Coal

SUMMARY

The speaker's existence or identity is the complete blackness of the earth's core (the speaker might also be saying that their identity comes from deep within the earth). There are many different ways to be "open," the speaker says (by which they might mean to break free or express oneself). For example, there's the way that a diamond emerges from a tangle of fire (or reflects light like a flame). There's also the way a sound can turn into a word, whose meaning is tinged by the fact that some people are punished for what they say.

Some words are like diamonds scratching at or cutting through windows, screeching and sparkling in the sunlight as it passes by. Other words are like bets bound together in a book filled with perforated pages (i.e., pages with small holes along the edge so they can easily be torn out), which can then be bought, autographed, and ripped up. Come what may, the sharp, rough edges will still be there, like the ragged gum left by a poorly extracted tooth. Some words are caught in the speaker's throat, where they multiply like venomous snakes. Then there are those words that have seen the sun (by which the speaker might mean they're free or hopeful); these words roam across the speaker's tongue like nomadic peoples until they burst from the speaker's lips like baby birds from eggshells. Other words torment the speaker.

And then there is love, the speaker says, which is also a word, and which is also a way of being open or breaking free, just like the diamond emerging from a tangle of fire. The speaker is black because they come from deep within the earth. They instruct the reader to take their words and hold them up to the light like precious gems.

THEMES

BLACKNESS, LANGUAGE, AND LIBERATION

"Coal" explores the oppression and liberation of Black people using a metaphor related to coal: a hard, black, organic substance mined from inside the earth. Coal is a form of carbon that has traditionally been used as fuel, but carbon can also turn to diamond when exposed to enough heat and pressure. Likewise, the poem suggests that the immense burden of racism on Black people—whose oppressors have historically defined them and treated them more as a resource than as human beings—has formed the resilient, precious "jewel" of Black language and identity.

By "Tak[ing]" possession of this "jewel," the poem further suggests, Black people open themselves up to possible repercussions—but also open the way to being seen and understood. That is, by taking control of their own narratives (through poetry, political speech, etc.), they liberate their buried experience and repressed identities, as if exposing something hard and beautiful to the "light." In this way, Black people themselves get the final "word" on who they are.

The speaker says that "I / Is the total black, being spoken / From the earth's inside." The syntax of this line suggests that the poem is referring not only to an *individual* identity or experience but also to the identity and experience of Black people more *generally*.

The speaker goes on to suggest both the danger and liberatory power of speaking out from this perspective. The speaker says, "There are many kinds of open." The word "open" suggests freedom—an "open" door, a way out, the freedom to express oneself, etc. One kind of openness, the speaker says, is "How a sound comes into a word, coloured / By who pays what for speaking." These lines imply that Black people have historically faced the threat of punishment—and often been made to "pay"—for "speaking" up. This threat has influenced (metaphorically, "coloured") Black language, forcing Black speakers to find creative ways of expressing themselves in repressive circumstances.

But the speaker also says that "Some words live in my throat / Breeding like adders" (or venomous snakes). On the one hand, this simile might imply that *not* speaking up can also be dangerous—swallowing all that venom will surely make one sick. On the other hand, it might suggest the power of letting one's anger and words "Breed[]" slowly—all that venom will be formidable once released. Either way, the speaker is arguing for the importance of giving language to one's experiences.

Furthermore, the speaker says that "Some words / Bedevil" (or torment) them. This might suggest that words not spoken take on a life of their own, haunting the person who fails to speak them. Or it might refer to language used *against* Black people, reinforcing their oppression. Still "Other" words, the speaker says, threaten to "explode through [their] lips / Like young sparrows bursting from shell." This imagery evokes the joyful, freeing power of language; the right words, the poem implies, can help liberate their speakers. But the verb "explodes" suggests that liberation can be violent or chaotic as well.

The poem ultimately compares the finest words, including "Love," to "diamond[s]," suggesting that language (particularly Black language and poetry) can astonish through its compressed beauty. Words are powerful, the poem implies. By speaking out, Black people can hold their experience up to the

"open light," where it will shine like a "jewel." Through language, in other words, Black people can expose the reality of their oppression and express their inner selves.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-7
- Lines 8-22

LOVE AND COMMUNICATION

"Coal" portrays language as a vehicle not only for liberation but also for love. It describes "Love" as both "a word" and "another kind of open," suggesting that love manifests itself in language—and has the same freeing power as language. In fact, "Coal" ultimately turns into a kind of love poem (one whose complexities may be informed by Lorde's experience as a lesbian in a homophobic society, a Black woman who had interracial romances in a racist society, and so on). It addresses an unnamed "you[]," who might be a particularly loved person, a loved community, or the reader in general. Through this direct outreach, the poem implies that one of the most important functions of "word[s]," and perhaps poetry in particular, is turning private or repressed experience into loving communication.

The poem stresses the close connection between language and "Love." The speaker says that "Love is a word," emphasizing that language is what allows love to make itself known. The speaker also says that "Love [...] is another kind of open," implying that love, like language, has the capacity to set people free. The speaker compares love's "open[ness]" to the process through which "diamond[s]" are made or illuminated—that is, "a diamond comes into" existence, or sparkles, "in a knot of flame." Likewise, "Love" comes into being, or flourishes, when it's communicated. "Diamond[s]" are also traditional symbols of romance, given as love gifts, so the simile hints at the way people use language to convey intimate feelings.

The speaker's struggles with language might therefore be *emotional* as well as political, making "Coal" a kind of love poem. The speaker says that while "Some words live in [their] throat / Breeding like adders"—a simile that conveys rage and frustration—"Others know sun" and eventually "explode through [the speaker's] lips / Like young sparrows bursting from shell." *This* simile is much more joyous, and hints at the liberatory feeling of revealing one's love for another person.

"Coal" ends with a direct address, as if to illustrate open and authentic communication. The speaker points out that "Love is a word" (thus broaching the subject of love directly), then adds in the final line, "Take my word for jewel in your open light." This image suggests that language exposes the speaker's feelings, holding them up to the "light" where they can be seen and admired. (Compare the phrase "bring [something] to light," meaning to make something known.) And since "jewel[s]" *reflect* "light," the speaker implies that *both* parties benefit—and are made visible—by the communication of love.

In all these ways, the poem implies that "word[s]" have the power to communicate what would otherwise "Bedevil" someone—such as secret feelings or repressed passion. By expressing love in words, one gives it the opportunity to thrive.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 4-26

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

I ...
... the earth's inside.

"Coal" begins with a strong declaration:

I
Is the total black, being spoken
From the earth's inside.

This single sentence is broken into three lines, with the first line containing only the word "I." By separating "I" from the rest of the sentence, the poet highlights it, asking them to consider the significance of this pronoun and the speaker's own individuality. However, the enjambment across lines 1-3 encourages the reader to read the sentence seamlessly through. In other words, the "I" is separated *visually*, but not when reading the poem aloud. These effects help signal that the poem deals with both individual and collective experience.

That the speaker equates this "I" with "the total black" of "the earth's inside" hints that the poem concerns Black identity, which it imagines as something deeply organic and natural. The voice of the poem, and the voice of "black[ness]" itself, is "spoken / From the earth's inside," suggesting both that it's part of nature and that it arises from the psychological or historical *underground*. That is, it conveys thoughts, emotions, etc. that have been buried or repressed (by society, the speaker's own psyche, or both). The poem's title, "Coal," also describes something that is "black" and buried underground. Combining the title with these opening lines, it becomes clear that the speaker is using "Coal"—a "black" substance mined from "inside" the earth—as a metaphor for Black identity.

The strange syntax of this opening clause grabs the reader's attention: "I / Is the total black." Again, this is a clue that the poem's speaker isn't necessarily a single individual, or if they are, they're speaking to a collective experience. If the speaker were referring to themselves personally as "the total black,"

they would more likely have said "I / *am* the total black." But "I / is" suggests that they're talking about the *word* "I," and the idea of Black identity itself. (Alternatively, one might interpret this syntax as AAVE, and synonymous with "I / am," in which case the speaker would still be referring to the way Black people express themselves—using and celebrating their own modes of speech rather than accepting "standard" English as the only correct mode.) Notice, too, that the line break in line 2 emphasizes the word "spoken," helping to introduce language/speech/self-expression as a core subject of the poem.

As a free verse poem, "Coal" doesn't follow a set meter or rhyme scheme. Instead, its lines progress organically, its rhythms mirroring the dynamic patterns of the poet's own thought and speech. In this way, the poem seems to stake out an independent identity through its very form.

LINES 4-7

There are many ...
... what for speaking.

In line 4, the speaker shifts gears a bit, saying: "There are many kinds of open." It isn't immediately clear what the speaker is referring to, or how this statement connects to the previous one. However, a combination of /oh/ assonance and /en/ consonance creates an imperfect rhyme between "spoken" and "open" in lines 2 and 4. This rhyme suggests that the speaker is making a connection between "sp[eaking] up" and "open[ness]." The word "open" itself connotes freedom: think "open" doors, minds, communication, etc.

The speaker then elaborates on this notion of "open[ness]," comparing it to the way "a diamond comes into a knot of flame." To understand the significance of this simile, one needs to keep in mind the poem's title: "Coal." Coal and diamond both come from carbon; carbon can become coal, or, if enough heat and pressure are applied, it can become diamond. Coal is mundane and used for fuel, but diamond is a precious, eye-catching gem. Putting all this together, the poem seems to imply that expressing oneself is one "kind[] of open"—that is, communicating one's experience can "open" the way to being seen and understood, just as a diamond invites attention and admiration.

But the speaker says another "kind[] of open" is the way "a sound comes into a word, coloured / By who pays what for speaking." Here, the speaker seems to acknowledge that when Black people *do* speak up, their words are metaphorically "coloured," or tinged, with a history of being punished for their efforts. Note, too, that the word "coloured" was long used by white people to refer disparagingly to Black people. This phrasing emphasizes that, while speaking out can open doors, it can also leave one open to criticism and repercussions. For Black people, speaking up makes one vulnerable to white people's anger and violence.

Notice the use of anaphora in lines 5-6:

How a diamond comes into a knot of flame
How a sound comes into a word, coloured [...]

This repetition draws attention to the two parallel similes, one of which seems to suggest the upside of speaking out while the other acknowledges the danger.

The enjambment after "coloured" highlights this historically charged and often painful word, reinforcing the speaker's point about the steep price Black people, especially, often "pay[]" for "speaking." It also draws attention to the light internal rhyme between "word" and "coloured," which further hints at the power of language—a tool that, depending on who's wielding it and how, can enable oppression or liberation.

LINES 8-10

Some words are ...
... of passing sun

In the second stanza, the speaker observes that "Some words are open." Notice the repetition of "word[]" and "open," which both appeared in the previous stanza. This repetition reinforces the poem's central concern: the way language can be used to liberate people.

Using a simile in line 9, the speaker compares these liberating words to "diamond on glass windows." The word "diamond" also appeared in the first stanza. Here, again, it illustrates the idea that language can transform internal thoughts and feelings into something visible and dazzling—perhaps something that will change the way the world sees and understands Black experience, or the way that Black people see and understand themselves. Vividly, the speaker describes this "diamond" as "Singing out within the crash of passing sun." By personifying the "diamond," the speaker may be suggesting that Black people themselves can become diamond-like (throwing off light/truth) through their use of language, and that the language itself might "Sing[]" out beautifully.

These lines are full of /ah/ assonance ("glass," "crash," "passing") and sibilance ("Some words," "glass windows, "Singing," "passing sun"). Their musicality aligns with the image of "Singing," perhaps drawing attention to the power of poetry, or lyrical language, in particular to illuminate Black identity and experience. The speaker also uses synesthesia to describe "the crash of passing sun," as if light—which often signifies truth—makes loud sounds that are impossible to ignore. This again suggests the power of language to capture people's attention.

Lines 8-10 are again enjambed, creating a smooth, flowing rhythm indicative of "open[ness]." As the poem evokes the liberating potential of language, it makes sense that the lines are gaining momentum, unhindered by end-stopping punctuation.

LINES 11-15

Then there are ...
... a ragged edge.

The speaker goes on to say that while "Some words are open," others are:

> [...] like stapled wagers
> In a perforated book—buy and sign and tear apart—
> And come whatever wills all chances
> The stub remains

This simile seems to suggest that some words, like bets entered into a book, leave a trail. No matter what happens, evidence of their former usage "remains." (For instance, the word "coloured," used earlier in the poem, means pigmented or tinted with color, but it also has a racist history in the United States, and has been considered an offensive term for Black people since the era in which Lorde was writing.) The speaker compares this evidence or residue to "An ill-pulled tooth with a ragged edge." This metaphor implies that the histories of some words can be quite ugly, and you can't ever really remove the root of that ugliness. The image of gamblers' "wagers" might also suggest the *risks* inherent in language—risks that sometimes pay off and sometimes leave only pain, as after a badly pulled tooth.

Notice the use of assonance ("stapled wagers"), consonance ("ragged edge"), and alliteration ("words" and "wagers," "book" and "buy," "whatever wills"). These sounds add dramatic intensity to the imagery, further underlining how loaded some words can be.

Notice that line 14 is shorter than those surrounding it, like the "stub" it describes. The varying line lengths, plus the caesura in line 12 and the end-stopping of lines 12 and 15, gives this passage a somewhat halting rhythm compared to the lines before. This rhythm may suggest that while "Some words are open" (line 8), others are less so. That is, words can be used to hinder or oppress as well as liberate.

LINES 16-22

Some words live ...
... Bedevil me.

Lines 16-17 contain a striking simile:

> Some words live in my throat
> Breeding like adders. [...]

This simile can be interpreted in a couple different ways. On the one hand, it suggests that words left unspoken can be poisonous; by *not* speaking up against oppression, for example, Black people risk becoming sick with their own repressed hurt and anger. On the other hand, the fact that these words are "Breeding" suggests that all these unspoken words are becoming more powerful as time goes by—by the time they come out, they will be dangerous.

In any case, the speaker says that "Other[]" words "know sun" and travel over their "tongue / To explode through [their] lips." (Note the use of the word "gypsies," a word which has long been used to describe the Romani people, who are famously nomadic. This word is considered an ethnic slur, but it's likely Lorde wasn't aware of the word's origins when she wrote this poem.) The word "explode" suggests the force behind this outburst of words. It might also suggest that words can produce personal or social *change* that seems sudden and violent—though considering how long these "words" have been waiting in their owners' "throats," they don't seem so sudden after all.

In any case, these "words" emerge "Like young sparrows bursting from shell." This exuberant simile clearly implies that communicating one's experiences is freeing. After all, once they leave the "shell," sparrows can fly anywhere. Likewise, people's path to liberation can start with language—with externalizing thoughts and feelings they'd previously repressed.

Finally, in the last two lines of the stanza, the speaker admits: "Some words / Bedevil me." The brevity of these lines, compared to most of those that came prior, adds force to this more personal statement. Whether these are words used to injure the speaker (e.g., racist slurs) or words the speaker themselves has been unable to utter, language can torment ("Bedevil") as easily as it can liberate. Either way, the speaker stresses once again that words have tremendous power.

LINES 23-26

Love is a ...
... your open light.

In this final stanza, the speaker asserts that "Love is a word another kind of open—." This unusual phrasing suggests that "Love" is *both* a "word" (with the capacity to "open" doors, minds, hearts, etc.) and its own powerful force manifested *through* words. (That is, love often makes itself felt when it's verbalized.)

The speaker then repeats the simile from line 5, comparing the way language manifests love to "a diamond com[ing] into a knot of flame." Again, the visual image here is of a sparkling diamond catching the light. Through this comparison, the poem suggests that language doesn't so much *create* love as illuminate what was there all along.

Line 25 also adapts language from the first stanza, as the speaker declares, "I am black because I come from the earth's inside." This statement echoes lines 1-3: "I / Is the total black, being spoken / From the earth's inside." But the phrasing at the end is more straightforward; the speaker isn't so much conveying a broad truth about Black identity as a simple,

personal truth. In general, the last stanza focuses on words as tools for direct personal communication and expressions of love.

In fact, the poem ends with the speaker directly addressing an unnamed other:

> Take my word for jewel in your open light.

Once more, the speaker repeats "word" and "open," implying that language is a means of reaching beyond oneself. The speaker imagines their language as a "jewel" to be held to the "light," which it will catch and reflect. This metaphor implies that "open" communication has the capacity to illuminate everyone involved. What the speaker has to say is as precious as a "jewel," and it's given as a "Love" gift, like a ring or other jewelry. So on top of all its social and political implications, "Coal" functions as a love poem—to the Black community as a whole, to a specific loved one, or maybe to both. (Given that Lorde was a lesbian in a homophobic society, this expression of love can also be seen as inherently political.)

Lines 23-26 are still free verse, but they hover on the verge of iambic pentameter (a five-beat da-DUM, da-DUM rhythm). The greater rhythmic regularity gives the closing stanza a kind of confident stride, as the speaker clinches their argument about the value of Black expression and loving communication. Still, the lines never quite settle into a traditional pattern; they retain their independence to the end.

SYMBOLS

DIAMONDS

The poem uses diamonds as a complex symbol, representing the power and beauty of Black language as well as love itself.

The coal in "Coal" is a metaphor for Black identity and experience. Chemically speaking, the same raw material (carbon) that forms coal can also be compressed into something beautiful and priceless: diamonds. The poem suggests that through language—including the compressed language of poetry—Black people can similarly transform the raw material of their lives into invaluable "jewel[s]" of self-expression. Even the deepest, most difficult emotions and experiences (including the experience of oppression) can be liberated, as if mined from the depths of the psyche. Diamonds reflect light brilliantly, as the poem repeatedly emphasizes, and light traditionally symbolizes truth. So in this context, diamonds seem to represent the act of speaking truth, or shedding light on one's own experiences.

Finally, diamonds are often given as romantic gifts (think of engagement rings, for example). In the poem, then, they may symbolize the way language can convey hidden or repressed feelings, bringing them out into the "open light."

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-3:** "I / Is the total black, being spoken / From the earth's inside."
- **Line 4:** "There are many kinds of open."
- **Line 5:** "How a diamond comes into a knot of flame"
- **Line 8:** "Some words are open"
- **Line 9:** "Like a diamond on glass windows"
- **Lines 23-24:** "Love is a word another kind of open— / As a diamond comes into a knot of flame"
- **Lines 25-26:** "I am black because I come from the earth's inside / Take my word for jewel in your open light."

POETIC DEVICES

REPETITION

The poem uses various kinds of repetition to emphasize key words and images, and to create rhythm and musicality.

Some of these repetitions fall in quick succession, as in the anaphora of lines 5-6:

> How a diamond comes into a knot of flame
> How a sound comes into a word, coloured

Besides making the lines more rhythmic, this repetition underscores the parallel the speaker is drawing between the way "diamond[s]" come into being and the way feelings emerge through "word[s]."

There's also anaphora in the second stanza, although the repeated phrase is spread out more: lines 8, 16, and 21 all begin with "Some words." This repetition reminds the reader that all the imagery in these lines ultimately describes language itself.

The poem repeats other words and phrases as well. For instance, "black" appears toward the beginning of the poem, in line 2, and toward the end, in line 25. The phrase "From the earth's inside" also occurs at the beginning and end of the poem, in lines 3 and 25. Additionally, the simile about "a diamond com[ing] into a knot of flame" appears in the first and last stanzas (lines 5 and 24). These repetitions bookend the poem, so that the ending mirrors the beginning and the poem, satisfyingly, comes full circle.

The words "open," "word"/"words," and "diamond" also recur in each stanza, underlining the poem's central idea: that words can transform private experience into something beautiful and visible, like heat and pressure turning raw material "from the earth's inside" into diamonds. This process represents a kind of "open[ing]"—a word that suggests both vulnerability and transformation.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “black”
- **Line 3:** “From the earth's inside.”
- **Line 4:** “open”
- **Line 5:** “How a diamond comes into a knot of flame”
- **Line 6:** “How a,” “word”
- **Line 8:** “Some words,” “open”
- **Line 9:** “diamond”
- **Line 11:** “words”
- **Line 16:** “Some words”
- **Line 21:** “Some words”
- **Line 23:** “word,” “open”
- **Line 24:** “a diamond comes into a knot of flame”
- **Line 25:** “black,” “from the earth's inside”
- **Line 26:** “word,” “open”

SIMILE

The poem uses many similes (as well as metaphor and more general imagery) to illustrate the liberating and communicative power of language.

In lines 4-7, for instance, the speaker compares being "open" to the process through which "diamond[s]" come into being, and also to the process of turning "sound[s]" into "word[s]." The speaker also says that language, for Black people, is metaphorically "coloured" by a history of oppressive punishment "for speaking." In lines 8-10, the speaker also compares the "open[ness]" of "words" to the way "a diamond on glass windows" seems to "Sing[]" when the sun "pass[es]" over it:

> Some words are open
> Like a diamond on glass windows
> Singing out within the crash of passing sun

This simile suggests that language can brilliantly illuminate identity and experience (including, perhaps, for people caught within the "crash" of violent forces).

The speaker says that other words are "like stapled wagers / In a perforated book." They elaborate on this simile with a metaphor, adding that no matter what happens, the "stub" of the "wager" will stick around, "An ill-pulled tooth with a ragged edge." This painful image might suggest that words leave a trail, standing as reminders of past events—including, for Black people, a traumatic history of oppression.

The speaker hints at the rage Black people feel towards racism, saying "Some words live in my throat / Breeding like adders" (or poisonous snakes). This may imply that Black people have been choking on their anger for a long time in order to survive. But other words, the speaker says, wander over their "tongue[s]" like nomads, until the "explode through [] lips / Like young sparrows bursting from shell." These similes suggest that Black people's identities and experiences can't be held back any longer; they will be given language, and when they are, that language will be powerful and freeing.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- Line 4
- Lines 5-7
- Lines 8-10
- Lines 11-12
- Lines 16-17
- Lines 17-20
- Lines 23-24

ENJAMBMENT

"Coal" uses a mix of enjambed and end-stopped lines, with enjambment adding momentum to certain passages of the poem.

The first stanza, for instance, begins with two enjambed lines:

> I
> Is the total black, being spoken
> From the earth's inside.

Thanks to the enjambment immediately afterward, "I" occupies its own line, drawing attention to the word, the speaker, and the key theme of identity. Enjambment also allows the line to flow freely into the next, where the speaker connects the individual Black self ("I") to collective Black identity ("the total black") and Black expression (what is "being spoken").

The second stanza also starts with two enjambments:

> Some words are open
> Like a diamond on glass windows
> Singing out within the crash of passing sun

The enjambment across these lines leaves them open rather than end-stopped, mirroring the "open[ness]" of language and "windows." Notice that there's no punctuation at the end of line 10, even though the syntax would seem to call for a period after "sun." Grammatically, the line is end-stopped, but visually, it looks enjambed. Again, the poet seems to create the appearance of "open[ness]" wherever possible.

Lines 16-20 contain a long string of enjambments:

> Some words live in my throat
> Breeding like adders. Others know sun
> Seeking like gypsies over my tongue
> To explode through my lips
> Like young sparrows bursting from shell.

This series of enjambments builds strong momentum as the

poem reaches the peak of its intensity. While the line breaks highlight images related to bold speech (including "throat," "tongue," and "lips"), enjambment propels readers along until they reach the forceful simile in line 20 ("Like young sparrows bursting from shell"). All this momentum makes the subsequent short lines ("Some words / Bedevil me") stand out sharply.

In the final stanza, lines 23 and 26 are both end-stopped. Under normal grammar rules, lines 24 and 25 would also end with punctuation, but once again, the poet chooses to leave them open-ended—in keeping with the stanza's celebration of "open[ness]."

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "I / Is"
- **Lines 2-3:** "spoken / From"
- **Lines 6-7:** "coloured / By"
- **Lines 8-9:** "open / Like"
- **Lines 9-10:** "windows / Singing"
- **Lines 11-12:** "wagers / In"
- **Lines 16-17:** "throat / Breeding"
- **Lines 17-18:** "sun / Seeking"
- **Lines 18-19:** "tongue / To"
- **Lines 19-20:** "lips / Like"
- **Lines 21-22:** "words / Bedevil"

ASSONANCE

Assonance (along with alliteration and consonance) adds musicality to the poem, while lending emphasis to key words and lines.

Look at the first stanza, for example. The /oh/ assonance in line 2 ("total," "spoken") emphasizes that the speaker is invoking—*speaking* to—the *total* identity of Blackness. The /b/ alliteration in the same line ("black, being") further underscores the poem's subject: the previously silenced experiences of Black people. There's also a light internal rhyme in line 6 ("word, coloured"), which reinforces the poem's concern with the way skin color—and the experience of Blackness in particular—"colour[s]" or influences language.

In lines 9-10, long and short /a/ assonance, long and short /i/ assonance, and /s/ and /z/ sibilance add intensity to a dazzling image:

> Like a diamond on glass windows
> Singing out within the crash of passing sun

These emphatic, repeated sounds seem to evoke the joyous "Singing" of "diamond on glass." In the following lines, the assonant phrase "stapled wagers" (line 11), as well as the imperfect internal rhyme between "wills" (line 13) and "ill-pulled" (line 15), keeps the music going to some degree. But these lines are less musical overall, in keeping with their more sobering imagery.

In lines 15-17, a string of hard, stuttering /d/ sounds helps suggest the difficulty of living with unspoken words in one's "throat":

> An ill-pulled tooth with a ragged edge.
> Some words live in my throat
> Breeding like adders. [...]

In lines 17, 18, and 20, the full or partial rhymes "sun," "tongue," and "young" intensify a passage about the liberating, "explo[sive]" power of language.

Finally, long /i/ assonance creates a near-perfect rhyme in the last two lines of the poem:

> I am black because I come from the earth's inside
> Take my word for jewel in your open light

This rhyme underlines the poem's closing contrast, or juxtaposition, between the darkness and silence of "the earth's inside" and the dazzle of experiences brought to "light." In other words, these final lines—with the help of assonance—reiterate the power of expressing what would otherwise remain unseen or unacknowledged.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "total," "spoken"
- **Line 6:** "word, coloured"
- **Line 9:** "glass," "windows"
- **Line 10:** "Singing," "within," "crash," "passing"
- **Line 11:** "stapled," "wagers"
- **Line 13:** "wills"
- **Line 15:** "ill"
- **Line 17:** "sun"
- **Line 18:** "tongue"
- **Line 20:** "young"
- **Line 25:** "inside"
- **Line 26:** "light"

VOCABULARY

Coloured (Lines 6-7) - Tinted or pigmented. This word was also used throughout much of American history to refer to people of Black or otherwise non-white descent.

Wagers (Line 11) - Bets.

Perforated (Line 12) - Having a row of small holes along the side so that it can be easily torn (as a page from a book).

Come whatever wills all chances (Line 13) - The speaker is inviting whatever it is that determines the way things happen.

Stub (Line 14) - The part of a ticket or receipt that is leftover

once the main part has been torn away.

Ill-pulled (Line 15) - Removed incorrectly or badly.

Adders (Line 17) - Poisonous snakes.

Gypsies (Line 18) - A term Europeans have used for the Romani people, who are traditionally itinerant or nomadic, and which is commonly used to describe people who live a bohemian lifestyle or who are nomadic. Note that this word is considered an ethnic slur by the Romani people. Considering Lorde's intersectional politics, it's unlikely she was aware of the word's derogatory history when she wrote the poem.

Bedevil (Lines 21-22) - Torment.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem's 26 lines of free verse are split into three stanzas of varying lengths. Rather than using a traditional form (like a sonnet, for example), the poem follows the organic rhythms of the poet's thought. This freedom of form is fitting for a poem that portrays language as liberating, and encourages Black people to express their independent identities and experiences.

The poem's stanzas don't progress chronologically, but rather seem to revolve around different aspects of Black experience and language. The first stanza most directly addresses Black identity; the second stanza details the power, risks, and possibilities of language; the third stanza focuses more specifically on language as a vehicle for love and intimate communication.

METER

"Coal" is written in free verse, so it doesn't follow a set meter. This *lack* of meter underscores the poem's focus on freedom, suggesting that it isn't just *any* language that liberates but specifically language that is authentic and grounded in Black people's own experiences.

Of course, by the time Lorde wrote this poem, metered poetry had long fallen out of favor. Free verse makes the poem more dynamic, allowing for the movement between incredibly short lines (such as the opening line, which consists not simply of a single word, but of a single *syllable*) and longer ones. This, in turn, creates a rhythm that is more conversational and even intimate.

RHYME SCHEME

As a free verse poem, "Coal" doesn't use a rhyme scheme. The absence of rhyme and meter helps the poem signal its departure from, or rejection of, the traditions of English-language poetry—and the European/Western cultural tradition more generally. This is a poem that aims to stake out its own independent identity, both personal and cultural. (Lorde almost always used free verse throughout her career.)

While the poem doesn't use a rhyme scheme, it does use the occasional slant or imperfect rhyme. For instance, the last two lines of the poem contain the imperfect rhyme "inside"/"light". This pairing drives home the poem's contrast between the unspoken and the spoken (i.e., feelings and experiences that remain bottled up "inside" vs. those that have been brought to "light").

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Coal" is a proud Black voice ("I am black," line 25) in a racist society. That voice can be interpreted as singular, collective, or both.

Some moments, such as the first three lines of the poem, suggest a collective voice: "I / Is the total black, being spoken / From the earth's inside." These lines seem to frame the poem as a broader celebration of, or act of witness on behalf of, Black people, who have historically had to "pay" for speaking up. Other moments feel more personal, such as in lines 21-22: "Some words / Bedevil me." The speaker might be referring to hurtful words (e.g., racist slurs) used against them, or to words they themselves have been unable to speak—anything from their truth in the face of oppression to an expression of love or desire.

The reader isn't given much other information about the speaker. However, the poem is enriched by considering Lorde's own identity as a Black lesbian activist who fought for racial, gender, and LGBTQ+ equality. The speaker—like the poet in her personal essays and other writings—honors the liberating potential of language. Through metaphor, the speaker conveys the importance of speaking up (bringing one's truth into "open light") when one is part of a marginalized group (or several at once, as Lorde was).

SETTING

The poem doesn't have a specific setting, though it's very much informed by America's (and the Western world's) legacy of racism. Instead, the abundant, somewhat disjointed imagery illustrates a fraught *emotional* landscape, suggesting the toll that silence and repression often take on Black people.

In other words, all of the poem's imagery is metaphorical in nature; there are no literal "diamond[s]," "adders," "sparrows," or "knot[s] of flame" here. Instead, these similes and metaphors reflect the speaker's psychological and emotional state. The speaker suggests, for example, that repressing one's true needs, beliefs, emotions, etc. feels like having venomous snakes multiply in one's "throat." Conversely, speaking one's truth feels like "young sparrows bursting from shell" and "exploding" into flight.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Audre Lorde (1934-1992) published "Coal" in her groundbreaking 1976 collection of the same title. Like much of her work, "Coal" speaks to issues of personal and political identity—in this case, racial identity, though she also wrote extensively about being a woman, queer, fat, and a mother. And like most of her work, this poem falls into the category of protest poetry: poetry that aims to provoke social and political change.

Lorde was an important member of the Black Arts Movement, an artistic and cultural movement that arose in the 1960s and '70s. Like the Harlem Renaissance poets of the 1920s and '30s, the poets of the Black Arts Movement sought to move away from European literary conventions and toward new forms based on Black history and culture. Poets such as Lorde, Nikki Giovanni, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Amiri Baraka introduced blues and jazz rhythms into their work and focused on writing for ordinary Black audiences rather than white literati.

Lorde was also a noted essayist, and her poems and essays often share themes in common. For example, "Coal" examines the necessity and difficulty of "open" communication, the way words can alternately frustrate us ("Bedevil") and liberate our deepest emotions ("Sing[] out"). Lorde's essay "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," from *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (1984), wrestles with the same subject in prose:

> What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence?

Lorde's work continues to have an enormous impact on feminist activism, inspiring countless women (especially queer Black women) to find their voices despite the obstacles they face.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Lorde was born in Harlem, New York, in 1934, during the Great Depression, and came of age in the 1950s, during the American civil rights movement. During this period, large numbers of Black Americans protested and organized against racial discrimination, particularly with respect to voting. (Though Black men had technically had the right to vote since after the Civil War and women since 1920, states used various forms of voter suppression—anything from poll taxes to literacy tests—to prevent Black people from exercising that right.) Lorde was involved in this movement as an activist, and her literary career began to take off in the late 1960s, at which time she also came out as a lesbian.

Lorde found herself unsupported in the feminist spaces of her day, where white feminist academics often refused to address the additional ways in which mainstream society marginalized Black and queer women. In these spaces, Lorde was often treated as an overly critical and angry radical; she often found that her own "words" were not welcome and that there was a price to pay "for speaking" (see lines 6-7 of "Coal"). However, through her work, Lorde empowered many Black women (particularly queer Black women) to embrace activism on behalf of themselves and their communities.

In 1974, Lorde described herself in a magazine as "Black, Woman, Poet, Mother, Teacher, Friend, Lover, Fighter, Sister, Worker, Student, Dreamer, Artisan, Digger of the Earth. Secret: also Impatient, Beautiful, Uppity, and Fat." These various identities shaped her influential theory of intersectionality: the idea that people's intersecting identities (including their race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and so on) impact their lives in overlapping and complicated ways. Though Lorde did not coin the term "intersectionality," she was among the first to explore the idea in depth, through both poetry and prose. She asserted that, for instance, a white woman is bound to have different experiences of oppression from a Black woman, just as a straight, cis, wealthy, thin, or able-bodied woman will have a different experience of oppression than a woman who is queer, trans, poor, fat, or disabled. In general, intersectional feminism stresses that the most marginalized people experience multiple forms of oppression at once—and that acknowledging and claiming these experiences can turn them into sources of power. As Lorde wrote in "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference" (1984):

> My fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly, allowing power from particular sources of my living to flow back and forth freely through all my different selves, without the restrictions of externally imposed definition.

Notice how that word "openly" echoes the "open" communication celebrated in "Coal."

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Listen to the Poem Out Loud — A recording of the poem for Brown Girl Reading. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TSttnhHzDjg)
- The Poet's Life and Work — A biography of Audre Lorde at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/audre-lorde)

- Lorde's Legacy of Radical and Intersectional Feminism — A Paris Review essay examining Lorde's influential ideas on race, gender, sexuality, and more. (https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2020/09/17/the-legacy-of-audre-lorde/)
- The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism — A transcription of Lorde's keynote presentation for the National Women's Studies Association Conference in Storrs, Connecticut in 1981. (https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/speeches-african-american-history/1981-audre-lorde-uses-anger-women-responding-racism/)
- A Conversation Between Audre Lorde and James Baldwin — Fellow writers and activists Lorde and Baldwin discuss power disparities between Black and white people and Black men and women. (http://theculture.forharriet.com/2014/03/revolutionary-hope-conversation-between.html)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER AUDRE LORDE POEMS

- A Litany for Survival
- A Woman Speaks
- Power

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