

Elegy For My Father's Father



SUMMARY

He realized just before he died that he'd never spoken openly or intimately to anyone throughout all eighty years of his life. Oh, he was like a tall, strong tower that then broke, leaving no memorial behind. To mark his graveside a stack of stones was built; bagpipes played during his funeral, and arronsrod flowered around the stones. His family stood around his grave during the ceremony with a sense of bitterness running through all of them, though they mourned him as is proper. When he was younger he was able to slice and stack turf to head-height in a single day, and often carried a blooming cherry tree on his shoulder even during the heat of the day. When he was old and losing his sight, he used to sit in a curved chair all day, ruminating by the kitchen fire. He would think about the many times he had seen the stars moving like drunk people dancing through his mind, which was like a convex lens concentrating the sun's rays. Without laughing, he would think about the trees enfolding the winter landscape in their branches. His pride prevented him from speaking openly. He realized this just before he died, that he'd never spoken openly or intimately to anyone, not when singing or even in his marriage bed. He thought, without any illusions, about a waterside house from long ago, where he could hear wind shaking the leaves as if they were performing for the child he was then. He remembered the waves that lapped all night, as if they were awake, and which sounded like the dark speech of the dead. The waves spoke to him, and he did not feel afraid.

It's thus not surprising then that, even though his family members are present at the grandfather's graveside, they don't seem all that heartbroken by his death. In fact, they're described as being "from his bitter veins born." This bitterness works both ways: it could be the cold grandfather's attitude towards his descendants, or the descendants' towards their cold grandfather. In either case, this bitterness prevents the usual outpouring of emotion. Instead, the family members just "mourned him in their fashion"—in other words quietly, formally. The use of such a straightforward, matter-of-fact phrase implies that the grandfather's death is no great tragedy for his family.

What's more, the poem implies that whatever legacy the grandfather leaves behind will soon be forgotten. The graveside is marked with an "unchanging cairn" (a cairn is a pile of stones traditionally used to commemorate the dead), whose constancy is juxtaposed with its uncertain status as a "Memorial. Whereas memorials usually commemorate the past for future generations, here this ability is "denied." In other words, the unmoving pile of rocks only highlights the fact that the grandfather *won't* be properly remembered.

This may well be the result of the cool relations between the grandfather and his family. His family members never really *knew* him, and as such *can't* memorialize who he really was—and perhaps they simply don't *want* to remember the cold, distant person he *seemed* to be.

And yet, for the speaker at least, the fact remains that this man is still family. The speaker clearly has some complicated feelings about the way the grandfather lived his life, but nevertheless seems to respect the man and mourn his death—something that becomes clear towards the end of the poem.

Given such a degree of isolation, the final memory of the grandfather as a child listening to the night-time waves is likely the speaker's own invention, a way for a grandchild to comfort themselves by imagining their grandparent as "unafraid." This loving act of imagination shows that, despite his isolation from the rest of his family, the grandfather is still loved, by his grandchild at least.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-6
- Lines 9-11
- Lines 18-20
- Lines 27-30
- Lines 31-38



THEMES



FAMILY, DEATH, AND LEGACY

The poem is told from the perspective of someone imagining their grandfather's final thoughts before death. This grandfather was emotionally distant from his family throughout his "eighty years of days," which leads the speaker to imagine the grandfather's realization that, upon his death, his experiences will die with him; his legacy will not be carried forward for future generations. The poem thus explores the consequences of emotional distance during life, which it implies isolates people from their families and complicates feelings of grief upon their deaths.

The poem begins with the speaker envisioning the grandfather "in the hour he died," acknowledging how closed off he has been throughout his entire life. Never has the grandfather expressed what is in his heart—his innermost thoughts and feelings—and, as such, all that will die with him.



MASCULINITY AND PRIDE

The speaker's grandfather is depicted as having been a hardy outdoorsman in his younger years, someone who embodied many traditional masculine values related to physical strength and emotional stoicism. The poem also implies, however, that such traits are in fact what led to his family's seeming detachment upon his death. The poem thus implies the painful shortcomings of traditional masculinity, which it suggests distances people not only from their families, but also from themselves.

The speaker repeatedly emphasizes the grandfather's strength and imposing figure. In life, he was a "tall tower," an adept gardener who could even carry a "cherry tree" on his shoulder "under a lion sun." Here even the natural world itself seems to echo the grandfather's prowess; the "lion" is the king of the jungle. All in all, it's clear that the grandfather embodied many of the masculine values of his time.

The speaker also, of course, repeatedly emphasizes the fact that the grandfather remained emotionally cut off from his family through his entire life. The grandfather's "heart had never spoken," meaning he had never revealed his deepest feelings to those around him. But it's unclear whether the speaker believes the grandfather to have actually *had* a rich emotional inner life in the first place, or to have been so emotionally stunted that his heart never even spoke to *himself*—that is, that even he was closed off from the longings of his own "heart."

This second possibility becomes more likely towards the end of the poem, as the speaker imagines the grandfather's final thoughts as an old man, sitting "All day by the kitchen fire." The poem's opening two lines are repeated, yet they're now sandwiched between lines that help contextualize the grandfather's reticence. The speaker suggests that the *reason* the grandfather never spoke intimately with his family was due to his "pride," which made him "dumb" (with "dumb" here being used in the sense of "unable to speak"). The grandfather embodied traditional masculine values when he was younger, and talking too openly about private emotions would not have been considered noble.

The consequences, in turn, were severe. The grandfather's stoicism extended not just to public occasions—such as singing—but even into the "bridal bed" (that is, into private moments alone with his wife). Even in this most intimate and trusting of places, "his heart had never spoken." The poem thus suggests that adhering to the tenets of traditional masculinity has denied the grandfather the ability to form genuine emotional connection with other people, and perhaps even to fully understand himself.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 12-17
- Lines 18-20
- Lines 27-30



THE COMFORT OF MEMORY

Although the grandfather is a deeply private character, the poem shares a few memories about his life. The poem suggests that such memories can serve as a comfort in the face of aging and death—for both the dying and those they leave behind.

As a young man the grandfather was physically active and strong. He seemed to have felt a connection with nature that he lacked with his family. The memories of this strength, of a man able to "slice and build [sods] / High as the head of a man," are a joyful celebration of physical activity that cuts through the sadness of the poem. It's unclear if these memories are being recovered by the grandfather himself or simply being imagined by his grandchild, but in either case they stand in contrast to the melancholy tone of the funeral.

However, again, this joy is notably confined to memory. The speaker juxtaposes these thoughts of the grandfather's youthful vigor with images of his final years, when he was "old and blind," no longer able to experience nor even see the natural world that once filled him with joy and satisfaction. The only recompense for such physical diminishment, the speaker argues, were the memories filtered through the "burning-glass of his mind."

And at the poem's end the speaker—his grandchild—seeks to imagine for the grandfather a vivid childhood scene, one that soothes the potential fear of death. As the speaker pictures it, the grandfather, sitting by the fire where he feels "sober"—that is, lacking any illusions about the bleakness of oncoming death—is suddenly struck by the "naked thought" of a "house by the waterside."

For the first time the reader gets a vision of a private, rather than shared, memory. This is a memory of the grandfather's childhood, in which he listens at night to the wind rustling leaves and waves lapping the shore. Such sounds are typical of ghost stories, whose scary atmosphere is evoked by the personification of the waves as sounding like "dark mouths of the dead."

However, rather than causing terror, these sounds comfort: "The tongues of water spoke" replaces the security of intimate conversation, which he failed to have with his family. His imminent death, because it reminds him of the deathly darkness of water in his memory, is not a threat but a reassurance. In the speaker's imagination, the grandfather finds peace in such memories irrespective of whether they will be passed on to future generations. Such memories, the poem

implies, help balance the grandfather's regret over his own isolation in his final moments.

Although this final image may well be the speaker's fantasy, it gives the poem a stoic rather than despairing tone in regard to the oblivion of death. Memory can still comfort, the poem suggests, even if it will disappear with the one who holds it.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 12-26
- Lines 31-38



HUMANITY AND NATURE

The poem positions human beings as part of the natural world but not central to nor dominant over it.

In fact, humankind's strength is shown to be short-lived in comparison to that of nature—which, the poem implies, reduces all human monuments and feats of strength to irrelevance.

The poem begins with a contrast between humanity's monumental constructions and a small group of flowers. At first such constructions appear strong: the graveside "cairn" (a "Memorial" built from piled stones) is "unchanging," and the speaker's grandfather is compared to a "tall tower." However this strength is not as enduring as it appears: the "Memorial is denied" and the "tall tower" representing the grandfather's strength is "broken." Moreover, the cairn is surrounded by "aaronsrod," a simple flower. This [metaphor](#) shows the greater strength of even simple forms of nature, which will endure where humanity's monuments cannot.

The poem then flashes back to the grandfather's youth, when he worked outdoors in harmony with the natural world. He was seen as a master gardener, able to "slice and build ... A chain of sods in a day ... High as the head of a man," and to carry with ease "a flowering cherry tree" even under the beating sun. These are joyous images of coexistence, which emphasize both the grandfather's masculine strength and the comparable strength of nature, with its "lion sun."

However, the poem then transitions to the grandfather's old age. His manly strength gone, he could no longer do physical labor out in the day's heat; instead he just "sat ... All day by the kitchen fire," remembering the familiar night sky. The natural transition from day to night mirrors the human transition from energetic youth to passive old age. However, whereas night leads once more to day, old age leads only to death. This is emphasized by the transition from a summer's day under a "lion sun" to the barrenness of a "winter world."

Although death is permanent, the poem's finale sees it not as a destruction of human achievement, but rather as a return to nature. The final scene seems scary (with the grandfather lying awake listening to the "leaves the wind had shaken" and the

"waves" speak "With the dark mouths of the dead"), but the grandfather's "heart was unafraid." In this vision death is shown to be natural, something present in the water, the wind, and the leaves. Rather than being destroyed, then, the poem implies that upon dying the grandfather's strength is simply returned to the natural world he loved, where it fertilizes the "aaronsrod" growing around his graveside.

Overall, then, the poem subverts ideas of human exceptionalism by revealing that the grandfather is not a "tall tower" standing alone, needing no support, but a contributor to the much greater cycles of nature.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 4-8
- Lines 12-17
- Lines 18-20
- Lines 21-23
- Lines 24-26
- Lines 33-38



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

*He knew in ...
... years of days.*

The opening lines of the poem firmly establish it as an [elegy](#), introducing the subject of death right away. Lines 1-3 depict the titular grandfather's epiphany (sudden realization) in the last "hour" before his death that "his heart had never spoken" openly, during all "eighty years" of his life.

Immediately noticeable is the fact that these lines are written in the third person, preventing the reader from having direct access to the grandfather's thoughts. There is therefore a high degree of ambiguity whenever the poem discusses the grandfather's inner world, especially since, as these lines establish, he is a highly reticent character who has never spoken intimately with his family, the speaker included. This epiphany that he comes to in his last hour could well be *imagined* by the speaker, as a way to project a sense of regret onto the grandfather that would justify the man's lifelong coldness.

This sense of distance is reinforced by the use of [personification](#) in the second line: it is the grandfather's "heart" rather than the man himself, who "had never spoken." The heart traditionally represents a person's deepest emotions, but the grandfather's character is such that he seems separated from these emotions, living 80 years without expressing them. Baxter also emphasizes the sheer length of time that this constitutes, with the phrase "eighty years of days"; this focuses attention on the huge number of days, which is 365 times the

number of years—over 29,000.

Though the poem does not have a consistent meter throughout, it's worth noting that these lines almost conform to [iambic trimeter](#), meaning there are three iambs—feet with a da DUM rhythm—per line:

He knew | in the hour | he died
That his heart | had nev- | er spoken
In eight- | y years | of days.

Although there is variation, this consists only in adding additional unstressed syllables (note that there are a few [anapests](#)—feet with a da da DUM rhythm—above). All three lines are consistent in each containing three stressed syllables. The iambic beat mimics the beating of the heart, which evokes both its [metaphorical](#) importance as the seat of deep emotions, as well as its vital place in keeping humans alive. The ceasing of the heartbeat causes death, which is this poem's starting point.

LINES 4-8

*O for the ...
... aaronsrod and blossom.*

Line 4 ("O for the tall ...") begins with the traditional poetic exclamation "O." This is a moment of [apostrophe](#), and it indicates the speaker's lament for "the tall tower broken—that is, for the death of the grandfather.

By describing him [metaphorically](#) as a "tall tower," the speaker emphasizes the grandfather's physical strength and independence. Towers originally referred to military fortifications designed to repel attackers and withstand long sieges, when they would be cut off from the surrounding land by enemy armies. However, with his death this strength is lost: he is "broken."

The brokenness of the tower also refers to the unlikelihood of enduring remembrance: "Memorial is denied." In other words, the poem implies that, as a result of his reticence, the grandfather's family is unlikely to keep his memory alive through subsequent generations.

There is also a wider sense in which these ideas can be thought of not as limited solely to the particular situation in the poem, but as universal: no matter how strong a fortified tower may be, time will see it decay. Just think of the ruined medieval castles throughout Europe that wouldn't repel a family of tourists, let alone an army! Memorials too, rarely guarantee remembrance: think of the numerous memorials to famous figures whom people today have never heard of.

The transience of such seemingly permanent things appears to be contradicted by line 6, when it introduces "the unchanging cairn." A cairn is a type of memorial, made from a pile of stones; this places it in the same group of objects as the "tall tower broken" and the numerous stone "Memorial[s]" to famous

people. But while these two are "denied" permanence, the cairn is apparently "unchanging."

A likely reason for this is that a cairn is far closer to being a natural construction than the other two. It is built out of rough, unpolished stones, often those found lying nearby, and frequently on top of prominent natural features like hills. The poem's view of nature celebrates its enduring strength in contrast to human deeds and lives. By sharing in nature, the grandfather's cairn becomes part of its indefinite cycles, as indicated by the "aaronsrod and blossom" flowering around it.

The idea of the grandfather's death feeding into natural cycles is further stressed by the choice of flower: "aaronsrod," an unusual spelling of Aaron's Rod, refers to a number of yellow-flowering plants. The flower's name is an [allusion](#) to the biblical figure Aaron, Moses's brother, who carried a magical "rod" or staff. In the Book of Numbers he comes forward to represent the tribe of Levi and his staff "put forth buds, produced blossoms, and bore ripe almonds." Likewise, the grandfather's body will help to fertilize plant life as it decays, thus enduring not alone, like a tower or monument, but as part of natural cycles.

The "pipes" that "set [the flowers] ablaze" are bagpipes, a traditional Scottish woodwind instrument, which are being played during the funeral. The word "cairn" derives from Scots Gaelic, further emphasizing that the grandfather's funeral follows Scottish custom. Baxter was descended from Scottish settlers in New Zealand, so these two references evoke the author's own family heritage. This celebration of heritage is itself a kind of memorializing, hence why the "pipes could set ablaze" the flowers around the cairn. Traditional custom and nature combine to create a metaphorical blaze in celebration of what truly lasts, which is not the individual but the world of which that person was once a part.

LINES 9-11

*They stood by ...
... in their fashion.*

These lines recount the grandfather's funeral, focusing on his family's reaction. Whereas one would expect a mood of sadness and regret on such an occasion, here the only emotion that is mentioned is bitterness: "They stood by the graveside / From his bitter veins born."

As with line 2 ("his heart had never spoken"), [personification](#) is used to describe *parts* of the body performing actions one usually attributes to human beings as a whole. Earlier it was the act of speech, here it is the act of giving birth, which is done by the "veins." Once more, this dehumanizes the grandfather, figuring him only in terms of his physical body and not his personality, mind, or emotions.

Such dehumanization is representative of his family's attitude towards him as an imposing physical presence, a "tall tower,"

but not as an emotionally open or supportive man. Moreover, the adjective "bitter" could well apply both to his family and to the grandfather himself, describing a family relationship closed off from both ends. The [alliteration](#) of the /b/ sound in "bitter ... born" mimics the harshness of the emotion it describes.

Note how the pronouns "They" and "their" don't distinguish between family members: there is not a variety of reactions, with some crying and some bitter—instead everyone has the same impassive mood. Line 11 ("And mourned him in their fashion") evokes the awkwardness of the funeral, through its use of the formal phrase "in their fashion." Rather than a personal, intimate style of mourning, the family's emotions are formalized, following ceremony rather than authentic grief.

The [assonance](#) and [consonance](#) between "born" and "mourned" links two words with opposite associations: birth and death. This recalls the poem's vision of life as a cycle, in which the grandfather's body will fertilize the "aaron's rod and blossom" growing around his grave. This circular process, of death leading to new life, is also implied by the ambiguity of the pronoun "They," which coming straight after "aaron's rod and blossom" initially seems to refer to these flowers as being "from his bitter veins born."

LINES 12-17

*A chain of ...
... the lion sun.*

The poem now flashes back to describing the grandfather as a young man, focusing on his work outdoors as a gardener and emphasizing his closeness with nature in contrast to his distance from family.

These six lines again stress his physical strength: he is able to "slice and build" a "chain of sods" (rolls of turf) "High as the head of a man" in just one day. This image recalls the previous examples of building: the "Memorial," "tall tower," and "cairn." However, whereas the first two of these were man-made and thus impermanent, the "chain of sods" (like the "unchanging cairn") is a combination of human and natural labor, which the poem argues is far stronger than the arrogant constructions of warfare and commemoration.

Also note the language used to describe the sods: they are "High as the head of a man," yet built in a day, implying that the so-called "heights" of human achievement are really not so impressive, being comparable to a single day's gardening.

A "flowering cherry tree" would be extremely heavy and unwieldy, yet the grandfather is able to carry it on his shoulder, showing just how strong he must have been as a young man. The fact that it is specifically described as "flowering" recalls the "aaron's rod and blossom" that grow around his grave, further emphasizing the strength and continuity of nature, which endures through the grandfather's youth and death.

The language of these lines promotes an active vision of

humankind. Note that all the verbs refer to physical movements—"slice," "build," "held"—as does the adjective "walking." This is a typically masculine vision, celebrating the masculine virtues of physical strength and mastery of a profession. The [metaphorical](#) description of the sun as a "lion" reinforces such notions, since the lion is considered master and king of the jungle and is celebrated for its power. The grandfather shares masculine characteristics with the sun, demonstrating the harmony between man and nature.

The [consonance](#) on the /h/ sound in "High ... head," which echoes the /h/ of "He" and "held," is heavily aspirated and imitative of heavy breathing—such as would be heard during the hard labor being carried out in these lines.

LINES 18-20

*When he was ...
... the kitchen fire.*

The poem now jumps forward in time to the grandfather's old age. In contrast to his physical strength as a young man, in his later years he was "blind." Rather than "walking" with a "flowering cherry tree" on his shoulder, he "sat in a curved chair / All day." And whereas before he could stack "A chain of sods in a day ... High as the head of a man," as an old man that same period of time, "All day," was spent stationary. The direct contrasts between youthful energy and old-age weakness continue in the shrinking of a majestic "lion sun" to a domestic "kitchen fire."

Another important change that occurs in these lines is the shift from outdoors to indoors. Both the funeral and flashback to the grandfather's youth focused on the former. Whereas outdoors is portrayed positively, as an open space in which humans and nature coexist, indoors is highly restricted. Note how lines 12 to 17 ("A chain of sods ... Under the lion sun.") were [enjambéd](#), only reaching an [end-stop](#) after six lines, whereas lines 18 to 20 ("When he was old ... fire.") are not allowed to continue flowing freely, reaching a stop after just three lines.

A few words in this section echo earlier words in the poem, including "blind"/"build" and "chair"/"cherry." The shared /b/ and /l/ consonants in the former pair reinforce the contrast between the grandfather's youthful strength, which he used to "build" impressive structures, and his old-age weakness, epitomized by blindness. The latter pair use the /ch/ and /r/ sounds to contrast his earlier closeness to nature, as represented by the living wood of the "cherry tree," to his later distance from it, since a "chair" is made of dead wood.

LINES 21-26

*Many hours he ...
... in their hand.*

Here the poem enters the grandfather's mind for the second time (the first being in lines 1-3). Again, the reader must take care to recognize that these shifts in perspective are directed

by the speaker—the old man's grandchild—and may thus be the *speaker's* own projections, rather than accurate reports of what the *grandfather* thought.

The first thing noticed by the aging grandfather are the "stars in their drunken dancing," which he spent "Many hours" watching. This time phrase builds on the three that appeared earlier: "All day" (line 20), "in a day" (line 12), and "eighty years of days" (line 3). Like the first and last of this trio, "Many hours" conveys a long sense of duration, stressing how old age and inactivity seem to last much longer than proactive youth.

Indeed, the "drunken dancing" of the stars could be a [metaphor](#) for youth: dancing is something only the physically fit can do, getting drunk is a youthful rite of passage. Moreover, "stars" recall the "lion sun," which represents peak physical strength, since the sun is a star. The fact that the grandfather's mind is a "burning-glass," a convex lens that concentrates the sun's rays to a point, only further strengthens this connection. In looking at the stars out his window, the old man is remembering his youth.

The second image that comes into his mind is that of "the green / Boughs of heaven" which are "folding the winter world in their hand." The lofty diction of "heaven" rather than "sky" stresses the grandfather's awareness of his own mortality, since heaven typically is used to refer to the afterlife. The fact that the sky is compared to "green / Boughs" suggests an idealized place of safety and comfort and evokes the paradise of Eden from the Bible. The image also evokes the green outdoors of the grandfather's youth as a gardener, further emphasizing a circular return to nature after his death.

Premonitions of death are also suggested by the image of a "winter world." Traditionally winter is associated with death: trees lose their leaves, water freezes still, the vibrant earth is obscured by snow, and many animals hibernate. Though the tone here is "sober," or serious and melancholy, hope remains, since the barren "winter world" is held protectively in the "hand" of heaven's "green / Boughs." This suggest a future fruiting, the white wastes of winter will turn "green" with life. Note also how it is not the old man's family in this section who offer comfort or protection, but nature.

LINES 27-30

*The pride of ...
... or bridal bed.*

For the first time the speaker names the reason for the grandfather's silence: his "pride." In this sense it means both a sense of satisfaction in his achievements and a deep consciousness of his own dignity. Pride is typically a masculine virtue, provided one doesn't boast: this may be why the grandfather is "dumb" (in the sense of not speaking)—he extends the idea of not boasting to all types of speech, including heartfelt openness with his family.

The [refrain](#) of lines 28 to 30 ("He knew ... bridal bed") returns to the subject of the opening lines. However, line 3, "In eighty years of days," is replaced by "In song or bridal bed." This forces the reader to reassess the fact that the grandfather's "heart had never spoken"—now it seems that rather than his old age being the cause of regret, it is the fact that he missed opportunities for intimacy, especially when it would have been easy to establish it.

The use of the word "song" is significant because a song provides an artistic structure within which deep feelings can be expressed that are not ordinarily expressed in speech. Even for a reticent personality like the grandfather, then, singing about his feelings could have been a way of communicating them without injuring his pride.

"Bridal bed" lies at the other end of the public-private spectrum, typically being the place of greatest intimacy and security for a married couple. The fact that the grandfather was unable to speak openly even here demonstrates the sheer impenetrability of his reticence. Nevertheless, his acknowledgement of the importance of such a place shows that perhaps, as he nears death, he is beginning to come to an understanding of the importance of family, even if it's too late to repair the damage he's caused.

LINES 31-34

*And the naked ...
... a child's sake:*

The last nine lines of the poem consist of the speaker's deepest dive yet into the grandfather's mind. Whereas before the speaker only went as far as stating what he "knew in the hour he died," now a highly specific memory is detailed.

This section is again deeply ambiguous because, as the poem has said several times, the grandfather's "heart had never spoken." Such is the intimate nature of the memory, that it seems highly unlikely the grandfather would have mentioned it to his grandchild. As such, this final section is likely the speaker's own invention.

The phrase "naked thought" implies that what follows is very intimate, shorn of the protective clothing of "pride." Moreover, the fact that this thought simply "fell back / To a house by the waterside" emphasizes that the memory is not consciously summoned, instead appearing unexpectedly in the grandfather's mind. This would imply that it is free of the self-promotion and self-protectiveness of his memories of gardening outdoors, which celebrated above all his youthful strength.

The reader learns in line 34 ("Then for a child's sake") that this is a childhood memory. Once more then, the idea of circularity, of death giving birth to life, appears, with the *end* of the poem returning to the *beginning* of the grandfather's life. And as with previous images of return, nature plays an important role. The

grandfather's childhood home is by "the waterside" and he can hear the "leaves the wind had shaken."

Note the grandfather's passivity in contrast to his activity earlier, when he "could slice and build," and could walk with a tree on his shoulder. Now his thought "fell" back, and the sounds of the leaves reach him without any need of his effort.

These sounds are conveyed [onomatopoeically](#) by the use of [sibilance](#)—"house ... waterside ... leaves ... shaken ... sake"—all of which evoke the familiar rustling of leaves brushing against surfaces as they are blown about. Moreover, the [assonance](#) on the long /a/ sound in both "shaken" and "sake" recalls the howling of the wind.

LINES 35-38

*To the waves ...
... heart was unafraid.*

"Waves all night awake" and "unafraid" carry on the [assonance](#) on the long /a/ sound, which began with "shaken" and "sake," and evokes the sound of the wind. The primary technique used here however is [personification](#): the "waves" are "all night awake" and have "mouths" and "tongues." By personifying nature, the poem enacts the idealized *fusion* between human beings and the natural world—which was hinted at in the funeral scene, with the grandfather's body fertilizing the "aaron's rod and blossom."

As in that scene, these images also show the closeness between life and death, with the waves being at once "all night awake" and at the same time speaking "With the dark mouths of the dead." The first phrase seems to imply that they're immortal, not needing to sleep or by implication die, but the second phrase reveals that they're already dead. This combination makes the water seem almost supernatural, as if speaking from beyond the grave.

Initially this idea is menacing: the [consonance](#) of "dark mouths of the dead," which repeats the thudding /d/ sound, adds to the creepiness of the dead murmuring through the medium of water. However, the next line begins introducing the comfort that the grandfather refused himself throughout his life: the comfort of intimate communication.

"The tongues of water spoke" to him as a child. If a medium like water, which is not even a living organism, can speak unbidden, perhaps the old man, remembering this fact on his deathbed, does not need to lose hope about reconciling with his family. Even if this reconciliation can only happen beyond the grave—that is through memory—these lines prove that memory is powerful enough to enact it: this very scene leads to the old man's "heart" feeling "unafraid," though he is about to die.

Since this entire memory is likely an invention of the speaker, one must acknowledge that this comforting ending may well be a grandchild's attempt to give a posthumous sense of meaning to the life of a figure who was difficult to understand when he

was alive. It is a loving act of imagination, which shows the grandchild's deep feeling for the grandfather, even if he remains isolated from the rest of his family.



SYMBOLS



FIRE

Fire appears in several forms in the poem, including in references to the "sun" and "stars." Fire and flame [symbolize](#) strength, vitality, and vibrancy throughout the poem.

Flame first appearance is in line 7, during the grandfather's funeral. Here the ceremonial bagpipes "could set ablaze / An aaron's rod and a blossom." This is clearly [metaphorical](#), since a musical instrument cannot set anything on fire. This phrase could refer to the color of aaron's rod flowers, which are indeed a flame-like yellow—a vibrancy added to by the powerful sound of bagpipes. These flowers are part of the poem's view of man and nature as intertwined (in that the grandfather's dead involves a return to the ground, his body nourishing the soil from which the flowers grow). As such, the choice of fire as a metaphor may well be intended to evoke the mythical phoenix, a bird that died in a burst of flames and was then reborn from the ashes.

The next two appearances of fire directly contrast with one another: "the lion sun" represents heroic physical strength and outdoor mastery, whereas a "kitchen fire" is a far smaller, domestic item, which in this poem serves only to warm the dying body of an "old and blind" man. This diminishment in fire's size and power echoes the diminishment of the grandfather's strength and vitality.

The "stars in their drunken dancing," meanwhile, recall the "lion sun," since the sun is also a star. These "drunken dancing" stars emphasize the grandfather's youthful physicality and freedom. The "burning-glass of his mind" is then a metaphor to describe the old man's effort to artificially resurrect such memories, as a burning glass artificially starts fires.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "The pipes could set ablaze / An aaron's rod and blossom."
- **Line 17:** "Under the lion sun."
- **Line 20:** "All day by the kitchen fire."
- **Lines 22-23:** "The stars in their drunken dancing / Through the burning-glass of his mind"



THE HEART

The heart has many well-established [symbolic](#) associations. In the poem, it represents a person's innermost self and most intimate emotions, including love. The

fact that the grandfather's heart has "never spoken," then, means that he has never talked openly about these intimate emotions to anyone. He has never shared who he really is with those closest to him, including his wife (in their "bridal bed") and family.

He realizes that the cause of such reticence is the fact that "the pride of his heart was dumb." In other words, the grandfather's pride has prevented his other emotions from being spoken—causing them to remain "dumb."

The heart also makes a subtle appearance in the description of the family as "From his bitter veins born." Veins carry blood towards the heart, yet these veins are "bitter." This juxtaposes the expected love towards one's family, a central emotion in most people's lives, with the grandfather's strained relations with his own family.

The final reference to the heart is in the last line of the poem: "And his heart was unafraid." In the face of imminent death, which will stop his heart from beating, the grandfather goes onward without fear.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "his heart had never spoken"
- **Line 10:** "From his bitter veins born"
- **Line 27:** "The pride of his heart was dumb."
- **Line 29:** "his heart had never spoken"
- **Line 38:** "And his heart was unafraid."



POETIC DEVICES

METAPHOR

The poem is filled with [metaphorical](#) language throughout. Some of this takes the form of [personification](#), such as the reference to the grandfather's "heart" never speaking. The heart here represents the grandfather's innermost thoughts and emotions, and its inability to speak represents the grandfather's emotional distance from his family.

Other metaphors abound. For example, the speaker calls the grandfather a "tall tower broken." Towers were originally defensive structures built to withstand sieges during war, so the fact that the grandfather was a "tall tower" emphasizes his physical strength as well as his solitude, cut off like a besieged castle from the surrounding land. Yet now he is "broken," showing how even the mighty eventually lose their strength.

The bagpipes' being able to "set ablaze" the "unchanging cairn" is the next metaphor; bagpipes cannot literally set anything on fire. This metaphor emphasizes the flame-colored "aaron's rod and blossom" growing around the cairn. It also might evoke the mythical phoenix, a bird that dies in a burst of flame and is reborn from the ashes—in turn suggesting the circular

relationship between man and nature; when man dies his body nourishes the soil, out which flowers bloom.

Fire and flame generally [symbolize](#) strength and vitality in the poem (for more on this, see the Symbols section of this guide). This is reflected by the metaphor of the "lion sun," which is a way for the speaker to describe the intensity and strength of the sun when the grandfather worked outside as a young man.

Later, fire comes into the poem again with the metaphor of "the burning-glass of his mind" in line 23. A burning-glass is a convex lens that focuses sunlight into a single beam, able to set alight certain things like paper. As a description of the old man's mind, this metaphor stresses his passion as well as the sheer degree of concentration he needs to summon up distant memories in his present decrepit state.

Finally, the "green / Boughs of heaven" again relate to the circular vision of humanity and nature. Heaven refers to an afterlife for people, so describing it as a "green / Bough" emphasizes the return of human beings to nature after death. It also evokes the garden of Eden, which in Christianity predated modern humanity, again stressing how death is a form of return.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "his heart had never spoken"
- **Line 4:** "O for the tall tower broken"
- **Lines 6-8:** "And the unchanging cairn / The pipes could set ablaze / An aaron's rod and blossom."
- **Line 10:** "From his bitter veins born"
- **Line 17:** "Under the lion sun"
- **Line 22:** "The stars in their drunken dancing"
- **Line 23:** "the burning-glass of his mind"
- **Lines 24-26:** "the green / Boughs of heaven folding / The winter world in their hand."
- **Line 29:** "his heart had never spoken"
- **Line 31:** "the naked thought fell back"
- **Lines 35-37:** "the waves all night awake / With the dark mouths of the dead. / The tongues of water spoke"

PERSONIFICATION

The poem's use of [metaphor](#) frequently overlaps with its use of [personification](#). As discussed in the Symbols section of this guide, the grandfather's heart represents his innermost thoughts and emotions, especially love. The fact that the heart is repeatedly personified as having "never spoken" thus represents the grandfather's emotional distance throughout his life, his inability (or refusal) to share what is in his heart with others.

There are uses of personification unrelated to the grandfather's body as well. The first of these is the image the grandfather sees outside when sitting by the fire as an old man of "The stars in their drunken dancing." Both dancing and

getting drunk are activities associated with youth (particularly the former, since it requires physical fitness). Stars also relate to the symbol of fire, which likewise represents youth and strength (see the Symbols entry for more detail). Having lost his physical power, the grandfather is reminded by the stars of his past, which contrasts with his weakened present.

The next example of personification is of the heavens "folding / The winter world in their hand." This is a comforting image, which evokes a parent cradling a baby, or someone stroking a small pet. It establishes a comforting view of death, the afterlife, and nature, with heaven/the sky protectively cupping the deathly "winter world."

The final instances of personification all relate to the water outside the grandfather's childhood home. Like the child listening to them, the waves are "all night awake," emphasizing the closeness between humanity and nature. Though at first they seem menacing, using their "tongues" to speak "With the dark mouths of the dead," rather than feeling scared, the grandfather's "heart is unafraid." The waves' seeming to speak might be thought of as an attempt at communication, with nature offering comfort to those about to die. This positive view echoes the image of the skies "folding / The winter world in their hand" and stresses the connection between humanity and nature, with both being united when a person dies and their body is returned to the earth.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "his heart had never spoken"
- **Line 10:** "From his bitter veins born"
- **Line 22:** "The stars in their drunken dancing"
- **Lines 25-26:** "Boughs of heaven folding / The winter world in their hand."
- **Line 27:** "The pride of his heart was dumb."
- **Line 29:** "his heart had never spoken"
- **Lines 35-37:** "To the waves all night awake / With the dark mouths of the dead. / The tongues of water spoke"
- **Line 38:** "And his heart was unafraid."

ALLITERATION

Strong [alliteration](#) is not especially frequent in the poem, though it does appear. There is an especially clear string of alliterative sounds (as well as [consonance](#) and [assonance](#)) from lines 21-26, which is when the elderly grandfather envisions the world of his youth and also sees approach of death with clarity:

Many hours he had seen
The stars in their drunken dancing
Through the burning-glass of his mind
And sober knew the green
Boughs of heaven folding
The winter world in their hand.

The language here is made all the more striking and beautiful through alliteration, in a way that reflects the comforting power of memory.

As seen in this example, alliteration is also part of many of the poem's [metaphors](#). For example, "tall tower" alliterates on the sharp /t/ sound, which is appropriate for a metaphor emphasizing the grandfather's cruel solitude. As a tower repels enemies, so he has repelled his family over his long lifetime, preferring to think and act independently, harshly denying them intimacy.

Later, "drunken dancing" alliterates on the /d/ sound. Compared to /t/, this is a clumsier sound, emphasized by the fact that both "drunken" and "dancing" are disyllabic words, with the stress falling on the first syllable; this mimics the clumsy, stomping footwork of a drunk person attempting to dance.

In line 26, "winter world" repeats the soft /w/ sound, evoking the mournful winds of the season, and helping to create the melancholy atmosphere intended by this particular image of a barren world. In line 30, "bridal bed" relies on alliteration to evoke the binding intimacy of the marriage bed, where secrets ought to be able to be discussed freely, with the assurance that they will remain secret. The /b/ unites two words as marriage ought to unite two people. However, this is only ironic, since the reader knows that even in his marriage, the grandfather was unable to speak openly.

Finally, "his heart had," repeated on both line 2 and 29 as part of the poem's [refrain](#), evokes the huffing breath of one struggling to suck down air, in this case, one nearing death. The aspirated /h/ creates an aural effect that perfectly reflects the last moments of the grandfather's life.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "his heart had"
- **Line 4:** "tall tower"
- **Line 7:** "ablaze"
- **Line 8:** "blossom"
- **Line 10:** "bitter," "born"
- **Line 12:** "sods"
- **Line 13:** "slice"
- **Line 14:** "High," "head"
- **Line 21:** "he had," "seen"
- **Line 22:** "stars," "drunken dancing"
- **Line 23:** "burning-glass"
- **Line 24:** "sober," "green"
- **Line 25:** "Boughs," "heaven"
- **Line 26:** "winter world," "hand"
- **Line 27:** "his heart"
- **Line 29:** "his heart had," "spoken"
- **Line 30:** "song," "bridal bed"
- **Line 35:** "waves," "awake"

- **Line 36:** “With,” “dark,” “dead”
- **Line 38:** “his heart”

CONSONANCE

[Consonance](#) is used throughout the poem. Broadly speaking, this helps elevate the poem's language, making it feel poetic and lyrical. This is fitting, given that the poem is an elegy and as such meant to commemorate someone who has died; the language marks the seriousness of the occasion.

Consonance can also draw attention to specific words and phrases and reflect the tone of the poem in certain moments. For example, when the speaker describes the grandfather's funeral in lines 9-11, note the many /n/, /m, and /r/ sounds, which create a closed mouth sensation—as if the speaker is talking through gritted teeth. The hissing /s/ and /v/ and heavy /b/ and /d/ consonance punctuates these lines as well, with the result that it feels like they are being spat out.

They stood by the graveside
From his bitter veins born
And mourned him in their fashion.

The sounds of these lines thus stress the estranged relationship between the grandfather and his family. Consonance evokes the poem's content in other places as well. For example, “High ... head” in line 14 and “hand ... heart” in lines 26-27 rely on the /h/ sound. This evokes puffing breath, which in the first instance mimics the young man's hard labour, cutting and piling turf, and in the second echoes his dying gasps as he approaches death. This is a deliberate contrast stressing the vast gulf between youthful strength and the decrepitude of old age.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “died”
- **Line 2:** “his heart had,” “spoken”
- **Line 3:** “eighty,” “days”
- **Line 4:** “tall tower,” “broken”
- **Line 5:** “denied”
- **Line 6:** “cairn”
- **Line 7:** “could,” “ablaze”
- **Line 8:** “An aaronsrod and,” “blossom”
- **Line 9:** “stood,” “by,” “graveside”
- **Line 10:** “bitter,” “veins,” “born”
- **Line 11:** “And,” “mourned,” “him in their fashion”
- **Line 12:** “sods,” “day”
- **Line 13:** “could,” “slice and build”
- **Line 14:** “High,” “head”
- **Line 15:** “flowering cherry tree”
- **Lines 16-17:** “shoulder held / Under”

- **Line 17:** “lion sun”
- **Line 18:** “old and blind”
- **Line 19:** “curved”
- **Line 20:** “kitchen”
- **Line 21:** “he had seen”
- **Line 22:** “stars,” “drunken dancing”
- **Line 23:** “burning,” “glass,” “mind”
- **Line 24:** “sober,” “green”
- **Line 25:** “Boughs”
- **Line 26:** “winter world,” “hand”
- **Line 27:** “heart,” “dumb”
- **Line 28:** “died”
- **Line 29:** “his heart had,” “spoken”
- **Line 30:** “song,” “bridal bed”
- **Line 31:** “back”
- **Line 32:** “waterside”
- **Line 33:** “wind”
- **Line 35:** “waves,” “awake”
- **Line 36:** “With,” “dark,” “dead”
- **Line 37:** “water”
- **Line 38:** “his heart”

ASSONANCE

[Assonance](#) is not particularly prominent in the poem, though it does appear occasionally. Often, this assonance revolves around the long /a/ vowel. This first appears in the funeral scene with “the unchanging cairn” (with “cairn” featuring quite a similar vowel sound as well) and the flowers that bagpipes “could set ablaze” by the “graveside.”

Linking these three words is interesting, since the primary associations of graves and fires is irreversible change. The first represents death, from which there is no coming back, while burning permanently changes the chemical structure of a substance. However, the poem's view of life and nature is cyclical: a person's death feeds life back into nature by fertilizing the earth. In this sense setting the flowers “ablaze” is a [metaphor](#) for giving them life, like the phoenix which dies in a burst of flames and is reborn from the ashes. The sense of this scene as “unchanging” is therefore a wider view, that sees humanity as part of nature rather than distinct from it.

Another cluster of long /a/ assonance comes towards the end: “shaken ... sake ... waves ... awake ... unafraid.” The [sibilance](#) between many of these words and the [consonance](#) of /w/ and /k/ sounds make this section of the poem aurally rich. This is appropriate, since its focus is on the sounds of waves a child hears from inside his “house by the waterside.” The combination of these three techniques mimics the soft, rushing, rippling sounds of waves washing against shore.

Assonance also performs a distinct role in associating this final section of the poem with the earlier funeral scene, tying them together in a cyclical structure. Both sections also focus on

death, but here, at the end of the poem, the idea that death is not something to fear is much more explicit: "his heart was unafraid."

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "spoken"
- **Line 4:** "broken"
- **Line 6:** "unchanging," "cairn"
- **Line 7:** "ablaze"
- **Line 9:** "graveside"
- **Line 10:** "veins," "born"
- **Line 11:** "mourned," "him in"
- **Line 12:** "chain," "day"
- **Line 13:** "slice"
- **Line 14:** "High"
- **Lines 14-15:** "man / And"
- **Line 15:** "cherry tree"
- **Line 17:** "Under," "sun"
- **Line 33:** "shaken"
- **Line 34:** "child's," "sake"
- **Line 35:** "waves," "night," "awake"
- **Line 38:** "unafraid"

ENJAMBMENT

The vast majority of lines in the poem are [enjambéd](#). The poem also lacks a cohesive [rhyme scheme](#) or [meter](#). Altogether, it feels free-flowing and unstructured, which is fitting for its thoughtful, meandering content. The use of enjambment also propels the poem forward, granting it a sense of unstoppable momentum as readers are pulled from one line to the next. In a way, this reflects the path of a life—the way that time inevitably moves forward until death.

One striking cluster of enjambéd lines is in the section about the grandfather's work as a gardener when he was young. Lines 12-17 ("A chain of sods ... Under the lion sun.") make up one of the longest passages without an [end-stop](#) in the whole poem. Given that the subject of this passage is outdoor activity and physical strength, the onrushing momentum of enjambment reflects the tireless labor that a young man can carry out. Most of the words at the beginning and end of these lines also emphasize this: "day ... build ... High ... man ... held."

Another sprawling section of enjambment begins in line 21 ("Many hour ...") and only comes to rest in line 26 ("The winter world in their hand."). As with its equally long cluster over lines 12-17, the subject here is youth: "drunken dancing" is something only a physically fit person could carry on with for a sustained period, and the fires of stars (discussed in the Symbols entry of this guide) represent new life. The enjambment builds up the poem's pace, reflecting the intensity of this memory.

The poem's final section, involving a memory of a childhood

"house by the waterside," is for the most part enjambéd as a way to mimic the involuntary "falling back" of the grandfather's mind into the memory. He does not consciously summon it up, but experiences it flowing into his mind, just as one reads these lines in a smooth flow.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "died / That"
- **Lines 2-3:** "spoken / In"
- **Lines 4-5:** "broken / Memorial"
- **Lines 6-7:** "cairn / The"
- **Lines 7-8:** "ablaze / An"
- **Lines 9-10:** "graveside / From"
- **Lines 10-11:** "born / And"
- **Lines 12-13:** "day / He"
- **Lines 13-14:** "build / High"
- **Lines 14-15:** "man / And"
- **Lines 15-16:** "tree / On"
- **Lines 16-17:** "held / Under"
- **Lines 18-19:** "blind / He"
- **Lines 19-20:** "chair / All"
- **Lines 21-22:** "seen / The"
- **Lines 22-23:** "dancing / Through"
- **Lines 23-24:** "mind / And"
- **Lines 24-25:** "green / Boughs"
- **Lines 25-26:** "folding / The"
- **Lines 28-29:** "died / That"
- **Lines 29-30:** "spoken / In"
- **Lines 31-32:** "back / To"
- **Lines 32-33:** "waterside / And"
- **Lines 33-34:** "shaken / Then"
- **Lines 35-36:** "awake / With"
- **Lines 37-38:** "spoke / And"

SIBILANCE

[Sibilance](#) appears in three distinct clusters in the poem. The first of these is during the funeral scene. The focus on the hissing /s/ and buzzing /z/ sounds in "pipes ... set ablaze ... aaronsrod ... blossom ... stood ... graveside ... his ... veins" evokes the stillness of the scene. The only deliberate sound is the loud blaring of the bagpipes; otherwise one can imagine that the strong wind on the hillside would be all anyone could hear. Sibilance may also be used here to echo this wind as it blows through the grass and flowers.

The next cluster occurs when the grandfather as an old man considers the night sky:

Many hours he had seen
The stars in their drunken dancing
Through the burning-glass of his mind
And sober knew the green
Boughs ...

Once more, part of the effect here may be to evoke stillness. However there is also the possibility that this section is a dream, due to the fact that it contains so much strange, [metaphorical](#) imagery, such as a vision of the sky as "green / Boughs," and stars that dance drunkenly. In this case, sibilance may be intended to evoke the sound of snoring, which accompanies sleep.

The final and most abundant use of sibilance occurs in the childhood flashback at the end of the poem. This evokes the wind rushing through leaves and waves lapping a shoreline, which, in turn, the poem says resemble the speech of the dead.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "pipes," "set," "ablaze"
- **Line 8:** "aaron's rod," "blossom"
- **Line 9:** "stood," "graveside"
- **Line 10:** "his," "veins"
- **Line 11:** "fashion"
- **Line 21:** "hours," "seen"
- **Line 22:** "stars," "dancing"
- **Line 23:** "burning-glass," "his"
- **Line 24:** "sober"
- **Line 25:** "Boughs"
- **Line 32:** "house," "waterside"
- **Line 33:** "leaves," "shaken"
- **Line 34:** "child's sake."
- **Line 35:** "waves"
- **Line 36:** "mouths"
- **Line 37:** "tongues," "spoke"

REFRAIN

The poem's [refrain](#) occurs twice: once at the very beginning of the poem and once at the end, just before the transition to a childhood memory. It depicts the grandfather's epiphany (sudden realization) in his final moments that he has never spoken intimately with his family.

There is variation in the third line between the two appearances. In the first instance the line reads "In eighty years of days," which stresses the sheer amount of time he has lived and during which he has remained silent. Rather than a simple "eighty years," the line focuses on the days—a number 365 times larger than 80.

The second refrain has as its third line "In song or bridal bed," which shows the grandfather's reticence both in public during "song" and in the most private space of all, the marriage bed. This is the only mention that he was married, yet it refers only to a piece of furniture, not to his wife as a person, further emphasizing their distance from true intimacy with each other.

Where Refrain appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "He knew in the hour he died / That his heart had never spoken"
- **Line 3:** "In eighty years of days."
- **Lines 28-29:** "He knew in the hour he died / That his heart had never spoken"
- **Line 30:** "In song or bridal bed."



VOCABULARY

Memorial (Line 5) - A memorial is a statue or structure built to commemorate a person or event. By association it can also refer to the act of remembering someone.

Cairn (Line 6) - A Scottish word for a mound or rough stones built as a landmark or memorial.

Pipes (Line 7) - In this case, pipes refer to bagpipes, a traditional Scottish woodwind instrument in which a constant feed of air, from a reservoir in the form of a bag, maintains a blaring tune.

Aaron's rod (Line 8) - "Aaron's rod" is an unusual spelling of Aron's rod, a name for a wide variety of yellow-flowering plants. The name itself is a biblical [allusion](#) to Moses's brother Aron, who carried a magical rod or staff.

Sods (Line 12) - Sods is a rare term for turf, a roll of grass held together by its roots, which can be laid out and combined with other pieces of turf to create a lawn.

Burning-glass (Line 23) - A convex lens used to concentrate the sun's rays into a single beam, which is able to set things like straw and paper on fire.

Boughs (Line 25) - Boughs is a collective term for the main branch of a tree, from which smaller branches grow.

Bridal bed (Line 30) - This refers to the marital bed, shared by a husband and wife, traditionally the most intimate of spaces.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

As the title says, the poem is an [elegy](#)—a poem written to commemorate someone who has died. Beyond that the poem follows no strict form, instead consisting of a single unbroken stanza of 38 lines. This single long stanza, with its relatively even line lengths, can be thought of as representing the grandfather himself. In life, he was a "tall tower," and his elegy is fittingly a "tall tower" of text.

That said, there are four distinct sections within this long chunk of text, each of which relates to a different time in the grandfather's life, along with two introductory/transitional sections in lines 1-5 and 27-30, containing the poem's [refrain](#).

The first five lines introduce the poem's melancholy mood as well as its subject: the regret of a dying man that he wasn't closer to his family during his life. The poem then describes his funeral: the first distinct part of his life, which takes the poem up to line 11 ("And mourned ... fashion."). Note how this reverses the usual chronology; instead of starting with his birth, the poem begins by focusing on his death.

It then flashes back to his days as a young man for its second distinct section, from lines 12-17 ("A chain of sods ... sun."). This sudden shift emphasizes the sharp juxtaposition between his isolation from his family members and his joy in outdoor life as a young man.

The next section, from lines 18-26 ("When he was old ... in their hand.") is another sharp contrast, as the poem flashes forward to his life as an old man. Having lost all youthful vigor, the grandfather is able only to look out the window and daydream.

The poem then repeats the refrain, before transitioning into its final section from lines 31-38 ("And the naked thought ... unafraid."). This is the furthest flashback yet, and takes readers back to the grandfather's childhood. As the poem began with his death, so it ends with his childhood. This stresses the circular relationship between humans and nature: the natural world feeds human beings, enabling them to grow, and when they die their bodies feed the natural world.

METER

The poem is mostly written in [free verse](#), meaning it does not have a regular [meter](#) or [rhyme scheme](#). This keeps it from sounding too structured, which might feel strange for a poem that meanders through memory and the imagination. Combined with the frequent use of [enjambment](#), the poem has a loose, free-flowing feel.

That said, there are some metrical moments in the poem that fall largely into [iambic trimeter](#). This means there are three **stressed** syllables per line in a da DUM pattern. For example, take line 3:

In eight- | y years | of days.

And line 7:

The pipes | could set | ablaze

Occasionally, then, the poem falls into the rhythm of a heartbeat—suggesting a kind of lifeblood surging beneath its lines. Many lines of iambic trimeter appear in the poem, but without the kind of regularity required to create a predictable meter. Some lines have three stressed beats but not in an iambic pattern, and some are not metrical at all.

The occasional use of meter may suggest a clock ticking; every once in a while the inevitable march of time imposes itself on the grandfather's life.

RHYME SCHEME

There are numerous [end-rhymes](#) in the poem, although they do not conform to a regular [rhyme scheme](#). As noted in this guide's discussion of [meter](#), the [free verse](#) nature of the poem keeps it from feeling too structured or stilted. Instead, it ebbs and flows unpredictably, much like life itself.

Again though there are certainly moments of rhymes in the poem. For example, "spoken" in line 2 rhymes perfectly with "broken" in line 4. This suggests a connection between the ideas behind these words—that the grandfather's inability to connect with others is what led to his breaking.

The most abundant rhyme sound is that introduced by "died," the last word of the first line. This rhyme sound occurs four times—"denied," "graveside," "died" again, "waterside"—and then twice as a half rhyme ("mind," "blind"). The /d/ and long /i/ sounds are also very prevalent in the poem. Altogether, death itself is thus scattered throughout the [elegy](#).



SPEAKER

The speaker of this poem is a grandchild of the old man in the title—the "father's father." Very little else can be determined about the speaker. This person's gender, name, and appearance all remain unclear.

Emotionally, the speaker seems to take a somewhat objective stance. During the funeral scene, for instance, the speaker simply reports on events, without giving their own emotional reaction.

However, once the poem describes the old man's thoughts, and especially in its final flashback to his childhood in a house by the waterside, the speaker's role becomes more active. Given the grandfather's distance throughout his life, it's unlikely he would have told anyone about his intimate thoughts. This then means that the memories attributed to him are likely imagined by the speaker.

There are several reasons why a speaker might have done this, but likeliest is that the speaker wished to humanize the grandfather, and to give a redemptive meaning to his death. Saying that he died "unafraid," is a generous act of the imagination, which shows that despite his reticence during his lifetime, his grandchild at least still loves him enough to wish him peace in his final moments.



SETTING

The poem begins "in the hour" of the grandfather's death and depicts his funeral before giving a sweeping overview of his life. It moves backwards in time to his old age, his young adulthood, and finally his childhood.

The grandfather's young adulthood is notably set outdoors.

Although no specific setting is detailed, the imagery depicted—"a flowering cherry tree ... the lion sun"—suggests an idealized vision of the natural world. Importantly, the funeral takes place outside as well, next to a "cairn," probably on top of a hill. The grandfather is most comfortable in nature, and the poem thus suggests a sort of comfort in his death because he has been returned to the earth.

By contrast, the grandfather's final years are spent inside, "by the kitchen fire." This contrasts with the generalized outdoors by its greater specificity, which limits it to one space, just as the old man is limited in his freedom compared to when he was younger. The final setting is the "house by the waterside," which is the grandfather's childhood home. It is enveloped by the sound of wind and waves, representing a fusion of human works (the house) with the natural environment.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Elegy for my Father's Father" is in many ways a rather traditional poem. Although the experiments of modernism that took place in Europe during the first three decades of the 20th century had reached New Zealand, Baxter chose to follow a heritage closer to that of the Romantic poets of the 19th century, such as William Wordsworth ("[I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud](#)").

Romantic poetry focuses on personal emotions and encounters with nature. One writer continuing this tradition, who influenced Baxter, is the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas, who wrote an [elegy](#) for his own father as well as the famous poem "[Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night](#)."

Like Baxter, Thomas was a member of a minority people sharing a language with a more dominant literary tradition—the English one. Both wrote intensely about their local environments and heritage: in this poem, reference is made to bagpipes, a Scottish instrument, and to a "cairn," a Scottish word for a burial mound. Baxter's father was Scottish, and he frequently drew similarities between the Highland clans and the indigenous Maori people of New Zealand.

In trying to integrate the Maori into an English language New Zealand literature, Baxter was part of the efforts of the Wellington Group, a loose school of poets all living in or around the city of Wellington. The group's mission was to write a localized poetry, which used native traditions and imagery to express universal truths. This poem lacks the Maori imagery of much of Baxter's other work, but its use of his Scottish heritage and of local diction, such as "sods" and "aaronrod," to depict general themes of masculinity, family, legacy, and humanity's relationship with nature, exemplify the Wellington Group's ideas.

Although neglected outside of his native country, the influence of Baxter's themes and imagery can be seen in the work of poets like Seamus Heaney ("[Death of a Naturalist](#)") and Ian Wedde, who said "he's probably the nearest we have come this century to a folk poet."

Baxter is also one of many poets to write about the relationships between fathers (or grandfathers) and their children, masculine stoicism, and the pain of watching a parent age. See Heaney's "[Follower](#)" and "[Those Winter Sundays](#)" by Robert Hayden for other examples.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

James K. Baxter was a New Zealand poet born in 1926 in Dunedin. His first collection *Beyond the Palisade* (1944) was published when he was just 18, in his first year at the University of Otago. He seemed on track for a brilliant literary career, but dropped out before graduating as a result of increasing alcoholism. He lived the rest of his life in unstable conditions, taking on a variety of odd-jobs, including postman and cleaner. An extended trip around India led to an enduring concern with poverty and injustice. Eventually, after a brief stint as a university lecturer he decided to settle in a Maori commune called Jerusalem. Only three years later however, he fell ill and died at the age of 44.

Although he lived through the Second World War, he did not fight in it. His father had been a conscientious objector during the First World War, and Baxter inherited his pacifist beliefs. World events are absent from this poem, and indeed from much of his work; he sought instead to give voice to marginalized traditions such as the 19th century Scottish immigrants to New Zealand, whose Highland clan heritage had been almost destroyed by the English in the 18th century.

Although not present in this poem, the indigenous Maori people and their mythologies were also important to Baxter, and he worked them deeply into his later poetry. He thought of himself as an outsider, writing for outsiders; he wondered at one point whether it might be possible to "try to live without money or books," as the Maori did.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Baxter on the Maori in New Zealand society](#) — A video of Baxter discussing discrimination against Maori and their role in a future cultural revolution. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vr9Uml-cm88>)
- [In the Footsteps of Baxter](#) — The poet Chris Gallavin writes about his visit to Jerusalem (Hiruharama), the commune where Baxter lived the last three years of his life. (<https://www.newsroom.co.nz/2019/08/20/749844/in-the-shadow-of-james-k-baxter-in-hiruhrama>)

- [James K. Baxter's biography](https://nzhistory.govt.nz/people/james-k-baxter) — A concise biography of Baxter by the New Zealand state history website. (<https://nzhistory.govt.nz/people/james-k-baxter>)
- [Masculinity and Stoicism](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-narcissus-in-all-us/201604/why-bottling-emotions-is-central-masculinity) — An article from Psychology Today on why men (like the speaker's grandfather) often bottle up their emotions. (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-narcissus-in-all-us/201604/why-bottling-emotions-is-central-masculinity>)
- [Elegies](https://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/elegy) — A discussion of the history and characteristics of the elegy poetic form. (<https://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/elegy>)



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