Who in One Lifetime

SUMMARY

A person who, in the course of a single life, sees everything she stands for defeated; feels depressed and powerless; witnesses whole cities crumble; feels love turn into a kind of boring dread; watches grim but unstoppable armies march and planes fall from the sky—this person will feel a deep sickness of the soul. Inward-looking and somehow still intact, she learns how various kinds of insanity come to exist. She watches people from different walks of life fail to fight effectively together, their bodies too fragile, their eyes crying violently.

She discovers that all sides of the fight have given up in advance. Flawed pre-war pacts, and a recurring rashness, transform battlegrounds into unholy places (or sites where false idols are worshipped). She still believes in humanity, and she keeps her own life supported and concealed within her outward defeat. She persists while everything burns down around her, like a fertility goddess who ironically has no kids.

THEMES

WAR, TRAUMA, AND DESPAIR

"Who in One Lifetime" laments humanity's insatiable lust for war, describing how it makes society and individuals sick, unfulfilled, and hopeless. In the speaker's experience—apparently as a witness to the atrocities of the 20th century—war is an "Inexorable" catastrophe, to which humanity seemingly always "surrender[s]" in advance. Until humankind works to achieve peace, the poem suggests, it will remain trapped in a "ritual" cycle of destruction, and "Life" will consist of grim persistence in the face of continual loss.

The world is full of terrible suffering, and the poem describes a woman who has seen her share. This woman, in just one lifetime, has seen whole "cities [fall] down," "all causes" (hopes, dreams, and beliefs) collapse in defeat, and love turn to "monotonous fear." Her trauma—which is really humanity's trauma—makes her world nightmarish.

The poem directly links this suffering to war and violence. From the woman's perspective, all this death and destruction seems unnatural and monstrous. Bearing witness to constant war ("Inexorable armies") has infected her with "sickness, sickness," a kind of incurable pessimism and alienation. She has seen "several madnesses [...] born" through war, and she perceives that the "integrated never fight[] well," as their "flesh" is "too vulnerable." This might suggest that, even in crisis, diverse groups have trouble rallying together; it might also suggest that violence doesn't come naturally to most people. Fighting denies them their humanity, leaving their eyes "tear-torn." In short, nothing spreads trauma and sorrow better than war.

Despite the poem's understandable pessimism, the woman still wants to live in a world of love, wholeness, and growth. She remains somewhat strong—but whether humanity as a whole can ever match that strength remains doubtful. The woman maintains "belief in the world," despite all the experiences that suggest she shouldn't. But this belief and persistence can only go so far. The woman's strength is admirable, and she remains alive and "stand[ing]," yet she can't stop the greater forces of hatred and war. Instead, she's forced to uphold "Life" in the face of constant "sickness" and "defeat."

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

WOMANHOOD, GENDER, AND VIOLENCE

The speaker of "Who in One Lifetime" suggests that war and destruction thwart her maternal instincts, turning her into a "childless goddess of fertility." In other words, she's been stripped of her power to love and be loved, and to foster and nurture the next generation. In this way, the woman might represent women or humanity in general. The poem seems to argue that women/humanity can't fulfill their true potential as long as (mostly male) leaders and soldiers inflict terrible destruction on the world.

The poem's "she" is an anonymous figure, but one who represents a specifically female experience of mass violence. The "Who" initially seems to refer to anyone who has witnessed/suffered mass upheaval in their "Lifetime," but they're soon given the pronouns "she" and "her," gendering the poem's central figure as a woman. From there, the poem concentrates on the woman's experience of war and chaos, while noting the remarkable fact that she has somehow survived with her sense of self intact. The whole world seems to have "pre-surrender[ed]" to violence, failing to honor (or create) "Treat[ies]" and beliefs that would maintain peace. The woman witnesses sites of violence turning into "chambers of imagery," a biblical phrase meaning shrines for false idols. Perhaps, then, the world actually *worships* war and the destructive myths surrounding it. Yet the woman still "holds belief in the world" and holds herself together, remaining "Introspective and whole." Here, the poem seems to express a more general admiration for women—who, on some level, hold humanity together while so many of their male counterparts wreak havoc through war.

Yet this woman becomes a conflicted, contradictory figure: she

survives, but she's also denied the love she naturally wants to give and receive. War and destruction thwart her maternal instincts, turning her into a "childless goddess of fertility." In other words, they prevent her from creating and nurturing new life despite her great potential to do so. This woman has seen many terrible things during a single lifetime, but she's just one of many witnesses to slaughter and chaos throughout the modern era. In this way, she stands in for the suppression of *humanity's* maternal, nurturing side, forced into hiding by the horrors of war. The image of the woman "hid[ing] / Life in her own defeat" might be read as a macabre twist on pregnancy: rather than a child, she carries in herself only the thwarted *desire* to create life. While the "whole world burn[s]," then, this woman can't become what she instinctively wants to be, nor can womankind. By extension, all of humanity holds itself back from its full potential, choosing destruction over creation and death over life.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

Who in one ...
... Has sickness, sickness.

"Who in One Lifetime" opens with a long, complex, four-and-a-half-line sentence. At first, this sentence might look like a question, since it starts with "Who." But it's a declarative statement; in this context, "Who" means "Anyone who."

The speaker argues that anyone who lives through terrible events, such as the wars and upheaval of the early 20th century, can't help but feel a deep "sickness." Rukeyser wrote this poem in 1941, not long after World War I and in the middle of World War II. (Years later, she recalled in another poem: "I lived in the first century of world wars. / Most mornings I would be more or less insane.") Though "Who in One Lifetime" doesn't demand an autobiographical reading, it can be interpreted as Rukeyser's personal reaction to the tragic historical events she lived through.

The "she" in this poem has seen "all causes lost" in her "lifetime." That is, in her experience, crusades for justice inevitably fail. This pattern leaves her feeling powerless and discouraged: "dismayed and helpless." She has seen whole "cities [go] down"—destroyed by war, perhaps, or economic collapse. (Rukeyser might be alluding here to the scale of destruction during the two world wars, but she might also be thinking of the Great Depression: the worldwide economic slump that plunged millions into poverty during the 1930s.)

Witnessing all this suffering has worn away at the woman's humanity. For her, "Love" has turned into "monotonous fear": it simply can't thrive in a violent world. Trauma has "[re]made" it into a persistent anxiety, on behalf of herself and/or her loved ones.

The woman has also witnessed "sad-faced / Inexorable armies and the falling plane." She's seen troops advancing in grim, seemingly unstoppable fashion, and aircraft bombed out of the sky—or, perhaps, swooping to drop their own bombs. The troops presumably look "sad-faced" out of fear and desire to be elsewhere. Violence prevents their humanity from fulfilling its potential. Notice how the enjambment here divides "sad-faced" from "inexorable," as if underscoring how war makes soldiers *individually* vulnerable and frightened, yet *collectively* powerful and frightening.

The poem's long opening sentence withholds its main verb until line 5. So far, the pile-up of clauses has built suspense, or perhaps conveyed weariness (as if the poem is trudging toward a distant goal). Finally, line 5 delivers: whoever witnesses such terrible events, according to the speaker, "Has sickness, sickness." This immediate repetition (known as epizeuxis) makes the "sickness" seem profound and overwhelming. The full-stop caesura that follows forces readers to linger painfully on the repeated word. War and disaster, the speaker implies, make people in general—and this woman in particular—physically and psychologically ill.

These opening lines establish the poem's iambic pentameter (its da-DUM, da-DUM rhythm and pattern of five beats per line). The poem's first rhymes—"lost"/"sad-faced," "down"/"plane"—are off-rhymes, which give the language an unsettled, unpredictable, "off" quality. Both iambic pentameter and rhyme are typical of the sonnet form, which the poem follows in *mostly* traditional fashion (see Form section for more).

LINES 5-8

Introspective and whole, ...
... the eyes tear-torn.

Lines 5-8 close out the *octave* (eight-line opening stanza) of the sonnet. They describe what war and trauma have done to the poem's central figure. This woman, though perhaps based on Rukeyser herself, also works as an archetype or symbol of all womankind. She represents the exasperation and exhaustion of women living in a world of male violence.

Despite all the terrible things the woman has seen, she remains "Introspective and whole." Somehow, she's still capable of examining her own character and maintaining a sense of unity and purpose—even if her hopes and dreams are different than they would be in a happier world.

Her experiences also grant her insight: "She knows how several madnesses are born" (line 6). In other words, she's observed how war and suffering can drive individuals and society into

various kinds of insanity. As with the "sickness" of line 5, the poem implies that this isn't the way things have to be, and that this isn't humanity's natural state. The word "born" is important here, too: this subtle metaphor implies that humankind both *creates* and *reproduces* the madness of war. Though it's a birth of some kind, it leaves no room for maternal love or tenderness (an idea the poem returns to in the last line).

The woman also witnesses the "integrated never fighting well" (line 7). This line is a little ambiguous, but it probably alludes to the way both world wars required civilians to sign up for battle in almost unfathomable numbers. The "integrated"—those who were members of diverse societies, and are now "integrated" into the machinery of war—don't fight well together. They weren't *meant* to join forces and kill others, just as the woman never asked to witness all this terror.

The next line develops this sense of human fragility, describing the "flesh" of "the integrated" as "too vulnerable" and their eyes as "tear-torn." Notice the violence of this last image and the harshness of its double /t/ sound (which alliterates with "too" earlier in the line). These people—participants in or witnesses of war—have been crying so violently, it's as though their eyes are ripped apart by what they've seen. Clearly, they'll never be the same.

Lines 7-8 also use parallelism and anaphora:

> Seeing the integrated never fighting well,
> The flesh too vulnerable, the eyes tear-torn.

The repeated "the" gives these lines a list-like structure. The omission of "and" between the last two phrases (a device known as asyndeton) makes the list look potentially indefinite, as if these are just three of the many terrible things the woman has witnessed.

LINES 9-11

> *She finds a ...*
> *... chambers of imagery.*

Line 9 traditionally marks a sonnet's *volta*, or change of direction. Here, however, there isn't much of a shift in subject or tone. It's as though the "monoton[y]" of war prevents things from taking a more positive turn. The sestet (last six lines of the sonnet) continues to describe violence and social upheaval—but it also shows the woman's admirable strength and will to survive.

Lines 9-11 are somewhat ambiguous and open to interpretation. According to the speaker, the woman (whose "lifetime" the poem discusses) "finds a pre-surrender on all sides." In other words, different warring parties have already surrendered before they even start fighting. Think of it this way: humanity is torn between its better nature and its lust for violence, yet it keeps giving into violence. In this sense, each "side[]" of a war has already lost by engaging in war at all.

The poem explains further (though still in ambiguous, abstract language). Part of the "pre-surrender" involves a "Treaty" signed "before the war" (line 10). Perhaps this is a kind of pact to *remain* violent: a treaty of military alliance, for example. The phrase could also allude to the Treaty of Versailles, the post-WWI agreement that punished the defeated German government for its aggression. Some analysts claim the treaty's devastation of the German economy helped enable Hitler's rise. The "ritual impatience" could be Germany's, then, or it could be humanity's repeated failure to learn the lessons of war. (Remember, this poem was written early in the *Second* World War.) Similarly, "ritual impatience" could refer to an instinctive, cyclical human frenzy for blood and death.

The "Treaty" and "ritual impatience" work in tandem to "turn / The camps of ambush to chambers of imagery." "Camps of ambush" probably refers to battlefields, while "chambers of imagery" alludes to the biblical Book of Ezekiel. These "chambers" were rooms in a temple where people could worship false idols (gods that weren't the true God). Here, the phrase seems to accuse humanity of losing its way, morally and spiritually. Rather than loving each other, nurturing the young, and embracing creativity, humanity worships at the altar of hate, greed, and destruction. The parallelism of "camps of ambush" and "chambers of imagery" underscores the close link between violence and twisted values.

Though these lines describe a tragic situation, they also imply that the woman (who may symbolize all womankind, or everyone who fights for just "causes") has risen above it to a position of knowledge. She "finds" out the true nature of the spiritual catastrophe, sees it for what it is. In this insight lies a kind of power—even if it's no match for the forces of war.

LINES 12-14

> *She holds belief ...*
> *... goddess of fertility.*

In line 12, the speaker declares that the woman still "holds belief in the world." Somehow, despite everything she's seen—warfare, poverty, etc.—she remains as positive as she can be. In this way, she might symbolize humanity's indomitable will to survive. Or she might represent the collective power of womankind. The verb "holds," in this context, hints at a maternal instinct; it's as though she cradles her belief like a vulnerable infant.

The parallelism and anaphora in line 12 echo earlier phrases in lines 6 and 9:

> She knows [...]
> She finds [...]
> She holds belief in the world, she stays and hides [...]

"Knows," "finds," "holds," and "stays" are all active, present-

tense verbs. They suggest that the woman's survival requires continuous strength and determination, a kind of daily labor just to stay sane. The repetition of "She" subtly highlights the difficulty of this labor for women in particular.

Surrounded by chaotic violence, the woman "stays and hides / Life in her own defeat" (lines 12-13). Here, "stays" primarily means "endures, sticks around," but it could also be a transitive verb with the object "Life"—that is, it might mean that she *secures* or *supports* life. The enjambment between these two lines is stark, dividing verb from object ("stays and hides / Life"). But it also mirrors the way the woman keeps life hidden, or protected: as if by magic, the word "Life" disappears from the end of line 12 and reappears on the other side of the stanza. Even in "defeat"—and defeat, it seems, is inevitable—the woman finds a way to sustain herself and carry on.

The poem's final image is bleak, powerful, and paradoxical:

> She [...] stands, though her whole world burn,
> A childless goddess of fertility.

She is both a vision of victory and defeat: standing like a victor, but unable to fulfill one aspect of her potential. Meanwhile, the "whole world burn[s]" through its obsession with violence and war, which diminishes humankind and prevents it, too, from fulfilling its collective potential.

The metaphor in the last line is almost an oxymoron, since fertility goddesses symbolize the creation of new life (i.e., children). Many cultures have had such goddesses, so this is a generic rather than a specific allusion. Here, the woman being compared to a fertility goddess seems ironically cut off from her powers. Warfare and trauma have left her unwilling or unable to bear children. Though she survives, she can't flourish—can't bring forth a new generation or use her nurturing, maternal instincts. Rukeyser's final message is clear: humanity's lust for warfare is destroying its future, as though turning a fruitful species into a barren one.

SYMBOLS

THE WOMAN

The "One Lifetime" mentioned in the title belongs to a female character, whom the speaker describes in the third person. The entire poem reflects her perspective. While she could be an actual woman (e.g., a version of the poet herself), she also functions as an archetype or symbol. She stands for anyone who's lived through turbulent times—perhaps even for universal human experience in the 20th century (and beyond).

But her gender, along with the overtones of the ending, also makes her a symbol specifically of *woman*kind. Wars are started and fought overwhelmingly by men, but they often inflict terrible violence on women. More broadly, the trauma of war interferes with women's ability to love, nurture, remain physically healthy, and lead emotionally fulfilling lives. Life, in all its wonder and glory, can't flourish unless women can.

The poem sums up this idea in its final line, which describes the woman as "A childless goddess of fertility." The word "goddess" signals that this woman stands for more than one individual, since deities are symbolic characters that represent particular ideas and attributes. But war denies her the very power that's supposed to be her domain: fertility and the creation of life. She's like the sea-god Poseidon if all the seas dried up! The thwarting of her purpose suggests that humanity in general has gone astray; war has had an unnatural, blighting effect on the species as a whole.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 12-14:** "She holds belief in the world, she stays and hides / Life in her own defeat, stands, though her whole world burn, / A childless goddess of fertility."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

"Who in One Lifetime" uses alliteration at several key moments. Sometimes it helps draw a connection between words; sometimes it makes the poem's descriptions more vivid. The first effect occurs in lines 1-2, for example:

> Who in one lifetime sees all causes lost,
> Herself dismayed and helpless, cities down,

Notice how /l/ sounds connect the words "lifetime" and "lost," as if suggesting that, in the poet's era, *loss* is inseparable from *life*. The /h/ consonants in "Herself" and "helpless" closely link the poem's subject—a woman who may be a version of Rukeyser, as well as a symbol of womanhood or humanity in general—with feelings of vulnerability and despair. The /h/ consonants also sound breathy and weary, perhaps hinting at the woman's exhaustion.

Line 3 reports that the woman has seen "Love made monotonous fear." Those subdued, repetitive /m/ sounds (combined with /n/ consonance: "monotonous") echo the description of what has happened to love. The woman also witnesses "the integrated never fighting well, / the flesh too vulnerable, the eyes tear-torn" (lines 7-8). The fricative /f/s and plosive /t/s in these lines have a harsh, spiky quality that helps evoke the violence of warfare. (Similarly, harsh /f/ sounds link the ominous words "fear," "sad-faced," and "falling" in lines 3-4.)

Despite all the suffering she's seen, the woman "holds belief in

the world, she stays and hides / Life in her own defeat, stands, though her whole world burn" (lines 12-13). That is, she somehow maintains her sanity and protects her own "Life," or life more generally. The combination of breathy /h/ sounds and solid /st/ sounds—which, in English, often appear in words related to endurance (*strong*, *sturdy*, *steady*, *stable*, etc.)—subtly reflects her mix of weariness and perseverance.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "lifetime," "lost"
- **Line 2:** "Herself," "helpless"
- **Line 3:** "made monotonous," "fear," "faced"
- **Line 4:** "falling"
- **Line 7:** "fighting"
- **Line 8:** "flesh," "too," "tear-torn"
- **Line 12:** "holds," "stays," "hides"
- **Line 13:** "her," "stands," "her whole"

ALLUSION

"Who in One Lifetime" keeps the reader at arm's length. Rather than naming the person ("Who") and historical events it's describing, it uses cryptic, generalized language. Because the poem dates to 1941, however, it seems related to the mass violence and upheaval of the early 20th century.

In particular, the poem probably alludes to the two world wars. Both were so devastating that it's easy to see why someone witnessing them might consider "all causes lost" (line 1). "Cities down" (line 2) might evoke the vast destruction caused by artillery and bombing. The phrase "sad-faced / Inexorable armies" (line 4) hints at war's traumatic impact on those forced to fight. The same goes for the "several madnesses" in line 6 and the "tear-torn" eyes in line 8. The woman in the poem observes the "integrated never fighting well": a reference to conflicts among the soldiers that armies conscript from various walks of life. (It's possible, though not certain, that this line alludes specifically to the racial integration of the U.S. military, which accelerated during WWI and WWII.)

Historical allusions continue in the second stanza. "Treaty before the war" (line 10) might refer to the Treaty of Versailles, a post-WWI document that forced the defeated German government to pay war reparations. It caused economic hardship and, some historians claim, contributed to Hitler's rise. Hitler himself also broke multiple treaties and agreements in the pre-war years.

Line 11 laments how "camps of ambush [turn] to chambers of imagery." This phrase alludes to the Bible, specifically Ezekiel 8:12. The "chambers of [...] imagery" were rooms in a temple where people worshipped false idols:

> Then said he unto me, Son of man, hast thou seen what the ancients of the house of Israel do in the dark, every man in the chambers of his imagery? for they say, the Lord seeth us not; the Lord hath forsaken the earth.

This allusion might suggest that today's "earth" is God-"forsaken" as well. It implies, too, that battle-sites—"camps of ambush"—have become macabre holy sites for a civilization obsessed with violence and death.

Finally, the last line describes the defeated woman as "A childless goddess of fertility." This is an oxymoron: a goddess of fertility should have *many* children; she's an avatar of life and creation. Her childlessness is as absurd and unnatural as Poseidon, the ancient Greek sea-god, living on dry land. This generic mythological allusion helps raise the woman to symbolic status: she's not just an ordinary individual but a stand-in for all womankind (or humankind). She illustrates the idea that modern war endangers humanity's whole future.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "all causes lost"
- **Line 2:** "cities down"
- **Lines 3-4:** "Love made monotonous fear and the sad-faced / Inexorable armies and the falling plane"
- **Line 6:** "several madnesses"
- **Lines 7-8:** "the integrated never fighting well, / The flesh too vulnerable, the eyes tear-torn."
- **Lines 10-11:** "Treaty before the war, ritual impatience turn / The camps of ambush to chambers of imagery."
- **Line 14:** "A childless goddess of fertility."

ENJAMBMENT

The poem's enjambments subtly contribute to its violent atmosphere: abrupt line breaks in the middle of phrases seem to mirror the way war tears people and countries apart. Take the enjambment in lines 3-4, for example:

> Love made monotonous fear and the sad-faced
> Inexorable armies and the falling plane,

This sudden break separates two adjectives that don't intuitively belong together. To be "Inexorable" is to be unstoppable; to be "sad-faced" suggests vulnerability and weakness. Breaking the line between these two separates the emotional side of war from its remorseless logic, which sends human beings hurtling forward into terrible danger.

The enjambment after "turn" in line 10 highlights the transformative nature of war, which can perversely "turn" sites of violence into sites of worship. The final enjambment, between lines 12 and 13, seems to mirror the action the speaker is describing:

She holds belief in the world, she stays and hides
Life in her own defeat, stands, though her whole
world burn,

In other words, it effectively *hides* away "Life" on a separate line from "hides," dividing verb from object and placing them on opposite sides of the stanza. The line break also adds emphasis to "hides," stressing that a degree of stealth and secrecy is important to this woman's survival.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "sad-faced / Inexorable"
- **Lines 10-11:** "turn / The"
- **Lines 12-13:** "hides / Life"

REPETITION

"Who in One Lifetime" uses various kinds of repetition for emphasis and dramatic effect. In line 5, for example, the speaker immediately repeats a single word:

Who in one lifetime sees all causes lost,
Herself dismayed and helpless, cities down,
Love made monotonous fear and the sad-faced
Inexorable armies and the falling plane,
Has sickness, sickness.

This type of repetition, called epizeuxis, is particularly emphatic. "Sickness" sounds bad enough; repeated, it sounds awful. The implication is that the woman's suffering is profound and relentless (perhaps more psychological than physical).

The poem also makes use of parallelism and anaphora, as in lines 7-8:

Seeing the integrated never fighting well,
The flesh too vulnerable, the eyes tear-torn.

The similar grammatical construction of these phrases makes this passage sound like a list—as though these are *just three* of the many terrible things the woman has "See[n]." The omission of "and" after "vulnerable" (an example of asyndeton) makes the list seem potentially endless.

Parallelism and anaphora also help convey the nature of the woman's struggle. Look at the parallel construction of the "She" phrases in lines 6, 9, and 12:

She knows how several madnesses are born,
[...]
She finds a pre-surrender on all sides:
[...]
She holds belief in the world, she stays and hides [...]

Each verb appears in its simple present-tense form, suggesting that the woman's survival is an ongoing effort, a work in progress. At the same time, this phrasing—*she does this, she does that*—places her in the role of active protagonist rather than passive victim of the world's brutality.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "sickness, sickness"
- **Line 6:** "She"
- **Line 7:** "the"
- **Line 8:** "The," "the"
- **Line 9:** "She"
- **Line 11:** "of," "of"
- **Line 12:** "She," "she"

VOCABULARY

Dismayed (Line 2) - Concerned and upset by something that wasn't expected.

Monotonous (Line 3) - Dull, boring, lacking in variation.

Inexorable (Lines 3-4) - Unstoppable; undefeatable.

Introspective (Lines 5-6) - Inward-looking; contemplative.

Integrated (Line 7) - Part of a larger whole (e.g., a society or army).

Pre-surrender (Line 9) - An admission of defeat (or some other concession) made in advance.

Camps of ambush (Lines 10-11) - An ambiguous phrase perhaps referring to battle sites (specifically, sites where one military "camp[]" was "ambushed" or unexpectedly attacked by another).

Chambers of imagery (Lines 10-11) - A biblical allusion to Ezekiel 8:12:

Then said he unto me, Son of man, hast thou seen what the ancients of the house of Israel do in the dark, every man in the chambers of his imagery?

These chambers were rooms in a temple where people worshipped false idols (i.e., deities other than the one true God). The implication, perhaps, is that sites of battle have become venues for the worship of war.

Treaty (Line 10) - An official agreement between two or more states.

Fertility (Line 14) - The ability to conceive offspring; can also relate to agriculture (as in fertile soil).

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Who in One Lifetime" is a fairly traditional sonnet: it contains 14 lines of rhymed iambic pentameter (see Meter and Rhyme Scheme sections for details). It's closer to the Italian sonnet form than the English, since it's divided into an octave (eight-line stanza) and a sestet (six-line stanza). But it's really a mix of the two forms, because, like the English sonnet, its first eight lines rhyme ABABCDCD. This clash of traditions might subtly reflect the upheaval and dislocation of the era Rukeyser is describing. (It's worth noting that she wrote the poem during World War II, when England and Italy were fighting on opposite sides.)

Sonnets are traditionally associated with love, including romantic conflict. Here, Rukeyser both plays within and subverts that tradition. Her sonnet is about the *death* of love—"Love made monotonous fear"—in a violent world. At the same time, its heroine retains "belief in the world," almost like a lover remaining faithful to someone who doesn't love them back (a classic sonnet scenario).

METER

"Who in One Lifetime" uses iambic pentameter, though the meter is fairly loose at times. A line of iambic pentameter has five feet, each of which follows an unstressed-stressed syllabic pattern (da-DUM). Here's how this pattern sounds in line 2, for example:

> Herself | dismayed | and help- | less, cit- | ies down [...]

In this poem, iambic pentameter might evoke the "Inexorable" trudge of an army's footsteps; its steady forward momentum might also convey the woman's determination to survive.

Several lines vary the pattern. For example, the next-to-last line (line 13) might be scanned as follows:

> Life in | her own | defeat, | stands, though | her whole | world burn,

However one scans it, the line has at least one extra stress. The longer line, with its two caesuras, builds both metrical and grammatical tension—which the final line releases, sounding a bit like a weary exhalation in the process.

RHYME SCHEME

Like many sonnets, "Who in One Lifetime" has a rhyme scheme that divides into an octave (eight-line unit) and a sestet (six-line unit). The octave can be further divided into two quatrains, creating a pattern that runs ABAB / CDCD / EFGEFG.

Some of the rhymes in the poem are exact, like "born"/"torn" and "turn"/"burn." But many are slant rhymes, such as "lost"/"faced" and "down"/"plane." These rhymes share only a consonant sound; their vowels don't match. Like the wobbly meter, the slightly off-kilter, unpredictable rhyming reflects the upheaval the poem describes.

SPEAKER

The speaker in "Who in One Lifetime" maintains a degree of detachment, acting as a kind of third-person narrator. The poem focuses on a female figure—the one whose "lifetime" this poem is about—and describes a world of suffering and madness.

Muriel Rukeyser was born in the early 20th century, and her life overlapped with some of humanity's worst catastrophes, including the two World Wars and the Great Depression. This poem, which dates to 1941, probably draws on her own life. In fact, its central female figure might, at least in part, be Rukeyser herself. At the same time, this figure seems to be a symbol for womankind, or for humanity's peaceful and loving side.

Perhaps, then, the speaker is narrating the poet's own experience as if it belonged to a separate, archetypal, "goddess"-like character. This might be the poet's way of gaining a larger, impersonal perspective on the "sickness" she feels.

SETTING

"Who in One Lifetime" captures the chaotic, violent atmosphere of the period spanning the two world wars (1914-1945). Cities in ruins, depressed armies, planes falling from the sky: all of these images were characteristic of the era. The mention of a "Treaty" (line 10) might allude to the controversial post-WWI Treaty of Versailles or to the treaties the Nazis broke in the run-up to WWII. Rukeyser wrote the poem in 1941, the year the U.S. entered WWII, and its tone reflects the depression, frustration, and fear millions of people felt at the time.

However, there's also an element of vagueness to the setting: the speaker never grounds the poem in a particular country or year. In fact, the "falling plane" (line 4) is the only detail that definitively narrows down the historical period (the first successful airplane flight took place in 1903). In this way, the poem might be a more general comment on humanity's lust for violence—which neither begins nor ends with the 20th century.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Muriel Rukeyser (1913-1980) was an American writer who

worked in various genres, including poetry, theater, biography, and children's literature. She was born just before World War I and wrote "Who in One Lifetime" in 1941, during the early phase of World War II. Her references to "Inexorable armies," "falling plane[s]," and "vulnerable" flesh evoke the terrible realities of modern warfare.

Rukeyser's poetry often takes human suffering as its central theme. She developed a type of documentary poetics, using verse both to examine and honor specific historical events. Her poem "The Book of the Dead," for example, focuses on the Hawk's Nest Tunnel disaster, an industrial accident that exposed workers to deadly silica dust. Toward the end of her life, she wrote a poem about the death sentence of Korean poet Kim Chi-Ha. "Who in One Lifetime" takes a more general approach, evoking an overall atmosphere of WWII-era pessimism and trauma while leaving specifics to the reader's imagination.

Critics now consider Rukeyser one of the leading feminist poets of her generation. Her work is often unsparingly political, yet it manages to find optimism even in stark situations. One of her more famous poems, an untitled piece from 1968, reads like a post-WWII update on "Who in One Lifetime" and still feels chillingly relevant in the 21st century:

> I lived in the first century of world wars.
> Most mornings I would be more or less insane,
> The newspapers would arrive with their careless stories,
> The news would pour out of various devices
> Interrupted by attempts to sell products to the unseen.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Who in One Lifetime" doesn't specify its historical setting. But its composition date (early 1940s), combined with the harrowing world it depicts, calls to mind the horrors of the early- to mid-20th century.

World War II began in 1939, when Britain and France declared war on Germany following Hitler's invasion of Poland. By the time the war ended in 1945, 40 to 60 million people had died. This was, of course, the *second* catastrophic global conflict of the 20th century, following World War I (1914-1918). Though humankind made major technological advancements during this period, for many, the carnage of these wars undermined any sense of genuine human progress. Observers like Rukeyser felt that technology had merely made humankind more efficient and creative in its own self-destruction, ushering in a new era of "several madnesses." Indeed, the reference to "cities down" might refer to the bombings of various cities across several conflicts, from Guernica in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) to Shanghai in the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) to London during the Blitz in WWII.

Line 10 of Rukeyser's poem mentions a "Treaty before the war," a possible reference to the Treaty of Versailles. This was the post-WWI agreement that dictated Germany's punishment for its role in that conflict. Some historians argue that the treaty was too harsh, and thereby created the conditions under which a dangerous leader like Hitler could rise. Alternatively, the "Treaty" could refer to the Munich Agreement of 1938, effectively a false promise on Hitler's part not to promote further armed conflict. Regardless, the phrase "pre-surrender on all sides" seems to capture the poet's pre-war sense that further disaster was inevitable: that humanity would once again"surrender" to its worst impulses.

Rukeyser was an uncompromising anti-war and social justice activist. She was also a Jewish woman whose work reflected (as one of her poems put it) on what it meant "To be a Jew in the Twentieth Century." In "Who in One Lifetime," her sense of "sickness" and "dismay[]" at "causes lost" may respond partly to the collapse of democracy and persecution of Jewish people in Hitler's Europe.

Also lurking in the background of the poem, perhaps, is the Great Depression. This was a global economic slump that lasted from 1929 to 1939 and caused widespread suffering. Following the stock market crash of 1929, unemployment escalated to 25 percent of the U.S. population. Americans experienced unprecedented levels of poverty and economic instability well into the 1930s. In general, the years Rukeyser had seen by the time she wrote this poem—1913 through 1941—were bloody and turbulent, offering ample cause to reflect on human vulnerability, tragedy, and "tear[s]."

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- More About the Poet — More information about and resources related to Rukeyser's career. (https://poets.org/poet/muriel-rukeyser)
- Rukeyser's Biography — Read more about the poet's life over at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/muriel-rukeyser)
- Rukeyser's Legacy — An informative Paris Review article that examines the poet's place in contemporary poetry. (https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/05/30/muriel-rukeyser-mother-of-everyone/)
- More on the 1930s and 1940s — Read about the turbulent historical events leading up to 1941 (the year "Who in One Lifetime" was published). (https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/united-states-history-primary-source-timeline/great-depression-and-world-war-ii-1929-1945/overview/)

- An Interview with Rukeyser — Read a short feature on the poet from Vassar College in New York, which Rukeyser attended. (https://newspaperarchives.vassar.edu/?a=d&d=miscellany19491116-01.2.11&e=-------en-20--1--txt-txIN--------)

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Howard, James. "*Who in One Lifetime.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 23 Mar 2023. Web. 4 Apr 2023.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Howard, James. "*Who in One Lifetime.*" LitCharts LLC, March 23, 2023. Retrieved April 4, 2023. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/muriel-rukeyser/who-in-one-lifetime.