The Three Fates

SUMMARY

Right as the man was about to drown, he appealed to the three Fates—the three sister goddesses who control destiny. He begged them for eternal life—a request that was a horrible mistake.

The man shot out of the river as though he were a cork submerged in water and then went back to shore. He put on his clothes, in the opposite order from how he'd taken them off, and went back home.

He re-experienced all the extreme suffering and intense emotions he'd felt in life. He wrote poems—working from their last lines to their openings—and wiped away teardrops before he'd even started crying.

As the day moved backwards in time towards the morning, he continued to love a specific woman passionately and without restraint. He looked on as she played on a swing in the garden and became younger and younger, wearing a straw hat and no shoes.

Eventually, both the woman and the swing disappeared, along with the man's house and the light of day. After a brief pause, the process repeated—the events of his life again unfolding in reverse, from the moment of his drowning in the river.

THEMES

THE PERMANENCE OF THE PAST

"The Three Fates" describes a man who begs for eternal life when he realizes that he is about to die. When his wish is granted, the man is forced to relive his time on earth in reverse order, over and over again. Unable to change his past or prevent the suffering that he knows is coming, the man's wish becomes a kind of curse. The poem thus suggests that it is best to live life well the first time around, as trying to change the past is futile.

After being granted his wish for eternal life, the man must perpetually go through everything he ever experienced—but in reverse. Saved from death by drowning, he shoots out of the river and returns to the shore. He then gets dressed "in reverse order" and proceeds backwards through the events of his life; he composes poetry "from the end backwards" and watches as his beloved "[grows] younger" and the "day [regresses] towards morning" (rather than developing into night). That his life now moves backwards underscores the man's inability to change the past—there's no way he can stop anything from happening, because now everything's *effect* happens before its *cause*.

As such, the man keeps re-experiencing all the pain and suffering he felt in life, repeatedly undergoing "the enormous agonies of passion" that apparently made him miserable in the first place. The fact that the man attempts to change his destiny indicates that he is unsatisfied with how his life played out, yet—despite having significant misgivings about his life—the man is unable to intervene as he relives these events. Because the man is incapable of removing the *sources* of his suffering, that suffering becomes inevitable. His inability to change the past makes the man trapped as a perpetual witness to his own pain and shortcomings, left "[b]rushing away tears that ha[ve] not yet fallen."

Perhaps the most striking example of this misfortune is the fact that he remains unable to hold onto someone he once loved "wildly," instead losing her again and again. He simply "watch[es]" as she becomes increasingly younger and ultimately disappears.

Once the past is gone, the poem implies, it's gone forever; there are no do-overs. The man thus seems to look on as everything he cares about—the young woman, "the house and the swing and daylight"—slips out of his reach. The man is apparently caught in this cycle forever, as the events of his life restart "all over," showing no signs that he might be able to change the outcome. The speaker even calls his attempt to alter his fate "a mistake," reinforcing the suggestion that perpetually reliving the difficult events of his life causes the man grave pain rather than healing.

Through his story, the speaker suggests that fate is singular and irreversible—there is no way to change one's destiny, and attempting to do so is unwise. Therefore, it is best to accept one's fate. Even if one believes in free will and does not take "the three sisters" literally, this message stands—that it is best to live life well as it happens, since in the end, it is impossible to change one's history.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-15

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

At the instant ...
... Life everlasting.

The poem opens by immediately immersing the reader in the action as the speaker describes an unnamed figure "at the instant of drowning." This sets the poem's stakes very high and

creates instant drama. The lack of comma where readers would expect one—after the word "drowning"—increases the speed with which this line is read, allowing momentum and anticipation to build and heightening the dramatic impact of the poem's opening. The repeating /t/ sounds—"at the instant [...] sisters"—contribute to the energetic, turbulent atmosphere as well. The /st/ sound also repeats throughout this stanza in "mistake" and "everlasting," the mixture of the sharp /t/ consonance and hissing sibilance creating a sinister tone and vividly evoking the image of the man struggling for his life in the water.

The unnamed man then "invoke[s]," or calls out for, "the three sisters." Given the poem's title, the audience can infer that these sisters are the Moirai, or Fates—figures from Greek mythology who control individual destiny. This allusion propels the audience into the world of mythology, which gives the poem an air of splendor and consequence, again heightening its stakes to draw the reader into the storyline. This allusion also subtly signals that the rules that govern the "real world" are suspended within the poem.

The speaker goes on to explain that calling on the Fates was not just "a mistake," but "an aberration," making a correction of sorts to underscore the seriousness of this error. While "mistake" usually indicates a minor or reversible decision, an "aberration" is a severe divergence from an expected course of action, usually with an undesirable outcome. As such, the speaker's careful phrasing stresses that invoking the Moirai is not something that happens often, or perhaps not something that *should* happen at all.

Lines 2-3 contain the poem's sole example of enjambment:

> It was a mistake, an aberration, to cry out for
> Life everlasting.

At the end of line 2, the audience understands the gravity of the man's "mistake" but it remains unclear what exactly that mistake was. The line break occurs right before his request is revealed, creating suspense and encouraging the audience to read on. Furthermore, as a result of enjambment, "Life everlasting" makes up its own line, emphasizing the significance of the man's desire for eternal life, which is also his downfall.

The poem's opening stanza also begins to establish the speaker's straightforward, matter-of-fact narration style. The combination of plain language and simple, end-stopped sentences results in a direct manner of speaking that comes across as factual. For instance, the Moirai are simply called "the three sisters," making these grand figures from ancient mythology appear ordinary. In general, by describing the poem's events as if they are normal, the speaker appears self-assured and believable, allowing the reader to accept the fanciful storyline.

Finally, the opening stanza introduces the poem's main organizational feature, namely its organization into tercets. The three lines in each stanza can be seen as a representation of the three sister goddesses, reinforcing their presence in the poem

LINES 4-6

> *He came up ...*
> *... to the house.*

As the poem's second stanza begins, the drowning man is pictured emerging from the water, indicating that his wish for eternal life has been granted. The speaker uses a simile to describe the man surfacing:

> He came up like a cork and back to the river-bank,

The speaker compares the man to an object that floats, illustrating the extreme speed with which he erupts from the water. The comically dramatic weight disparity between a grown man and a cork also creates a vivid, memorable image in the reader's mind. Moreover, the audience can reasonably conclude that since the man's life now moves in reverse, he was instantly *submerged* in the river before he drowned. As such, readers might infer that the man jumped or fell to his death. By creating suspicion—or at least increased curiosity—about the factors that contributed to the man's death, this simile encourages the audience to read on.

The line that contains this image also features a high concentration of unstressed syllables, quickening the pace. The stressed beats seem to burst forth from the line like the man erupting out of the water:

> He came up like a cork and back to the river-bank,

The repetitive anapestic meter (those da-da-DUMs) mirrors a cork bobbing along, up and down, over and over again as it approaches the shore.

The omission of the word "went"—"He came up [...] and [went] back to the house"—maintains energetic rhythm, almost as if the speaker doesn't have time to include such words, emphasizing the urgency with which he emerges from the water.

The simile also contains an abundance of hard /k/ sounds, whose percussive quality approximates the sound of an object hitting the surface of the water. The turbulent mood of these plosive sounds mirrors the force and vigor with which the man shoots out of the water, making the image more graphic and impactful. As such, consonance magnifies the implication of violence in this line.

As readers make their way through the second stanza, the speaker's language choices guide them to the realization that the man's life now moves in reverse—from the moment of

death to that of his birth. In particular, the speaker specifies that he goes "back" to the shore and "returns" home, indicating that the man follows a path that he has already taken. But the biggest indicator that his life moves backwards is the peculiar comment that he "put on his clothes in reverse order." It goes without saying that people put on articles of clothing in the opposite order from that in which they were removed. Here, the speaker's phrasing stages the man's present actions as an inversion of his past actions—those performed *before* he invoked the muses in the river.

The phrase "in reverse order" features literal, sonic reversals to subtly reinforce this implication. Here is a look at this line's pattern of stressed syllables:

Put on his clothes in reverse order,

At first, the rhythm is iambic, alternating between stressed and unstressed syllables. However, the phrase "reverse order" disturbs and literally reverses the stress pattern, resulting in an inversion: unstressed-stressed | stressed-unstressed. Similarly, assonance and consonance among /re/ and /er/ sounds create an interlocking effect: "in reverse order / Returned." By enacting the reversal that these lines describe, the use of sound subtly strengthens the audience's understanding that the man's life now moves backwards from the moment of drowning, creating a more vivid picture of his experience.

The structure of this stanza also helps readers track the man's movements. It consists of three punctuated, end-stopped lines, each of which contains a distinct action that the man takes. One might assume that the clear, orderly divisions make the progression of the events easy to follow. However, there are no connective words between the individual scenes—a device known as asyndeton—so the relationships between them are unclear. Because these events are so deliberately broken up, they appear fragmented, heightening the audience's awareness that the speaker only provides selective moments from the man's life.

LINES 7-9

He suffered the ...
... not yet fallen.

In the poem's third stanza, the audience sees the man enduring the great emotional pains that plagued him throughout his life. The fact that the man attempts to escape death suggests that he was not satisfied with how his life turned out, and the audience now receives confirmation that he experienced heartache and disappointment. Interestingly, this vivid illustration of his emotional torment occurs at the midpoint of the poem, acting as the centerpiece of his story.

The speaker uses very dramatic language to introduce the man's hardships. If his despair was *not* presented so graphically, the images of him crying and writing poetry might appear wistful or tender, rather than coming across as eruptions of his pain. The speaker makes an unexpected pairing of "passion," which is most commonly associated with enthusiastic love and affection, and "agonies," which suggests excruciating pain. As such, the audience can infer that the man's greatest passions in life—whether they be romantic or familial love, enthusiasm for a hobby or career, etc.—brought him devastating heartache, suggesting that he failed to fully realize his desires.

This stanza also contains individual events that do not make sense without the understanding that the man's life now moves in reverse. First, he writes poems "from the end backwards," and then he wipes "away tears that had not yet fallen." This latter image highlights the man's awareness of the extreme pain that is to come, which he can do nothing to prevent.

There is plenty of assonance and consonance in this stanza as well, drawing readers' attention to the poignant scene. Note, for example, the assonant /ah/ sounds (as in "agonies of passion"), as well as consonant /b/, /p/, /n/, /sh/, and /s/ sounds:

He suffered the enormous agonies of passion
Writing poems from the end backwards,
Brushing away tears that had not yet fallen.

All this sonic play mirrors the chaos of the man's emotions. Also notice how, while in the previous two stanzas the lines within each tercet became progressively shorter, that structure is disrupted here—again subtly reflecting the man's turbulent, uncontrollable emotions.

Finally, all three lines in this stanza are end-stopped—the man's actions exist within separate, complete clauses, each of which are also divided by line breaks. The omission of conjunctions, a device called asyndeton, leaves the precise relationships between these clauses unclear. The last two lines, which describe the man crying and writing poetry, can further be thought of as an example of parataxis—a device that effetely equates these actions, so that they appear interchangeable. As elsewhere in the poem, it is therefore hard to decipher which events happen before, after, or alongside others, as well as which events might happen as a *result* of others. Such ambiguities contribute to readers' sense of chaos and confusion, allowing them to empathize with the man's overwhelming emotions at this point in the poem.

LINES 10-12

Loving her wildly ...
... Bare-foot, straw-hatted.

Stanza 4 marks the introduction of a new character in the poem—an unnamed female figure, whom the man watches as she plays in a garden, gradually becoming younger. Her precise age and relationship to the man remain unknown. What is clear, however, is that the man cares for her greatly, as he is described "loving her wildly." This term suggests a lack of

control, perhaps indicating that the man wishes that he could curb his intense care for this person but is unable to do so. Indeed, now that the man relives his life, he cannot influence the way he feels and is instead subjected to his past emotions.

The man looks on as the girl becomes younger and younger, indicating that he originally watched her grow up. As such, the audience might infer that she is his daughter, or perhaps a childhood figure whom he always loved. Because the man is only pictured *watching* the girl, it is unclear if they interacted the first time he lived. Still, this image is tinged with pain and regret, as the man is destined to witness her grow so young that she eventually disappears before him, and he is unable to intervene.

The girl's reverse-aging process is referred to as "growing younger," an oxymoron that reminds the audience of the backwards progression of time. The nonsensical phrasing highlights the uniqueness of the man's situation, including how disorienting and frustrating it must be to be thrust into this topsy-turvy world without any agency.

The speaker notes that "the day regresse[s] towards morning" while the man watches the girl. An antonym of "progress," "regress" has generally negative connotations—rather than something moving forward, to a more developed state, the opposite occurs and all growth is undone. As such, this term emphasizes that for the man and his beloved, both their ages *and their relationship with one another* move back to an earlier point. Whatever progress he *was* able to make with the girl—whatever intimacy or trust was established—is now revoked, and he cannot do anything about it. Furthermore, "morning" is a homonym for "mourning," calling attention to the grief that the man feels when he watches the girl slip away from him, unable to intervene.

Because both figures because younger "as the day regresse[s] towards morning," the various times of day can be interpreted as the symbolic representation of different phases of life. In particular, morning would be the earliest years of one's life (i.e., childhood), while the day might be adolescence and young adulthood. Plus, since the course of a day is a natural cycle, much like one's life, the symbolism foreshadows the cyclical nature of his fate, which will be revealed at the poem's conclusion.

As he watches the day slowly slip away, the man knows that it must come to an end, reinforcing the sense of inevitable loss that the man feels. Repeated /or/ sounds in "towards morning" highlight this image and subtly alert the audience to its symbolic and thematic importance. In fact, consonant /r/ sounds pervade this stanza, their harsh growl giving the images that first appear pleasant a dark, foreboding feeling, drawing out the implication that the man faces great pain and disappointment in this scene.

Another key symbol appears for the first time in these lines—the girl plays on *the swing*, expressing her joyful, carefree youthfulness. The girl "swinging in the garden" is equated with her "growing younger." Therefore, the swing can be interpreted as a representation of the beauty of youth. The line that contains this image features an appropriately jaunty rhythm:

> He watched her swinging in the garden, growing younger,

The repeated rises and falls of the iambic stress pattern mimic the girl's motions as she swings, making the image more vivid for the reader. Furthermore, the meter has a very lighthearted feel, as iambic rhythms are typically associated with nursery rhymes and other children's poetry. As such, the speaker's intonations emphasize her youth and innocence.

This stanza's structure reflects the man's pain as he watches the object of his affections slip away from him. In particular, the second line is longer than the first, departing from the overarching rule that the lines in each tercet become gradually shorter. The lengthiness of the second line, which describes the girl playing and becoming younger, accentuates how slow and painful it is to watch her. Syntactically speaking, there is one very long clause that stretches across two lines ("Loving her [...] garden,") before being met with several forms of punctuation, chopping the rest of the sentence into short phrases. The structure of the sentence that comprises this stanza, then, reinforces the painful sluggishness of her reverse-aging process, in contrast with how abruptly she is cut off from him, suddenly altering his reality.

LINES 13-14

> *And when she ...*
> *... began all over,*

As the poem's final stanza opens, the speaker inventories everything that the man loses as he returns to the very outset of his life. First, the female figure, whom the man loves "wildly" and watches become younger, finally disappears. With her, a dense list of symbols that have accumulated meaning throughout the poem also vanish.

In particular, the man loses his house—the safe, private place in which he is free to express and process his emotions. The man's house can be seen as a symbol for his senses of self and security, which disappear as he returns to the moment of his birth. Plus, one's home is typically one's most valuable possession, something that is worked hard for, perhaps indicating that everything that the man has invested in is now gone.

The swing on which the young girl plays also escapes him. The swing can be seen as a symbol of the beauty and innocence of childhood, including the hope for a great life. Earlier, the man watched the girl become younger, her beauty and the potential for a great relationship slipping away, and now the inevitable

has happened—they are gone.

Finally, "daylight" itself dissolves, symbolizing the disappearance of the man's early years to reinforce the return to the moment of his birth. The first moments of his life are now stained with loss, disappointment, and regret, as he spends them in agony, watching everything he cherishes dwindle before his eyes. As all the above items have gradually amassed emotional significance throughout the poem and are taken away at once, symbolism allows the audience to envision the magnitude of the man's loss at this moment.

All of these symbols are strung together in one long list that comprises the opening line to this stanza:

> And when she was gone and the house and the swing
> and daylight

The proliferation of the conjunction "and," an example of polysyndeton, extends this line, which is the poem's longest, drawing out his suffering so that it appears excruciatingly slow and painful. In combination with the lack of punctuation at the end of this line, polysyndeton creates the impression that the list of everything the man loses could go on forever. The repetition of "and the X" also establishes an anapestic meter:

> And when she was gone and the house and the swing
> and daylight

The repeating stress pattern allows the rhythm to gain momentum, contributing to the impression that all the list items pile on top of one another, overwhelming the reader with everything that eludes the man.

At this point, there is an "instant's pause" before the whole process begins again. That this phrase recalls the poem's very first line ("At the instant of drowning") emphasizes the fact that the cycle repeats. The lack of any punctuation after "pause" further reinforces the brevity of this moment, driving home just how fleeting the man's reprieve is, in turn creating the impression of a relentless cycle of suffering.

LINE 15

The reel unrolling towards the river.

In the poem's final line, the speaker uses a metaphor to compare the man's life restarting to "the reel unrolling towards the river." According to this description, the whole course of his life points back to the moment of the Fate's invocation in the river, highlighting the man's request for eternal life as the source of his predicament—and, by extension, reminding the audience that the Fates ultimately dictate the poem's events, as they fulfill his request. Additionally, the fact that the reel unrolls in the direction of the river, which is where the poem begins, reinforces the impression of an endless loop.

The term "unrolling" signals that something being laid out in front of the audience, but it also plays on the idea of something becoming less organized or more chaotic. Film is probably the material most commonly associated with reels, perhaps suggesting that the man's life is akin to a movie. Indeed, film reels can be played in reverse. This image also recalls Clotho, the Fate who spins the thread of life and is traditionally pictured with a spindle.

Further, the image of something unrolling over and over again for all eternity brings to mind the story of Sisyphus. Sisyphus is another figure from Greek mythology who was punished for attempting to cheat Death, condemned to eternally push a boulder up a hill. Each time he reached the top, the boulder rolled back down, and the process began again. The speaker's allusion to this punishment recalls the lessons of Sisyphus's story, namely that being crafty and attempting to save oneself from death—cheating one's destiny—is dangerous. That Sisyphus is famous for pushing a boulder also signals that the man finds reliving his life to be very taxing, difficult work. Moreover, his fate might be a *punishment* for requesting eternal life. In this way, his wish has become a burden, perhaps signaling that readers should "be careful what you wish for." These allusions to Greek mythology generally reinforce the poem's sense of grandeur and importance as it comes to a close. The layered associations of this metaphor create an interesting and memorable image as the poem draws to a close.

Additionally, the rhythm of the poem's last lines is vaguely iambic:

> [...] it began all over,
> The reel unrolling towards the river.

As the rhythm rises and falls, the periodic stresses subtly mimic the sound of something tumbling, reinforcing the image of the reel. At the same time, the repetitiveness of the iamb mirrors the repetitiveness of the man's eternal fate. Assonance among long /o/ sounds in "over" and "unrolling" further helps to establish the rhythm in the poem's final moments. Meanwhile, consonant /r/ and /l/ sounds flow together, creating a seamless "rolling" effect that mirrors the wheel's movement, while also calling attention to the phrase that describes this action (i.e., the "reel unrolling").

Lastly, the poem's final stanza marks the restoration of its main structural organization—that is, within each tercet, each line gradually becomes shorter. The previous two stanzas slightly modified this format, but its reinstatement here again indicates a return to the initial conditions of the poem, mimicking the repetitive nature of the man's fate. Plus, the dwindling length of each line illustrates that something is unraveling, gradually running out, which is exactly what happens to both the reel and the man's lifespan at the poem's conclusion.

SYMBOLS

THE HOUSE

The home is generally a space where people can enjoy privacy, feel safe, and process their experiences and emotions. In many works of literature, home has therefore come to represent security and comfort, as well as a sense of stability and belonging. These symbolic implications are important to the poem.

The man's house first appears after he emerges from the river and gets dressed. Having returned home, he writes poetry and cries, experiencing intense and agonizing "passion." The house gives the man space to fully feel and express his emotions, but it does not exactly provide him any comfort—suggesting, already, that his foolish wish has doomed him and that he cannot, in fact, go home again.

By the end of the poem, the man's house disappears entirely, along with other features that have apparently comforted him throughout his life (the swing in the garden, for example). These losses reflect the total loss of security and stability that the home represents. Reliving his life in reverse means watching everything that he has loved and worked for slip away over and over again.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "Returned to the house."
- **Line 13:** "And when she was gone and the house and the swing and daylight"

TIMES OF DAY

Within the poem, the various times of day represent various phases of life. In the poem's third stanza, the man lovingly watches a young woman as she frolics in a garden. Both of them gradually become younger and younger "as the day regresse[s] towards morning." When the man reaches the very beginning of his life, everything disappears, including "daylight" itself.

The reader can thus infer that the poem "begins" at night, here symbolic of middle of old age. The man experiences emotional torment (or "suffer[s] the enormous agonies of passion") during his later years. Because his life moves backwards, the man experiences the heavy burdens of adulthood—the darkness of night—before the beauty and promise of youth (the brightness of "morning"). When the whole cycle starts over again, "daylight" (here, youth) disappears—signalling a return to the darkness representing of the man's later years as the cycle starts all over again. In addition to simply illustrating that the man now moves *backwards* through his life, the times of day also enhance the poem's atmosphere of regret, disappointment, and loss.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "Loving her wildly as the day regressed towards morning"
- **Line 13:** "And when she was gone and the house and the swing and daylight"

THE SWING

The man's beloved is first pictured "swinging in the garden"—a classic image that represents the innocence and joy of youth. The speaker further describes the girl as "bare-foot" and "straw-hatted," contributing to the idea that, for her, the carefree wonder and happiness of childhood are in, well, full swing.

But because time moves backwards within the poem, the girl gets younger and younger, until eventually, both she and the swing disappear. This represents the loss of innocence and joy, which the man could not hold onto despite having "[l]ife everlasting."

This would be the second time this happened, of course: the man ostensibly lost his innocence the first time around when he grew up and became an adult. Now, even growing backwards can't preserve the magic of childhood. The swing helps the audience envision the fleeting beauty of youth, better understanding how torturous it must be for the man to watch it escape him once again.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-12:** "He watched her swinging in the garden, growing younger, / Bare-foot, straw-hatted."
- **Line 13:** "And when she was gone and the house and the swing and daylight"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

This poem contains allusions to figures from Greek mythology, most notably the Moirai, or Fates, after whom the poem is titled. The Fates are three sister goddesses who are said to control individual destiny, which is represented by the thread of life. Clotho's task is to spin the thread, selecting the moment of one's birth; Lachesis controls the course and length of one's life by measuring the thread; and Atropos clips the thread, determining the moment and means of one's death.

The Moirai command a great deal of respect because their decisions are both highly consequential and irrefutable. They make compromises for no one, and in most accounts, even the

most powerful gods cannot reverse their judgments. Tending to operate in the background, when the Fates *do* appear in the main action of myths, such stories generally reinforce their ultimate power—and by extension, the irreversibility of one's destiny.

The Moirai are directly referenced in the poem's title, where they are referred to as "The Three Fates," and first line, where they are simply called "the three sisters." But their influence doesn't end there. After they grant the man's wish for everlasting life, their presence is felt throughout the poem as the audience watches the consequences of their judgment unfold.

The poem's final stanza contains an allusion to another well-known mythological figure: when the audience learns that the man's life repeats in reverse once again, this process is compared to "the reel unrolling towards the river." This image recalls the story of Sisyphus, an infamously crafty king who angered Zeus.

Depending on which version of the story you read, either Thanatos (the personification of Death) or Hades (the god of Death) visits Sisyphus on behalf of Zeus, intending to capture him and bring him to the Underworld. However, Sisyphus tricks Thanatos/Hades into demonstrating how the restraints work, leaving *him* chained up instead of Sisyphus. As punishment, Sisyphus is condemned to push a boulder uphill for all eternity. Each time it reaches the top of the hill, the boulder rolls back down and he must begin again.

The circular reel "unrolling" towards its starting point—"the river"—subtly evokes Sisyphus's similar eternal fate. This allusion suggests that, like Sisyphus, the man was *punished* for attempting to cheat Death and save himself from the afterlife. The reel here also gestures again towards the Moirai and their spool of thread.

In ancient Greece, myths were used to explain natural phenomena and other aspects of life that were mysterious or unknown. They also helped establish, communicate, and preserve cultural ideals, educating people about their society's values and the proper way to conduct oneself. This poem's allusions to mythology draw on such traditions, signaling that there is a larger lesson to be gleaned from the man's story.

By propelling the audience into the world of mythology, the allusions also allow readers to suspend conventional lines of reasoning, leaving room for the poem's unusual storyline. The mythic atmosphere also gives the poem a sense of grandeur and consequence, despite the very ordinary man that it follows. Perhaps this allows readers to relate to the man and therefore see themselves within such myths. As such, modern audiences are invited to partake in ancient explorations of such subjects as fate, death, and regret.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "the three sisters"
- **Lines 14-15:** "it began all over, / The reel unrolling towards the river"

ASSONANCE

Assonance appears throughout the poem, generally making things sound interesting and drawing readers' attention to especially important moments and ideas. For example, note the short /ih/ sounds in line 1 with "instant," "invoked," and "sisters." There is consonance here as well, on the /n/ and /st/ sounds, making the poem's opening line feel forceful and dramatic.

The same short /ih/ sound then reappears along with long /i/ and /ay/ sounds in lines 2-3, hooking readers' attention at the poem's outset and highlighting keywords:

> It was a mistake, an aberration, to cry out for
> Life [...]

Indeed, the man's "cry [...] for life everlasting" will echo throughout the poem, as the audience learns of its twisted outcome, which makes "it [...] a mistake, an aberration." The repeating vowel sounds accentuate such words, hinting that the concepts they represent are key to understanding the poem. Additionally, assonance can subtly create or reinforce connections between words that contain the same sounds. For instance, the sonic similarity between "cry" and "life" hints that the man's life has been full of pain and tears, which is confirmed later on.

In fact, assonance also appears throughout stanza 3, which details his suffering. Here, assonance spotlights some of the most expressive words that illustrate his distress, making this poignant moment more vivid and impactful for the reader. For example, the first line of this stanza contains repeating /ah/ sounds:

> He suffered the enormous agonies of passion

Meanwhile, two lines later, assonant long /aw/ sounds fall on stressed syllables:

> [...] not yet fallen.

In this case, the repeating sounds receive additional emphasis, drawing out the description of the man's pain so that it appears slow and relentless. As such, assonance can manipulate the poem's mood by exaggerating its rhythm. The poem's final lines contain a strong example of this effect:

> [...] it began all over,
> The reel unrolling towards the river.

In this case, long /o/ sounds fall on stressed syllables, reinforcing an iambic (da-DUM) rhythm here. The rises and falls of the stress pattern reflect the repetitiveness of the man's eternal fate, as he is forced to relive his life in reverse over and over again. The steady plod of the iamb allows the rhythm to gain momentum, driving towards the poem's conclusion and perhaps evoking a rounded object (i.e., a reel, Sisyphus's boulder) tumbling along. Plus, when reciting the poem aloud, the reader's mouth lingers in an "O" shape, mirroring the object that the text describes. Overall, then, assonance maintains the audience's interest throughout the poem, while also calling particular attention to important images and ideas, reinforcing their narrative and thematic significance.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "instant," "invoked," "sisters"
- **Line 2:** "It," "mistake," "aberration," "cry"
- **Line 3:** "Life"
- **Line 5:** "reverse," "order"
- **Line 6:** "Returned"
- **Line 7:** "agonies," "passion"
- **Line 8:** "backwards"
- **Line 9:** "that," "had," "not," "fallen"
- **Line 10:** "towards," "morning"
- **Line 11:** "swinging," "in"
- **Line 14:** "an," "instant's," "began," "over"
- **Line 15:** "unrolling"

ASYNDETON

Asyndeton often appears in the poem, as the speaker regularly omits expected conjunctions. This creates a sort of fragmentation, as the reader drifts from one distinct image or scene to another with no clear sense of their relationships.

As a result, asyndeton confuses the reader's sense of time—what events are happening *before*, *after*, *or alongside* other events—as well as cause and effect—what events are happening *as a result of* other events. This ambiguity might allow readers to empathize with the man's predicament, as the audience is also thrust into a similarly confusing, overwhelming world where time and cause-effect relationships are unclear.

The poem's second stanza contains a strong example of asyndeton:

> He came up like a cork and back to the river-bank,
> Put on his clothes in reverse order,
> Returned to the house.

Because there is no certain start or endpoint to the events and images that the speaker catalogs, asyndeton creates the possibility of additional items in these series. The impression of a never-ending list reflects the eternal duration of the man's curse. The sense that there could be additional list items also calls attention to the fact that the audience only gets *glimpses* of his life. Many of his life experiences are omitted, and the transitions between the moments that *are* pictured are also unknown. Therefore, the reader's imagination is invited to fill in such gaps, encouraging a personal connection to the text.

Asyndeton also helps control the poem's rhythm, in turn shaping its mood. When it places two clauses of similar length and structure side-by-side, as in stanza 3, asyndeton can reinforce their likeness, creating a sense of measure and regularity:

> Writing poems from the end backwards,
> Brushing away tears that had not yet fallen.

In the above example, this effect is heightened by the fact that there is a line break between the two clauses. The slightly plodding feel of these lines suits the man's somber mood as he expresses his pain. However, asyndeton can also produce the *opposite* result, speeding up the pace of the speaker's cadence by removing several expected connectives, as in lines 11-12:

> He watched her swinging in the garden, growing
> younger,
> Bare-foot, straw-hatted.

Here, the three commas that replace conjunctions quicken the reading experience, creating a sense of chaos. In doing so, they suggest that the girl becomes younger very rapidly, slipping away from the man before his eyes.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-6:** "back to the river-bank, / Put on his clothes in reverse order, / Returned to the house."
- **Lines 8-9:** "Writing poems from the end backwards, / Brushing away tears"
- **Lines 11-12:** "swinging in the garden, growing younger, / Bare-foot, straw-hatted"
- **Lines 14-15:** "it began all over, / The reel unrolling"

CONSONANCE

Consonance makes its way into each line of this poem. On one level this simply makes the poem sound more interesting, drawing the audience in. When the patterns of interlocking sounds become quite dense and complex, they also increase the difficulty of reading the poem, requiring further attention from the audience.

Consonance also helps to shape the poem's mood. The poem's second stanza, for instance, opens with a cacophony of hard /k/ sounds:

He came up like a cork and back to the river-bank,

In this case, the harsh, percussive sonic atmosphere embodies the force with which the man shoots out of the water, giving the image an energetic—almost violent—feel. Moreover, the explosive /k/ sounds mimic the sound of an object slapping the surface of water. The reader might imagine the man bobbing up and down, striking the water repeatedly, with the periodic /k/ sounds repeatedly punctuating the line.

The fourth stanza might have the most consonance of all, reflecting the intensity of the man's feelings for the young girl he watches. The many /w/ and /l/ sounds soften the atmosphere, while /d/, hard /g/, /ng/, and /r/ sounds add heaviness to the lines—dragging them down:

Loving her wildly as the day regressed towards morning
He watched her swinging in the garden, growing younger,

Later, in the poem's final lines, the liquid /l/ sounds of "all over / The reel unrolling" suggest the endless loop at hand, as one word bleeds into the next. Here, as in many instances, consonance also works alongside assonance to produce a pleasant musicality that makes the lines more memorable. Note the long, round /o/ sounds in this example, which add to the feel of the line itself unraveling.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "instant," "drowning," "invoked," "sisters"
- **Line 2:** "It," "mistake"
- **Line 3:** "Life everlasting"
- **Line 4:** "came," "like," "cork," "back," "bank"
- **Line 5:** "clothes," "reverse order"
- **Line 6:** "Returned"
- **Line 7:** "enormous agonies," "passion"
- **Line 8:** "poems," "backwards"
- **Line 9:** "Brushing"
- **Line 10:** "Loving," "wildly," "day regressed towards morning"
- **Line 11:** "He watched her swinging," "garden, growing younger"
- **Line 12:** "Bare-foot, straw-hatted"
- **Line 13:** "when," "was," "swing"
- **Line 14:** "an instant's," "before," "began all over"
- **Line 15:** "reel unrolling towards," "river"

END-STOPPED LINE

Nearly every line in this poem is end-stopped. In general, the fact that complete clauses and sentences are neatly contained within their own lines reinforces the speaker's straightforward, self-assured tone. As such, this device contributes to the speaker's credibility, which is particularly useful when the speaker describes events that are outside the usual realm of possibility, as in lines 14-15:

There was an instant's pause before it began all over,
The reel unrolling towards the river.

In combination with the use of plain language, the end-stopped lines give the narration a matter-of-fact attitude, encouraging the reader to take the speaker's assertions at face value.

At first, lines 7, 10, and 13 might appear enjambed because they lack end punctuation. However, each of these line breaks occurs at the end of a complete clause, so they are also end-stopped lines. That being said, the effects of end-stopped lines with and without punctuation are slightly different. In particular, punctuated end-stopped lines further accentuate pauses indicated by line breaks, slowing the pace of the poem. Conversely, the absence of punctuation at the end of a line signals that the audience should continue to read beyond the line break, quickening the pace. This prevents the poem from becoming too plodding, which might happen if every single line was punctuated, detracting from the poem's energy and excitement. Plus, the lines without end punctuation seem to linger on the page without a definite conclusion, making them appear longer, as in lines 10-11:

Loving her wildly as the day regressed towards morning
He watched her swinging in the garden, growing younger,

The lack of end punctuation makes line 10 feel extended, reflecting the long stretches of time that pass as the man watches the girl becoming younger. In the next line, however, the presence of end punctuation gives the impression that she is cut off from him abruptly, as the line and clause both come to a definitive end.

Regardless of punctuation, the division of complete clauses and sentences—many of which describe individual actions and scenes—into separate lines contributes to the poem's sense of fragmentation. These events are carefully split apart and stacked on top of one another, creating distinct moments out of one individual's continuous life. The fact that these actions and events are separated both structurally and syntactically helps the reader track their sequence. At the same time, their division heightens the audience's awareness of the fragmented nature of the man's life as it is presented in the poem, perhaps inviting readers to "fill in the gaps" between individual actions and the distinct scenes they comprise. Plus, when end punctuation is absent, there is often increased ambiguity surrounding the relationships between different events. Therefore, the reader is *further* invited to consider such relationships, requiring a

more engaged audience.

There is one true example of enjambment in lines 2-3, and it creates suspense at the poem's outset:

> It was a mistake, an aberration, to cry out for
> Life everlasting.

The audience understands that the man has made some huge, consequential mistake by asking the sisters for something, but doesn't yet know what his request is. Because it breaks the line in the middle of the clause, enjambment encourages the audience to read on. The use of enjambment also leaves "life everlasting" on its own line, reinforcing the significance of the man's appeal to the Fates.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "sisters."
- **Line 3:** "everlasting."
- **Line 4:** "river-bank,"
- **Line 5:** "order,"
- **Line 6:** "house."
- **Line 7:** "passion"
- **Line 8:** "backwards,"
- **Line 9:** "fallen."
- **Line 10:** "morning"
- **Line 11:** "younger,"
- **Line 12:** "straw-hatted."
- **Line 13:** "daylight"
- **Line 14:** "over,"
- **Line 15:** "river."

METAPHOR

This poem contains a single metaphor, which appears in its final lines. The metaphor compares the man's life repeating in reverse to a reel unwinding as it tumbles along in the direction of the river:

> [...] it began all over,
> The reel unrolling towards the river.

The reel contains some material that is meant to represent the man's life, but it is unclear precisely what that material is. Given that Clotho (one of the sister Moirai) winds the thread of life, readers might picture her spindle unrolling. This image brings returns awareness to the Fates at the poem's conclusion, reinforcing their key role in the poem (as well as the importance of the man's plea to them for eternal life).

That said, reels are perhaps most commonly associated with films. In this regard, the metaphor likens the man's life to a movie—as if it has been captured on film and is being played in reverse, which is actually possible for physical, old-school film reels.

Given earlier references to mythology, the image of a circular object rolling down a surface over and over again for all eternity also subtly recalls the story of Sisyphus. According to Greek mythology, Sisyphus was a cunning king who cheated Death and was condemned to perpetually push a boulder up a hill. Each time he reached the top of the hill, the boulder rolled back down. His story recalls that of the man in the poem, who must relive his life over and over again in reverse. Each time he reaches the moment of his birth, "There [is] an instant's pause before it [begins] all over," his life unfolding before him again.

The arguable allusion to Sisyphus reinforces the impression that reliving his past is very hard work for the man. In this way, what he wishes for becomes his ultimate burden, perhaps implying that the audience should "be careful what you wish for." Plus, the reference to Sisyphus signals that the man is being *punished* for his attempts to be crafty and cheat Death.

Finally, reels typically keep materials compact and organized. The fact that the reel is "unrolling" the man's life before him suggests that it is wreaking chaos and havoc. Plus, it unrolls "towards the river," emphasizing that the man's decision in the river (to call on the Moirai) is what began this whole mess—everything points back to that moment, and his need to relive each event from his life stems from that decision.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 14-15:** "There was an instant's pause before it began all over, / The reel unrolling towards the river."

PARATAXIS

The speaker often repeats simple sentence constructions, resulting in a great deal of parataxis. On a basic level, parataxis is one feature of the speaker's straightforward narration style. The plain, repetitive structures contribute to the impression that the speaker is matter-of-fact and to-the-point, making the poem's peculiar events more believable. For instance, here's a look at stanza 2:

> He came up like a cork and back to the river-bank,
> Put on his clothes in reverse order,
> Returned to the house.

Here, the man is seen moving in reverse for the first time—he emerges from the water, puts on his clothes in the opposite order from that in which he removed them, and returns home. The speaker presents his actions in a plain, factual manner, so they seem ordinary—sensible, even.

Furthermore, parataxis effectively equates similar clauses that are set side-by-side. The poem's events are simply presented alongside one another, without one being better or more consequential than another. This lack of hierarchy furthers the speaker's neutral tone. At the same time, it creates the

impression that the events are interchangeable. In other words, because they appear equal and their precise relationships are unclear, they appear as if they could take place in any order.

Parataxis also overlaps at times with asyndeton, exaggerating the effect, as the lack of conjunctions leaves the specific relationship between list items unknown. As such, on the surface, parataxis gives the speaker's recount of the poem's events increased directness and clarity. But upon closer inspection, it reinforces ambiguity surrounding specific narrative details.

Where Parataxis appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-6:** "He came up like a cork and back to the river-bank, / Put on his clothes in reverse order, / Returned to the house."
- **Lines 8-9:** "Writing poems from the end backwards, / Brushing away tears that had not yet fallen"
- **Lines 11-12:** "swinging in the garden, growing younger, / Bare-foot, straw-hatted"

POLYSYNDETON

The opening line of the final stanza contains an overabundance of conjunctions, making it the poem's sole example of polysyndeton:

> And when she was gone and the house and the swing and daylight

For starters, the fact that "and" appears four times within one line reflects the repetition that is discussed throughout the poem—the man must relive the events of his life over again, and, as we learn in this stanza, this process repeats for all eternity.

Polysyndeton also creates a sense of rhythm through repetition. In particular, the "and the X" structure helps to establish an anapestic (unstressed-unstressed-stressed) meter:

> And when she was gone and the house and the swing and daylight

The repeating stress pattern allows the rhythm to gain momentum, creating a sense of anticipation through mounting speed. In combination with the repetition of "and," this momentum creates a pileup of sorts—the various valuables that now escape the man become stacked on top of each other, highlighting just how much loss he feels at this point in the poem. Such lengthy, unrelenting lists can feel overwhelming to read, and this effect is heightened due to the lack of punctuation at the end of this line, which is also the longest in the poem. The list seems like it could go on forever, again contributing to the reader's impression that the man has suffered a tragically enormous loss. In general, polysyndeton allows the audience to better understand the man's circumstances, creating a more emotionally impactful reading experience.

Where Polysyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 13:** "And when she was gone and the house and the swing and daylight"

SIMILE

In the opening to the poem's second stanza, the speaker uses a simile to describe the man emerging from the water after he has been granted eternal life:

> He came up like a cork and back to the river-bank,

By likening the man to a cork, the reader can better envision just how quickly the man shot out of the water. The disparity between the weight of a grown man and that of a cork makes the image particularly memorable. Plus, the weightlessness of corks and their relative insignificance as regular, everyday objects reinforces the impression that this man's life is ordinary, as the events that he relives are exceedingly normal. Finally, the simile likens him to a very lightweight object that is tossed around by water. The man, too, becomes something of a prop in his own life, acting without agency, beholden to both fate and his own past decisions.

Because humans are comparatively *much* heavier than corks, the speaker greatly exaggerates the speed with which the man emerges from the water to suggest that it happened incredibly quickly. Because the man is now reliving the events of his life *in reverse*, this comparison actually signals that he was originally submerged in the water *instantly*, causing him to drown. Therefore, the audience might conclude that he jumped or fell into the water. By introducing the possibility that the man intentionally jumped to his death, the simile foreshadows the pain and regret that the coming stanzas reveal filled his life.

Still, corks are so light that they are known to bob along the surface of water, so some readers might imagine him bouncing along from the shore to the center of the river, at which point he drowned. The ambiguity of whether or not he jumped, fell, or otherwise—as well as the unknown cause of this incident—encourages audience members to continue reading so that they might learn the answers such lingering questions.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "He came up like a cork"

VOCABULARY

Invoke (Line 1) - Summoned, usually as an appeal for assistance.

The three sisters (Line 1) - The *Moirai* (or Fates), sister goddesses in Greek mythology who control individual destiny. Clotho spins the threads of human life, determining the moment of birth. Lachesis measures the threads, deciding how long people's lives last and choosing their destinies. Finally, Atropos cuts each thread, selecting the moment and means of death. Traditionally, the Moirai are portrayed as old women. They are also known to be stern and uncompromising. Indeed, no one—not even the most powerful gods—are able to interfere with their decisions, and attempting to do so is said to bring grave consequences.

Aberration (Line 2) - An (undesirable) deviation from the normal or expected course.

Agonies (Line 7) - Extreme pains or distress.

Regressed (Line 10) - Moved backwards.

Reel (Line 15) - A cylindrical object around which a material is wrapped. In this case, the speaker probably refers to the spindle that holds the man's thread of life. However, this term is often used in the context of videography (i.e., a film reel). In both interpretations, the "reel" refers to the full course of the man's life, which unfolds before him.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

This poem does not fit into a traditional form like a sonnet or ballad. However, it is carefully structured according to its own set of rules. Its 15 lines are broken up into five tercets, with their three-line format subtly recalling the three Fates. In this way, the presence of the sister goddesses is felt in each stanza of the poem, reinforcing the fact that they control the man's destiny.

Each tercet can be seen as a particular moment or episode from the man's life—from the instant of death to his birth. The consistent three-line structure highlights the repetitive nature of the man's experience and thus calls attention to his inability to change the past as he relives it.

Fittingly, each stanza is made up of a complete sentence (with the first stanza made up of two sentences). This format gives the impression of separate events arranged in a sequence. As such, the format helps the reader track the man's life as it moves in reverse, making the poem's narrative easier to follow. At the same time, there are no transitional words such as "next" or "then." The fragmentation of the poem's events into separate stanzas combined with the sense of equality among those stanzas suggests that the events could happen in *any* order. In this way, the reader is encouraged to consider what the man's life would have been like the first time around (from birth until death), as well as in reverse.

Finally, in general, the lines within each stanza become progressively shorter, in terms of their appearance on the page. As the man proceeds backwards through life, he becomes younger and watches all that has brought him joy, hope, and comfort slip away. The gradually dwindling lines create a visual illustration of loss and the man's movement backwards in time. The only slight deviations from this structure occur in stanzas 3 ("He suffered [...] fallen") and 4 ("Loving her [...] hatted."), which describe the man's intense emotions. The unpredictable line lengths express his inner turmoil at these moments.

METER

This poem does not follow a stable pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables, or meter. Instead, the flexible, free verse nature of this poem allows the speaker's cadence to shift in accordance with its events—reinforcing important images and ideas, maintaining interest, and ultimately giving the reader a more vivid picture of the man's experience.

For instance, line 11 features an iambic (da-DUM) meter:

> He watched her swinging in the garden, growing younger,

The alternating unstressed and stressed syllables create a sing-song effect that recalls a nursery rhyme, strengthening the image of youthful joy and innocence. Plus, the repeated rises and falls of the speaker's cadence mimic the act of swinging. A similar effect occurs in line 4, which contains a repeating anapest (da-da-DUM):

> He came up like a cork and back to the river-bank,

Here, the high concentration of unstressed syllables quickens the pace and exaggerates the stresses, which seem to burst forth, much like the man who emerges from the water and bobs along.

Interestingly, in a few places, the rhythm settles into a pattern of alternating stressed and unstressed syllables, only to be inverted when the speaker mentions that the man's life moves in reverse. Here is a look at line 5:

> Put on his clothes in reverse order,

In this case, the metrical pattern literally "reverse[s] order" at the end on the line, subtly reinforcing the implication that the man now moves through his life backwards.

While the poem's form—and in particular the consistent use of tercets—might be said to reflect the repetitive nature of the

man's experience, variations in meter make individual episodes of his life more vivid and unpredictable for the reader. In this way, the constantly changing rhythm also expresses the chaos of being thrust into this "new normal" wherein the man must relive a wide range of experiences and emotions.

RHYME SCHEME

This poem is written in free verse and thus does not feature a rhyme scheme. Coupled with the inconsistent meter and the speaker's plain language, the lack of rhyme gives the poem a prose-like feel, almost as if the speaker is relaying a news story or myth to the audience. The inclusion of a rhyme scheme would likely give the poem a more lighthearted atmosphere, clashing with the man's painful experiences. Instead, the lack of rhyme contributes to the sense of chaos and disharmony, reflecting the man's inability to resolve his past.

SPEAKER

The speaker is not directly involved in the poem's events, nor does the speaker offer personal reactions to those events. As such, the speaker appears to be a third party who looks on as the poem's events unfold—or is somehow otherwise aware of them—and later relates them to the reader. The speaker's use of everyday language and past-tense verbs is consistent with this physical and emotional removal from the man's experience. For instance, line 1 simply reads:

> At the instant of drowning he invoked the three sisters.

The straightforward narration style makes the mythical storyline feel "real" to the reader and contributes to the speaker's credibility.

The audience learns no biographical information about the speaker over the course of the poem, and due to the lack of personal input, very little can be inferred from the text. In ancient Greece, poets and storytellers would recount myths in the style of the day. Given this poem's classical subject matter, the anonymous speaker can be taken as one such storyteller, reimagined for a modern audience.

SETTING

Over the course of the poem, the speaker describes a river, a garden, and a young girl who frolics about while barefoot. As such, the poem appears to be set in an idyllic countryside. However, the descriptions are highly generalized ("the garden," "the river-bank"), so the poem could theoretically take place anywhere in the world, at any point in history. Such a nondescript setting allows an array of readers to picture themselves in the man's place, thus making his story more universally relatable.

In general, the man's rural surroundings—complete with a river, a swing, and greenery—come across as quite pleasant. However, the picturesque setting gains a darker undercurrent when the audience learns more about the suffering that has taken place there. For instance, the river is the site of the man's death, while the garden is tinged with regret as the man wishes for more time with the female figure who slowly slips away from him. In fact, all of the pleasant features of the landscape eventually disappear as time passes. As such, they might be seen as representations of the pleasurable and hopeful aspects of his life, which he is forced to watch vanish.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"The Three Fates" opens Rosemary Dobson's 1984 collection of poetry, also serving as its titular work. By this point in her career, Dobson had written about a dozen poetry collections, establishing a strong and consistent literary voice.

Dobson's work often focuses on themes such as mortality, mythology, and the natural world, and featured a distinct narration style. Her speakers are generally restrained, meditative, and observant, but still able to convey the passion and emotion of their subjects. They tend to take a descriptive and exploratory approach, rather than overtly offering a specific lesson or belief to the reader.

Dobson's poetry also often explores the intersections of visual art and literature. In fact, the title poem of her earliest collection, *In a Convex Mirror* (1944), was inspired by painter Jan Van Eyck's acclaimed *Arnolfini Portrait* (1434). Dobson was particularly drawn to the Old Masters and frequently adopted subjects that European artists have engaged with for centuries.

In this poem and others, Dobson reimagines ancient Greek myths for the modern reader. Dobson was known for utilizing traditional poetic forms, but altering them, or perhaps "relaxing" their rigid molds. By reimagining both beloved myths and revered forms, Dobson put herself in conversation with great writers from history, aligning herself with ancient Greek masters such as Homer (*The Odyssey*) and Hesiod (*Theogony*), as well as more contemporary poets who have kept such storytelling traditions alive and relevant—for instance, the Greek poets C.P. Cavafy and Giorgos Seferis, and venerated English-language writers like John Keats ("Ode on a Grecian Urn"), Alfred Lord Tennyson ("Ulysses"), and T. S. Eliot ("The Waste Land"). The *Moirai*, in particular, have been the subject of poems by such writers as Lord Byron ("To Anne: Oh, Say Not, Sweet Anne") and Henry David Thoreau ("Though All The Fates").

As the granddaughter of English poet and essayist Austin Dobson, Dobson was born into a literary family. Her friends included fellow Australian poets Francis Webb and Nan McDonald, as well as artist and writer Norman Lindsay, the latter of whom shared Dobson's enthusiasm for fusing classical subjects with Australian landscapes. Dobson is probably most closely associated with Australian writer David Campbell, and the two collaborated on translations—or what they called "imitations"—of Russian poetry.

Finally, Dobson is known to ponder those evasive and unknowable aspects of life. In the preface to her 1973 *Selected Poems*, Dobson described her own work as "part of a search for something only fugitively glimpsed.... a doomed but urgent wish to express the inexpressible."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Dobson's poetry tends not to explicitly deal with the specific social, cultural, or political conditions of her time. Instead, her work generally meditates on aspects of the human experience that people have pondered for centuries. Dobson was also known to reimagine ancient myths within Australian landscapes. As such, her poetry reveals the *universality* of questions about such subjects as life and death, fate and free will, and regret and acceptance.

Dobson published "The Three Fates" in 1984, when Australia was in the midst of an economic boom. Financial worry is absent from the poem, but the man it describes still has a literal eternity of hardships ahead of him. Perhaps by offering this poem in a time of growth and greed, Dobson reminded her audience that joy, beauty, grief, and mystery are constants in life—from antiquity until today—even when other factors fluctuate.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Biography of the Poet — An overview of Dobson's life, with a bibliography and recordings of the poet reading her works aloud. (https://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/dobson-rosemary)
- Sisyphus's Punishment — Read up on the crafty king who cheated Death and was punished for all eternity. (http://www.mythweb.com/encyc/entries/sisyphus.html)
- Dobson's Creative Influences — Learn more about Dobson's engagement with other writers and visual artists, including their impact on her poetry. (https://theconversation.com/guide-to-the-classics-the-poetry-of-rosemary-dobson-100581)
- Who Are the Three Sisters? — Familiarize yourself with the Moirai (or Fates), the Greek sister goddesses who inspired Dobson's poem. This brief article includes a discussion of their role in Greek mythology as well as examples of their depiction in art. (https://greece.greekreporter.com/2018/03/17/the-moirai-the-fates-of-greek-mythology/)
- Read the Collection Online — Access Dobson's full 1984 poetry collection that is titled after "The Three Fates" and opens with the poem. (https://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poems-book/the-three-fates-other-poems-0545000)

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