For Heidi With Blue Hair

SUMMARY

You dyed your hair blue—actually, you dyed the short hair on the sides of your head bright blue; you dyed the spikes of your mohawk black. Then you got sent home from school.

This was because, as the principal said, even though there wasn't an explicit rule against dying your hair, yours was not in the school colors.

You cried in the kitchen and your father—who cared deeply about personal freedom—called in to protest how you were treated. "She's not a punk, it's just a style," he complained. You wiped the tears from your eyes, which also weren't in the school colors.

"We talked about it before she got her hair dyed and we checked the school's rules," your dad said. And you said, "Besides, Dad, it cost twenty-five dollars to have it done. Tell the school that the dye won't wash out of my hair—whether I wanted to wash it out or not."

It would've been wrong to bring up the fact that your mom had recently died, but her death was on everyone's mind during this conversation anyway. The school officials didn't have anything else to penalize you for, so the teachers grumbled a bit but ultimately said you could come back.

The next day, your black friend dyed her hair too. She dyed hers gray, white, and yellow—which were in fact the school's colors. It was an act of friendship and support, a cunning joke at the school's expense. You'd already won the fight.

THEMES

REBELLION AND CONTROL

"For Heidi with Blue Hair" opens with a seemingly rebellious act: a schoolgirl named Heidi has gotten a spiky black and blue mohawk. Her school responds to this act swiftly and uncharitably. The principal sends her home, even though the hairstyle isn't against the school's rules, based on a trumped-up technicality. The decision seems arbitrary to Heidi and the people around her. The poem argues that Heidi isn't being intentionally provocative or disobedient—rather, she's grieving the death of her mother. The school's punishment—and, more broadly, the way it wields its authority—thus seems cruel and capricious. The poem suggests that the school is primarily focused on power and control—and that such control requires stigmatizing and punishing any sign of difference.

When Heidi shows up with a black and blue mohawk, the "headmistress" finds an excuse to send her home. Even though there's no rule against having a mohawk, the colors she chose for hers don't match the "school colours." Judging by the speed and severity of the response, it seems clear that the headmistress regards Heidi's mohawk as a challenge to the headmistress's authority.

But it quickly becomes clear that Heidi's motivations are more complicated. Her "freedom-loving" father dismisses the idea that Heidi intended any disrespect. Her haircut is not a matter of "behaviour": "it's just a style." And before she got the haircut, she and her father carefully "checked the rules" to make sure they weren't going to cause any trouble with the school.

Behind these arguments lies another motivation—albeit an unspoken one. The speaker notes that "It would've been unfair to mention / your mother's death, but that / shimmered behind the arguments." In other words, Heidi's mother has recently died. Although no one explicitly acknowledges the death, the implication seems clear: Heidi gets her mohawk as a way of grieving for her mother.

The school's punishment is thus more than an overreaction. It is, in its own way, cruel. The school fails to recognize the hurt and sorrow that lies behind Heidi's mohawk. To the speaker of the poem, this seems like a betrayal of the school's mission: after all, a school is supposed to nurture and support young people, to help them prepare for their adult lives. But instead of helping Heidi through this difficult time, it punishes her for acting out. The school's focus is not on Heidi's well-being; instead, it seems primarily interested in suppressing any form of rebellion or disobedience. The headmistress wants to maintain her power, her control over her students—even at the price of stigmatizing difference.

Both Heidi's father and her "black friend" protest the school's decision. Both defend her right to grieve her mother however she wants. But the poem suggests that Heidi's friend has figured out something important about the school and its harsh, inflexible authority that the others haven't. By showing up with her own hair dyed in the school's colors, Heidi's friend effectively challenges that authority. In this way, the poem suggests that the best way to protest rigid authority is to satirize it, to poke fun at it, to reveal its arbitrariness. Simply doing so is a victory: as the speaker argues in the poem's closing line, "The battle was already won."

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-30

GRIEF AND SOLIDARITY

Beyond being a critique of rigid authority, "For Heidi with Blue Hair" also subtly explores the nature of grief and the power of solidarity. The poem implies that Heidi has dyed her hair not to be particularly rebellious, but because her mother has recently died. She is grieving, her world has been upended; perhaps her dying of her hair is an attempt to distract herself or to regain a sense of control over her life. Regardless of the exact psychology behind the hair dying, it is undoubtedly an expression of grief—something the poem insists must be treated with patience and understanding. The poem valorizes people like Heidi's father and her "black friend," who rally around Heidi and in doing so illustrate a meaningful way to support those who are grieving.

Heidi's father and friend respond to the school's punishment in different ways, but both express a sense of solidarity. Heidi's father—whom the speaker describes as "freedom-loving"—objects to the arbitrary character of her punishment, stressing the fact that Heidi has not actually violated any of the school's rules. His support for his daughter suggests that he understands, though this is not directly stated in the poem, that Heidi is in pain following her mother's death and has expressed that pain in a unique way. His challenge to the school is at once a challenge of the school's desire for control and a way to support his child's grieving process.

Heidi's "black friend" takes a more dramatic and direct approach: she shows up at school the next day with her hair dyed too. But she's dyed her hair "grey, white and flaxen yellow"—the school's colors. The speaker describes this as an "act of solidarity" and a "witty / tease." Heidi's friend is calling attention to the arbitrary, capricious way the school enforces its rules, but, even more potently, she's demonstrating her support for Heidi, letting her know she's not alone in her grief.

By calling attention to the friend's race, the speaker also implies that this isn't an isolated incident; that the school has targeted Heidi's friend in the same arbitrary and cruel manner as it is now targeting Heidi. Indeed, both Heidi and her black friend have been "othered" by the school—punished for being different. The "black friend" is punished, the speaker implies, for being black, while Heidi is punished for grieving her mother. Those who are singled out for being different may find comfort in one another, the poem thus also suggests.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-30

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

When you dyed ...
... home from school

The poem begins with a—seemingly—rebellious act. A girl named Heidi shows up at school with a mohawk. The sides of her head are shaved and dyed blue. The hair on the "crest" of her head is gelled up into sharp, black spikes. The word "crest" is a metaphor: it compares Heidi's hair to a mountain range, with its spiny peaks, or to the tuft of feathers or hair that some animals have on their heads.

As the speaker describes her spiky haircut, the poem's language itself becomes sharp, with hard alliterative /c/ sounds in "clipped" and "crest." (Those sharp sounds are balanced out by a series of softer /s/ sounds, as in "sides," which gives these lines their own peaks and valleys: like Heidi's haircut, the lines rise and fall, with sharp peaks and soft valleys.)

The mohawk is a symbol of punk culture. Punk music is fast, aggressive, and rebellious; punk culture is similarly anti-authoritarian, even subversive. It thrived as a subculture during the 1980s in England, where the poem is likely set. And it terrified parents and authority figures—like the teachers at Heidi's school. They evidently see Heidi's mohawk as a rebellious gesture, a protest against their authority. And so they send her "home from school." In other words, they kick her out simply for having a new hairstyle. This decision seems a bit arbitrary—and no justification is given for it in the poem's first five lines.

As a result, the speaker seems a little bit impatient. The speaker is eager to figure out why the school felt like this punishment was necessary. All of the poem's first five lines are enjambed—even line 5, which closes the stanza. As a result, the lines spill urgently down the page. It feels like the speaker is rushing through these opening lines, trying to get to the point. And these enjambments thus build up a sense of anticipation in the reader: the reader also feels rushed, feels like they want to figure out why the school kicked Heidi out.

The poem is written in free verse: it does not have a set meter or rhyme scheme. (However, there is a slant rhyme based on the assonance between "blue" in line 1 and "school" in line 5.) The poem's free verse is not particularly radical or challenging. Its lines are all more or less the same length; they tend to have about six syllables apiece.

This fits with the speaker's general self-presentation. The speaker uses simple, straightforward language without a lot of poetic flourishes—and the speaker also employs a simple, straightforward form. This makes the speaker feel like an ordinary person. As the speaker narrates the poem's events, it seems like the speaker is just another person living in Heidi's community, observing the circumstances of her life.

LINES 6-10

because, as the ...
... the school colours.

In the first stanza, the speaker explained that Heidi had been sent home from school for getting a mohawk. In the second stanza, the speaker presents the school's justification for its punishment, indirectly quoting the "headmistress," or principal, of the school. (Note that the poem uses a caesura in the first line of stanza 2 to attribute this justification to the "headmistress" herself.)

But her justification is obviously silly. It seems trumped-up, arbitrary, capricious—even cruel. Indeed, she admits that there's no rule against "dyed hair": it's not "specifically forbidden." But she sends Heidi home because her mohawk isn't "done in the school colours." In other words, her dyed hair doesn't match the colors the school uses for its uniforms and athletic jerseys.

It takes the whole stanza for the headmistress to get this justification out: only in line 10, the last line of the stanza, does she finally supply her reason. And her reason is almost laughable. Indeed, it feels like a let down when the reader finally gets to it in line 10. The sentence just keeps tumbling down the page, impatient to get to the headmistress's justification for her punishment. The anticipation builds and builds. After all that anticipation, line 10 is deflating, almost comical. It's hard to believe the "headmistress" can offer this justification with a straight face.

And it's clear what the real reason is: the "headmistress" thinks that Heidi's mohawk is a rebellious gesture, intended to challenge her authority—and so she responds forcefully to maintain her power and control within the school. In other words, she prioritizes her own power and authority over Heidi's well-being.

Like lines 1-5, this stanza is written in free verse—without meter or a rhyme scheme. This makes these lines seem straightforward, ordinary: the language is not particularly elegant or poetic. It reflects the way the headmistress talks, her business-like tone of voice.

LINES 11-15

Tears in the ...
... a school colour.)

Lines 11-15, the third stanza, mark an important shift in the poem. The speaker spent the first 10 lines explaining what happened to Heidi—how (and why) she was kicked out of school for getting a mohawk. The rest of the poem is dedicated to the response that Heidi and the people around her mount to this arbitrary and cruel punishment.

As the poem's third stanza opens, Heidi and her father are in the kitchen; she's in "tears" and he's making "telephone calls / to school" to protest the decision. The scene feels intense, dramatic, chaotic. In line 11, the first line of the stanza, the speaker uses short paratactic phrases separated by a caesura. As a result, it feels like everything is happening at once: Heidi's crying, her father's yelling on the phone.

For Heidi's father, this almost seems like a matter of principle. He's "freedom-loving"—he objects to the oppressive way the "headmistress" wields her power. But he also objects to the assumptions she makes about Heidi's mohawk. The "headmistress" assumes that Heidi's mohawk is a rebellious, subversive gesture. But her father insists it's "just a style." While her fashion may be rebellious, her intentions aren't: "She's not a punk in her behavior." In other words, her mohawk isn't really rebellious; it doesn't actually constitute a challenge to the school's power and authority.

That objection makes the "headmistress" look silly. Not only has she used a trumped-up technicality to kick Heidi out of school—she also misjudged Heidi's intentions. There was no need for the punishment, no need to protect her authority. And the father's argument also comforts Heidi. As the stanza closes, she wipes the tears from her eyes. (And, the speaker wryly notes, her eyes are also not in the school's colors.)

These lines are also in free verse, with no regular meter or rhyme scheme. But something important has changed. The first two stanzas of the poem are almost entirely enjambed. Here, however, almost all the lines are end-stopped. Only line 11 is enjambed ("Tears in the kitchen, telephone calls / to school ..."). These end-stops convey the conviction and passion that Heidi and her father feel in confronting the school's unjust punishment. The lines feel as definite and determined as Heidi and her father do. This shift in the poem's form continues through the rest of the poem. The anxiety and uncertainty of the opening stanzas has been replaced by a strong sense of righteous anger and conviction.

LINES 16-20

"She discussed it ...
... wanted to try.

In lines 16-20, Heidi and her father continue to protest the school's decision to send Heidi home simply for having a mohawk. In lines 16-17, Heidi's father points out the arbitrary character of the punishment. It's not even against the school's rules to have dyed hair—Heidi and her father checked ahead of time. Without explicitly saying so, this comment underscores the lack of rebellious intent on the part of Heidi and her father. They are so far from being rebels that they checked the school's rules first! However, the assonance between "school" in line 15 and "rules" in line 17 suggests a rather bleak view of the school itself: it seems a place of oppressive rules, not a fun, nurturing space.

Heidi, meanwhile, focuses on the money involved. This was an expensive haircut—"it cost twenty-five dollars," a significant cost for a schoolgirl. The price she paid, the sacrifices she must have made to afford her haircut, harden her resolve. She refuses to budge, and she wants the school to know that: "Tell them it won't wash out," she instructs her father, "not even if wanted to

try."

The scene continues to feel a bit chaotic. Note, for instance, the way Heidi and her father seem to be almost talking over each other. No sooner has her father ended his speech in line 17 than Heidi jumps in with a whole new point—with only an awkwardly placed, disorienting caesura to separate them:

> we checked the rules." "And anyway, Dad,

But despite the hectic, impassioned atmosphere of the poem, Heidi's conviction comes through. Lines 19 and 20, for instance, are both strongly end-stopped. They feel definite, determined. Heidi isn't second guessing herself. She's not going to debate or make concessions:

> it cost twenty-five dollars.
> Tell them it won't wash out –

These lines are again written in free-verse; they don't have a set meter or rhyme scheme. In this stanza, the speaker cedes the floor entirely to Heidi and her father. The whole stanza is made up of quotations from them. The speaker doesn't say anything at all. Heidi and her father use straightforward, simple, conversational language. There aren't a lot of big poetic flourishes: instead, they are focused on making their arguments and objections to the school's decision as forcefully and directly as possible.

LINES 21-25

> *It would have ...*
> *... and gave in.*

In lines 21-25, the speaker steps in and reveals something that reshapes how the reader understands Heidi's decision to get a mohawk and the school's punishment: Heidi's mother has recently died. Heidi is mourning her mother, and her mohawk is not an act of rebellion; it's a way of grieving a shocking and traumatizing loss.

Everyone knows about this, but no one mentions it—not Heidi's father nor the "headmistress." It doesn't seem appropriate to discuss it, at least not in front of her. And even the speaker seems to feel a little uncomfortable talking about it—the sharp enjambment at the end of line 22 feels like an awkward pause, the speaker struggling to find the right words:

> your mother's death, but that
> shimmered behind the arguments.

Although no one talks about it, Heidi's mother's death "shimmer[s] behind the arguments." A shimmer is a flickering, glittering light—something that pulses on and off. The metaphor thus suggests that the "headmistress" and Heidi's father keep forgetting and then remembering the tragedy. But a "shimmer" is usually something beautiful and soothing. Here it refers to something painful. The metaphor thus seems a bit off—evidence that the speaker is struggling, and failing, to find the right way to talk about the tragedy. At the same time, the hard consonant /m/ sounds that run through lines 21-23, appearing in "mention," "mother," "shimmered" and "arguments" suggest the difficulty and pain that Heidi experiences.

In the face of this tragedy, the school's punishment seems more than unfair. It seems actively cruel. The school is so focused on maintaining its power and authority that it fails to give Heidi the support and nurturing she needs during this difficult time. Indeed, it punishes her for grieving for her mother's death. It seems even the "headmistress" recognizes that she has over-played her hand. Without actually admitting wrongdoing, she allows Heidi to come back to school, though she does so only reluctantly. The speaker describes how the teachers "twitter" about the decision. In other words, they gossip and complain; and, in doing so, they end up sounding like birds chirping. And the speaker uses parataxis in lines 24-25:

> The school had nothing else against you;
> the teachers twittered and gave in.

The lines thus feel indifferent, even rude: parataxis communicates the disdain the teachers and the "headmistress" feel, their lack of concern for the harm their actions caused.

These lines are written in free verse—they have no set meter or rhyme scheme. Like the rest of the poem they are relatively conversational, straight-forward. The speaker continues to feel like a real person, a person who uses ordinary, everyday language. However, the metaphor in line 23 is by far the loudest and most ostentatious metaphor in the poem—a rare moment where the speaker is willing to use a distinctly poetic gesture. The grief that Heidi feels requires such a gesture: it escapes the capacities of ordinary language to express.

LINES 26-30

> *Next day your ...*
> *... was already won.*

"For Heidi with Blue Hair" opens with an act that *seems* rebellious—Heidi shows up at school with dyed hair and a mohawk. It closes with another seemingly act, and this one actually *is* subversive: it's intended to satirize the school's heavy-handed response to Heidi's mohawk. The day after Heidi's kicked out of school, her "black friend" shows up with a mohawk of her own. But hers isn't black and blue. Instead, it's "grey, white and flaxen yellow." These are "the school colours precisely." In other words, Heidi's "black friend" is testing the school's rules—and making fun of the "headmistress" and her lame excuse for kicking Heidi out of school.

The speaker goes out of the way to mention the race of Heidi's friend. The speaker thus implies that Heidi's friend sympathizes

with her plight because of her race: she too has been targeted, punished by the school simply for being different. (Indeed, the speaker thus suggests that the school is in the habit of targeting students who appear different, enforcing conformity.) Because of her experience being targeted by the school, Heidi's "black friend" is capable of empathizing with Heidi—she understands her anger, her sense of frustration and victimization. Her mohawk is thus a gesture of "solidarity"—a way of showing support—as well as a "witty / tease."

Though the speaker functions as a narrator—not a character in the poem—it should be clear by now that the speaker is not unbiased. Indeed, the speaker seems to take Heidi's side, regarding the school's punishment as both unfair and cruel. The poem ends with the speaker explicitly endorsing the strategy that Heidi's "black friend" uses to push back against the school's authority. In the poem's final line, the speaker pronounces a verdict: "The battle was won." The way to beat the school, the speaker suggests, is to make fun of it and its rigid authority. While Heidi's father succeeds in getting her sent back to school, he doesn't fundamentally undermine or challenge the school's authority. But Heidi's "black friend" does. She makes clear that the school is small-minded and heavy-handed.

Like the rest of the poem, these lines are written in free verse. They have no set meter or rhyme scheme, though "done" in line 26 and "won" in line 30 form a perfect rhyme—emphasizing the finality and closure of the poem's last line. Throughout, the speaker has been straightforward and conversational. That makes the speaker seem like a normal person—someone in Heidi's orbit who shares her anger and frustration. As the speaker celebrates Heidi's friend and her act of subversion, however, the language pitches up a bit, becomes more literary, rich in sonic play. In lines 26-27, the speaker uses an assonant /a/ sound:

> Next day your black friend had hers done
> in grey, white and flaxen yellow—

The assonance binds together Heidi's "black friend" and her "flaxen"—golden—dyed hair, suggesting that this defiant and satiric act is closely linked to the "black friend['s]" personality, an expression of who she is. And "flaxen" is a traditional, cliché way of describing blonde hair, strongly associated with white femininity. The assonance thus emphasizes the way the school stigmatized Heidi's friend for her race. And the poem's final two lines contain a strong consonant /t/ sound:

> ... an act of solidarity, a witty
> tease. The battle was already won.

The /t/ sound makes these lines combative—full of anger and power. The /t/ sound emphasizes that Heidi's friend isn't simply being funny or satirical. She is actively combating the school and its unjust authority. The poem thus ends with a flurry of fury and literary power, the speaker joining Heidi's friend in a powerful expression of anger and rebellion.

SYMBOLS

HEIDI'S HAIR

Heidi's hair is mentioned in the title of the poem, so it's not surprising that it has symbolic importance. Hair has long been treated as source of both beauty and power in literature; just look at the biblical story of Samson, who lost his strength after his lover chopped off his hair. Hair in this poem specifically serves as a symbol of personal freedom, self expression, and identity.

When Heidi dyes her hair blue, it's not meant as an act of disobedience. Instead, it's implied that this a way for her to express her grief over the death of her mother; perhaps it's a way to regain a sense of control in a world that has been turned upside down by her mother's loss. Heidi's hair thus also becomes representative of her grief, which adds poignancy to the lines "it won't wash out – / not even if I wanted to try." Heidi can't simply wash away the dye any more than she can wash away the pain over her mother's death, which has shaped her life indelibly.

The style Heidi chooses for her hair is also important. "Spikes" are a symbol of punk rock culture. Punk is a musical and cultural movement that developed in New York and London during the 1970s and 1980s. Punk music is fast and aggressive; punk culture is often subversive and anti-authoritarian—a culture of disobedience and rebellion. Punks developed a distinctive sense of style; many punks had mohawks. A person with a mohawk shaves down the sides of their head and puts gel in the hair on the top of their head to make it stand up straight in spikes. Mohawks were also often frequently dyed bright colors.

As a symbol of a rebellious and subversive subculture, then, the "spikes" are key to understanding the poem and its conflicts. For the "headmistress" and the teachers at Heidi's school, the mohawk is a clear sign that Heidi has become rebellious and disrespectful. Even though Heidi doesn't intend it that way, the cultural associations of the mohawk, its status as a symbol, overwhelms the teachers—so they can't see the real reasons why Heidi gets her mohawk.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "When you dyed your hair blue / (or, at least ultramarine / for the clipped sides, with a crest / of jet-black spikes on top)"
- **Lines 19-20:** "Tell them it won't wash out – / not even if I wanted to try."

POETIC DEVICES

END-STOPPED LINE

End-stop appears often in "For Heidi with Blue Hair"—though the poem doesn't follow a pattern or scheme to organize its use. Indeed, the poem is somewhat uneven, unpredictable in the way that it employs end-stop and enjambment. The first 10 lines of the poem only contain three end-stops, and of these, only that in line 10 is a strong full stop after "colours." That shapes the reader's expectations: the reader expects that the rest of the poem will flow similarly. But, in lines 11-15, almost every line is end-stopped. These end-stops convey the passion and conviction that Heidi and her father feel:

> She's not a punk in her behavior;
> it's just a style." (You wiped your eyes,

The strong end-stop at the end of line 13 indicates how strongly Heidi's father feels: it is definite, clear, unwavering. That conviction seems to comfort Heidi: the end stop in line 14 feels almost like a resolution. As she "wipe[s her] eyes," she moves from grief and injury to indignation and protest. She takes strength from her father's passionate defense of her right to get a mohawk. And that renewed strength and conviction finds expression in the end-stops in lines 19-20:

> Tell them it won't wash out—
> not even if I wanted to try.

Because they are so firmly end-stopped, these lines feel strong and powerful. Heidi feels self-assured. She will not even entertain the idea of cutting off her mohawk. Although the poem opens with a long run of enjambed lines, it shifts in its final four stanzas, becoming heavily end-stopped. And these end-stops generally reflect the passion, anger, and conviction that Heidi, her father, and the speaker feel in response to the school's unjust punishment.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "top)"
- **Line 6:** "it,"
- **Line 9:** "else,"
- **Line 10:** "colours."
- **Line 12:** "father:"
- **Line 13:** "behaviour;"
- **Line 14:** "eyes,"
- **Line 15:** "colour.)"
- **Line 16:** "first –"
- **Line 17:** "Dad,"
- **Line 18:** "dollars."
- **Line 19:** "out –"
- **Line 20:** "try."
- **Line 23:** "arguments."
- **Line 24:** "you;"
- **Line 25:** "in."
- **Line 27:** "yellow –"
- **Line 28:** "precisely:"
- **Line 30:** "won."

ENJAMBMENT

"For Heidi with Blue Hair" opens with 6 straight enjambed lines. These lines tumble down the page. They move fast; they convey a sense of anxiety and urgency. For instance, line 5—the last line of the poem's first stanza—is enjambed:

> …you were sent home from school
> because, as the headmistress put it…

It's unusual for a poet to enjamb the final line of a stanza. Usually stanzas are discrete, separate units. So the enjambment at the end of line 5 feels disruptive and strange—a good sign that something has seriously gone wrong. It feels all the more strange because it doesn't *have* to be enjambed. Lines 1-5 are a complete sentence—totally grammatically satisfactory on their own. The poet could put a period there. But she doesn't. That gives the reader a strong sense that something is incomplete, unfinished at the end of the first stanza. The speaker—and the reader—both want to know *why* Heidi was "sent home from school." Indeed, the first two stanzas of the poem cascade toward an explanation, a revelation. Only in line 10—the poem's first full stop—does the speaker finally reveal the reason. Her mohawk was "not done in the school colours." After rushing through the first 9 lines of the poem, with suspense building and building, the reader becoming more and more eager to understand the reason for Heidi's punishment, this explanation can only feel disappointing—almost comical. It is a let down to discover that the reason is so technical, so small, so obviously trumped-up. And that's precisely the speaker's point. By using so much enjambment across the poem's first two stanzas, the poem communicates to the reader the pettiness and silliness of the school's justification for its punishment.

After line 10, the poem is heavily end-stopped. Though there are enjambments here and there, they don't have the same energy—or powerful effect—that the long run of enjambments in the poem's first 9 lines do. There's one exception to that: the enjambments in lines 21-22:

> It would have been unfair to mention
> your mother's death, but that
> shimmered behind the arguments.

These enjambments convey the uncertainty and awkwardness that everyone—including the speaker—feel about Heidi's mother's death. The speaker seems to be searching for the right words, pausing awkwardly. The conviction and passion that otherwise marks Heidi and her father's response to the school's punishment slips away here in the face of the tragedy that "shimmer[s]" behind the poem.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "blue / (or"
- **Lines 2-3:** "ultramarine / for"
- **Lines 3-4:** "crest / of"
- **Lines 4-5:** "top) / you"
- **Lines 5-6:** "school / because"
- **Lines 7-8:** "not / specifically"
- **Lines 8-9:** "yours / was"
- **Lines 11-12:** "calls / to"
- **Lines 21-22:** "mention / your"
- **Lines 22-23:** "that / shimmered"
- **Lines 26-27:** "done / in"
- **Lines 29-30:** "witty / tease"

CAESURA

Caesuras appear throughout "For Heidi with Blue Hair"—though they mostly don't play a particularly significant role in shaping the poem's meaning. Many of them serve as parentheticals, bracketing off qualifications and interjections. That's true of the caesura in line 6,

> ... because, as the headmistress put it,

Here the speaker specifies that the next several lines will be an—indirect—quotation from the "headmistress." It creates a slight pause to allow the speaker to attribute the lines to the "headmistress" but it doesn't otherwise shape the reader's experience of the poem.

More significant are the caesuras in lines 11 and 17:

> Tears in the kitchen, telephone calls

And:

> we checked the rules." "And anyway, Dad,

These caesuras convey the hectic environment in the "kitchen" after Heidi is sent home from school—with tears and telephone calls overlapping, Heidi and her father talking over each other in impassioned cacophony. And they work with other poetic devices; line 11 is an example of parataxis, for instance. And, notably, caesura appears in the most strongly enjambed line in the second half of the poem, line 22:

> your mother's death, but that
> shimmerd ...

The enjambment conveys the awkwardness the speaker feels addressing the death of Heidi's mother. The speaker seems to pause at the end of line 22, struggling to find the right way to describe it. Falling near the end of the line, the caesura strengthens that sense of awkwardness: it is an unexpected and disorienting pause.

Although the poem's caesuras are not all significant or even noteworthy, some of them do play important roles in the poem. At times, they convey the passion and urgency that Heidi and her father feel in responding to the school's punishment. And the caesura in line 22 communicates the difficult that the speaker—and everyone else—feels in addressing Heidi's mother's death, the tragedy that "shimmer[s]" behind the poem.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "or, at"
- **Line 3:** "sides, with"
- **Line 6:** "because, as"
- **Line 9:** "was, apart"
- **Line 11:** "kitchen, telephone"
- **Line 14:** "style." (You"
- **Line 17:** "rules." "And," "anyway, Dad"
- **Line 22:** "death, but"
- **Line 27:** "grey, white"
- **Line 29:** "solidarity, a"
- **Line 30:** "tease. The"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration appears throughout "For Heidi with Blue Hair," but it's never overwhelming or ostentatious. The poem uses everyday language; its speaker sounds like an ordinary person. Too much alliteration would take away from that: alliteration can make a poem sound pretentious and literary. So though the poem uses alliteration fairly often, it's also careful not to *overuse* it. Alliteration serves to emphasize moments of particularly strong emotion, to make the speaker's narration more vivid and powerful.

For example, the speaker uses alliterative /k/ and /s/ sounds in lines 3-4:

> for the clipped sides, with a crest
> of jet-black spikes on top)

The /k/ sound is sharp and percussive, while the /s/ sound is softer, particularly in the word "sides." The sound of the lines thus rises and falls, moving from hard peaks to soft valleys. In other words, the sound of the line mimics the shape of Heidi's

mohawk: it too has its "spikes," its "crest[s]."

Later in the poem, alliteration emphasizes the power of Heidi's emotions, her pain and frustration in response to the school's unjust punishment. As she tells her father that she doesn't plan to "wash out" her "blue hair" in lines 19-20, Heidi uses strong /t/ and /w/ sounds:

> Tell them it won't wash out—
> not even if wanted to try.

The alliteration here is clear and insistent. The repeated sounds punctuate the line, making it feel powerful, forceful. And in doing so, the alliteration here communicates how strongly Heidi feels; the repeated sounds reflect her passion, anger, and frustration. "Heidi with Blue Hair" thus manages to use alliteration to sharpen its narration, to communicate passion and anger—without losing contact with the everyday language that its characters use.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "clipped," "sides," "crest"
- **Line 4:** "spikes"
- **Line 5:** "sent," "school"
- **Line 11:** "Tears," "kitchen," "telephone," "calls"
- **Line 12:** "school," "from," "freedom," "father"
- **Line 14:** "You," "your"
- **Line 17:** "And," "anyway"
- **Line 18:** "twenty"
- **Line 19:** "Tell," "won't," "wash"
- **Line 20:** "wanted," "try"
- **Line 21:** "mention"
- **Line 22:** "mother," "'s"
- **Line 25:** "teachers," "twittered"
- **Line 26:** "day," "had," "hers," "done"

ASSONANCE

"For Heidi with Blue Hair" is not a heavily assonant poem. However, there are a few assonant sounds that pop up. These assonant sounds strengthen the poem's narrative.

For instance, note the assonant /oo/ link between "you" and "blue" in the first line of the poem. The assonance subtly binds together the two words, suggesting that Heidi's new blue hair is a meaningful part of her identity and self-expression. It's also interesting to note that the first and final stanzas of the poem are the most assonant of the bunch. In the first stanza, note the long /ee/ sounds of "at least ultramarine," and the /eh/, long /i/, and /aw/ assonance of "for the clipped sides, with a crest / of jet-black spikes on top." (There's also a fair amount of consonance and alliteration here.)

In the final stanza, notice the shared /ah/ sounds of "black" and "flaxen," as well as the many long /ee/ sounds and short /i/ sounds in "precisely," "solidarity," "witty," "tease," and "already." Again, there's lots of consonance here as well. Not coincidentally, these are the two stanzas that focus on Heidi and her friend's sense of personal freedom and creativity. It's fitting, then, that these stanzas have a bit more obvious musicality to them than the stanzas that focus on the school's strict, monotonous rules. The comparative *lack* of clear assonance in the other stanzas implies, in other words, that there's no sense of freedom, possibility, or play at school—and, therefore, that it's a dull, authoritarian place.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "you," "blue"
- **Line 2:** "least," "ultramarine"
- **Line 3:** "sides," "crest"
- **Line 4:** "jet," "spikes," "on," "top"
- **Line 5:** "you," "school"
- **Line 12:** "to," "school"
- **Line 14:** "style," "eyes"
- **Line 16:** "She," "me"
- **Line 17:** "we," "And," "anyway"
- **Line 26:** "black"
- **Line 27:** "flaxen"
- **Line 28:** "precisely"
- **Line 29:** "solidarity," "witty"
- **Line 30:** "tease," "already"

CONSONANCE

"For Heidi with Blue Hair" doesn't use a lot of assonance. It's relatively sparing in its use of alliteration. But it does contain a good deal of consonance. That makes a certain amount of sense. This is a poem about conflict. It involves passionate feelings—anger and grief. It documents injustice, protest, solidarity. The poem turns to consonance, with its tough, spiky, sharp consonant sounds to convey the conflict, the pain and anger, the grief that its characters experience.

For instance, note the consonant /m/ sound that runs through lines 21-23:

> ... mention
> your mother's death, but that
> shimmered behind the arguments.

The /m/ sound flickers in and out of focus—appearing in one word, disappearing for a while, then reappearing. In this way it mimics the "shimmer[ing]" knowledge the speaker describes—the knowledge that Heidi is grieving her mother's death. (And that she is not being intentionally disrespectful of the school's authority). The hum of the /m/ sound, however, emphasizes that Heidi's grief is a constant hum in the background of her life.

Similarly, the poem's final two lines ring out with a strong /t/

sound:

> an act of solidarity, a witty
> tease. The battle was already won.

The /t/ sound makes these lines sound combative—full of anger and power. The /t/ sound emphasizes that Heidi's "black friend" with her "grey, white and flaxen yellow" mohawk isn't simply being funny or satirical. She is actively combating the school and its unjust authority. Consonance thus emphasizes the conflict—and the powerful feelings—that run through the poem.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "at," "least," "ultramarine"
- **Line 3:** "clipped," "sides," "crest"
- **Line 4:** "jet," "black," "spikes," "top"
- **Line 5:** "sent," "school"
- **Line 7:** "dyed"
- **Line 8:** "forbidden"
- **Line 10:** "school," "colours"
- **Line 11:** "Tears," "kitchen," "telephone," "calls"
- **Line 12:** "to," "school," "from," "your," "freedom," "father"
- **Line 14:** "it's just," "style"
- **Line 15:** "school," "colour"
- **Line 17:** "And," "anyway"
- **Line 18:** "cost," "twenty," "dollars"
- **Line 19:** "Tell," "won't," "wash," "out"
- **Line 20:** "wanted," "to," "try"
- **Line 21:** "mention"
- **Line 22:** "mother's"
- **Line 23:** "shimmered," "arguments"
- **Line 25:** "teachers," "twittered"
- **Line 26:** "day," "had," "hers," "done"
- **Line 28:** "school," "colours"
- **Line 29:** "act," "solidarity," "witty"
- **Line 30:** "tease," "battle," "was," "won"

METAPHOR

"For Heidi with Blue Hair" is a conversational, unpretentious poem. The speaker talks directly to the reader, avoiding flowery and pretentious literary language. Fittingly, then, the poem doesn't use a lot of metaphor, and the metaphors that it *does* use are quiet. They subtly support the poem's narrative, without interrupting it.

For instance, in lines 3-4, the speaker describes Heidi's mohawk as a "crest / of jet-black spikes." The word "crest" is usually used to describe the top of a hill or mountain; the metaphor thus helps the reader see how sharp and spiky Heidi's mohawk is. Similarly, the speaker describes how the teachers "twittered" but "gave in" when the school allows Heidi to return. The word "twitter" is usually used to describe birds chirping. It's thus subtly metaphorical here, reducing the teachers' complaints to the cacophonous chirping of angry birds. It suggests that their objections are petty, insignificant—they don't even rise to the level of human speech.

There is, however, one key metaphor in the poem—a metaphor that announces itself prominently, that attracts attention to itself as a metaphor. It appears in lines 21-23:

> It would have been unfair to mention
> your mother's death, but that
> shimmered behind the arguments.

In other words, everyone's aware that Heidi is grieving for her mother—but no one mentions it. Nonetheless, that fact "shimmered behind the arguments." A "shimmer" is a flickering, glimmering light. Usually a "shimmer" is beautiful. Here, it suggests something painful and difficult that flickers in and out of focus. The metaphor thus describes the way that Heidi's father and her school both do and do not acknowledge her grief, the way it is only partially part of their discussion. And, at the same time, it acknowledges the way her grief shapes their response to Heidi's mohawk: it throws light on her actions, makes it clear why she got her mohawk. In this instance, then, metaphor conveys to the reader, to Heidi's father, and to her school, the truth at the heart of the poem: Heidi's mohawk is not a rebellious or disobedient act, but a way of grieving her mother's death.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "with a crest / of jet-black spikes on top"
- **Lines 22-23:** "but that / shimmered behind the arguments."
- **Line 25:** "the teachers twittered and gave in"

PARATAXIS

"For Heidi with Blue Hair" uses parataxis often. The device often conveys the passion and anger that Heidi and her father feel after she's kicked out of school for getting a mohawk. (Note that many of these instances of parataxis could also be characterized as asyndeton.) For instance, in lines 11-12, parataxis conveys the frenzy and intensity of the moments after Heidi's kicked out of school:

> Tears in the kitchen, telephone calls
> to school from your freedom-loving father:

Line 11 doesn't have any connecting or subordinating words. There's no "and" or "then" to show the reader how things play out. Instead, the "tears" and the "telephone calls" seem to happen simultaneously. In this way, one gets a sense of the frenetic energy of Heidi and her father: the way anger, grief, and hurt lie on top of each other, motivating them to respond

passionately to the school's punishment.

Later in the poem, the speaker uses parataxis to convey the school's resignation in the face of Heidi and her father's protests:

> The school had nothing else against you;
> The teachers twittered and gave in.

Here, the speaker's narration takes on the tone and feeling of the school's response. It sounds resigned and a little perfunctory. The school doesn't feel any regret or remorse; it's not sorry for hurting Heidi—at a time when she was already grieving her mother's death. And parataxis helps convey the school's indifference, making the lines themselves sound curt, abrupt, and rude. Parataxis thus plays different functions in different parts of the poem: conveying the grief and anger that Heidi and her father feel—and the school's indifference to their feelings.

Where Parataxis appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-12:** "Tears in the kitchen, telephone calls / to school from your freedom-loving father"
- **Lines 13-14:** "She's not a punk in her behaviour; / it's just a style"
- **Lines 16-17:** "She discussed it with me first – / we checked the rules"
- **Lines 24-25:** "The school had nothing else against you; / the teachers twittered and gave in."
- **Lines 28-30:** "the school colours precisely: / an act of solidarity, a witty / tease."

VOCABULARY

Ultramarine (Line 2) - Bright blue.

Clipped Sides (Line 3) - Closely cut or shaved. Although Heidi has long hair on top of her head, the sides have been cut down.

Crest (Line 3) - Top or peak. The top of Heidi's head is covered with gelled-up spikes.

Headmistress (Line 6) - Principal. The woman in charge of Heidi's school.

Punk (Line 13) - Punk rock is a musical subculture, popular during the 1970s and 1980s (though it continues to be active in the present). Punk music is aggressive and loud; punk culture is rebellious and subversive. Punks—the people who participate in this culture—often reject or make fun of authority figures, like the "headmistress."

Shimmered (Line 23) - Glittered. A "shimmer" is an intermittent, flickering light.

Twittered (Line 25) - Grumbled or complained. The word is usually used to describe the noises that birds make.

Flaxen Yellow (Line 27) - Golden, the color of hay or wheat.

Solidarity (Line 29) - Mutual support, mutual aid. The word is often used in the context of labor struggles (which were prominent in British politics during the 1980s) to describe workers who stick together to fight their bosses.

Tease (Line 30) - An act of satire and subversion. Heidi's "black friend" is poking fun at the teachers and their inflexible rules.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"For Heidi with Blue Hair" is a 30-line poem made up of six quintains—five-line stanzas. The poem doesn't use rhyme or meter—it is written in free verse. It is thus not an example of formal verse. It doesn't observe any of the rules that mark highly patterned poetic forms like the sonnet or the villanelle.

Indeed, such formal rules would probably feel out of place in this poem—which is about life in England during the 1980s. They would make the poem feel fusty, out-of-date. Instead, the poem is conversational and direct; it uses everyday language. And its form—or lack thereof—is similarly easy-going, colloquial, and modern. Though the poem is written in free verse, it doesn't engage in any radical experiments: its lines are more or less the same length. All of them are justified against the left margin, instead of spilling across the page.

The poem's poem's easy free verse thus feels natural and unremarkable. It doesn't get in the reader's way, or call attention to itself. Instead, the reader feels like they are hearing the poem's speaker talk directly to them.

METER

"For Heidi with Blue Hair" is not written in meter. The poem is in free verse: its lines have different rhythms and different lengths. However—unlike some free verse poems—the poem doesn't engage in radical or surprising variations. Its lines aren't *exactly* the same length, but they're all pretty close. For instance, all of the lines in the poem's first stanza are either six or seven syllables long.

That establishes a benchmark for the poem. Most of the rest of its lines hover around that length. So even though the poem doesn't have a stable, predictable rhythm, it also doesn't challenge or shock the reader with sudden shifts in the length of its lines. This helps the poem feel conversational—as though the speaker were talking directly to the reader. The poem's rhythms recede into the background and instead the speaker's voice comes through: a clear, distinct, ordinary voice.

RHYME SCHEME

"For Heidi with Blue Hair" is written in free verse, so it has no

rhyme scheme. And the speaker of the poem generally avoids using rhyme. There are only two rhymes in the poem—and only the second would be considered a strong rhyme.

The first rhyme appears in the poem's first stanza: "blue" at the end of line 1 has a kind of slant rhyme with "school" at the end of line 5. It's not a perfect rhyme because of the /l/ sound at the end of "school." At best, it can be described as an assonant rhyme. There *is* a perfect rhyme in the poem's final stanza: "done" in the first line of the stanza rhymes with "won" in the last line. That gives the final line of the poem a sense of closure and completion—reinforcing the speaker's claim that "the battle was already won."

With the exception of these rhymes, the poem is remarkably free of rhymes. This is important to developing the speaker's conversational, everyday voice. Rhymes often make a poem sound fusty, old-fashioned. Especially in a poem like "For Heidi with Blue Hair"—set in England during the 1980s—they would feel overly poetic, out of place. Refraining from rhyming, the speaker sounds like a real person, an ordinary person—someone who lives in the same world as Heidi, her father, and her school.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "For Heidi with Blue Hair" doesn't participate in the story the poem tells. Indeed, the speaker isn't really a character in that story at all. The speaker isn't Heidi or her father or her "black friend"; nor is the speaker the "headmistress" or one of the "twitter[ing]" teachers at Heidi's school. Instead, the speaker observes, describes, recounts what happens to Heidi. In other words, the speaker is a narrator: someone who tells a story, rather than participating in it. At times, the speaker tells the story directly, using his or her own voice; at other times, the speaker quotes Heidi or her father, letting them interject and argue in their own voices.

There are two key things to note about the way the speaker tells Heidi's story. First, the speaker uses second person narration. Throughout, the speaker calls Heidi "you." Though this might seem like an instance of apostrophe, there's no sign that the speaker is actually *addressing* Heidi; instead, the speaker is talking *about* Heidi. But the use of the second person does convey a sense of intimacy, familiarity. The speaker seems to be someone close to Heidi. Indeed, the speaker uses the same kind of language that Heidi and her father do: the poem is conversational, unpretentious. It uses everyday language. The speaker feels like a normal person, talking about a more or less ordinary event; it seems safe to assume that the speaker comes from the same world as Heidi, the same culture.

Second, the speaker is not unbiased. The speaker clearly takes Heidi's side, suggesting throughout the poem that the "headmistress" is arbitrary, capricious, and cruel. Thus, while the speaker doesn't participate in the poem's events, the speaker does have a strong opinion about what happens to Heidi—and is eager to convince the reader to take Heidi's side.

SETTING

"For Heidi with Blue Hair" is most likely set in England (or another anglophone country) in the 1980s. Though the poem is never very explicit about its setting, it does provide a couple of clues that help the reader to situate it.

First, the speaker uses the word "headmistress" to describe the woman who runs Heidi's school. That's a word specific to British contexts—Americans, for instance, would probably call her a "principal."

Second, the poem references "punk" culture throughout—Heidi's mohawk, for instance, is a symbol of punk. A rebellious subculture organized around fast, aggressive music, punk flourished in England in the 1980s. Many teachers and parents found it threatening, even subversive—and tried to suppress it.

So, though the poem doesn't explicitly locate itself in time or space, it feels infused with the fraught political and social energies of England in the 1980s. That setting serves as a springboard for the poem, allowing it to meditate on broader themes. It raises questions about rebellion, grief—and, most importantly, it asks what constitutes just, fair, and legitimate authority.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"For Heidi with Blue Hair" was written in England in the 1980s—and it reflects the broad poetic trends of its moment. This was a time when many of the leading English poets were using loose free verse to write poems reflecting on their personal experiences: things they saw, heard, or lived through. In other words, these poets—often called "lyric narrative"—had left behind the bold experiments of the modernist period in the early part of the twentieth century. Their poems usually aren't written in strict forms, but they also don't push the boundaries of what's acceptable in poetry. Instead, they draw on their personal experiences to explore broader themes.

"For Heidi with Blue Hair" fits nicely within these trends. It is written in free verse, but it doesn't push too hard against the reader's expectations about poetry. Its speaker uses conversational, everyday language to reflect on something that—apparently—really happened. And the speaker draws a series of lessons, almost morals, from those events, presenting the reader with a set of observations about authority and rebellion. That makes the poem approachable, easy to

read—and yet subtly profound, filled with rage and wisdom.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Written in England during the 1980s, "For Heidi with Blue Hair" reflects the cultural trends and tensions of English society during that period. The poem focuses on Heidi's decision to get a mohawk, a "punk" haircut. Her teachers find the haircut threatening and subversive. That reflects the place that punk rock had in English society during the 1980s.

Born at the end of the 1970s, punk was aggressive, loud, and fast. The music was rebellious, expressing dissatisfaction with mainstream pop music. And it bred a vibrant subculture in England during the 1980s. Punk culture was as rebellious as its music: punks expressed a deep disdain for figures of authority and power. In turn, these authority figures often regarded punks as dangerous and subversive. That mistrust is evident in the headmistress's heavy-handed response to Heidi's haircut, even though, as her father explains, she's "not a punk in her behavior; / it's just a style." "For Heidi with Blue Hair" is thus situated in a moment of generational mistrust, with young people and older figures of authority confronting and antagonizing each other.

More broadly, the 1980s were a time of transformation in English society. Following Margaret Thatcher's rise to power, the government engaged in a series of protracted conflicts with the country's labor unions—confrontations that the government largely won. Those conflicts are subtly present in the poem. For instance, the speaker describes Heidi's friend's mohawk as an act of "solidarity"—a word drawn from labor struggles, where it describes workers who stick together to fight their bosses.

And the poem also subtly suggests that Heidi's "black friend" has also been targeted by the school's administration, which reflects the racial tensions in the country at the time—a moment when immigrants and black Britons lived under threat of street violence from white supremacist gangs. Though the poem wrestles with a small conflict—over one schoolgirl's haircut—it reflects a set of much larger and more serious social tensions that ran through British society at the time the poem was written.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Britain in the 1980s — At the Guardian Newspaper, Jason Cowley runs through the history of Britain during the 1980s. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/apr/19/1980s-cultural-history)
- 37 Pictures Showing What Punk Britain Was Really Like — A photo essay, displaying punk styles and haircuts from the 1970s and 1980s, including a truly glorious mohawk (#36). (https://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/features/37-pictures-what-punk-britain-was-really-like)
- "For Heidi with Blue Hair" Read Aloud — Fleur Adcock recites her poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ad-0rEBp5wE)
- Fleur Adcock's Life Story — A brief biography of Fleur Adcock from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/fleur-adcock)
- Punk, Politics and Youth Culture, 1976-84 — Professor Matthew Worley outlines the early history of punk rock and its importance for youth culture in the early 1980s. (https://unireadinghistory.com/2013/09/04/punk-politics-and-youth-culture-1976-84/)

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