Chainsaw Versus the Pampas Grass

SUMMARY

The speaker remembers when he went to get his chainsaw out of storage to mow down some ornamental grass in his garden. It seemed, he recalls, like an improbable fight—or as if he and the terrible chainsaw were an odd pair. All winter, the chainsaw had waited angrily in its plastic case, hung from a hook in the speaker's darkroom. The speaker recalls how it greedily drank down engine oil until trickles oozed across its dry blade.

The speaker next went into his garden shed, which was hot and full of clumpy old spiderwebs. He ran a power cord from there into the garden, drawing it out like a trail of gunpowder. Then he flipped the socket's switch, connected the chainsaw to the cord, and turned it on.

The chainsaw, he remembers, came to angry life immediately, its blade rushing the second it got power. It struck him as an indifferently violent machine, willing to slice through whatever it came in contact with, be that clothes, jewelry, or hair. It seemed dangerous, hungry for human flesh and bone, ready to bounce off a nail or a knot in some wood and fly back into the speaker's head. The speaker let it run on, lifted it up so the sunlight glinted off it, and felt its powerful motor revving.

The pampas grass he was going to cut down, meanwhile, stood there looking silly with all its decorative, feathery plumes. It was standing there stealing light from other plants, enjoying the sun, showing off with all its fluffy foliage and its tall stalks. The chainsaw, the speaker felt, was as overpowered for this job as a sledgehammer would be against a nut. All that he'd *really* need to do to get rid of the grass, he thought, would be to yank it from the ground or dig it up. The chainsaw was a more serious tool than necessary for the job. By merely touching the chainsaw's blade to a stalk of grass, the speaker made the stalk seem to evaporate. He attacked a few stalks, then all of them in a big shoulder-high sweep, starting to have fun with it. He hit lower then, attacking the plant's trunk. Sap and juice from the cut grass spat at him, and clouds of dust rose as he ripped apart the warm, tangly undergrowth.

To give himself more room to work, the speaker brushed all the fallen grass to the side of an outhouse wall so that he could set them on fire. Then, he sliced and raked away most of the grass, until the only thing left was a stump about the size of a barrel's lid, which he found he couldn't dig up. He still wanted to be rid of it, though, so he dug the chainsaw straight down into the plant's roots. The dirt and weeds clogged the blade, and the sliced roots seemed to heal themselves, as if he'd been trying to slice through water or air with a knife. So he poured lighter fluid into the remains of the plant and set it on fire. It caught, smoked for a while, and went out. The speaker felt that was good enough.

Over the next few weeks, the grass began to put up fresh new shoots. By June, it was completely restored, with a new crown of plumes, looking like a miraculous biblical crop of corn. The speaker remembers looking down on it from his window as if he were the pale moon you can sometimes see in the sky during the day.

Downstairs, hanging from its hook again, the chainsaw quietly raged to itself. The speaker left it there all year, letting it dream its angry technological dreams and get over its defeat. All it could do was long to go on cutting.

THEMES

HUMAN TECHNOLOGY VERSUS NATURE

When the speaker of Armitage's poem hauls a chainsaw out of his shed to cut down some decorative feathery "pampas grass," he admits it's "overkill": the chainsaw is a tool of pure destruction, ready to chew through anything in its path, and more than a match for a patch of ornamental vegetation. However, while the speaker and his chainsaw manage to wipe out the grass above ground, its roots persist, and before long the plant has sprung right back up. Nature, this poem suggests, has a quiet power that's more than a match for mechanical destruction. Humanity might enjoy a brief fantasy of dominance through technology, but technology can never defeat nature.

The chainsaw the speaker pulls out of his shed is a frightening, indiscriminately destructive instrument. To the speaker, it seems just as eager to devour "the flesh of the face and the bones beneath" as to do the jobs it's intended for: it's emotionless and pitiless, and its only purpose is to buzz right through whatever it meets. A real technological achievement, it has one job—to saw—and it's terrifyingly good at it.

All this power is a little scary, but it's also seductive. Though the speaker knows he doesn't really need a whole chainsaw to get rid of the unwanted decorative grass in his garden, he also enjoys the feeling that, with the help of technology, he can destroy anything he wants with a mere touch. Just one "blur of the blade," and the plant he's fighting "[doesn't] exist" anymore. With the chainsaw's help, he feels, he can be the master of the world, asserting human dominance over nature.

He runs into trouble, however, when he tries to "finish things off" by hacking up the pampas grass's "upper roots" and setting them on fire with "barbecue fluid." Chopped and burnt, the roots first clog up the chainsaw's blade, then quietly heal

behind the speaker's back. Before long, "new shoots" spring up. The grass puts out its decorative plumes again as if wearing a "new crown"—a metaphor that suggests that, in the power struggle between tool-wielding humanity and nature, nature will always come out on top in the end.

The poem thus makes some wry fun of humanity's illusions of control. People enjoy the idea that, through cleverness and technology, they can bend nature to their will. But no matter how people try to manipulate (or destroy!) the world around them, nature will always quietly go on doing its thing behind their backs.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-68

VIOLENT FORCE VERSUS QUIET PERSISTENCE

The chainsaw this poem's speaker uses to mow down some ornamental grass is a tool of pure destruction: angry, greedy, and violent, it drips with power and danger. The pampas grass appears to be no match for it. But by quietly regrowing even after it's unceremoniously chainsawed down, the pampas grass wins out in the end. Read symbolically, this poem suggests that gentle persistence and endurance can beat even the most aggressive displays of force.

At first glance, the chainsaw's indiscriminate power seems unstoppable. As the speaker observes, this machine can buzz through anything the speaker puts in its path, "flesh" and "bone" included. (It feels a little bit frightening for that reason!) Symbolically, this chainsaw represents the kind of power that's built on sheer strength and violence. The poem hints that this kind of force has a way of getting out of control: used carelessly or left in the wrong hands, hard power can be destructive.

With this tool of sheer power in his hands, the speaker has no trouble cutting down the pampas grass. But he can't kill it altogether. The pampas grass doesn't fight the speaker or the chainsaw; it has no hard power of its own. Instead, it simply persists, refusing to let apparent defeat keep it down. Its soft power, slow and steady as the proverbial tortoise's, wins out against the chainsaw's violence in the end. Not long after the speaker thinks he's hacked it to death, it's sprouted again, placidly "sunning itself" in the exact same spot.

Through the symbolism of the violent chainsaw and the peaceful grass, the poem thus suggests that soft power is ultimately stronger than hard power. Violent domination might seem as if it conquers all, but that just isn't the case.

In this light, some readers have also interpreted this poem as a tale of stereotypical masculinity versus stereotypical femininity, with male dominance ultimately losing out to female persistence and patience.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8
- Lines 19-68

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-8

It seemed an ...
... the dry links.

The poem begins with what the speaker calls "an unlikely match." In the light of the title—"Chainsaw Versus the Pampas Grass"— this might be a match in the sense of a fight: the battle between a chainsaw and some unruly decorative grass. As the speaker hauls out his chainsaw to do a spot of light gardening, the outcome of this "match" seems like a foregone conclusion. No way could grass fight back against a chainsaw.

In these first lines, though, the "unlikely match" could also be an unlikely *partnership*. Hefting the chainsaw, the speaker feels awe, alarm, and titillation at its power—emotions that make him seem like a very "unlikely match" indeed for such a singlemindedly destructive piece of equipment.

Right from the start, the chainsaw seems dangerous. The speaker personifies it, picturing it "grinding its teeth" as it waits "all winter unplugged"; it sounds frustrated and angry at its long inactivity, more than ready to leap into action again.

It's also thirsty. It "knock[s] back a quarter-pint of engine oil" like a belligerent drunk doing a shot at the bar, and an overflow of "juices" messily run down its blade into its "dry links" like dribblings into stubble. The speaker follows the course of that oozing oil as it crosses "the guide-bar and the maker's name" embossed in the metal, making it sound as if he's looking the chainsaw up and down in admiration and fear.

In short, the speaker seems in awe of the chainsaw, treating it not like a tool he's about to use, but like a dangerous guest who's been lurking in his "darkroom" all winter long. He's fascinated by the chainsaw's brusque gulpings and grindings. Perhaps he himself is not the kind of guy who grinds his teeth and knocks back a quarter-pint of *anything*; perhaps he'd sort of like to be. This will be a tongue-in-cheek poem about the allure—and folly—of violent power.

The speaker will tell this tale in seven irregular stanzas of free verse, without rhyme or meter. This flexible form will shift its shape to mirror his experiences.

LINES 9-12

From the summerhouse, ...
... . . .

Chainsaw in hand, the speaker heads out to the garden to begin

his career of destruction. He begins by heading into the "summerhouse" (that is, the garden shed)—a word choice that suggests this poem takes place in a suburban back garden somewhere in the UK. Spend a moment with the imagery here:

> From the summerhouse, still holding **one last gulp of last year's heat** behind its double doors, and **hung with the weightless wreckage of wasps and flies, mothballed in spider's wool** . . .

The summerhouse's stale, overheated air and dangling fly-corpses create a stagnant atmosphere. Everything in this shed feels old and worn out: the heat is "last year's," the wasps and flies are wound up in dirty webs like mothballs in a fusty old closet. (Notice, too, the visual joke the speaker makes there: the dead insects in their windings look like the pellets people use to keep bugs *away*.)

In other words, the speaker's domestic garden feels pretty musty and dull. Perhaps this scene gives a hint of the speaker's own frame of mind as he heads out to challenge the grass with his chainsaw: he's ready for there to be a little noise and action around here!

LINES 13-18

> *from there, I ...*
> *... gunned the trigger.*

Now, the speaker prepares himself and the chainsaw to wreak backyard havoc. As he hooks up the "day-glo orange power line," his imagery already suggests peril: the cord that will power the chainsaw is the same glaring, cautionary orange as a safety vest or a traffic cone. The speaker is aware of the danger; in a telling simile, he describes feeding this cord out "like powder from a keg," as if he were laying out a gunpowder fuse to set off an explosion.

Nervously, he describes every second of his preparations. Verb-focused parallelism and repetitions trace each step of the process: "I **trailed** the day-glo orange power lone [...] then **walked** [...] then **walked** again," he says, following his own path back and forth between the outlet in the summerhouse and the place on the lawn where the chainsaw lies in wait.

At long last, everything is hooked up; he's ready to get started. So far, all of his metaphors about the chainsaw have presented it as an angry beast "grinding its teeth" and waiting to get down to its violent business. Now, he's moved into images of explosions and gunfire. He doesn't merely turn the chainsaw on: he flips off the "safety catch" and "gun[s] the trigger," just as if he were firing a revolver.

LINES 19-26

> *No gearing up ...*
> *... into the brain.*

Even after the speaker's long, nervous lead-up to the moment he turns the chainsaw on, the chainsaw's fury comes as a shock. The machine springs to life without even needing to warm up; its "instant rage [...] lash[es] out at air" as if it were a caged tiger, just released.

In awe of all this violent power, the speaker also feels more than a little unsettled. The personified chainsaw's "perfect disregard" for everything around it strikes him as sinister, even psychopathic: he feels the chainsaw might just have a "sweet tooth," a "bloody desire" to grind right through "the flesh of the face and the bones underneath." Perhaps it's even plotting against him, making a "grand plan" to kick back and sink right into his brains.

The speaker's long, vivid description of all the ways the chainsaw might mangle a guy suggests that he's torn between fear and fascination. Perhaps he's even projecting some of his own violent impulses onto this violent machine. When he observes that the chainsaw might get into a mood "to tangle with cloth, or jewellery, or hair," the specific items he mentions seem oddly *feminine*. While some men wear jewelry or have hair long enough to get tangled in a chainsaw's blade, the images still suggest a vision from a slasher movie: a dolled-up woman screaming in terror as the chainsaw descends.

The speaker, in other words, seems to feel both threatened and threatening as he holds this machine. Sure, the chainsaw might rebel against him—it doesn't care one bit what it cuts up, it just likes cutting. But, for the moment at least, its power is at his command. It lets him imagine being a dangerous, powerful, fascinatingly cruel man.

Repeated sounds help to bring the scene to life. Take line 20, for instance:

> the r**u**sh of m**e**tal l**a**sh**i**ng out at air, connected to the m**a**ins.

The combination of /sh/ consonance and /m/ alliteration here evokes the whoo**sh** and hu**m** of the chainsaw's dreadful blade.

LINES 27-29

> *I let it ...*
> *... in its throat.*

Having marveled at the chainsaw's dangerous, even malicious power, the speaker takes a moment to revel in the fact that this dreadful machine is in his hands. With strange glee, he lifts the chainsaw "into the sun" so that the light flashes off its blade:

> **and felt** the hundred beats per second drumming in its heart,
> **and felt** the drive-wheel gargle in its throat.

Notice how his anaphora focuses attention on what he can *feel* happening in the chainsaw's works, suggesting that for a

moment he and the chainsaw could almost be one being: at last, his arm is complete again. His technical attention to the motor—he knows the chainsaw runs at a "hundred beats per second" and uses a "drive-wheel"—also suggests an enthusiastic relish of this machine's workings.

Still, though, he presents the personified chainsaw as a living beast with its own intentions and its own moods. Its dangerous "heart" and "throat" *aren't* the speaker's; the speaker is just getting a little vicarious enjoyment out of the idea that *he* might be indiscriminately powerful and violent.

Readers here might want to take a step back and imagine the scene from the outside. The speaker is enjoying a full-on power trip (if a little nervously). An observer, however, would just see some guy in his suburban backyard gearing up a much-too-powerful machine to do a spot of gardening. There's something *silly* about this image—though the chainsaw's dangers are very real.

LINES 30-38

The pampas grass ...
... Overkill.

The speaker now turns from his dangerous allegiance with the chainsaw to the other participant in this "unlikely match": the pampas grass, a tall, feathery kind of ornamental plant. Listen to this introduction:

> The pampas grass with its ludicrous feathers
> and plumes. The pampas grass, taking the warmth
> and light
> from cuttings and bulbs, sunning itself,

The dramatic anaphora here ushers the grass onstage as if it were a cage fighter. If it's a fighter, though, it's an unlikely one indeed. With "ludicrous feathers / and plumes," it's like an ostrich or a Victorian lady in a fancy hat; "sunning itself" and casually stealing the light from the "cuttings and bulbs" straggling in its shadow, it's like a big lazy cat. It's enjoying itself, decorating its surroundings with "footstools, cushions and tufts" of growth. In short, it's a languorous, pleasure-loving, ladylike sort of creature.

It's not defenseless, however. Amid all those comfy footstools and show-stealing feathers, the pampas grass also grows "twelve-foot spears"—a metaphor that suggests this plush plant has military reserves.

The speaker doesn't seem too worried about those spears, though. In fact, he scoffs at them. In relation to the grass, the chainsaw is a "sledgehammer taken to crack the nut"—that is, as the speaker puts it a moment later, serious "overkill." It seems to the speaker as if he could do away with the plant with little more than a "good pull or shove," or with the help of a "pitchfork" at most.

As the previous stanzas have shown, however, he's having too much fun with his mighty chainsaw to give it up now. Overkill it might be—but overkilling is exactly what he plans to do, attacking this grass until it's deader than dead.

LINES 38-45

I touched the ...
... dark, secret warmth.

The speaker now stands before his unassuming nemesis with all the chainsaw's power grinding away in his hands. Tentatively at first, he tries his tool on the nearest stalk, merely "touch[ing]" the blade to its "tip." Take a look at the way Armitage shapes this first encounter:

> [...] I touched the blur of the blade
> against the nearmost tip of a reed — || it didn't exist.

The dramatic caesura at the dash makes it clear just how sudden and complete the chainsaw's destruction is. It takes only that little touch for the "blur of the blade" (and note that almost onomatopoeic /bl/ alliteration, too) to make the reed into nothing.

Thrilled, the speaker starts to get into the swing of things. In a parallel sequence of three alliterative verbs, he first "dab[s]" at "swoon[ing]" stalks of grass, then "dock[s]" the grass as if lopping off its many "heads," then "dismiss[es]" the whole "top third of its canes" in one dramatic "sideways sweep." From a mild dab to a scornful and complete dismissal, the speaker moves from cautious to gleefully aggressive in moments.

The real coup de grace comes when he starts to get down into the plant's "trunk." Though the pampas grass rebels a little, "sp[itting]" its "plant-juice" at him like a cobra, that juice can't do him a bit of harm. He "rip[s] into pockets of dark secret warmth" down in the plant's undergrowth without meeting any real resistance.

This action-packed passage makes it clear that things are going just as the speaker hoped they might when he got that chainsaw out. With this powerful tool in hand, he feels like the godlike master of all he surveys, able to destroy with his touch. Perhaps he's also working out some of those troubling misogynist impulses we noted earlier; the image of him attacking "pockets of dark, secret warmth" might evoke sexual violence, especially considering the way the grass has been personified as an elegant lady and the chainsaw as a drunk, angry man.

LINES 46-51

To clear a ...
... from the earth.

Once he's lopped down most of the grass, the speaker begins clearing up, like a murderer disposing of a corpse.

Take a look at the way the poem uses repetition in this passage:

> I raked whatever was severed or felled or torn
> towards the dead zone under the outhouse wall, to
> be fired.
> Then cut and raked, cut and raked [...]

The polysyndeton of "severed or felled or torn" draws attention to the raggedy destruction he's visited on the grass: some stalks are cleanly "severed or felled" like trees, some are just cruelly "torn" apart. The epizeuxis on "cut and raked," meanwhile, makes him sound maniacal. He's utterly absorbed in destruction now, dragging *everything* to the "dead zone"—just a plot of bare ground beside a shed, but one to which the speaker gives a significant grim name.

All that's left after this energetic clearing-away is "a flat stump the size of a barrel lid" that the speaker can't dig up or "prise[] from the earth" no matter how hard he tries. Readers might recall that, not long ago, the speaker was bragging that he probably could have uprooted the whole plant with "a good pull or shove," or a "pitchfork" at the most. This barrel-lid stump gives the lie to that bravado.

The image of the barrel lid also offers a touch of foreshadowing. A barrel lid, after all, sits atop a barrel—and who knows what that barrel might contain? The pampas grass might look totally defeated, but perhaps it isn't out of surprises yet.

LINES 52-59

> *Wanting to finish ...*
> *... it at that.*

Frustrated by the pampas grass's persistent stump, the speaker decides to "finish things off" once and for all with the help of the trusty chainsaw. Raising it dramatically into the air once more, he plunges it straight into the plant's "upper roots."

There, though, he runs into a problem. "Choked with soil or fouled with weeds," the previously unstoppable blade sputters. The speaker can't even tell if he's doing any damage. The roots he "slice[s] or split[s]" seem to close up, he says; it's as if he's "cutting at water or air with a knife."

This simile, like that barrel-lid stump, foreshadows the grass's eventual victory. Water and air are both defenseless against knives (you can slice right into 'em!) and undisturbable by knives (you'll never leave a lasting mark). The earth the speaker drives his blade into now seems to have just the same quiet, unbothered resilience.

Still, the speaker isn't ready to give up yet. His mighty chainsaw has failed him, but perhaps fire won't. He douses the stump with "barbecue fluid" and lights it on fire. Perhaps he's hoping for a dramatic bonfire or an explosion; he doesn't get it. Halfheartedly, the fire:

> [...] flamed for a minute, smoked
> for a minute more, and went out. I left it at that.

Notice how the speaker's mild repetitions there stress just how anticlimactic this all looked. A minute of fire, a minute of smoke: one small sentence can describe the whole process. Worn out and perhaps a little crestfallen, the speaker decides that's probably good enough. Fatal error!

LINES 60-64

> *In the weeks ...*
> *... the midday moon.*

As the poem starts to move toward its close, look back for a moment at the last couple of stanzas. They've been long and elaborate, full of violent detail and action, right in the moment with the speaker and his chainsaw.

Now look at this short stanza. It's only five lines long, and it begins by compressing a lot of time into a few words: "In the weeks that came."

After all that roaring mechanical activity, it's time for the grass to fight back—but the simple, unhurried, matter-of-fact shape of the stanza suggests how different its style of fighting is to the speaker's. The grass is about to win, but it's going to do so quietly.

Notice the speaker's figurative language here:

> In the weeks that came new shoots like asparagus
> tips
> sprang up from its nest and by June
> it was riding high in its saddle, wearing a new crown.

The simile of the "new shoots like asparagus tips" suggests that the grass's fresh growth is green and tender: no "twelve-foot spears" here, just gentle little sprigs, grown in a "nest" like baby birds. From such soft beginnings, though, the grass rears back up to its former magnificent height and earns some powerful personification. "Riding high in its saddle," it could be a tough old cowpoke or a noble knight; "wearing a new crown," it's like a monarch.

In fact, the transformation is so thorough that it makes the speaker think of "corn in Egypt"—an allusion to a Bible story in which the patriarch Jacob sends his sons to Egypt, knowing there's an abundance of corn there. The reference also suggests that something feels ancient, legendary, and miraculous about this regrowth.

The resurrected grass looks as if it were never attacked; its passive, patient power has won out over the speaker's active, violent, technological power. In the face of this defeat, the speaker can only look sulkily out his "upstairs window like the midday moon," pale, ineffectual, out of place, and decidedly *indoors*. All his dreams of total power over his surroundings

were dreams only.

LINES 65-68

Back below stairs ...
... as it got.

The grass has had its victory and the speaker has been forced to admit defeat. As the poem closes, the speaker looks to the final character in the drama: the chainsaw. He's returned it to its resting spot "below stairs on its hook," and it doesn't seem pleased about it (or about anything). Still personified, it "seethe[s]" with rage.

Here, the speaker seems to identify with his chainsaw a little, or at least to project some of his own less comfortable emotions onto it:

> I left it a year, to work back through its man-made dreams,
> to try to forget.

Sure, readers sense, it's certainly just the *chainsaw* that needs to take a break to "try to forget" about its humiliating failure to achieve even a simple spot of gardening with an arsenal of motors and oils and grinding teeth. The speaker acknowledges his projection quietly in describing the chainsaw's "man-made dreams." The chainsaw has no dreams itself, only the dreams of the men who made it. In fact, it *is* a man-made dream: a dream of ultimate destructive power and control that simply can't last in the real world.

The speaker's changing line lengths there suggest his sheepishness as he comes up short against his own limitations, "try[ing] to forget" that he really doesn't have as much power as he might like to dream: he's learned that the simple, persistent mechanisms of nature will always win over human schemes.

Still, he can't *quite* give up on that fantasy. He and the chainsaw share "the seamless urge to persist," a driven, intense desire to keep on mastering the world—or to believe that this might be possible at all.

SYMBOLS

THE CHAINSAW

The chainsaw symbolizes violent power, technology in general, and the futile human urge to dominate nature.

The speaker sees the chainsaw as an unstoppable force, ready to indiscriminately slice through the pampas grass or human "brain[s]." Holding it makes him feel both powerful and frightened. In this, the chainsaw suggests a fantasy of domination. With such a tool in his hand, the speaker feels, he has great power. But that power—like all violent power—is dangerous, volatile, and liable to backfire.

Trying to master the pampas grass with the chainsaw, the speaker is also trying to assert human dominance over nature through technological skill. This, the poem suggests, is futile. No matter how powerful or clever technology gets, nature will always win out.

Some readers might also see the chainsaw as a symbol of *male* dominance in particular. The image of the chainsaw destroying the "dark, secret warmth" of the pampas grass could be read as a fantasy of violent sexuality.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-8:** "All winter unplugged, / grinding its teeth in a plastic sleeve, the chainsaw swung / nose-down from a hook in the darkroom / under the hatch in the floor. When offered the can / it knocked back a quarter-pint of engine oil / and juices ran from its joints and threads, / oozed across the guide-bar and the maker's name, / into the dry links."
- **Lines 19-29:** "No gearing up or getting to speed, just an instant rage, / the rush of metal lashing out at air, connected to the mains. / The chainsaw with its perfect disregard, its mood / to tangle with cloth, or jewellery, or hair. / The chainsaw with its bloody desire, its sweet tooth / for the flesh of the face and the bones underneath, / its grand plan to kick back against nail or knot / and rear up into the brain. / I let it flare, lifted it into the sun / and felt the hundred beats per second drumming in its heart, / and felt the drive-wheel gargle in its throat."
- **Lines 35-45:** "This was the sledgehammer taken to crack the nut. / Probably all that was needed here was a good pull or shove / or a pitchfork to lever it out at its base. / Overkill. I touched the blur of the blade / against the nearmost tip of a reed — it didn't exist. / I dabbed at a stalk that swooned, docked a couple of heads, / dismissed the top third of its canes with a sideways sweep / at shoulder height — this was a game. / I lifted the fringe of undergrowth, carved at the trunk — / plant-juice spat from the pipes and tubes / and dust flew out as I ripped into pockets of dark, secret warmth."
- **Lines 52-54:** "I took up the saw / and drove it vertically downwards into the upper roots, / but the blade became choked with soil or fouled with weeds,"
- **Lines 65-68:** "Back below stairs on its hook, the chainsaw seethed. / I left it a year, to work back through its man-made dreams, / to try to forget. / The seamless urge to persist was as far as it got."

THE GRASS

The pampas grass symbolizes the quiet power of nature—and soft, passive power in general. Its

regrowth and rebirth in the face of destruction suggest that dogged persistence beats out violent force in the long run.

By sprouting right back up almost as soon as it's cut down, the pampas grass makes a mockery of the speaker's oh-so-scary and oh-so-powerful chainsaw. It doesn't matter how violently one attacks nature, the regrown grass suggests: nature keeps on doing what it does. This image might even offer an environmentalist message, reminding readers that people who try to master or exploit nature only embarrass (and harm) themselves in the end.

The grass's resurrection also suggests that persistent, gentle growth always defeats violent destruction. Destruction takes violent effort; regrowth quietly goes on and on.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 30-34:** "The pampas grass with its ludicrous feathers / and plumes. The pampas grass, taking the warmth and light / from cuttings and bulbs, sunning itself, / stealing the show with its footstools, cushions and tufts / and its twelve-foot spears."
- **Lines 55-56:** "what was sliced or split somehow closed and mended behind, / like cutting at water or air with a knife."
- **Lines 60-63:** "In the weeks that came new shoots like asparagus tips / sprang up from its nest and by June / it was riding high in its saddle, wearing a new crown. / Corn in Egypt."

POETIC DEVICES

PERSONIFICATION

By personifying both the chainsaw and the pampas grass, the poem's speaker hints that the struggle he describes—violent force versus calm persistence—might appear *within* human society, not just in the battle between humanity and nature.

Right from the start, the chainsaw is a violent, shady character. Even before it's plugged in, it lies in wait "grinding its teeth," as if anger is its natural state. It "knock[s] back a quarter-pint of engine oil" like a cantankerous drunk at a bar. When the speaker turns it on, its nasty character becomes even clearer: with its "perfect disregard" for human flesh and its "bloody desire" to chew up whatever comes in its path, the chainsaw sounds practically psychopathic. It's a killing machine, and it seems to love its job. All these images of uncontrolled rage, violence, and binge drinking have led some readers to interpret the chainsaw as a symbol of stereotypical violent *male* dominance in particular.

By contrast, the pampas grass is a placid, gentle creature: it "sun[s] itself" like a cat (though it also selfishly takes the "warmth and light" that would otherwise go to "cuttings and bulbs" at its feet). It's showy and dramatic, setting out "footstools, cushions and tufts" to decorate its surroundings. However, it also has "twelve-foot spears," a reminder that it can defend itself in its own way. While those spears "swoon[]" when the speaker applies the chainsaw's blade to them, they also spring right back up in mere weeks, donning a "new crown" that shows the grass is the true ruler of this garden.

In personifying these nemeses, the speaker also sets up a contrast between two ways of being in the world: aggressive and active versus passive-but-persistent. The latter way, the poem suggests, tends to win out in the end.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "grinding its teeth in a plastic sleeve, the chainsaw swung / nose-down from a hook in the darkroom"
- **Lines 4-5:** "When offered the can / it knocked back a quarter-pint of engine oil"
- **Line 19:** "just an instant rage,"
- **Lines 21-26:** "The chainsaw with its perfect disregard, its mood / to tangle with cloth, or jewellery, or hair. / The chainsaw with its bloody desire, its sweet tooth / for the flesh of the face and the bones underneath, / its grand plan to kick back against nail or knot / and rear up into the brain."
- **Lines 28-29:** "and felt the hundred beats per second drumming in its heart, / and felt the drive-wheel gargle in its throat."
- **Lines 31-34:** "The pampas grass, taking the warmth and light / from cuttings and bulbs, sunning itself, / stealing the show with its footstools, cushions and tufts / and its twelve-foot spears."
- **Line 40:** "I dabbed at a stalk that swooned, docked a couple of heads,"
- **Lines 61-62:** "by June / it was riding high in its saddle, wearing a new crown."
- **Lines 65-68:** "Back below stairs on its hook, the chainsaw seethed. / I left it a year, to work back through its man-made dreams, / to try to forget. / The seamless urge to persist was as far as it got."

IMAGERY

Throughout this poem, imagery conjures up the summery heat, oily smells, and terrifying mechanical whirs of the speaker's jolly day of chainsawing.

The fun begins when the speaker offers the parched chainsaw a "quarter-pint of engine oil." He then watches as "juices [...] ooze[] across the guide-bar and the maker's name" and run down "into the dry links" of the sawblade. That oozing oil evokes the slow, dangerous process of the chainsaw waking up, refreshing itself after a long dry winter.

Everything around the chainsaw feels a little threatening, right

down to the "day-glo orange power line" the speaker uses to hook it up. That bright orange line, the color of warning signs and safety vests, suggests potential danger. And as soon as the speaker turns the chainsaw on, that danger roars into life: he hears the quick "rush of metal lashing out at air" and feels the powerful "drumming" and "gargl[ing]" of its motor.

Against such technological power, the pampas grass's defenses at first seem pretty paltry. All it can do is spit "plant-juice" at the speaker as he "rip[s] into pockets of dark, secret warmth" at its roots. All that "dark, secret warmth" makes the pampas grass feel cozy and domestic (and perhaps rather sexy) as compared to the chainsaw's noisy mechanical violence.

At last, the speaker manages to reduce the pampas grass to "a flat stump the size of a barrel lid," which he imagines he can make short work of with a little fire. In the end, however, the grass survives against all the odds.

The poem's imagery of violent machinery versus warm, passive roots makes it feel as if this battle is stacked against the grass—and thus prepares the ironic surprise at the end of the poem, when the grass matter-of-factly sprouts right back up.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-8:** "juices ran from its joints and threads, / oozed across the guide-bar and the maker's name, / into the dry links."
- **Lines 13-14:** "I trailed the day-glo orange power line / the length of the lawn and the garden path,"
- **Line 20:** "the rush of metal lashing out at air, connected to the mains."
- **Lines 27-29:** "I let it flare, lifted it into the sun / and felt the hundred beats per second drumming in its heart, / and felt the drive-wheel gargle in its throat."
- **Lines 44-45:** "plant-juice spat from the pipes and tubes / and dust flew out as I ripped into pockets of dark, secret warmth."
- **Line 50:** "a flat stump the size of a barrel lid"

SIMILE

The poem's similes help to paint a vivid picture of the speaker's battle with the pampas grass.

The first of these similes describes the "day-glo orange power line" the speaker uses to power the chainsaw forming a long trail "like powder from a keg"—in other words, like a line of gunpowder being poured out to form a makeshift fuse. Light one end of the gunpowder and the flame will travel along it toward the rest of the keg, with explosive consequences. The analogy is clear: the chainsaw itself is an explosion waiting to happen, an almost uncontrollable destructive force.

However, all that blasting power can't do the damage the speaker imagines. When he hacks at the pampas grass's roots with his chainsaw, he finds that:

> what was sliced or split somehow closed and mended behind,
> like cutting at water or air with a knife.

This simile suggests that the pampas grass's real power is in passive resistance. Like water, it's defenseless against slicing; like water, it also can't be permanently sliced! Its "new shoots like asparagus tips" will just spring up again in a gentle vegetable resurrection.

The speaker, seeing that the grass has grown right back, is left to gaze down on it "from the upstairs window like the midday moon." This simile makes him sound utterly powerless: like the moon at midday, he's pale, ineffectual, and out of place in a natural world that merrily does what it likes regardless of his attempts to master it.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 15:** "fed it out like powder from a keg"
- **Lines 55-56:** "what was sliced or split somehow closed and mended behind, / like cutting at water or air with a knife."
- **Lines 60-61:** "In the weeks that came new shoots like asparagus tips / sprang up from its nest"
- **Lines 63-64:** "I looked on / from the upstairs window like the midday moon."

JUXTAPOSITION

The sharp contrast between the chainsaw and the pampas grass lies at the heart of this poem. By juxtaposing overwhelming mechanical power with slow-but-steady natural power, the speaker suggests that humanity ultimately has little control over nature—and that hard, aggressive power might always lose to soft, persistent power in the long run.

At first, the chainsaw's raging energy seems unstoppable. As the speaker points out, the chainsaw has a "perfect disregard" for whatever it might be slicing: be it "the flesh of the face" or "cloth, or jewelry, or hair," it stands ready to chew through them all. Such a dreadful weapon seems like "overkill" for a project like turfing up some gentle, feathery grass; as the speaker puts it, it's like using a "sledgehammer" to crack a nut.

Sure enough, the pampas grass at first seems to "swoon[]" before this violent onslaught. But as it turns out, it's unstoppable in its own way. The speaker might be able to reduce it to "a flat stump the size of a barrel lid," then to set that stump on fire. However, he can't stop the grass's root systems from putting up "new shoots," tender and gentle as "asparagus tips" but also powerful in their own way. The grass's power is in simply refusing to be killed, healing and creating new life in the face of the chainsaw's singleminded destructive power.

The juxtaposition between saw and grass ends up creating a joke at the speaker's expense, making it clear that he (and all of

humanity) is only fooling itself when it believes it can use raw technological power to control the natural world. Nature, the poem suggests, just keeps on doing what it does, and no man can stop it.

For that matter, the grass's victory could be read as an allegory of passive resistance, an argument that gentle persistence might be a greater power than immediate violent force. Those oppressed by the more overtly powerful, this poem suggests, might win through by just doggedly getting up again.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-68

PARALLELISM

"Chainsaw Versus the Pampas Grass" uses parallelism—and especially anaphora—to build anticipation and create drama.

For instance, when the speaker begins to imagine all the damage his whirring chainsaw could do, he envisions the way it could "tangle with cloth, or jewellery, or hair." The anaphora there (which is also an example of polysyndeton, the use of extra conjunctions) pushes his imagination out into uglier and uglier places: the imagined chainsaw starts at a bit of a distance with "cloth," then gets closer to the body with "jewellery," then touches the body with "hair."

A similar moment of parallelism introduces the chainsaw:

> The chainsaw with its bloody desire, its sweet tooth
> for the flesh of the face and the bones underneath,
> its grand plan to kick back against nail or knot

The repeated "its" links the chainsaw's desire and greed for human flesh with its sinister "grand plan" to wreak havoc.

Meanwhile, the pampas grass gets its own little trumpet-blast of anaphora at its introduction:

> The pampas grass with its ludicrous feathers
> and plumes. The pampas grass, taking the warmth
> and light
> from cuttings and bulbs, sunning itself,

Here, the speaker seems to be sizing the grass up; it's as if it were his enemy in a Wild West gunfight and it just stepped in the saloon door. It makes an odd opponent, though: it's more interested in "sunning itself" like a cat than fighting back against the chainsaw.

The speaker thus attacks it without trouble. When he slices at it with the chainsaw, another chain of anaphora draws attention to his agency: "I touched" (line 38), "I dabbed" (line 40), "I lifted" (line 43). All those active verbs make it clear that *he's* the powerful one here—he and his mighty chainsaw, that is. Note, too, that what the speaker *himself* does here is rather tentative. The point is that all that mild "touch[ing]" and "dabb[ing]" is all that it takes to wreak destruction when you've got a chainsaw on your side.

The speaker doesn't triumph for long, though. Take a look at the parallelism that marks the grass's eventual victory:

> [...] by June
> it was riding high in its saddle, wearing a new crown.

Now the sentence structure draws attention to the grass's verbs. They're gentler verbs than the speaker's: the grass seems as if it's "riding" on horseback, carried along, and "wearing a new crown" isn't a terribly strenuous activity. But that's exactly the point. The grass's power is in its persistent quiet growth, not its active energy.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 15:** "then walked"
- **Line 16:** "then walked"
- **Line 22:** "cloth, or jewellery, or hair"
- **Line 23:** "its bloody desire, its sweet tooth"
- **Line 25:** "its grand plan"
- **Line 28:** "and felt"
- **Line 29:** "and felt"
- **Line 30:** "The pampas grass"
- **Line 31:** "The pampas grass"
- **Line 38:** "I touched"
- **Line 40:** "I dabbed"
- **Line 43:** "I lifted"
- **Line 54:** "choked with soil or fouled with weeds"
- **Line 55:** "sliced or split"
- **Line 56:** "water or air"
- **Line 62:** "riding high," "wearing"

VOCABULARY

Darkroom (Lines 2-3) - A room used for developing photographs, usually lit only with a dim red bulb.

Summerhouse (Lines 9-10) - A little garden shed used for storage or relaxation.

Mothballed (Lines 11-12) - To "mothball" something is to store it with strongly scented pellets that repel moths. Here, the speaker's use of the word suggests both that the wasps and flies are tidily stored away and that, wrapped in spiderweb, they look like mothballs themselves!

Powder from a keg (Line 15) - In other words, the trailing power cord makes the speaker think of a line of gunpowder being poured out in a trail from a barrel.

Coupled the saw to the flex (Lines 15-17) - Connected the

saw to the power cord.

The mains (Line 20) - That is, the main electrical power supply.

Pampas grass (Lines 30-32) - A tall ornamental grass that sprouts distinctive feathery plumes.

Nearmost (Line 39) - Closest.

Swooned (Line 40) - Fell as if fainting.

Docked (Line 40) - Lopped off, cut short.

Undergrowth (Line 43) - Low-growing, scrubby plants.

Prised (Line 51) - Pried up.

Seethed (Line 65) - Bubbled with anger.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Chainsaw Versus the Pampas Grass" is written in seven irregular stanzas of free verse. Rather than sticking to any standard stanza form or regular pattern of rhyme or meter, Armitage allows the poem to develop in a loose, organic way; the verse shapeshifts to mirror the speaker's emotional experience.

For instance, compare the two long, elaborate stanzas in which the speaker describes how he sawed the pampas grass into oblivion and the short, simple closing stanzas in which the grass grows back and the personified chainsaw "seethes" in rage at its defeat. This movement from intense descriptions of violence and destruction to the casual, matter-of-fact payoff works like a punchline, suggesting that it's pretty funny when people believe (foolishly) that they can take on nature and win.

METER

"Chainsaw Versus the Pampas Grass" is written in free verse, so it doesn't use a meter. Instead, the speaker uses varied, flexible line lengths to give the poem a conversational tone—and to create moments of drama.

For instance, listen to the way the lines move when the speaker describes lifting the buzzing chainsaw:

> I let it flare, lifted it into the sun
> and felt the hundred beats per second drumming in
> its heart,
> and felt the drive-wheel gargle in its throat.

That first shortish line isolates the moment the speaker gets to grips with this dangerous machine: it's as if he takes a moment just to watch it glint in the sunlight. The longer lines suggest the chainsaw's ceaseless, terrifying whir.

RHYME SCHEME

Written in free verse, "Chainsaw Versus the Pampas Grass" doesn't use a rhyme scheme. Instead, it plays with sound through evocative alliteration and assonance.

When the speaker first attacks the pampas grass with his chainsaw, for instance, the /bl/ alliteration in "the blur of the blade" suggests the sawblade's unbelievably quick, sputtering motion. By contrast, the gentle /uh/ assonance the speaker uses to describe how the pampas grass overshadows "cuttings and bulbs, sunning itself" feels soft, luxurious, and calm.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is a man from the suburban UK. He's rather enjoying the idea that he can master his garden with the help of a violently powerful chainsaw. Though he supposes it's "overkill" to haul out such a mighty machine to hack down a few stems of ornamental grass, it turns out the chainsaw isn't powerful *enough*: the grass comes right back the second the speaker's back is turned, leaving him to look on sourly from his "upstairs window," safe back inside his suburban home, where he belongs.

This poem's tongue-in-cheek description of a failed gardening adventure suggests that this speaker is someone who privately fancies the idea of himself as master of all he surveys—but who's also willing to see the funny side of his ignominious defeat.

SETTING

The poem is set in an ordinary suburban backyard. Moments of dialect (calling a garden shed a "summerhouse," for instance) suggest this yard is in Armitage's native UK.

In this setting, the pampas grass is both a normal decorative landscape feature and a little bit exotic: it's not a native plant, but an imported one. Still, it's made itself at home; placidly deep-rooted, it's much harder to kill than the speaker anticipates.

The poem's utterly normal suburban landscape also contrasts with the violent imagery around the chainsaw and its "bloody desire" to buzz right through whatever gets in its way. This juxtaposition between calm neighborhood and terrifying machine hints that the speaker might be just the tiniest bit bored, excited to get the chance to do something noisy and destructive.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Simon Armitage is one of the UK's most popular contemporary poets. He was born in Yorkshire in 1963 and began writing

poetry at a young age. His first collection, *Zoom!*, was published by Bloodaxe in 1989 and was an immediate success, widely acclaimed and shortlisted for the Whitbread Poetry Award. "Chainsaw Versus the Pampas Grass" first appeared in Armitage's ninth poetry collection, *The Universal Home Doctor* (2002).

Armitage's poems are known for their dark comedy, clarity, and playfulness. Their outward simplicity often conceals a complex emotional world and reflects the influence of other important 20th-century poets like Ted Hughes and W.H. Auden.

Armitage is the current serving Poet Laureate of England, having taken over from Carol Ann Duffy. This is a ceremonial role, the original responsibility being to compose poems on significant occasions. Nowadays, the Laureate tends to focus on furthering poetry's audience, particularly within an educational context—the kind of work that Armitage has been doing for many years.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This poem's tale of one man's violent efforts to dominate nature might be read as an allegory of the way that humanity and nature interact more generally. When Armitage published this poem in 2002, the troubled relationship between human beings and their environment was becoming a prominent and serious political issue. More and more scientists and politicians were raising the alarm about the dangers of climate change; for instance, Al Gore's important documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* (which explained the science of global warming and called for political action against it) would appear only a few years after Armitage's book.

Armitage has been open about his belief that poetry should address the climate crisis (among other major contemporary issues). This poem's tongue-in-cheek portrait of a man trying to bend even a part of nature so small as his own garden to his will might thus be read as a serious reminder of humanity's ultimate weakness. When people think they can shape or exploit the natural world for their own purposes, this poem suggests, they're only fooling themselves: nature wins out every time, with consequences that might range from humiliation to extinction for foolhardy humanity.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- An Interview with Armitage — Watch a brief interview with Armitage in which he discusses his poetic philosophy. (https://youtu.be/TvFcbedyQ0A)
- Armitage's Official Website — Visit Armitage's website to learn more about his recent work. (https://www.simonarmitage.com/)
- A Brief Biography — Learn more about Armitage's life and work via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/simon-armitage)
- Armitage as Laureate — Learn more about Armitage's position and duties as Poet Laureate of the UK. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/apr/17/poet-laureate-simon-armitage-elegy-for-prince-philip-the-patriarchs-an-elegy)
- What Is Pampas Grass? — Learn more about pampas grass, at once an invasive species and a modern home decor trend. (https://www.thespruce.com/how-to-grow-pampas-grass-5194991)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER SIMON ARMITAGE POEMS

- Mother, any distance
- Remains
- The Manhunt

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