Half-Past Two

SUMMARY

One day, during school, a boy misbehaved and broke the rules, although the speaker doesn't remember exactly what he did.

The teacher reprimanded the boy. She told him that because he'd misbehaved, he'd have to stay behind, by himself, in the classroom until 2:30 p.m.

The teacher was so angry with the boy that she forgot he didn't know what or when "half-past two" was, since she hadn't yet taught him how to tell time. But after being scolded, the boy was so worried about being bad that he didn't want to ask the teacher what she meant.

Time itself was already pretty familiar to the boy. The speaker describes, in childlike language, how, to the boy, there seemed to be a specific time for everything: time when you got up and out of bed, time when you had to leave for school, time when you had to go home, and time when you got to watch TV.

There were even specific times when his grandma would ask him to give her a kiss. All of these times were important and familiar, but "half-past two" was new and strange.

The boy also knew what a clock looked like. To him, the numbers around the clock appeared like eyes, and the two hands seemed like a pair of legs. But it was impossible for the boy to understand what the clock was trying to say.

So he just kept waiting, like at the start of a story beginning "Once upon a time," until it seemed like he'd evaded time's reach entirely. He became convinced that he'd fallen out of time altogether.

Now, he existed only in the scent of the wilting flowers on his teacher's desk, in the tiny scratch of his hangnail, in the air outside the classroom window, a place with no beginning or end.

"My goodness," said the teacher, bustling back into the room. She had completely forgotten about the boy. She told him to hurry up and leave or else he'd be late.

The school day resumed, and things seemed normal again. The boy made it back home in time for tea, although things were a little hurried.

Still, the boy would always remember how, by not knowing any better, he'd once found a way to disappear into a world outside of time itself.

THEMES

CHILDLIKE WONDER AND UNDERSTANDING

"Half-past Two" takes the reader inside the mind of a young boy who has been given detention. Because he hasn't yet learned how to tell time, however, the boy doesn't fully grasp the terms of his punishment: to sit, alone, in the schoolroom, until half-past two (that is, 2:30 p.m.). The little boy's strange experience of time during his punishment playfully reveals the difference between the way that children and adults understand the world—and suggests that there's something magical about a child's-eye view.

Since the little boy hasn't learned to read a clock, time, to him, is just when things happen: when you wake up and get dressed, when you head off to school, when you go back home, when you watch TV. The speaker mimics the little boy's understanding by writing out how it sounds when an adult tells him it's "time" for something: "Timetogohomenowtime," "Timeformykisstime." Time is something kids experience in the present—it isn't abstract and measurable to them like it is for adults. Instead, it's tied to specific events and activities.

Only having thought of time in terms of events, and never having learned to read a clock, the little boy has no concept of time as an empty unit of measurement. Compared to all "the important times" the little boy is already familiar with, "half-past two" thus feels made-up and arbitrary. Perhaps, the poem thus hints, the way that adults frame and think about the world is a bit artificial: clock time certainly isn't the only way to understand time!

The little boy's special perspective on time allows him to have a strangely magical experience during his detention: rather than counting down the minutes like an adult would, he gets a glimpse of a whole new concept of time. In detention, it's not time for anything. Without events or clock time to measure by, the boy experiences something like infinity, time without end. Even though it's disorienting, the experience is also fascinating and awe-inspiring. Before this experience, the boy thought about his life like a story, with a clear beginning ("onceupona") and lots to do in between ("timefors"). But now he finds himself "beyond" and "out of reach" of what he knows.

Even after the teacher returns and things go back to normal, this episode makes a lasting impression: as the speaker says, the boy "never forgot" the wondrous experience of sitting in that seemingly infinite, in-between space outside of time itself. Perhaps that childlike innocence is never truly lost. After all, the speaker suggests, in some ways, the little boy is still there in

that "clockless land," where he will stay "for ever." Now, having grown up, with a grownup's perspective and experience, time will never seem quite as strange and extraordinary again. Adults might lose the ability to see things in such an unconventional way, but childhood discoveries can be lasting and profound.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 10-24
- Lines 28-33

AUTHORITY AND ADULTHOOD

The poem's speaker describes a little boy's anxiety and confusion after being scolded by a teacher for misbehaving in some way. This teacher and the other adults around him seem to have absolute authority. They know things he doesn't, control his day-to-day life, and decide what's right and wrong. By adopting the little boy's point of view, the speaker makes adults' attempts to regulate the world around them seem harsh and strange—and often arbitrary and careless, too. Adult authority over children is powerful, the poem suggests, but not necessarily wise or just.

The poem's speaker emphasizes that adults control the boy's life: they have the power to tell him what to do and where to go, to declare what's right and wrong, and to punish him when he misbehaves. For example, when the boy's teacher puts him in detention, she doesn't make it clear why: all he knows is that he's done "Something Very Wrong." The boy accepts that, whatever he did, it must have been terrible. Ironically, though, it probably actually wasn't very bad at all. The speaker notes in an aside that "I forget what [the boy's crime] was," suggesting it was probably not really that big a deal.

However, since a grown-up is upset with him, the boy feels certain he must have done something terrible and deserves a serious punishment: he accepts his teacher's judgment with fear and awe. Cowed by the apparent total power of the grown-ups around him, the boy doesn't even think to ask questions when his teacher—known only as an imposing "She"—tells him to stay until half-past two, despite the fact that he can't tell time. It doesn't matter that he doesn't understand the terms or length of his punishment: to the child, grownup word is law. "So he waited," the speaker says. Having broken the rules once, it doesn't occur to the boy to question them again.

But while the teacher seems to be the ultimate authority (at least, to the little boy), she's certainly not really all-knowing and all-powerful: while he serves his detention, she goes away and forgets she left him there. When she at last returns, her anger has vanished, and she no longer seems quite so scary: she "scuttl[es]" back into the room in a rush, saying, "My goodness [...] I forgot all about you." Although she still has the power to restore things to normal and "slot[] him back into schooltime," the incident leaves her embarrassed, even a little apologetic, reminding readers that grownups aren't really as powerful—or as infallible—as they might seem. They might be in charge, but adults are still just people, not gods.

In this way, the poem suggests that adult power isn't either as great or as just as children might at first feel: adults, for all their ability to steer children's lives, make mistakes and sometimes behave unfairly. To the speaker, the whole episode is a little bit funny. Their wry tone gently pokes fun at the little boy's confusion as well as the absurdity of his punishment. Adults might have authority over kids, but not even they can understand, or control, something as vast as time itself.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-9
- Lines 25-28

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

Once upon a ...
... what it was).

"Half-Past Two" begins as if the speaker were about to recount a fairy tale, riffing on the cliché opening "Once upon a time." The poem takes place more specifically "One upon a schooltime"—a compound word that establishes the setting—a classroom—while also foreshadowing the way the poem's main character conceives of time.

Line 2 then introduces that main character: a young boy, who is referred to only as "he" and "him." The speaker declines to give him a name just as, later, they will refrain from naming his teacher. This anonymity makes the poem more fablelike; he could be any boy, and this could be any classroom.

The speaker informs the reader, in no uncertain terms, that the boy has done "Something Very Wrong." Readers never learn exactly what that "Something" was. Still, the phrase "Something Very Wrong" is capitalized for emphasis—clearly, this is serious stuff; the phrase might be ambiguous, but the capitalized words are formidable and imposing. They communicate the angry tone of an adult chastising a small child.

And yet, the details of this incident are left intentionally vague throughout the poem, as if the episode were only half-remembered. In fact, the speaker admits in the next line that they "forget what it was" that the boy had, thoroughly undermining the idea that something truly heinous has taken place. If the speaker can't remember what the boy did, his terrible crime couldn't have been all that serious after all!

The first stanza of the poem is thus effectively a bait-and-switch. It sets the reader up to expect one thing, but it then

delivers the speaker's parenthetical like a punchline. This goes a long way in establishing the poem's wry tone. Although the speaker takes the young boy's feelings seriously, they also put the whole episode into perspective.

Metrically, the first two lines play another trick on the reader as well. They set the reader up to expect a somewhat regular pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables:

> Once upon a schooltime
> He did Something Very Wrong

The trochaic meter of these first two lines has a childish, sing-song quality to it. It actually sounds quite a lot like a nursery rhyme. Line 3, however, breaks the pattern. Like line 1, line three has six syllables; unlike line 1, those syllables can be broken into two anapests instead of three iambs:

> I forget what it was

Because anapests are made up of three beats, not two, one might say that an anapestic meter is a little more complex, or even grownup. The switch in meter coincides with a sudden shift in tone—and with the adult speaker interrupting the narrative to provide some grown-up context.

LINES 4-9

And She said he'd done ...
... wicked to remind her.)

The boy's teacher, an anonymous, imperious "She," reiterates that "he'd done / Something Very Wrong." His punishment is to stay put in the classroom until "half-past two." Basically, he's got detention!

The second stanza is filled with sibilance (as both /s/ and /sh/) sounds. This lends a lisping quality to the sound of these words; a reader can almost imagine a young child, maybe missing a couple of teeth, recounting what had happened:

> And She said he'd done
> Something Very Wrong, and must
> Stay in the school-room till half-past two.

There's a bit of assonance at work here too, with the repetition of the /ee/ sound between "She" and "he'd" and the long /oo/ of "school-room" and "two." Though the poem has no regular meter or rhyme scheme, such devices keep the language sounding musical and distinctly poetic. Notice, too, that only "She" is capitalized. There's a clear power difference at play here: "She" is in charge.

The speaker then interrupts the narrative again with another parenthetical. Critically, the teacher or schoolmistress hasn't realized that the boy's punishment—detention till 2:30 p.m.—won't make any sense to him, because "She hadn't taught him Time." Here, "Time" is capitalized to underscore its conceptual significance. This line suggests that not only has the little boy not yet learned how to *tell* time or read a clock, he also is missing some critical information about what time is or how it works. This is a problem, obviously, but he's too afraid of getting into more trouble to ask her what she means. The boy's misdeed, the "Something Very Wrong," has been so overblown that he's now convinced that he's actually bad, or "wicked," and he's prepared to accept his punishment.

LINES 10-15

He knew a ...
... not half-past two.

The speaker asserts that even though the boy isn't sure what "half-past two means," he does, in fact, know "a lot of time." The speaker then lists many of the "times" the boy knows, including "Gettinguptime," "timeyouwereofftime," and "Timetogohomenowtime." The speaker uses these word mashups to illustrate how the boy thinks about parts of his daily life. It's as if the speaker is actually transcribing the boy's childish references to different "times" of day.

Athough this way of telling time is unique to the little boy, these different "times" all reflect the speech of adults telling the little boy where to go and what to do. For him, things happen not because some arbitrary numbers line up on a clock, but because a parent, teacher, or grandparent says so. Each of these times is defined by an action or activity. For the little boy, time isn't some abstract thing that ticks on and on in the background. Instead, it's something self-explanatory, purposeful, and definite.

The word "time" appears a whole lot in stanzas 3 and 4, creating both diacope and epistrophe:

> He knew a lot of time: he knew
> Gettinguptime, timeyouwereofftime,
> Timetogohomenowtime, TVtime,
> Timeformykisstime (that was Grantime).
> All the important times he knew,

Note that the phrase "he knew" repeats three times as well. First, there's the anaphora in line 10 ("He knew a lot of time: he knew"). The phrase then appears at the end of line 14, creating a kind of extended chiasmus. The lines seem to fold back in on each other:

> He knew a lot of time [...] all the important times he knew

All this repetition humorously underscores the speaker's point: the boy really *does* know "a lot of time." Each one of these very specific times is evidence that what the speaker says is true. The playful phrases also bring to life the little boy's perspective;

even though *he* isn't the one narrating the poem, the reader gets a clear sense of how he thinks and the limits of his understanding.

Stanza 5 then concludes with a rhyming couplet:

> All the important times he knew,
> But not half-past two.

The perfect rhyme between *knew* and *two* grants this section a sense of finality. The previous sentence extended across four lines, offering six different examples of time. Here, the speaker concisely restates the point they're trying to make—it's not that the *idea* of time is so unfamiliar to the boy. Rather, "half-past two" seems totally disconnected from how he conceptualizes everyday events. It doesn't even sound like the other times he knows.

The final line of stanza 5 is also noticeably shorter than the line that comes before it: line 15 has only six syllables, whereas line 14 has eight. This might give the reader the impression that the rhyming couplet is coming up short. It doesn't sound balanced—in fact, it sounds like something's missing. This, in turn, subtly evokes the gap in the little boy's understanding of time itself. It's true that he knows lots of different times, but it's still not enough for him to grasp what his teacher means.

LINES 16-18

> *He knew the ...*
> *... click its language,*

The speaker says that the little boy "knew the clockface," which likely refers to a clock in the classroom. The boy can recognize that a *clock* is a *clock*; he's familiar with what a clock looks like, but the way it works is still a mystery to him. To the boy, the clockface looks like an actual face: the poem personifies the clock, noting that it has "little eyes" (possibly two of the numbers around the perimeter) as well as "two long legs for walking," which refers to the hour and minute hands that move (figuratively, "walk") around the clock face.

The boy's childish sense of wonder transforms the clock into a living thing that even has a "language" of its own—one that the boy can't "click." This is a subtle pun: while "click" means "to get" or "to figure," it also connotes the mechanical *ticking* of the clock.

These lines are filled with alliteration, consonance, and assonance that make them sound musical and playful. Take the lilting /l/ alliteration and drawling /aw/ assonance of "long legs for walking," for example, which lengthen the phrase itself. The crisp alliteration and consonance of "couldn't click" (echoing the earlier "clockface" and "walking") evoke the sounds the clock makes as the second tick by.

LINES 19-24

> *So he waited, beyond ...*
> *... window, into ever.*

Unsure was "half-past two" means and unable to tell time using the clock in the classroom, all the little boy can do is wait "beyond onceupona." This is a callback to the poem's first line, which set the poem "Once upon a schooltime." With the phrase "beyond onceupona," the speaker conveys that the boy has run out of context for what's going to happen next.

Up until now, he's thought about time as a series of events, something with a distinct beginning, middle, and end. But without a clear sense of when his punishment will be over, he begins to slip outside a linear understanding of time altogether. The boy is "Out of reach of all the timefors"; time as he knows it is happening elsewhere, without him. "Timefors" gestures back to the word mashups that the speaker introduced in stanzas 4 and 5. The word neatly illustrates how, before this punishment, the boy had always assumed it was always literally time *for* something. This is his first experience with adult time, or time in the abstract. In fact, he's glimpsed something like eternity.

Since the boy has no way of telling how much time has passed, or if time is passing at all, he beings to think that everyday life will never resume. He's "escaped for ever," the speaker says, the enjambment at the end of line 21 leaving the reader, momentarily, on a cliffhanger:

> And knew he'd escaped for ever

What comes after "ever"? What could possibly come next, beyond the reach of time itself? It feels as if, in the space between the stanzas, the boy has been profoundly changed.

When the sentence then picks back up in line 22, the speaker reveals where the boy has gone: he's escaped *into* the sights, smells, and sounds of the classroom. Rich imagery brings those details to life—in many ways, the "old chrysanthemums," the "silent noise" of the boy's hangnail, and "the air outside the window" are more vivid than anything else the speaker has described so far. The boy is utterly alert to what's going on around him. In a way, he's completely *present*.

At the same time, the specific images mentioned here create a surreal, otherworldly atmosphere:

- The flowers are "old" rather than freshly in bloom (perhaps a reflection of the teacher's carelessness).
- The noise the boy's hangnail (or loose bit of skin around his nail) makes is "silent"—an oxymoron that perhaps hints at the boy's confusion now that the usually bustling classroom is quiet.
- Becoming one with the air "outside" the window as he sits inside the classroom suggests that the boundaries around the boy's physical world have

dissolved just as the markers of time have.

The strangeness of these images conveys the strangeness of the boy's situation; he's everywhere and nowhere. Indeed, the section ends by saying that he's "escaped for ever [...] into ever." At this point, "ever" has become a kind of in-between space or no man's land beyond the reach of adults and known only to the little boy. The speaker uses anaphora in lines 22-24 to invoke the otherworldliness of this static, unchanging space. The repetition of "Into the" draws the reader, like the little boy, further and further into this seemingly endless moment.

LINES 25-30

And then, ...
... Nexttime, notimeforthatnowtime,

After the strange, meditative turn the poem takes in stanza 8, stanza 9 feels sudden and abrupt. The boy's teacher comes "scuttling" back into the classroom and, flustered, admits that she'd forgotten "all about" him. The woman who was so intimidating and tyrannical earlier in the poem doesn't seem all that authoritative anymore. She might *understand* how grownup time works, but she doesn't have control over it. And while the little boy has been acutely aware of the present moment that surrounds him, the teacher has apparently been too distracted to pay much attention to time's passage at all.

Her hurried words to the boy ("Run along your you'll be late") are jarring after the profound experience the boy has just had alone. The spell has been broken; the unfathomable vastness of "ever" has suddenly disappeared. For the boy, this experience was so profound that it felt like time essentially ceased to exist. For the teacher, it was so mundane that she simply "forgot" it was happening. The juxtaposition between these experiences conveys the stark divide between a child's perspective and that of an adult.

Now, time as the boy knew it before resumes. The school day goes on (he's "slotted [...] back into schooltime") and, even though the teacher seems to have kept him longer than intended, he still gets back "home in time for teatime." The rest of the day is a blur: "Nexttime, notimeforthatnowtime." The boy is back in the familiar swing of things, and time seems to be operating in the way that he understood it before. Once again, adults are telling him where he ought to be and what he can and cannot do.

LINES 31-33

But he never ...
... to be born.

Although stanza 10 suggests that everything has simply gone back to the way it was, the poem's final stanza reveals that the boy's experience has had a profound effect on him: "he never forgot" what became possible that afternoon because he couldn't yet tell time. His childish innocence made his "escape" possible, while his sense of wonder conjured a "clockless land" where he might stay "for ever."

Line 32 ("He escaped [...] for ever") implies that the boy, in some way, is still here, in this place with no beginning or end. This doesn't mean that he's *literally* still sitting in the classroom, but that that imaginative leap is something that has stayed with him even as he's grown up.

In that realm without clocks, "time hides tick-less waiting to be born." This phrase is onomatopoeic, the crisp /t/ alliteration ("time"/ "tick-less") again evoking the ticking of a clock. The poem also personifies time once more here, granting it the ability to "hide" and later "be born." Viewing time this way evokes the boy's childish perspective; to him, this is a space of extraordinary potential, where time itself originates. It is a "clockless land" beyond the watchful "little eyes" of both the clockface and adult authority figures. In that sense, waiting alone until half-past two ultimately proves to have been liberating—pretty ironic, considering it was intended as a punishment!

SYMBOLS

THE CLOCK

The clock symbolizes the authority, knowledge, and order of the grownup world—things that seem impenatrable and mysterious to the little boy.

The speaker says that the boy "knew the clockface," by which the speaker means that he's seen it before; he knows that the clock has something to do with capital-T "Time." But even though the clock *itself* is a familiar object, he's young enough that he hasn't yet learned how to *read* it. He knows it's important to the adults around although he's not sure why. In fact, the clock is almost like another adult: it has a "face," "little eyes," and "two long legs." It even possesses its own "language." This, however, is not a language the boy can understand. In this way, the clock itself becomes another kind of authority figure: remote, controlling, and mysterious.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 16-18:** "He knew the clockface, the little eyes / And two long legs for walking, / But he couldn't click its language,"
- **Line 32:** "He escaped into the clockless land for ever,"

POETIC DEVICES

ANAPHORA

"Half-Past Two" features anaphora in its fourth and eighth

stanzas. In the first instance, the repetition of "he knew" emphasizes the depth—and limits—of the little boy's knowledge of time:

> He knew a lot of time: he knew
> Gettinguptime, timeyouwereofftime,

The anaphora here creates some subtle ironic humor, as it highlights the boy's confidence in his own limited knowledge: the boy is certain that he knows "a lot of time," and, from his child's perspective, he does! From an *adult* perspective, of course, he doesn't know much about time at all.

The phrase "he knew" appears again at the end of line 14, creating a kind of extended chiasmus:

> He knew a lot of time [...] All the important times he knew,

The lines seem to fold in on themselves, creating a closed loop. This, in turn, reflects the child's simple, concise understanding of how time works.

Anaphora is even clearer in stanza 8, where it marks a major shift in the poem. By now, the little boy has now been sitting in detention for what feels like forever—since he can't tell time, he has no idea how long he's been there, or how long he's going to stay. "So he waited," says the speaker. He's patient not because he expects that his punishment will be over soon, but because he genuinely isn't sure that it will ever end. At this point, the boy "knew he'd escaped for ever"—

> Into the smell of old chrysanthemums on Her desk,
> Into the silent noise his hangnail made,
> Into the air outside the window, into ever.

The repetition of "Into the" gives these lines (and stanza 8 as a whole) a hypnotic quality. It's almost as if the boy is falling under the power of a spell as he floats outside of the everyday experience of time.

The repetition invites the reader to become entranced, like the young boy, by everything he can smell, hear, and feel in this moment. Asyndeton adds to the effect, the lines seeming to pile up swiftly on top of one another. Nothing new is happening; instead, the poem seems to come to a standstill. But though the poem's narrative stops, the long sentence that began way back at the start of stanza 6 ("He knew the clockface [...]") continues to unfold, finally coming to a close at the end of line 24. Anaphora carries the reader towards that open-ended conclusion, "into ever." This, in turn, makes the teacher's sudden reappearance in line 25 even more surprising. After lulling the reader into a kind of trance, the poem is ready to jolt everyone "back into schooltime."

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-11:** "He knew a lot of time: he knew / Gettinguptime"
- **Lines 22-24:** "Into the smell of old chrysanthemums on Her desk, / Into the silent noise his hangnail made, / Into the air outside the window, into ever."

COLLOQUIALISM

One of the first things readers likely notice in "Half-Past Two" are the funny word mashups: "Gettinguptime," "timeyouwereofftime," "Timeformykisstime." Typically, as a stylistic device, colloquialism refers to the way regional differences in speech are reproduced on the page. But here, instead of mimicking a regional dialect, colloquialism is being used to illustrate how a very young child perceives the world and thinks about his day. The poem's speaker has created new words by jamming together phrases that the little boy hears from adults when he's supposed to be somewhere or do something.

In addition to adding humor to the poem, these words bring the little boy to life in a way that emphasizes his innocence and naivete. They're also a memorable demonstration of what he does and does not know. While, as the speaker says, he's familiar with the idea that different things happen at different times of day ("All the important times he knew"), these words reveal that he thinks about time in discrete chunks. To him, time isn't an abstract force that can be counted or measured. Instead, "time" is just a suffix that gets tacked onto the end of words or phrases to describe something taking place. In this way, colloquialism is a window into the boy's thought process. They also give the reader a sense of how the boy is typically spoken to (he must have heard these phrases said by adults).

Where Colloquialism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-13:** "Gettinguptime, timeyouwereofftime, / Timetogohomenowtime, TVtime, / Timeformykisstime (that was Grantime)."
- **Line 19:** "onceupona"
- **Line 20:** "timefors"
- **Line 28:** "schooltime"
- **Line 29:** "teatime"
- **Line 30:** "Nexttime, notimeforthatnowtime,"

IMAGERY

Lines 22-24 mark the first time that the poem really engages the readers' senses. Beyond this, the poem doesn't actually use a lot of descriptive language. But here, in stanza 8, the poem makes it easy for the reader to feel like they're right there with the little boy as he feels himself drift off:

Into the smell of old chrysanthemums on Her desk,
Into the silent noise his hangnail made,
Into the air outside the window, into ever.

Far from the "reach of the all the timefors," the little boy is suddenly, vividly present. He notices the heady scent of wilting flowers on the teacher's desk, the nagging little scratch of a hangnail, and the fresh air just outside the classroom. Whereas before, the poem's speaker was basically just reporting the boy's experience of time, explaining what he does and doesn't know, the setting of the poem suddenly becomes real and concrete. Smells and sounds come to life, and the present moment becomes palpable. In other words, the present, the *now* of the poem, becomes more real. In the same instant that the little boy grasps just how abstract (and even arbitrary) the grownup conception of time is, he becomes highly sensitive to what's actually going on around him. It's a moment of calm attentiveness—one might even call it zen.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 22-24:** "Into the smell of old chrysanthemums on Her desk, / Into the silent noise his hangnail made, / Into the air outside the window, into ever."

PERSONIFICATION

Although the little boy in the poem doesn't know how to tell time (at least, not the way a grownup would), he's familiar with the clock as an object. He thinks about the "clockface" literally, as a face: the way he sees it, it has eyes and "two long legs for walking." This personification illustrates the boy's fantastical, childish way of thinking. The image reflects the boy's naivete, but it also underscores the notion that there's something magical about the way that he perceives the world. The boy brings the "clock" to life.

The boy personifies "time" itself as well. First, he notes that he is "Out of reach of all the timefors." This presents time as an entity with a will and agency—albeit will and agency that the boy has escaped! Later, he images the "clockless land" where "time hides tick-less waiting to be born." Again, this personification reflects the boy's childish perspective; he imagines time as a living (or, in this case, soon to be living) thing.

It's also clear that he associates both the clock and time itself with adults—like his teacher, the clock is an authority figure. It towers over him (it has "long legs"), and it speaks a "language" he doesn't understand. The clock represents a grownup way of thinking that the boy will only master when he gets older.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 16-18:** "He knew the clockface, the little eyes / And two long legs for walking, / But he couldn't click its language,"
- **Line 20:** "Out of reach of all the timefors,"
- **Line 33:** "Where time hides tick-less waiting to be born."

HYPERBOLE

The speaker of "Half-Past Two" uses hyperbole throughout the poem to convey the young boy's perspective. Everything feels bigger and more significant to this child, and everyday experiences—being scolded by a teacher, sitting alone in detention—can have enormous significance.

For example, the speaker never reveals exactly how the boy had misbehaved; all the reader knows is that the boy "did Something Very Wrong." This is clearly an exaggeration. There's no reason to believe the boy, say, seriously hurt anyone or robbed a bank during recess. His crime has been blown out of proportion by a teacher who wants to correct his behavior and teach him a lesson. But the boy is confused about what, exactly, he did. All he knows is that he has been chastised by an adult—someone he respects and fears greatly. He's just downright terrified about being in trouble. The phrase "Something Very Long," with its imposing capital letters, is ambiguous and damning all at the same time.

Likewise, "wicked" is a very strong word to describe a young kid. Readers will recognize that the boy isn't evil or *bad*, but his actions have been labeled as "wicked" to impress upon him the fact that he messed up and to scare him straight. In this case, as before, hyperbole introduces a degree of irony and contributes to the poem's humorous, wry tone. Because the reader has a more grown-up perspective than the little boy, they're able to see that the boy's fears are totally overblown.

In stanza 7, the child has a realization: he has "escaped for ever" into a realm beyond time itself, in which nothing happens, nothing changes, and the present stretches on and on into eternity. This, again, is an exaggeration. The boy hasn't actually "escaped" his circumstances at all—he's still just sitting in that classroom, although he certainly isn't going to stay there "for ever." Sooner, rather than later, his teacher is going to return and his day will resume. Here, hyperbole emphasizes just how *profound* this experience of time feels to the young boy. Detention only *seems* endless, after all.

Where Hyperbole appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "He did Something Very Wrong"
- **Lines 4-5:** "And She said he'd done / Something Very Wrong"
- **Line 9:** "He was too scared at being wicked to remind her."
- **Line 21:** "And knew he'd escaped for ever"

CONSONANCE

Consonance, along with the related sonic devices alliteration and assonance, makes the language of "Half-Past Two" more playful and childlike. For example, the mixture of smooth, languid /l/ and /aw/ sounds in the phrase "long legs for walking" bring the image to life: readers can envision the slow, steady movement of those "legs" (that is, the minute and second hands) around the "clockface." The near rhyme of "forgotten / She hadn't taught him" (created again through a mixture of consonance and assonance) makes the teacher's oversight seem trivial—though, of course, it is anything but that to the little boy.

Most obviously, "Half-Past Two" is brimming with crisp /t/ and /k/ sounds, which mimic the "click" of the clock's "language." For example: "taught him time," "till half-past two," "time for teatime," "TVtime," "Timeformykisstime," "important times," and so on. The poem is even onomatopoeic at moments, as with "time hides tick-less" or "couldn't click its language." It sounds as though a clock is constantly ticking in the background of the poem (and, presumably, a clock really is ticking in the classroom where the little boy sits).

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Once," "schooltime"
- **Lines 5-6:** "must / Stay"
- **Line 6:** "school," "till half-past two"
- **Line 7:** "forgotten"
- **Line 8:** "taught," "Time"
- **Line 9:** "scared," "wicked"
- **Lines 11-12:** "Gettinguptime, timeyouwereofftime, / Timetogohomenowtime, TVtime"
- **Line 13:** "Timeformykisstime," "Grantime"
- **Line 14:** "important times"
- **Line 15:** "half-past two"
- **Line 16:** "clockface," "little"
- **Line 17:** "long legs," "walking"
- **Line 18:** "couldn't click," "language"
- **Line 22:** "smell," "chrysanthemums," "desk"
- **Line 28:** "slotted," "schooltime"
- **Line 29:** "time," "teatime"
- **Line 30:** "Nexttime, notimeforthatnowtime"
- **Line 31:** "never," "once," "not knowing"
- **Line 32:** "escaped," "clockless land"
- **Line 33:** "time," "tick-less"

VOCABULARY

Cross (Line 7-8) - Angry, irritable, or somewhat annoyed.

Click (Line 18) - To "get" or understand something. Here, the word also plays on the "clicking" sound a clock makes as it ticks.

Chrysanthemum (Line 22) - A vibrant, ornamental garden flower (also sometimes called "mums").

Hangnail (Line 23) - A loose or torn strip of skin next to the base of the fingernail.

Scuttling (Lines 25-26) - Moving hurriedly, with brisk, short steps.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Half-Past Two" is a free verse poem made up of 11 tercets, or three-line stanzas. These tercets lend the poem some structure, much like all the "time" the boy knows helps him organize his day. Yet "Half-Past Two" doesn't have a regular meter or rhyme scheme, and the lines vary in length: some have as few as six syllables, while others have as many as 13. Thus, while the *stanzas* have a steady structure, the text of the lines *within* those stanzas does not.

In addition to making the poem feel conversational, as if the events the speakers described were being casually recounted by an old friend, this form also makes it seem a little looser and, perhaps, more childlike. The stanzas offer little pockets of linguistic freedom, "Out of reach" of poetic rules and expectations.

METER

"Half-past Two" uses free verse, for the most part. This means that there's no strict meter here, and this lack of meter keeps the poem sounding conversational.

Most of the poem's lines are also fairly short, containing six to eight syllables. A few lines, however, are relatively longer: lines 9 ("He was too scared [...] reminder her."), 22 ("Into the smell [...] Her desk,"), and 31 ("But he never [...] knowing time,") all have 13 syllables. These unexpectedly long lines contribute to the boy's sense, at different points in the poem, that time is stretching on. Take line 22, for example:

> Into the smell of old chrysanthemums on Her desk,

Here, the boy has lost track of time altogether; he's "escaped" outside the familiar, everyday rhythms that he knows. The poem's speaker mimics that experience by allowing the line to go on and on. The boy doesn't know when his punishment will end because he can't read a clock, and the speaker unsettles the reader's sense of time within the poem by messing with the rhythm and meter.

That's not to say that the poem *never* uses a more regular meter, however. In fact, a few important lines use meter to great effect. The first two lines, for example, use a somewhat steady pattern of trochiac (DUM-da) and iambic (da-DUM) feet

to imitate the sing-song quality of a nursery rhyme:

> Once upon a schooltime
> He did Something Very Wrong

Together, with the familiar opening, "Once upon a time," the poem takes the reader into the naive and imaginative mind of a young child. The regular beats also make it that much more surprising when the meter changes suddenly, and unexpectedly, in line 3:

> (I forget what it was).

Here, the switch to anapests (da-da-DUM) mimics the adult speaker's interjection, interrupting the pattern established in the first two lines and undercutting the ominous phrase "Something Very Wrong."

RHYME SCHEME

"Half-past Two" doesn't use a rhyme scheme. Initially, this might be surprising, since the poem begins almost like a nursery rhyme. Instead, Fanthorpe cleverly subverts the reader's expectations: while rhyming is usually a staple of children's poetry, and this is a poem about a child, this isn't actually a poem *for* children. Although the poem explores the way a child thinks and feels, and even borrows childlike phrases, the lack of rhyme suggests an adult perspective on what's taking place.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Half-past Two" is never named. Although it's unclear what sort of relationship the speaker has to the little boy, the speaker clearly has an intimate knowledge of what this boy's life is like and how he thinks about the world. The speaker adopts the boy's point of view and often writes as if they *were* the little boy, spelling out the different times the boy knows and exaggerating adult concepts and figures like "She" and "Time."

The speaker does make a point to differentiate themselves from the child early in the poem, however, when they speak in the first person in line 3: "I forget what it was." However, the speaker's memory of what follows is so personal and specific that it's possible to read the speaker as the little boy, all grown up, and looking back on this childhood incident in the schoolroom. Perhaps the speaker narrates the events of the poem in the third person because their own childhood was some time ago, and, looking back, the little boy seems like a totally different person compared to who the speaker is today.

SETTING

"Half-past two" is set in a classroom at some point during the school day. The speaker doesn't provide many additional descriptive details to help the reader picture the space. They do reveal that there is an analog clock hung up on the wall, an open window, and a bouquet of "old chrysanthemums" sitting on the teacher's desk. That said, the speaker doesn't provide enough information to help the reader get a sense of what month, or year, the poem takes place in. The vagueness of the setting may reflect that the child (and/or the speaker) doesn't really remember much about the school-room, except for the imagery they use in stanzas 6 and 8—these sensory details (the fragrance of the wilting flowers, the air outside the window) are what made a lasting impression at the time.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

U. A. Fanthorpe (1929-2009) didn't begin writing poetry until she was nearly 50 years old, and she published her first collection, *Side Effects*, in 1978. After teaching English for many years at Cheltenham Ladies College in England, Fanthorpe made an abrupt career change and took a job as a clerk at a psychiatric hospital. What she observed there made a lasting impact on Fanthorpe, who "felt the urge to tell the world" about both the "strange specialness" of the patients and the mundanity of life in such a "queer" place. The hospital features heavily in *Side Effects*. "Half-Past Two" appears in Fanthorpe's 1992 collection, *Neck Verse*, which also explores institutional settings.

Fanthorpe was greatly admired by British readers and critics alike. Her work is known for its humor and is also often ironic and wryly empathic, leading at least one critic to compare Fanthorpe to writers like Philip Larkin. Throughout her career, Fanthorpe also made great use of persona, adopting the voice of another person to explore their point of view—"Half-Past Two" is a notable example of this type of poem.

Other poems that explore various aspects of the school experience from child's perspective include Carol Ann Duffy's "In Mrs Tilscher's Class" and Roger McGough's "First Day at School."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Half-Past Two" was published in 1992, although it seems to describe an earlier time, perhaps reaching back as far as Fanthorpe's childhood in the early 1930s. The classroom was a familiar space for Fanthorpe. She was, herself, a teacher for many years. Much later in her career, she would become the first woman ever to be nominated for a prestigious position at Oxford University.

Public education became a major priority in Britain in the 20th century. For the first time, young children—no matter how rich or poor—were required to attend school. Although Fanthorpe

was privately educated, the boy in "Half-Past Two" might very well be enrolled at one of the new local primary schools in his hometown.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- What Do Kids Know About Time? — An article from Psychology Today exploring how young children conceive of time. (https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-baby-scientist/202301/what-kids-know-about-time)
- U. A. Fanthorpe's Life and Work — A short biography of Fanthorpe via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/ua-fanthorpe)
- U. A. Fanthorpe's Obituary — The Guardian recounts U. A. Fanthorpe's life and major influences after the writer's death in 2009. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/may/02/obituary-u-a-ua-fanthorpe)
- A Short Interview With Fanthorpe — U. A. Fanthorpe shares why she started writing poetry. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=og7Fa9YdY2w)

HOW TO CITE

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