

Please Hold



SUMMARY

My wife tells me that the future has arrived. It is here and nothing has changed. Here's your future, she adds. I am on a telephone call with a robot. The robot offers me endless choices, but none of them are helpful. The robot responds enthusiastically when I provide my phone number and again when I provide the number for my account. These numbers are spectacular, the robot says, but the phone call isn't helpful. Money enters my account, which belongs more to the robot than to me; my money isn't getting me anything. I am giving the robot money, but I'm not getting anything in return. The robot assures me the call doesn't cost anything, but I yell at him that it *does* cost me something. Money comes out of my account to pay for my telephone bill. The robot says this is spectacular. My wife tells me the future has arrived. The robot apologizes, says he can't parse what I said. Kindly answer either Yes or No, he says. Or I can ask him to repeat himself, or go back to the main menu. My options are Yes, No, Repeat, and Menu. Or I can request a customer agent if I want to talk to a human being, but they will sound just as mechanical as the robot. I yell for the agent, but I'm interrupted. My wife tells me the future has arrived. It is here and nothing has changed. Here's your future, she adds. I am on a telephone call with a robot. The robot offers me no choices in the form of endless choices. He assures me that my patience is valued. He asks me to stay on the line. Mozart plays over the phone. He asks me to stay on the line. Mozart plays over the phone. He asks me to stay on the line. More stupid Mozart. The robot picks up my call. He tells me my call matters. What I hear is that my call *doesn't* matter. My wife tells me the future has arrived. What I hear is that being put on hold means that regardless of everything I've achieved, the only way I'll get what I need now is to wreak havoc. The robot tells me this is spectacular.

He asks me to kindly stay on the line. To kindly get old. To kindly be drained of life. To kindly do what is expected of me. Get older and fade away. The future has arrived. Kindly stay on the line.

“robot,” they become increasingly exasperated and even hopeless. It's clear they're never going to get their “needs” met through this computerized system, yet there's no denying this is how the world works now; they can either accept that this “is the future” or be left behind to “grow old” and “cold” (i.e., die). In this way, the poem illustrates how infuriating and isolating modern technology can be. “Please Hold” also implicitly questions the effectiveness—and, perhaps, the morality—of such soulless systems, which make life colder by devaluing human interaction.

The speaker's experience with an automated phone system is annoying, repetitive, and fruitless, illustrating how technology doesn't always benefit those it's meant to help. The speaker is given “countless options” as they talk “to a robot on the phone,” but none of these options actually addresses their “needs.” Indeed, they feel as if they are “paying a robot for doing nothing.”

The robot only recognizes a few programmed words, giving the speaker no opportunity to explain what they need. Instead, the robot instructs the speaker to “say Yes or No” or “Repeat or Menu.” The robot also informs the speaker that they can speak to an “Agent” if they want, but this agent will inevitably be “just as robotic” as the robot itself. Even when the speaker “scream[s]” out in sheer frustration for the agent, the robot only “transfers” the speaker back “to himself” (that is, the robot). So even though it seems like the robot is offering “countless alternatives,” the speaker actually has “no options” other than staying on the line or giving up on whatever it was they hoped to accomplish.

The robot not only fails to help the speaker but also makes the speaker feel obsolete. The pre-recorded message on the automated system tells the speaker that their “call is important,” yet the speaker understands that it isn't. They gripe that “for all [their] accomplishments,” the only way they're going to get anything done “is by looting.” In other words, the system is so infuriatingly repetitive that the speaker wants to smash the thing to pieces.

The poem ends with the voice of the automated system saying “Please hold. Please grow old. Please grow cold.” The system doesn't care if the speaker waits in line until they drop dead of old age. It doesn't care about the speaker's needs, and this begins to make the speaker feel like dead weight, something that simply has no place in “the future.” Meanwhile, throughout the poem, the speaker's wife repeats “This is the future,” adding that “We are already there, and it's the same / as the present.” These lines suggest that technology isn't everything it's cracked up to be; it hasn't really made people's lives any better or easier, only more repetitive and frustrating. The [repetition](#) also makes



THEMES



THE LIMITATIONS AND FRUSTRATIONS OF TECHNOLOGY

“Please Hold” [satirizes](#) an all-too-familiar situation: the speaker tries to navigate an automated phone system only to find themselves growing ever more frustrated. As they are put on “hold” repeatedly, directed in circles by an impersonal

the wife sound rather robotic; it's as if technology is draining humans of their humanity!

All in all, the poem illustrates how technology often makes life difficult and dehumanizing and thus questions both its efficacy and its impact on the people it's meant to help.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-52



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

*This is the ...
... to my needs.*

"Please Hold" is an account of an extremely frustrating phone call. It begins with the speaker quoting their wife:

This is the future, my wife says.
We are already there, and it's the same
as the present. Your future, here, she says.

The short sentences and [repetition](#) make the poem [tonally](#) flat from the start, illustrating the idea that while the future has arrived, nothing has changed. (In other words, time itself seems flat and repetitive.) "Your future, here" seems to indicate that the wife is handing the speaker the phone, but the disjointed, [paratactic](#) style of these lines is disorienting. The speaker's confusion will grow—and the parataxis will continue—as the poem goes on.

The speaker then says that they're "talking to a robot on the phone." This robot (automated answering system) provides "countless options," but none of those options actually address the speaker's "needs." Whatever task they're trying to complete, the robot doesn't help. The repetition of "robot" in lines 4 and 5 helps establish a monotonous tone, which already makes the call feel tedious. Instead of getting on with their day, the speaker has to listen to endless irrelevant "options."

The poem is written in [free verse](#), so it doesn't follow any [meter](#) or [rhyme scheme](#). As a result, its style is conversational, direct, and purposely "unpoetic" (like a soulless robot). This long opening [stanza](#) (49 lines) pulls the reader in and won't let them go—much like a phone call that should take five minutes but ends up taking an hour.

LINES 7-12

*Wonderful, says the ...
... great account number,*

In lines 7-10, the speaker starts describing their phone call in depth:

Wonderful, says the robot
when I give him my telephone number.
And Great, says the robot
when I give him my account number.

These lines are full of [parallelism](#) and [repetition](#), mimicking the fixed, scripted nature of these automated phone calls. Meanwhile, the robot's tone is overly enthusiastic to compensate for the lack of human interaction. In reality, there's nothing "Wonderful" or "Great" about having a phone or account number; this friendliness is simply meant to distract.

The word "number" appears three times in a row at the ends of lines 10-12:

when I give him my account **number**.
I have a wonderful telephone **number**
and a great account **number**,

This numbing [epistrophe](#) conveys the coldness of the interaction. To the company the robot represents, the speaker is just a statistic, one of countless people who need to be managed. There's no personal relationship between the speaker and the people they're paying, or the people who handle their money. In fact, to the company, the customer is just a "number."

The over-the-top repetition also helps establish the poem as [satire](#). When the speaker spits back the words "wonderful" and "great," their [tone](#) is scathingly sarcastic, highlighting the absurdity of making polite conversation with a robot.

LINES 13-17

*but I can ...
... for doing nothing.*

Despite their supposedly "wonderful telephone number" and "great account number," the speaker says that they "can find nothing to meet [their] needs / on the telephone." The veneer of friendliness doesn't change the fact that this automated system is confusing, frustrating, and inconvenient.

Indeed, the speaker next says that their "money" ultimately "pay[s] for nothing." It isn't clear what task they're hoping to accomplish, but clearly, this conversation isn't helping them do it. The speaker is "paying a robot for doing nothing," and even the account that's supposedly theirs is "really the robot's account."

Lines 14-17 contain multiple kinds of [repetition](#):

[...] on the telephone, and into my **account**
(which is really the **robot's account**)
goes **money, my money, to pay for nothing**.
I'm **paying a robot** for doing **nothing**.

Epistrophe—the repetition of "account" and "nothing" at the ends of lines—contrasts what the speaker is *trying* to accomplish (some mundane task, perhaps of a financial nature) with what they're *able* to accomplish (nothing). The ongoing repetition of "robot" emphasizes the cold, inhuman nature of the call.

Meanwhile, **diacope** (the repetition of "money") emphasizes what this interaction is all about: in the end, the speaker is just one more source of revenue for the company. The **polyptoton** of "pay"/"paying" reinforces the same idea. This call is purely transactional; the robot's friendliness isn't genuine. The system is designed to fake human warmth so that it can profit off human "needs."

LINES 18-23

*This call is ...
... is the future.*

In line 18, the robot informs the speaker that "This call is free of charge." Infuriated, the speaker contradicts the robot, "shout[ing]" back that they are in fact "paying for it"—though perhaps not in the way the robot means. If nothing else, this call is driving up the speaker's "telephone bill" and costing them time, energy, and peace of mind.

Lines 20-23 bring even more **repetition**. The sarcastic phrases "wonderful account" and "great telephone bill" echo the earlier "great account number" and "wonderful telephone number." Line 22 ("Wonderful, says the robot") is an exact repetition of line 7, and line 23 ("And my wife says, This is the future") is an inversion of line 1 ("This is the future, my wife says"). The slight variations only highlight how inane this interaction is: the call is going in circles, accomplishing nothing.

The wife's insistence that "This is the future" makes her sound mechanical as well. Her repetitive voice begins to resemble the robot's, suggesting that technology is eroding whatever makes people human. The "future" she keeps referring to isn't exactly a pleasant one; the poem implies that everyone will soon be participating, willingly or unwillingly, in this impersonal and vacuous script.

LINES 24-29

*I'm sorry, I ...
... just as robotic.*

After the wife speaks, the robot responds that he doesn't "understand." (Perhaps the system has registered but can't process her words.) "Please say Yes or No," the robot instructs the speaker, illustrating how limited people's choices are when interacting with automated systems.

Then the robot expands these options slightly: the speaker can say "Yes, No, Repeat, or Menu." (Through these last two options, the speaker can prompt the robot to repeat their last instruction or return to the main menu of the system.) They can

even "say Agent" if they want to speak to a real person—though this person will admittedly be "just as robotic" as the robot himself. That is, even if the speaker can get through to a human, the human will cycle through a fixed script just as the robot does. Whatever choice the speaker makes will produce the same result, meaning they don't have any real choice at all.

The poem continues to sound **satirical** in large part due to its **repetition**, which creates a flat, robotic **tone**. The poem's depiction of the robot is also satirical; in a real-life call of this sort, the robot wouldn't admit that a human agent "is just as robotic." This detail makes the poem less strictly realistic; the poet is exaggerating a real-world situation in order to highlight its absurdity.

LINES 30-36

*I scream Agent! ...
... of countless alternatives.*

By line 30, the speaker is completely losing their patience. They "scream Agent," hoping to reach a real person (no matter how "robotic"-seeming), but they're "cut off" mid-scream. The speaker's wife exacerbates the situation, repeating her words from lines 1-3:

[...] This is the future.
We are already there and it's the same
as the present. Your future, here, she says.

In fact, lines 31-36 are almost identical to lines 1-6. This prolonged **repetition** makes it clear that the speaker isn't getting anywhere; the phone call's going in circles, breeding more and more frustration. Time itself seems flat; "the future" echoes "the present."

While repeated phrases can make a poem more musical, the repetition here is so relentless that it has the opposite effect. The language grows dull, and everything blends together. This is exactly the problem the speaker faces: talking to an automated system is boring and fruitless. (Their interactions with their wife sound monotonous as well, so perhaps the speaker's frustration extends beyond technology.)

The speaker complains that the robot offers them "no options / in the guise of countless alternatives." In other words, the robot keeps listing things the speaker can say ("Yes, No," etc.), but the speaker knows that none of these options will cause anything new to happen. It's as if they're stuck in an infinite loop.

LINES 37-40

*We appreciate your ...
... fucking Kleine Nachtmusik.*

The robot assures the speaker that "We appreciate your patience," then puts them on hold. While the speaker is waiting, "Eine Kleine Nachtmusik"—a serenade by the 18th-century classical composer Mozart—plays over the phone.

The [allusion](#) to this famous song highlights how far humanity has come since the 1700s—and not necessarily in a good way. Who would have dreamed, before automated call systems, that Mozart's music would be used to fill time while people wait on the phone? What was once a beloved work of art, meant to be enjoyed live, now plays gratingly on loop, interrupted by a robot. (Some real-life call systems use this exact song as hold music!) Also, "Eine Kleine Nachtmusik" is meant to be spirited and playful, so it makes an especially [ironic](#) soundtrack for this mind-numbing call.

[Repetition](#) and [parataxis](#) evoke the speaker's long, annoying wait:

We appreciate your patience. Please hold.
 Eine Kleine Nachtmusik. Please hold.
 Eine Kleine Nachtmusik. Please hold.
 Eine fucking Kleine Nachtmusik.

The back-and-forth shifts between "Eine Kleine Nachtmusik" and "Please hold" feel jarring—and realistic. Anyone who's ever been on hold knows: just as the listener starts to get swept up in the hold music, a robotic voice interrupts (only to tell the listener to keep waiting). The [epistrophe](#) in lines 37-49 (the repetition of "Please hold") builds a sense of relentless tedium. The variation in line 40—and the use of an expletive—conveys the speaker's mounting anger. They just want this phone call to be over.

LINES 41-45

*And the robot ...
 ... is the future.*

After the blitz of Mozart music, the robot "transfers" the speaker "to himself." Once again, the robot is inescapable; the speaker seems stuck in an endless, hellish cycle.

The robot then claims that the speaker's "call is important," but the speaker says their "translator" tells them the opposite. This isn't a literal translator but the speaker's own perception: if their call *really* mattered, they wouldn't have been talking with a robot this whole time. But the speaker's wife assures the speaker that "This is the future," implying that this is just how society works now. The speaker had better get used to it, because nothing's going to change.

Note the ongoing use of [repetition](#) and [parallelism](#) in lines 42-45:

Your call is important to us, he says.
 And my translator says, This means
 your call is not important to them.
 And my wife says, This is the future.

This repetition continues to create a flat, lifeless [tone](#), capturing the tedium of spending hours on hold. It also

highlights the gap between what the company wants the speaker to believe (that their call matters to someone) and the poorly concealed truth (their call doesn't matter to anyone). It seems there's no room for human "needs" in the future; again, the poem suggests that technology isn't about helping people so much as it is about profiting off them.

LINES 46-52

*And my translator ...
 ... future. Please hold.*

Based on the way this call system treats them, the speaker concludes:

[...] Please hold
 means that, for all your accomplishments,
 the only way you can now meet your needs
 is by looting. [...]

In other words, waiting patiently on the phone is never going to get the speaker anywhere. The company doesn't actually care about meeting the customer's needs, regardless of what they claim. The only way the speaker will accomplish something is through "looting"—the kind of theft that typically happens during rioting or wartime. This word marks a startling break from the monotonous language of the previous lines. It suggests that the speaker is thinking about waging war on all this dehumanizing technology, or on the companies that leverage it against people.

The poem then ends with the robot addressing the speaker. Once more, the robot's language is [satirically](#) exaggerated—it may even be what the speaker's internal "translator" *hears* rather than what the robot literally *says*. Notice the abundant [anaphora](#) (the [repetition](#) of "Please," "Please grow," and "Grow") and [epistrophe](#) (the repetition of "cold") in these final lines:

Please hold. Please grow old. Please grow cold.
 Please do what you're told. Grow old. Grow cold.
 This is the future. Please hold.

The heightened repetition suggests that if the speaker doesn't rebel against this system, their wait will go on forever. They've been put on hold indefinitely; the robot is essentially telling them they might as well go die, because their needs will never be met. The instruction to "Grow old," in particular, implies that technology wastes people's time and alienates older people who can't keep up with constant changes. This "future" expects people simply to comply—and waste away doing so. The poem thus critiques the way modern technology exploits human needs rather than respecting or addressing them.



POETIC DEVICES

EPISTROPHE

The poem uses lots of [epistrophe](#), which adds rhythm to the language, emphasizes key words and phrases, and underscores the monotony of the speaker's situation.

In lines 8-12, for instance, the word "number" repeats several times at the ends of lines and sentences:

when I give him my telephone number.
And Great, says the robot
when I give him my account number.
I have a wonderful telephone number
and a great account number.

This insistent [repetition](#) evokes the way technology depersonalizes interactions and turns *people* into numbers. Similarly, the speaker repeats the word "account" at the ends of lines 14-15, "nothing" in lines 16-17, and "Menu" in lines 26-27. The accumulation of all this epistrophe has a deadening effect; it suggests how boring and repetitive modern life can be.

In lines 37-39, the speaker describes listening to the automated system while waiting for their phone call to be transferred:

We appreciate your patience. Please hold.
Eine Kleine Nachtmusik. Please hold.
Eine Kleine Nachtmusik. Please hold.

Again, the repetition evokes the tedium of listening to the same message over and over again. And in the last [stanza](#), the speaker exaggerates this experience to suggest what such tedium does to people:

Please hold. Please grow old. Please grow cold.
Please do what you're told. Grow old. Grow cold.

Here, repetition drives home the idea that technology couldn't care less about wasting people's time and making them feel obsolete.

There is also the more spread-out repetition of the phrase "says the robot" at the ends of lines 7, 9, 18, 22, 24, and 49. This recurring phrase adds to the dreary consistency of the poem, illustrating how automation can make life seem unbearably predictable.

Where Epistrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "says the robot"
- **Line 8:** "number"
- **Line 9:** "says the robot"

- **Line 10:** "number"
- **Line 11:** "number"
- **Line 12:** "number"
- **Line 14:** "account"
- **Line 15:** "account"
- **Line 16:** "nothing"
- **Line 17:** "nothing"
- **Line 18:** "says the robot"
- **Line 22:** "says the robot"
- **Line 24:** "says the robot"
- **Line 26:** "Menu"
- **Line 27:** "Menu"
- **Line 37:** "Please hold."
- **Line 38:** "Please hold."
- **Line 39:** "Please hold."
- **Line 49:** "says the robot"
- **Line 50:** "grow old. Please grow cold."
- **Line 51:** "Grow old. Grow cold."

ANAPHORA

[Anaphora](#) contributes rhythm and momentum as the poem builds to its conclusion. In lines 43-46, for example, the speaker repeats the word "And":

And my translator says, This means
your call is not important to them.
And my wife says, This is the future.
And my translator says, Please hold [...]

The [repetition](#) makes it feel as if this situation is going to go on forever; the speaker will never get through to a human being. The style drives home how time-consuming and annoying the experience is.

More anaphora follows in lines 50-51:

Please hold. Please grow old. Please grow cold.
Please do what you're told. Grow old. Grow cold.

The overbearing repetition of "Please" conveys a veneer of cloying, hollow politeness. It's not as if the speaker has much choice in this matter—they have to stay on the line regardless of how long the call takes. Causing a ruckus with a robot isn't going to get them anywhere. Notice that anaphora overlaps with epistrophe in these lines, so that the repetition becomes almost unbearable. Anyone who's ever waited in a tedious queue, only for their call to be dropped or transferred to the wrong department, will identify with the speaker's pain!

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 43:** "And"

- **Line 45:** "And"
- **Line 46:** "And"
- **Line 50:** "Please," "Please," "Please"
- **Line 51:** "Please," "Grow," "Grow"
- **Line 52:** "Please"

REPETITION

[Anaphora](#) and [epistrophe](#) aren't the only kinds of [repetition](#) in this poem; in fact, the poem contains so much repetition that it would be easier to talk about the parts that *don't* repeat!

While repetition can make words and images pop, its overabundance in this poem has the opposite effect. That is, it creates a dull, flat rhythm, evoking the monotony of the speaker's phone call with a soulless "robot." Here are a few examples:

- Lines 1-5 ("This is the [...] countless options.") repeat almost verbatim in lines 31-35 ("and my wife [...] no options"). The repetition of such a large chunk of text emphasizes how fruitless and discouraging these automated interactions can be.
- The repetition of "Wonderful" and "Great" (as well as "robot," "telephone number," and "account number") in lines 7-12 highlights the absurdity of the speaker's situation. The speaker is deeply annoyed, but there's no human on the other end to read their tone and empathize, so the robot's cheeriness is like rubbing salt in a wound.
- The repetition of "needs" in lines 6, 13, and 48 is a reminder that this technology is supposed to *help* people. Yet the speaker's needs are being ignored rather than met.
- In addition to epistrophe in lines 37-40 (the repetition of "Please hold"), there is also the repetition of "Eine Kleine Nachtmusik," the title of a famous Mozart piece. This repetition evokes the way the hold music plays on loop, interrupted periodically by the robot saying, "Please hold."
- Lines 50-52 contain not only anaphora and epistrophe but also the repetition of "This is the future" and "Please hold," both of which appeared earlier. This recycling of phrases suggests that nothing will change: technology will just keep eating up more of people's time.

There is also [diacope](#) and [polyptoton](#) in lines 16-19:

[...] goes money, my money, to pay for nothing.
I'm paying a robot for doing nothing.
This call is free of charge, says the robot.
Yes but I'm paying for it, I shout,

These repetitions highlight the reality that this call *does* cost the speaker something. Not only does it add to their phone bill, but it costs them time and peace of mind—[ironically](#) enough, given that technology is supposed to make tasks faster and easier.

Finally, the poem contains a number of [parallel](#) phrases, as in lines 42-44:

Your call is important to us, he says.
And my translator says, This means
your call is not important to them.

The parallel structure here heightens the contrast between what the robot is programmed to *say* ("Your call is important to us") and what this frustrating process *reveals* ("your call is not important to them").

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Lines 2-3
- Line 3
- Lines 4-4
- Line 4
- Lines 5-5
- Line 5
- Line 6
- Line 7
- Line 8
- Line 9
- Line 10
- Line 11
- Line 12
- Line 13
- Line 15
- Line 16
- Line 17
- Line 18
- Line 19
- Line 20
- Line 21
- Line 22
- Line 23
- Line 24
- Line 25
- Line 26
- Line 27
- Line 28
- Line 29
- Line 30
- Line 31
- Lines 32-33
- Line 33
- Line 34

- Line 35
- Line 38
- Line 39
- Line 40
- Line 41
- Line 42
- Lines 43-44
- Line 43
- Lines 45-46
- Line 48
- Line 49
- Lines 50-52

ALLUSION

The poem contains an [allusion](#) in lines 38-40:

Eine Kleine Nachtmusik. Please hold.
 Eine Kleine Nachtmusik. Please hold.
 Eine fucking Kleine Nachtmusik.

"Eine Kleine Nachtmusik" (German for "A Little Night Music") is one of classical composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's best-known works. The allusion helps bring to life the scenario the speaker is describing: as they're on "hold," waiting for their call to be picked up, upbeat music plays over the phone. The recording seems to loop endlessly, interrupted only by an automated voice saying "Please hold." Probably everyone has experienced some version of this scenario (some real-life automated systems do use Mozart's piece as their hold music).

The back-and-forth between classical music (originally played and enjoyed live) and the detached, robotic voice highlights the disconnect of modern life. To make matters worse, "Eine Kleine Nachtmusik" is a rousing, energetic, playful composition—the exact opposite of what the speaker is feeling as they deal with this annoying phone call. In fact, the exasperated speaker finally interjects the word "fucking" into the name of the piece, providing a funny contrast between classical sophistication and everyday vulgarity.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 38:** "Eine Kleine Nachtmusik."
- **Line 39:** "Eine Kleine Nachtmusik."
- **Line 40:** "Eine fucking Kleine Nachtmusik."

PARATAXIS

[Parataxis](#) adds to the flat, disjointed rhythm and robotic [tone](#) of the poem. It also creates a kind of mashup effect, as when the poem [juxtaposes](#) the wife's and robot's dialogue in lines 23-24:

And my wife says, This is the future.
 I'm sorry, I don't understand, says the robot.

These two lines don't necessarily occur in sequence; "This is the future" is a line the speaker has already quoted, something their wife probably says often. But the juxtaposition makes it sound as though the robot were somehow responding to the wife—and mirroring the speaker's incomprehension of "the future." Ironically, the parataxis here makes the wife sound a bit robotic, while making the robot sound more human. This effect, in turn, might suggest that technology blurs the line between real and not-real, human and inhuman. By presenting details repetitively and non-sequentially, the poem also underscores the speaker's frustration and confusion.

More parataxis appears in lines 37-40:

We appreciate your patience. Please hold.
 Eine Kleine Nachtmusik. Please hold.
 Eine Kleine Nachtmusik. Please hold.
 Eine fucking Kleine Nachtmusik.

The short, simple, disconnected sentences evoke the sound of the automated voice, as well as the abrupt switching between lively music and dull instruction.

There is also parataxis in the last few lines of the poem:

Please hold. Please grow old. Please grow cold.
 Please do what you're told. Grow old. Grow cold.
 This is the future. Please hold.

These short sentences could be rearranged in any order without really changing their meaning. Again, the accumulation of sentences with no clear causal relationship evokes the cold reality of technology, which leaves people feeling bewildered and cut off from their own humanity.

Where Parataxis appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-4:** "We are already there, and it's the same / as the present. Your future, here, she says. / And I'm talking to a robot on the phone."
- **Lines 23-24:** "And my wife says, This is the future. / I'm sorry, I don't understand, says the robot."
- **Lines 32-34:** "We are already there and it's the same / as the present. Your future, here, she says. / And I'm talking to a robot on the phone,"
- **Lines 37-40:** "We appreciate your patience. Please hold. / Eine Kleine Nachtmusik. Please hold. / Eine Kleine Nachtmusik. Please hold. / Eine fucking Kleine Nachtmusik."
- **Lines 50-52:** "Please hold. Please grow old. Please grow cold. / Please do what you're told. Grow old. Grow cold. / This is the future. Please hold."



VOCABULARY

Account number (Line 10, Line 12) - The identifying number linked to one's account with a financial institution or other business.

Agent (Lines 28-29, Line 30) - Here meaning a customer service representative; a person who interacts with customers or clients on behalf of a business.

Alternatives (Lines 35-36) - Choices.

Guise (Lines 35-36) - A form or outward appearance that hides the true nature of something; a disguise.

Eine Kleine Nachtmusik (Line 38, Line 39, Line 40) - A famous piece of music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart; the title is German for "A Little Night Music."

Looting (Lines 48-49) - Stealing goods during a war, uprising, or riot.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Please Hold" is a 52-line [free verse](#) poem split into two stanzas. The first stanza makes up the bulk of the poem and details the speaker's increasingly frustrated attempts to navigate an automated phone call. The second stanza is only three lines long and consists of the robot's instructions to the speaker.

Though the poem is written in [free verse](#), its lines are fairly uniform in length. This makes it feel a bit static and predictable, echoing the idea that the future is "the same / as the present." And while the poem doesn't [rhyme](#), it repeats many words at the ends of lines, including "says," "needs," "robot," "number," "account," "nothing," and more. In other words, the poem's form reinforces the idea that technology is more tedious than helpful.

METER

"Please Hold" is written in [free verse](#), meaning that it doesn't follow a set [meter](#). Instead, its rhythm emerges through intense [repetition](#), frequent [parallelism](#), and brief sentences—so that the poem feels frustratingly flat, like the "robot on the phone."

Free verse also tends to make poetry sound more speech-like than song-like. This is a poem about a modern phone conversation (of sorts), so its language reflects that premise.

RHYME SCHEME

As a [free verse](#) poem, "Please Hold" doesn't follow a [rhyme scheme](#). The lack of formal structure contributes to the poem's [colloquial](#), conversational tone. The plain language helps evoke the mundane and tedious experience the speaker is describing.

Though there's no rhyme scheme, the poem does repeat a number of words at the ends of lines (a form of identical rhyme). The [repetition](#) of end words like "robot" (lines 7, 9, 18, 22, 24, and 49, plus "robotic" in line 29), "number" (lines 8, 10, 11, and 12) and "hold" (lines 37, 38, 39, 46, and 52) conveys the maddening repetitiveness of the speaker's experience. As the poem continually circles back to these terms, the reader can feel the speaker's mounting frustration and despair.



SPEAKER

The speaker of "Please Hold" is trying to complete a task over the phone. The task has something to do with banking or billing, as an "account number" is involved. The speaker's attempt turns into a long, repetitive conversation with a "robot" (automated answering system), so that they're unable to accomplish what they set out to accomplish. This failure is exacerbated by the speaker's wife, who keeps repeating "This is the future"—implying that this is just how things are done now and the speaker had better get used to it.

The poem doesn't specify whether the speaker is young or old, what their gender or race is, where they live, or anything else of this nature. They are married and concerned about money ("Yes but I'm paying for it, I shout"), but otherwise hard to pin down biographically. The lack of specificity makes the poem more relatable; in today's world, anyone will recognize the speaker's annoyance at this cold, impersonal system.



SETTING

The poem is set in the contemporary world, where people pay bills and accomplish other tasks by communicating with "robot[s]" over the phone. When the speaker is put on hold, the automated call system automatically plays "Eine Kleine Nachtmusik"—an 18th-century classical composition by Mozart. This detail highlights how disconnected people have become; as the speaker waits for a robot to transfer their call, they listen to music from an entirely different era, when people conducted business by actually speaking to other people. (And when people only performed and heard music live, and never had to hear it on an endless loop!)

The speaker clearly feels cut off from the modern world and its impersonal technology—technology that purports to make life easier and provide abundant choices, but really just makes the speaker feel small and obsolete.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Please Hold" was published in 2018, in Ciaran O'Driscoll's 9th

poetry collection, *The Speaking Trees*.

Early in his career, O'Driscoll was influenced by modernist poets [T.S. Eliot](#) and [St. John Perse](#). He [drew](#) from their formal experimentation as well as their penchant for "testing [...] pure emotion against [irony](#)." As he grew older, though, O'Driscoll became interested in writing more explicitly about social and political issues. "Having absorbed so much of the purity of Modernism's attitude," O'Driscoll [wrote](#), it was hard

to write poems that made political or social statements, and the obliqueness that ensued often resulted in readers failing to see anything political or social in a poem that I thought had serious, though undercurrent, designs on the world and its wrongs. The only release from this dilemma was anger: when it reached a certain pitch, rage broke through the constraints and actually found imagination in another form—the [satirical](#)—waiting to help on the other side. This, I believe, is the case with poems such as "A Gift for the President," "Great Auks" (I wrote the first draft in a fit of silent apoplexy, on a train) and "Please Hold."

Indeed, "Please Hold" harnesses anger and frustration in order to reveal the damage modern technology inflicts on people. O'Driscoll's experimental, modernist influences are evident here in his over-the-top [repetition](#) and use of [free verse](#). But he uses these tools to make a clear argument about the world: that all too often technology wastes people's time, disconnects them from one another, and leaves people feeling hopeless.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Ciaran O'Driscoll was born in Callan, Ireland in 1943. He published "Please Hold" in 2018, when he was 75 years old. The poem deftly depicts the conundrum of modern technology: more often than not, automated systems and devices are frustrating, time-consuming, and not particularly helpful, yet we live in a world where they are quickly becoming the only available option.

While anyone can relate to the speaker's anger at the cold "robot" on the other end of the line, the poem might be seen more specifically to reflect the feelings of older generations, who weren't raised to interact with automated technology but with each other. (Automated phone menus of the kind the poem describes [appeared](#) in the 1980s, when O'Driscoll was already reaching middle age.) The wife's insistence that "This is

the future" echoes messaging that is leveled at everyone in modern society, but particularly at people who have been made to feel obsolete for misunderstanding or rejecting these isolating "advancements."



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Listen to the Poem Out Loud](#) — A 2009 video of O'Driscoll reading his poem at a poetry slam. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cAXDT4DK2To>)
- [The Poet's Life and Work](#) — A short biography of O'Driscoll from Poetry International. (https://www.poetryinternational.com/en/poets-poems/poets/poet/102-13165_O-Driscoll)
- [Southword Poetry Podcast Featuring O'Driscoll](#) — Scroll down to episode 4 to listen to O'Driscoll talk about his poetry. (<https://munsterlit.ie/podcasts/>)
- [A Little Night Music Recording](#) — Listen to Mozart's "Eine Kleine Nachtmusik"—the song playing over the phone while the speaker is on hold. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oy2zDJPlgwc>)
- [Staying Human: Poetry in the Age of Technology](#) — Former U.S. Poet Laureate Tracy K. Smith explains why poetry is an important antidote to the overwhelming presence of modern technology. (https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/tracy-k-smith-staying-human-poetry-in-the-age-of-technology/2018/05/29/890b6df2-629b-11e8-a768-ed043e33f1dc_story.html)



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