The Trees

SUMMARY

The trees are beginning to bloom, their leaves slowly unfolding like a word on the tip of someone's tongue. As the new buds open luxuriously and stretch into leaves, their green color feels like a kind of sadness.

Does this sadness have to do with the fact that the leaves are reborn each spring while we, as human beings, just keep getting older? No, the trees die just like we do; they just play a trick every year by making it *seem* like they're young, even as the rings in their trunks reveal that they're actually getting older.

Even so, the trees tirelessly grow their thick, lush fortress of green every May. "The past is dead," they seem to say, "begin anew."

THEMES

MORTALITY AND RENEWAL

"The Trees" is, in part, about the sense of renewal that comes along with spring, but the poem isn't all that joyous or celebratory—at least not on its surface. The speaker has a complicated reaction to the newly blossoming trees, seeing the "recent buds" as "a kind of grief." This is because each year's leaves eventually die, so they feel to the speaker like a reminder of mortality. And yet, these leaves are *also* a reminder that life is full of new beginnings and opportunities to start "afresh." The poem therefore both laments the inevitability of death and celebrates the opportunity for renewal in the present.

The speaker is wary of the new life that blossoms every spring, seeing more in the "recent buds" than freshness and beauty. "The trees are coming into leaf," the poem begins, and though readers might expect the next line to say something about how lovely this is, the speaker instead compares the budding trees to "something almost being said." Rather than admiring the new buds, the speaker feels like they're *withholding* something—more specifically, that there's "a kind of grief" lying behind the season's pleasant façade.

That grief, in turn, stems from the fact that even these symbols of rebirth and renewal will themselves one day die. Spring typically makes people think of youth and new beginnings, but they make the *speaker* think of the fact that even those new beginnings will someday come to an end!

The new buds might *look* young and fresh, but they're also a reminder that the previous year's buds are dead. The growth rings of the trees to which these buds are attached speak to the fact that "looking new" is a kind of "yearly trick"; in reality, the buds simply die each year as the trees grow older and older. The presence of these youthful buds is, ironically enough, a tangible sign that everything is subject to the ravages of time—including human beings.

And yet, the poem isn't totally pessimistic. The trees still bloom in "fullgrown thickness every May," renewing themselves even in the face of time's relentless march. To the speaker, the trees' renewal is a call to "begin afresh": to accept the inevitable passage of time and not dwell on the past. In other words, they encourage the speaker to live life fully in the present.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

The trees are ...
... kind of grief.

The poem opens with trees "coming into leaf," which means that it's spring and that everything is beginning to blossom. The speaker describes this in line 3, saying that the "recent buds relax and spread." The word "relax" hints at a sense of relief, as if the buds have been tensely waiting all winter to finally open up and "spread" themselves into lush green leaves.

Because poems about spring are, very often, celebratory or happy in nature, many readers will probably assume going into "The Trees" that it will be a good-natured poem about the beauty of budding trees and the excitement of spring. However, things take an unexpected turn at the end of this opening quatrain ("The trees are [...] of grief"), when the speaker metaphorically suggests that the "greenness" of the new leaves is "a kind of grief." At this moment, the speaker projects feelings of discontent onto the otherwise happy, care-free sight of budding trees.

This actually makes sense alongside the simile the speaker uses in the poem's first two lines:

> The trees are coming into leaf
> Like something almost being said;

By comparing the budding trees to "something almost being said," the speaker subtly implies that there's something lurking behind their beauty. In the same way that it's possible to sense when people are just barely holding themselves back from

saying something meaningful, the speaker feels as if the buds are hiding something.

Behind the buds' surface-level beauty, the poem intimates, lies "grief" and sadness. It's not yet clear why, exactly, the speaker feels this way. At this point, then, the only thing that's clear is that "The Trees" will take an unconventional, nuanced look at the sense of renewal associated with spring.

These opening lines also establish the poem's use of iambic tetrameter, a meter in which each line contains four iambs: feet consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (da-DUM). Look, for example, at the first two lines:

> The trees | are com- | ing in- | to leaf
> Like some- | thing al- | most be- | ing said;

This gives the language a consistent, plodding rhythm, perhaps reflecting the speaker's lack of enthusiasm about the changing seasons. Whereas free verse might allow the language here to feel exuberant and frolicking, the poem's use of iambic tetrameter gently calms it down, giving the speaker's tone a somewhat subdued, structured quality that matches the hesitance to view spring as a time of joy and excitement. The ABBA rhyme scheme at play in this stanza also contributes to this musical yet methodical feel.

LINES 5-8

> *Is it that ...*
> *... rings of grain.*

Having metaphorically called the "greenness" of the budding leaves "a kind of grief," the speaker now looks closer at why this sign of spring's arrival feels so sad:

> Is it that they are born again
> And we grow old? [...]

This is a rhetorical question. It invites readers to wonder if the new leaves feel like a form of "grief" because they're a reminder of the relentless march of time. Under this interpretation, the newly budded leaves make the speaker feel bad because they force an acknowledgement of the fact that, unlike these youthful buds that appear anew each year, people only getting older and older. And this, of course, means that the speaker is inching ever closer to death.

The poem asks this question as a way of planting it in the reader's mind, but the speaker immediately goes on to refute this idea by pointing out that these leaves "die too." Although the newly blossomed buds *seem* eternally young, then, the reality is that they—just like human beings—will eventually die. They're not invincible to the ravages of time. Age shows not on the leaves themselves, but on the "rings of grain" in the tree trunk. These rings are tangible evidence of the passage of time, given that trees add a new ring to their trunks every year.

There's a certain irony at play here, since the very leaves that look so young and new are actually signs of age. This is why the speaker views the seemingly youthful buds as a "yearly trick": they dupe people into thinking about newness and rebirth, when what they *really* represent is the unavoidable fact that time brings itself to bear on everything in the world—even blossoming trees. Simply put, they are a clear sign that time is passing.

The speaker's use of caesura in line 6 adds a small sense of drama to the moment:

> And we grow old? || No, || they die too,

The caesura after the rhetorical question creates a thoughtful pause, as if the speaker is genuinely trying to figure out if this is why the new buds cause "grief." The next caesura isolates the word "no," adding a little suspense before the speaker says: "they die too." This helps accentuate the idea that, despite their apparent youthfulness, the leaves won't last forever—in fact, they won't even last a full year!

LINES 9-10

> *Yet still the ...*
> *... thickness every May.*

There's a tonal shift at the beginning of the poem's final quatrain, when the speaker goes from talking very cynically about the trees to actually appreciating their strength and "thickness." Although each year's new leaves eventually die (serving as reminders of mortality and the passage of time), they still make the trees look healthy and strong, giving them a "fullgrown thickness," or image of vitality and lushness.

The speaker finally recognizes the beauty of these newly budded trees without being under any illusion that they symbolize youthfulness. Instead, the speaker insists that what they *actually* symbolize is the fact that nothing lasts forever; the new leaves will die in the autumn, and the trees themselves will also someday die and decay. But this doesn't mean the trees and their thick new leaves aren't beautiful *right now*.

The fact that the trees are susceptible to time (just like human beings) seems to make the speaker admire them all the more. "Yet still the unresting castles thresh / In fullgrown thickness every May," the speaker says. The words "yet still" are especially telling here, since the speaker is basically acknowledging that the trees go on blooming every year *even as* they get older. They're not eternally youthful, but what is? The word "unresting" also suggests that the speaker appreciates that the trees seem to triumph over the passage of time—just like human beings, they are constantly getting older, but this doesn't stop them from budding new leaves "every May."

These lines are filled with sibilance and other soft, whispery sounds:

Yet still the unresting castles thresh
In fullgrown thickness every May.

The hush of these lines might evoke the sound of leaves rustling.

LINES 11-12

Last year is ...
... afresh, afresh, afresh.

The shift in the speaker's outlook becomes even more pronounced in the poem's final two lines. At first, the speaker was deeply cynical of springtime, seeing the new buds on the trees as nothing but a reminder of the passage of time. Now, though, the speaker actually seems to *appreciate* the fact that the trees keep blossoming each year even though they're only getting older.

What the speaker admires, then, isn't the common idea that spring symbolizes new *life*, but that it symbolizes new *beginnings*. Looking at the "fullgrown thickness" of the trees, the speaker feels as if they're saying, "Last year is dead." And the speaker clearly welcomes the idea of letting the past go. The poem ends with the speaker personifying the trees by suggesting that their rustling leaves "seem to say, / Begin afresh, afresh, afresh." It's as if, at this moment, the leaves announce the importance of living in the present instead of dwelling on the past—or, for that matter, obsessing over the future (and, in turn, obsessing over the fact that everything grows older and dies).

The speaker doesn't just automatically accept clichéd ideas about spring, but any cynicism in the poem actually leads to an even more profound appreciation for the season. After all, it's because the speaker sees the buds as reminders of mortality that the speaker is then able to admire them for thriving in the present. The poem, therefore, celebrates spring for its rejuvenating qualities—qualities that are all the more meaningful because they're set against a backdrop of mortality and the uncompromising passage of time.

The meter in line 11 changes slightly, as the speaker begins the line with a trochee (stressed-unstressed) instead of an iamb (unstressed-stressed):

Last year | is dead, || they seem | to say,

Readers might also take this opening foot as a spondee ("Last year"); either way, this emphasizes the word "last," calling attention to the idea that the past is "dead." In contrast, the final line perfectly follows the poem's use of iambic tetrameter:

Be**gin** | a**fresh**, || a**fresh**, || a**fresh**.

This rhythm of four iambs (four da-DUMs) helps call attention to the word "afresh," which is itself an iamb. The use of repetition (specifically epizeuxis) also spotlights this word. The poem thus ends by emphasizing the idea that spring brings along new beginnings and that this is a reminder to live in the present.

SYMBOLS

SPRING, TREES, AND NEW LEAVES

The newly budded leaves symbolize renewal and new beginnings. The sight of newly budding trees is always a sure sign of spring, a season associated with happiness and a feeling of rebirth. But the speaker also sees them as reminder of time's relentless forward march. This then makes the speaker think of mortality and getting older.

But the trees themselves, the speaker realizes, continue to thrash about in "fullgrown thickness every May." Even though they're constantly getting closer to death (just like human beings), they keep thriving. In this way, they come to symbolize a certain resiliency, demonstrating that it's possible to prosper and "begin afresh" even in the face of mortality.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 5-8
- Lines 9-12

POETIC DEVICES

SIMILE

The speaker uses a simile to compare the newly budding trees to "something almost being said"—they're like a word on the tip of the tongue. This suggests that the leaves haven't yet fully budded, infusing the poem's opening with a sense of anticipation. This simile implies that the speaker is anxious to see the leaves come into full bloom.

Taken alongside the rest of the poem, this simile also subtly hints at the speaker's feeling of suspicion or cynicism about what spring really symbolizes. It's almost as if the speaker feels like the trees are *hiding* something, or that they're withholding some kind of important information.

That something, in turn, is the idea that time affects everything. While most people see new leaves as a sign of rebirth and youthfulness, the speaker knows that springtime blossoms will eventually die, meaning that they *actually* symbolize the process of aging and mortality. The budding leaves are therefore a "yearly trick," since they trick people into thinking about new life instead of death. This, it seems, is what the leaves aren't saying: that all things die, even things that look

fresh and new.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "The trees are coming into leaf / Like something almost being said;"

METAPHOR

The poem's metaphors help the speaker describe the trees in unexpected, unconventional ways. For instance, while describing the new buds "spread[ing]" into lush green leaves, the speaker says:

> Their greenness is a kind of grief.

This is perhaps a little surprising given that people usually associate the rich colors of spring with joy and excitement. Here, though, the speaker metaphorically presents the color of the leaves as a form of "grief," implying that they actually represent something desperately sad.

The next metaphor helps explain why the speaker feels this way. The fact that the trees look so beautiful each year, the speaker argues, makes it easy to overlook the fact that they, too, are aging—just like everything else in the world. This, the speaker says, is a "yearly trick," a phrase that metaphorically presents the budding trees as some kind of magic trick intended to deceive people.

Although it's easy to fall for this "trick," the speaker metaphorically illustrates that the trees themselves aren't eternally young. After all, their "yearly trick of looking new / Is written down in rings of grain." The word "written" suggests that the trees keep a comprehensive record of the passing years, which are etched into their trunks (trees gain one ring per year). This helps spotlight the irony at play in the poem: the new buds on a tree *look* young, but they're actually a sign that the tree itself is aging.

By the end of the poem, though, the speaker metaphorically says that the lush trees seem to send a message that "last year is dead." This metaphor implies that it's futile to try to slow down the passage of time by dwelling on the past, since the past is as good as dead. The only thing people can do, then, is appreciate the present and focus on beginning "afresh." In this way, this seemingly sad metaphor about the past actually helps the speaker end on an inspiring note about the value of living in the moment.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "Their greenness is a kind of grief."
- **Lines 7-8:** "Their yearly trick of looking new / Is written down in rings of grain."
- **Line 9:** "the unresting castles"
- **Line 11:** "Last year is dead"

PERSONIFICATION

The speaker personifies the buds and the trees they're attached to, talking about their life cycles as if they're human beings. For example, the speaker wonders if the newly budded leaves feel upsetting because they "are born again" even as human beings continue to "grow old." The word "born" subtly personifies the leaves, since it's uncommon to talk about the *birth* of a plant—instead, most people talk about plants in terms of *growth*; sprouting, blossoming, or budding.

This personification helps the speaker compare the human own experience to the experience of these new leaves, highlighting the fact that the leaves seem to gain new life each spring while people march toward old age and death. But the speaker also recognizes that this isn't actually the case: "No," the speaker says, "they die too," going on to explain that the leaves *look* like they're "born again" each spring but that, in reality, this is nothing but a "yearly trick." What really happens, of course, is that the trees themselves continue to age, just like people do.

Although this might feel cynical, the poem's final use of personification gives the last stanza ("Yet still [...] afresh") a slightly uplifting tone: "Last year is dead, [the trees] seem to say, / Begin afresh, afresh, afresh." This personification not only implies that the trees are—like human beings—capable of speaking, but also that they have an important message to deliver: namely, that the past is "dead" and that people ought to focus on new beginnings.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "The recent buds relax and spread,"
- **Lines 5-6:** "Is it that they are born again / And we grow old?"
- **Lines 11-12:** "Last year is dead, they seem to say, / Begin afresh, afresh, afresh."

SIBILANCE

The poem's sibilance adds a soft hissing quality to the language that recalls the sound of leaves rustling against each other. Take, for example, lines 3 and 4:

> The recent buds relax and spread,
> Their greenness is a kind of grief.

The sibilance in words like "recent," "relax," and "spread" makes the language sound whispery and gentle, but it also subtly imitates the sound a bud might make as it opens up and "spread[s]" into a new leaf.

Similarly, the sibilant /s/ reappears in lines 9 and 10, when the speaker describes the "fullgrown" trees:

Yet still the unresting castles thresh
In fullgrown thickness every May.

Again, the hissing /s/ has an onomatopoeic effect, since it mimics the sound of leaves brushing against each other. The many other sounds in these lines—/z/, /th/, /sh/, and /f/—add to the effect, in ords like "castles," "thresh," "fullgrown," and "thickness."

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "something almost," "said"
- **Line 3:** "recent," "relax," "spread"
- **Line 4:** "greenness"
- **Line 9:** "still," "unresting castles"
- **Line 10:** "thickness"
- **Line 11:** "Last," "seem," "say"

ASSONANCE

Like the speaker's use of sibilance, the assonance in "The Trees" gives the language a heightened, poetic sound. It also emphasizes certain words and connects them to each other, like when the speaker repeats the long /ee/ sound in the first line:

The trees are coming into leaf

This highlights the image of trees gradually sprouting new leaves. By calling attention to the words "trees" and "leaf," then, the speaker accentuates the poem's focus on the kind of growth that comes along with springtime.

Line 4 also features the /ee/ sound:

Their greenness is a kind of grief

Instead of drawing attention to two similar words, this use of assonance actually underlines the surprising fact that the speaker sees the "greenness" of the new leaves as a form of "grief." This rather pessimistic outlook goes against the joy and excitement most people associate with spring, and the assonance here only spotlights this unexpected, unconventional viewpoint.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "trees," "leaf"
- **Line 2:** "being"
- **Line 3:** "recent," "relax"
- **Line 4:** "greenness," "grief"
- **Line 6:** "grow old? No"
- **Line 9:** "unresting," "thresh"
- **Line 11:** "dead"
- **Line 12:** "afresh"

CONSONANCE

Just like sibilance and assonance, the consonance in "The Trees" adds emphasis to the language while also spotlighting certain words. Consider, for example, the way the /r/ sound works its way through lines 3 and 4:

The recent buds relax and spread,
Their greenness is a kind of grief.

This consonant /r/ sound highlights words like "recent," "relax," "spread," and "greenness"—all words that help the speaker evoke the abundance of spring. But the /r/ sound also appears in "grief," a word that doesn't necessarily align with the other more joyous words related to springtime. Consonance, then, helps accentuate the speaker's unexpectedly bleak way of looking at the otherwise beautiful aspects of spring.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "trees are," "coming," "leaf"
- **Line 2:** "Like," "something almost," "said"
- **Line 3:** "recent," "buds," "relax," "spread"
- **Line 4:** "Their," "greenness," "grief"
- **Line 5:** "born again"
- **Line 6:** "And," "grow," "old," "die"
- **Line 7:** "Their yearly," "trick," "looking," "new"
- **Line 8:** "written down," "rings," "grain"
- **Line 9:** "still," "unresting castles," "thresh"
- **Line 10:** "fullgrown," "thickness," "every"
- **Line 11:** "Last," "year," "seem," "say"

IRONY

"The Trees" goes against the associations most people have about spring, given that the speaker sees the lush new leaves as a "kind of grief." This is because, to the speaker at least, the many leaves that bud each year don't represent youth or rebirth, but actually serve as reminders that everyone—and every*thing*, for that matter—is getting older. And this, of course, feels like a reminder of death and mortality.

And yet, what's ironic is that this yearly reminder actually leads to a renewed interest in life! Although the speaker sees the budding leaves as evidence that everything is speeding toward death, this ultimately helps the speaker realize the importance of living in the present. The leaves are symbols of time's relentless march, but this ends up helping the speaker appreciate that the trees just keep budding year after year, essentially thriving even as they inch closer to death.

The very thing that depresses the speaker, then, also encourages the speaker to appreciate life more fully. Irony thus sits at the core of the poem, since something that initially seems cynical and pessimistic eventually feels inspiring and even uplifting.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- Lines 5-8
- Lines 9-12

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The speaker poses a rhetorical question as a way of trying to get to the bottom of why, exactly, the lush new leaves on the trees seems so sad. "Is it that they are born again / And we grow old?" the speaker asks in lines 5-6. In other words, the speaker wonders if the trees' "greenness is a kind of grief" because it acts as a reminder that time has passed and, thus, that the speaker is getting older even as the trees themselves *seem* to be reborn. The speaker is basically wondering whether resentment or envy is behind this springtime "grief."

But the speaker then undercuts this question right away: the leaves *aren't* actually "born again" as human beings "grow old." Instead, "they die too"; the leaves will wither and fall as the seasons change. As such, the leaves actually aren't all that different from people, and, in fact, are a testament to the passage of time rather than a sign of some sort of immortality that taunts the speaker with eternal youth. The rhetorical question thus gives him an opportunity to suggest that new buds ironically represent the aging process—despite their apparent youthfulness.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "Is it that they are born again / And we grow old?"

CAESURA

Because there aren't many caesuras in "The Trees," the ones that *do* appear in the poem are all the more noticeable. For instance, the caesuras in line 6 break up the flow of the language and, in doing so, call attention to the speaker's thought process upon considering the answer to the question posed in lines 5-6:

> Is it that they are born again
> And we grow old? || No, || they die too,

The first caesura inserts a pause after the speaker asks if the new leaves cause grief because they seem eternally young while the speaker, as a human being, continues to age. The small beat between "old?" and "No" not only slows down the overall pace of the line but also makes it seem as if the speaker is genuinely considering whether this is what is upsetting about the leaves.

The second caesura then isolates the word "no," making it especially pronounced—in fact, it even changes the meter by forcing a stress onto the word, accentuating the fact that the speaker doesn't actually think the leaves are eternally young. Rather, the speaker realizes that the leaves all "die" just like human beings, and the caesuras around "no" call attention to this realization.

There also several caesuras in the final two lines:

> Last year is dead, || they seem to say,
> Begin afresh, || afresh, || afresh.

The first caesura here adds a little drama or intensity, allowing the word "dead" to hang in readers' minds for a moment. This emphasizes the idea that the past is gone. The two caesuras in the final line also stress the importance of beginning "afresh," since the speaker pauses between each repetition of the word.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "old? No," ", they"
- **Line 11:** "dead, they"
- **Line 12:** "afresh, afresh," ", afresh"

EPIZEUXIS

The speaker uses epizeuxis in the poem's final line. The trees "seem to say":

> Begin, afresh, afresh, afresh.

This immediate repetition really hammers home what is arguably the poem's most important message—namely, that even though everyone and everything is subject to the ravages of time, it's still possible to enjoy new beginnings. The trees continue to thrive each spring even as they keep aging, and their lush regrowth every spring reminds the speaker to accept the passage of time and live fully in the present.

The repetition at this moment also heightens the general intensity of the final line. The soft, swishing /sh/ sound in the wore itself even evokes the sound that leaves might make as they rustle up against each other as they sway back and forth in the wind.

Where Epizeuxis appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** "afresh, afresh, afresh"

VOCABULARY

Coming Into Leaf (Line 1) - Blossoming.

Buds (Line 3) - Small pods that eventually open up into flowers or—in this case—leaves.

Rings of Grain (Line 8) - The concentric circles in a tree's trunk. Each ring represents a year of the tree's life.

Unresting (Line 9) - Tireless; ceaseless.

Castles (Line 9) - Large fortresses. The speaker uses the word metaphorically to make the trees seem mighty and strong.

Thresh (Line 9) - Thrash; move about wildly.

Afresh (Line 12) - Anew.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Trees" is a 12-line poem broken into three quatrains (or four-line stanzas). This simple, straightforward structure makes the poem feel very even and measured. This isn't a poem about intense emotion; it's about an underlying feeling of sadness, so the poem's subdued, uncomplicated structure helps convey the speaker's reflective and melancholic mood.

The three stanzas here also neatly break down the speaker's emotional development:

- In the first stanza ("The trees [...] of grief"), for example, the speaker remarks upon the budding trees and says that their "greenness" feels like "grief."
- Then, in the second stanza ("Is it [..] of grain"), the speaker tries to put a finger on why this is the case, wondering if it's because the leaves are "born again" each year while human beings continue to age.
- Finally, in the third stanza ("Yet still [...] afresh"), the speaker comes to see the trees as symbols of renewal in the face of mortality.

METER

The poem is written in iambic tetrameter. This means that each line contains four iambs, feet consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable: da-DUM. Take, for example, the first two lines:

> The trees | are com- | ing in- | to leaf
> Like some- | thing al- | most be- | ing said;

This creates a consistent, bouncing rhythm that both draws readers into the poem and creates a sense of predictability. This is appropriate given that "The Trees" is about the inevitable arrival of spring and the steady march of time.

The poem sticks closely to its meter for the most part, making it all the more noticeable when the speaker does vary the rhythm. Line 11 is a good example of this. The first foot is rather ambiguous and can be read either as a trochee (stressed-unstressed) or a spondee (stressed-stressed):

> Last year | is dead, || they seem | to say,

Or:

> Last year | is dead, || they seem | to say,

Either way, the fact that the line begins with a stressed syllable emphasizes the word "last," calling attention to the idea that the past is gone and that, as a result, there's nothing to do but live in the present.

The final line is then purely iambic:

> Begin | afresh, || afresh, || afresh.

The word "afresh" has a clear rhythm to it, and the fact that the speaker repeats it three times in a row only emphasizes its swaying bounce. This, in turn, adds intensity and urgency to the trees' call to start anew.

RHYME SCHEME

Each of the poem's three quatrains follows the same rhyme scheme, in which the first line rhymes with the last line, and the two middle lines rhyme. The entire poem can be mapped out like this:

> ABBA CDDC EFFE

This rhyme scheme is tidy and well-organized, adding to the poem's thoughtful, measured tone.

The rhymes here also emphasize several important words. For instance, the word "leaf" in line 1 rhymes with "grief" in line 4. This highlights the unexpected connection the speaker makes between beautiful new leaves and sadness—a connection that stands in contrast to the joy and excitement most people associate with spring.

On a simpler level, this consistent rhyme scheme just *sounds* good. It pairs well with the da-DUM da-DUM rhythm of the iambic tetrameter, and it accentuates the speaker's strict adherence to the poem's form. And this, in turn, gives the poem a pleasantly predictable feeling that pulls readers from one line to the next.

SPEAKER

There isn't much identifying information about the poem's speaker, though many readers take this speaker to be Phillip Larkin himself.

The only thing that's clear is that spring reminds the speaker of the passage of time and, thus, that everyone and everything is constantly inching closer to death. Keeping the speaker nonspecific allows the poem's message feels universal and timeless.

SETTING

The poem takes place in early spring, but beyond that it could pretty much be set anywhere (anyplace, of course, with trees). This, like the lack of a specific speaker, helps to keep the poem's message universal. This is a poem about time and mortality in general, and it applies to everyone, everywhere.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Philip Larkin was one of the 20th century's most famous British poets, and often wrote poems with a rather bleak, cynical outlook. He frequently expressed skepticism toward love, for example, as in his well-known poem "The Whitsun Weddings." He also took an unsparing look at the idea of family in "This Be The Verse."

"The Trees," published in 1974, has a lot in common with another of Larkin's most celebrated poems: "Coming," which is also about what it feels like to observe the first signs of spring. In both poems, the speaker seems hesitant to embrace the joy and excitement that most people feel when the weather begins to turn. And yet, both poems still manage to capture a sense of renewal and an appreciation for the natural world's constant state of change—even as they challenge stereotypical or clichéd attitudes surrounding the season.

Many critics associate Larkin's gloomy outlook with a quintessentially British sensibility, since his writing was simultaneously glum and sharply observant. Because of this, he's often considered an important member of the Movement, a group in the 1950s that was made up of British writers like Donald Davie, Thom Gunn, Kingsley Amis, and Ted Hughes. The Movement is a little hard to define, given that the main thing that held it together was a certain "Englishness"—the same biting, cynical, and quintessentially British style that characterizes most of Philip Larkin's work.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Trees" appeared in Larkin's final collection of poetry, *High Windows*, which was published in 1974. This means the poem came out in a time of cultural upheaval and revolution, when people across Europe and the United States began to celebrate equality, free love, and artistic expression. This period also made up the final years of the Vietnam War, which ended in 1975.

Of course, England didn't send troops to Vietnam, but the counter-cultural movement of the 1960s and '70s was very focused on the importance of peace, and this message certainly made its way into the British mainstream (consider, for example, the many anti-war songs written by famous English musicians like John Lennon).

However, "The Trees" doesn't really engage with its own cultural moment. Instead, it's a timeless poem that transcends the period in which it was written. After all, it's about spring, mortality, and new beginnings—all things that pretty much apply to any time period! And yet, although it's unlikely that the poem itself was inspired by its historical context, its message to "begin afresh" *does* feel relevant to the period, since the 1970s saw so much change.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- "Rings of Grain" — Learn a little about how to determine the age of a tree by studying the rings in its trunk: a practice known as dendrochronology! (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dendrochronology)
- Portraits of the Artist — The National Portrait Gallery has several portraits of Philip Larkin, including a painting and several photographs. (https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/person/mp05491/philip-arthur-larkin)
- Hear the Poem — Listen to Philip Larkin himself read "The Trees." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EM6n3SXSyeA)
- About the Poet — For more information about Philip Larkin, check out this brief overview of his life and work. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/philip-larkin)
- The Paris Review Interview — Read The Paris Review's "The Art of Poetry" interview with Philip Larkin. (https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3153/the-art-of-poetry-no-30-philip-larkin)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER PHILIP LARKIN POEMS

- Afternoons
- An Arundel Tomb
- Church Going
- Coming
- Mr Bleaney
- The Whitsun Weddings
- This Be The Verse
- Water

HOW TO CITE

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