Giuseppe

SUMMARY

The poem's speaker recounts a story their Italian Uncle Giuseppe told them. During World War II, when Giuseppe lived in Sicily, he witnessed something strange in a flowery courtyard behind an aquarium: the world's only captive mermaid, he says, was butchered by members of the community, including a doctor, a fishmonger, and a few unnamed other people.

The mermaid, Giuseppe tells the speaker, couldn't talk. Some people said that was because she was a bit slow. But the priest—who helped to hold her down while her throat was being cut—insisted that she couldn't talk because she was nothing more than a fish. However, Giuseppe remembers, her scream of terror sounded an awful lot like a woman's.

When the mermaid's killers pulled out a golden egg sac from her body, the doctor said that this proved she was a fish, not a person, and added that eggs aren't babies. Still, he didn't eat any of the eggs when someone offered them to him.

The mermaid's killers buried her head and hands in a little box. Someone tried to steal the mermaid's wedding ring, but other people intervened, so the mermaid's hand was buried with her ring intact.

The remainder of the mermaid's body was cooked and served up to soldiers. The killers said they happened to have found a big fish washed up on the beach.

"Starvation," said Giuseppe—who was once the keeper of the aquarium—"is an excuse for a lot of things." But he couldn't look the speaker in the eye as he said so. The speaker thanks God that he couldn't.

THEMES

EVIL, CRUELTY, AND DEHUMANIZATION

In "Giuseppe," a speaker listens in horror to their uncle Giuseppe's nightmarish tale from World War II-era Italy. Alongside a crowd of other starving men, Giuseppe remembers, he butchered "the world's only captive mermaid" for food—a surreal killing that he clearly still feels guilty over. He remembers in hideous detail how the mermaid "screamed like a woman in terrible fear," how he and the other killers "took a ripe golden roe" (or fish egg pouch) from her body, and how they "put her head and her hands / in a box for burial." The only way that Giuseppe can cope with his awful deed is to tell himself the mermaid wasn't a person at all, but an animal—or at least something subhuman, a "simple" creature whom it was perfectly reasonable to butcher for food.

His fellow killers make the same justifications. When they extract the mermaid's roe, for instance, they tell themselves that "an egg is not a child," and that this mermaid is of course "just a fish." Clearly, however, none of them completely believe this. From the mermaid's screams to her "wedding ring," there's plenty to suggest that she's a sentient, suffering person. Nevertheless, these men manage to go through with the killing by insisting, in the face of all the evidence and of their own consciences, that the mermaid is just an animal.

The shape of this story suggests that human beings can inflict all kinds of evil on each other so long as they first persuade themselves that their victims aren't human, aren't like them. The poem's setting (fascist Italy during World War II) invites readers to read this surreal poem symbolically, seeing the mermaid—a precious, unique creature, just like every human being—as an image of all the people the Nazis and their allies persecuted, demonized, and murdered in the Holocaust.

More than that, the poem's surrealism suggests that such evil isn't confined to one time, place, or conflict. The first step toward atrocities, this poem says, is an insistence that another person's *difference* from you makes them less of a *person* than you—or not a person at all.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-29

GUILT, SHAME, AND THE HORRORS OF HUMAN NATURE

The speaker of this nightmarish poem is horrified and fascinated by their uncle Giuseppe's tale of murdering a mermaid during World War II. Giuseppe does his best to justify the killing to the speaker and to himself, insisting that he and the other killers were starving and that the mermaid was "just a fish," really. However, the details of the murder—and the killers' obvious guilt—make it clear that the mermaid was much more than a fish, and that Giuseppe knew it.

Though the murderers insist the mermaid is no more than dinner, they don't *treat* her as they would treat a fish. They formally bury her "head and hands," the most obviously human parts of her; they notice her "wedding ring" and prevent one of their number from stealing it; and even the doctor who extracts the "roe" (or fish egg pouch) from her body and declares that "an egg is not a child" refuses to eat that egg when it's offered to him.

In short, though Giuseppe tries his hardest to justify what he did, he and all the other killers know deep down that they committed murder to satisfy their own hunger. All these years

later, his guilt is still eating him alive. Though he tries to make excuses for himself, saying that "starvation forgives men many things," he can't "look [the speaker] in the eye" as he tells his tale.

The appalled speaker can only "thank God" that Giuseppe can't meet their eye. Without that evidence of Giuseppe's shame and remorse, there would be nothing for the speaker to do but despair of human nature altogether.

Yet Giuseppe's squeamish, evasive guilt is pretty cold comfort. Human beings, this poem suggests, are capable of truly hideous crimes—and a guilty conscience isn't always (or even often) enough to stop them. The poem's wide-ranging cast of murderous characters, from the aquarium-keeper Giuseppe to a priest to a doctor to a fishmonger, further hints that the same potential for evil lurks in everyone, no matter how ordinary, civilized, or caring they might appear.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 5-7
- Lines 8-13
- Lines 14-18
- Lines 19-23
- Line 25
- Lines 26-29

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-7

My Uncle Giuseppe ...
... and certain others.

In the first stanza of "Giuseppe," what starts out as an avuncular (that is, uncle-related) anecdote slides into a nightmare.

The poem's speaker recounts how their "Uncle Giuseppe" once told them a story from his life in Italy during World War II. While Giuseppe himself isn't the speaker here, his niece or nephew retells his story in his voice, a technique known as free indirect speech. This free verse poem, without meter or rhyme, thus presents itself as a conversational true story, just one of old Uncle Giuseppe's anecdotes. That unobtrusive form prepares the way for a terrible shock.

At first, it seems as if Giuseppe's story might be pleasant enough. It begins with a memory of the "courtyard behind the aquarium" in Sicily, a place where flowering "bougainvillea" grew in colorful abundance. Giuseppe clearly knew this place well and even remembers it fondly.

But in this flowery courtyard, Giuseppe tells the speaker, something strange and terrible happened. Listen to how an enjambment unravels the story:

> the only captive mermaid in the world
> was butchered on the dry and dusty ground

First comes the shock of the surreal: the "only captive mermaid in the world" was living right there in 1940s Sicily, apparently. But she didn't live long. The line introducing her hangs in space for a moment before collapsing into disaster: she "was butchered," Giuseppe says, "by a doctor, a fishmonger, and certain others."

The poem paints a grisly picture by indirection here. The imagery of the "dry and dusty" courtyard, juxtaposed with the "butcher[y]" of a mermaid body, invites readers to picture that dry dust splattered with gore and saltwater.

Through this dreamlike image, this poem will illuminate an all-too-real dark time and place in history: fascist Italy under Mussolini. Already, the vision of a butchered mermaid—the only one in captivity, no less!—suggests something beautiful, miraculous, and unique being wilfully abused and destroyed. That idea has an obvious connection to the atrocities of World War II, when the Nazis and other fascist forces murdered millions of Jewish people (and other persecuted groups).

This poem thus takes on the symbolic power of a nightmare. Every human life is as miraculous and irreplaceable as a mermaid, this poem will suggest—and to become a murderer, one has to persuade oneself that isn't so.

Take another look at the phrasing of those last two lines:

> [...] butchered on the dry and dusty ground
> by a doctor, a fishmonger, and certain others.

Look beyond the dark humor of the "fishmonger" coming along to help in the butchery as well as the "doctor"—a specialist for each half of the mermaid, one supposes—and notice Giuseppe's evasive language. Rather than starting by naming the butchers themselves, he simply says the mermaid "was butchered"—and rather than listing all the butchers, he trails off into vagueness: besides the doctor and the fishmonger, "certain others" were there too, he hedges. Giuseppe's hands, readers can guess, are not clean, and nor is his conscience.

LINES 8-13

She, it, had ...
... in terrible fear.

The speaker goes on telling Giuseppe's story in Giuseppe's words. Just as in his vagueness about those "certain others" who participated in the mermaid's murder, Giuseppe sounds self-protective here. He revises "she" to "it," for instance, playing down the mermaid's humanity. Then he notes that she hadn't "learned to speak," as if in attempted justification for the murderers' actions: *Well, if she could speak, we wouldn't have killed her*. Some unnamed parties, he reports, said that she was

"simple," incapable of learning—and some, like the "priest" in attendance at the butchering, argued that she couldn't learn because she was "just a fish."

In one way or another, then, everyone involved in this mermaid's death did their best to distance themselves from her, needing to believe she must be somehow less than human. Otherwise, it wouldn't be all right to kill her (or to imprison her in an aquarium, for that matter—she seems to have been in there long enough for people to have tried to teach her to speak).

But there's something naggingly human about this mermaid. Giuseppe calls her "she" first, then corrects himself to "it," then reverts to "she," as if unwillingly drawn back to the truth. And when her "throat was cut," he recalls, she "screamed like a woman in terrible fear"—a simile of self-defense. She didn't scream *like* a woman in fear, she *was* a woman in fear, and it's just this that Giuseppe can't let himself admit.

He also can't look directly at the scene of the crime. In this stanza, he holds the moment when the mermaid's "throat was cut" at arm's length: his sinister phrasing withholds the knowledge of who did the cutting. What he does remember, and see in his mind's eye, is:

> [...] the priest who held one of her hands
> while her throat was cut,

The enjambment there prepares a nasty little surprise. At first, it seems as if the priest might be performing his traditional deathbed function and consoling the dying person, holding her hand to comfort her as she goes. Then the sentence picks up on a new line, and it turns out that he isn't holding the mermaid's hand to comfort her, but to restrain her: he pins "one of her hands" while someone else pins the other.

This stanza suggests how important it is to these men to dehumanize their victim. They have to believe she's "just a fish," or they won't be able to live with themselves. Grimly, they all seem pretty good at performing the necessary mental gymnastics—even and especially the priest, a man who's meant to embody compassion.

But Giuseppe's struggle to hold his memory of the mermaid's humanity at a distance suggests that he never totally believed she was "just a fish."

LINES 14-18

And when they ...
... offered to him.

In this stanza, the real butchery begins. The mermaid's killers, Giuseppe recalls, carved up her body and pulled out a "ripe golden roe"—a fish's egg sac—"from her side."

The intense, specific imagery of that shining egg pouch suggests that the sight stayed vividly in Giuseppe's memory. If it was "ripe," it was bursting with life, plump as fresh fruit. And its "golden" gleam underscores its value. These are the eggs of the "only captive mermaid in the world," remember.

The roe seems to have made an impression on the other killers, too:

> [...] the doctor said
> this was proof she was just a fish
> and anyway an egg is not a child,

Something about this egg pouch makes the doctor jump to reassure everyone that the mermaid was "just a fish"—a point that he rather undermines when he points out that "anyway an egg is not a child," suggesting that everyone is thinking just the opposite. The sight of the roe, in other words, made everyone uncomfortably aware that they had just killed a pregnant woman, an idea they had to swiftly deny. The doctor's actions here speak far louder than his words: when the roe is shared around, he "refuse[s]" to take any.

This moment reveals *why* the killers are butchering the mermaid. They're *hungry*. If they can persuade themselves this mermaid is "just a fish," then they get to do what you do with a fish and eat it for dinner.

But the killers' self-delusion, this moment suggests, is incomplete. Insist though they might that all they're doing is carving up a fish for supper, they can't talk their bodies into belief. No matter how hungry he is, the doctor can't bring himself to eat what some part of him sees as a dead fetus.

Notice, too, that Giuseppe singles out the "priest" and the "doctor" in these stanzas—figures meant to embody compassion and healing. There's a horrible irony in their role here, and a terror. Civilized society and human compassion, in this story, aren't holding together, or perhaps never meant much to begin with.

LINES 19-23

Then they put ...
... ring stayed put.

The killers, Giuseppe has recalled, were not what you would call totally confident that the mermaid they butchered was "just a fish." Their hypocrisy becomes even clearer in this stanza. After carving the mermaid up, they:

> Then they put her head and her hands
> in a box for burial

Again, an enjambment prepares a horrible surprise. At that line break, readers wonder for an awful second: *what are they going to do with her head and hands?*

The burial might seem like a relieving answer. At least the killers didn't just eat the mermaid's face. But on reflection, this

moment might be even *more* chilling for its macabre parody of respect. The killers don't eat the parts of the mermaid that are most obviously *like them*, most clearly human. Had they fully convinced themselves that she was fish and fish alone, it seems unlikely they would have gone to the trouble; nobody holds a funeral for a fish head.

All along, the murderers have known what they were doing, in other words. They have not fully succeeded in dehumanizing the mermaid—but that hasn't stopped them from killing and eating her.

That becomes even clearer in a moment of nightmarish strangeness:

> [...] someone tried to take her wedding ring,
> but the others stopped him,
> and the ring stayed put.

The image of the mermaid's "wedding ring" summons up a whole underwater culture, a past life, a tragedy even before the butchery: where is this mermaid's poor spouse now? It also makes it transparently clear that this being wasn't "just a fish."

Again, the fact that someone *stopped* a thief from taking the ring is perhaps more (or differently) disturbing than the alternative. The murderers have already completed an act of dreadful cruelty. In stopping the ring from being stolen, they try their best to preserve a veneer of *decency*; it's their own consciences, not the mermaid's dignity, that they're protecting here.

LINES 24-25

The rest they ...
... on the beach.

The fifth stanza uses just two flat end-stopped lines:

> The rest they cooked and fed to the troops.
> They said a large fish had been found on the beach.

After all the unease and hypocrisy and dark irony of the past stanzas, Giuseppe presents the fate of the mermaid's body in a matter-of-fact reporter's voice: *and that's what happened*. Matter-of-fact, or perhaps traumatized: at this point in the story, it's obvious that Giuseppe is deeply ashamed by his part in this grisly story.

The killers claimed, Giuseppe remembers, that "a large fish had been found on the beach," a line that makes it clear the killers are guilty of murder, and know it. If they ever truly believed the mermaid was a fish, they could have blithely told the troops: *Oh, yeah, we butchered that mermaid we've been keeping in the aquarium—dig in!*

That the mermaid's body went to feed the "troops" also grounds readers in the setting once more. This is Italy in World War II, and those troops are fascist forces, allied with the Nazis. These men's murder of a partially and squeamishly dehumanized victim is only one among many.

LINES 26-29

Starvation forgives men ...
... I thank God.

In the final stanza, Giuseppe's story winds up, and the poem's lens changes. Readers have been immersed in Giuseppe's perspective through free indirect speech: the speaker has retold Giuseppe's story in Giuseppe's own words. Now, readers seem to be standing next to the speaker in the moment they first heard this story, listening again as Giuseppe winds up:

> Starvation forgives men many things,
> my uncle, the aquarium keeper, said,

These lines reveal that, like the doctor and the priest, Giuseppe broke a trust on the day of this killing. As the "aquarium keeper," the man responsible for the mermaid's care, he might have been a last line of defense between mermaid and murderers, but he was not.

They also reveal that Giuseppe is desperate for forgiveness, but can't quite ask for it directly. Trying to justify himself, he can only say, in general terms, that when people are starving they do all sorts of terrible things they shouldn't be held accountable for—an indirect plea that his listening niece or nephew might understand and offer some sort of absolution. Even the fact that Giuseppe is *telling* this story rather than hiding it suggests he can't bear to carry his memories alone. He's making a confession.

However, he can't quite bring himself to ask forgiveness for what he's really done. He can't say, in so many words, *I am a murderer*. His story is evasive and indirect throughout.

It's for that reason that the speaker "thank[s] God" that Giuseppe can't "look [them] in the eye" as he makes his halfhearted excuse about hunger. The one crumb of hope the speaker has left for their uncle now is that he *knows* what he did, even if he's too weak to fully admit it.

The speaker's grim relief at the end of the poem tells the reader a lot about them. The speaker clearly feels a kind of pity for their uncle, whose guilt and shame are both deep and deserved. They might feel, too, that there's something especially disturbing about knowing someone close to you could commit a monstrous crime.

Last but far from least, they can't be happy at the realization that an orderly society, with its doctors and priests and fishmongers, might dissolve into hideous cruelty without exactly losing its *shape*. The doctor, the priest, the fishmonger, and the aquarium keeper preserve their social roles even as they commit a crime that cuts across the most basic moral

principles. In the face of these harrowing realizations, no wonder the speaker finds relief in Giuseppe's guilt, however imperfect.

Here at the end, readers might pause to think about what the *mermaid* in particular gives to this poem. History, after all, is full of real-life atrocities that an old Uncle Giuseppe might describe with a similar mixture of self-justification, horror, and shame. But by presenting the victim as a mermaid, Ford implies that every life, rightly seen, is distinct and miraculous, as astonishing as "the only mermaid in captivity." The poem's central image—the gutting of a wonder—brings that reality to life with the awful symbolic clarity of nightmare.

The image of the mermaid also suggests that humanity latches onto difference to justify cruelty. The mermaid's commonalities with her killers are far more meaningful than her differences; their funeral for "her head and her hands" and solicitude for her wedding ring reveals as much. People who want to use or destroy other people, this poem suggests, will begin by looking for reasons that their victims *aren't* people—reasons that will always be spurious.

SYMBOLS

THE MERMAID

The mermaid can be read as a symbol of all those who have been persecuted over a perceived difference—and as an image of the intrinsic value of human life.

Much about this mermaid seems very human. She has a woman's voice, face, and hands, and she even wears a wedding ring. In order to persuade themselves she's not a person like them, her persecutors have to tell themselves she's "just a fish"—that the fishy parts of her outweigh her obvious humanity. This, the poem hints, is just what people do when they decide that it's their right to abuse another group: they focus on what makes that group *different* from them rather than paying attention to the more important matter of their shared humanity.

Ford's use of a mermaid in this role also suggests that there's something precious and magical about every human life. The mermaid's wondrous rarity—she's the "only captive mermaid in the world"—parallels every individual's irreplaceability.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "the only captive mermaid in the world"
- **Lines 8-9:** "She, it, had never learned to speak / because she was simple, or so they'd said,"
- **Line 13:** "But she screamed like a woman in terrible fear."
- **Lines 14-16:** "And when they took a ripe golden roe / from her side, the doctor said / this was proof she was just a fish"
- **Lines 19-22:** "Then they put her head and her hands / in a box for burial / and someone tried to take her wedding ring, / but the others stopped him,"

POETIC DEVICES

IMAGERY

Flashes of imagery give the poem the bright, horrible clarity of a nightmare.

The poem takes place in a scene that Giuseppe knows well: the "courtyard behind the aquarium" where he worked in Sicily back during the years of World War II. The speaker paints a picture of a spot where the flowering bougainvillea bush flourishes under hot sun; the ground here is "dry and dusty" in an Italian summer.

In these ordinary, pleasant surroundings, a terrible crime takes place: Giuseppe and a gang of accomplices butcher "the only captive mermaid in the world." Giuseppe—the aquarium keeper who must have been responsible for this mermaid's care—remembers her scream, "like a woman in terrible fear," as well as the sight of a "ripe golden roe" (a fish egg pouch) that he and his fellow murderers pull "from her side."

That "golden roe" is the only moment of explicit visual imagery in the poem; Ford leaves the hot fuchsia of the bougainvillea, the dull yellow-brown of the dust, and the splattering crimson blood up to his readers' imaginations. Standing alone, the gleam of the golden egg-sac stresses that the murderers have destroyed something precious and beautiful. An egg, the doctor in attendance declares, is "not a child"—but his need to insist on this suggests that he and the other murderers are uncomfortably aware they've killed off not just this mermaid, but a whole potential lineage of mermaids.

Giuseppe's specific attention to the roe's bright, "ripe" gold suggests that this image in particular haunts him. While he never looks directly at the murder in this poem—he never describes the actual throat-slitting, for instance, just the priest holding the mermaid down—he can't look away from this image of the beauty and life he's destroyed.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "the dry and dusty ground"
- **Line 13:** "she screamed like a woman in terrible fear"
- **Lines 14-15:** "they took a ripe golden roe / from her side"

ENJAMBMENT

The poem's enjambments frame nasty shocks, uncovering the horror of the mermaid's murder and the hypocrisy of her

killers.

For instance, take a look at this moment from the tale of the mermaid's death:

> but the priest who held one of her hands
> while her throat was cut,

The enjambment here at first makes it seem as if the priest might have been sympathetically holding the mermaid's hand, supporting her through her ordeal. The next line destroys that briefly comforting impression. The priest is in fact holding the mermaid down, pinning "one of her hands" while another murderer pins the other. This enjambment highlights a horrible parody of a priest's usual deathbed role, turning a comforter into a killer.

And listen to the enjambment in lines 19-20:

> Then they put her head and her hands
> in a box for burial

Here, the mermaid's severed head and hands—the most uncontrovertibly human parts of her body—sit there on a line of their own for a moment, making a grisly impression, inviting readers to wonder what awful thing the killers might have done with them. The next line reveals that the murderers actually *buried* these body parts in a little box of their own. This apparent mark of respect comes as a shock: this miniature funeral only highlights the killers' hypocrisy. Clearly, this line reveals, some part of them knows they've committed a murder. Again, an enjambment frames and centers a dreadful revelation.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "me / that"
- **Lines 5-6:** "world / was"
- **Lines 6-7:** "ground / by"
- **Lines 8-9:** "speak / because"
- **Lines 10-11:** "hands / while"
- **Lines 14-15:** "roe / from"
- **Lines 15-16:** "said / this"
- **Lines 19-20:** "hands / in"

END-STOPPED LINE

The poem uses a careful, measured progression of end-stopped lines to evoke the inexorable horror of Giuseppe's memory. This story is clearly one he's told himself over and over, one he can't escape: it moves as deliberately as a nightmare.

Listen, for instance, to these lines from the first stanza:

> in Sicily in World War Two,
> in the courtyard behind the aquarium,
> where the bougainvillea grows so well,
> the only captive mermaid in the world
> was butchered on the dry and dusty ground

Each of the highlighted lines is self-contained, a little unit of memory—and at first, the memory seems as if it might not be so awful. It takes place "in the courtyard behind the aquarium"—a place that Giuseppe clearly knew well—"where the bougainvillea grows so well"—how nice! These solid, self-contained lines seem to hold the story back, as if Giuseppe wants to linger on his sweeter memories of Sicily for a moment before the real horror begins.

In the fifth stanza, meanwhile, flat end-stops evoke the unchangeable conclusion of the story:

> The rest they cooked and fed to the troops.
> They said a large fish had been found on the beach.

These two lines are plain statements of fact, each landing with a thump. In the context of the rest of the poem, however, their self-contained simplicity feels horrific. The soldiers devoured the mermaid, her killers declared that she was a fish, and that was that: the deed, these heavy, final-feeling lines suggest, was done, and cannot be undone.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Two,"
- **Line 3:** "aquarium,"
- **Line 4:** "well,"
- **Line 7:** "others."
- **Line 9:** "said,"
- **Line 12:** "speak."
- **Line 13:** "fear."
- **Line 16:** "fish"
- **Line 17:** "child,"
- **Line 18:** "him."
- **Line 21:** "ring,"
- **Line 22:** "him,"
- **Line 23:** "put."
- **Line 24:** "troops."
- **Line 25:** "beach."
- **Line 26:** "things,"
- **Line 27:** "said,"
- **Line 28:** "eye,"
- **Line 29:** "God."

SIMILE

The poem uses only a single simile—but it's a critical one.

When he and his fellow killers prepared to murder the mermaid, Giuseppe recalls:

> [...] she screamed like a woman in terrible fear.

Perhaps at first glance, readers will barely count this as a simile at all. The mermaid screams *like* a woman in terrible fear because she *is* a woman in terrible fear. But Giuseppe's use of the word "like" there is telling. He and his accomplices, after all, can only bring themselves to kill the mermaid because they've persuaded themselves that she's not a woman at all, "just a fish."

Clearly, however, he's haunted by that terrible scream, and by his memories of the mermaid's humanity more generally. A fish who wears a wedding ring and screams in terror hardly seems a fish at all—and Giuseppe knows it.

The simile here, then, suggests that Giuseppe is still trying his hardest to hold his agonizing guilt at bay, telling himself that the mermaid wasn't really a person: she was just *like* a person. Though he wants to believe he only killed a fish—how could he not have, he was starving!—his return to the sound of that scream shows he can't escape the truth his senses, his memories, and his conscience tell him.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 13:** "she screamed like a woman in terrible fear"

IRONY

The men who assemble to gut this poem's mermaid are a respectable crew. There's a fishmonger, a doctor, a priest, and Giuseppe himself, the aquarium keeper—all identified, at one time or another, by their role in society. Each has a profession, and three of those professions are dedicated to care: the aquarium keeper cares for his creatures, the doctor cares for his patients' health, the priest cares for his congregation's souls.

It's thus bleakly ironic that these are the men who assemble to butcher the mermaid. Their social role is to look out for other people (or fish); their actual behavior denies a fellow person's humanity. Ford underscores the irony with a dark image of the priest holding "one of [the mermaid's] hands" as she dies—a moment that might seem almost touching (in a macabre sort of way) until the reader realizes that the priest is actually holding the mermaid *down*.

Through his images of caretakers ironically turned to murderers, Ford suggests that *everyone* carries in them the potential for deep evil. A civilized role, a religious or professional ideal: none of these things is proof against monstrous cruelty. Perhaps the false veneer of decency even allows people to *justify* terrible acts: *I can't be doing something evil, I'm a priest!*

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "a doctor, a fishmonger, and certain others."
- **Lines 10-11:** "but the priest who held one of her hands / while her throat was cut,"
- **Lines 15-17:** "the doctor said / this was proof she was just a fish / and anyway an egg is not a child,"
- **Line 27:** "my uncle, the aquarium keeper,"

VOCABULARY

Sicily (Line 2) - A region in southern Italy.

Bougainvillea (Line 4) - A big flowering shrub with bright fuchsia, red, or purple flowers.

Fishmonger (Line 7) - Someone who sells fish.

Roe (Lines 14-15) - A fish's ovary, full of maturing eggs. Fish roe are a delicacy in a number of cuisines.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Giuseppe" is written in 29 lines of free verse divided into six irregular stanzas. In this form, the speaker recounts their Uncle Giuseppe's story of murdering a mermaid in Italy during World War II.

The first five stanzas tell Giuseppe's tale, episode by awful episode. The first stanza introduces a nightmarish scene: the world's "only captive mermaid" laid out for butchery behind a Sicilian aquarium. Each new stanza thereafter captures a stage in that murder:

- At first, the mermaid's killers justify their deed by dehumanizing their victim.
- But as the stanzas unfold, their behavior around the murder—for instance, their creepy funeral for just the mermaid's head and hands, her most human parts—suggests they never really believed their own story.
- All different lengths, the stanzas move at a deliberate, dreadful pace, taking as long as they need to follow the story to the bottom. For instance, in lines 24-25 ("The rest they cooked [...] on the beach"), it takes only takes two terrible, flat end-stopped lines for Giuseppe to recount the ultimate fate of the mermaid's corpse.

The final stanza switches its lens. Emerging from Giuseppe's story, the reader now watches as Giuseppe finishes telling his tale to the speaker, unable to look them in the eye—and hears the speaker "thank God" that at least Giuseppe feels guilt over what he did.

The poem's movement from storytelling to the *aftermath* of storytelling invites readers to consider the long afterlife of atrocities. No dreadful act, the poem's shape suggests, stays in the past: Giuseppe and the speaker will both have to reckon

with the mermaid's murder and the questions it raises about humanity's capacity for evil.

METER

"Giuseppe" is written in free verse, so it doesn't use a regular meter. Instead, Ford uses methodical line breaks and enjambments to create a steady, sinister pace. The poem's speaker seems to be recounting his uncle Giuseppe's story with creeping horror.

Consider the way the first stanza ("My Uncle Giuseppe told me [...] and certain others.") builds. The pace of these lines (all about the same length) is as methodical as the scene of butchery to come. At first, it seems as if Uncle Giuseppe might be about to recount a relatively pleasant memory: the lovely bougainvillea (a flowering shrub) behind the aquarium gets a whole line to itself, for instance. Then, unexpectedly, the "only captive mermaid in the world" puts in an appearance—hangs there for one tantalizing moment—and is murdered in the very next line. Each unrushed line carries readers closer to a nightmare vision in horribly slow, inexorable steps.

RHYME SCHEME

Written in free verse, "Giuseppe" doesn't use a rhyme scheme—a choice that only makes the poem feel more like a nightmare. The poem's unadorned, naturalistic language makes it sound as if the speaker is telling a true story. But this conversational tone butts up against images of surreal horror. If Ford had used meter and rhyme here, the obvious artfulness might have given readers a little room to breathe; as it stands, the speaker's almost ordinary-sounding voice makes the mermaid's demise feel terribly strange and terribly real at exactly the same time.

SPEAKER

Readers learn much less about the poem's actual speaker than they do about the speaker's uncle Giuseppe, the poem's titular character. The speaker retells a story of Giuseppe's, capturing Giuseppe's surreal and horribly vivid memory of helping to murder a mermaid during the World War II years. The speaker uses free indirect speech: that is, they tell Giuseppe's story in Giuseppe's voice, not their own. It's the guilt-ridden Giuseppe, not the speaker, who refers to the mermaid as "she, it," revising the pronoun to try to make himself feel less like what he did was murder.

The speaker's *own* voice comes through clearest in the poem's closing stanza, where they "thank God" that Giuseppe at least seems to know he did wrong, even though he's still trying to make excuses for himself. That final haunted, fervent line suggests that the speaker is appalled by Giuseppe's story, relieved to have the slightest crumb of proof that Giuseppe hasn't fully succeeded in justifying his dreadful actions to himself.

The speaker comes across as both sympathetic to Giuseppe (who clearly suffers from a very bad conscience over the murder) and terrified by humanity's capacity for evil. The realization that even their sweet old uncle could commit such crimes hits awfully close to home.

SETTING

The poem is set in a kind of dream-version of Italy during World War II. More specifically, it takes place at an aquarium in Sicily. This picturesque place "where the bougainvillea grows so well" makes an incongruous setting for a scene of horror. The juxtaposition between Giuseppe's wistful memories of flowery Sicily and the murder of the mermaid warns that evil can happen in your own backyard, literally and metaphorically.

The specific time period here invites readers to read the poem symbolically. The mermaid's murderers have to dehumanize her to do what they do—just as the fascists who murdered millions of people during World War II dehumanized their victims. But the poem's surreal image of the dying mermaid also suggests that this isn't *just* about World War II, but about how atrocities happen wherever and whenever they happen. The first step toward murder, the poem suggests, is convincing yourself your victim isn't a person.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Roderick Ford is an award-winning contemporary Welsh poet and playwright living in Ireland. He has published two books of poetry, *The Shoreline of Falling* (2005), in which "Giuseppe" first appeared, and *The Green Crown* (2010). He has also published a number of plays, including *The Spider's House* (in which, in Ford's words, a man "hallucinates a psychologist for himself") and *Ob Gob*.

Ford's poetry uses dreamlike images (or nightmarish ones, in the case of "Giuseppe") to explore memories, fantasies, and human nature. Many of his poems look on as a character undergoes some strange encounter, more or less surreal: a grieving elderly lady has a run-in with a spirit, two children meet a sinister man in the woods, a watcher observes an ancient beast by the seashore.

In interviews, Ford often discusses the role of being on the autism spectrum in his poetic career. Living what he calls an "outsider life," he says, has made him an "autodidact," a self-educated person with an atypical perspective. His work reflects a curious, imaginative approach to the world, taking nothing for granted.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Giuseppe" draws on the grim history of World War II. Set in the fascist dictator Mussolini's Italy, the poem uses dreamlike imagery to explore what happens when people manage to persuade themselves that other people aren't human.

The poem's mermaid, who screams very human screams as she's cut up for food, might be read as a symbol of all the people whom the Nazis and their allies dehumanized and murdered during World War II. It is by telling themselves their victim is "simple" and "only a fish" that the men who butcher the mermaid can bear to do their grisly work. In just this way, the fascists of the WWII era represented the Jewish people (and other persecuted groups, including gay people and the Romani) as subhuman. As the great cartoonist Art Spiegelman has famously explored, fascist propaganda justified mass murder by depicting Jewish people as rats, mice, and cockroaches.

Ford's speaker finds some small consolation in the fact that his uncle Giuseppe feels guilt over murdering the mermaid. But the poem's unflinching depictions of the evil people can do even *while* feeling guilt suggests that a capacity for remorse isn't enough to quell horrors. Writing in 2005, perhaps Ford was also thinking of the war that the United States and United Kingdom had recently launched in Iraq—a war of dubious motives that would kill many innocents.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Ford's Website — Visit Ford's website to read more of his poetry. (https://www.roderickford.com/)
- An Interview with Ford — Read an interview in which Ford discusses his life and work. (https://adiarts.ie/artists/showcasing/meet-an-artist/roderick-ford/)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to Ford himself reading the poem aloud. (https://youtu.be/fElvHm-76NI)

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