# The City Planners

## SUMMARY

While casually driving down these suburban streets on a sunny Sunday in August, we're bothered by just how intensely controlled and orderly everything is. The houses in their perfect little rows with neat, clean trees planted out front confidently reflect how straight the ground is, as if they're scolding our car for having a dent in the door. There's no yelling here or sounds of glass breaking; there's nothing more unexpected than the sensible drone of a mechanical lawnmower as it tidies up the demoralized grass.

But even as the driveways try to avoid any signs of chaos by being so perfectly uniform, and as all the roofs are angled in the same way to shield people from the scorching sky above, there are some things that peek through all this order. This includes the stench of spilled oil hanging about in garages, like some lurking illness; a little paint smear on a brick, popping up like an unexpected bruise; a plastic hose curled up like a snake waiting to pounce; and even the creepily unwavering gaze of the broad windows.

All these things give a quick glimpse into the world that still exists behind or beneath the walls of these houses, which will one day crack as the houses are overturned and slip sideways into a pile of rubble, as imperceptively as the massive, ever-moving bodies of ice that no one's paying any attention to at the moment.

Meanwhile, the City Planners, with the deranged faces of government accomplices, are dispersed all over wild, unmapped regions, hidden from one another, each in his own personal snowstorm.

They're approximating different directions (i.e., north, south, east, west) as they draw impermanent lines, which they treat like strict wooden boundaries, onto a wall in the snow-filled air that surrounds them.

They're mapping the terrifying chaos of an orderly suburb onto the wild, featureless snow.

## THEMES

### ORDER, CONTROL, AND MADNESS

"The City Planners" critiques humanity's obsession with controlling its environment. The poem's speaker finds suburbia's monotonous perfection—its orderly houses, manicured lawns, and eerie silence—stifling and strange. At the same time, the speaker suggests that these markers of human "sanit[y]" are just an illusion; people may strive to make their world *appear* neat and rational, but the world isn't always neat and rational—and this stiff veneer of order is thus liable to crack. The need for such strict control, the poem ultimately implies, is itself a kind of "panic."

While driving through suburban streets, the speaker is "offend[ed]" by the rigid regularity they see. Houses are in precise rows alongside "sanitary trees" that people have deliberately "planted," and the only sound is the "rational whine of a power mower" that keeps grass "straight" and tidy. In other words, everything is scrupulously controlled; nothing is overgrown, surprising, or out of place.

While the people living in the suburbs may think the lack of "shouting" and the absence of "shatter[ing ...] glass" is a mark of stability, the speaker finds such silence and sterility alarming. To the speaker, such order is an implicit "rebuke" of any signs of imperfection or difference—such as "the dent in our car door," a mark that makes the speaker stand out. Even the "grass" seems "discouraged" as it's cut "straight" rather than being allowed to grow however it pleases, suggesting that society's need for "sanit[y]" stifles expression, joy, and personal development.

The speaker suggests that this rigidity and control is in fact a sign of "panic": people are so terrified of disorder that they try to "trac[e]" meaning into the "madness" of nature. Yet this effort, the speaker implies, will fail; chaos will inevitably break through humanity's attempts to contain it.

To that end, the speaker describes "the smell of spilled oil" as "a faint / sickness lingering in the garages," suggesting that while everything looks perfect in this suburb, there's something rotten beneath the surface. There's also a "landscape behind or under / the future cracks in the plaster" just waiting to make itself known, and eventually all those tidy houses "will slide" into the "seas," gobbled up by the natural world that humanity tried to tame. However much people try to "sidestep hysteria" with their perfect "driveways" and yards, hysteria will find a way through.

The poem thus argues that human desire to impose order on the environment is itself a kind of insanity—a doomed attempt to regulate an irrational world. The speaker imagines the "city planners" thinking they can avoid chaos by dividing wild "territories" into suburbs. But the speaker describes their faces as "insane"; their attempts to control everything, the poem argues, is sheer "madness."

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-38

## HUMANITY'S DESTRUCTION OF THE ENVIRONMENT

In addition to critiquing the human need for rigid order and conformity, "The City Planners" can also be read as a poem about humanity's increasing distance from and destruction of the environment. For one thing, the poem implies that suburbia's neat and tidy surface shields people from the true cost of their cushy lives. And it also suggests that these housing developments aren't just a distraction, but are in fact part of the problem: the poem's city planners, driven by profit and pride, expect to continue developing wild territories into ever-expanding suburbs, using up more of the earth's natural resources in the process. The poem suggests that such short-sighted greed will eventually result in an unstable and inhospitable planet.

The speaker implies that perfectly "sane" residential streets shelter people from the realities around them, pointing out that "the driveways neatly / sidestep hysteria," for example, while their homes shield them from "the hot sky." Indeed, the speaker says that sometimes "the smell of spilled oil" or "a splash of paint on brick surprising as a bruise" will "give momentary access to / the landscape behind or under / the future cracks in the plaster." The perfect surface is thus just an illusion; beneath it, the reality of environmental destruction (and specifically, perhaps, the use of fossil fuels) is still there, waiting to be addressed.

These perfect "residential streets" are actively *contributing* to this destruction as well. When this set of houses falls into disrepair, the poem suggests, the "City Planners" will just build more. They'll even continue to make the same mistakes, "concealed from each other, / each in his own private blizzard, / guessing directions." In other words, these "political conspirators" won't communicate with each other and make a plan that is best for the people and the environment, but will rather continue making decisions alone (ostensibly out of pride and a desire for more personal profit).

The poem suggests such continued exploitation of the earth, its resources, and its inhabitants can only end in ruin. The speaker envisions the future of these houses as they "slide / obliquely into the clay seas, gradual as glaciers / that right now nobody notices." Basically, as long as people continue to ignore the reality of environmental destruction and waste the earth's resources, the future looks pretty bleak. The houses will "capsize[]" (or tip over, like a boat) into a sea of rubble.

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-38

# LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

## LINES 1-4

*Cruising these residential ...*
*... the sanities:*

As the poem begins, the speaker and some other unnamed person (or people) are "Cruising" (or leisurely driving) through a neighborhood. Everything about the poem's first two lines suggests comfort and calm:

- Not only is the speaker "cruising" along, but the streets are "residential"—they're streets where people live, rather than, say, the busy streets of a city center.
- It's Sunday, meaning it's the weekend (and a day when many go to church).
- It's also August—the height of summer, a time marked by vacation, leisure, etc.

The speaker thus seems to be just driving around aimlessly, enjoying the sunshine and maybe looking for a little fun.

The next lines, however, flip this image on its head, as the speaker says, "what offends us is / the sanities." The speaker isn't driving through the neighborhood with a sense of enjoyment, it seems, but rather is upset and disturbed by what they call "the sanities"—those things the world has deemed "sane" and normal.

One might assume "sanities" would be comforting, a sign of order and control. That the speaker is *offended* by these "sanities" is thus ironic—a sign that the speaker is feeling pretty disillusioned with suburbia.

The sounds of these lines, meanwhile, make their imagery more striking. Notice, for example, all the sibilance here (in the form of /s/ and /z/ sounds):

> Cruising these residential Sunday
> streets in dry August sunlight:
> what offends us is
> the sanities:

These smooth, hushed sounds suggest the ease and comfort—and perhaps the sinister, eerie quiet—of this suburban neighborhood.

## LINES 5-8

*the houses in ...*
*... our car door.*

The speaker goes on to explain what, exactly, those "sanities" are—what is it that the speaker finds so offensive about this neighborhood.

For one thing, the houses are in neat rows, orderly to a fault

("pedantic" suggests an overly perfect, arrogant, or downright obnoxious attention to detail). And along the sidewalk in front of those houses are "planted, sanitary / trees." The word "planted" implies that these trees have been very deliberately placed where they are, while "sanitary" suggests that they've somehow lost their wildness and vitality. There's nothing messy, dirty, or truly natural about them.

The speaker then says that these tidy houses and trees "assert / levelness of surface." The speaker subtly personifies the trees and houses here, saying that they "assert," or forcefully proclaim, their own uniformity in a way that feels "like a rebuke / to the dent" in the door of the speaker's car. In other words, it feels like the neighborhood, in its rigid regularity, is actively scolding the speaker for standing out by being imperfect.

These lines are filled with yet more sibilance, which here sounds a lot like a disapproving hiss (especially when combined with the sharp /t/ consonance below):

> sanitary trees, assert
> levelness of surface like a rebuke

The heavy alliteration of "dent" and "door" interrupts the smooth /s/ sounds, drawing attention to the car's imperfection. The alliteration of "pedantic" and "planted," meanwhile sounds crisp and controlled, while the combined consonance and assonance of "pedantic," "planted," and "sanitary" lends the poem a forceful, driving rhythm.

## LINES 9-12

*No shouting here, ...*
*... the discouraged grass.*

The issue, the speaker continues, isn't just that the neighborhood *looks* so neat, tidy, and homogenous. There also aren't any interesting sounds to break up this monotony—"No shouting" or "shatter of glass." (And note how the whooshing /sh/ consonance of these words brings them to life on the page.)

In fact, the speaker says, there's "nothing more abrupt / than the rational whine of a power mower." The only remotely "abrupt" or surprising sound is that of a tool people use to keep the grass in front of their houses looking uniformly neat. Thus, even that "whine" is "rational"; it serves a purpose, unlike, say, the chaotic "shatter of glass." These lines suggest that every sound in this neighborhood can be accounted for, every disturbance explained logically.

The personification of the grass also echoes that of the "planted trees" earlier in the stanza. No pieces of nature here are simply allowed to grow, but rather are placed, maintained, controlled. Here, personification also makes even more palpable the strangeness of planting a living thing just so one can cut it down again and again. The grass is "discouraged" from growing, suggesting that human interference in the environment stunts the natural progression of life.

## LINES 13-16

*But though the ...*
*... the hot sky,*

After the stanza break, the speaker shifts gears. The "But" that opens this stanza clues readers into the fact that there will be some addendum to whatever the speaker says next. Though they look perfectly rational and well-thought-out on the surface, there's something off-putting about the uniformity of these homes.

The speaker continues by describing the neighborhood's perfect driveways. To the speaker, these driveways, each a carbon copy of the last, look as though they're trying to "sidestep," or gingerly avoid, "hysteria" (i.e., drama, irrationality, intense feeling) "by being even." It's as though these personified driveways are thinking, *"Hey, if we look rational and orderly enough, no messiness can creep in."*

Likewise, the speaker says that "the roofs all display / the same slant of avoidance to the hot sky"—that is, all the houses' roofs slope at the same angle. The word "avoidance" specifically suggests there's something these perfectly manicured houses are meant to distract or shield people from—namely, the "hot sky" (which might represent the environment and/or the struggles and chaos of the rest of the world). It's all too easy for the inhabitants of these houses to ignore what is going on around them because of the comfort and convenience of their homes.

Consonance continues to bring the poem's imagery to life here. Listen, for example, to the sharp /t/ consonance in "neatly / sidestep hysteria," which evokes the crisp borders of the driveways. And the continued sibilance of this passage ("sidestep hysteria"; "same slant" and "sky") again mirrors the sinister hush that fills this neighborhood.

## LINES 17-22

*certain things: ...*
*... the wide windows*

Here comes the conclusion of that "But" introduced at the top of this stanza. Even though the neighborhood tries to shut out any signs of disorder, imperfection, or nonconformity, the speaker says, "certain things" peek through—and hint at a darkness beneath the neighborhood's pristine surface.

The first of these is "the smell of spilled oil," which the speaker metaphorically likens to "a faint sickness lingering in the garages." Clearly, there's something gross and wrong trickling in the background of this place. This mention of oil might also be a subtle allusion to humanity's increasing dependence on petroleum and fossil fuels (suburbs create longer commutes to work and often feature large lawns people use "power mower[s]" to keep tidy). That the smell of oil is a kind of

"sickness" suggests that there is something wrong with this increasing dependence. The liquid /l/ consonance ("smell," "spilled oil," "lingering") and smooth sibilance ("smell," "spilled," "sickness") of these lines evoke the unseen oozing oil.

The second of these "certain things" is "a splash of paint on brick surprising as a bruise." This simile suggests that even the slightest disruption in this neighborhood's uniformity is not just seen as "surprising," but also *violent*. The booming alliteration of "brick" and "bruise" adds to the intensity of the image.

Next, the speaker describes "a plastic hose poised in a vicious / coil." Once again, there's something unsettling about this image. The hose isn't just curled up on the lawn, it's "poised" like a snake about to strike. And as with the mention of "oil," the reference to "plastic" sounds like a subtle dig at humanity's wastefulness and destruction of natural resources.

The final "thing" the speaker mentions is "the too-fixed stare of the wide windows," the yawning /w/ alliteration seeming to echo the image at hand. The personification of these windows suggests that the houses are gazing emptily at the streets. Their "too-fixed stare" seems to imply they're rather lifeless; unlike houses built with love and care, these houses have no character, no soul. Despite being occupied, there is something sad and vacant about them.

## LINES 23-28

*give momentary access ...*
*... now nobody notices.*

After the stanza break, the speaker says that the "certain things" listed in lines 18-22 ("the smell of spilled oil," the "splash of paint surprising as a bruise," etc) ultimately "give access to / the landscape behind or under / the future cracks in the plaster." In other words, as the speaker looks upon suburbia's frightening perfection, conformity, and misuse of the earth's resources, they get a glimpse into a future where these houses have fallen apart and the environment they are meant to dominate begins to take over.

The speaker says that these houses will "capsize[]," or tumble over, and "slide / obliquely" (or slantwise) "into the clay seas." The speaker might be saying that the houses will tumble into literal water (through rising seas, etc.) or metaphorically describing piles of rubble as "seas" of clay. Either way, these neighborhoods will one day crumble.

The speaker also says that this process will happen "gradual as glaciers." Glaciers are giant masses of ice that are always moving and shifting under their weight, so slowly that people typically can't see it happening. Through this simile, the speaker is saying that the collapse of these houses will happen too slowly for people to notice, but it will happen steadily all the same. Indeed, the speaker goes on to say that "right now nobody notices" the melting glaciers (perhaps because they feel so safe and protected inside their homes, so separate from nature, that it never occurs to them to worry about the future of the planet).

Sonic devices add intensity to the fourth stanza. The heavy /g/ alliteration in "gradual as glaciers" draws attention to the simile and also slows the passage down. The same can be said for the consonance of /l/ sounds throughout these lines ("will slide / obliquely," "clay," "gradual as glaciers"). Finally, the quick alliteration of "now nobody notices" draws attention to one of the poem's central concerns: that the obsessive cosmetic concerns of suburbia are a distraction from issues of far greater consequence.

## LINES 29-33

*That is where ...*
*... own private blizzard;*

The speaker says that in this future, after the houses have all fallen apart, "the City Planners" will be "scattered over unsurveyed territories." In other words, they will already be looking for somewhere new to build—for some new, wild, unmapped land that they can tame and transform into another suburb.

Note the irony in the speaker's description: although the "City Planners" are the architects of all these suburban "sanities," they in fact are "insane." They're also like "political conspirators," or people plotting evil deeds in secret. the speaker clearly doesn't admire their desire to control the chaos of the natural world—to transform "unsurveyed territories" into more neighborhoods like the one in the poem (and, ostensibly, to make a profit in the process).

Their self-serving motives are evidenced by the fact that they are "concealed from each other, / each in his own private blizzard." In other words, there is no communication or community connecting them. The metaphor of these "City Planners" being each swept up in their "own private blizzard" also suggests that they can't see anything clearly—not each other, not the world, not the work that they're performing. They are utterly disconnected from reality—that is, "insane."

## LINES 34-38

*guessing directions, they ...*
*... madness of snows.*

Wrapped up in their "own private blizzard[s]," the "City Planners" don't know which way is north, south, east, west; they're just "guessing directions" as they plan (a phrase that also suggests they're guessing at instructions, or what the right thing to do is).

They then "sketch / transitory" (or impermanent) "lines rigid as wooden borders / on a wall in the white vanishing air." By using a simile to compare their plans to "wooden borders," the speaker suggests that even though these planners might think they're creating sturdy boundaries, their creations will never

last. They might as well be hammering fences into the very blizzards that surround them—fixing borders onto "white vanishing air." There are no borders in the air, of course, which is the speaker's point: trying to impose order on an essentially disordered world is a futile, "insane" endeavor.

The drumming /d/ consonance in "rigid as wooden borders" evokes the hollowness of their plans, while /w/ alliteration ("wooden," "wall," "white") brings to life the metaphorical "blizzard" that isolates each of these planners from each other. The imagery of "white vanishing air" further suggests that things are getting wilder, more chaotic, and out of control, yet the planners continue to act as if they can bend the environment to their will.

The poem concludes with the speaker saying that even as the world swirls chaotically around them, the "City Planners" will still be trying to impose "suburb order" on it. The speaker uses a metaphor to imply that such attempts at control are a form of "panic"—an irrational, gut reaction to fear.

The poem also returns to the metaphor of the "City Planners" being trapped in their "own private blizzard[s]," describing the mess they've created (or, perhaps, the natural world around them that refuses to be tamed) as a "bland madness of snows." The oxymoron draws attention to the fact that "madness" doesn't actually have to look all that extraordinary; humanity's desire for control is no less frenzied for being dull.

## SYMBOLS

### SNOW

The blizzards mentioned towards the poem's end symbolize the inherent disorder, irrationality, and wildness of the natural world. Each of the scheming "City Planners" is surrounded by "his own private blizzard," the speaker says, within which he can only "guess[] directions." This might reflect the idea that human ideas of north, south, and so forth are just that: human ideas, a means of assigning order to the world that ultimately exists only in people's own minds.

Next, the speaker says that these planners:

> [...] sketch
> transitory lines rigid as wooden borders
> on a wall in the white vanishing air

This is a metaphorical description of drawing up blueprints or plans for new suburban developments. The speaker is saying that any "lines," or boundaries, the planners draw are "transitory," or impermanent—like trying to fence in the air itself. The white air (that "private blizzard") swirling around each planner can't be contained by any sort of border or wall, which is precisely the point: humanity's attempts to rationally divvy up the world are in fact *irrational*, meaningless.

At the poem's end, the speaker makes this explicit: the planners are simply "tracing the panic of suburb / order," or trying to assert irrational human order, onto the "madness" that is the natural world.

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 33-38:** "each in his own private blizzard; / guessing directions, they sketch / transitory lines rigid as wooden borders / on a wall in the white vanishing air / tracing the panic of suburb / order in a bland madness of snows."

## POETIC DEVICES

### PERSONIFICATION

The poem uses personification to imbue the suburban setting with a sense of human agency and also to evoke the power of the natural world.

First, the speaker says that the houses in their perfect rows and the neat and tidy trees out front "assert / levelness of surface like a rebuke." While this personification is subtle, it suggests that these houses and trees are actively scolding the speaker for having a "dent[ed]" car door. The perfection of the suburb reflects its residents' dislike and distrust of anything out of the ordinary.

Later in the stanza, the speaker subtly personifies the grass as well, describes it as "discouraged" while being cut into neat and tidy patches by a lawnmower. This adjective highlights the way "power mower[s]," like many of humanity's inventions, are meant to control the natural world rather than to live in harmony with it. It also suggests that human interference "discourages" or dissuades the environment from growing in ways that are natural and healthy.

There's more personification in lines 13-14, where the speaker says that "the driveways neatly / sidestep hysteria." The image of inanimate "driveways" gingerly evading "hysteria"—or irrational behavior—again fills the setting with a sense of agency and power that reflects the will of its inhabitants. The driveways are neat and orderly because the residents of this suburb think that such neatness and order will keep them at a safe distance from "hysteria."

Finally, in lines 22-25, the speaker says that the "too-fixed stare of the wide windows" gives a brief glimpse into the future, in which these houses will fall apart. By describing the "stare" of these windows, the poem personifies the houses themselves as beings with the ability to "stare." This echoes the earlier personification of the houses and trees in their perfect little rows, again implying that the suburb itself is watching and judging all who enter. That this gaze is "too-fixed" suggests

there's something off and unnatural about its unwavering watchfulness. It doesn't seem warm or welcoming, but eerie and judgmental.

**Where Personification appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 5-7:** "the houses in pedantic rows, the planted / sanitary trees, assert / levelness of surface like a rebuke"
- **Line 12:** "the discouraged grass"
- **Lines 13-14:** "But though the driveways neatly / sidestep hysteria"
- **Line 22:** "the too-fixed stare of the wide windows"

## ALLITERATION

This poem uses quite a lot of alliteration, which adds musicality and emphasis. Take a look at the first four lines, for example, with their many /s/ sounds:

> Cruising these residential Sunday
> streets in dry August sunlight:
> what offends us is
> the sanities:

This sibilance (which appears within words as well; "August," "us," etc.) evokes the stillness and quietness of this suburb. Sibilance (in the form of both /s/ and /sh/ sounds) weaves throughout this entire stanza, in fact, as in "sanitary," "surface," "shouting," "shatter," and "straight swath." All these sounds might evoke the threatening hiss of a snake, and they thus fill the poem with a sense of tension and dread.

Other alliterative sounds call readers attention to specific images. The sharp /p/ sounds of "pedantic" and "planted," for example, emphasize just how precisely curated and deliberately organized this world is. The heavy /d/ alliteration in "dent" and "door," meanwhile, stands out like a sore thumb, much the way even the most harmless of imperfections stands out in such a rigidly controlled environment. The same can be said for the pounding /b/ of "brick" and "bruise" in line 20, which makes the image of this bruise all the more "surprising" in the poem itself.

**Where Alliteration appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "Sunday"
- **Line 2:** "streets," "sunlight"
- **Line 4:** "sanities"
- **Line 5:** "pedantic," "planted"
- **Line 6:** "sanitary"
- **Line 7:** "surface"
- **Line 8:** "dent," "door"
- **Line 9:** "shouting"
- **Line 10:** "shatter"
- **Line 12:** "straight," "swath"
- **Line 16:** "same," "slant"
- **Line 17:** "certain"
- **Line 18:** "smell," "spilled"
- **Line 19:** "sickness"
- **Line 20:** "splash," "brick," "surprising," "bruise"
- **Line 22:** "wide," "windows"
- **Line 27:** "gradual," "glaciers"
- **Line 28:** "now," "nobody," "notices"
- **Line 36:** "wall," "white"

## CONSONANCE

Like alliteration, consonance fills the poem with music and adds emphasis to certain images and ideas.

For example, notice how all the crisp /t/ sounds of the first stanza ("pedantic rows, the planted / sanitary trees, assert") evoke the sense of everything being neatly in its place.

Much of this consonance is more specifically sibilance, with /s/, /z/, and /sh/ sounds filling the poem with a threatening hiss from start to finish. The /z/ and /s/ sounds of phrases like "Cruising these residential Sunday / Streets in dry August sunlight" also evoke the smooth, quiet perfection of this suburban world. The hushed /w/ and /s/ sounds at the end of the stanza work in the same way:

> than the rational whine of a power mower
> cutting a straight swath in the discouraged grass.

The sounds of the lines themselves reflect the notion that even the whir of a lawnmower is nothing more than a "rational" buzz, and it also suggests defeated gentleness of the grass doesn't bother to put up a fight.

In other moments, consonance makes the poem feel threatening and tense, as is the case with the mixture of hissing /s/, liquid /l/, nasally /n/, and guttural /g/ consonance in lines 18-19:

> the smell of spilled oil a faint
> sickness lingering in the garages

These sounds draw attention to the way that this "spilled oil" oozes through the cracks of this suburb's veneer of perfection.

Similarly, the consonance of lines 20-21 adds intensity to violent, unsettling imagery at hand:

> a splash of paint on brick surprising as a bruise,
> a plastic hose poised in a vicious

Consonance works like this throughout the poem, helping its language come alive for readers. As a final example, listen to the sharp /k/ and /p/ sounds and hushed /s/ sounds in the description of the "City Planners" for whom the poem is named:

That is where the City Planners
with the insane faces of political conspirators
are scattered over unsurveyed

The language here feels at once crisp and hushed as though the speaker is at once spitting these words out in disgust and suggesting the quiet secrecy with which these people go about their terrible work.

**Where Consonance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "Cruising these residential"
- **Lines 1-2:** "Sunday / streets"
- **Line 2:** "August sunlight"
- **Line 3:** "offends us is"
- **Line 4:** "sanities"
- **Line 5:** "pedantic," "planted"
- **Line 6:** "sanitary trees, assert"
- **Line 7:** "levelness," "surface," "like," "rebuke"
- **Line 8:** "dent," "door"
- **Line 9:** "shouting"
- **Line 10:** "shatter"
- **Line 11:** "whine," "power mower"
- **Line 12:** "straight swath," "discouraged grass"
- **Line 14:** "sidestep hysteria"
- **Line 16:** "same slant," "avoidance," "sky"
- **Line 17:** "certain"
- **Line 18:** "smell," "spilled oil"
- **Line 19:** "sickness," "lingering," "garages"
- **Line 20:** "splash," "paint," "brick," "surprising," "bruise"
- **Line 21:** "plastic hose poised," "vicious"
- **Line 22:** "too-fixed stare," "wide windows"
- **Line 23:** "access"
- **Line 24:** "landscape"
- **Line 25:** "cracks," "plaster"
- **Line 26:** "capsized," "will slide"
- **Line 27:** "obliquely," "clay," "seas," "gradual," "glaciers"
- **Line 28:** "now nobody notices"
- **Line 29:** "City Planners"
- **Line 30:** "insane faces," "political conspirators"
- **Line 31:** "scattered," "over unsurveyed"
- **Line 32:** "territories," "concealed"
- **Line 35:** "wooden"
- **Line 36:** "wall," "white"
- **Line 38:** "bland madness ," "snows"

## ASSONANCE

The poem uses assonance in much the same way as it uses alliteration and consonance, adding intensity and emphasis to certain ideas and images. Assonance often works right alongside these other sonic devices to create strong rhythms in the poem, as in these lines:

the houses in pedantic rows, the planted
sanitary trees, assert
levelness of surface like a rebuke

Later in the poem, in line 30, the long /ay/ assonance in "insane faces" draws attention to the wild faces of the people—and thus to the madness—that lurks behind these "residential Sunday streets." Meanwhile, the clipped /eh/ sounds in "guessing directions, they sketch" emphasizes the slapdash nature of the City Planners' work; they don't bother to take the time to do things correctly, they just "guess" and "sketch" their "directions" hurriedly and without real consideration for the people who will live in the homes or the natural areas they are carving up with these developments.

**Where Assonance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "these"
- **Line 2:** "streets"
- **Line 4:** "sanities"
- **Line 5:** "pedantic," "planted"
- **Line 6:** "sanitary," "assert"
- **Line 7:** "surface"
- **Line 15:** "being," "even"
- **Line 19:** "sickness lingering"
- **Line 21:** "poised"
- **Line 22:** "coil"
- **Line 26:** "capsized," "slide"
- **Line 27:** "obliquely," "clay," "glaciers"
- **Line 30:** "insane," "faces"
- **Line 34:** "guessing," "directions," "sketch"

## IMAGERY

The poem is driven by vivid imagery that paints a picture of a sterile, stiflingly homogenous world.

Right away, the speaker brings this suburban neighborhood to life by describing "the houses in pedantic rows" and "the planted / sanitary trees." Whereas "*tidy* rows" might have had a more neutral impact, the word "pedantic" suggests the houses are *overly* symmetrical—to the point that it seems annoying or self-righteous. And those trees aren't just "planted"; they are "sanitary," a word that implies the trees seem somehow artificial, separate from the natural world.

The speaker goes on to say that there is "no shouting" in this place, and "nothing more abrupt / than the rational whine of a power mower." The imagery, then, begins to point to what is wrong with suburban housing developments: the need for uniformity and order strips the place of any feeling, uniqueness, interest, or excitement. Imagery makes the world feel overly genteel and concerned with appearances.

All this rigid, orderly imagery also makes the moments of *disorder* all the more striking. After mentioning how "the driveways neatly / sidestep hysteria," for example, the speaker

describes:

> the smell of spilled oil a faint
> sickness lingering in the garages,
> a splash of paint on brick surprising as a bruise,
> a plastic hose poised in a vicious
> coil [...]

The imagery of lurking illness, chaos, and danger. The imagery of that coiled hose even brings to mind a snake, an animal linked with deception and humanity's fall from grace in the Bible—suggesting subtly that behind this perfect suburban facade lies humanity's downfall.

To that end, the imagery gets more chaotic as the poem moves on and the speaker envisions humanity's future, in which these houses will tumble "obliquely into the clay seas" around them, "gradual as glaciers." The striking imagery of the poem's ending contrasts the "madness" of nature with the "panic of suburb / order," emphasizing the wildness, movement, and tenacity of nature in phrases like "the white vanishing air" and "order in a bland madness of snows." Such images make the "transitory lines rigid as wooden borders"—that is, the City Planners' plans—seem all the more futile and outright ludicrous.

**Where Imagery appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 5-6
- Lines 9-10
- Lines 11-12
- Lines 13-16
- Lines 18-22
- Lines 24-27
- Lines 35-38

## SIMILE

The poem uses several similes. The first is in lines 5-8, when the speaker says:

> the houses in pedantic rows, the planted
> sanitary trees, assert
> levelness of surface like a rebuke
> to the dent in our car door.

In other words, the speaker is saying that the neighborhood is so scrupulously organized, everything is so perfectly in its place, that it seems to be "rebuk[ing]" (or scolding) the speaker for daring to have a "dent" in their "car door."

There's then another simile in line 20, when the speaker says that "a splash of paint on brick" is as "surprising as a bruise." Because this neighborhood is so seemingly flawless, the "splash of paint" seems terribly out of place—and even painful. With this simile, readers get an even stronger sense of the "sickness" and violence lurking beneath the surface of the suburb.

Later in lines 34-35, the speaker describes the "City Planners" as "they sketch / transitory lines rigid as wooden borders." While the word "wooden" can refer to something that is made out of wood, it can also mean that something is stiff, unnatural, and lacking vitality. This simile thus suggests that the "transitory" (or short-lived) natures of these plans has to do with their rigidity. The "City Planners" don't actually care about the longevity or quality of these plans—all that matters is that they build houses quickly and cheaply so that they can continue to profit.

**Where Simile appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 5-8:** "the houses in pedantic rows, the planted / sanitary trees, assert / levelness of surface like a rebuke / to the dent in our car door."
- **Line 20:** "a splash of paint on brick surprising as a bruise"
- **Line 27:** "gradual as glaciers"
- **Lines 34-35:** "they sketch / transitory lines rigid as wooden borders"

## METAPHOR

The speaker uses a metaphor, saying that "the smell of spilled oil [is] a faint / sickness lingering in the garages." Through this metaphor, the speaker suggests that there is something unhealthy lurking in the background of this seemingly perfect suburb. The metaphor might also subtly allude to people's environmentally destructive dependence on fossil fuels, which are used to power the vehicles and "power mower[s]" in the "garages."

Later, in lines 26-27, the speaker uses another metaphor of "clay seas" to describe the way these cheaply made houses will someday soon deteriorate into piles of rubble. And towards the poem's end, the speaker describes the "City Planners" as each being completely wrapped up in their "own private blizzard." In other words, they're totally isolated from one another, which prevents them from having thoughtful conversations about what they're creating. Rather than collaborating, the "City Planners" are caught in a frenzy of predatory competition.

This comparison continues into the last two stanzas of the poem, therefore becoming an extended metaphor. The speaker says that the "City Planners" will continue to make their flimsy plans even when the world is falling apart around them, even as the "air" itself seems to "vanish[]" in the "blizzard" of their greed. The speaker describes the frenzied profiteering of the "City Planners" as a "bland madness of snows," implying that for all of humanity's attempts to avoid "hysteria," there is nothing more hysterical than its delusions of control.

**Where Metaphor appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 18-19:** "the smell of spilled oil a faint / sickness lingering in the garages,"
- **Lines 26-27:** "when the houses, capsized, will slide / obliquely into the clay seas"
- **Line 33:** "each in his own private blizzard;"
- **Line 36:** "on a wall in the white vanishing air"
- **Lines 37-38:** "tracing the panic of suburb / order in a bland madness of snows."

## IRONY

The poem implies that there's a certain irony inherent to suburban life: it's an attempt to assert a sense of rationality, order, and control onto an essentially irrational, disorderly, uncontrollable world. The many "sanities" are suburban life, in this speaker's summation, are actually a kind of "madness"; the suburb, instead of being a place of calm rationality, is ironically a place of "panic," where people desperately try to "sidestep hysteria."

The first two lines of the poem feel complacent and laid-back, almost as if this is going to be a poem celebrating the ease and pleasure of driving through a neighborhood in late summer. By beginning the poem in such a place, the poet sets the reader up to be surprised by the fact that this ease and complacency is "offen[sive]" to the speaker. The speaker suggests that what these people (and even perhaps the reader) consider to be "san[e]" and reasonable is actually quite the opposite. In other words, the poem isn't just criticizing this specific neighborhood; it is challenging the status quo that deems such neighborhoods "normal."

Likewise, the poem uses irony to describe the "faces" of the "City Planners" as "insane." While it is supposedly the planners' job to create neighborhoods that "sidestep hysteria" (or avoid irrationality), the poem argues that, in fact, it's irrational to think that people can have complete and perfect control over their environments. By humorously depicting the planners as "political conspirators," the poem makes their "panic[ked]" attempts at control seem almost cartoonish, emphasizing their absurdity.

**Where Irony appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 1-4:** "Cruising these residential Sunday / streets in dry August sunlight: / what offends us is / the sanities:"
- **Lines 29-30:** "That is where the City Planners / with the insane faces of political conspirators"

## OXYMORON

In line 35, there is an oxymoron as the speaker describes the "City Planners" drawing "transitory lines rigid as wooden borders." By describing their plans as both "transitory" (that is, impermanent) and "rigid" (inflexible) in the same breath, the poem suggests that their lack of adaptability or consideration for factors other than cost is *why* the houses are so unstable. These lines also suggest that though they may *think* they're creating sturdy "borders," but in reality nothing they build will last.

There are also two oxymorons in the final stanza of the poem. The speaker says that as the "City Planners" draw out their hurried, profit-driven plans, they "trac[e] the panic of suburb / order in a bland madness of snows." By describing the "order[liness]" of these residential neighborhoods as a kind of "panic," the poem suggests that there is nothing thoughtful about their design. Rather, their uniformity has to do with making things as quickly as possible. Calling "suburb order" a kind of "panic" also suggests that humanity's desire for rationality, control, and order is, itself, a kind of panic—a frantic response to the essential irrationality of the world.

**Where Oxymoron appears in the poem:**

- **Line 35:** "transitory lines rigid"
- **Lines 37-38:** "panic of suburb / order"

## VOCABULARY

**Residential** (Lines 1-2) - Designed for people to live in; occupied by private homes.

**Sanities** (Lines 3-4) - Plural form of the word sanity, which refers to the quality or state of being sane or sound of mind. The speaker is referring to the marks of order, cleanliness, etc. in this suburb.

**Pedantic** (Line 5) - Scrupulous; over-exacting; obsessively perfectionist when it comes to minor details. The worried carries connotations of arrogance.

**Sanitary** (Lines 5-6) - Hygienic and clean; free from dirt, infection, and disease.

**Assert** (Lines 6-7) - State or declare something forcefully or aggressively.

**Rebuke** (Line 7) - Harsh criticism or reprimand.

**Abrupt** (Lines 10-11) - Sudden and unexpected.

**Swath** (Line 12) - A row of cut grain or grass.

**Hysteria** (Lines 13-15) - Irrationality; exaggerated or uncontrollable emotion or excitement.

**Sidestep** (Lines 13-15) - Avoid.

**Capsized** (Line 26) - When a boat or other vessel is overturned in the water.

**Obliquely** (Lines 26-27) - Indirectly.

**Conspirators** (Line 30) - People who take part in a conspiracy (a secret plan or scheme that is illegal or harmful in some way).

**Unsurveyed territories** (Lines 31-32) - Areas that haven't been mapped or closely examined yet; wild, untamed tracts of land.

**Transitory** (Lines 34-35) - Temporary; short-lived.

**Rigid** (Line 35) - Stiff; unable to be changed or adapted.

**Suburb** (Lines 37-38) - A district on the outskirts of a city, which is often mostly residential.

**Bland** (Lines 37-38) - Boring or uninteresting; without strong or unique features.

## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"The City Planners" is a free verse poem, meaning it doesn't follow any specific pattern of meter or rhyme. There is some structure, however, as its 38 lines are broken into 7 stanzas of varying lengths.

Generally, these stanzas get shorter as the poem moves along: the first stanza has 12 lines, while the last has just two. This trajectory might reflect the way that suburbs (or residential areas that are built on city outskirts) disconnect people from each other, keeping everyone in their own little "sanitary" worlds. This privacy and disconnection, the poem's form seems to imply, are part of what is destroying the environment: people no longer work together for what is best for everyone, but rather center themselves and their own desires.

The form could also be seen to mimic the melting of glaciers; as the glaciers melt, they break into pieces which "vanish[]" into the sea.

### METER

The poem is written in free verse and therefore doesn't follow any regular metrical patterns. Instead, line lengths and rhythms vary greatly—as in the first stanza, where the shortest line is just four syllables long and the longest is 12!

Free verse feels appropriate in a poem that is criticizing humanity's rigid control of its environment. The poem's language itself is loose and unpredictable, thus contrasting with "the houses in pedantic rows" and neat "driveways."

### RHYME SCHEME

As a free verse poem, "The City Planners" does not follow a rhyme scheme. The absence of a rhyme scheme, much like the absence of meter, allows the poem to unfold naturally and unpredictably. This lack of a steady rhyme pattern fits right in with the poem's critique of humanity's destructive desire to "perfect" its environment with "rigid" designs.

## SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is never named, but this person is clearly someone who is not from, or who at the very least doesn't like, the homogenous perfection of modern suburbia. The speaker starts the poem by driving slowly through a suburban neighborhood on a "Sunday" in "August." Despite the seeming lightheartedness of this activity, the speaker is "offend[ed]" by what they see: too-perfect rows of houses and trees, an inhuman silence, and the "whine" of lawnmowers clipping the grass into a uniformly "level[]" surface.

The speaker doesn't fit in here, as evidenced by the fact that they've got a "dent in [their] car door"—a mark of imperfection. And rather than finding the tidiness of the neighborhood comforting or welcoming, the speaker finds it strange, unnatural, and alarming. As an outsider, the speaker feels able to see this world more clearly—and thus to see what's wrong with it.

It's possible to read the speaker as simply being the poet, Margaret Atwood, herself. Atwood is an advocate of environmental causes, and the poem seems to express her own discomfort with rigid conformity.

## SETTING

The poem takes place on a "dry," sunny Sunday in August as the speaker slowly drives down the quiet streets of a suburban neighborhood. The first two stanzas provide plenty of descriptive details: the neighborhood is made up of "houses in pedantic rows," "planted / sanitary trees," and "driveways" that "sidestep hysteria / by being even." In other words, the neighborhood appears rigidly pristine, without the slightest hint of a flaw.

Yet, despite this seeming perfection, the grass is described as "discouraged," the "smell of spilled oil" is like a "sickness lingering in the garages," and even something as seemingly harmless as a "plastic hose" seems "poised in a vicious coil" like a snake waiting to pounce. For all its orderliness, the setting thus feels threatening and tense—like there's some rot lurking beneath its surface.

Indeed, the speaker imagines that one day the the "landscape" that still exists "behind or under" this world will break through "cracks in the plaster" of these house's walls—that is, that the disorderly, irrational world will make its way back into the open, and those houses themselves will crumble.

At the poem's end, the setting moves to an imagined vision of the "City Planners"—those people tasked with creating these suburban environments in the first place. The speaker depicts such people as isolated in their own "private blizzard[s]," evoking an image of human beings futilely trying to create order when surrounded by fierce chaos.

# CONTEXT

## LITERARY CONTEXT

"The City Planners" was published in 1964 in Margaret Atwood's second collection of poetry, *The Circle Game*. Many poems in the collection tackle themes related to social conformity and compliance. Such ideas are clearly present in "The City Planners," with its depiction of suburbia as a place where even the slightest deviation from the norm—such as the speaker having a "dent" in their "car door"—warrants "rebuke."

Atwood also often writes from the perspective of outsiders and outcasts. In that sense, her later poem "Half-Hanged Mary" makes for an interesting comparison with "The City Planners"; despite being set centuries earlier, during the infamous Salem witchcraft trials, this poem similarly grapples with the tension between social conformity and "hysteria."

In addition to her poetry, Atwood has written many works of fiction, nonfiction, children's books, and criticism. Her work in every genre is frequently noted for its anti-authoritarian, environmentalist, and feminist concerns (all of which can be seen in what is perhaps her most famous work, the dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale*).

Atwood's early poetry, including *The Circle Game*, was influenced by the work of visionary English poet William Blake, who is associated with the Romantic movement. Blake is known for exploring contrasting states: childhood vs. adulthood, innocence vs. experience, etc. This can be seen in much of Atwood's work as well, including in this poem's juxtaposition between the perceived "hysteria" of the world and humanity's "rigid" desire to dominate it. Blake also believed human beings were losing their connection to nature, and therefore their connection to themselves and each other; this fear marks Atwood's vast body of work as well.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Margaret Atwood was born in Canada in 1939. Her father was an entomologist who studied forest insects, and Atwood spent her formative years developing a deep appreciation for nature while exploring the woods of Ottawa and Quebec.

Published in 1964, "The City Planners" is undoubtedly a response to the proliferation of suburban neighborhoods throughout the mid-20th century. In the wake of World War II, a rise in economic prosperity and the return of veterans who wanted to settle down and have families meant that Canada and the U.S. both entered a housing boom.

To meet demand, houses were often built quickly and cheaply. Everything from the design of the houses themselves to the size and shape of amenities such as stoves, refrigerators, and kitchen cabinets were also often standardized to ensure that the housing industry could keep costs down. And as people fled the cities in favor of cheap real estate and the promise of a more wholesome, traditional family life, dependence on transportation grew.

The poem might subtly allude to this increased dependence on cars (and therefore fossil fuels) with its mention of "the smell of oil" in suburban garages, which it compares to a "sickness." The poem further suggests that the standardization necessary to make these residential areas viable led to dull homogeneity.

# MORE RESOURCES

## EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Atwood's Biography — Learn more about Atwood's life and work via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/margaret-atwood)
- The Circle Game — Read a review of Margaret Atwood's first collection of poetry, The Circle Game, in which "The City Planners" appeared. (https://www.thenav.ca/2014/12/04/book-review-the-circle-game-by-margaret-atwood/)
- Atwood on Climate Change — An article discussing the role of climate change in Atwood's fiction. (https://tabitha-whiting.medium.com/climate-fiction-is-now-our-reality-a267bd1db4c7)
- The Problems of Suburbia — A brief article highlighting some of the main environmental concerns presented by suburban housing developments. (https://www.planetizen.com/news/2018/11/101570-problems-suburbs-are-numerous-change-course-possible)
- "Home Sweet Suburb" — Learn more about the rise of suburbia in Canada in the mid-20th century. (https://www.canadashistory.ca/explore/arts-culture-society/home-sweet-suburb)

## LITCHARTS ON OTHER MARGARET ATWOOD POEMS

- Half-Hanged Mary
- This Is a Photograph of Me
- [you fit into me]

## HOW TO CITE

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