nobody loses all the time

POEM TEXT

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i had an uncle named
Sol who was a born failure and
nearly everybody said he should have gone
into vaudeville perhaps because my Uncle Sol could
sing McCann He Was A Diver on Xmas Eve like Hell Itself which
may or may not account for the fact that my Uncle

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of all to use a highfalootin phrase
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my Uncle Sol's farm
failed because the chickens
ate the vegetables so
my Uncle Sol had a
chicken farm till the
skunks ate the chickens when

my Uncle Sol
had a skunk farm but
the skunks caught cold and
died and so
my Uncle Sol imitated the
skunks in a subtle manner

or by drowning himself in the watertank
but somebody who'd given my Uncle Sol a Victor
Victrola and records while he lived presented to
him upon the auspicious occasion of his decease a
scrumptious not to mention splendiferous funeral with
tall boys in black gloves and flowers and everything and

i remember we all cried like the Missouri
when my Uncle Sol's coffin lurched because
somebody pressed a button
(and down went
my Uncle
Sol

and started a worm farm)

SUMMARY

Even the unluckiest people have some luck.

My uncle Sol seemed destined to be a failure all his life. Almost everyone thought he should have tried for a career on the vaudeville stage, maybe because he could sing the comic song "McCann He Was a Diver" like nobody's business on Christmas Eve. And this might or might not explain why Sol treated himself to perhaps the most—if you'll excuse the fancy phrasing—inexcusable of all luxuries: namely, farming. And, needless to say, Sol's farm went bust because his chickens ate his crops. So then Sol found himself with a chicken farm, until skunks ate the chickens.

At that point, Sol had a skunk farm—but then all the skunks died from a cold. So my uncle subtly mimicked them by also getting sick and dying, or maybe he drowned himself in his water tank. Anyway, when he died, someone who'd once given him a phonograph and records now gave him, on the grand occasion of his death, a marvelous—no, an absolutely *splendid*—funeral, complete with tall guys wearing black gloves, flower arrangements, the works.

I remember how much we all cried at his burial: the waterworks were like the Missouri River. Someone pushed a button, and Sol's coffin jerked and dropped into the grave, where his corpse started a worm farm.

THEMES

DEATH AND THE CIRCLE OF LIFE

E. E. Cummings's "nobody loses all the time" spins a wild comic yarn about the speaker's doomed Uncle Sol. Over the course of the story, Sol takes up farming and suffers a cyclical series of failures: chickens eat his crops, skunks eat his chickens, and so on. Finally, Sol himself dies and his corpse goes underground to "start[] a worm farm." Through a mix of gallows humor and cartoon zaniness, the poem makes the point that it's a dog-eat-dog (or skunk-eat-chicken) world out there. Life's a series of challenges, then we die and become worm food—and the cycle starts over again.

Though it's presented as a comic anecdote, the poem's plot consists of a series of deaths—plant, animal, and human. Uncle Sol tries to succeed at farming, a job that's literally about breeding life (crops and livestock) to nourish other life. Over and over, he fails. Yet even his failures illustrate how the death of one thing nourishes another: chickens eat veggies, skunks eat chickens, and so on. Ironically, Sol only succeeds at farming, in a sense, when he himself dies and "start[s] a worm farm" in the grave, continuing the cycle and breeding new life.

The implication of the poem's macabre punchline is that the circle of life goes on no matter what—and we're all part of it, whether we like it or not. Sol *can't* fail at this last form of "farm[ing]": he is worm food now. And the worms will, in turn, make the soil more fertile, enabling plants to grow and other humans to farm the land (or try to!). In the end, the poem seems to remind readers there's no escaping death. Whether or not we're "born failure[s]" like Sol, we're born to die, destined to be absorbed back into the endless circle of life. In that way, humans are just like vegetables, chickens, skunks, worms—anything we might consider a lesser life form. We all came from soil and we'll all return to it.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-3
- Lines 14-38

FAILURE, DESPAIR, AND HOPE

The title of "nobody loses all the time" could be read as the poem's central message—if it weren't drenched in irony. The poem's main character, Uncle Sol, is a "born failure" who crashes and burns in every endeavor he tries—and finally loses everything he's got, including his life. Meanwhile, he never pursues the one thing he's good at: singing. Yet by the poem's end, Sol's story also reflects some of the optimism of the title, even if the optimism is the speaker's rather than Sol's own. The speaker compares Sol's death to a new undertaking ("start[ing] a worm farm"), as if to imply that hope springs eternal even in the grave. And if Sol enjoyed entertaining people, his story is certainly entertaining! The poem as a whole seems to hint that life *can* consist of chronic "los[ing]"—but that there are grounds for hope, and humor, even in unlucky lives.

From the start, the poem's title clashes with the relentless misfortunes of its protagonist. Uncle Sol seems to live under a curse: he's a "born failure." Though he can sing and "should have gone / into vaudeville," according to those who know him, he goes into farming instead. It's not clear how much choice he had, however. The mischievous speaker describes Sol's farming career as something he "indulges" in, the most "inexcusable of all [...] luxuries"—but this might be an ironic reversal of the truth. Show business is more likely than farming to be a dream people "indulge[]," so Sol may have been forced into his farming career by circumstance. Either way, he fails miserably at it: his chickens eat his vegetables, then skunks eat his chickens, then even the skunks get sick and die. Finally, Sol himself dies, in what might well be a death of despair. The speaker leaves it unclear whether he dies of illness like the skunks "or by drowning himself in the watertank," thus inflicting the final "los[s]" on himself.

From one angle, then, Sol's life looks like a monument to futility and broken dreams. The moral of his story seems to be the exact opposite of the one in the title. Even in death, he can't catch a break—or rather, he catches one too late. Unexpectedly, someone "present[s]" him with a "splendiferous funeral" to honor "the auspicious occasion of his decease." But he doesn't get to enjoy this windfall; others do. The lavish "flowers and everything" around his coffin ironically seem suited to the star he *wanted* to be, not the failed farmer he was.

Still, the poem contains some evidence that *does* back up the claim in the title, and suggests that Sol's life represents a victory after all. By catching cold and dying (if that's what actually happens), Sol "imitate[s] the / skunks in a subtle manner," as if doing an impression of them. In an ironic way, then, his entertainment career is alive to the end! His story seems to amuse the speaker, and it's clearly meant to entertain the reader, too.

Plus, Sol gets a grand sendoff, even if he's not there to see it. His funeral is paid for by a mysterious benefactor who had previously given him a phonograph and records—so there was at least a *little* luck, and a little music, in Sol's life. (The brand name of the phonograph, "Victor Victrola," even contains a synonym for "winner"!) And the mourners at Sol's funeral "cr[y] like the Missouri" River, suggesting that he was loved by many.

Meanwhile, Sol is on to his next endeavor. Of course, "started a worm farm" is just a joking way of saying "became worm food"—but it could also reflect the kind of irrepressible spirit that kept Sol going through his misfortune. Even if he ended up taking his own life, despair doesn't get the last word here.

Though the poem's robust comedy lies more in the speaker's telling than in Sol's own experience, it partly redeems the bleak facts of Sol's story. The poem can be read as a high-spirited celebration of Sol, much like the "splendiferous funeral" that capped his life. It can also be read as a roundabout proof of its title, suggesting that even the Uncle Sols of the world aren't complete "lose[rs]" or "failure[s]." In fact, they're often memorable and lovable.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-38

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

nobody loses all the time
i had an uncle named
Sol who was a born failure and
nearly everybody said he should have gone
into vaudeville perhaps because my Uncle Sol could
sing McCann He Was A Diver on Xmas Eve like Hell Itself
which

The opening line of the poem gets a stanza to itself, and can be read as a kind of thesis statement: "nobody loses all the time." In other words, even the unluckiest person has *some* luck once in a while.

But this statement immediately starts to sound ironic in light of what follows. The speaker starts telling the story of their Uncle Sol, "who was a born failure." So this will be a poem about someone who loses *most* of the time, at least. The question is whether this man is a *total* loser, or whether even he scores a victory now and then. Right away, then, the opening claim becomes ambiguous, and by the end of the poem, the reader is left to judge whether it's true or false.

In the speaker's telling, it's not that Uncle Sol was totally hapless. In fact, he had a knack for singing and performing. He "could / sing" the old comic song "McCann He Was A Diver" like nobody's business—or, as the speaker colorfully puts it, "like Hell Itself." He would sing this song "on Xmas Eve," presumably to entertain friends and relatives. "Nearly everybody" who saw these performances thought that "he should have gone / into vaudeville"; that is, he should have tried to make a career performing in variety shows. ("Vaudeville" was a kind of theater that combined singing, dancing, comedy skits, and more, popular in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.)

Of course, the word "nearly" qualifies the claim a little bit. Obviously, there's a difference between amusing family members around the holidays and entertaining thousands on stage. And even people who respect Sol's talent aren't *sure* he could have made it in show business. They just suspect he could have gone further in it than in the work he actually chose—which, as the rest of the poem explains, was farming, a career at which (to put it mildly) he did not succeed.

Here it may be relevant that the nickname "Sol" is usually short for "Solomon," a name associated with wisdom (as in the biblical King Solomon). If the name is meant as an allusion, the fact that Sol keeps bumbling into folly and "failure" gives it an ironic tinge.

By line 6, the poem's general form, or formlessness, is clear. It's written in sprawling free verse that suits the speaker's chatty, energetic style. Its many enjambments (e.g., "named / Sol") make the speaker's narrative style sound almost breathless.

One line spills into another, unpunctuated, with no consistent logic to the line breaks, as if the speaker is too exuberant to pause or organize their thoughts.

LINES 7-11

may or may not account for the fact that my Uncle
Sol indulged in that possibly most inexcusable
of all to use a highfalootin phrase
luxuries that is or to
wit farming and be

Lines 6-11 come as a kind of non sequitur. That is, they don't follow logically from the lines before, even if the speaker makes it sound as if they do.

The speaker claims that Uncle Sol's singing talent—which others thought he should have pursued—"may or may not account for the fact" that he "indulged" in another career: "farming." The logic here isn't clear at all, although there are some plausible ways to make sense out of it. Maybe Sol decided to defy other people's expectations. Or maybe he couldn't pursue a career in showbiz for other reasons (such as financial circumstances), and this is the speaker's ironic way of saying he *had* to go into a trade like farming.

The speaker's harsh judgment on farming sounds like part of that irony:

- The speaker claims in fancy—or "highfalootin"—language that farming is "that possibly most inexcusable / of all [...] luxuries." In other words, it might be the most frivolous, self-indulgent thing you could do with your life.
- The speaker throws a couple more pretentious, unnecessary terms into the mix: "that is or to / wit."

This self-conscious fancy talk adds to the poem's playful, ironic tone, hinting that the speaker's opinion here may be less than serious. Farming can be a prosperous business under some circumstances, but it's usually thought of as a down-to-earth, practical trade, not a mere "indulge[nce]" or "luxur[y]." It's certainly not a luxury in the grand scheme of things, because without it, the human species would die.

Then again, there's a grain of truth under all the silliness, because it turns out that Uncle Sol was *really bad* at farming. Thus, farming might have been a frivolous, pointless career for *him* to "indulge[] in." He might have better spent his time and talents elsewhere.

LINES 11-18

and be
it needlessly
added
my Uncle Sol's farm
failed because the chickens

ate the vegetables so
my Uncle Sol had a
chicken farm

In lines 11-18, the speaker develops Uncle Sol's story further while continuing to clown around with language.

First, the speaker makes another whimsically jarring transition: "and be / it needlessly / added." This is another comically "highfalootin" phrase, a fancier version of the expression "needless to say." It's also ironic, because what the speaker says next isn't redundant or predictable at all:

> my Uncle Sol's farm
> failed because the chickens
> ate the vegetables so
> my Uncle Sol had a
> chicken farm

The repetitious language here ("my Uncle Sol[]," "chicken[s]," "farm") helps show that a cyclical process is underway. First, Sol tries to grow "vegetables" and raise "chickens." But then the chickens eat the vegetables, so Sol's whole operation becomes nothing more than "a chicken farm." In the next lines, the chickens will become prey themselves, causing Sol to struggle even more.

This unfortunate cycle is the reason Sol's farm "failed." It's as though Sol is trapped in a doom loop, an endless series of events that prove what the speaker said right up front: he's "a born failure." Sol is also trapped in a cycle of *loss*, which will end in the loss of his own life in lines 24-26.

But there's also a strange cheer in these lines. Quick as a wink, Uncle Sol decides that his farm—destroyed by chickens—is in fact *not* destroyed: it has simply become a chicken farm. That decision reveals a comically optimistic resilience even in the face of failure.

LINES 18-25

till the
skunks ate the chickens when
my Uncle Sol
had a skunk farm but
the skunks caught cold and
died and so
my Uncle Sol imitated the
skunks in a subtle manner

In lines 18-25, the cycle of failure continues. Uncle Sol has already lost his crops, because his chickens ate them. Now, the chickens are on the menu: "the skunks" eat them all up, leaving Uncle Sol with "a skunk farm." (Skunks really do pester chickens sometimes; as a child, the famous poet Emily Dickinson once speculated that a "skonk" might have invaded her family's henhouse.)

Needless to say, this skunk farm isn't really a farm at all. (Skunk farms are not unheard of, but this is certainly not what Uncle Sol planned.) Sol doesn't so much have a "skunk farm" as a complete mess on his hands. He has no control over these skunks: they're not domesticated animals, just pests that have overtaken his *real* farm.

And his losses don't end there. If the speaker's main point is that "nobody loses all the time," Sol's story ironically seems to prove the opposite. After the skunks eat the chickens, they "cat[ch] cold and die[]" themselves. They don't have any predators in the vicinity, but illness gets them anyway.

And poor Uncle Sol is next. He "imitate[s] the / skunks in a subtle manner"—meaning that he dies, too, possibly of a cold or some other illness. His losing streak culminates in the loss of his own life. His death becomes a kind of punchline—in fact, the first of several punchlines. The poem isn't over yet.

LINES 26-31

or by drowning himself in the watertank
but somebody who'd given my Uncle Sol a Victor
Victrola and records while he lived presented to
him upon the auspicious occasion of his decease a
scrumptious not to mention splendiferous funeral with
tall boys in black gloves and flowers and everything and

Line 26 tacks a surprise onto the end of the previous stanza. Suddenly, the speaker creates some ambiguity as to how Uncle Sol really died. He might have died of illness, like the skunks on his farm, "or" he might have died "by drowning himself in the watertank." In other words, he might have died from natural causes or by suicide. If it was the second, the implication is that Sol's failures finally caught up with him. Having nothing left but a farm full of dead skunks, he drowned himself in despair.

Lines 27-31 don't offer any further clarification. Instead, the speaker shifts gears again and describes the aftermath of Sol's demise. Ironically, just after Sol goes, he finally has a stroke of luck. Someone who had previously given him a smaller gift (a "Victor / Victrola" record player and "records") now decides to give him a bigger one: a lavish funeral. The speaker's language here combines playful irony with comic hyperbole:

> him upon the auspicious occasion of his decease a scrumptious not to mention splendiferous funeral with
> tall boys in black gloves and flowers and everything and [...]

Of course, for the dead person, death is never an "auspicious" (or lucky) "occasion." Nor are funerals, even lavish ones, usually described as "scrumptious" and "splendiferous": in most cultures (though not all!) they're mournful occasions rather than luxurious extravaganzas. But the over-the-top language seems to fit Sol's story as well as the speaker's own exuberant

style. In life, Sol was a massive screw-up, a "born failure" as well as an entertaining member of the speaker's family. Even in death, he looms large, and he gets a funeral to match his big personality—complete with "tall" mourners in fancy "black gloves," nice "flowers," and so on. (Notice, too, how the speaker's train of thought ploughs right over the stanza break, creating yet another breathless enjambment: "and // i remember.")

Finally, look again at the small detail about the "Victor / Victrola." It appears that, even "while [Sol] lived," someone loved him enough to give him this gift—so he got to taste a *little* luck, after all. There was *some* joy and music in his life, including the kind of comic songs he liked to sing. Even the brand name of the gift sounds triumphant (the word "Victor," emphasized through enjambment, means "winner"). So maybe the title of the poem, "nobody loses all the time," isn't 100% ironic. Sol may have been a complete financial "failure," but he seems to have done a little better in the personal relations department.

LINES 32-38

i remember we all cried like the Missouri
when my Uncle Sol's coffin lurched because
somebody pressed a button
(and down went
my Uncle
Sol
and started a worm farm)

Lines 32-38 end the poem with a punchline. They also present the best evidence yet that Sol had a little luck in his life—or a lot of love, anyway.

Still in hyperbolic mode, the speaker describes Sol's burial as a very tearful occasion:

> i remember we all cried like the Missouri
> when my Uncle Sol's coffin lurched [...]

In the speaker's telling, the mourners don't just cry, they "all" cry "like the Missouri" (the Missouri River, that is). They turn on the waterworks so hard that their tears flow like one of America's major waterways. Even accounting for comic exaggeration, this description *does* seem to indicate that a lot of people loved Uncle Sol, and will miss him now that he's gone.

Even if Sol's life was full of failure, then, he meant something to the people around him—and that, arguably, is a moral victory. Again, the poem's title seems at least a little justified here. Someone who truly "loses all the time" would keep right on losing through death and beyond; no one would throw them a lavish, tearful funeral.

Still, fate—or the speaker telling this anecdote—seems to get in a last laugh, too. When "somebody presse[s] a button" to lower Sol's coffin into the grave, his story concludes with one more irony:

> (and down went
> my Uncle
> Sol
> and started a worm farm)

At long last, Sol has started a farm that can't fail. The only catch is, he's not the farmer, he's the fertilizer. He's worm food now—and his corpse might even enrich the soil and produce new plants. In a tragicomic twist, he's more successful at farming in death than he was in life.

SYMBOLS

THE VICTOR VICTROLA

Though it's a small detail, the "Victor / Victrola" in lines 27-28 carries some hefty symbolic weight, representing Uncle Sol's off-kilter brand of luck.

The Victor Victrola was a popular brand of phonograph (or record player) manufactured in the early 20th century. Uncle Sol was clearly a fan of music: the speaker mentions that he was a talented singer of comic songs, and that people in his life thought he "should have gone / into vaudeville" (lines 4-5). So his Victor Victrola suggests that his interest in music and entertainment continued long after he had taken up a (failed) farming career.

Plus, the Victrola was a gift from an unnamed benefactor, who gave it to Sol "while he lived." Once Sol died, this same mysterious benefactor also threw Sol a grand "funeral." The Victrola thus represents the one stroke of luck Sol experiences *during his lifetime* as opposed to after his death. The record player seems to have brought a little music and joy into an otherwise unlucky life, as if to prove the claim in line 1: "nobody loses all the time."

In short, the record player symbolizes Sol's kind of victory: not what most of the world would call a successful life, exactly, but a warmth, friendliness, and joy that gives even his failures a hint of grace. That symbolism is right there in the record player's name! Cummings plays on the fact that the word "victor," as in the brand name "Victor Victrola," is a synonym for "winner."

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 27-28:** "but somebody who'd given my Uncle Sol a Victor / Victrola and records while he lived"

POETIC DEVICES

IRONY

"nobody loses all the time" is charged with irony from start to finish.

First, the title (which is also the opening line) has an ironic relationship to the events of the poem. The poem's protagonist, Uncle Sol, is so unlucky that he *does* appear to lose "all the time." Only in subtle ways does Sol emerge as a kind of winner: for example, lots of loved ones mourn him after he dies. But then, it's also rather ironic that most of his good fortune only comes along when he's no longer around to appreciate it (as when a benefactor throws him a "splendiferous funeral").

Likewise, Sol's final farming venture is "start[ing] a worm farm" in the grave. Of course, this is just a comic euphemism for becoming worm food; Sol isn't actually trying to "farm" under the earth. The speaker is cheekily presenting Sol's death as one more attempt at success, when in reality, death marks the end of all such attempts. Sol was a "born failure" and he died a failure, at least in financial terms.

There are other, subtler ironic touches throughout the poem. For example, the speaker frames farming as a self-indulgent "luxur[y]" compared to a career in show business, when most of the world, arguably, would see it the other way around. This unexpected framing underlines the idea that Sol wasted his true talents while doing something he had no talent for. Later, "chickens" eat Sol's "vegetables" and "skunks" eat his "chickens," so that Sol suddenly finds himself with a "skunk farm." Again, the phrasing is loaded with irony: Sol doesn't have an organized "farm" of skunks, he has a plot of land *overrun* with skunks.

In general, the poem's ironies turn Sol's sad story into an entertaining comedy, while presenting a wry perspective on life in general. In the end, the claim "nobody loses all the time" *can* be read as pure verbal irony (that is, the speaker might mean mean the opposite of what they're saying). But the speaker might also be partway sincere. They might feel that even a life as loaded with situational irony as Sol's—a life in which nothing works out as you hope or expect—has *some* redeeming elements.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Lines 7-11
- Lines 11-13
- Lines 16-21
- Lines 23-26
- Lines 27-31
- Lines 35-38

ENJAMBMENT

The poem is chock full of enjambment: nearly every line is enjambed, and even lines that would normally be end-stopped (according to standard grammar rules) generally omit punctuation at the end.

As a result, the poem feels deliberately longwinded and rambling. The speaker's monologue spills over breathlessly from one line to the next, never truly reaching an end. Cummings plays up this effect by breaking a number of lines on words speakers wouldn't normally pause after: "and," "the," "to," "Uncle" (as part of the phrase "Uncle Sol"), and so on.

Enjambment also helps emphasize some of the words that fall just before or after line breaks. One example is the gaudy word "scrumptious," which falls at the beginning of line 30; sitting in such a prominent position, "scrumptious" comes across as an especially dark, unexpected, and funny word to describe a funeral.

The line break that splits the word "Victor" from the word "Victrola" has a similar emphatic, surprising effect. The speaker is alluding to a phonograph with the brand name "Victor Victrola" here. But by splitting "Victor" off, enjambment helps underline a word that's a synonym for "winner"—which is exactly what Uncle Sol usually is not. This playful enjambment creates a subtle joke, and sends the reader back to the poem's title and central claim ("nobody loses all the time").

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "named / Sol"
- **Lines 3-4:** "and / nearly"
- **Lines 4-5:** "gone / into"
- **Lines 5-6:** "could / sing"
- **Lines 6-7:** "which / may"
- **Lines 7-8:** "Uncle / Sol"
- **Lines 8-9:** "inexcusable / of"
- **Lines 9-10:** "phrase / luxuries"
- **Lines 10-11:** "to / wit"
- **Lines 11-12:** "be / it"
- **Lines 12-13:** "needlessly / added"
- **Lines 14-15:** "farm / failed"
- **Lines 15-16:** "chickens / ate"
- **Lines 16-17:** "so / my"
- **Lines 17-18:** "a / chicken"
- **Lines 18-19:** "the / skunks"
- **Lines 19-20:** "when / my"
- **Lines 20-21:** "Sol / had"
- **Lines 21-22:** "but / the"
- **Lines 22-23:** "and / died"
- **Lines 23-24:** "so / my"
- **Lines 24-25:** "the / skunks"
- **Lines 25-26:** "manner / or"
- **Lines 26-27:** "watertank / but"

- **Lines 27-28:** "Victor / Victrola"
- **Lines 28-29:** "to / him"
- **Lines 29-30:** "a / scrumptious"
- **Lines 30-31:** "with / tall"
- **Lines 31-32:** "and / i"
- **Lines 32-33:** "Missouri / when"
- **Lines 33-34:** "because / somebody"
- **Lines 35-36:** "went / my"
- **Lines 36-38:** "Uncle / Sol / and"

REPETITION

Much of the poem's comic effect comes from the repetition of key words and phrases. Chief among these is the phrase "my Uncle Sol" (along with variants like "my Uncle Sol's"). After introducing the character in lines 2-3, the speaker never refers to plain "Sol" or "my uncle," but always "my Uncle Sol." The phrase has a folksy, affectionate quality, and the constant repetition helps cement the character in the reader's mind—because Uncle Sol *is* a character!

Other repeated words include "farm"/"farming," "chicken"/"chickens," and "skunk"/"skunks." Here, the speaker's repetitions help illustrate a vicious cycle of failure. Uncle Sol starts a vegetable farm, which gets eaten by chickens and becomes a "chicken farm," which gets eaten by skunks and becomes a "skunk farm." (There don't seem to be any predators around to eat the skunks, so the skunks drop dead from a "cold" instead.) Ultimately, the point is that it's a harsh world out there, and no matter what, Uncle Sol can't win.

Finally, Sol starts one last "farm": a "worm farm," in the grave. His death might seem to break the cycle, but even that's not guaranteed: after all, when we become worm food, we fertilize the soil, and new farmers might come along to try growing crops all over again.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "uncle"
- **Line 3:** "Sol"
- **Line 5:** "my Uncle Sol"
- **Lines 7-8:** "my Uncle / Sol"
- **Line 11:** "farming"
- **Line 14:** "my Uncle Sol's," "farm"
- **Line 15:** "chickens"
- **Line 17:** "my Uncle Sol," "had a"
- **Line 18:** "chicken," "farm"
- **Line 19:** "skunks," "chickens"
- **Line 20:** "my Uncle Sol"
- **Line 21:** "had a," "skunk," "farm"
- **Line 22:** "skunks"
- **Line 24:** "my Uncle Sol"
- **Line 25:** "skunks"
- **Line 27:** "my Uncle Sol"
- **Line 33:** "Uncle Sol's"
- **Lines 36-37:** "my Uncle / Sol"
- **Line 38:** "farm"

HYPERBOLE

The speaker's zany monologue is laced with comic hyperbole. It can be hard to draw a clear line between hyperbole and plain old exuberance, but the speaker clearly crosses that line on a few occasions here!

In the third stanza, for instance, the speaker declares farming "possibly" the "most inexcusable / of all [...] luxuries." Here, there's both an element of hyperbole and an element of irony. Some farmers do their work for subsistence (i.e., the opposite of self-indulgence) or because it's the only work available in rural areas. And obviously, farming isn't a luxury to the human species as a whole! It's hard to know exactly what Sol's own situation is, or whether he *needs* to farm. But the claim that farming is the most "luxur[ious]" career he could find sounds comically over-the-top.

Later, the speaker uses cartoonishly exaggerated adjectives—"scrumptious not to mention splendiferous"—to describe Sol's funeral. Maybe the funeral really was lavish, or maybe it only seemed that way in comparison with Sol's limited means. (No matter what, "scrumptious" and "splendiferous" are oddly luxurious words with which to describe a solemn funeral!) At this funeral, the speaker claims, "we all cried like the Missouri." This is a wildly exaggerated way of saying that the mourners shed a lot of tears—a Missouri River's worth. Still, all this hyperbole seems to capture something of Sol's personality. He was clearly a big presence: a colorful, memorable man whose talents might have panned out in "vaudeville" but who led a life of crushing failure instead.

The poem's over-the-top language also reflects the speaker's own animated, cheerful spirit—their tendency to look on the bright side, even when considering a life as unlucky as Sol's.

Where Hyperbole appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-10:** "Sol indulged in that possibly most inexcusable / of all to use a highfalootin phrase / luxuries"
- **Lines 29-30:** "a / scrumptious not to mention splendiferous funeral"
- **Line 32:** "i remember we all cried like the Missouri"

ALLUSION

Lines 3-6 praise Sol's talent for singing "McCann He Was a Diver." The speaker is alluding, here, to an old comic song of Irish-American origin. A recording of the song is available here. The full lyrics go like this:

McCann he was a diver, and he worked beneath the sea,
Off a Jersey pier, off a Jersey pier.
O'Reilly worked the pump above, his hand upon the line,
Pumping atmosphere, pumping atmosphere.

One day McCann was walking on the bottom of the sea.
He met a mermaid and she said, "McCann," she said, said she:
"You look just like a devil-fish and will you marry me?"

"Oh ho!" says McCann, says McCann, "Pull me up O'Reilly where it's dry,
For I met a lady down below, and she has a fishy eye.
Oh, she's looking nice and neat
But bedad she has no feet—
Pull me up O'Reilly where it's dry."

Sol's friends take his skillful performances of this song "on Xmas Eve" as evidence that he would make a good "vaudeville" performer. (Vaudeville shows were theatrical variety shows popular in the late 19th and early 20th centuries; they typically featured singing and dancing as well as comedy routines.)

In a subtle way, the imagery of the song contrasts with that of the poem. McCann refuses to let a mermaid lure him to his death "on the bottom of the sea," and successfully escapes "up" to the surface. By contrast, the unlucky Sol ends up dying, and his coffin plunges "down" under the earth. McCann the diver is a survivor, but poor Sol is a doomed "failure"—a failure at everything but singing the song, that is.

As a result, Sol's own name might be an ironic allusion. "Sol" is most likely short for "Solomon," a name that invokes the biblical King Solomon. But Uncle Sol's foolishness contrasts starkly, and comically, with the legendary wisdom of the king (captured in the idiom "as wise as Solomon").

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-6:** "nearly everybody said he should have gone / into vaudeville perhaps because my Uncle Sol could / sing McCann He Was A Diver on Xmas Eve like Hell Itself"

VOCABULARY

Vaudeville (Lines 4-5) - A popular form of stage entertainment in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, typically featuring music, comedy, dancing, and other variety acts.

McCann He Was a Diver (Lines 5-6) - A comic song from the vaudeville era. Readers can hear a rendition of the song here.

Highfalootin (Line 9) - Slang for fancy or pretentious. More often spelled "highfalutin."

Victor Victrola (Lines 27-28) - Brand name of a popular phonograph (record player) from the early to mid-20th century.

The auspicious occasion of his decease (Lines 28-29) - That is, the grand event of his death. The idiom "auspicious occasion" refers to a notable event, and "auspicious" generally means "fortunate," so in this context, the phrase is heavily ironic.

Splendiferous (Lines 29-30) - Fantastic; splendid.

Scrumptious (Lines 29-30) - Here meaning sumptuous or lavish.

The Missouri (Line 32) - The Missouri River, a major river in the midwestern United States. (Part of a hyperbolic simile claiming that the mourners' tears flowed like a river.)

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem is written in loose, conversational free verse. Its casual form conveys the voice and attitude of its speaker, who is telling an old family anecdote with plenty of padding and digression along the way.

The poem's first and last stanzas contain one line each, while the middle six stanzas contain six lines each. This symmetrical structure lends a hint of order to an otherwise freewheeling and unpredictable piece. The first line (which is also the first stanza!) gives a thematic introduction to the poem (and is now often printed as the poem's title, though originally the poem was simply numbered as part of a sequence). The middle six stanzas develop the poem's weird, wild narrative, while the last line/stanza serves as a kind of punchline. (Old Sol, the failed farmer, has started a successful venture after all: a "worm farm," in the grave.)

In terms of line length, the poem veers all over the place, ranging from one to 17 syllables per line. In general, the language here is proudly informal and "unpoetic." It has a boisterous comic energy that may be partly inspired by old vaudeville comedy routines (see lines 4-5).

METER

As a free verse poem, "nobody loses all the time" contains no regular meter. Its line and stanza lengths vary wildly; for example, line 37 contains only one syllable, whereas line 6 contains 17. This unpredictability contributes to the poem's offbeat, madcap quality.

In general, E. E. Cummings was famous for his playful experimentation with language. He wrote poems in regular meter and rhyme, poems whose words are scrambled and

scattered all over the page, and just about everything in between. His daring free verse experiments (which can sometimes read like comic pranks) joined the broader wave of literary innovation known as 20th-century modernism.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem is written in free verse, so it doesn't have a rhyme scheme. (In fact, it doesn't use end rhyme at all.) The absence of rhyme keeps the poem light and informal, as the speaker ramblingly—but entertainingly—monologues about their late, lamented "Uncle Sol." (The speaker's zany patter might even be inspired by the kind of comedy routines found in old vaudeville shows, which apparently inspired Sol as well.) A formal structure or traditionally "poetic" technique like rhyme would undermine the loose, colloquial flavor of the language.

SPEAKER

The speaker is a relative (nephew, niece, or nibling) of the hapless "Uncle Sol." Beyond that, the speaker's identity is never revealed: Sol is the clear protagonist here. Still, the speaker's personality comes through in their *telling* of Sol's story.

It's the speaker, for example, who describes Sol as a "born failure." They have a bluntly realistic attitude toward their uncle, seeing him as someone who (contrary to the poem's opening line) *does* "lose[] all the time"—though this doesn't stop them from feeling affectionately toward him. (They mention his skill at singing, join the many mourners who "cried like the Missouri" at his burial, and so on.)

The speaker also editorializes about Sol's choice of careers, calling "farming" (with some apparent irony) "that possibly most inexcusable / of all to use a highfalootin phrase / luxuries." Basically, they think Sol's farming ventures were ill-advised and self-indulgent, even if farming is usually considered an honorable, salt-of-the-earth type profession.

Here the speaker also shows a desire not to speak in too "highfalootin" (fancy) a fashion—to keep things light and colloquial, in other words. As a result, the poem itself doesn't come off as a "highfalootin" work of art, but a funny, tongue-in-cheek one.

SETTING

The poem's setting is unnamed, but readers can guess Uncle Sol takes up farming somewhere in the rural United States: the speaker's distinctive colloquial vocabulary and their allusion to the Missouri River suggest that much. Besides those hints, the setting feels pretty general: one can raise "vegetables" and "chickens" (and be pestered by "skunks") pretty much anywhere.

This lack of detail helps give Uncle Sol's tale a universal quality: he's a generic lovable loser, the kind who might pop up in anyone's family, anywhere. When the poem reaches its closing graveyard scene, it ends up in the most universal setting of all!

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

E. E. Cummings (often styled "e e cummings") lived from 1894 to 1962 and was one of the most distinctive voices in 20th-century American poetry. The tradition that his name should be written without capital letters draws on his idiosyncratic style: Cummings liked to experiment with language as a visual medium.

Cummings's playful poetic innovations made him an important voice in the avant-garde literary world of the 1920s, a movement in which writers pushed the boundaries of traditional poetic form. Cummings is also often considered a major modernist, one of a group of early 20th-century poets who championed free verse. (Other voices in this tradition include William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, and T. S. Eliot.)

Cummings's work met with suspicion from both more conventional and more subversive writers. But that was nothing he wasn't ready for. In a short essay offering advice to young poets, he remarked that being a poet means "to be nobody-but-yourself"—and that to do so "in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else—means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight; and never stop fighting." By the end of Cummings's life, the poetry world had recognized his unique brilliance, and he was widely lauded, earning honors from a Guggenheim to a prestigious fellowship from the Academy of American Poets.

Cummings published "nobody loses all the time" in his 1926 poetry collection is *5*, which contains some of his most enduringly popular poems: "since feeling is first," "next to of course god america i," and more.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Cummings published "nobody loses all the time" in 1926, during a relatively optimistic period of world history. World War I (in which he'd reluctantly served) had recently ended, and many hoped and believed that widespread bloodshed was over for good.

The so-called Great War, which began in Europe and slowly spread to wrap around the globe, killed millions of people, most of them heartbreakingly young soldiers. When the war finally ended in 1918, the world entered a confused period marked by both mourning and giddy exuberance. When the "Roaring Twenties" kicked into gear, youth culture became an important force for the first time, as the younger generation who'd survived the war partied their cares away.

The decade was marked by a rejection of old values—values which the younger generation felt had only led to devastation. Experimental, avant-garde art became popular as artists moved away from traditional forms and embraced movements like surrealism and jazz. Cummings's work was just one part of this explosion of creativity.

This particular poem enshrines some pop-culture artifacts from the early 20th century. It alludes to "vaudeville," a wildly popular form of stage entertainment that combined song, dance, comedy skits, and more. It specifically references the Irish-American song "McCann He Was a Diver," a comic ditty of the kind audiences might hear during vaudeville performances. Finally, it mentions the "Victor Victrola," an iconic brand of phonograph (record player) from the early 20th century. Together, these details portray Sol as a man who loved the popular entertainment of his age—and might even have succeeded in showbiz himself, if he hadn't gone into farming instead.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a reading of "nobody loses all the time." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p752j6JlrgI)
- The Poet's Life and Work — Read a biography of E. E. Cummings at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/e-e-cummings)
- Modernism 101 — Read a brief explainer of the 20th-century literary movement with which Cummings was associated. (https://poets.org/text/brief-guide-modernism)
- Cummings: An Introduction — Read the Poetry Foundation's "E.E. Cummings 101," an overview of the poet's playful, groundbreaking work. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/90442/ee-cummings-101)
- A Brief History of Vaudeville — Read about the antique form of popular entertainment that "Uncle Sol" almost went into. (https://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA02/easton/vaudeville/vaudevillemain.html)
- McCann He Was a Diver — Listen to the old comic song mentioned in the poem. (https://econtent.unm.edu/digital/collection/RobbFieldRe/id/13189)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER E. E. CUMMINGS POEMS

- anyone lived in a pretty how town
- i carry your heart with me(i carry it in
- in Just-
- next to of course god america i
- O sweet spontaneous
- since feeling is first
- somewhere i have never travelled,gladly beyond

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