Hitcher

SUMMARY

The speaker says that he had been feeling worn out and sick. He kept getting angry messages from his boss, telling him that if he called out sick one more time, they'd fire him. He hitched a ride to pick up a car, which was a Vauxhall Astra rental.

He picked up a hitchhiker in the city of Leeds. The hitchhiker was traveling in the direction of the setting sun, carrying nothing but a toothbrush and sleeping on the ground each night. He quoted Bob Dylan, saying the truth is "blowin' in the wind," or else just around the corner.

The speaker attacked him on the main road out of Harrogate, first headbutting him, then striking his face six times with the steering-wheel lock. The speaker kept the car steady the whole time.

He shifted down to third gear and leaned over to push the hitchhiker out through the passenger door. In the mirror, the speaker watched as the man hit the curb and rolled away off the grassy edge of the road. He and the speaker were basically the same age, with maybe a week's difference between them.

The hitchhiker has told the speaker that he loved feeling the wind tousle his hair. It was midday. The weather was looking decent. Screw that, the speaker thought—if he wants to get to his destination, he can walk there himself.

THEMES

THE MAINSTREAM VS. COUNTERCULTURE

"Hitcher" can be read as a kind of allegory for the conflict between the consumerist mainstream and free-spirited counterculture. The poem's speaker is a seemingly normal worker who's been threatened by his boss for taking too many sick days. He picks up a hitchhiker who rejects material possessions and whose carefree, self-determined lifestyle seems like the polar opposite of the speaker's. The poem thus pitches two rival ideologies against each other: mainstream capitalism vs. anti-consumerist, independent hippiedom. The speaker's sudden attack on the hitchhiker suggests that he threatens the speaker's worldview, and, perhaps, that the speaker can't admit his dissatisfaction with his own way of life.

The speaker's life seems decidedly average and unfulfilling. He has a boring job that seems to take him around England, driving from city to city in rental cars (the Vauxhall Astra even has a reputation as a bland kind of car). His car trip is either part of his commute or part of his job, and the job may not pay well enough for him to afford his own vehicle. His "tired, under / the weather" mood suggests a kind of malaise: perhaps he subconsciously dislikes his mundane life or his role as a cog in the capitalist machine (that is, a system motivated above all by profit). His schedule also seems tightly controlled by his job: his boss threatens to fire him if he takes any more sick days. Readers don't know how egregious the speaker has been in taking time off, of course, but it certainly seems like this company is placing profit before his well-being.

The hitchhiker, on the other hand, has next to no possessions and can go wherever he wants, whenever he wants. This man loves to be in touch with nature, following the "sun from east to west" with "just the good earth for a bed." He enjoys living in the open air, feeling the wind "run its fingers / through his hair." He also quotes the famous folk singer Bob Dylan, declaring that the truth is "blowin' in the wind." Dylan was an essential figure in the 1960s folk revival, which condemned the commercialization of mainstream culture and embraced authenticity. The Dylan quote further links the hitchhiker with the counterculture; in classic hippie fashion, he seems to reject the conventional world of consumerism and profit-driven work.

Perhaps, then, the speaker brutally assaults the hitchhiker because the man represents a threat to the speaker's ideology and way of life. Through his act of violence, the speaker reasserts his dominance over the hitchhiker. By killing (or nearly killing) this free-spirited hippie, perhaps the speaker is trying to quash his own doubts about the life he leads.

Yet there are also some uneasy parallels between the two characters. The speaker has to hitch a ride to get to his rental car, just as the hitchhiker needs a lift. The two men are "the same age, give or take a week." The speaker's aggression, then, might stem as much from their similarities as from their differences. The hitchhiker shows that the speaker, too, could live another kind of life, one that might nourish his soul rather than his bank account. But truly embracing this idea, the poem suggests, would require the speaker to do some deep soul-searching. It's easier to eliminate this ideological threat than to look inward and ask hard questions about what it means to be human in the modern world.

Read symbolically, this attack might also represent the way mainstream, capitalist culture callously destroys any threats to its continued existence. A profit-driven society can't abide those who seek the simple "truth" that's "blowin' in the wind"—and will do what it takes to silence them.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-25

THE POTENTIAL FOR VIOLENCE

"Hitcher" tells a brutal tale of violence from the perspective of the attacker: a worker under pressure who picks up a hitchhiker, only to batter him and leave him for dead. The speaker's casual tone and seemingly normal demeanor make this act all the more shocking. The tale illustrates how the potential for violence lurks under the surface of everyday life. One never knows, the poem suggests, what people are capable of.

Early in the poem, there's no hint that the speaker is about to commit such a terrible act. In fact, he seems average rather than deeply disturbed. He's been "tired" and "under / the weather," but not necessarily to any unusual degree. He's also missed a few shifts and is close to getting fired. Still, he doesn't seem all that concerned—on the surface, at least. Perhaps traveling on business, the speaker picks up a rental car and drives to Leeds. His car is perfectly average (a Vauxhall Astra), and he's not going anywhere exciting or exotic. Again, there's nothing to set off readers' alarm bells or to hint at the speaker's underlying anger.

The speaker offers a ride to a hitchhiker, who sounds like a hippie: he's a Bob Dylan fan traveling with nothing but a toothbrush and sleeping on "the good earth" (that is, the ground). He's a carefree wanderer and certainly very different from the speaker, but there's still no suggestion of what's about to happen.

Then, without warning, the speaker attacks the hitchhiker, headbutting him and clubbing him with the steering wheel lock. The sudden violence is as surprising to the reader as to the hitchhiker himself; the assault is both savage and inexplicable. Something in the speaker snaps, apparently, and he takes out his aggression on an innocent stranger. The speaker doesn't even "swerve" during the assault, as though his two identities as traveling worker and brutal attacker seamlessly coexist. Violence and normality sit side-by-side, the poem suggests, and regular people are capable of extreme, shocking acts.

What's most disturbing is how the speaker immediately reverts to business as usual, as though the assault never happened. After the attack, he just keeps on driving, while the hitchhiker is probably dying in a ditch. Toward the end of the poem, he matter-of-factly notes that the "outlook for the day" is "moderate to fair." In other words, the weather will be plain and unremarkable—just like the speaker himself. In the end, the poem might simply be a horrifying portrait of a deviant mind. But it might also be satirizing how modern, polite society pushes regular people to the brink, encouraging them to swallow their rage and resentment until they explode.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-25

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

I'd been tired, under ...
... It was hired.

"Hitcher" is a dramatic monologue: its speaker is a separate character from the poet. This speaker is a frustrated man with a dull job, recounting what at first sounds like an unremarkable story about picking up a hitchhiker.

This first stanza provides some information about the speaker's situation. He recalls feeling "tired" and "under / the weather" before the poem's events took place. In other words, he'd been feeling sick—or maybe suffering from a more general malaise, such as dissatisfaction with his life. He had certainly *claimed* to be ill, as the "ansaphone" (answering machine) message in line 3 makes clear:

> *One more sick-note, mister, and you're finished. Fired.*

The voice "scream[s]" this threat at the male speaker ("*mister*"), so it seems the speaker's work life had been miserable. A demanding boss had been hurling abuse at him and treating his sick leave with contempt. So the poem does begin with some tension—but there's no hint, yet, of the terrible event that comes later.

Caving to the threat, the speaker goes to work. First, he picks up a rental car, which he needs either for his commute or for the job itself. He "thumb[s] a lift" to the car's location, making him the first "Hitcher" in the poem. This detail sets up a subtle, but crucial, parallel between the speaker and the hitchhiker he'll soon meet.

Initially, the poem's language is as uneventful as the speaker's life. Line 5, for example, specifies the make of the speaker's rental car (known in the UK as a *hire car*):

> A Vauxhall Astra. It was hired.

The speaker's tone sounds flat, perhaps even depressed. That full-stop caesura slows the line down, building an atmosphere of boredom and frustration. The car itself is about as average as they come: a small family car, common in the UK. It seems to symbolize the speaker's conventional, uninspired lifestyle, his role as a small cog in the capitalist machine. However, "Astra" comes from the Latin word for *star*, perhaps hinting at the speaker's frustrated ambitions—his subconscious longing for a brighter, more romantic existence.

Everything about this opening stanza, then, lulls the reader into a false sense of security. It also establishes the poem's form: quintains (five-line stanzas) in which the first and fifth lines are shorter than those in between, and the middle line is the

longest. It's as if the poem is struggling to escape the constraint of its shorter lines—and sometimes bursts out of them, but only temporarily. Soon enough, this pattern will make sense in terms of the speaker's personality.

"Fired" (line 3) and "hired" (line 5) set up the expectation of a rhyme scheme, but the poem thwarts this expectation: there won't be another full rhyme until the final stanza. These two words are staples of capitalist work culture, in which people get hired and dismissed according to their usefulness and with little regard for their mental health. Subtly, then, the rhyme reflects the poem's broader social commentary.

LINES 6-10

I picked him ...
... the next bend.

In the second stanza, the speaker picks up a hitchhiker (or "Hitcher"). This happens somewhere in "Leeds," a city in northern England. The speaker provides a quick character sketch of the man who gets in his car—but remember, since this is a dramatic monologue, the characterization may be biased!

The speaker reports that the hitchhiker is "following the sun from west to east." In other words, he's not going anywhere in particular, just heading in one general direction, like the sun setting at night and rising in the morning. He's idealistic and a bit of a drifter. The mention of the sun suggests that he feels an affinity with nature. Already, then, the poem sets up a contrast between the speaker—with his conventional job—and the hippie-ish hitchhiker. The enjambment at the end of line 7 (i.e., the white space after "east") makes the line look open-ended, in keeping with the hitchhiker's free-roaming lifestyle.

The hitchhiker is traveling with only one possession: a "toothbrush." He sleeps in the open air, using "the good earth for a bed." Presumably, "the good earth" is the hitchhiker's own phrase, an expression of his fondness for Mother Nature. Everything about the man implies a rejection of consumerism, a desire to break free from mainstream capitalist society and live on his own terms. He seems happy with very little.

The hitchhiker then quotes Bob Dylan's song "Blowin' in the Wind," an anthem of the 1960s counterculture:

> [...] The truth,
> he said, was blowin' in the wind,
> or round the next bend. (lines 8-10)

Dylan's song is an anti-war protest tune, which rhetorically asks questions like: "How many times must the cannonballs fly / Before they are forever banned?" This allusion confirms that the hitchhiker is a peace-loving, bohemian free spirit in the '60s mold. In fact, the poem might seem to be set in the '60s—except that the Vauxhall Astra car model wasn't released until 1980. So the hitchhiker is a bit of a throwback, a holdover from an era that had, in many ways, already run its course.

"Round the next bend" is not a lyric in the Dylan song. It may be the hitchhiker's own creative addition, something he quips while philosophizing in the speaker's car. In any case, it ironically foreshadows the ugly turn this road trip is about to take—and the harsh "truth" it demonstrates to the unwitting hitchhiker. The peaceful Dylan song becomes an ironic detail, too, as the poem erupts into violence.

LINES 11-15

I let him ...
... it into third

In the third stanza, the speaker assaults the hitchhiker, first by head-butting him and then by striking him with a steering-wheel lock. The eruption of violence is sudden and unexpected, surprising the reader as much as it presumably does the hitchhiker.

The incident happens near the town of "Harrogate," not too far from Leeds. The two men haven't been sharing the car long. Perhaps the speaker couldn't tolerate much of the hitchhiker's free-spirited attitude, or perhaps the attack was premeditated. Indeed, it's possible that the speaker has done this kind of thing before; the reader can't know for sure.

With slangy understatement, the speaker boasts that he "let [the hitchhiker] have it." In other words, he started beating the hitchhiker up. The assault is barbaric and cold-blooded. First, the speaker hits the hitchhiker "once / with the head." (Notice how enjambment emphasizes the brutality here by *breaking* the phrase after a single word.) Then he batters him "six times with the krooklok / in the face." A "krooklok" is a brand of steering-wheel lock; this second mention of a brand name (after "Vauxhall Astra") subtly reminds the reader of the speaker's materialistic, consumerist outlook. The cacophonous /x/ and /k/ consonants in "six times with the krooklok" sound harsh and painful. The speaker's casual tone suggests that he feels no guilt about the incident.

In other words, the speaker's violence seems psychopathic. He doles it out without "even swerv[ing]" the car, maintaining a kind of icy self-control even in a moment of rage. This attitude is as frightening as the violence itself. He doesn't explain why he commits the assault, leaving the reader to assume that he takes offense at the hitchhiker's way of life. Perhaps the hitchhiker even represents a kind of threat, his apparent freedom aggravating the speaker's frustration with his dead-end job. (Recall that the speaker hitchhiked *to* his job; indeed, the title "Hitcher" could refer to either man. The perpetrator and his victim are similar in many ways, except that one feels miserably trapped and the other doesn't.) The existence of men like the hitchhiker implies that the speaker could live life differently—so why doesn't he? It might be easier to hurt or even kill someone than ask such difficult questions.

After the assault, the speaker slows the car down, dropping it "into third" gear. Here, the stanza break seems to mirror the

car's change in pace. It might also reflect the speaker's (frustrated) desire to break free of his routine. Think of it this way: the speaker lives a constrained life, boxed in by his 9-to-5 work and consumerist mentality. But part of him clearly wants to transgress: after all, there's nothing conventional about beating a man senseless. The abrupt stanza break, complete with enjambment, makes it look as if the poem is violently trying to escape its form, just as the speaker wants to escape his life.

LINES 16-20

and leant across ...
... liked the breeze

In the fourth stanza, the speaker opens the passenger door and lets the hitchhiker's unconscious body roll out to the "kerb" (curb). The speaker describes this move as "let[ting] him out," casually understating the violent reality of the situation. He watches the man's body "in the mirror / bouncing off the kerb, then disappearing down the verge," or the sloped side of the road (lines 17-18). Notice how line 18 has a strongly iambic (da-DUM, da-DUM) rhythm:

> [...] bouncing off the kerb, then disappearing down
> the verge.

This rhythm mimics the bounce and thud of the man's body as it falls out of the car.

By disposing of the hitchhiker, the speaker seems to suppress the part of himself that might wonder if there's more to life than work. It's as if the hitchhiker was never there at all; his free-spirited counterculturalism simply "disappear[s]" in the rearview. Read allegorically, the speaker's move violently pushes the counterculture to the margins (the "verge" of society) rather than allowing any place for it in the mainstream (on the "top road" or main road) of society.

The speaker then notes that he and the hitchhiker are around the "same age, give or take a week." He says this in the same chilling, offhand tone with which he described the assault. The similar age of the two men develops the juxtaposition between them: in some ways, they're very alike, yet they also represent two incompatible ways of seeing the world. It's impossible to live spontaneously and "follow[] the sun" while working some corporate job. Still, the fact that they're hitchhikers of the same age reminds the reader that the speaker *could* be different. That is, there are other men his age who approach life differently. The speaker might be under pressure at work, might resent his job, and might even be a psychopath—but he still has agency over his own life. Rather than take some initiative to change his situation, he takes his frustrations out on an innocent peer.

The speaker then recalls something else the hitchhiker said to him:

> He'd said he liked the breeze [...]

The poem enjambs this sentence over into the fifth stanza, breaking the hitchhiker's idealistic sentiment in half. This formal choice mirrors the way the speaker has *physically* broken the hitchhiker, apparently in an angry response to his idealistic talk.

LINES 20-25

He'd said he ...
... walk from there.

The final stanza shows the speaker carrying on with his day as if nothing ever happened. First, the poem completes the sentence begun in line 20 (the end of the previous stanza):

> He'd said he liked the breeze
> to run its fingers
> through his hair.

Again, enjambment makes the lines stagger along brokenly, perhaps reflecting the way the speaker has broken the hitchhiker's body (or shattered his idealistic worldview).

Then, just like that, the speaker moves on. After the briefest of pauses—the full-stop caesura following "hair"—he checks the time, returning to the clockwork normality of his day-to-day existence. He also recounts the weather forecast ("moderate to fair," line 23), again signaling that he's resuming his routine as though his crime had been a minor disruption.

Indeed, the weather reflects the speaker's improved mood (he was "under / the weather" in the first stanza). At the same time, the juxtaposition between the hippie sentiments of lines 20-22 and the bland remark in line 23 heightens the contrast between the two men. For the hitchhiker, nature is a nurturing life force, something that feels intimate and loving. He personifies "the breeze" as an affectionate companion tousling his "hair." For the speaker, nature is just another measurable component of a practical world. The hitchhiker has a sense of wonder and joy; the speaker has none.

In the closing lines, the speaker recalls what he thought as he drove away from the hitchhiker's body:

> Stitch that, I remember thinking,
> you can walk from there.

"Stitch that" is the speaker's idea of a joke. He means something like "Screw that"—as in, *To hell with that hippie nonsense*. But there's a macabre pun at work, because "stitch" could also refer to the wounds on the hitchhiker's face, which will require stitches if he's still alive. And, of course, the hitchhiker *can't* "walk from there": he's either unconscious or dead. (The speaker could also be snidely implying that traveling by foot, rather than car, would better suit the hitchhiker's love

of nature.)

The speaker evidently delights in expelling the hitchhiker from the car. Of course, it isn't *his* car; it's a rental. Unlike his boss, or whichever corporation does own the car, he has no real power in mainstream society; he's not even fully in charge of his own life. Still, to him, the expulsion restores order: normal people in cars, outsiders on foot. The dull, brand-name "Astra" symbolizes the conventional world, and it no longer contains any dissenting voice, because the normie has pushed the dissenter back out to the margins.

As in the first stanza, the third and fifth lines of this stanza rhyme ("fair"/"there"). These two stanzas coincide with the parts of the poem from which the hitchhiker is absent. When the hitchhiker is present, the rhyme scheme goes out the window, mirroring both the disruption in the speaker's routine and the speaker's violent, chaotic response. The closing rhyme then ties the poem up with a kind of chilling tidiness. The speaker's itch for violence has been scratched, and his eyes are firmly on the road ahead.

SYMBOLS

THE CAR

The speaker's car works as a symbol with multiple layers:

- The model, a Vauxhall Astra, is about as standard and conventional as it comes. It's a mainstream brand name in the UK. The choice of car stands in for the speaker's lifestyle and worldview more generally: bland, functional, and consumerist. "Astra" comes from the Latin for "star," which might suggest a subconscious yearning for a different, more mystical type of existence—or at least a hint that other ways of life (like the hitchhiker's) remain possible.
- The car is also a little world in and of itself. It's like a microcosm of "normal" society, one in which the speaker calls the shots. The hitchhiker enters as a kind of malign outside influence, which the speaker duly deals with.
- Notice, too, that the speaker's weapon is part of the car. A "krooklok" is a brand name for a steering-wheel lock. Normally, a lock protects possessions—here it protects the speaker's worldview. The speaker batters the hitchhiker with a symbol of his own fixed ideology.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "I thumbed a lift to where the car was parked. / A Vauxhall Astra. It was hired."
- **Lines 13-14:** "then six times with the krooklok / in the face—and didn't even swerve."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

The poem makes one clear allusion, which appears in the second stanza (lines 8-10):

> [...] The truth,
> he said, was blowin' in the wind,
> or round the next bend.

"Blowin' in the Wind" is a 1962 song by Bob Dylan, and one of the key anthems of the 1960s folk revival and counterculture movement. It's a song about freedom, peace, and the folly of humankind. (Earlier in the stanza, "following the sun from west to east" might also allude to Dylan: the chorus of his famous 1968 song "I Shall Be Released" begins, "I see my light come shining / From the west unto the east.") Within the poem, the Dylan allusion portrays the hitchhiker as a hippie-like character. He doesn't buy into the speaker's conventional workaday lifestyle.

Note, though, the hitchhiker's reference is a little dated. The Vauxhall Astra didn't come out until the 1980s, so there is no way this poem can be set in the 1960s. By this point in the 20th century, capitalist consumerism has largely won out over the idealistic longing of the hippie movement. Perhaps that's partly what enrages the speaker about the hitchhiker.

It's not clear whether it's the speaker or the hitchhiker who says "round the next bend." Either way, it ties in ironically with the main allusion. Perhaps it's a little quip made by the hitchhiker to try and break the ice with the stranger driving the car. Or maybe it's the speaker's own joke to himself. But it's "round the next bend" that the speaker suddenly assaults the man and leaves him for dead. This, in a way, is the speaker's answer to the rhetorical questions posed by a song like "Blowin' in the Wind": he perpetuates the same kind of senseless violence the song critiques.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-10:** "The truth, / he said, was blowin' in the wind, / or round the next bend."

CAESURA

Caesuras appear throughout the poem, contributing to its choppy, unsettled rhythms. The caesuras in the first stanza, for example, help create an atmosphere of malaise and frustration.

In other words, they mirror the speaker's mood:

> I'd been tired, under
> the weather, but the ansaphone kept screaming:
> *One more sick-note, mister, and you're finished. Fired.*
> I thumbed a lift to where the car was parked.
> A Vauxhall Astra. It was hired.

The poem's just getting started, but already it feels like it's grinding to a halt. Those first commas slow the pace immediately, evoking the speaker's fatigue and preventing the language from finding a groove. The full stop after "*finished*" is even more of a drag: it ends a sentence just before the end of the line. Similarly, line 5 is so prosaic and lifeless (intentionally so) that it hardly sounds like it belongs in a poem. The full stop after "Astra" lets the boredom sink in, luring the reader into a false sense of security. All of these effects create tension between the poem's form and the speaker's sentence rhythms, which often seem at odds with the placement of line and stanza breaks.

At this point, it's hard to imagine anything happening in the poem, let alone a violent assault. Notice how the poem returns to this lulling effect in line 22:

> He'd said he liked the breeze
> to run its fingers
> through his hair. It was twelve noon.

That full stop marks the transition between the assault and the speaker going back to driving as if nothing happened. It's as if the caesura provides a little space in which the reader can appreciate the horror.

Elsewhere, caesuras help convey the sheer senselessness of the speaker's violent act. Look at the choppy, abrupt rhythms in lines 11-14:

> I let him have it
> on the top road out of Harrogate—once
> with the head, then six times with the krooklok
> in the face—and didn't even swerve.

There's very little correlation here between phrase length and line length; as a result, the language sounds jumpy and fractured. The caesuras and enjambments harshly disrupt the flow of the poem, just as the assault shatters an otherwise normal working day.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "tired, under"
- **Line 2:** "weather, but"
- **Line 3:** "sick-note, mister, and"
- **Lines 3-3:** "finished. / Fired."
- **Line 5:** "Astra. It"
- **Line 8:** "bed. The"
- **Line 9:** "said, was"
- **Line 12:** "Harrogate—once"
- **Line 13:** "head, then"
- **Line 14:** "face—and"
- **Line 17:** "out, and"
- **Line 18:** "kerb, then"
- **Line 19:** "age, give"
- **Line 22:** "hair. It"
- **Line 24:** "that, I"

ENJAMBMENT

Though the poem's stanzas have a consistent shape, its phrases and sentences often seem to rebel against that shape—either by starting/ending mid-line or by spilling via enjambment over line breaks and stanza breaks. This tension between restraint and freedom might reflect the speaker's personality, which is divided between ordered "normality" and sudden eruptions of violence. It might also reflect the stark differences between the speaker and the hitchhiker—how they live, how they see the world, etc.

In the first stanza, the enjambment in lines 1 and 2 ("under"/"the weather") disrupts the poem's flow immediately. Together with caesura, enjambment gives these lines a choppy rhythm that conveys the speaker's pent-up, frustrated mood.

Later, enjambment leaves "west to east" dangling in the air at the end of line 7. This pause helps suggest the open-endedness of the hitchhiker's journey as he travels the roads and "follow[s] the sun."

The speaker then assaults the hitchhiker. Notice how the enjambments in lines 11-14 capture the ferocity and surprise of this violence:

> I let him have it
> on the top road out of Harrogate—once
> with the head, then six times with the krooklok
> in the face—and didn't even swerve.

The lack of end-line punctuation speeds the poem up, suggesting the rapidity of the speaker's attack. The enjambment after "once" has an especially stark, snapping quality: this single-syllable word falls between a caesura and a line break, so it receives a lot of emphasis. It's as percussive as the head-butt the speaker is describing.

In lines 20-22, the poem splits a sentence over three lines:

> He'd said he liked the breeze
> to run its fingers

through his hair.

The enjambments slow the language down as if to match the hitchhiker's gentle sentiment—which sounds grimly ironic in this violent poem. This sentence also comes *after* the attack, so it's as though the hitchhiker's physical brokenness carries over into the way the speaker represents his words.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "under / the"
- **Lines 7-8:** "east / with"
- **Lines 11-12:** "it / on"
- **Lines 12-13:** "once / with"
- **Lines 13-14:** "krooklok / in"
- **Lines 15-16:** "third / and"
- **Lines 17-18:** "mirror / bouncing"
- **Lines 20-21:** "breeze / to"
- **Lines 21-22:** "fingers / through"

JUXTAPOSITION

"Hitcher" juxtaposes the speaker with the hitchhiker—indeed, that's the whole poem! These two characters represent opposing approaches to life. Loosely speaking, the poem pits the mainstream against the counterculture, or consumer capitalism against freewheeling hippiedom. This clash manifests itself in several ways:

- The speaker has a mundane job that he plainly doesn't enjoy. He keeps calling in sick, and his boss threatens to sack him. Still, he participates in the working world and complies with professional expectations when forced to do so. The hitchhiker probably *doesn't* have a job, because he has the time to wander the land with no greater aim than following the sun.
- The hitchhiker feels a close affinity with Mother Nature. "The good earth" is his bed, and he likes "the breeze / to run its fingers / through his hair." The speaker talks about nature only in terms of the weather forecast.
- The hitchhiker is a bit of a hippie, then, even if the poem is set well after the 1960s. It's implied that he believes in peace (he quotes a famous antiwar song by Bob Dylan). The speaker, despite his bland surface, has a deeply violent nature.
- The hitchhiker seems happy, while the speaker seems pent-up and frustrated.

The car becomes a kind of incubator for this conflict, which breaks out into violence. Of course, the hitchhiker has no idea what's coming, and the speaker holds all the power—much as the consumer establishment holds power in the wider world. Notice, though, that the two men do share some common ground. They're almost exactly the same age—part of the same generation—and both have to hitch a ride (the speaker's "lift" is just to get to his rental car). These parallels only throw their differences into greater relief, suggesting that the speaker *could* live the hippie life if he wanted to. It's as if, by assaulting the hitchhiker, the speaker purges the part of himself that might question who he is and how he lives.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-25

VOCABULARY

Under the weather (Lines 1-2) - Sick; unwell.

Ansaphone (Line 2) - Answering machine (similar to voicemail).

Sick-note (Line 3) - A metonym for a "day off due to illness," referring to a doctor's note testifying that someone is unwell.

Thumbed a lift (Line 4) - Hitchhiked.

Vauxhall Astra (Line 5) - A mainstream make and model of car, common in the UK.

Hired (Line 5) - In this context, "It was hired" means the car was a rental.

Leeds (Line 6) - A city in the north of England.

Blowin' in the wind (Lines 8-9) - An allusion to a Bob Dylan song (this phrase appears in both the title and refrain). "Blowin' In the Wind" was a key anthem for the countercultural movement of the 1960s.

Harrogate (Lines 11-12) - A town about fifteen miles north of Leeds.

Krooklok (Lines 13-14) - A locking device for steering wheels (to prevent automobile theft).

Dropped it into third (Line 15) - Changed down to third gear (in a car with manual transmission); slowed the car down.

The verge (Line 18) - The strip of land by the side of a road.

Outlook (Line 23) - Weather forecast.

Stitch that (Lines 24-25) - The speaker's own phrase, meaning something like "Screw that." Of course, if the hitchhiker is still alive, he's going to need a lot of stitches for his wounds.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Hitcher" is a dramatic monologue: it's entirely in the voice of a made-up character. In dramatic monologues, the speaker's language and selection of details reveal aspects of their

personality. Here, for example, the speaker's casual tone (e.g., "I let him have it" in line 11) demonstrates his disregard for the man he picks up—and lack of guilt over assaulting him.

The poem consists of five quintains (five-line stanzas). The first and last lines of each stanza are shorter than those in between, and the middle line is always the longest. The consistent stanza shape may be meant to mimic the repetitiveness of car travel, or of the speaker's life in general.

Though the stanza pattern is fairly strict, the poem doesn't follow a meter, and it contains many enjambments (phrases spilling over from line to line or stanza to stanza). The quintain is like a box from which the poem subtly tries to escape. Perhaps, then, the stanza shape is meant to evoke modern society's conventions and norms. The speaker mostly adheres to these—except he's also brutally violent. He breaks free from constraints, then goes right back to them, never examining what it is within himself that makes him so violent. The progression from short, tight lines to long, loose lines—and back again—might mimic this cycle within the speaker's psyche.

Notice, too, how the poem starts and ends with the speaker driving on his own. It's almost as if the violence in the middle never happened!

METER

"Hitcher" is mostly written in free verse. The lack of strict meter gives the monologue a casual tone, which makes perfect sense: this speaker is a man who can beat up a fellow human being, leave him for dead, and then carry on driving as if nothing happened.

That said, the poem does slip into a strong iambic meter in places. Iambs are metrical feet with an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern (da-DUM). Line 4, for example, is perfect iambic pentameter (meaning it has five iambic feet):

> I thumbed | a lift | to where | the car | was parked.

Lines like this perhaps reflect the speaker's surface conventionality, in that they give the poem a kind of background steadiness (though not all the way through). For another example, look at lines 16-18, displayed here with the line breaks removed:

> and leant | across | to let | him out, | and saw | him in | the mir- | ror bounc- | ing off | the kerb, | then dis- | appear- | ing down | the verge.

This is a string of fourteen straight iambs! (The previous two lines are strongly iambic, too.) The steady rhythm might reflect how the speaker keeps the car steady during his frenzied attack on the hitchhiker. Its bounciness might also be meant to mimic the "bouncing" of the hitcher's body.

RHYME SCHEME

"Hitcher" doesn't have a rhyme scheme as such, though readers might *expect* one on the evidence of the first stanza. Lines 3 and 5 rhyme loud and true: "*Fired*"/"hired." Note that these two words relate to the modern, corporate work culture, which is what seems to put the speaker under intense pressure. (Though that's no excuse for his actions, of course!)

After this, however, the rhymes mostly disappear until the last stanza, which rhymes "fair" (line 23) with "there" (line 25). There's also a softer slant rhyme between "wind" and "bend" in the second stanza (lines 9 and 10). Perhaps the *lack* of rhyme in the middle stanzas reflects a transgression from normality. In both the first and last stanzas, the speaker is alone, driving his car—and both stanzas rhyme. In the second, the pattern changes as he picks up the hitcher. In the third and fourth, he acts in a way most people never would—and the subtle orderliness of the rhymes disappears.

SPEAKER

"Hitcher" is a dramatic monologue, so it uses the first person throughout. The speaker is male (his boss calls him "*mister*"). He lives a conventional life and works a boring job—which is probably why he keeps calling in sick.

The speaker never talks openly about himself. But, as is often the case with dramatic monologues, what the speaker says and how he says it reveals a lot about his character. He seems to hate everything that his passenger stands for: rejection of the capitalist system, love of the natural world, and commitment to an alternative way of living. But the two men are of similar ages—and both depend on rides from strangers—so the hitchhiker's very existence suggests that the speaker *could* live differently if he wanted to. One way of interpreting the speaker's violent streak, then, is that it suppresses his doubts about the life he leads. It's easier to kill a man than to ask himself hard questions about his identity and choices.

Notice, too, how nonchalantly the speaker recalls his violent episode. References to extreme violence sit side-by-side with banal observations about the weather. The poem is a casual anecdote, told with a chilling lack of remorse. It's as though the speaker's bland, mainstream exterior and inner brutality are opposite sides of the same coin.

SETTING

The setting of the poem, or at least the anecdote the speaker tells, is the north of England. The speaker picks up a car, then collects his victim from the city of Leeds and drives north through the town of Harrogate.

The speaker doesn't say precisely when this all took place. The

hitchhiker acts and talks like a hippie. But the speaker's car, a Vauxhall Astra, dates the poem much later than the 1960s countercultural era. This is at least 1980, and probably even later. The hitchhiker, then, is a man out of time, a kind of throwback to a different era—one that the speaker clearly detests. (Given the similarities between the two men, it's possible that the hitchhiker reminds the speaker of a previous self he'd like to leave behind, or a path he wishes he'd taken but never will. After all, he last sees the hitchhiker "disappearing" in his rearview "mirror.")

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Simon Armitage is one of the UK's most popular contemporary poets. He was born in Yorkshire in 1963 and began writing poetry at a young age. His first collection, *Zoom!*, was published by Bloodaxe Books in 1989 and was an immediate success, selling well and getting shortlisted for the Whitbread Poetry Award.

Armitage's poems are known for their dark comedy, clarity, and playfulness. Their outward simplicity often conceals a complex emotional world and reflects the influence of other important 20th-century poets, such as Ted Hughes, W. H. Auden, and Philip Larkin.

"Hitcher" was published in Armitage's 1993 collection *Book of Matches*. In this book and others, Armitage makes frequent use of the dramatic monologue form, the poetic equivalent of throwing one's voice. Carol Ann Duffy, a contemporary of Armitage's, also uses this formal technique.

Armitage is the current Poet Laureate of England, having taken over from Duffy. Originally, the Laureate's main duty was composing poems for major public occasions. Nowadays, the Laureate tends to focus on furthering poetry's audience, particularly in an educational context—the kind of work that Armitage has been doing for many years.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Hitcher" dramatizes one of the key ideological conflicts of the 20th century: mainstream consumerism vs. free-spirited counterculture. This conflict took many forms over the decades, but a major flashpoint was the 1960s. Throughout this decade, younger people rebelled en masse against social conventions, opposing the conservative views of their parents, racial and gender inequalities, and humanity's lust for war. Hippies (as they were popularly known) wanted to opt out of mainstream society and find new ways of doing things. Disenchanted with the booming consumer culture of the post-WWII years, many advocated for leftist or egalitarian economic policies, and some even tried to model alternative societies on communes.

The hitchhiker might seem like he belongs to that '60s generation. Indeed, he quotes one of the era's key anthems, the Bob Dylan song "Blowin' in the Wind," which originated in the early 1960s folk revival and protest movement. But the poem is definitely *not* set in the '60s, because the speaker drives a "Vauxhall Astra"—a car that didn't come out until the 1980s. Thus, the poem is set much closer to the period in which it was published. By the 1980s and 1990s, the battle between mainstream consumerism and free-spirited counterculture had largely ended, with the former apparently winning. Corporations and advertisers found ways to absorb the liberation movements of the '60s, repackaging people's desire for freedom as a set of products they could buy.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The 1960s Counterculture — Dive into the history of the decade (which informs the hitchhiker's character). (https://www.history.com/topics/1960s)
- "Blowin' in the Wind" — The classic Bob Dylan song quoted by the hitchhiker. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MMFj8uDubsE)
- A Brief Biography — Learn more about Armitage's life and work via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/simon-armitage)
- Armitage on Poetry — Watch a brief interview with Armitage in which he discusses his poetic philosophy, including the violence that appears in this poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TvFcbedyQ0A&feature=youtu.be)
- Armitage on Writing — Simon Armitage offers some advice for budding poets. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qb5COxnLKfw)
- Armitage's Official Website — Visit Armitage's website to learn more about his recent work. (https://www.simonarmitage.com)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER SIMON ARMITAGE POEMS

- Chainsaw Versus the Pampas Grass
- Mother, any distance
- Remains
- The Manhunt

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