which was published in 1982 as part of the magazine's "The Art of Poetry" series. (https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3153/the-art-of-poetry-no-30-philip-larkin)
- Portrait of the Artist — Take a look at the six portraits of Philip Larkin that exist in the National Portrait Gallery's online archive. (https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/person/mp05491/philip-arthur-larkin)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER PHILIP LARKIN POEMS

- An Arundel Tomb
- The Whitsun Weddings

HOW TO CITE

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