Advertisement

SUMMARY

I'm a sedative drug, effective both in the home and in the workplace. I can help when you're taking exams or a witness in court (i.e., even in high-stress situations). I can help you carefully fix a cracked cup (i.e., help you solve daily problems). You just need to swallow me as a pill: melt me in your mouth and wash me down with water.

I can help you manage bad luck and bad news. I can make the world seem less unfair, make the lack of a God seem less serious, or assist you in the grieving process (like a woman's mourning veil). Why hesitate? Place your trust in my synthetic form of kindness.

You're not a grown man or woman yet; you still have time to figure out how to relax. What makes you think you have to stoically accept suffering?

Let me handle your fear that everything's meaningless and empty. I'll put you to sleep and take the edge off it. You'll be grateful that I made you the equivalent of an unthinking animal.

In exchange, give up your core identity. There's no longer any "Devil," or anyone else, who'll buy your soul off you.

THEMES

THE FALSE COMFORT OF SELF-MEDICATION

The speaker of "Advertisement" is a personified "tranquilizer" (a sedative or anti-anxiety drug) advertising its benefits to a potential buyer. This speaker promises to ease all the difficulties "you" face in life, from "misfortune" and "bad news" to "injustice" and "God's absence." Yet the poem suggests that this comfort is false; instead of offering any *actual* solutions to one's problems, the tranquilizer is merely a numbing distraction from the painful reality of being alive. And in return for this distraction, the poem warns, such medications foster dependency and addiction—so steep a price that you might as well be "Sell[ing] your soul."

The speaker (again, a "tranquilizer") promises to relieve pain of all kinds. It vows to help "handle" everything from daily work challenges to anxiety stemming from the loss of religious belief. In other words, it's an all-purpose treatment for "your" pain, fear, stress, and existential angst (that is, dread tied to the sense that life is ultimately meaningless). It rhetorically asks, "Who said / you have to take it on the chin?"—essentially seducing people with the promise of escaping, rather than stoically accepting, misfortune and grief.

In return, the tranquilizer asks for people's "faith" in its "compassion" and invites them to "Sell" it their souls—to become dependent upon it and, in doing so, relinquish part of their humanity. Indeed, the poem implies that the comforts of modern medication are not just false but totally inhuman and dehumanizing. The tranquilizer can only offer "chemical compassion" and "lighten up God's absence" rather than *compensate* for that absence with some other source of higher meaning. Even in inviting you to "Sell me your soul," the speaker can only promise sedation—not power, knowledge, pleasure, or any of the traditional rewards offered in "deal with the Devil" stories. The speaker promises to "cushion" the existential "abyss" (the sense that life is meaningless) with the dullness of "sleep" rather than any meaning, pleasure, etc. The speaker also offers the comfort of "four paws to fall on"—that is, to reduce people to an unthinking animal.

By extension, the poem suggests that part of being human, of having a "soul" to sell, is confronting the things medication allows people to avoid. The speaker offers an artificial relief that merely *feels* like divine "compassion," or else like the kind of pleasures and comforts people sell their "soul[s]" for in morality tales about dealing with the Devil. In the end, the poem implies that these pills are a way of evading—rather than healing—the pain of being human.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-28

MODERN ANXIETY AND LOSS OF FAITH

The speaker of "The Advertisement," a personified tranquilizer shilling itself to potential users, includes "God's absence" in its list of woes that it can relieve. The poem thus links the pain and anxiety of modern life with the loss of religious faith. The poem doesn't necessarily imply that this loss is good or bad, but it does suggest that human beings naturally long for a sense of meaning and purpose; in a secular modern society, people are searching for something to replace the comfort that religion once offered.

In effect, the speaker poses as a *substitute* for both God and the Devil, offering people relief from the sense that they're alone and life is meaningless. Rather than heavenly rewards or earthly power and pleasure, however, the tranquilizer offers only simple, synthetic contentment. For example, rather than providing justice, it claims to "minimize injustice"; rather than divine "compassion," it offers a "chemical" equivalent. And despite claiming that it can take the edge off "God's absence" and even "cushion" the hollowness of life, it will only do so if you

"Sell [it] your soul," as if dealing with the Devil.

This might seem like a raw deal, but the speaker argues that there are no other options; the tranquilizer claims that "There are no other takers" for "your soul," suggesting that medication is the only thing skeptical modern people can turn to when they feel desperate, broken, or empty. If no belief system can help their fear of the "abyss," then drugs (and the companies advertising them) will offer the closest substitute.

Rather than claiming to be virtuous or sinful, the drug simply claims to be "effective." Similarly, the poem doesn't flatly suggest that medication is a *worse* option than religion, just that it addresses a continuing human problem: the need for comfort and meaning when life feels empty.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 13-17
- Lines 22-25
- Lines 26-28

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

I'm a tranquilizer. ...
... cups with care.

Lines 1-6 introduce the anthropomorphic speaker of the poem: a "tranquilizer" drug. Tranquilizers have sedative and anti-anxiety effects; they're designed to relax you, ease your anxiety, and help you fall asleep. This poem is framed as an "Advertisement" in which the drug directly addresses "you," the consumer, and sells you on its benefits. In other words, the poem is both a dramatic monologue and a parody of a print, radio, or TV ad.

The speaker claims that they can help in pretty much any situation:

> I'm effective at home.
> I work in the office.
> I can take exams
> or the witness stand.
> I mend broken cups with care.

In other words, the drug claims to be useful in both domestic and workplace settings, to help people through high-stress situations (such as tests at school or testimony in court), and to help you "care[fully]" complete small tasks, such as "mend[ing] broken cups." There's a metaphorical side to this last claim, too: the speaker seems to imply that they can fix whatever's broken in someone's life or psyche.

This opening is full of short, staccato, end-stopped lines, mimicking the rapid-fire language of many real-world advertisements. (As a parody, the poem draws on a number of actual advertising conventions.) The lines repeatedly begin with "I'm" or "I," as the speaker rattles off their abilities or benefits one right after another. This anaphora again mimics the style of ads, which often list the benefits of their products; at the same time, all the "I"s make the speaker sound boastful and slick, as if they might be promising *too* much.

Finally, notice the zeugma in lines 4-5, which plays on two slightly different (English-language) uses of the verb "take": "I can take exams / or the witness stand." This is the translator's witty way of rendering Szymborska's original Polish phrase, which uses antithesis and translates more directly to: "I sit for exams, / stand at the trial."

LINES 7-10

All you have ...
... glass of water.

In lines 7-10, the speaker's tone shifts slightly. After boasting of its benefits in the first six lines, the tranquilizer addresses "you" (the ad consumer) directly. It starts to coax you in the way that real ads often do:

> All you have to do is take me,
> let me melt beneath your tongue,
> just gulp me
> with a glass of water.

It's no coincidence that the language here starts to sound seductive. (Phrases like "take me" and "let me melt beneath your tongue" could be read as sexual double entendres.) This "Advertisement" is trying to persuade "you" to use its product—which, as the rest of the poem hints, may not actually be in your best interests—and it's out to charm and beguile you in the process. It wants to make the product sound both convenient and thrilling: *Just take this pill and, presto! you'll feel amazing.*

At the same time, that phrase "just gulp me" could be read as a little desperate: *Come on, just do it.* This ad is going for the hard sell, in part because (as the poem soon suggests) the speaker is after more than your money. It wants to make you completely dependent on it.

LINES 11-15

I know how ...
... suits your face.

Lines 11-15 list more of the tranquilizer's supposed benefits. Once again, the speaker's sentences start with "I," in a proud or boastful use of anaphora:

> I know how to handle misfortune,
> how to take bad news.

I can minimize injustice,

Notice that the speaker's claims are expanding in scope. In the first stanza, the drug promised to make everyday tasks and problems easier, but now it's promising a deeper kind of comfort. According to this "Advertisement," it can boost people's moods when they experience any kind of "misfortune" or receive any kind of "bad news." No matter what's going wrong in their lives, the drug can "handle" the problem. (Of course, the more things the drug promises to "handle," the more it sounds as if it might take *over* people's lives.)

Then there's the lofty promise to "minimize injustice." Suddenly, this drug is claiming more than a real-world pharmaceutical ad ever would. And the claims only get grander:

> I can minimize injustice,
> lighten up God's absence,
> or pick the widow's veil that suits your face.

Basically, the drug claims to help with even the most profound sources of anxiety and distress: the world's "injustice," "God's absence," and grief. (A "widow's veil" is an old-fashioned black veil worn by women in mourning for their husbands; here, it's a symbol of mourning in general.) Whether you're feeling righteous anger, spiritual despair, or aching loss, the tranquilizer promises to step in and improve your mood!

Although the tranquilizer may be able to relax or numb people in such situations, the poem suggests that there's something troubling about these promises. The drug can't directly *address* any of the problems it mentions (e.g., promote justice, provide spiritual insight, or console the grieving). It can only "minimize" people's sense of their importance, "lighten up" the way people feel about them, or make people focus on small tasks (like choosing accessories) instead of their pain. Metaphorically, it can customize people's moods to "suit[]" them better. But from this point forward, the poem hints that people might be losing some of their basic humanity in the process.

LINES 16-17

What are you ...
... my chemical compassion.

In lines 16-17, "Advertisement" does two things real-life ads often do: try to build a sense of urgency and gain the consumer's trust. The speaker asks a rhetorical question, followed immediately by an appeal to "faith":

> What are you waiting for—
> have faith in my chemical compassion.

The rhetorical question "What are you waiting for?" is an advertising cliché designed to persuade the customer to buy the product *now*. (Often before thinking about it too much!) In this context, the speaker's pushiness sounds a little sinister and manipulative—in part because they've basically been promising the world.

The next line sounds even creepier, because the speaker is asking for something more than money: "have faith in my chemical compassion." The speaker wants "your" unquestioning trust, but it's not clear that they've actually earned it. Moreover, since they've already promised to "lighten up God's absence," it sounds as if they're posing as a substitute for God or religion. In other words, they want *power* over the consumer. The "chemical compassion" they're offering is metaphorical: it refers to the drug's soothing effect, which feels like a kind of gentleness. But the phrase carries an ironic ring—an implication that "chemical compassion" is only a poor, artificial substitute for the human (or divine) kind.

Notice how these lines use punchy, memorable alliteration ("What are you waiting for?"; "chemical compassion"), just as real ad copy often does.

LINES 18-21

You're still a ...
... on the chin?

Lines 18-21 continue the sales pitch by trying to persuade "you," the customer, that your life could be better. Interestingly, the ad narrows down the "you" somewhat by targeting "young" people—or at least, people who believe they're still young:

> You're still a young man/woman.
> It's not too late to learn how to unwind.

It's implied that the tranquilizer (or its manufacturer) hopes to get users hooked during their youth, in order to foster a lifelong dependency. Otherwise, the drug isn't very particular about whom it targets, as the impersonal phrase "man/woman" suggests. (This English phrase captures the way the original Polish text uses both male and female gendered adjectives.) The drug promises both relaxation and a kind of wisdom: by taking it, the "Advertisement" claims, you'll "learn how to unwind."

The speaker then poses another rhetorical question: "Who said / you have to take it on the chin?" The idiom "take it on the chin" means to accept suffering fully and stoically. The question implies, then, that the drug will render such stoicism unnecessary; it will soften whatever metaphorical punches life throws. Overall, then, this stanza presents the tranquilizer drug as a remedy for—or a way of deflecting—the anxiety and pain of life in general.

LINES 22-25

Let me have ...
... to fall on.

In lines 22-25, the speaker continues to prod, coax, and tempt

the prospective customer. It offers to manage the customer's "abyss" by "cushion[ing] it with sleep." An "abyss" is a chasm or void; metaphorically, "the abyss" often refers to hell, the depths of despair, or some inner feeling of emptiness. The tranquilizer is promising, then, to soften its users' despair—their sense that life lacks meaning and purpose—by putting them to sleep. Once again, this promise is loaded with irony: sleep isn't really a *remedy* for despair, any more than it is for "injustice" or "God's absence"! It's just a way of avoiding or forgetting about these problems.

The tranquilizer then makes a smug, yet curious claim: "You'll thank me for giving you / four paws to fall on." Most likely, this is an allusion to the urban legend that cats always land on their feet, even when falling from a great height. When the user falls into the "abyss" of despair, the drug will "cushion" their landing, as if turning them into a nimble cat.

At the same time, this metaphor suggests that the drug will make the user *animal-like*: that is, unthinking, instinctive, and untroubled by human anxieties. Ironically, this promise sounds more like a warning, as if the drug demands that users sacrifice part of their human nature.

LINES 26-28

Sell me your ...
... other devil anymore.

Lines 26-28 close the poem—and the advertising pitch—with a startling command:

> Sell me your soul.
> There are no other takers.
> There is no other devil anymore.

The final line is given a stanza unto itself, like a slogan set apart from the rest of the "Advertisement."

Having previously claimed godlike powers and asked for the consumer's "faith," the tranquilizer now takes on the role of the "devil." The line "Sell me your soul" alludes to a long tradition of stories (including Goethe's 19th-century play *Faust*) in which characters sell their souls to the Devil. Usually, the sellers receive something like power, wealth, or pleasure in return—though they always end up disappointed in the trade.

Here, the poem adapts this myth for a modern, scientific age, in which religion no longer holds the power it once did (in which "There is no other devil anymore"). Rather than a terrifying embodiment of evil, the "devil" here is a simple pill. The "soul" it's demanding isn't so much the user's immortal spirit as the user's normal identity and personality. These are the things people lose, the poem implies, when they get hooked on this type of drug. Worst of all, they don't get anything as glamorous as power or pleasure in exchange for their "soul[s]"; they just get some extra sleep and relief from anxiety. But because they have "no other takers" for their souls—because, as modern skeptics, they don't believe in God, the Devil, or any higher power—such medications become the one place they can turn when they're feeling broken and empty.

In the end, then, this parody "Advertisement" becomes a sort of moral tale: an ironic commentary on the loss of faith in modern society and the "chemical" substitutes science has supplied.

SYMBOLS

THE TRANQUILIZER

The speaker of this dramatic monologue is supposed to be an actual "tranquilizer"—a sedative or anti-anxiety medication—advertising its benefits to the world. However, the tranquilizer takes on symbolic qualities as well. In the poem's portrayal, it represents an easy, false cure for life's problems. It's associated with complacency and emotional numbness—the desire to check out, distract yourself, and avoid pain rather than confront it.

Since it's framed as a substitute for religious belief, it also represents the kind of scientific solutions favored by a skeptical, modern age. Again, while the poem isn't necessarily pro-religion, it implies that there's something artificial about such "chemical" solutions to life's "misfortune." It associates the tranquilizer with God and the Devil, suggesting that it's taken on aspects of both roles—partly through its ability to create a dependency in its users, as if taking possession of their "soul[s]." Thus, the tranquilizer is ultimately a symbol of *power*, including the cultural power that religion once held and that science has now assumed.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-28

POETIC DEVICES

ANTHROPOMORPHISM

"Advertisement" anthropomorphizes its speaker, a "tranquilizer" or sedative medication. The poem is both a dramatic monologue in the voice of this inanimate object and a mock "Advertisement" for the tranquilizer as a product. Naturally, the drug touts its benefits to "you," the potential buyer. It brags about itself and tries to beguile readers with its supposed convenience. "I'm effective at home," it says, for example, adding, "I work in the office. [...] just gulp me / with a glass of water."

If this voice sounds a little unsettling, it's supposed to be! By turning the tranquilizer into a human-like character, shilling

itself to customers, the poem dramatizes what it sees as the false promises (and hidden dangers) of these medications. It's really the drug *manufacturers* who make such promises, of course, but it's more jarring and immediate to hear them in the voice of the drug itself.

Over the course of the poem, the speaker takes on some of the traits of a false God, or the Devil—who is himself, arguably, an anthropomorphic representation of power and evil.

Where Anthropomorphism appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-28

ANAPHORA

"Advertisement" is full of anaphora, which serves the poem in several ways.

First, anaphora adds a bit of structure to what is otherwise a loosely flowing free verse poem. Second, it helps reinforce the conceit that the poem is an "Advertisement," because ads often contain repetitive language (including lists of their products' features and benefits). Third, because most of the anaphora involves the pronoun "I," it makes the speaker (the tranquilizer) sound slick and boastful:

> I'm a tranquilizer.
> I'm effective at home.
> I work in the office.
> I can take exams
> [...]
> I mend broken cups with care.
> [...]
> I know how to handle misfortune,
> [...]
> I can minimize injustice,

The more things the speaker promises "I" can do, the more they sound like they're *over*selling their abilities—and like they might not have "your" best interests at heart.

A final example of anaphora comes in the last two lines:

> Sell me your soul.
> There are no other takers.
> There is no other devil anymore.

Again, it sounds as if the speaker is using repetitive (almost hypnotic) language to clinch their "sales pitch." Specifically, they're trying to drive home the claim that "you" have "no other" alternative to the tranquilizer if you're feeling anxious, empty, or upset.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I'm"
- **Line 2:** "I'm"
- **Line 3:** "I"
- **Line 4:** "I"
- **Line 6:** "I"
- **Line 11:** "I"
- **Line 13:** "I"
- **Line 27:** "There"
- **Line 28:** "There"

METAPHOR

The poem uses a number of colorful metaphors as part of its "Advertisement." Some of its phrases can be taken both literally *and* metaphorically, as in line 6, when the speaker (the tranquilizer drug) claims it can "mend broken cups with care." This might mean, literally, that the drug can help people perform a small household task, but figuratively, it also seems to imply that the drug can help people fix whatever's broken in their life.

Similarly, in line 15, the speaker promises to "pick the widow's veil that suits your face." A "widow's veil" is a garment worn by women in mourning. The larger idea here is that this mood-altering drug will help people through grief, or even "customize" their grief so that it suits their personality and needs.

In the same stanza, the tranquilizer invites readers to "have faith in my chemical compassion." Here, the "chemical compassion is a metaphor for the sedative effect of the drug: it calms people's nerves, so it *feels* like kindness and gentleness (but, the poem implies, is really no more than a false, synthetic substitute).

Lines 20-21, as rendered by the translator, use an idiomatic English-language metaphor: "Who said / you have to take it on the chin?" To "take it on the chin" means to accept suffering fully and unflinchingly, as if taking a punch squarely on the jaw. This idiom is an efficient way of conveying the idea expressed in the Polish original, which translates to "Who said / that life is to be lived boldly?"

Finally, lines 22-25 feature several different metaphors in a row, creating a slightly surreal (and unsettling) effect:

> Let me have your abyss.
> I'll cushion it with sleep.
> You'll thank me for giving you
> four paws to fall on.

The "abyss" (chasm, void) is a conventional metaphor for hell, or for a general sense of emptiness and meaninglessness. The tranquilizer, which is designed to relax people, offers to soften this pit of despair with the metaphorical "cushion" of sleep. (In other words, it'll make people too tired to feel hopeless.) The

speaker adds that it will "giv[e] you / four paws to fall on," metaphorically suggesting that it will comfort people by turning them into the equivalent of unthinking animals. (Picture a person falling into the depths of despair, only to land nimbly on four feet like a cat.) "You'll thank me," it eerily promises, for robbing you of your humanity in this way!

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "I mend broken cups with care."
- **Line 15:** "or pick the widow's veil that suits your face."
- **Line 17:** "have faith in my chemical compassion."
- **Lines 20-21:** "Who said / you have to take it on the chin?"
- **Lines 22-25:** "Let me have your abyss. / I'll cushion it with sleep. / You'll thank me for giving you / four paws to fall on."

END-STOPPED LINE

All but four of the poem's 28 lines are end-stopped. (All of its stanzas are end-stopped, too.) Combined with the poem's generally short line lengths, this gives "Advertisement" a clipped, staccato rhythm that mimics the prose style of many real-life advertisements.

For the most part, ad copy relies on brief, direct, grabby statements (or urgent-sounding rhetorical questions, like the ones in lines 16 and 20-21: "What are you waiting for" and "Who said / you have to take it on the chin?"). That's because too many long-winded phrases—like the kind that sprawl over line breaks in a poem—would risk losing potential customers' attention. Many ad writers are also constrained by time and space factors (such as the length of a TV commercial or the size of a print ad) that force them to be concise. Short, clipped phrases are also simply more memorable: a plus when you're hoping to make your product stick in consumers' minds.

Of course, this "Advertisement" is satirical and parodic rather than literal. But like all good parody, it shows a close familiarity with the thing it's mimicking. It's because the poet knows the conventions of advertising so well (right down to its typical rhythms) that she's able to twist them for comic and critical effect. After a stanza or so, all these short, end-stopped lines begin to sound *suspiciously* rapid-fire and glib—like the patter of a fast-talking ad pitchman trying to manipulate you.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-3
- Lines 5-8
- Line 10
- Lines 11-19
- Line 21
- Lines 22-23
- Lines 25-28

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The poem contains two rhetorical questions, only one of which is punctuated with a question mark. (The translator's English-language version follows the Polish original in this regard.) The first comes in line 16, where it's part of a longer sentence:

> What are you waiting for—
> have faith in my chemical compassion.

This is a question borrowed from many real-life ads! "What are you waiting for?" is a marketing cliché designed to build a sense of urgency around purchasing a product. Here, of course, the question reinforces the poem's conceit: that it's an "Advertisement" for a drug "you" supposedly need right away.

The second rhetorical question comes in lines 20-21:

> Who said
> you have to take it on the chin?

"Take it on the chin" is an idiom meaning to suffer pain directly and/or accept it stoically. (Picture someone taking a punch to the jaw without flinching.) In this context, the speaker is effectively asking, *Who says you have to stoically accept life's miseries?* In other words, *Why not just take a pill to relieve your pain and anxiety?*

The idiom "take it on the chin" doesn't exist in Polish; the translator is using it here as an approximation. The original phrase translates more literally as "Who said / that life is to be lived boldly?"—a further clue that this drug is advertising itself as a substitute for stoicism.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Line 16:** "What are you waiting for—"
- **Lines 20-21:** "Who said / you have to take it on the chin?"

ALLUSION

The last three lines of the poem allude to a long tradition of folktales and myths involving pacts with the Devil:

> Sell me your soul.
> There are no other takers.
>
> There is no other devil anymore.

Typically, these stories feature a character who sells their immortal soul to the Devil in exchange for some kind of worldly benefit. The most famous such story is the German legend of Faust, who gives up his soul in exchange for knowledge and romantic pleasure. This legend dates from the 16th century and has earlier sources in other tales. It's also been adapted into later works, including two of the most famous plays in

Western literature: Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (c. 1592) and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust* (1808, 1832). Phrases like "Devil's bargain" or "deal with the Devil," which draw on the same concept, have become idiomatic in many languages.

In the poem, the allusion suggests that to become dependent on the "tranquilizer" is to give away your core identity—or even a key aspect of your humanity. (By continually altering your mood, you might alter your character; if you're really zoned out, you might even become as unthinking as a zombie or "four paw[ed]" animal.) In return, the poem implies, you get nothing but some extra sleep and an artificial sense of comfort. In other words, you get the raw end of the deal, because part of what defines a "devil's bargain" is that it's never worth it in the end!

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 26-28:** "Sell me your soul. / There are no other takers. / There is no other devil anymore."

VOCABULARY

Tranquilizer (Line 1) - A sedative or anti-anxiety drug; a medication that helps with sleep and relaxation.

Widow's veil (Line 15) - A black veil traditionally worn by widows and other women in mourning, designed to hide the face (including the emotions) of the wearer.In the Polish original, this line refers to a "mourning hat"; the translator has chosen a funeral item that's more familiar (though old-fashioned) in English-speaking countries.

Unwind (Line 19) - Relax; let go of tension.

Take it on the chin (Lines 20-21) - Accept pain stoically; experience suffering directly and fully (like someone taking a punch to the face).

Abyss (Line 22) - A chasm or void. Often used in reference to the emptiness of death or the perceived emptiness (meaninglessness) of life, and in connection with spiritual crises (as in the expression "staring into the abyss").

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Advertisement" contains six stanzas of varying lengths, including a single-line stanza at the end. It's a free verse poem, meaning that it has no meter or rhyme. (These things are true both in Szymborska's original poem and in Stanisław Barańczak's English-language translation, which follows the Polish text closely. The number and arrangement of lines is also consistent between the two versions.)

The stanzas get shorter as the poem goes on—10, 7, 4, 4, 2, and 1 line(s), respectively—and the sentences are especially short and punchy at the poem's beginning and end. In these ways, the form of "Advertisement" reflects some common features of advertisements in general. Ad copy often begins with an attention-grabbing line or two, explains the benefits of the product, then closes with one or more snappy lines, including a slogan. In this case, the "tranquilizer" begins with a simple introduction ("I'm a tranquilizer"), rattles off a couple of quick benefits ("I'm effective at home. / I work in the office."), then launches into a more extended pitch. Finally, there's a brisk, memorable closer (lines 26-28):

> Sell me your soul.
> There are no other takers.
>
> There is no other devil anymore.

This last phrase, set apart on its own line, could almost be the tranquilizer's slogan!

METER

"Advertisement" has no meter; it's a free verse poem, in both the Polish original and the English translation. Its language flows loosely but briskly, like advertising copy that's trying to grab readers' attention with its casual tone.

Interestingly, the translator has chosen to set the final line (line 28) in iambic pentameter, the most common meter in English. In other words, the translated line follows a "da-DUM | da-DUM | da-DUM | da-DUM | da-DUM" rhythm:

> There is | no oth- | er dev- | il an- | ymore.

This rhythm doesn't appear in the original (and Polish has different metrical conventions, anyway). But since it's so familiar to readers of English poetry, the translator may have used it here in order to make the last line—which is set apart from the rest, almost like a slogan—more musical and memorable.

RHYME SCHEME

As a free verse poem (both in the original and in translation), "Advertisement" has no rhyme or rhyme scheme. Again, the plainness and straightforwardness of its language make the poem read like advertising copy. (A highly lyrical, metrical, rhyming structure wouldn't make much sense for any poem imitating the language of ads—unless it were supposed to be a jingle!)

SPEAKER

The speaker introduces themselves in the first line: "I'm a

tranquilizer." The poem is framed as an "Advertisement," and the tranquilizer is the product, selling "you," the potential consumer, on its benefits. In other words, this is not only a mock ad but a dramatic monologue: a poem written in the voice of a character separate from the poet.

It's not unheard of for an advertisement to be delivered in the "voice" of its product, but it's not especially common, either. In the context of the poem, this device has a slightly unsettling quality, as an inanimate drug seems to come alive and push readers to "take [it]."

There's something a little slick and boastful about this voice (it's "advertising" itself, after all), as well as something aggressive. It's claiming all sorts of powers and abilities; as a sedative drug, it promises to work both in the home and in the workplace, in high-pressure situations (such as school examinations and courtroom appearances), and during everyday tasks (such as "mend[ing] broken cups"). Metaphorically, it seems to be suggesting that it can "mend" (heal) the person taking it, too. Ironically, this tranquilizer doesn't sound very relaxed—it's selling itself hard to the consumer!

As the poem goes on, the tranquilizer claims even more power, to the point where it frames itself as a substitute for God and/or the Devil. Even as it's selling itself to "you," it wants you to "Sell me your soul" in return (line 26). Basically, it's asking people to become dependent on it: to give up their normal character and identity in return for the comforting numbness it provides. In this way, the voice breaks out of the language of advertising and into the language of morality tales, such as *Faust* and other stories in which characters make deals with the Devil. (See the Allusion and Context sections of this guide for more.)

SETTING

The poem has no clearly defined physical or geographical setting, although it *mentions* a few settings:

> I'm effective at home.
> I work in the office.
> I can take exams
> or the witness stand.

These are settings in which the tranquilizer pill claims to "work." (Basically, it promises to work wherever you need it!) The advertising language in this "Advertisement" suggests that it's set in a relatively modern society, with some form of mass media—print, TV, etc.

The poem's final phrase, "There is no devil anymore," implies that the poem takes place in the present day (i.e., at the time of its publication) rather than in some historical period. It suggests that modern society has secularized and religion—including its gods and "devil[s]"—has lost its force. The poem was published in Poland in 1972 and was likely intended as a commentary on modern European/Western culture.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Wisława Szymborska (1923-2012) has become known around the world as the premier Polish poet of her generation. Awarded the 1996 Nobel Prize in Literature for her life's work, she has gained a devoted audience both in her native Polish and in translation. Many of her best-known poems—including "The End and the Beginning," "Photograph from September 11," and "Vietnam"—confront war and disaster from unexpected perspectives.

"Advertisement" appeared in Szymborska's 1972 collection *Wszelki wypadek* (*Could Have*). This English-language version has been translated from the Polish by poet and critic Stanisław Barańczak (1946-2014), a junior contemporary of Szymborska's. It closely follows the style and structure of the original (titled "Prospekt"), though it adapts some of Szymborska's phrasing into idiomatic English. For example, lines 20-21 of the original translate more literally as "Who said / that life is to be lived boldly?"; Barańczak renders this colloquially as "Who said / you have to take it on the chin?"

The poem's references to soul-selling (lines 26-28) draw on a long tradition of myths and legends involving deals with the Devil. The most famous of these is the German legend of Faust, who sells his soul to Mephistopheles (the Devil) in exchange for knowledge and sensual pleasures. The Faust story has featured in several well-known works of Western literature, including Christopher Marlowe's play *Doctor Faustus* (c. 1592) and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's two-part play *Faust* (1808, 1832).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Advertisement" was published in the 1970s, at a time when minor tranquilizers (in pill form) had been in popular use throughout the Western world for 20 years. The first such drug to be widely marketed (*advertised*, as in the poem) was called Miltown; it was introduced in the 1950s and became a staple in the popular culture of the period. (It appeared in the poetry of the period, too, including Robert Lowell's "Man and Wife," from his landmark 1959 collection *Life Studies*.)

The poem also emerged in a largely (though, of course, not entirely) secularized society. Throughout much of Europe, the cultural predominance of organized religion had declined since the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This decline accelerated in the period spanning World War I and World War II, events that caused massive social upheaval and tested or broke the faith of many who witnessed them. (The poet's native Poland,

which became an independent country after WWI, was the site of bloody fighting and atrocities in both wars.)

"Advertisement" registers this general cultural shift away from a worldview defined by religion, toward one in which science—including the medical science that produces mood-altering drugs—held something like the same cultural authority. In fact, it suggests that "chemical compassion" is the only kind its culture now offers, and that science and medicine produce the only "God[s]" and "devil[s]" still available.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Szymborska: A Retrospective — Read the New York Times's 2021 obituary of the poet, which looks back at her award-winning career. (https://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/02/books/wislawa-szymborska-nobel-winning-polish-poet-dies-at-88.html)
- A Celebration of the Poet — Watch the 92Y program "Celebrating Wisława Szymborska" (2015). (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UvXigilf7vU)
- Szymborska, Nobel Laureate — A biography and other materials related to Wisława Szymborska, winner of the 1996 Nobel Prize in Literature. (https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1996/szymborska/biographical/)
- The Poet's Life and Work — Read a biography of Szymborska at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/wisaawa-szymborska)
- A Conversation with the Poet — Watch a 1995 profile featuring a conversation with Szymborska. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N7PM3mzk5DQ)

HOW TO CITE

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Allen, Austin. "*Advertisement.*" LitCharts LLC, February 8, 2022. Retrieved March 11, 2022. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/wislawa-szymborska/advertisement.