Timothy Winters

SUMMARY

Timothy Winters arrives at school with his eyes as wide open as the betting pools for gambling on soccer. His ears are as big and ugly as bombs, and his neglected teeth are as sharp as splinters. Timothy Winters is as surprising and unruly as a sudden attack in wartime.

His stomach is pale, his neck is dark with grime, and his unkempt hair stands straight up, like an exclamation point. His clothes are as ragged as a scarecrow's, and the wind blows through his torn pants.

He never listens to what the teacher's saying, and he rejects arithmetic as if shooting down a bird. He's so hungry that he licks the design off his plate at meals, and he's never even heard of the Welfare State that's supposed to care for him.

Timothy Winters's shoes are so inadequate that his feet bleed, and his home is on Suez Street. He sleeps in a bag on the kitchen floor rather than in a bed. People say boys in his situation don't exist anymore.

Timothy Winters's father is a heavy beer drinker whose wife left him for a military airman. His grandmother sits at the fireplace drinking gin, while Timothy's medicated with nothing but aspirin.

Timothy's case keeps the Welfare Worker up at night, but the law that should help Timothy is as slippery and unmanageable as a long snake. So Timothy Winters keeps drinking like his caretakers, and he slowly grows older.

At morning prayers, the schoolmaster cries out for the sake of children less fortunate than his students. Timothy Winters gives the loudest answer, yelling, "Amen!"

So come help him, whether you're one angel or ten. Timothy Winters keeps saying "Amen." Timothy Winters, God. Amen.

THEMES

CHILD POVERTY AND NEGLECT

"Timothy Winters" tells the story of a desperately poor schoolboy. The poem describes Timothy's ragged appearance, raucous behavior, and troubled home life in vivid, sympathetic terms. But though its rhythms sound playful, the poem expresses sincere compassion for a boy who's been shortchanged by his family and society—and, by extension, for all children in similar circumstances. As it joins Timothy in praying for kids like himself, the poem encourages empathy for the world's neglected misfits.

The speaker's initial descriptions of Timothy emphasize his eye-catching, homely appearance—his wide eyes, unkempt hair, and "blitz-like" presence. Timothy never listens during school lessons and interjects loudly during morning prayers. The poem's fantastical imagery and upbeat rhythm might, at first, seem to indicate a comic portrait of a wild child.

But as the details of Timothy's life accumulate, it becomes clear that this is really a portrait of a destitute child who's likely been abandoned and/or mistreated by the adults in his world. From the start, some details about Timothy are disturbing: for example, his "teeth like splinters" and ragged clothing hint at severe neglect.

The reader then learns that Timothy is chronically hungry, has “bloody feet” due to inadequate shoes, “sleeps in a sack on the kitchen floor,” and so on. His mother has left the family, his only guardians (father and grandmother) are heavy drinkers, and it’s implied that the “State” should, but doesn’t, take care of him. (The “Welfare Worker” who seemingly wants to help is frustrated by “the law.”) In general, the poem suggests, Timothy has been failed by his family and community and is growing up without any resources. He's not just a rowdy kid, then; he's almost feral.

In the end, the poem openly empathizes with Timothy, suggesting that kids like him need all the help (divine or human) they can get. The line “they say there aren't boys like him anymore” is ironic: clearly, boys like Timothy do exist, and the poem forces the reader to pay attention to them. Timothy’s “Amen!” after the schoolmaster’s prayer for “less fortunate” children is also an ironic detail, signaling that most adults around Timothy don’t really see or care how much he’s struggling. The poem’s closing series of “Amen”s shows that the speaker cares about Timothy and wants the reader to care, too.

Despite its comic tone and outlandish metaphors, “Timothy Winters” captures some of the real suffering of childhood poverty, showing how grown-ups often mismanage or ignore it. With compassion and a sharp eye for detail, the poet—who said that he based “Timothy” on a real person—takes a boy who survives at the margins of society and places him at the center of a memorable tale.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-33

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Timothy Winters comes ...
... is Timothy Winters.

The first stanza introduces the title character of the poem: a schoolboy named Timothy Winters. It describes his appearance in hyperbolic, somewhat unsettling language, using striking similes and metaphors:

- First, the poem claims that his "eyes are as wide as a football pool"—that is, as wide-open as the popular UK betting pools for soccer matches, or as wide as the actual spreadsheets used to place bets in those pools.
- Next, it compares his ears to "bombs" (large, ugly, shocking, etc.) and his teeth to "splinters" (sharp, small, perhaps crooked as if shattered to splinters).
- Finally, it calls him "a blitz of a boy," comparing his overwhelming, shocking presence to a massive wartime attack—such as Germany's World War II bombing campaign against the UK, known as "the Blitz."

At first, the reader has no context for these comparisons; the speaker might just be describing a particularly odd-looking boy. When it turns out that Timothy is terribly poor, these initial details gain new resonance. Timothy's eyes may appear wide because he's emaciated from hunger; his teeth are splintery because they're uncared-for (his family can't afford dentistry); and even his bomb-like ears might be swollen or disfigured from abuse. If he's as wild and shocking as a "blitz," it's because he's so neglected that he's almost feral.

The voice making all these comparisons turns out to be the voice of Timothy's schoolmates. It repeats his full name twice in this stanza alone (right after the title, which also consists of his full name). These repetitions help cement the name of the poem's hero in the reader's memory. They suggest that "Timothy Winters" is a much-discussed figure, even a kind of legend, among these schoolchildren—but perhaps also an outsider among them, because they haven't nicknamed him in any way.

This opening stanza establishes the four-beat accentual meter that will carry throughout the poem. Notice how the syllable count varies from line to line, but each line contains four strong stresses:

Timothy Winters comes to school
With eyes as wide as a football pool,

This stanza also establishes the AABB rhyme scheme that will continue throughout the poem (with the exception of the final five lines). The combination of rhymed couplets and accentual meter is playful, simple, and familiar from many nursery rhymes and children's poems. Causley wrote a lot of poetry geared toward children, and "Timothy Winters" is *about* a child, though it handles serious, "grown-up" themes. This mix of the light and serious, and the seeming cross-pollination of children's and adult literature, is part of what makes the poem unsettling.

Finally, alliteration ("blitz of a boy") and assonance ("Timothy Winters," "eyes"/"wide") pop up in this stanza, as they will throughout the poem. These devices add extra musicality to the verse; in particular, by placing extra weight on stressed syllables, they help the reader "hear" the poem's lively accentual rhythm.

LINES 5-8

His belly is ...
... blue winds blow.

The second stanza shares further details about Timothy Winters. In fact, much of the poem consists of such details, as if the speaker (a group of grade-school students) is excitedly telling the reader everything they know about their unusual schoolmate.

These details continue to stress Timothy's wild appearance while also dropping hints about the poverty and neglect he suffers:

- "His belly is white, his neck is dark" suggests that he's pale but perpetually grubby (his neck is dark with grime, unlike his belly, which doesn't get exposed to as much dirt). He doesn't seem to have a guardian who makes sure he bathes each day.
- "[H]is hair is an exclamation mark" is a metaphor suggesting that his messy hair stands straight up, as in a cowlick. (It also causes the same kind of surprise that an exclamation mark conveys.)
- "His clothes are enough to scare a crow" means that his clothes are as ragged as a scarecrow's.
- "[T]hrough his britches the blue winds blow" means that there are holes in his pants and/or underwear, through which "the blue winds blow" (i.e., the winds from the blue sky, or perhaps winds that cause the skin to turn blue with cold). Again, he doesn't seem to have a guardian who gives him adequate clothing.

Even as the details about Timothy paint a sadder and sadder picture, the verse retains its bouncy, sing-song quality, heightened by alliteration ("his hair," "clothes"/"crow," "britches"/"blue"/"blow"), assonance ("belly"/"neck," "clothes"/"crow," "his britches"/"winds"), and internal rhyme ("through"/"blue"). This contrast between form and content might be read as ironic, or at least unsettling. At times, the poem sounds like a very dark nursery rhyme!

LINES 9-12

When teacher talks ...
... the Welfare State.

The third stanza adds more vivid yet unsettling details to the portrait of Timothy Winters. Here, the reader learns that:

- Timothy has no patience for school. "When teacher talks he won't hear a word"; he refuses to listen to his lessons, and perhaps actively disrupts them. He also "shoots down dead the arithmetic-bird," or rejects math lessons as violently as if he's shooting a bird down.
- Timothy is perpetually hungry. "He licks the pattern off his plate"—in other words, cleans his plate so thoroughly at mealtimes (perhaps to the point of actually licking it) that it's as if he's licking the design itself off of the dish.
- Timothy's community/society isn't helping him, either. "[H]e's not even heard of the Welfare State"—that is, he doesn't know anything about the government programs that are supposed to provide poverty relief and other social services for children like him. They clearly aren't intervening in his case.

There's a strong connection implied between all these details. Hungry, neglected Timothy is too distracted to focus on education; he has more immediate needs that aren't being met. On some level, he might even resent school because it's part of the society that's failing him.

Once again, alliteration bridges some of the syllables in this stanza ("won't"/"word," "down"/"dead," "pattern"/"plate"). It adds some extra force to Timothy's refusal in line 9 ("he *won't* hear a word"). It also adds weight to "down" in line 10, suggesting that this might be read as an extra stressed syllable: "And he shoots down dead the arithmetic-bird." If so, the string of three stressed syllables evokes the *bang-bang-bang* sound of someone "shoot[ing]."

LINES 13-16

Timothy Winters has ...
... like him anymore.

The fourth stanza continues to illustrate Timothy's poverty while offering the first details about his home life.

Timothy's schoolmates (again acting as the poem's collective speaker) note that "Timothy Winters has bloody feet," evidently because his shoes are wrongly sized and/or falling apart. They share that "he lives in a house on Suez Street"—a fictitious place but one that, in context, implies a poor or working-class part of town. ("Suez" might also be a political allusion: the year before the poem was published, the Suez Crisis—in which the UK, along with France and Israel, invaded Egypt for economic reasons but were forced to withdraw—helped signal the end of the British Empire as a major global force. It thus became associated, in the UK, with economic problems and declining power.)

Timothy also "sleeps in a sack on the kitchen floor," implying that he has neither a bed nor a bedroom. Another possibility is that he sleeps in the kitchen (near the stove) for warmth because the house is inadequately heated. The "sack" might be a sleeping bag, or it might be something even cruder and less comfortable. The sibilance in this stanza ("Suez Street," "sleeps in a sack") adds extra punch to these disturbing images of dire poverty.

The stanza ends on an ironic note, as the speaker adds that "they say there aren't boys like [Timothy] anymore." Apparently, adults in the community have told Timothy's schoolmates that poverty as severe as Timothy's no longer exists in their country. Of course, Timothy's presence among them proves otherwise, so this line hints at the kind of willful disregard for the poor that sustains poverty in the first place.

LINES 17-20

Old Man Winters ...
... with an aspirin.

The fifth stanza fills in further details about Timothy's troubled family and home life, revealing what the people who are supposed to be taking care of Timothy are up to.

"Old Man Winters likes his beer," the speaker says—a euphemistic way of saying that Timothy's father drinks a lot. Implicitly, his drinking problem contributes to the poverty and neglect Timothy experiences.

Meanwhile, "[H]is missus," Timothy's mother, "ran off with a bombardier." This means that Timothy's mother (Old Man Winters's wife) has left the family to pursue a relationship with a military airman. Timothy is neglected in part because his mother is no longer around to care for him.

That "Grandma sits in the grate with a gin" indicates that Timothy's grandmother—apparently his only other guardian—also drinks heavily (while sitting by the fireplace, or "in the grate"). Beer and gin are drinks conventionally associated with the UK working classes, further implying Timothy's poverty.

Finally, the line "Timothy's dosed with an aspirin" suggests that Timothy is given only aspirin when he's sick or hurting (from his painful shoes, for example). His destitute family may lack access to any other medical care. Later, the poem will say that Timothy "drinks his cup," which may imply that he drinks alcohol along with his father and grandmother; if so, the aspirin might be a treatment for hangover headaches. Regardless, the word "dosed" suggests that the aspirin is given regularly, as an insufficient remedy for chronic problems.

In short, Timothy comes from a broken home and suffers neglect at the hands of his hard-drinking father and

grandmother.

LINES 21-24

The Welfare Worker ...
... on growing up.

The sixth stanza offers the first evidence that anyone is even *trying* to help Timothy. Apparently, "The Welfare Worker lies awake" because Timothy's case is so difficult and/or poignant that they're losing sleep over it. Though Timothy hasn't "even heard of the Welfare State" (line 12), the state does seem to feel some obligation to intervene on his behalf.

Unfortunately, it can't do so, because, as line 22 explains, "the law's as tricky as a ten-foot snake." The speaker leaves the exact legal problem unclear, but the general idea is that some bureaucratic obstacle(s) prevents the Welfare Worker from actually helping Timothy. (One possibility is that Timothy has two guardians—father and grandmother—making it difficult for the state to remove him from their care, even though they neglect him.)

The "snake" simile specifically suggests that the law is slippery, hard to manage, and possibly deceptive, like a wily serpent. This line's high syllable count and tongue-tripping /t/consonance ("But"/"tricky"/"ten-foot") make it long and tricky to say, reinforcing its meaning.

Without help from the law, Timothy continues "drink[ing] his cup"—possibly a euphemism for drinking alcohol along with his father and grandma—and "slowly [...] growing up." The word "slowly" has a poignant implication: Timothy survives and grows older despite the challenges he faces, but those challenges make the process seem painfully slow. The sounds line itself emphasis that slowness through the long, round /o/ assonance of "slowly goes" and "growing."

LINES 25-28

At Morning Prayers ...
... Winters roars "Amen!"

An important shift happens in the seventh stanza, as Timothy speaks for the first time in the poem. Each day at "Morning Prayers," according to the speaker, the "Master" (that is, the schoolmaster or headmaster) prays fervently "for children less fortunate than ourselves." In response, Timothy "roars" louder than the other students: "Amen!"

This moment is loaded with irony. As he leads his school in morning prayers, the Master makes a great show of concern for "children less fortunate" than his students. (The pronoun "ourselves" in line 26 is the clearest indication that the poem is voiced by Timothy's schoolmates.) But it's hard to imagine a child less fortunate than Timothy, who receives no help at all from the adults in his community—including the Master.

Basically, the Master's piety seems hypocritical, and Timothy's loud "Amen!" appears to mock this hypocrisy. Alternatively, it may be an earnest sentiment based on Timothy's own experience of poverty, or simply a way of getting an adult to pay attention to him.

The verb "helves" is unusual and, in this context, especially ironic. In Causley's region of England, it can refer to a cow's moaning for its calf when the two are separated. Thus, the Master "helves" for impoverished children as if his heart aches for them, but given how little he does for Timothy—his own impoverished student—there's reason to doubt his sincerity.

LINES 29-33

So come one ...
... Amen.

In the closing lines of the poem, the speaker transitions from descriptions of Timothy's appearance, behavior, and circumstances into a prayer on Timothy's behalf. At first, the speaker addresses "angel[s]" (in a kind of apostrophe), then directly calls out to the "Lord."

As in the previous stanza, Timothy is quoted as saying "Amen"—in this case, five times over. (This repetition might indicate that he says "Amen" once a day, morning after morning, or that he says it over and over in each chapel session.) In fact, "Amen" is the only word Timothy ever speaks in the poem, giving him a holy aura despite—or in part because of—his rough manners and appearance. The speaker then echoes that "Amen," praying on Timothy's behalf (or joining Timothy in prayer for all children as unfortunate as he is).

In some editions of the poem, that last "Amen" is part of line 32:

> Timothy Winters, Lord. Amen.

In others, it gets its own line (and carries additional weight as a result):

> Timothy Winters, Lord.
> Amen.

Either way, it brings the poem to an emphatic and empathetic close. It's possible to read some humor into these final lines; for example, that "Lord" might be said partly in head-shaking amazement, as in the phrase, "Oh, Lord!" Still, it's clear that the speaker, unlike so many adults in the community, understands what Timothy's going through—and feels some real compassion for him. In fact, the speaker prays for divine aid on Timothy's behalf, as if to stress that no other help is available.

POETIC DEVICES

METAPHOR

The poem uses a number of striking metaphors (along with other types of figurative language, such as similes) to convey

Timothy's wildness and intensity. For example:

- In line 4, "A blitz of a boy" suggests that Timothy is as shocking and overwhelming as a sudden, massive attack in wartime. He may be as violent as a blitz, himself the victim of blitz-like violence or abuse (e.g., his teeth look bombed to "splinters"), or both.
- In line 6, "his hair is an exclamation mark" suggests that his unkempt hair stands straight up—perhaps in a cowlick—and also that it's surprising or intense (since an exclamation mark communicates surprise or intensity).
- In line 10, "he shoots down dead the arithmetic-bird" suggests that he violently rejects the math he's taught in school, as if shooting down a bird.

More subtly, the word "helves" in line 25 has a metaphorical quality. In Causley's region of England, this verb could mean "cries out in distress"—specifically, "cries out like a cow separated from its calf." In this context, the word implies that the schoolmaster is crying out on behalf of "less fortunate" children—or, at least, theatrically pretending to care about them.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "A blitz of a boy is Timothy Winters."
- **Line 6:** "And his hair is an exclamation mark."
- **Line 10:** "And he shoots down dead the arithmetic-bird,"
- **Line 25:** "At Morning Prayers the Master helves"

SIMILE

Along with its metaphors, the poem uses a number of similes to bring the character of Timothy Winters to life. These similes often capture Timothy's unruly appearance. For example:

- In line 2, the simile "eyes as wide as a football pool" compares Timothy's wide eyes (possibly related to his gauntness/hunger) to a betting pool for soccer games. The idea is either that Timothy's eyes are as big as the betting *spreadsheets* for these pools, or as expansive as the very popular pools themselves. To be "wide-eyed" can also mean to be innocent or naive, meaning the simile subtly emphasizes Timothy's youth.
- In line 3, "Ears like bombs" implies that Timothy's ears are as large and ugly as bombs. (Perhaps they are also battered due to abuse.) Meanwhile, "teeth like splinters" implies that Timothy's neglected teeth are small and sharp, almost like fangs. They may also be crooked, as if the mouth of this "blitz of a boy" has been bombed to splinters.
- In line 7, "His clothes are enough to scare a crow" implies that Timothy's clothes are ragged, like a scarecrow's. In other words, he's desperately poor.

A final simile appears in line 22, which says that "the law's as tricky as a ten-foot snake." In other words, the law that should protect and provide for Timothy, allowing the "Welfare Worker" to intervene in his case, is as slippery, hard to handle, and/or deceptive as a very long snake. It's implied that Timothy will grow up before the Worker ever manages to tame this "snake"!

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "With eyes as wide as a football pool, / Ears like bombs and teeth like splinters:"
- **Line 7:** "His clothes are enough to scare a crow"
- **Line 22:** "But the law's as tricky as a ten-foot snake,"

HYPERBOLE

Some of the language used to describe Timothy Winters is hyperbolic; that is, it's exaggerated to make a point, or for comic/dramatic effect.

In the first stanza, for example, the speaker claims that Timothy's "eyes [are] as wide as a football pool," meaning either that his eyes are as big as the spreadsheets on which UK soccer fans placed bets or that they're as wide open as the gambling pools those fans were part of. Either way, the simile hyperbolically exaggerates the size of Timothy's eyes (which may look especially wide because he's gaunt from hunger).

Similarly, Timothy's ears aren't *really* as big and ugly as bombs, and his uncared-for teeth probably aren't as thin and sharp as splinters (though they're probably chipped, undersized, etc.). Nor is Timothy really as surprising and violent as a wartime "blitz." But by *exaggerating* for effect, these comparisons vividly convey how striking and disturbing Timothy's presence is.

The poem's language remains vivid throughout, but it becomes less clearly hyperbolic in the second half. The last clear instance of hyperbole appears in line 11: "He licks the pattern off his plate" is an exaggerated way of saying that Timothy is so starving, he completely cleans his plate at mealtimes. (Maybe he *literally* licks the plate, but it would take a lot of licking to actually wear away the pattern!) This shift from more hyperbolic toward more plausible details reflects the way Timothy comes into focus as a sympathetic, suffering person rather than an embellished "character."

Where Hyperbole appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "Timothy Winters comes to school / With eyes as wide as a football pool, / Ears like bombs and teeth like splinters: / A blitz of a boy is Timothy Winters."
- **Lines 6-7:** "And his hair is an exclamation mark. / His clothes are enough to scare a crow"

- **Line 10:** "And he shoots down dead the arithmetic-bird,"
- **Line 11:** "He licks the pattern off his plate"

ALLITERATION

The poem is full of alliteration, which adds to the musical, almost sing-song quality of the verse. Each stanza contains at least one example of this device.

Many of these alliterative phrases make emphatic use of plosive or guttural consonants, such as "A blitz of a boy" (line 4), "He licks the pattern off his plate" (line 11), and "Grandma sits in the grate" (line 19). These alliterative moments help make the poem sound both lively and, at times, harsh—in keeping with the poem's depiction of a harsh childhood.

Often, the poem's alliteration works hand in hand with consonance and assonance, as with the /k/ and long /o/ sounds in line 7 ("His clothes are enough to scare a crow") or the /b/, /bl/, short /ih/, and /oo/ sounds in line 8 ("And through his britches the blue winds blow"). Some of the alliteration is also sibilant, as in the name "Suez Street" (line 14) or the phrase "sleeps in a sack" (line 15). All of these prominent sounds, most of which are metrically stressed, help draw out the bouncy cadence of the poem's accentual verse.

Occasionally, alliteration reinforces the meaning of lines as well. For example, the dense /t/ sounds in line 22 (in the form of both alliteration and consonance), which compares the law to a "tricky" snake, make the line a bit *trickier* to say (almost like a tongue-twister):

> But the law's as tricky as a ten-foot snake [...]

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "blitz," "boy"
- **Line 6:** "his hair"
- **Line 7:** "clothes," "crow"
- **Line 8:** "britches," "blue," "blow"
- **Line 9:** "teacher talks," "won't," "word"
- **Line 10:** "down dead"
- **Line 11:** "pattern," "plate"
- **Line 14:** "Suez Street"
- **Line 15:** "sleeps," "sack"
- **Line 19:** "Grandma," "grate"
- **Line 21:** "Welfare Worker," "awake"
- **Line 22:** "tricky," "ten"
- **Line 24:** "goes," "growing"
- **Line 25:** "Morning," "Master"
- **Line 27:** "response," "room"
- **Line 29:** "ten"
- **Line 30:** "Timothy"

ASSONANCE

Along with alliteration and consonance, assonance plays an important role in the poem. Like alliteration, assonance (and its close cousin internal rhyme) adds emphasis to the syllables it connects, many of which are already stressed by the poem's meter. In this way, it helps underscore the bouncy cadence of the poem's accentual verse, contributing to the poem's sing-song quality.

Readers can clearly hear this in lines 23-24, for example. Short /ih/ sounds link "Timothy," "Winters," and "drinks" in line 23, while long /o/ sounds link "slowly," "goes," and "growing" in line 24:

> So Timothy Winters drinks his cup
> And slowly goes on growing up.

Here's what the scansion of those lines looks like—notice how *every* stressed syllable (including "cup"/"up") is either rhymed or assonant. That's a lot of extra emphasis on the meter!

> So Timothy Winters drinks his cup
> And slowly goes on growing up.

Notice that the name "Timothy Winters" *itself* is assonant—a quality that makes the name of the poem's hero more memorable.

Where assonance is especially dense, it can also simply make the poem more lively to recite and hear. Listen to the outlandish tangle of alliteration (/b/, /bl/) and assonance (/i/, /oo/) in line 8, for instance, which captures some of the outlandishness of Timothy's appearance: "And through his britches the blue winds blow."

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Timothy Winters"
- **Line 2:** "eyes," "wide"
- **Line 4:** "Timothy Winters"
- **Line 5:** "belly," "neck"
- **Line 7:** "clothes," "crow"
- **Line 8:** "through," "his britches," "blue," "winds"
- **Line 13:** "Timothy Winters"
- **Line 19:** "sits in," "with," "gin"
- **Line 23:** "Timothy Winters drinks his"
- **Line 24:** "slowly goes," "growing"
- **Line 28:** "Timothy Winters"
- **Line 29:** "come one," "come"
- **Line 30:** "Timothy Winters"
- **Line 32:** "Timothy Winters"

REPETITION

"Timothy Winters" is full of repetition, from its first words to its

last. These repetitions serve a variety of purposes, from establishing the poem's voice and structure to fixing its hero firmly in the reader's imagination.

Notice, for example, how the poem constantly repeats Timothy's full name. "Timothy Winters" appears eight times, including in the title, the first two words of the poem, and the last two words of the first stanza. Only once (in line 20: "Timothy's") is he referred to by his first name alone.

These repetitions help establish Timothy as a memorable character—even a kind of schoolyard legend. In the process, they help establish the voice of the poem's plural speaker, Timothy's schoolmates. (Perhaps they call him by his full name to distinguish him from other "Timothy"s at school, or perhaps the fact that they don't refer to him more familiarly hints at his outsider status.)

Many of the poem's repetitions are technically anaphora and/or broader parallelism, as the speaker ticks off a series of facts and observations about Timothy. Detail by detail, the speaker shares what "His belly is" like, "his neck is" like, "his hair is" like, and so on, as if breathlessly catching the reader up on school gossip. And later:

> And he lives in a house on Suez Street,
> He sleeps in a sack on the kitchen floor
> [...]
> And his missus ran off with a bombardier,
> Grandma sits in the grate with a gin
> And Timothy's dosed with an aspirin.

In other words, much of the poem is structured as a kind of list, a gradual accumulation of detail that paints a sharp portrait of this neglected boy.

The poem also ends with a flurry of repetition, as the speaker quotes—and echoes—Timothy's series of "Amen"s on behalf of children like himself. This is an example of both epizeuxis and diacope:

> Timothy Winters says "Amen
> Amen amen amen amen."
> Timothy Winters, Lord.
> Amen.

The speaker also repeats Timothy's name three times in the final six lines. These repetitions suggest that the speaker, like Timothy himself, is pleading for divine intervention on Timothy's behalf, because the boy needs all the help he can get.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Timothy Winters"
- **Line 3:** "like," "like"
- **Line 4:** "Timothy Winters"
- **Line 5:** "His," "is," "his," "is"
- **Line 6:** "his," "is"
- **Line 7:** "His"
- **Line 8:** "his"
- **Line 9:** "he"
- **Line 10:** "he"
- **Line 11:** "He"
- **Line 12:** "he's"
- **Line 13:** "Timothy Winters"
- **Line 14:** "he," "in a," "on"
- **Line 15:** "He," "in a," "on"
- **Line 18:** "with a"
- **Line 19:** "with a"
- **Line 20:** "Timothy's," "with an"
- **Line 23:** "Timothy Winters"
- **Line 28:** "Timothy Winters," "Amen"
- **Line 29:** "come," "come"
- **Line 30:** "Timothy Winters"
- **Lines 30-31:** "Amen / Amen amen amen amen"
- **Line 32:** "Timothy Winters"
- **Line 33:** "Amen"

IMAGERY

"Timothy Winters" is full of striking metaphors and similes, but its non-figurative imagery is just as vivid. These images convey a great deal of information about Timothy's appearance and circumstances. For example:

- "His belly is white, his neck is dark" (line 5) indicates that he's a pale child, but his neck is always dark with grime.
- "[T]hrough his britches the blue winds blow" indicates that his pants and/or underwear are so ragged and full of holes, the wind (from the "blue" sky) blows right through them.
- "Timothy Winters has bloody feet" suggests that his shoes are painful and inadequate.
- "He sleeps in a sack on the kitchen floor" suggests that he has neither a bed nor a bedroom.
- "Grandma sits in the grate with a gin" sketches the picture of a grandmother, who might otherwise be caring for Timothy, continually drinking by the fireplace.

These images are primarily visual (or visual and tactile, in the case of the "blue winds" line), but the poem closes with a volley of sound. The speaker describes Timothy "roar[ing] 'Amen!'" during morning prayers, then apparently repeating it just as "loud[ly]": "Amen / Amen amen amen amen." The speaker adds their own, quieter echo in the final line: "Amen."

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "His belly is white, his neck is dark,"
- **Line 8:** "And through his britches the blue winds blow."
- **Line 9:** "When teacher talks he won't hear a word"
- **Line 11:** "He licks the pattern off his plate"
- **Line 13:** "Timothy Winters has bloody feet"
- **Line 14:** "And he lives in a house on Suez Street,"
- **Line 15:** "He sleeps in a sack on the kitchen floor"
- **Lines 19-20:** "Grandma sits in the grate with a gin / And Timothy's dosed with an aspirin."
- **Line 21:** "The Welfare Worker lies awake"
- **Line 23:** "So Timothy Winters drinks his cup"
- **Lines 25-28:** "At Morning Prayers the Master helves / for children less fortunate than ourselves, / And the loudest response in the room is when / Timothy Winters roars "Amen!""
- **Lines 30-31:** "Timothy Winters says "Amen / Amen amen amen amen.""

IRONY

The poem contains at least two moments of pointed irony. One occurs in line 16: "And they say there aren't boys like him anymore." Here, Timothy Winters's schoolmates—who make up the poem's collective speaker—are most likely repeating something they've heard adults in their community say. But those adults are wrong, of course: the poem shows that boys like Timothy still very much exist, whether people pay attention to them or not. The speaker is probably aware of this ironic gap between the statement and the underlying reality (and even if the speaker isn't, the poet is!).

Another ironic moment occurs in lines 25-28, as the schoolmaster prays "for children less fortunate than [his students]," and Timothy Winters "roars" back, "Amen!" This exchange suggests that the schoolmaster doesn't really understand or care how destitute Timothy is. His prayer seems to include Timothy among the *more* fortunate children of the world, but based on the poem's details, it's hard to imagine a less fortunate child than Timothy!

The word "helves" (an English regionalism meaning "cries out in distress, like a cow for its calf") has an especially ironic ring here. The schoolmaster is praying as if his heart aches for impoverished kids, but he doesn't seem to have done much for Timothy, an impoverished kid in his own school. In this context, Timothy's "roar" sounds like a cry for attention—and help.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Line 16:** "And they say there aren't boys like him anymore."
- **Lines 25-28:** "At Morning Prayers the Master helves / for children less fortunate than ourselves, / And the loudest response in the room is when / Timothy Winters roars "Amen!""

VOCABULARY

Football pool (Line 2) - A football pool is a betting pool for soccer matches. In the period when the poem was written, such pools were very popular in the UK (where *soccer* is called *football*); hence, the poet may be comparing Timothy's wide eyes to their broad popularity, or wide openness to the gambling public. Alternatively, the poet may be comparing Timothy's eyes to the actual forms (broad spreadsheets) on which pool bets were placed.

Blitz (Line 4) - A sudden, massive attack in wartime. (For UK readers of the period, this term would have especially recalled *the* Blitz, the German bombing campaign against the UK during World War II.)

Britches (Line 8) - Pants or underwear.

Arithmetic-bird (Line 10) - An invented word metaphorically comparing basic math to a bird that Timothy, a poor student, shoots down.

Welfare State (Line 12) - Government programs designed to ensure citizens' well-being, and especially to aid the less fortunate (through poverty relief, etc.).

Missus (Line 18) - UK slang term for "Mrs.," or wife.

Bombardier (Line 18) - A member of a military bombing crew (specifically, one who drops bombs during air raids).

Grate (Line 19) - A metal framework for logs in a fireplace; by extension, a fireplace or hearth.

Master (Line 25) - Here, a schoolmaster.

Helves (Line 25) - Cries out in distress.(In Causley's region of England, according to Causley's biographer Laurence Green, this word specifically refers to "the noise a cow makes when deprived of her calf.")

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem is written in quatrains (four-line stanzas) that follow an AABB rhyme scheme (i.e., consist of two rhyming couplets). It uses a four-beat accentual meter, meaning that each line contains four strong stresses even as the syllable count per line varies.

This form is similar to the traditional ballad, which also consists of short rhyming quatrains (though usually with rhyming second and fourth lines rather than couplets). Rhymed couplets and accentual meter frequently pop up in children's poetry—a genre this poem could almost fit into, though it contains

unsettling imagery and serious themes.

The poem's form sometimes mirrors its content in more subtle ways, as in line 22 ("But the law's as tricky as a ten-foot snake"), which is both long (snakelike) and tricky to say (in part because of all the /t/ consonance).

There's also a formal shift in lines 28-33, which break the AABB pattern by unleashing a series of repetitive rhymes ("Amen!"/"ten"/"Amen"/"amen"/"Amen"). This chorus of "Amens" evokes a fervent prayer on behalf of Timothy and other "less fortunate" children. The formal shift may also mirror the way the speaker hopes Timothy's luck will turn.

(Note that the poem is sometimes printed with that final "Amen" on the same line as "Timothy Winters, Lord," and sometimes it is set apart for emphasis.)

METER

The poem uses four-beat accentual meter, meaning that the number of syllables per line varies, but each line contains four strong stresses. Take the first stanza, for example:

> Timothy Winters comes to school
> With eyes as wide as a football pool,
> Ears like bombs and teeth like splinters:
> A blitz of a boy is Timothy Winters.

The line length ranges between eight and eleven syllables, and the stressed syllables fall in different places from line to line, but each line contains four stressed beats. This kind of accentual meter is frequently found in folk ballads, nursery rhymes, and children's verse, making it a fitting choice for this ballad-like poem about a schoolboy.

The playful bounce of the meter also contrasts with the harsh details of the poem. This contrast might be read as deliberately disturbing and ironic, driving home the fact that Timothy is suffering terribly (and his schoolmates are witnessing that suffering) at an age when he (and they) should still be reading light children's verse.

Interestingly, the meter becomes most regular at the very end; lines 28-31 all contain eight syllables, as do lines 32 and 33 combined. (Lines 32-33 are sometimes printed as one line.):

> Timothy Winters roars "Amen!"
> So come one angel, come on ten:
> Timothy Winters says "Amen
> Amen amen amen amen."
> Timothy Winters, Lord.
> Amen.

Along with the sudden departure in the rhyme scheme, this change helps highlight the poem's shift from description to prayer, and perhaps reflects the speaker's hope that Timothy's life will change, too.

RHYME SCHEME

"Timothy Winters" is written in quatrains that follow a simple AABB rhyme scheme. That is, each stanza consists of two rhymed couplets:

> Timothy Winters comes to school
> With eyes as wide as a football pool,
> Ears like bombs and teeth like *splinters*:
> A blitz of a boy is Timothy *Winters*.

The only variation in this scheme comes in the final 5 lines (or final stanza), which rhymes AAABA (or AAAA, depending on whether that last "Amen" gets its own line—the formatting varies in different printings).

The simple rhymed couplets, along with the poem's rough accentual meter, are characteristic of many nursery rhymes, children's poems, and folk ballads. This form is a natural choice for "Timothy Winters," which concerns a rough schoolboy, and whose tone and subject matter hover somewhere between "adult poetry" and dark "children's poetry."

The rhyme variation toward the end adds a bit of formal surprise to a poem that has otherwise chimed along consistently, almost in singsong fashion. As the speaker prays for divine intervention on Timothy's behalf, the change helps convey the speaker's hope that Timothy's life, too, will break from its existing pattern.

SPEAKER

The poem has a plural or communal speaker: its voice is the collective voice of Timothy's schoolmates, as indicated by their reference to "ourselves" in line 26. Their exact age isn't stated, but they appear to attend grade school—likely a British primary school of the postwar period, featuring a "Master" (schoolmaster/headmaster) and "Morning Prayers."

As the collective speaker describes Timothy, they sound as if they're sharing a mix of facts and rumors about their unfortunate schoolmate and his family. Though they've been told that "there aren't boys like him anymore," they pointedly contradict this falsehood through the evidence of their own observations. Their language is sometimes hyperbolic and tinged with blunt humor ("Ears like bombs," etc.), but they convey Timothy's desperate situation with sensitivity and compassion. In the end, they're even moved to offer a kind of prayer on Timothy's behalf.

SETTING

The poem takes place in a grade school, or grammar school, and

its surrounding community. No place names are specified (other than the fictional "Suez Street"), but the poem's language and details strongly imply an English setting. For example, "football pool[s]" (betting pools for soccer matches) are popular in the UK; "missus" is UK slang for "wife"; "beer" and "gin" are drinks popularly associated with the English working classes; and "the Master," as in schoolmaster, is a more common title in the UK than, for example, the U.S.

The poem was published in 1957, just over a decade after World War II, and its references to "bombs," "blitz," the "bombardier," etc. reflect the cultural atmosphere of that postwar period. The poverty Timothy experiences is likely connected to the postwar period of "austerity," during which the UK, financially devastated by the war, experienced housing shortages and other crises. The same period saw an expansion of the UK's "Welfare State," but some struggling citizens, including "boys like [Timothy]," remained outside its reach. In general, "Timothy Winters" depicts a child living at the absolute margins of society, in a community of adults who either can't or won't provide for him.

Causley's biographer Laurence Green has argued that, "Although [boys like] Timothy existed the length and breadth of the country of post war austerity," the poem is probably set in or near Causley's native Cornwall. He mentions, as evidence, the Cornish word "helves," which refers to the cry of a cow who's been separated from her calf.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Charles Causley (1917-2003) was one of the most popular poets of England's post-World War II period. Apart from his service in the Royal Navy during the war, he spent most of his life in his hometown of Launceston in Cornwall, England. A self-effacing writer who joined no major literary movements, he worked as a schoolteacher for most of his career; upon retirement, he said that he'd served nearly "thirty years in chalk Siberias."

His teaching experience frequently informed his writing, including his popular verse for young readers—gathered in *Collected Poems for Children* (1996)—as well as poems such as "Timothy Winters," which walk the line between "adult poetry" and "children's poetry."

Although he didn't achieve (or seek) the international renown of UK peers such as Ted Hughes and Philip Larkin, he earned their admiration. Hughes, in particular, became a close friend and champion of his work. In his later decades, Causley became increasingly beloved and honored in the UK. Since its first publication, "Timothy Winters" has been perhaps his best-known and most frequently anthologized piece of writing. (He sometimes remarked that he could live on the royalties from that poem alone.)

Though Causley considered himself an outsider to the literary trends of his day, his work sometimes resembles Larkin's in its dark humor, postwar British imagery and sensibility, and even its outsider quality. In its exploration of the border between writing for children and adults, it somewhat resembles the work of another postwar British poet, Stevie Smith.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Timothy Winters" was published in England in 1957, 12 years after World War II ended, and evokes the atmosphere of that time and place in many ways. For example, its repeated war references ("bombs," "blitz," "bombardier") reflect an era when the war and its traumas were fresh in the popular memory.

Causley himself had served in the Royal Navy from 1940 to '46, and some of his early poetry drew from that experience. Indeed, most adults in the UK had served the war effort in some way and/or experienced its effects directly; the country had been devastated, for example, by the two-year German bombing campaign known as the Blitz (1940 to '41), which cost some 40,000 civilian lives. The war had also nearly bankrupted the UK, prompting the postwar government to enact "austerity" measures such as food rationing.

Timothy Winters, too, appears to be a product of that era (as opposed to, say, the era Causley grew up in). His struggles mirror some of the social and economic disruptions of the UK's postwar period. Although the UK rebuilt its economy throughout the late 1940s and 1950s, expanding its welfare state and dramatically reducing unemployment, not all families saw immediate or equal benefits. Timothy seems to be one of the kids who's slipped through the cracks of the system, contradicting the idea that "there aren't boys like him anymore." Though his plight keeps the "Welfare Worker" up at night, the bureaucratic tangle of "the law" prevents any effective intervention.

Even the (fictional) location of Timothy's home, "Suez Street," may be a political allusion. The Suez Crisis of 1956—the year before "Timothy Winters" was published—humiliated the UK along with Israel and France, as the three countries unsuccessfully invaded Egypt for economic reasons. The episode helped signal the end of the British Empire and became emblematic of the UK's postwar doldrums.

More immediately, "Timothy Winters" was inspired by a real-life child. Causley worked as a schoolteacher during the period in which he wrote the poem, and when asked if "Timothy Winters" was based on a boy he'd known, the poet answered, "Yes, by God he was, poor little devil!"

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Reading of the Poem — Listen to a reading of "Timothy Winters." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZ-sNpaD-r4)
- More on the Poet — A biography of Causley, plus readings of "Timothy Winters" and other poems, via The Poetry Archive. (https://poetryarchive.org/poet/charles-causley/)
- Charles Causley Resources — A Causley biography, bibliography, and more via the Causley Trust. (https://causleytrust.org/centenary/)
- The Poet, Remembered — Read Causley's 2003 obituary in The Guardian. (https://www.theguardian.com/news/2003/nov/06/guardianobituaries.booksobituaries)
- A Documentary on the Poet — Watch a BBC documentary on Causley, which includes a reading of "Timothy Winters." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ySL37f0KXo)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER CHARLES CAUSLEY POEMS

- Eden Rock

HOW TO CITE

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