What Kind of Times Are These

SUMMARY

The speaker describes a grassy hill sandwiched by trees, where a road that dates back to the revolution vanishes into darkness. Nearby is an abandoned house that was once used by persecuted people to gather in secret; those people have since vanished into the darkness as well.

The speaker has scavenged for mushrooms in this place, which exists at the border of fear. The speaker wants readers to understand that this poem isn't about Russia; the place the speaker describes is right here, in the speaker and reader's shared country, which is closing in on the fearsome truth about itself and developing its own methods for getting rid of people it doesn't like.

The speaker refuses to tell readers where, exactly, this place is located, this place where the dark web of the trees' overlapping branches intersects with a nameless strip of light—an intersection filled with ghosts, a heaven of rotting leaves. The speaker is well aware that there are certain people who'd like to own this place, commodify it, or erase it altogether.

The speaker again refuses to reveal the location of this place, which might make the reader wonder why they bother saying anything at all. The speaker says they talk because the reader is still paying attention and that, in order for people to pay attention in times such as the ones they're living in, they have to focus on the trees.

THEMES

POETRY AND POLITICS

"What Kind of Times Are These" alludes to German poet Bertolt Brecht's 1939 poem "To Those Who Follow," which relays his fear that writing about nature and beauty—the things that normally move poets—was irresponsible in a time of great suffering. Writing under the Nazi regime, Brecht felt that poets had a duty to speak out against this violence, not hide away in poems about nature. Lamenting the state of the world, he wrote, "What times are these, in which / A conversation about trees is almost a crime," because in talking about the trees, poets "maintain [their] silence about so much wrongdoing!"

Rich's poem likewise describes dangerous times, yet it reaches a different conclusion: in this environment, the speaker implies, poetry can become a kind of *refuge*—like a "meeting-house" in the woods where the oppressed can share ideas without facing immediate danger. This literary refuge, like the real-life meeting-houses of revolutionaries, is always in danger of being sold out, and thus it's risky for "the persecuted" to have frank conversations about where the country is headed. In order to speak up about state violence and political unrest, then, poets need to keep themselves and their medium safe. They need to frame their "truths" in ways that both lure readers in and throw the powerful off the scent; they need "to talk about trees."

Rich's poem insists that danger is right on readers' doorsteps: the poem is set in "our country," where there's been some form of failed or disrupted rebellion. "The persecuted" once met in an "unmarked" place near "the woods," presumably organizing this rebellion by "the old revolutionary road." Eventually, they "disappeared [into shadows]" after "abandoning" their former refuge. This might imply that the meeting-house had been compromised in some way and that the rebellion subsequently fizzled.

The speaker suggests that poetry, too, could be turned into an industry in which nothing real or risky can be communicated. As if already sensing this threat, the speaker communicates in a kind of code, "talk[ing] about trees" as a way of engaging the reader in the first place. The implication is that, if the speaker spoke in "revolutionary" terms or told certain kinds of truth point blank, they would risk turning readers away and/or revealing poetry to be the radical "place" that it is—and thus put themselves in danger.

It isn't clear what form this danger would take, but in general, poetry would no longer be a safe place to express certain feelings or ideas. As such, the poem echoes Emily Dickinson's famous instruction to "Tell all the truth but tell it slant." That is, poems should deliver revolutionary truths but disguise them behind more innocuous, traditional, or inviting subjects, like "trees"—both to lure readers in and so that the poet's true intentions aren't immediately snuffed out by those in power.

Indeed, the speaker says they "won't tell you where the place is," implying that in order to maintain poetry as a safe place for the exchange of difficult ideas, poets must avoid explaining or revealing too much in their poetry. People interested in this kind of truth-telling must seek it out themselves, by paying close attention and "listen[ing]." Someone who's *looking* for truth will be able to see past the trees, past the disguise, and know they've come to the right place.

It's also possible that Rich isn't differentiating between poetry and politics so starkly here—that she's arguing that art is *inherently* political because nothing exists in a vacuum. Those "trees" in the first stanza are incidental; they surround, and perhaps shield, the old "meeting-house." Art is always a part of the world in which it is created.

To that end, the declaration that "it's necessary / to talk about

trees" might even be an acknowledgment of violence against the earth itself. In this way, Rich suggests that even supposedly simple nature poems are revolutionary when the earth itself is being "persecuted."

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

There's a place ...
... into those shadows.

"What Kind of Times Are These" alludes to the 1939 poem "To Those Who Follow in Our Wake," written by the German poet Berthold Brecht at the beginning of World War II. At one point, the speaker of Brecht's poem says:

> What times are these, in which
> A conversation about trees is almost a crime
> For in doing so we maintain our silence about so much wrongdoing!

Brecht uses "trees" to represent the beauty and seclusion of nature, which has so often moved poets to write. But Brecht thought it was irresponsible—"almost a crime"—to write about nature when all over his country people were being violently persecuted by the Nazi regime. As far as Brecht was concerned, artists have a responsibility to address what is happening in the world around them.

Rich's poem announces itself as being in conversation with Brecht's through the title, though Rich doesn't make her argument immediately apparent. Instead, "What Kind of Times Are These" opens with a description of "a place between two stands of trees where the grass grows uphill / and the old revolutionary road breaks off into shadows."

Rich's poem thus nods to the "trees" Brecht spoke of, but the trees in Rich's poem aren't exactly removed from what's going on in the world at large. They're *part* of the setting and, in fact, seem to serve as a kind of cover for some sort of operation: the speaker's mention of an "old revolutionary road" that disappears into the darkness of the woods suggests that these woods were once a haven for revolutionaries, people organizing at a "meeting-house" in order to fight against oppression. Note, too, the use of alliteration in these lines: the /t/ sounds in "two stands of trees," /gr/ sounds in "grass grows," and /r/ sounds in "revolutionary road" creates musicality and emphasis, highlighting the importance of this setting. Right away, then, the speaker is talking about both trees and revolution; poetry, the image might imply, always exists in conversation with its surroundings.

The speaker goes on to say that the "place" they're describing was "abandoned." The "meeting-house" where revolutionaries once met is now empty; both the "road" and the "persecuted" have vanished into the "shadows." Their disappearance implies that their revolution failed. It isn't clear whether the revolutionaries found somewhere else to meet or if they were caught by those who wanted to squash their efforts. In any case, there's a sense of incompletion; it seems this revolution didn't achieve what it set out to achieve.

Note the repetition of the word "shadows" at the ends of lines 2 and 4. This repetition makes this place seem more sinister and threatening; it's a world surrounded by darkness, which perhaps also represents how little the speaker actually knows about what happened. The speaker doesn't know how far the road extends into the woods, nor do they know precisely what became of the people who met here. Their ignorance suggests that those in power were successful in snuffing out the revolution. That these people "disappeared into those shadows" implies that they were effectively silenced—hence the speaker's ignorance of their fate.

Finally, this stanza establishes the poem's form: "What Kind of Times Are These" is made up of four quatrains written in free verse, creating a conversational, direct, and intimate tone. Enjambments across the first few lines of the poem also create momentum, building a sense of urgency right from the poem's start.

LINES 5-8

I've walked there ...
... making people disappear.

In the second stanza, the speaker says that they've actually "walked" by the place they're describing, "picking mushrooms at the edge of dread." Overlapping /eh/ assonance and /d/ consonance ("edge of dread") add intensity to the poem's language at this moment, subtly evoking the speaker's apprehension.

While the image of mushroom hunting in the woods may come across as picturesque and fanciful, the speaker assures the reader that what they're describing is no fairy tale:

> [...] but don't be fooled
> this isn't a Russian poem, this is not somewhere else but here

There are several devices at work in these lines that create insistence and urgency. Anaphora ("this isn't/is not") as well as asyndeton (the lack of any coordinating conjunction between "this isn't a Russian poem" and "this is not somewhere else but here") speed the poem up, making the speaker's words feel more pressing.

The speaker isn't mentioning Russia at random, either. This poem was written in 1991, at the end of the Cold War; by saying "this isn't a Russian poem," the speaker is implying that it's an *American* poem—that it is their own homeland that's "moving closer to its own truth and dread." In other words, the speaker is urging the reader to pay attention to what's going on in their *own* country, to notice their *own* government's "ways of making people disappear."

There is more parallelism and asyndeton in lines 7-8:

> our country moving closer to its own truth and dread,
> its own ways of making people disappear.

The repetition of "its own" highlights the importance of acknowledging the violence of one's own country rather than fixating only that which exists elsewhere. Parallelism and asyndeton add rhythm and speed things up, conveying the speaker's belief that the United States is "getting closer" to being more like Russia or other oppressive governments than many Americans care to admit. The pounding /d/ alliteration connecting "dread" and "disappear" suggests that the speaker's apprehension comes from the knowledge that their country has erased people before and will undoubtedly do so again.

Notice, too, the use of an end rhyme in lines 6 and 8 with the words "here" and "disappear." This rhyme creates musicality and emphasizes that atrocities like the ones Brecht was so moved by don't just happen elsewhere and in another time: they're happening right here, right now, in the speaker and reader's homeland.

LINES 9-12

I won't tell ...
... make it disappear.

The speaker addresses the reader directly for the first time in the poem, saying "I won't tell you where the place is." This refusal to name the place they're describing suggests that the speaker doesn't think it is safe to reveal too much. Instead, they continue to describe the place in vague, increasingly metaphorical terms:

> [...] the dark mesh of the woods
> meeting the unmarked strip of light—

Describing the tree branches as a "dark mesh" makes them seem oppressing and safe at once—a net that smothers yet also hides those within. The "unmarked strip of light" suggests a sliver of hope in the darkness: perhaps the revolution isn't dead but only driven underground, into places that are more difficult to discover. Alliteration and consonance ("mesh," "meeting the unmarked") add intensity and drama to these lines, drawing the reader's attention to this confrontation between darkness and light, a place marked by secrecy, oppression, and hope.

Continuing to describe this place, the speaker says it's a "ghost-ridden crossroads" and a "leafmold paradise." This suggests that it is haunted by the deaths/disappearances of those who have fought for freedom over the years. That the place is filled with rot and decay suggests a dark and difficult history. At the same time, the speaker believes this is a rich history to draw from, a place with real potential; perhaps future revolutionaries can learn from those "ghosts."

By this point, readers might get the sense that the speaker isn't (or isn't only) talking about a literal place: the speaker isn't hiding out in an actual house at the edge of the forest, perhaps, but rather finding shelter within *poetry* itself. Poetry can become that "meeting-house": a place for "the persecuted" to organize and rebel. Brecht argued writing nature poetry was irresponsible in times of state violence and oppression, but this poem suggests that such poetry can serve as a kind of camouflage or cover. That "dark mesh of the woods," in this reading of the poem, stands in for poetry itself; writing about nature can allow a poet to *gesture* towards important truths without stating them directly and making themselves vulnerable.

Indeed, the speaker says they know all too well "who wants to buy" this place and "make it disappear." Note how the asyndeton of this line and the repetition of "it" create a sense of building urgency:

> I know already who wants to buy it, sell it, make it disappear.

The speaker also once again repeats the word "disappear," which already popped up in line 4 ("disappeared into those shadows") and line 8 ("making people disappear"). The repetition of this word conveys the speaker's anxiety around people and places being silenced/erased by oppressive governments and/or the ruling class. (Some critics take these lines as also speaking to literal *environmental* destruction; this poem about trees might subtly nod toward humanity's devastating commodification of the earth's resources.) The speaker's unwillingness to divulge the location of this "place" is an attempt to protect it from those who would destroy it.

LINES 13-16

And I won't ...
... talk about trees.

The final stanza opens with anaphora: the speaker again declares that they "won't tell" the reader "where [the place] is." This repetition makes the speaker sound more emphatic, conveying the importance of keeping this "place" secret and safe. The speaker follows this statement with a rhetorical question: if they're not going to reveal the location of this place, what's the point in telling the reader "anything" at all? They

immediately answer their own question; still addressing the reader directly, the speaker says:

> [...] Because you still listen, because in times like these
> to have you listen at all, it's necessary
> to talk about trees.

The speaker is directly responding to Brecht's poem here. Whereas Brecht presented talking about trees as "almost a crime," the speaker comes to an entirely different conclusion: writing about nature isn't beside the point, nor is it akin to turning away from the responsibility a poet has to society. Beyond being merely acceptable, Rich's speaker argues that writing about nature is "necessary" in order to make people "listen at all."

By this, the speaker might mean that trees are a more alluring poetic subject. People turn to art for an escape from the overwhelming violence and oppression of the modern world, and they're more likely to turn to art about beauty and nature. As such, the poet must wrap their revolutionary truths up in language about things like trees and beauty in order to make readers pay attention. Or, maybe, the speaker is saying that poets must do this in order to avoid censorship—to avoid being "disappeared" by their "own country."

Either way, poetry about trees isn't necessarily *about* trees. Part of the power of poetry, this poem implies, is its ability to imbue a handful of lines with rich meaning, to use something like "trees" to talk about something entirely unrelated. As poet Archibald Macleish famously wrote in his "Ars Poetica":

> For all the history of grief
> An empty doorway and a maple leaf.

That is, poets have the power to capture something as vast and immeasurable as "the history of grief" in the image of "an empty doorway and a maple leaf."

This entire stanza is enjambed, speeding up the poem as it nears its conclusion. Note, too, how repetitive the language of this stanza is:

> And I won't tell you where it is, so why do I tell you anything? Because you still listen, because in times like these
> to have you listen at all [...]

Diacope ("I tell you," "listen") and anaphora ("Because") make the speaker sound forceful and insistent. The asyndeton of line 14 adds yet more urgency to the poem's final moments:

> [...] Because you still listen, because in times like these

Finally, it's possible to take the poem's final lines at face value. It isn't just that nature serves as a disguise for revolutionary thoughts and ideas; the poem implies that writing about nature in a time when nature is being systematically destroyed by governments and corporations is revolutionary in and of itself! In other words, the "trees" are also in danger of being "disappear[ed]." What's at stake, here, isn't just freedom from persecution, but also the future of the planet itself.

SYMBOLS

THE TREES

The trees in Rich's poem are rich with symbolism. On one level, they represent the safety of traditional poetic subjects like the beauty of nature. When the speaker says that one must "talk about the trees," they might be saying that poets must use such subjects to *disguise* revolutionary ideas and upsetting "truth[s]." In a "country" that can make people "disappear," it may not be safe for "the persecuted" to openly criticize those in power. As such, these people use poetry as a way of speaking in a kind of code. Those who "still listen" closely can hear what the speaker is really saying while those who don't won't look twice at a poem about a forest. Just as the "two stands of trees" enclose that abandoned "meeting-house" in stanza 1, they can form a protective barrier around a poet's revolutionary ideas.

In the Berthold Brecht poem to which Rich's poem responds, the speaker has a different take on talking about trees. To Brecht, writing at the dawn of WWII, focusing on the beauty of nature was "almost a crime" in light of all the evil in the world, a kind of immoral distraction from the horrors facing humanity. But Rich's poem doesn't view the trees as a distraction: things like nature's beauty are a way of making people pay attention to art, and specifically poetry, in the first place. Talk of trees lures people in; the trees represent the way poetry can sneak harsh truths into the world.

It's also possible to read Rich's poem as saying that there *isn't* a clear separation between the trees and the "truth" about the world in the first place. That "old revolutionary road" and "meeting-house" were located "between" the trees; the trees are *part of the image*. Perhaps talking about trees also represents the idea that poetry doesn't exist in a vacuum. Poets are part of the world in which they live, and thus their poetry inevitably is a *response* to that world.

Finally, it's entirely possible that the speaker is also pointing to the necessity of talking about the *actual* trees. While poets have long turned to nature for inspiration, climate change and deforestation both mean that the source of so much poetic inspiration is in real danger. In this way, the poem might suggest that even seemingly straightforward nature poems are

inherently political in a time when nature itself is being "disappeared."

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "There's a place between two stands of trees"
- **Line 9:** "the dark mesh of the woods"
- **Lines 14-16:** "because in times like these / to have you listen at all, it's necessary / to talk about trees."

THE REVOLUTIONARY ROAD AND MEETING-HOUSE

The "place" that the speaker describes in the first stanza seems like the site of an old, and likely failed, revolution against those in power. The "revolutionary road breaks off into shadows," disappearing into the darkness in a way that suggests that the revolution itself has since broken down—or that the ideals it fought for have been lost. The house where "the persecuted" once met, to plot against their persecutors, is "abandoned" because those people have "disappeared." This place symbolizes a revolutionary movement or spirit that has been snuffed out—but which, with careful tending, can perhaps be brought back to life.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "There's a place between two stands of trees where the grass grows uphill / and the old revolutionary road breaks off into shadows / near a meeting-house abandoned by the persecuted / who disappeared into those shadows."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

The poem alludes to German poet Berthold Brecht's 1939 poem, "To Those Who Follow in Our Wake" (also translated as "To Those Born Later"). Written at the start of World War II, Brecht's poem states:

> What times are these, in which
> A conversation about trees is almost a crime
> For in doing so we maintain our silence about so much wrongdoing!

To write about "trees"—which Brecht uses as a stand-in for natural beauty more broadly—is to turn away from the oppressive violence happening all around us. Brecht's poem argues that artists have a responsibility to politically engage with their times; writing about "trees" is akin to staying silent in the face of atrocity.

Rich's poem presents a different take. Despite living in an oppressive "country" that has "its own ways of making people disappear," the speaker of this poem doesn't believe the trees are beside the point. On the contrary, "in times like these," the speaker argues, "it's necessary / to talk about trees":

- For one thing, poems about things like the beauty of nature are more likely to lure readers in; people often want to find beauty and escape in art, and so writing about nature is a way to ensure that people engage with a poet's work in the first place.
- Rich's poem further suggests that poets can communicate radical, revolutionary ideas even *within* a poem about more traditional subjects. Poets may present such ideas as subtext available to those able to read between the lines, yet which fly under the radar of those in power who might otherwise try to censor them.

By alluding so directly to Brecht's poem, Rich places her work within a longstanding conversation about the role of poetry in politics and politics in poetry. She also creates a parallel between the violence happening in her country (the United States) and those that were occurring in Nazi Germany during Brecht's lifetime.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 14-16:** "Because you still listen, because in times like these / to have you listen at all, it's necessary / to talk about trees."

ALLITERATION

Alliteration adds lyricism and emphasis to the poem, making certain words and images pop. Take a look at the first two lines, which feature repetition of the /t/, /gr/, and /r/ sounds:

> There's a place between two stands of trees where
> the grass grows uphill
> and the old revolutionary road breaks off into
> shadows

The alliteration enhances the poem's imagery at this moment, allowing readers to envision the eerie setting the speaker describes: a "place" tucked away in the woods, between rows of trees, where "grass grows" and an old road disappears into the darkness.

In the next stanza, the thudding /d/ alliteration of "dread" and "don't" subtly evokes the heart-pounding fear the speaker feels walking along the border of this place. Assonance highlights the phrase "the edge of dread" further, emphasizing just how dangerous this place is—and how much "the persecuted" risked by meeting there. The sharp alliteration of "country moving

closer" adds to the foreboding atmosphere as well.

The final line of the poem features more /t/ alliteration:

> to talk about trees.

These crisp sounds make the final line feel forceful and assured; the speaker is clearly enunciating while stressing the importance of paying close attention to poetry in order to read between the lines.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "two," "trees," "grass," "grows"
- **Line 2:** "revolutionary," "road"
- **Line 5:** "dread," "don't"
- **Line 7:** "country," "closer," "dread"
- **Line 8:** "disappear"
- **Line 9:** "dark," "mesh"
- **Line 10:** "meeting"
- **Line 13:** "where," "why"
- **Line 16:** "to," "talk," "trees"

REPETITION

The poem uses lots of repetition to create rhythm and make its language generally more intense and lyrical. Repeating specific words and images across the poem calls readers' attention to important ideas. For example:

- The phrase "times like these" in line 14 echoes the poem's title, "What Kind of Times Are These," emphasizing the poem's central concern: the role of poetry in difficult times.
- The word "trees" appears in both the first and last line, strengthening the allusion to Berthold Brecht's 1939 poem that calls writing about trees a "crime" in light of the atrocities being committed in the world.
- The speaker repeats the word "dread" twice in the second stanza, adding to the poem's foreboding, threatening atmosphere.
- The words "disappeared" and "disappear" show up in lines 4, 8, and 12: the "persecuted" have "disappeared into those shadows"; the country has "its own ways of making people disappear"; and the speaker knows "who wants to make [this place] disappear." Through this repetition, the poem highlights the way those in power quell dissent and silence anyone who fights back.

There are more specific kinds of repetition throughout the poem as well. Take the diacope of lines 2 and 4:

> and the old revolutionary road breaks off into
> shadows
> [...]
> who disappeared into those shadows.

This repetition connects the "revolutionary road" with the revolutionaries themselves; both have been lost, "disappeared" into the darkness.

The poem also contains a great deal of parallelism that makes the speaker sound more urgent and forceful. In line 6 the speaker says:

> this isn't a Russian poem, this is not somewhere else
> but here,

This parallelism makes the speaker sound more emphatic as they insist that the poem isn't describing some far-off place, but their "own country." Likewise, in lines 7-8, the speaker says:

> our country moving closer to its own truth and
> dread,
> its own ways of making people disappear.

This parallelism links the country's "truth and dread" with violence: the dreadful truth is that this country destroys those people it deems undesirable or politically dangerous.

The anaphora of "I won't tell you where [the place/it] is" at the start of stanzas 9-4 hammers home the speaker's unwillingness to divulge information directly to readers, who must learn to read between the lines if they want to find "the place" the speaker describes.

Finally, the speaker uses more anaphora and diacope in lines 14-15 to underscore the importance of paying attention during times such as these:

> [...] Because you still listen, because in times like
> these
> to have you listen at all, [...]

The repetition of "because" and "listen" suggests that the only reason to continue writing about "trees" when so much violence is occurring all around is that poets might still be able to communicate something worthwhile with their readers and with one another. In other words, there's still hope that these revolutions can be brought back to life.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "trees"
- **Line 2:** "shadows"
- **Line 4:** "disappeared into those shadows"
- **Line 6:** "this isn't a Russian poem, this is not somewhere else"

- **Lines 7-8:** "its own truth and dread, / its own ways"
- **Line 8:** "making people disappear"
- **Line 9:** "I won't tell you where the place is"
- **Line 12:** "make it disappear"
- **Lines 13-14:** "And I won't tell you where it is, so why do I tell you / anything?"
- **Lines 14-15:** "Because you still listen, because in times like these / to have you listen at all"
- **Line 16:** "trees"

ASYNDETON

Asyndeton makes the poem sound more emphatic and urgent. Take lines 6-8:

> this isn't a Russian poem, this is not somewhere else
> but here,
> our country moving closer to its own truth and
> dread,
> its own ways of making people disappear.

The speaker doesn't pause for any conjunctions to connect these statements, and as a result, the poem flows swiftly and somewhat choppily down the page. Readers can sense the urgent conviction behind the speaker's words. The repetition in the stanza—of "this isn't/is not" and "its own"—adds to the effect. The speaker is trying to make the reader understand that the horror the poem describes is not limited to some far-off land but is present right at home, right now.

Asyndeton appears again throughout the next stanza:

> [...] where the place is, the dark mesh of the woods
> meeting the unmarked strip of light—
> ghost-ridden crossroads, leafmold paradise:
> [...] buy it, sell it, make it disappear.

The speaker again sounds urgent, forceful, and emphatic. They don't waste time with words like "and." The poem's phrases seem to crash into each other and speed the reader forward, subtly evoking the speed with which bad actors would destroy "the place" the speaker describes. The poem again is marked by an urgent, insistent rhythm.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-8:** "this isn't a Russian poem, this is not somewhere else but here, / our country moving closer to its own truth and dread, / its own ways of making people disappear."
- **Lines 9-11:** "I won't tell you where the place is, the dark mesh of the woods / meeting the unmarked strip of light— / ghost-ridden crossroads, leafmold paradise:"
- **Line 12:** "buy it, sell it, make it disappear."
- **Lines 14-15:** "Because you still listen, because in times like these / to have you listen at all"

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment helps to keep the poem's language sounding natural, and it also lends the poem momentum. For instance, in the first stanza, there are three enjambments in a row:

> [...] the grass grows uphill
> and the old revolutionary road breaks off into
> shadows
> near a meeting-house abandoned by the persecuted
> who disappeared [...]

These enjambments push the reader from one line to the next without pause (note that there are no pauses *within* lines either). The sentence sprawls down the page until it reaches the first end-stop in line 4, pulling the reader deeper and deeper into the "place" the speaker describes. Such a lengthy, twisty intro might evoke just how hidden this place is. It also makes the end-stop in line 4 land more forcefully: on the heels of so much sprawling enjambment, that period after "shadows" feels all the more final and severe. This, in turn, suggests that the "persecuted" from earlier in the stanza are gone for good.

There's another interesting enjambment across lines 9-10:

> I won't tell you where the place is, the dark mesh of
> the woods
> meeting the unmarked strip of light—

This enjambment mirrors the imagery at hand: the woods in line 9 jump across the line break to "meet" the light of line 10. The speaker is describing the way light filters through the thick web of the trees' branches, and enjambment appropriately "mesh[es]" these lines together.

In the last stanza, a string of enjambments again create speed and momentum leading up to the poem's conclusion:

> [...] so why do I tell you
> anything? Because you still listen, because in times
> like these
> to have you listen at all, it's necessary
> to talk [...]

Note that this stanza doesn't flow quite as freely as the first stanza because there are lots of pauses *within* lines. Still, the enjambments push the reader forward even as the poem urges the reader to pay close attention. The increased speed suggests urgency, that "times" like those that led to the abandonment of the meeting place early in the poem are once again upon the

speaker and reader both.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "uphill / and"
- **Lines 2-3:** "shadows / near"
- **Lines 3-4:** "persecuted / who"
- **Lines 5-6:** "fooled / this"
- **Lines 9-10:** "woods / meeting"
- **Lines 13-14:** "you / anything"
- **Lines 14-15:** "these / to"
- **Lines 15-16:** "necessary / to"

VOCABULARY

Revolutionary road (Line 2) - A road used during a revolution or uprising. It's possible Rich is, in part, referring to a road dating back to the American revolution, but the poem itself remains nonspecific.

The persecuted (Lines 3-4) - People who are oppressed for reasons that are political and/or because of their race, gender, religion, etc.

Mesh (Line 9) - A material made up of crisscrossed strands or threads. The speaker is using the term to evoke the image of the trees' overlapping branches.

Ghost-ridden (Line 11) - To be "ridden" with something is to be filled with something unpleasant. The speaker is saying that this "crossroads" in the woods is filled with ghosts (perhaps of those "persecuted" people who have since "disappeared").

Leafmold paradise (Line 11) - This means the ground is primarily made up of decaying leaves. The phrase is thus a kind of oxymoron: this is "paradise," or idyllic spot, for rotting leaves.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"What Kind of Times Are These" is a 16-line, free verse poem arranged into four quatrains (four-line stanzas). The use of free verse makes the poem feel more conversational and direct, even though the speaker is actually withholding specific information from the reader.

Notice, too, the *visual* impact of the poem on the page: each stanza (except the third) starts out with generally longer lines that get smaller as the stanza progresses. Overall, then, the right margin of the poem is gradually worn away, echoing the "disappear[ances]" of both "persecuted" groups of people as well as the "trees."

METER

Like most poems of its era, "What Kind of Times Are These" is written in free verse. This means that it doesn't follow a set meter. Instead, it uses the rhythms of ordinary speech to create something that sounds more true to life. Free verse helps the poem sound intimate, as though the speaker is talking directly to the reader. The lack of meter also makes the poem feel less measured and therefore more urgent, as if something real and serious is at stake (i.e., the future of the "country" the speaker is describing).

Rich's early poems were actually highly formal, but as she grew older and her work became more political, her verse became much looser and more experimental. This poem was written late in her career and reflects her disinterest in keeping with traditions of the past.

RHYME SCHEME

As a free verse poem, "What Kind of Times Are These" doesn't follow a rhyme scheme. That said, the poem does contain a few end rhymes. In the second stanza, for instance, "here" and "disappear" rhyme, highlighting the fact that the speaker is talking about violence in their *own* country rather than far away somewhere else. And in the fourth stanza, "these" and "trees" rhyme, making the poem's conclusion sound more emphatic and urgent.

SPEAKER

There is no real distance between the speaker of the poem and Adrienne Rich herself, whose poetry became increasingly political as she grew older. Regardless of whether one interprets the speaker as Rich, however, what's important is that the speaker is a citizen of the "country" in which the poem is set—the same country of the poem's intended audience.

The speaker makes clear that they are *not* an outside observer and neither is the poem's reader; both are living in a dangerous world that has "its own ways of making people disappear." As such, the speaker needs to choose their words carefully. The speaker also says that they've "walked there," by the old "meeting-house abandoned by the persecuted," which suggests that the speaker has some link to or at least familiarity with "the persecuted" and likely has been persecuted themselves. Taking the speaker as representing Rich herself enhances this reading: Rich was a Jewish lesbian who wrote fiercely about women's oppression.

SETTING

The poem takes place in "our country." The poem never specifics where, exactly, this country is, beyond saying that it's *not* Russia. This reference isn't randomly pulled from a hat: Rich wrote this poem in 1991, at the end of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. Presumably, then, that

"here" refers to Rich's home country and that of her primary audience: the U.S.

While Americans were all too eager to acknowledge the Soviet Union's corruption and violent oppression of its people, they were, in Rich's estimation, less willing to look at their *own* country's "truth and dread." Broadly, Rich is illustrating that the kind of oppressive, tyrannical power her American readers might link with far-off, less progressive regimes also crops up right at home.

Within this country, the speaker describes an eerie, deserted "place" that is more symbolic than literal: an area in between rows of trees where an "old revolutionary road breaks off into the shadows" and on which stands "a meeting-house abandoned by the persecuted." Readers can picture an old house tucked away in the woods where revolutionaries would once conspire, away from the eyes of those in power. The disappearing road and the abandoned house represent a revolution that has itself faded into darkness and/or been actively stamped out; no one is using that road or meeting in that house, and those who once did have "disappeared into those shadows."

The speaker says that they've gone foraging along the "edge" of this place, suggesting that the speaker is familiar with revolution and perhaps connected to "the persecuted." The image of someone picking mushrooms in the woods has a fairy-tale quality to it, but the speaker quickly dispels any quaintness from the reader's mind: this poem takes place in the real world, in a country that has "ways of making people disappear." In other words, this is no fairy tale forest; it's a dangerous place where those in power can silence those without it.

The speaker refuses to say explicitly where this place is—lest those in power "buy it, sell it, make it disappear." The speaker wants to protect this place, which once served as a home to revolution and perhaps can again. The image of a "dark mesh of woods" that eventually presses up against a "strip of light" might suggest that hope peaks through the darkness of this mysterious place. At the same time, calling it a "ghost-ridden crossroads" and a "leafmold paradise" suggest that it's a place marked by death and decay, haunted by those who the ruling class has already made "disappear."

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"What Kind of Times Are These" was published in Adrienne Rich's 1995 collection *Dark Fields of the Republic: Poems 1991-1995*. The opening section of the book is also titled "What Kind of Times Are These" and examines issues facing contemporary American society.

Early in her career, Rich often wrote using traditional poetic structures like meter and rhyme. With its intimate language and lack of a clear poetic form, "What Kind of Times Are These" reflects Rich's later adoption of free verse, which she found less "distancing" and restrictive than meter.

"What Kind of Times Are These" is also in direct conversation with German poet Berthold Brecht's 1939 poem, "To Those Who Follow in Our Wake." Written at the start of World War II, Brecht's poem questions the morality of writing about nature in times of intense violence and oppression. Brecht wrote,

> What times are these, in which
> A conversation about trees is almost a crime
> For in doing so we maintain our silence about so much wrongdoing!

Rich, by contrast, argues that writing about nature is essential if poets want to engage their readers. This ideology suffuses Rich's own poetry. Along with friends such as Audre Lorde and June Jordan, Rich helped lead a generation of female and LGBTQ poets whose work challenged patriarchal, racist, and homophobic power structures in America and beyond.

Rich's commitments to feminism and left-wing politics grew over the course of the 1960s, in parallel with the growing women's liberation movement and other social movements of the era. Her collections from the late '60s (including *Leaflets*) and early '70s (including *The Will to Change* and *Diving into the Wreck*) are considered landmarks of feminist and LGBTQ literature. Rich won the National Book Award for Poetry in 1974 for her collection *Diving into the Wreck*, whose title poem explores women's erasure from cultural narratives. Rich accepted the award alongside Audre Lorde and Alice Walker, on behalf of all women "whose voices have gone and still go unheard in a patriarchal world."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As both a writer and activist, Rich was a leading voice in what is now known as second-wave feminism (or "women's liberation," the term she preferred). After leaving an unhappy marriage and coming out as a lesbian, Rich also became a leader in the modern LGBTQ rights movement. Rich's life (1929 to 2012) spanned a period of significant social upheaval in the United States, and Rich frequently addressed topics such as racism, the Vietnam War, and homosexuality through her poetry and prose. A Jewish lesbian, she also had reason to identify with "the persecuted" mentioned in this poem.

"What Kind of Times Are These" was published in 1995, four years after the end of the period of political tension between the United States and the USSR known as the Cold War. The speaker's reference to Russia in the poem's second stanza is informed by this historical reality: the KGB, the Soviet Union's secret intelligence agency, was infamous for its brutal quashing of political dissent. Rich's speaker asserts that violent

oppression and censorship are not unique to Russia but also exist in the reader's home country (implied to be the U.S.).

Rich's poem might also be nodding to the modern reality of climate change, of which the 1990s public had become increasingly aware.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Read About Rich's Life and Career — A biography of the poet from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/adrienne-rich)
- "To Those Who Follow in our Wake" — Read Bertolt Brecht's 1939 poem, to which Rich's poem responds. (https://harpers.org/2008/01/brecht-to-those-who-follow-in-our-wake/)
- Listen to the Poem Out Loud — A recording of Rich reading "What Kind of Times Are These. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TRQapdNY-F4)
- An Overview of Rich's Legacy — An article about Rich's relationship to poetry and feminism as well her views on political poetry. (https://indypendent.org/2012/05/affirming-the-outsiders-eye-adrienne-richs-legacy/)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ADRIENNE RICH POEMS

- Amends
- Aunt Jennifer's Tigers
- Diving into the Wreck
- Living in Sin

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Mottram, Darla. "*What Kind of Times Are These.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 3 Oct 2022. Web. 1 Dec 2022.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Mottram, Darla. "*What Kind of Times Are These.*" LitCharts LLC, October 3, 2022. Retrieved December 1, 2022. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/adrienne-rich/what-kind-of-times-are-these.