From the Dark Tower

POEM TEXT

We shall not always plant while others reap
The golden increment of bursting fruit,
Not always countenance, abject and mute,
That lesser men should hold their brothers cheap;
Not everlastingly while others sleep
Shall we beguile their limbs with mellow flute,
Not always bend to some more subtle brute;
We were not made to eternally weep.

The night whose sable breast relieves the stark,
White stars is no less lovely being dark,
And there are buds that cannot bloom at all
In light, but crumple, piteous, and fall;
So in the dark we hide the heart that bleeds,
And wait, and tend our agonizing seeds.

SUMMARY

We won't always be the people who do the hard work of planting just so other people can benefit from the precious fruits of our labor. We won't always quietly tolerate the fact that people who are inferior to us treat us like *we're* the ones who are inferior. We also won't always let other people rest while we relieve them of their burdens as if we're playing them to sleep with the sound of a calming flute. And we won't always submit to the sly beasts who mistreat us; our sadness and suffering will not last forever.

The night sky, whose very blackness is what allows the stars to stand out so brightly, isn't any less beautiful just because it's dark. There are some flowers that can't even blossom in the daytime because the sun's harsh light shrivels them up and causes them to droop in a sad, defeated way. Like flowers that blossom at night, then, we live in darkness with suffering hearts, waiting to someday flourish and overcome the painful oppression we've endured for so long.

THEMES

BLACK OPPRESSION AND HOPE

The poem highlights the fact that racism and oppression keep Black Americans from benefiting from the fruits of their own labor. White people, the poem argues, are the ones who prosper from the hard work of Black people, ultimately "reap[ing]" rewards without sharing anything with the people who made those rewards possible in the first place.

Given this dynamic, the speaker calls attention to the many ways in which Black people suffer because of racism. For example, the speaker notes that when Black people "plant" something, white people are the ones who end up enjoying the tangible results of this hard work (something the speaker refers to as the "golden increment of bursting fruit"). Worse, Black people are expected to put up with this racist mistreatment without saying a word, acting "abject"—which is to say without dignity or pride—and "mute" instead of speaking up for themselves.

Despite these demoralizing circumstances, though, the speaker believes that Black people will not remain oppressed and subservient forever. To that end, the speaker emphasizes the words "not always," saying that Black people will "not always countenance"—or tolerate—being treated so poorly. With this conviction, then, the speaker reveals the optimistic belief that Black people will one day overcome the manipulative and exploitative oppression they've been forced them to endure.

This hopeful outlook is most likely the result of the speaker's belief that hardship can lead to good things. To illustrate this point, the speaker refers to certain kinds of flowers that actually thrive in darkness—a metaphor for the idea that positive outcomes can emerge from unlikely circumstances. With this in mind, the speaker appears content with the idea of "wait[ing]" for the day when Black people overcome racism and oppression. In this way, then, the speaker uses a hopeful tone to suggest that Black people's suffering *will* inevitably come to an end, at which point Black people will finally have the opportunity to prosper from the many things they've been deprived of as a result of racist subjugation.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

We shall not always plant while others reap
The golden increment of bursting fruit,

The speaker begins by using the first-person plural pronoun, saying, "We shall not always plant while others reap."

Considering that the poem is about how Black people will someday overcome racism and oppression, the speaker's use of "we" is notable because it establishes that the speaker is Black.

Of course, the speaker never *explicitly* states that this poem is about Black oppression, but the opening two lines make this element clear enough since the speaker alludes to the institution of slavery by referencing the act of planting. The main kind of forced labor during slavery was agricultural, meaning that most enslaved people were forced to work in fields—fields that belonged to white enslavers who then "reap[ed]" the benefits of this labor.

This first line also alludes to a proverb found in the Bible, which says that "whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." This phrase has worked its way into popular usage, though the wording is usually changed to something like, "You reap what you sow." It essentially emphasizes the idea that hard work leads to positive outcomes, since the act of sowing—which means planting—is what creates harvestable crops.

However, the poem turns this phrase on its head by spotlighting the ways in which Black Americans have been unable actually "reap" what they sow. Indeed, the speaker's point is that Black Americans have historically been *cut off* from enjoying the fruits of their labor. To that end, the oppression of Black people has created a situation in which powerful white people are the ones to benefit from the hard work of Black people.

Despite this, the speaker is confident that this will not always be the case. In fact, the poem begins with the speaker's assertion that Black people will "not always" be mistreated in this way. In keeping with this, the speaker is confident that Black people will one day be able to enjoy "the golden increment of bursting fruit," which is the speaker's way of saying that Black people will someday actually benefit from the precious growth of the plants they themselves have worked so hard to tend.

It's worth noting that the consonance in these first two lines is very euphonic, since there are so many pleasing, rounded or humming sounds, like /l/, /th/, /z/, /n/, /m/, and /r/:

> We shall not always plant while others reap
> The golden increment of bursting fruit

This euphony gives the opening lines a pleasant, lush sound that ultimately matches the speaker's highly poetic tone. In keeping with this poetic tone, these lines also establish the sonnet's adherence to iambic pentameter, meaning that each line contains five iambs (metrical feet made up of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable, da-DUM). The lines scan like this:

> We shall | not al- | ways plant | while oth- | ers reap
> The gold- | en in- | crement | of burst- | ing fruit

These lines are good examples of iambic pentameter, but it's worth mentioning that some readers might hear a stress on the word "not" in line 1, turning the line's second foot ("not al-") into a spondee, meaning that both syllables are stressed. If this is the case, then the speaker ultimately ends up emphasizing the idea that Black people won't live in oppression forever.

LINES 3-4

> *Not always countenance, abject and mute,*
> *That lesser men should hold their brothers cheap;*

Whereas the poem's first two lines suggest that the oppressive circumstances that affect Black people won't last forever, these lines imply that this won't magically happen on its own. Rather, Black people will someday stop responding to injustice with passive acceptance. In other words, Black people won't always "countenance"—or tolerate—such terrible treatment by simply ignoring their own sense of dignity. Rather, the speaker implies, Black people will someday stand up for themselves after enduring racist oppression for so long.

These two lines conclude the sonnet's opening quatrain. As such, they establish an ABBA rhyme scheme (which will repeat in the next four lines of the octave), since the word "cheap" in line 4 rhymes with "reap" in line 1 and the word "mute" in line 3 rhymes with "fruit" in line 2.

What's more, lines 3 also begins with an anaphora, as the speaker repeats the phrase "not always." This recalls the first line's phrase, "We shall not always," ultimately leaving off the words "we shall" to create a shorter line that emphasizes the speaker's belief that Black people will not suffer in oppressive conditions forever. To that end, the speaker's use of anaphora underscores just how confident the speaker is that there will come a day when Black people no longer have to endure such demoralizing conditions.

LINES 5-6

> *Not everlastingly while others sleep*
> *Shall we beguile their limbs with mellow flute,*

The speaker begins line 5 with a variation on the anaphora that appears in line 3, substituting the phrase "not always" with the phrase "not everlastingly." In doing so, the speaker stresses the idea that Black people aren't destined to suffer for the rest of eternity, even if white people have historically oppressed them and made it seem like they will continue to live in such conditions forever.

Going on, the speaker uses a metaphor to illustrate the ways in which Black people have been forced to work hard so that white people can lead comfortable lives. In this metaphor, Black people play white people lullabies with the calming sound of a flute, relaxing the oppressor's "limbs" and essentially doing everything possible to soothe them. This, in turn, represents

the unfortunate fact that racists are able to lead prosperous, unbothered lives precisely because they exploit and oppress Black people.

In keeping with the soft, lulling sound of "mellow flute[s]," these lines contain a fair amount of sibilance, including not just the standard /s/ sound, but also the /sh/, /z/, /th/, and /f/ sounds:

> Not everlastingly while others sleep
> Shall we beguile their limbs with mellow flute

This sibilance gives the lines a soft sound, one that enhances the quality of the language while also conveying a sense of sleepiness and relaxation. The consonance in these lines is also noticeable, especially because the speaker repeats the /l/ sound so frequently:

> Not everlastingly while others sleep
> Shall we beguile their limbs with mellow flute

This /l/ sound also pairs well with the /m/ sound in words like "limbs" and "mellow," creating euphony that adds to the relaxed, pleasant sound of this particular section of the poem.

LINES 7-8

> *Not always bend to some more subtle brute;*
> *We were not made to eternally weep.*

The speaker's assertion that Black people will not "bend to some more subtle brute" can be interpreted in two different ways. One possible analysis is that the speaker's use of the word "brute" is an allusion to the deeply racist belief that Black people are more like animals than humans—a belief that was common among enslavers and especially apparent in the way they talked about buying and selling Black people. Under this interpretation, the speaker turns this idea back around on the enslavers themselves, suggesting that *they* are the ones who are "brute[s]," even if they believe they're somehow more human than the people they enslave.

Another way to interpret this phrase is that white people oppress Black people in multiple different ways, some of which are "more subtle" than others. According to this analysis, the speaker effectively acknowledges that racism manifests itself in a number of different ways and that some of these ways are less obvious than others, though this doesn't mean they aren't still harmful.

Either way, the speaker's main point is, once again, that Black people will not submit to racists forever. And if this idea weren't already clear, the speaker adds, "We were not made to eternally weep." By saying this, the speaker rejects the idea that Black people will suffer "eternally" and instead reveals a strong sense of hope and optimism.

Like many of the lines in the poem, both lines 7 and 8 are end-stopped. The end-stop after the word "weep" is especially noticeable because it comes at the very end of the sonnet's octave. In this way, the speaker prepares readers for the "turn," which can be expected to take place in the next line, since Petrarchan sonnets usually feature some kind of shift at the beginning of the sestet (the last six lines of the poem).

Lines 7 and 8 also conclude the octave's ABBAABBA rhyme scheme, since "brute" rhymes with "flute" in line 6 and "weep" rhymes with "sleep" in line 5. Accordingly, the end of the octave has a conclusive feel, ultimately making the entire first half of the poem feel cohesive. Indeed, the speaker has spent the first 8 lines of the poem listing all the things that Black people will someday stop doing for white people, even using anaphora to repeat the same sentence construction multiple times by using variations on the phrase "not always" at the beginning of every other line. In this regard, the octave follows a consistent and predictable pattern—a pattern from which the speaker will deviate in the coming lines.

LINES 9-12

> *The night whose sable breast relieves the stark,*
> *White stars is no less lovely being dark,*
> *And there are buds that cannot bloom at all*
> *In light, but crumple, piteous, and fall;*

This section features the sonnet's "turn," in which the speaker stops emphasizing the idea that Black people will "not always" live in oppression. Instead of repeating all the things Black people will eventually stop doing for white people, the speaker becomes less literal, using metaphors that illustrate the fact that beauty and resiliency can come from unexpected places.

To that end, the speaker points out that the darkness of the sky at night is "no less lovely" than the dazzling brightness of the stars. This suggests that people tend to overlook the actual sky itself, instead focusing on the stars. Similarly, society prioritizes white people and refuses to acknowledge Black people—except, that is, in ways that are degrading and oppressive. This obviously doesn't mean Black people deserve less than white people, just as the sky's lack of light doesn't make it any less beautiful than the stars.

In fact, one couldn't even *see* the stars without the night, "whose sable breast"—"sable" meaning black in color—"relieves" the stars. "Relieves" here means to make something stand out; in other words, the darkness of the night sky makes the stars stand out more clearly. After all, one can't see stars in the daytime. Black people, the speaker is saying, are an inherent, invaluable part of society, and worthy of equal respect.

The speaker goes on to note that there are certain kinds of flowers that are unable to blossom in sunlight, since the sun will make them wilt. And though the speaker doesn't say this outright, the implication is that these flowers *can* blossom in the dark. By pointing this out, then, the speaker suggests that unlikely conditions can still create positive outcomes—an idea

that is particularly relevant to the speaker's belief that Black people will one day manage to overcome oppression. In the same way that some flowers are capable of blooming in the darkness, then, perhaps Black people will triumph in the face of persecution.

The consonance in these lines stands out right away, as the speaker repeats the /b/ sound in the phrase "sable breast," which also features the sibilant /s/ sound. To that end, there is actually quite a bit of sibilance in this moment, since the /s/ and /z/ sounds appear in words like "whose," "sable," "breast," "relieves," "stark," "stars," "is," "less," and a handful of other words. On the whole, this makes the speaker's language come across as especially musical and well-controlled, ultimately giving these lines a unified feeling.

It's also worth noting that the sestet features a different rhyme scheme than the octave, thereby creating a subtle shift in tone. In the sestet, the rhymes are closer together and have the following pattern: CCDDEE. The word "stark" in line 9 rhymes with the word "dark" in line 10, and the word "all" in line 11 rhymes with the word "fall" in line 12. As such, the speaker's language begins to sound even more musical and poetic than it already did, a fact that aligns with this section's use of imagery that is generally more abstract and figurative than than that which appears in the first stanza.

LINES 13-14

> *So in the dark we hide the heart that bleeds,*
> *And wait, and tend our agonizing seeds.*

In the poem's final two lines, the speaker insinuates that, in the same way certain flowers grow strong and blossom in the dark, Black people are capable of gathering strength while enduring terrible oppression. To make this idea even more vivid, the speaker references "the heart that bleeds," making it clear that dealing with oppression is still a deeply painful thing, even if the speaker remains optimistic that Black people will be able to overcome this hardship.

Building upon the poem's use of plant-related metaphors, the speaker continues by saying that Black people will continue to "wait" until it's possible to triumph over white racists, relating this period of anticipation to the experience of planting and "tend[ing]" seeds. In turn, the speaker echoes the opening line's assertion that Black people will "not always plant while others reap." Now, in the final line, the speaker returns to the symbolic act of planting, this time suggesting that Black people have already planted the "seeds" of freedom and equality and are simply waiting for them to grow, at which point it will finally be possible for Black people to "reap" the fruits of their labor.

Lines 13 and 14 are very musical. This is partly because of the end rhyme that occurs between "bleeds" and "seeds," but also because of the internal slant rhyme in line 13 that occurs between "dark" and "heart." The assonant /ah/ sound that appears in both words makes the line sound particularly knit together, and the speaker's repetition of the consonant /d/ sound throughout both lines 13 and 14 only adds to this effect:

> So in the dark we hide the heart that bleeds,
> And wait, and tend our agonizing seeds.

This repeated /d/ sound elevates the language, making it sound especially poetic and well controlled. Similarly, the speaker adheres closely in these lines to the sonnet's use of iambic pentameter:

> So in | the dark | we hide | the heart | that bleeds,
> And wait, || and tend | our ag- | oniz- | ing seeds.

The steady, bouncing rhythm of iambic pentameter makes the end of "From the Dark Tower" feel very thoughtfully deployed, giving readers the sense that the speaker has complete control over the words. In turn, the meter ends up emphasizing the speaker's patient confidence that, although Black people are forced to endure horrible oppression, this will not always be the case.

SYMBOLS

CROPS AND PLANTING

Crops and planting are symbolic in the poem of potential and success. Note how the fruit in line 2 are described as "golden," like a treasure, and "bursting," suggesting that they are fully ripe. Black people are filled with immense value, beauty, and potential, the speaker insists, but are denied these things by racist society; they work hard "while others reap," or harvest, the fruits of their labor.

During slavery, this theft was quite literal: enslaved Black people were forced to tend crops without any kind of compensation or benefit. And while Black people did the hard work of planting, white enslavers prospered and the country at large grew more powerful. In turn, the very act of planting in the poem comes to also stand for the ways in which Black people have been cut off from the resources that they themselves have created.

The speaker continues the symbolism in the poem's sestet, here metaphorically comparing Black people to "buds that cannot bloom at all / In light." Buds are flowers that are not yet mature, again implying that Black people have been smothered by the "light" of racist society, prevented from growing and realizing their full power and potential. As such, the speaker says, they "wait, and tend our agonizing seeds." Seeds, like buds, are not yet mature plants—they offer potential for growth and often represent new beginnings or hope. The speaker does not deny the pain of racism and oppression, noting that these seeds are "agonizing," but also uses the symbolic resonance of

planting to suggest a certain optimism as Black people "tend," or take care of, the "seeds" of their own future.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "We shall not always plant while others reap"
- **Line 2:** "The golden increment of bursting fruit,"
- **Lines 11-12:** "And there are buds that cannot bloom at all / In light, but crumple, piteous, and fall;"
- **Line 14:** "And wait, and tend our agonizing seeds."

DARKNESS

The speaker uses darkness to stand for a certain kind of unexpected beauty. The speaker's initial point about darkness is that it is "no less lovely" than the brightness of the stars—an idea that ultimately urges readers to question society's tendency to value whiteness over blackness. What's more, this idea also implies that, although stars are dazzling and therefore get all the attention, they wouldn't actually be all that beautiful if it weren't for the vast sky that surrounds them, since the darkness of the sky is what provides the backdrop upon which the stars shine. Similarly, it might *seem* like white people deserve all of their wealth and power, but Black people are the ones who have made this wealth and power possible by working hard—only to end up having the fruits of their labor stolen.

The speaker also notes that there are some flowers that require dark conditions in order to blossom. Needless to say, most flowers need sunlight in order to survive, but the speaker suggests that this isn't always the case, thereby indicating that beauty often emerges from unlikely circumstances. With this in mind, darkness comes to symbolize the idea that Black people will someday rise up and prosper even though they've had to face harrowing oppression and incredible hardship.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-12:** "The night whose sable breast relieves the stark, / White stars is no less lovely being dark, / And there are buds that cannot bloom at all / In light, but crumple, piteous, and fall;"

POETIC DEVICES

ANAPHORA

The speaker uses anaphora in the sonnet's opening octave to emphasize the point that Black people will not have to endure racist oppression forever. Starting in the first line, the speaker says, "We shall not always plant while others reap." Then, two lines later, the speaker uses a pared down version of this sentence construction by saying, "Not always countenance[...]."

This time, the speaker leaves off the words "we shall," which are implied because they appear at the beginning of the poem. In turn, the speaker is able to place extra emphasis on the words "not always," thereby underscoring just how hopeful the speaker is that oppression will not last forever.

The speaker continues in line 5 by using anaphora to repeat another variation on the phrase, this time saying, "Not everlastingly[...]." For something to be "everlasting" means that it lasts forever. As such, the use of the word "everlastingly" is little more than a replacement of the word "always," ultimately enabling the speaker to build upon the stanza's central idea that the misery that comes along with racism and oppression will someday end. Then, in line 7, the speaker returns to the words "not always," saying, "Not always bend to some more subtle brute."

All in all, the speaker's use of anaphora stresses the idea that the oppressive conditions in which Black people live are temporary. This is an especially important idea when considering how long racist oppression has been present in the U.S. As a result of this terrible history, it might seem like Black Americans will never experience what it's like to live freely. The speaker, however, is confident that the day will come when Black people are able to triumph, and this is why the speaker repeats the words "not always" so many times, putting a sense of hopefulness on display in a way that is uplifting and encouraging.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "We shall not always"
- **Line 3:** "Not always"
- **Line 5:** "Not everlastingly"
- **Line 7:** "Not always"

ASSONANCE

The speaker uses assonance to enhance the sound of the poem, intensifying the language in certain moments and adding to the poem's overall musicality. For instance, the long /ee/ sound appears prominently in line 8:

> We were not made to eternally weep.

The assonance here adds power to this important line, which closes out the first stanza (the sonnet's octave) with the declaration that Black people's suffering will not last forever. By repeating the /ee/ sound in the words "we" and "eternally," the speaker also anticipates the fact that the word "weep" will conclude the first stanza's rhyme scheme. The /ee/ sound is thus an important feature of the opening octave, which feels all the more powerful, unified, and cohesive because of the way the speaker threads this assonance throughout the lines.

Similarly, the speaker repeats the /ah/ sound several times in

lines 9 and 10:

> The night whose sable breast relieves the stark,
> White stars is no less lovely being dark

Again, this use of assonance contributes to the poem's feeling of confidence and cohesion, since the words "stark" and "dark" rhyme. Adding to this, the speaker uses the /ah/ sound in the word "stars," which appears near the beginning of line 10: "White stars is no less lovely being dark." In this way, these two lines sound even *more* unified and assonant, since the speaker enhances the rhyme scheme by sprinkling assonance *between* the two end rhymes.

The speaker also brings back the /ah/ sound in line 13:

> So in the dark we hide the heart that bleeds

In addition to simply adding a pleasing assonant sound to this line, the /ah/ sound in the words "dark" and "heart" creates an internal slant rhyme. Overall, then, the poem sounds both controlled and lyrical, confident and poetic, thanks to devices like assonance.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "not," "always"
- **Line 2:** "fruit"
- **Line 3:** "mute"
- **Line 4:** "lesser," "men," "cheap"
- **Line 5:** "everlastingly," "sleep"
- **Line 6:** "we," "flute"
- **Line 7:** "brute"
- **Line 8:** "We," "eternally," "weep"
- **Line 9:** "relieves," "stark"
- **Line 10:** "stars," "lovely," "being," "dark"
- **Line 11:** "all"
- **Line 12:** "but," "crumple," "fall"
- **Line 13:** "dark," "we," "heart," "bleeds"
- **Line 14:** "seeds"

CONSONANCE

The speaker uses consonance throughout the poem, making the lines feel rich with sound and deeply lyrical. This adds to the poem's power and intensity. Take the first line, where the speaker repeats the /w/ sound:

> We shall not always plant while others reap

The /w/ sound is strong in this line and pairs well with the /l/ sound that appears in words like "shall," "always," "plant," and "while." On the whole, this insistent consonance makes the speaker's words sound forceful and determined. This, in turn, conveys the speaker's sense of conviction that Black people will one day experience better conditions.

The speaker's use of the /l/ and /w/ sounds runs throughout the entire poem, in fact. Take lines 5 and 6:

> Not everlastingly while others sleep
> Shall we beguile their limbs with mellow flute

These gentle sounds reflect the scene being described, wherein white people sleep calmly while Black people remain oppressed. Several other, softer consonant sounds add to this effect, including the sibilant /s/ sound along with the /z/, /sh/, and /f/ sounds. Overall, this creates a pleasant, almost lisping effect that evokes a sort of gentle sleepiness—but also, perhaps, this hiss of a quiet threat:

> Not everlastingly while others sleep
> Shall we beguile their limbs with mellow flute

In other places, harsher consonance reflects a sort of forcefulness. Note, for example, the many blunt /b/, popping /p/, and hard /k/ sounds that weave their way throughout the second stanza, evoking a sense of the speaker's passion and confidence. At the same time, more gentle /l/ sounds suffuse these final lines as well, in words and phrase like "sable," "less lovely," "light," "crumple," and "fall." By combining blunter, heavier consonant sounds with somewhat soothing sounds, the speaker makes the language in this section feel well-balanced. This balanced sound reflects the way that the speaker balances conviction and determination with patience, essentially setting forth a steady, unshakable sense of confidence.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Line 3
- Line 4
- Line 5
- Line 6
- Line 7
- Line 8
- Line 9
- Line 10
- Line 11
- Line 12
- Line 13
- Line 14

EUPHONY

"From the Dark Tower" is a very euphonic poem. The speaker's language is often very poetic and musical, relying on a mixture of pleasing consonance and assonance to deliver the poem's message with an air of patient confidence. This is especially the

case when the speaker uses sounds like /l/, /m/, /n/, or /r/, all of which have a muffled, humming, or rounded quality. For example, lines 1 and 2 contain quite a few of these sounds, along with gentle /sh/, /th/, and /z/ sounds:

> We shall not always plant while others reap
> The golden increment of bursting fruit

Phrases like "golden increment" sound especially pleasing, with the mixture of guttural and fluid consonants in /gold/ ringing out like a bell while the humming /m/ and /n/ sounds giving these lines a sense of resonance and texture. That this phrase is euphonic is appropriate, given that this line is supposed to communicate a feeling of awe and appreciation for the beautiful bounty that Black people will someday be able to "reap." In this way, then, the speaker uses beautiful language to convey positive, hopeful feelings.

The speaker combines consonance and sibilance in line 7:

> Not always bend to some more subtle brute

The /z/ and /s/ sounds in this line soften the overall feeling, pairing nicely withe the rounded sounds created by the consonance. In turn, the speaker's words come to sound even more satisfying, and this reflects the speaker's calm demeanor. To that end, although the speaker acknowledges how hard it is to live under racist oppression, the tone of the poem is not pessimistic. Instead, the speaker strikes a hopeful, optimistic note that is accentuated by the use of euphony, which makes the speaker sound confident and assured that Black people will one day overcome the hardships forced upon them.

Where Euphony appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Lines 5-6
- Line 7
- Line 8
- Lines 9-10

METAPHOR

The idea of planting just so other people can "reap" the harvest can be interpreted both literally and metaphorically. From a literal standpoint, the first line functions as an allusion to slavery, since enslavers forced Black people to work in fields without any kind of compensation or reward. From a metaphorical standpoint, though, the idea of planting "while others reap" can be seen as a broader representation of the injustices of racism and how this kind of oppression disenfranchises Black people.

The speaker also uses plant-related imagery at the end of the poem by bringing up the fact that certain flowers can only bloom in darkness, ultimately suggesting that positive outcomes can emerge from unexpected circumstances. With this in mind, the speaker implies that Black people have planted their "seeds" and are simply waiting for them to grow, knowing that it's possible to flourish in even the most unlikely environments.

The speaker also uses a metaphor to describe the ways in which Black people have historically been forced to work hard to make white people's lives easier. In this metaphor, Black people are forced to play calming songs on the flute in order to relax white people, doing this to soothe the very people who oppress them.

All in all, then, "From the Dark Tower" includes a handful of metaphors that illustrate not only the injustices Black people face as a result of racism, but also the resiliency and potential for growth that these conditions have ultimately created. This, in turn, enables the speaker to more vividly depict both the hardships that Black people must endure in the U.S. *and* a sense of hope that, despite these conditions, this kind of oppression will not keep Black people down forever.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 5-6
- Lines 9-10
- Lines 11-12
- Lines 13-14

ENJAMBMENT

Most of the lines in "From the Dark Tower" are end-stopped, but there are several moments of enjambment. In fact, the very first line is enjambed, creating a moment of anticipation after the word "reap." Technically, line 1 might end there and be a full sentence—meaning that the "we" of the poem won't always have their labor harvested by others. The enjambment expands the thought, however, emphasizing the extent of what's being stolen here: "The golden increment of bursting fruit."

Line 5 is also enjambed with line 6, since the phrase "Not everlastingly while others sleep" tips into "Shall we beguile their limbs with mellow flute." By enjambing this line, the speaker adds a brief moment of anticipation at the end of line 5, as readers wait to learn what, exactly, the speaker says Black people must do while other people sleep.

Perhaps the most prominent instance of enjambment appears at the end of line 9:

> The night whose sable breast relieves the stark,
> White stars is no less lovely being dark

Line 9 ends with a comma, making it seem, at first, like it is end-

stopped. Indeed, the phrase "The night whose sable breast relieves the stark" could *almost* stand on its own. However, it soon becomes clear that the word "stark" is supposed to function *alongside* the word "white" as an adjective for the noun "stars." As such, readers will see that the two lines have been divided in the middle of a description of the stars: "the stark, white stars." In turn, it becomes clear that line 9 is enjambed, not end-stopped.

These moments of enjambment briefly accelerate the speaker's otherwise controlled and measured pace, giving the entire poem a slight hint of eagerness—a quality that subtly goes against the speaker's patient, calm tone, and perhaps suggests that the speaker is more than ready for racist oppression to come to an end, even if the speaker is also willing to wait for this to happen.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "reap / The"
- **Lines 5-6:** "sleep / Shall"
- **Lines 9-10:** "stark, / White"
- **Lines 11-12:** "all / In"

SIBILANCE

The speaker uses sibilance throughout the poem, at times adding to its musicality and evoking the content of various lines. Take lines 5 and 6, as the speaker repeats the sibilant /s/ and /sh/ sounds multiple times, along with the similar /z/ sound:

> Not everlastingly while others sleep
> Shall we beguile their limbs with mellow flute,

Note that these lines also feature the gentle /l/ sound. Together, all this consonance reflects the imagery in these lines—evoking that "sleep" and "beguil[ing]" of limbs with "mellow," or calm and soothing, music. The lines are soft and quiet—but also perhaps, through the hiss of all those /s/ sounds, subtly threatening; to "beguile" can mean to charm or entrance, and the sibilance here evokes that sense of enchantment. It's almost as if the lines are saying, "You're getting sleepy, very sleepy..."

Sibilance again appears in lines 9 and 10:

> The night whose sable breast relieves the stark,
> White stars is no less lovely being dark,

Again, /s/ and /z/ sounds combine with gentle /l/ sounds to create a sense of quietude, of gentle calm that reflects the speaker's patient confidence.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "everlastingly," "others," "sleep"
- **Line 6:** "Shall," "limbs"
- **Line 7:** "some," "subtle"
- **Line 9:** "whose," "sable," "breast," "relieves," "stark"
- **Line 10:** "stars," "is," "less"

ALLUSION

The poem opens with an allusion to slavery, as the speaker mentions "plant[ing] while others reap" the rewards. As previously mentioned, this can be interpreted metaphorically, but it's also a direct allusion to *actual* practices that were in place during the era of American slavery, when white enslavers forced enslaved Black people to tend to their crops.

Needless to say, the enslaved people who toiled day after day in these fields never got to benefit from their hard work. By saying "We shall not always plant while others reap," then, the speaker exhibits a sense of optimism and hope while also acknowledging that Black people have historically been prevented from enjoying the fruits of their own labor. This, however, is something the speaker believes will one day come to an end.

It's also worth mentioning that the opening line alludes to a biblical passage taken from *The Epistle to the Galatians*, which is found in the New Testament. The phrase is: "whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." In everyday conversation, most people distill this idea into the simpler "You reap what you sow." In essence, this outlines the idea that hard work leads to tangible rewards. For Black Americans, though, this is not necessarily the case. After all, white enslavers have been exploiting Black laborers for hundreds of years, both during and after slavery. This is why the speaker acknowledges that "others" end up "reap[ing]" what Black people sow. As such, by alluding to the phrase "You reap what you sow," the speaker highlights just how unfair it is that Black people are still unable to benefit from the rewards of their own hard work.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "We shall not always plant while others reap"

PERSONIFICATION

The speaker uses subtle personification by describing the night sky's "sable breast" and how it "relieves the stark, white stars." In particular, the words "breast" and "relieves" suggest that the speaker is personifying the sky by imbuing it with human qualities and intentions. After all, the sky doesn't actually have a "breast" upon which it could "relieve" anything (note that "relieve" here means both to comfort and to make stand out; the light of the stars literally cannot be seen without the "sable breast"—or blackness—of the night behind them).

And yet, the speaker implies that this is exactly what the sky

does to the bright stars. In this way, the speaker presents the sky as if it were a Black person who is expected to work hard to soothe and uplift the white people (the stars) who, in turn, are able to fully enjoy their lives. Because the stars would not seem so dazzling and brilliant if they weren't surrounded by the darkness of the night sky, the simple image of the dark sky forming a backdrop for the white stars represents the ways in which white people depend upon the Black people they oppress in order to succeed.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-10:** "The night whose sable breast relieves the stark, / White stars is no less lovely being dark,"

VOCABULARY

Shall (Line 1, Line 6) - An antiquated way of saying "will."

Reap (Line 1) - To gather, collect, or receive a rewarding bounty of some kind.

Increment (Line 2) - An increase.

Bursting (Line 2) - In this case, the word "bursting" refers to fruit that is so ripe that it is almost exploding.

Countenance (Line 3) - To "countenance" something is to accept or tolerate it.

Abject (Line 3) - To be "abject" is to be completely without pride or dignity.

Mute (Line 3) - Silent.

Cheap (Line 4) - Something or someone who has very little worth. The implication here is that enslavers or other white racists view Black people as inferior.

Everlastingly (Line 5) - Another word for "always." As the word itself suggests, something that is "everlasting" will last forever.

Beguile (Line 6) - To enchant or charm. In this case, the speaker is referring to the racist expectation that Black people soothe white people by putting them at ease and relieving them.

Limbs (Line 6) - A person's arms and legs.

Mellow (Line 6) - Calm, relaxing, soft.

Bend (Line 7) - In this case, the speaker uses "bend" to refer to the act of bowing in submission to somebody else.

Subtle (Line 7) - Nuanced, complicated, or understated.

Brute (Line 7) - The word "brute" most often refers to somebody who is especially violent or animalistic. This word is fairly charged with uncomfortable connotations, since racist white people often used it as a way of referring to Black people as if they were animals.

Eternally (Line 8) - For something to be "eternal" means it will last forever.

Sable (Line 9) - A literary word for the color black.

Relieves (Line 9) - In this instance, "relieves" mean to make stand out; the darkness of the night sky makes the stars stand out more vividly.

Stark (Line 9) - Something that is "stark" has particularly vivid outlines or features that stand out to create a sharp contrast with the surroundings.

Piteous (Line 12) - Deserving of sympathy and pity.

Tend (Line 14) - To look after and care for.

Agonizing (Line 14) - To be in agony means to experience great physical or emotional distress.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"From the Dark Tower" is a Petrarchan sonnet. This means it's divided into an eight-line octave and a six-line sestet. Taking the poem's rhyme scheme into account, these can further be broken down into two quatrains followed by three couplets. Like most Petrarchan sonnets, the poem also uses iambic pentameter and features a "turn" (or "volta") at the beginning of the sestet.

Here, this "turn" isn't all that surprising, since it doesn't set forth anything that contradicts what came before it. However, there *is* a subtle change when the speaker transitions from the octave to the sestet in that the poem becomes more abstract and metaphorical. The speaker offers up several metaphors about beauty and resiliency instead of simply listing all the ways in which Black people will one day stop working for white people without any of reward or benefit.

On the whole, the sonnet's form adds structure and formality to the speaker's words. Indeed, this traditional form matches the speaker's use of language, which is fairly formal and poetic. This, in turn, adds a certain sense of confidence to the speaker's tone, ultimately reflecting the speaker's confidence that Black oppression will not last forever.

METER

The poem is written in iambic pentameter, the meter typical of sonnets. Each line contains five iambs: metrical feet consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (da-DUM). Consider, for example, line 9:

> The night | whose sab- | le breast | relieves | the stark,

This line adheres perfectly to the rhythm of iambic pentameter, which gives the poem a bouncy but flowing sound—a sound that ultimately reflects the speaker's confidence and sense of optimism or hopefulness. Iambic pentameter also mimics the

rhythms of regular speech, keeping the poem accessible while also elevating its subject by using a highly-respected poetic form.

The poem maintains this iambic rhythm with surprising consistency. In fact, the only moments in which the rhythm isn't definitively iambic comes when the speaker says the words "not always." Of course, many readers will read the lines that begin with "not always" in perfect iambic pentameter, like this:

Not al- | ways bend | to some | more sub- | tle brute

But because the word "not" is a somewhat harsh word to begin a line with, many readers will perhaps hear it as a stressed syllable, meaning that the first foot of this line would be a spondee, or a foot with two stressed syllables: "Not al-." This, in turn, would only emphasize the speaker's conviction that Black people aren't destined to submit to racists forever. Either way, though, the line retains its iambic bounce, since the rest of the feet are undoubtedly iambs. As such, the speaker preserves the poem's overall rhythm.

RHYME SCHEME

As a Petrarchan sonnet, "From the Dark Tower" follows a more or less typical rhyme scheme, especially in the opening octave. The poem can be mapped out like this:

ABBAABBA CCDDEE

Most Petrarchan sonnets follow the rhyme scheme found in the poem's octave. However, the rhyme scheme of the sestet tends to vary in Petrarchan sonnets, and though the CCDDEE scheme found in "From the Dark Tower" certainly isn't out of the ordinary, it also isn't the *most* common pattern.

Setting aside convention, though, the sestet's rhyme scheme in this poem stands out because the rhymes appear very close together and rotate rather quickly. Whereas the octave spreads certain rhymes out over the entire stanza (waiting, for instance, four whole lines to rhyme "reap" with "cheap"), the sestet groups the lines into pairs of two (creating couplets), giving readers an immediate sense of conclusion and satisfaction by delivering the rhymes quickly. This, in turn, makes the sestet sound musical and cohesive.

To that end, the entire poem's use of rhyme adds to the controlled overall sound. After all, each rhyme is a perfect rhyme instead of a slant rhyme, and they all appear with dependable consistency. In this way, the speaker's words sound particularly thoughtful and controlled, which is yet another indication of the speaker's confidence and unflappability in the face of oppression and hardship.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "From the Dark Tower" uses the word "we," indicating that the speaker identifies with the people upon whom the poem focuses. Judging by the poem's allusions to slavery and racial oppression, then, it's safe to say that the speaker is Black and has experienced racism firsthand. Accordingly, some readers will perhaps view the speaker as Countee Cullen himself, since Cullen was a Black man who lived in the first half of the 20th century—a time in which racial segregation was still legal. However, there isn't quite enough identifying information about the speaker to conclude with any kind of certainty that the speaker is, indeed, Cullen himself. To that end, it's possible that the speaker is living during slavery and is talking about the prospects of freedom and liberation. Either way, what remains clear is that the speaker is Black, knows what it's like to experience racism and oppression, and is optimistic that Black people will someday leave this oppression behind.

SETTING

Given that the poem alludes to slavery, it's reasonable to assume that it is set in the United States, since the country was profoundly shaped by slavery. However, it is difficult to say *when*, exactly, the poem is set, since the speaker's words could easily pertain to almost any period during or after slavery. Indeed, the poem is even relevant to the contemporary society, since the speaker's allusions to slavery can be interpreted as metaphorical ways of talking about the ongoing disenfranchisement of Black people in the United States. However, given that Countee Cullen lived between 1903 and 1946, it seems most likely that the poem takes place at some point during this period, after slavery but before the legal end of racial segregation.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"From the Dark Tower" was published in Countee Cullen's second collection of poetry, *Copper Sun*, in 1927. Cullen was active in the Harlem Renaissance, a cultural and artistic movement that took place in New York City in the 1920s. The writing and art that came out of the Harlem Renaissance was specifically aimed at empowering the Black community and examining the social positioning of Black people in the U.S. This resonated with Cullen, who was interested at the time in examining the history of racism and oppression while also focusing on the current nature of life for Black Americans.

Because Cullen is often associated with the Harlem Renaissance, it's worth mentioning his relationship with the prolific writer Langston Hughes, who praised Cullen's work for the way it depicted Black prosperity and success in the face of hardship and oppression. However, Cullen wrote less and less

about race as time went on; by the 1930s, hardly any of his poems mentioned race at all. Hughes, for his part, criticized this apparent desire of Cullen's to turn away from matters of race. Nonetheless, Cullen became most interested in ideas surrounding beauty and nature, thereby hearkening back to the central themes of the Romantic movement.

On that note, Cullen was very affected by Romantic poets like William Wordsworth and William Blake. In "From the Dark Tower," this influence manifests itself in the speaker's florid language and metaphorical references to nature and its beauty. In this way, Cullen combines Romantic values with the racial focus of the Harlem Renaissance, all while setting forth a certain kind of musicality that is reminiscent of the Romantic poets.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"From the Dark Tower" alludes to the era of American slavery by referencing the act of planting. This, in turn, draws upon the history of slavery in the U.S., which was primarily fueled by field work carried out by enslaved people while enslavers or their white employees watched to make sure nobody escaped. Enslaved people were forced to plant, care for, and harvest the crops, which in most cases yielded cotton, tobacco, sugar, or rice—all of which enslavers would then sell. It is in this sense, then, that enslavers "reap[ed]" what enslaved people sowed, depriving Black people of benefiting from their own hard work.

This history of slavery serves as a backdrop for the poem, but it's also possible to read the poem as a response to post-slavery injustices. After all, racism in the U.S. certainly did not end with slavery. Indeed, the Jim Crow laws that enforced segregation and other racist policies were still in effect when Countee Cullen wrote "From the Dark Tower" in 1927—a good indicator of the extent to which Black Americans continued to experience bigotry and oppression long after slavery.

In fact, the poem unfortunately pertains to the landscape of contemporary times as well, considering that Black communities still struggle to gain the same kind of economic and cultural benefits that most white communities can take for granted. So although the speaker of "From the Dark Tower" expresses a sense of hopefulness by asserting that white people will "not always" prosper so unfairly over Black people, the poem's acknowledgment of this inequality still resonates today because it still exists in many ways.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Jim Crow Laws — More on the racist and segregationist policies still in place at the time Cullen wrote this poem. (https://www.britannica.com/event/Jim-Crow-law)
- The Poet's Voice — Hear Countee Cullen read one of his other well known poems, "Heritage." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UvN96fn5xTE)
- More About Cullen — To learn more about Countee Cullen, take a look at this overview of his life and work. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/countee-cullen)
- The Harlem Renaissance — For more information about the Harlem Renaissance, check out this helpful entry in the Encyclopedia Britannica. (https://www.britannica.com/event/Harlem-Renaissance-American-literature-and-art)
- A Reading of the Poem — Hear the poem read aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XhGAf-hXBrw)

HOW TO CITE

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