

The Trees are Down



POEM TEXT

*—and he cried with a loud voice:
Hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees—
(Revelation)*

- 1 They are cutting down the great plane-trees at the end of the gardens.
- 2 For days there has been the grate of the saw, the swish of the branches as they fall,
- 3 The crash of the trunks, the rustle of trodden leaves,
- 4 With the 'Whoops' and the 'Whoas,' the loud common talk, the loud common laughs of the men, above it all.
- 5 I remember one evening of a long past Spring
- 6 Turning in at a gate, getting out of a cart, and finding a large dead rat in the mud of the drive.
- 7 I remember thinking: alive or dead, a rat was a god-forsaken thing,
- 8 But at least, in May, that even a rat should be alive.
- 9 The week's work here is as good as done. There is just one bough
- 10 On the roped bole, in the fine grey rain,
- 11 Green and high
- 12 And lonely against the sky.
- 13 (Down now!—)
- 14 And but for that,
- 15 If an old dead rat
- 16 Did once, for a moment, unmake the Spring, I might never have thought of him again.
- 17 It is not for a moment the Spring is unmade to-day;
- 18 These were great trees, it was in them from root to stem:
- 19 When the men with the 'Whoops' and the 'Whoas' have carted the whole of the whispering loveliness away
- 20 Half the Spring, for me, will have gone with them.
- 21 It is going now, and my heart has been struck with the hearts of the planes;
- 22 Half my life it has beat with these, in the sun, in the rains,
- 23 In the March wind, the May breeze,
- 24 In the great gales that came over to them across the

roofs from the great seas.

- 25 There was only a quiet rain when they were dying;
- 26 They must have heard the sparrows flying,
- 27 And the small creeping creatures in the earth where they were lying—
- 28 But I, all day, I heard an angel crying:
- 29 'Hurt not the trees.'



SUMMARY

An unspecified group of people is cutting down grand trees at the furthest part of a group of gardens. They have been doing so for days, causing a ruckus that includes saws grinding against the trees, branches swishing to the ground, crashing tree trunks, and leaves that rustle as they are trampled. These sounds are accompanied by the "whoops" and "whoas" of male workers who talk and laugh crudely and loudly as they cut down the trees, their voices dominating the site.

The speaker is reminded of a Spring night years ago, when the speaker entered a gate, stepped out of a carriage, and came upon a big rat lying dead in a muddy driveway. The speaker recalls thinking that rats are wretched no matter if they are alive or dead, but that even a rat ought to be alive in May.

The workers' task for the week is drawing to a close—essentially done. There is a single limb remaining on the last tree trunk that is marked with rope (to designate that it will be cut down). The tall, green branch is lonely in the grey sky, from which delicate raindrops fall. A worker calls out, "Down now!," indicating that the men are cutting down the final tree. If it wasn't for this incident with the trees, the speaker would never have thought of the rat again, as it disrupted Spring's atmosphere of liveliness and renewal for just a moment.

However, on this day, that atmosphere is disrupted on a much greater scale. The trees that have been cut down were large and magnificent, and Spring lived within them, from the trees' roots to their stems. From the speaker's perspective, half of the Spring will disappear when the loud, crude men carry the rustling, beautiful remnants of the trees away.

Now the trees' remains are being carted off, and this hurts the speaker's heart, as if the speaker has been struck to the core like the trees have. The speaker's heart has beat along with those of the trees for half of the speaker's life, across many seasons, weathering March winds, May breezes, and powerful gusts that traveled to the trees from the sea across rooftops.

There was only the quiet sound of rain as the trees were dying. The trees must have heard sparrows flitting about and little creatures creeping through the earth where they lay. All day the speaker heard the cries of an angel, calling out "Hurt not the trees."



THEMES



THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NATURE AND HUMANKIND

Mew wrote "The Trees are Down" in reaction to workers cutting down plane trees in London's Euston Square Gardens during the early 1920s. The poem's speaker provides an account of the trees' destruction that both suggests that the natural world must be cherished and illustrates humankind's failure to do so. In this way, the speaker implicitly argues that humankind's destructive approach to nature is unjust because it fails to recognize the majesty of all living things.

The speaker presents the natural world as a living entity that is worthy of reverence. The poem opens and concludes with a quote from the Bible's Book of Revelation, which discusses the apocalypse. In the quote, an angel shouts, "Hurt not the earth, nor the sea, nor the trees" (Revelation 7:3). The speaker's invocation of scripture implies that treating the earth with care is humankind's godly duty. Throughout the poem, the speaker describes the trees in positive terms. They are first presented as "great plane-trees," and the speaker uses the adjective "great" again in line 18, praising both their stature and their virtue. The last tree standing is characterized as "green," indicating that it is healthy and fertile, "and high," emphasizing its stature and using religious imagery to subtly associate the tree with the heavens.

The speaker also humanizes the trees by describing them as "lonely" and "whispering" to evoke the reader's empathy. The speaker's own heart "has beat with these [trees]," creating a sense of kinship between the two. In fact, the speaker states that "even a rat should be alive" in spring to suggest that *all* living things are worthy of compassion. Thus, the language and references that the speaker uses to describe the trees elevate and dignify them, advocating their worthiness of respect and admiration.

At the same time, the speaker consistently calls out the cruelty with which "the men" cut down the trees. The speaker uses violent language to underscore the brutality with which people act. For example, the poem opens with the straightforward statement, "They are cutting," before then providing brutal details, which include "the grate of the saw" and "the crash of the trunks." Similarly, a tree trunk is described as "roped," evoking bondage. The trees are also shown "dying," explicitly charging the men with killing them, and doing so in a drawn-out

way at that. Indeed, the speaker says that the men have "struck...the hearts of the planes."

The speaker's despair surrounding the death of the trees also broadens to a more general indictment of the irreversible damage humankind does to God's earth. Line 17 reads, "It is not for a moment the Spring is unmade to-day," meaning that the men have disturbed nature's cycle not "for a moment" but instead in a significant, lasting way. In the Christian tradition, spring has long been a symbol of new life and spiritual renewal. Thus, the speaker suggests that the men defy God's will by perpetuating death rather than celebrating revival.

Yet in the face of violent destruction, the men appear happy and unbothered, a [juxtaposition](#) that plays up their cruelty. The speaker hears "the loud common laughs of the men, above it all." In this context, the descriptor "common" means vulgar or unrefined, but it also conveys that the men are desensitized and view their task as ordinary. The addition of "above it all" indicates that the men's voices are louder than the sound of the trees falling and dying—yet another way in which they dominate nature. It also suggests that the men see themselves as more important than the trees, figuratively "above" them.

By placing images that cast the trees as lively and noble next to examples of the men's cruelty throughout the poem, the speaker calls on the reader to recognize the injustice of the men's—and of humankind's—actions. In doing so, the speaker resists the normalization of humankind's environmental destruction.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-29



THE UBIQUITY OF DEATH

Descriptions of death and its impact pervade "The Trees are Down," which can be interpreted as a reflection of the poem's emphasis on the ubiquity of death. The speaker's account of the trees' drawn-out slaughter calls attention to the inevitability of death, as well as death's widespread impact and the universality of the speaker's painful experience. As such, the speaker's narration displays death's ever-presence and inescapability, for both nature and humanity.

As the plane trees disappear one by one, the speaker recognizes the inevitability of their death. The speaker's opening description of the trees' demolition reads, "They are cutting" and goes on to use the phrase "For days," implying a prolonged process. The speaker later says that "the week's work here is as good as done." This language indicates an awareness of each tree's tragic outcome as they are cut down one by one, as well as an inability to prevent it. This reality is so painful that the speaker appears to look away, choosing to

describe the sounds of the men and the falling trees rather than describe the action visually. The speaker does not need to bear direct witness to their demise, as the speaker is certain that each plane tree will fall. Thus, the speaker's descriptions highlight the inevitability of the tree's death.

The speaker also links discrete living things, using their connectedness to reveal the widespread impact of an individual death. For example, the speaker's own heart has "beat with [the trees]" across many seasons. That same "heart has been struck with the heart of the planes," demonstrating the profound pain that the speaker feels when the trees die. The speaker is even touched by the death of a rat, which "is a god-forsaken thing," according to the speaker. The speaker claims that spring "was in [the trees] from root to stem," indicating that the earth has nurtured the trees and lives within their every limb.

As the poem draws to a close, the speaker describes various natural forces that interact with the trees and will be impacted by their death: "quiet rain [...] sparrows flying [...] and the small creeping creatures in the earth where [the trees] were lying." Finally, the speaker concludes with a reference to the biblical passage that opens the poem, in which an angel cries out demanding that the earth, the sea, and the trees go unharmed. Again, the speaker ties together all of the world's elements, while also suggesting that death's impact reaches as far as the heavens, rippling outward to affect so much more than just the being that has died.

The speaker's experience of death is also universal because of the frequency with which living things encounter death, largely as a result of their connectedness. Even the last tree standing, described as "lonely," shares the speaker's grief, as it is aware of and disturbed by the death that surrounds it. A similar conclusion can be drawn from the description of various plants, creatures, and elements that bear witness to the trees' death in the final stanza. The speaker's recollection of a dead rat from "a long past Spring" also proves that death can be encountered at any time. Even those times associated with new life, during which it seems "that even a rat should be alive," are no exception.

The speaker's language when retelling the encounter with the dead rat is vague—"turning in at a gate, getting out of a cart." In fact, the speaker's language throughout the poem is highly generalized. Those who cut down the trees are referred to as "they" or "the men" and they engage in "loud common talk." These nonspecific characterizations are consistent with any number of men the reader—or most creatures, for that matter—might have encountered. Furthermore, the trees' appearance and locale are never detailed and the speaker's own biography remains a mystery. Due to such broad language, the speaker's descriptions of this traumatic experience become applicable to anyone and anything that has experienced the death of another.

The speaker's narration of the plane trees' death implies that

every human and every living thing—including the reader—will in some way be witness to and touched by death. And yet, in the poem, the omnipresence of death does nothing to diminish the anguish it causes. Everything in the natural world is touched by death and the pain it brings, the poem insists, which is all the more reason to fight against *untimely* death, such as that of the rat and trees.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-29



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

They are cutting down the great plane-trees at the end of the gardens.

For days there has been the grate of the saw, the swish of the branches as they fall,

*The crash of the trunks, the rustle of trodden leaves,
With the 'Whoops' and the 'Whoas,' the loud common talk,
the loud common laughs of the men, above it all.*

"The Trees are Down" opens with a quote from the Book of Revelation, in which an unnamed figure calls out a command not to hurt the earth, sea, or trees. This passage's broader biblical context is explored in the Vocabulary & References section. But even without background information, the quote provides some insight into the coming poem's themes, namely humankind's destruction of nature and the connectedness of all living things.

The first line of the poem itself makes a very plain statement that an unidentified group of people is cutting down trees in a garden. In contrast to the remainder of the poem, line 1 does not contain an [end rhyme](#). (Even the last word of line 3 rhymes with the poem's title and [epigraph](#).) It also does not contain the [caesurae](#) that will come to define the poem's structure. As a result, the poem's opening statement comes across as direct and authoritative, functioning as a brief break from both scripture and verse to establish the speaker's credibility. It also contains three [stressed](#) syllables in a row, which fall on "the great plane trees," immediately establishing the poem's subject.

The speaker goes on to list all of the sounds that emanate from the demolition site. These lines heavily feature [onomatopoeic](#) language, including "grate," "crash," "swish," and "rustle," words whose sounds seem to imitate what they describe. The noises that these words imitate resound throughout the stanza due to [assonance](#) and [consonance](#):

For days there has been the grate of the saw, the
swish of the branches as they fall,
The crash of the trunks, the rustle of trodden leaves,

Sibilant /s/, /z/, and /sh/ sounds clash with **cacophonous** /t/ and /k/ sounds here and elsewhere throughout the poem. The tension between hard and soft that they create mirrors the workers' cruel interruption of nature's beauty. Additionally, the **homophone** pair "grate" and "great" as well as the men's "Whoops" and "Whoas" contribute to the chorus of discordant sounds.

The speaker uses ambiguous language such as "a garden" and "the men," which reflects the commonness of the images that the speaker describes. Plus, the sounds listed above could originate from any number of worksites. Therefore, the dense, layered cluster of sounds adds a sense of dimension to the setting, while allowing the reader's imagination and memory to fill in the gaps. Sound will continue to play a central role in characterizing the poem's setting and establishing its mood.

The ongoing activity indicated by phrases like "for days" and "they are cutting" emphasizes the drawn-out nature of the demolition and hints at the trees' ultimate fate. Repetition in the form of **parallelism** and **anaphora** stylistically reflects this idea of continuing action. The parallel sentence structure in lines 2-3 within "grate of the," "swish of the," etc. creates a repeating **metrical** pattern. Each phrase features an **iamb** followed by an **anapest** (unstressed stressed | unstressed unstressed stressed):

For days | there has been | the grate | of the saw, | the
swish | of the bran- | ches as | they fall
The crash | of the trunks, | the rus- | tle of trod- | den
leaves,

These repeating stress patterns build momentum and anticipation, driving the poem forward.

Meanwhile, caesurae distinguish each sound and instance of parallelism, while **asyndeton** strings them together so that they flow into one another without any conjunctions, creating an echoing chorus. The repetition in line 4 also amplifies the workers' "loud common talk" and makes it more "common" via repetition, ensuring that the workers' presence is felt.

LINES 5-8

*I remember one evening of a long past Spring
Turning in at a gate, getting out of a cart, and finding a large
dead rat in the mud of the drive.
I remember thinking: alive or dead, a rat was a god-forsaken
thing,
But at least, in May, that even a rat should be alive.*

The poem's second stanza marks a shift in time and place, as the speaker reflects on a years-old memory. The speaker recalls stumbling upon a large rat, lying dead in a muddy road, one spring evening. The stanza breaks before and after this scene structurally distinguish it from the surrounding events, while **enjambment** gives line 5 the appearance of drifting off. These

visual markers subtly reinforce the fact that the memory takes place outside of the poem's main narrative timeline. Furthermore, the phrase "long past Spring" receives three **stresses**, drawing attention to the shift in time. The repetition of "I remember," an example of **anaphora**, has a similar effect because it reminds the reader that the events described took place long ago.

The speaker's insistent "I remember" stands in contrast to the lack of detail provided—"turning in at a gate, getting out of a cart." What gate? What cart? The speaker leaves this unspecified. However, the ambiguity calls more attention to what the speaker *does* remember. The image of the rat and the thought that it should have been alive in spring stick with the speaker. The speaker references spring twice in this passage, the second time with the interjection "in May." The **caesurae** that separate this phrase call attention to it, making it clear that the speaker is disturbed by the *springtime setting* of the rat's death.

Both the rat and the spring will reappear later in the poem, and this memory sets up their **symbolic** meanings. The rat is a representation of unjust death, as the speaker believes "that even a rat should be alive" in May. In the Christian tradition, which the **epigraph** evokes, spring is a symbol of rebirth and spiritual renewal. As the speaker believes that the spring is an unsuitable time for death, this symbolic meaning is consistent with the speaker's perspective. The **juxtaposition** of these two symbols hints at one of the poem's main messages—death is inescapable.

Finally, the repeating grammatical structures in line 6 features a repeating **metrical** pattern—two **trochees** followed by an **iamb**: stressed unstressed | stressed unstressed | unstressed stressed. This pattern occurs in the phrase "Turning | in at | a gate," and again in "getting | out of | a cart." This pattern is then broken in the phrase "a large dead rat." The three stresses that land on "large dead rat," as well as their break from the established rhythm, draw attention to this grisly **image**. At the same time, the **parallelism** and its corresponding pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables create momentum and anticipation that culminates in that image. Furthermore, parallelism results in a series of verbs with "-ing" endings, which resonate with each other sonically, lending the stanza musicality and tying it together.

LINES 9-12

*The week's work here is as good as done. There is just one
bough
On the roped bole, in the fine grey rain,
Green and high
And lonely against the sky.*

The first half of stanza 3 describes the last tree standing, opening with the direct statement, "The week's work here is as good as done." This straightforward language lays bare the

inevitability of the final tree's death. Setting the scene, the speaker contrasts the grandness of the tree, which is "Green and high" with the "fine grey rain" that reflects its hostile environment. The falling rain subtly hints that the poem's present events take place in the springtime.

The speaker [personifies](#) the tree by describing it as "lonely," which suggests the tree's own awareness, as well as disapproval of the workers' action and an inability to stop them. When the tree exhibits such a common human emotion, the reader is more empowered to empathize with its situation. The personification also suggests that all living things have shared experiences, with death being the most universal. The text's structure mirrors the loneliness it describes, as the lines gradually shorten and shift rightward, creating a stout column (or *trunk*) that visually stands apart from the rest of the poem. The brevity of the lines, especially in combination with [enjambment](#) and [caesura](#), creates a rhythm that starts and stops abruptly. Its choppiness reflects the dismembered trees and slows the reader down, calling attention to the solemn scene.

There is a high concentration of [metrical stresses](#) in this passage, which elongates many syllables and results in a slower pace to reflect the gloomy mood. Here is a closer look at lines 9-10:

The week's work here is as good as done. There is
just one bough
On the roped bole, in the fine grey rain

Furthermore, [assonance](#), or repeating vowel sounds, exaggerates the slow pace by placing additional emphasis on stressed syllables. For example, take /uh/ in "done" and "just one," /oh/ in "roped bole," and /ay/ in "grey rain." [Consonant](#) sounds, such as /w/ in "weeks work," have a similar effect. And, beginning in line 10, there is a prevalent /n/ sound that continues through the end of the stanza. This high concentration of consonant sound is unique to the stanza and therefore draws further attention to the sinister moment in which the plane trees are wholly terminated.

LINES 13-16

*(Down now!—)
And but for that,
If an old dead rat
Did once, for a moment, unmake the Spring, I might never
have thought of him again.*

The second half of stanza 3 is a continuation of the scene in which the last tree is cut down. These lines announce the death of the final tree and provide evidence of its impact on the speaker. The structure of this passage is essentially an inversion of the stanza's first half—now that the final bough has fallen, the lines expand, resembling the various roots and limbs

that branch off of it. While the last line is relatively long, it contains [caesurae](#) to maintain the choppy rhythm established by the short lines that precede it.

Instead of describing the appearance of the tree as it falls, the speaker records the shouts of the workers—"Down now!" This decision emphasizes the workers' role in the trees' destruction, while also implying that the speaker looks away, unable to bear watching. The parentheses that surround the exclamation set it apart from the rest of the poem. It becomes a visual and thematic turning point—a point of no return after which it is impossible to deny the trees' fate. Repeating /ow/ and /n/ sounds ("Down now"), examples of [assonance](#) and [consonance](#), place additional emphasis on this line's two [stressed](#) syllables.

Furthermore, this passage contains [cacophony](#) but very little [sibilance](#). Harsh, percussive /d/, /p/, /k/, and /t/ sounds contribute to the scene's discordant atmosphere. Here is a closer look at line 19:

Did once, for a moment, unmake the Spring, I might
never have thought of him again.

As mentioned in the previous entry (Lines 9-12), there is an abundance of /n/ sounds in this stanza, which draws the reader's attention by creating sonic intensity. These sounds are often associated with negation, appearing here in "never" and the prefix "un-," which is consistent with the passage's fatalistic atmosphere. That is, their repetition calls attention to how dead things "unmake the Spring," which is a central idea within the poem.

According to the speaker, the rat "unmake[s]" or undermines the spring only "for a moment." In other words, the speaker initially finds the rat's death disturbing because it is at odds with the speaker's idea of spring—which is meant to bring about new life—but the speaker quickly moves on and forgets about the incident. The rat is "god-forsaken" and insignificant; it destroys spring only briefly. These lines also reveal that, if it wasn't for the trees' death, the speaker "might never have thought of [the rat] again." The trees' death changes the speaker's perspective by causing the speaker to reflect on a minor, obscure memory that would otherwise have been forgotten. Although the rat once seemed unimportant, the speaker now believes it worthy of respect and consideration.

Thus, the demolition of the trees has greatly impacted the speaker, prompting a reevaluation of *all* living things, no matter how seemingly "god-forsaken" they might be.

LINES 17-20

*It is not for a moment the Spring is unmade to-day;
These were great trees, it was in them from root to stem:
When the men with the 'Whoops' and the 'Whoas' have
carted the whole of the whispering loveliness away
Half the Spring, for me, will have gone with them.*

Stanza 4 is a direct response to the lines that precede it. The speaker claims that the trees' death "unmake[s]" the spring "not for a moment," as the dead rat had, but on a much greater scale. The speaker explains that their demolition disrupts spring because spring lives within the trees "from root to stem." In fact, in line 18, the speaker uses [asyndeton](#) (excluding the word "and") to link the trees' greatness with the Spring that has nurtured them, presenting the season as a positive, life-giving force.

Thus, the springtime backdrop makes their death appear all the more tragic and untimely. As a result, from the speaker's perspective, when the last tree has been carted off, much of Spring will vanish, too. The phrase "for me," set apart by commas, emphasizes the personal loss that the speaker feels and the profound impact that the trees' death has on the speaker's worldview.

Line 19, in which the speaker imagines the workers carrying the trees away, is one of the poem's longest lines. It is also [enjambéd](#) and contains no [caesurae](#), meaning that there is no end punctuation or internal punctuation. Therefore, the line appears lengthy and continuous, lingering out in space and flowing into the next line. Its structure reflects the speaker's assessment that the distortion of Spring is "not for a moment" and will have lasting ramifications.

The term "whispering" does a lot of work within these lines. First, it creates an image of the trees murmuring amongst themselves, able to perceive and respond to the circumstances that they find themselves in. Such language [personifies](#) the trees, humanizing them so that the reader can relate to them more easily, evoking empathy. As a result, the tragedy of the trees' death and the suffering that the speaker experiences become more palpable. Second, "whispering" is an example of onomatopoeia. Thus, it works in conjunction with [assonance](#) and [consonance](#), as well as the workers' "whoops" and "woahs," to animate the scene through sound.

The soft, [sibilant](#) sounds within "whispering" reflect the gentleness and beauty of nature. As such, the opposition of sibilance and [cacophony](#) in line 19 mirrors the tension between nature and humankind: "carted the whole of the whispering loveliness away." Finally, this stanza also contains a great deal of assonance, particularly among long /ay/, long and short /e/, and long /oh/ sounds. For example:

It is not for a moment the Spring is unmade to-day;
These were great trees, it was in them from root to stem:
When the men with the 'Whoops' and the 'Whoas'
have carted the whole of the whispering loveliness away

The repetition of these vowel sounds increases the stanza's musicality. The assonance also creates slant rhymes that

craftily link the men to the trees. (See, for example, "them," "stem," "when," "men," and "them" again, and "'Whoas" and "whole".) Their sonic harmony expresses the connectedness of all living things, even those that may seem at odds.

LINES 21-24

*It is going now, and my heart has been struck with the hearts
of the planes;
Half my life it has beat with these, in the sun, in the rains,
In the March wind, the May breeze,
In the great gales that came over to them across the roofs
from the great seas.*

The poem's final stanza opens with Spring's departure ("It is going now"), indicating that the remnants of the trees are all but gone. Their disappearance pains the speaker, who has lived alongside the trees for many years and lists various weather conditions that they have endured together. The speaker uses these conditions as evidence of their persistent, longstanding bond, through good times ("in the sun") and bad ("in the rains"). The escalation over the course of lines 23-24 from "wind" to a "breeze" to "great gales" can be seen as a reflection of the increasing hardships that they have faced together. This [symbol](#) adds depth and validity to their close relationship, which makes the speaker's loss more tangible and heartbreaking.

The speaker also uses hearts as a symbol of the speaker's relationship with the trees, saying that they have "beat" together. This image of life simultaneously surging through the speaker and the trees speaks to their kinship. The [onomatopoeia](#)-like quality of "beat," exaggerated by the long /e/ sounds in lines 22-23, puts additional force behind the corporeal image, giving the impression of a pumping heart. The speaker also tells of their hearts being "struck," which has a similar sonic effect, but more violent connotations. This description of the trees' death is shocking and impactful due to the graphic, bodily imagery that [personifies](#), or humanizes, the trees.

This language also ascribes human emotions to the trees, as the speaker's "struck" heart suggests emotional pain, which the trees apparently share because they are struck too. The speaker's emotional strife, arising from conflict between humankind and nature, can be observed in the tension between [sibilance](#) and [cacophony](#) that reappears in lines 21-22:

It is going now, and my heart has been struck with
the hearts of the planes;
Half my life it has beat with these, in the sun, in the
rains,

As elsewhere throughout the poem, the clash of soft, flowing sounds with abrupt, harsh sounds mirrors the workers' thoughtless destruction of nature's beauty.

The phrase "in the" introduces each of the weather patterns

that the speaker's lists, creating both [anaphora](#) and [parallelism](#). These forms of repetition govern the passage's rhythms of [stressed](#) syllables. Line 21 contains an abundance of [anapests](#) (unstressed-unstressed-stressed), which quicken the poem's pace:

[...] and my heart | has been struck | with the hearts |
of the planes;

Anapests feature in line 22 as well: "in the sun, | in the rains."

In contrast, lines 23-24 contain [spondees](#) (stressed-stressed) in the phrases "March wind," "May breeze," and "great seas."

These spondees bring about a slight downshift in speed due to an increase in stressed syllables.

The various forms of repetition create rhythmic momentum to mirror the idea that the speaker and the trees have cycled through many seasons together, over and over again. Both [rhyme](#) and [asyndeton](#) perpetuate the effect. The [end rhymes](#) in this quatrain are much closer together than those of the preceding stanzas, making them more apparent. This reinforces the poem's rhythm by exaggerating stresses, and it contributes to the repetition of similar sounds within the passage.

[Asyndeton](#), on the other hand, allows the list of items to flow smoothly from one to the next in lines 22-24. Plus, the [anaphora](#) of "in the" before each item draws the list out significantly, suggesting a relationship that has existed for a long time. All of the poetic devices and linguistic choices discussed above indicate that the speaker and the trees have a deep bond, which gives the reader insight into the speaker's pain.

LINES 25-29

*There was only a quiet rain when they were dying;
They must have heard the sparrows flying,
And the small creeping creatures in the earth where they
were lying—
But I, all day, I heard an angel crying:
'Hurt not the trees.'*

As the poem draws to a close, the speaker imagines what the trees' final moments must have been like. The speaker describes "quiet rain," and the sounds of "sparrows flying, / And the small creeping creatures" that inhabit the earth around the trees. The speaker, however, hears the incessant cries of an angel, who commands, "Hurt not the trees." This cry references the Bible verse that also serves as the poem's epigraph.

The angel is, of course, a [symbol](#) of Christianity, and his message suggests that hurting trees runs counter to Christian morality. Although his command not to harm the trees is repeated "all day" and lingers at the poem's conclusion, the trees within the poem are already gone. The reader's powerlessness to follow the command and prevent the death of trees within the context of the poem mirrors the helplessness

of the speaker, who watches in agony as the trees slowly die.

The [caesurae](#) surrounding "all day" draw attention to the prolonged nature of the speaker's suffering. As the trees' destruction is inevitable, the command can be interpreted in a few ways. First, the speaker is haunted by the trees' destruction, unable to shake a sense of personal responsibility. Second, the speaker is pleading with whoever will listen—perhaps with God, but definitely with the reader—to protect the Earth. Third, the angel knows that humankind's destruction of nature is inevitable but still calls on the pious to recognize the value of all living things. (This final interpretation is consistent with the verse's broader biblical context, which is discussed in both the Symbols and Vocabulary & References sections.)

Much like the rest of the poem, this stanza focuses heavily on sound. The speaker [personifies](#) the trees by imagining what they "hear" as they die. The speaker's decision to describe sounds comes across as a refusal to confront the gruesome "sights" that the dying trees might encounter. Still, the speaker discusses the trees' final moments as if they have a sensory experience of their death, or are able to *feel* it. Thus, their humanization suggests that they are susceptible to grisly sensations as well, making their death all the more disturbing and sad.

Lines 25-29 have a repetitive rhythm that is uniquely consistent, in comparison to other parts of the poem. Each of these lines ends in four [trochees](#) (stressed unstressed), creating a steady trod to the poem's conclusion. Here's a closer look at lines 25-26:

There was | only a | quiet | rain when | they were |
dying;
They | must have | heard the | sparrows | flying,

The lack of caesura in lines 25-27 and the repetition of the stress pattern allows the rhythm to steadily gain momentum. Plus, relative to the lines that immediately surround it, line 27 is fairly long, building additional anticipation.

[Assonance](#) and [consonance](#) work together to create repeating sounds in "creeping creatures," which reinforces the rhythm by adding additional emphasis to syllables that receive [metrical](#) stress. The repetition of "-ing" verb forms (called participles) at the end of lines 25-28 has a similar effect, creating strong rhymes that reinforce the repetitive rhythms. The "-ing" verbs also link the creatures together, forming a harmonious network of living beings. The side-by-side placement of each lifeform, with the help of [parallelism](#), equalizes them, reflecting the speaker's newfound perspective that *all* living things are interconnected and valuable.

The caesurae that separate "all day" from rest of the sentence briefly interrupt the established cadence, slowing the pace and

demanding attention as the reader approaches the poem's final line. The momentum that has accumulated culminates in a dramatic break from the trends laid out above, most notably due to the final line's short length. It also has a high concentration of stressed syllables ("Hurt not the trees"), which puts emphatic force behind its declaration.

The directness of the line, aided by its brevity and stresses, gives it an heir of authority. (It is, after all, a reference to the Bible, which carries its own weight.) The break from the repetitive rhymes of lines 25-28 also draws attention to this final line and particularly to the word "trees," which rhymes with "seas" and "breeze" from earlier in the stanza and resonates with the poem's title and epigraph. Similarly to the "ing" verbs, this chorus of resonant sounds ties together the various elements of the earth, as well as the elements of the poem, reflecting the interconnectedness of nature.



SYMBOLS



SPRING

Spring is traditionally a [symbol](#) for life and rebirth. The poem employs that symbolism, while also adding its own sense of the cruelty of death.

Spring marks a shift from dormancy to growth and liveliness in the natural world. According to Christian thought, Jesus rose from the dead in spring, furthering its associations with rebirth and renewal. The speaker sets the poem in both a present-day and a past spring, referencing its months, weather patterns, and nurturing ability. However, the speaker presents a contrast between this vivacious perception of spring and the heart-wrenching loss of life that the speaker witnesses—first that of the rat and later that of the trees.

According to the speaker, such deaths defy, or "unmake," spring, throwing nature off of its habitual course. So although death might be one of life's most natural occurrences, its placement within a spring landscape causes the loss to feel *unnatural* and particularly disturbing. Thus, the speaker employs this widely known symbol for life and renewal to stress the cruelty of the trees' death, as well as the inescapability of death, no matter the season. Furthermore, by challenging the common perception that Spring always brings about new life, the speaker expands its symbolic meaning to include darker elements.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "Spring"
- **Line 8:** "May"
- **Line 16:** "Spring"
- **Line 17:** "Spring"

- **Line 18:** "it"
- **Line 20:** "Spring"
- **Line 21:** "It"
- **Line 23:** "March," "May"



THE RAT

The rat in the poem [symbolizes](#) the injustice of untimely death. Although death may be inevitable, the speaker argues that even the lowliest creatures, such as rats, don't deserve to die cruelly.

In stanza 2, the speaker recounts a years-old memory of coming upon "a large dead rat" lying in a muddy road on a spring evening. The speaker remembers thinking that although rats are vile, they, like all creatures, ought to be alive during the spring months. As a result, the rat becomes a symbol of unjust, untimely death. The speaker's description of it as "a god-forsaken thing" suggests that even the most dreadful and seemingly insignificant creatures should be allowed to live in the spring.

This sentiment is picked up again in lines 15-17, which state that the speaker would not have given the rat a second thought were it not for the trees' death. The rat is a wretched, relatively small creature, while the trees are grand and beautiful. But the speaker learns from the loss of the trees that all creatures are deserving of a lively spring and should be mourned. Thus, the rat stands in for all living things who are taken for granted and whose death is disregarded.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "rat"
- **Line 7:** "rat"
- **Line 8:** "rat"
- **Line 15:** "rat"
- **Line 16:** "him"



WEATHER

Weather acts as a complex and shifting [symbol](#) in the poem. In general, though, it can be said to represent the experiences of life that the speaker and the trees share.

References to weather appear frequently within the poem but are mostly concentrated in the final stanza, which lists all of the conditions that the speaker and the trees have lived through, side by side:

[...] in the sun, in the rains,
In the March wind, the May breeze,
In the great gales [...]

The rapid list of various weather patterns evokes a sense of

passing time and suggests that the speaker and the trees have endured (or "weathered") many life events together. Thus, they come to represent the longstanding shared experiences between the speaker and the trees. The escalation of air currents from wind to a breeze to gales can be interpreted as an intensification of the hardships that the speaker and the trees face before being confronted with the ultimate tragedy—the trees' demolition.

The speaker mentions rain twice more throughout the poem, and in each instance it serves as a gloomy backdrop for the trees' death, denoting loss and mourning. Line 10 mentions "fine grey rain," while the rain in line 25 is described as "quiet." This delicate language suggests that there is a subdued, darker side to the spring months that are typically associated with new life. Therefore, much like the wind discussed above, rain can be seen as a dreary emblem of the march towards the trees' death. So although its precise meaning shifts in different contexts, weather generally represents the difficult experiences shared by the trees and the speaker, and by extension, all living things.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "rain"
- **Line 22:** "sun," "rains"
- **Line 23:** "wind," "breeze"
- **Line 24:** "gales"
- **Line 25:** "rain"



HEARTS

Hearts traditionally [symbolize](#) emotion. The poem combines that symbolism with the sense that all living things have feelings. So, the hearts in the poem come to represent the interconnectedness of all things.

The final stanza states that the speaker's "heart has been struck with the hearts of the planes" and "has beat with" them. This graphic imagery indicates that the speaker feels the trees' physical pain as they are destroyed. The first, literal heart can also be interpreted as a stand-in for the speaker's emotions, creating continuity of both emotional *and* physical experience between the speaker and the trees.

In this way, the hearts represent the commonality amongst all beings. This symbolism enables a poignant description of pain because the concept of connectedness takes the form of a strong, vivid image that the reader can relate to.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 21:** "heart," "hearts"
- **Line 22:** "it," "these"



THE ANGEL

The angel that the speaker references is a figure in the Book of Revelation, which discusses the apocalypse. In this story, the moral failings of humankind have brought on God's wrath, which will ultimately be unleashed and cause great damage to the planet. The angel calls out to four others, each of whom holds one of the heaven's four winds at a different corner of the earth. The angel asks that they not wreak havoc on the planet until a number of devout Christians have been saved.

Within the poem, the angel directly ties environmental preservation to religious duty. As a savior of the pious who did not bring about the planet's ruin, he can be seen as a symbol of Christian morality in general, and the religious duty to be kind to the earth in particular. But he also acts as a harbinger of inevitable environmental decay at the hands of humankind, despite the efforts of a minority of good actors.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Before Line 1:** "he"
- **Line 28:** "angel"



POETIC DEVICES

ANAPHORA

"The Trees are Down" contains three examples of [anaphora](#), a form of [repetition](#) that generally adds structure to the poem and controls its pace. This device first appears in the poem's second sentence, which begins with a great deal of [parallelism](#)—"the grate of the ... the swish of the ... the crash of the ... the rustle of ..." Anaphora perpetuates the echoing effect, with "the loud common" appearing twice in close succession. The repetition of this phrase calls attention to its presence, making it "louder" or more prominent. Plus, the phrase becomes more "common" in that it appears more frequently, the anaphora reflecting the text's meaning.

Furthermore, this initial stanza's various forms of repetition, in conjunction with devices such as [onomatopoeia](#), establish an important trend that will persist throughout the poem: sound is used as an essential tool for adding depth to the setting and creating moody atmospheres in which to frame the poem's events.

Anaphora appears again in lines 5-7, where "I remember" introduces a scene from the speaker's past in which the speaker stumbles upon a "large dead rat." Here, repetition distinguishes the episode from the present action that surrounds it by placing its events firmly in the past. The reader later learns that the speaker would have forgotten this incident were it not for the trees, so the increased emphasis on the speaker's remembrance becomes a testament to the great

impact that the trees have on the speaker. In combination with the seven "-ing" endings scattered throughout these lines, anaphora also perpetuates the poem's repetitive but dynamic cadence.

Lines 22-24 describe the various environments through which the speaker and the trees have lived side-by-side, their hearts "beating" together. Each month and weather condition is introduced by "in the," which helps to build speed and momentum as the short clauses roll into one another, aided by [asyndeton](#). The repeating phrase gives the impression that the seasons have been cycled through over and over again, giving longevity and credibility to the speaker's relationship with the trees. As a result of the strong bond that the anaphora implies, the intensity of the speaker's suffering becomes more evident.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "the loud common," "the loud common"
- **Line 5:** "I remember"
- **Line 7:** "I remember"
- **Line 22:** "in the," "in the"
- **Line 23:** "In the," "the"
- **Line 24:** "In the"

ASSONANCE

The [assonant](#) sounds within this poem tend to appear in concentrated groupings, the first of which spans lines 1-3. Here, the speaker uses [onomatopoeic](#) terms to describe the noises coming from the gardens. The assonance echoes these sounds—the long /ay/ of grate, the /ah/ of crash, and the /uh/ of rustle:

They are cutting down the great plane-trees at the end of the gardens.
For days there has been the grate of the saw, the swish of the branches as they fall,
The crash of the trunks, the rustle of trodden leaves,

This dense, reverberating cluster of sounds at the poem's outset paints a vivid picture of the setting, situating the reader. There is also a great deal of repeating consonant sounds in this section, heightening the effect (for more details, see this guide's entry on [consonance](#)).

Later, assonance reinforces the unique rhythm of stanza 3, where each assonant sound occurs within a stressed syllable. Here is a closer look at lines 9-10:

The week's work here is as good as done. There is just one bough
On the roped bole, in the fine grey rain,

The repeating vowel sounds place additional emphasis on the

stressed syllables, exaggerating the rhythm. The assonance also slows the reader down, due to the high concentration of stressed syllables, which become elongated. These drawn-out, repetitive vowel sounds create a slow, somber cadence that matches the tragic death they describe. Furthermore, assonance allows this section to retain a degree of musicality and harmony, despite its choppy punctuation and line breaks.

Assonance plays a similar role in the final two stanzas, reinforcing the meter and drawing attention to important ideas. Repeating long /ay/, short /eh/, and long /oh/ sounds appear in stanza 4:

These were great trees, it was in them from root to stem:
When the men with the 'Whoops' and the 'Whoas'
have carted the whole ...

The assonance here creates moments of internal rhyme, again adding to the intense musicality of these lines. The same can be said for the final stanza especially lines 27 and 28:

And the small creeping creatures in the earth where they were lying—
But I, all day, I heard an angel crying:

Assonance of /ee/, /ay/, and long and short /i/ sounds reinforces the building rhythm of these lines—but this assonance then abruptly stops with the final line of the poem. This makes that final line—the commandment to "Hurt not the trees"—stand out all the more starkly.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "They," "great," "plane"
- **Line 2:** "days," "grate," "saw," "as," "they," "fall"
- **Line 3:** "crash," "trunks," "rustle," "trodden"
- **Line 4:** "common," "talk," "common," "all"
- **Line 6:** "drive"
- **Line 7:** "I," "alive"
- **Line 8:** "least," "even," "be"
- **Line 9:** "week's," "here," "done," "just one"
- **Line 10:** "roped bole," "fine," "grey rain"
- **Line 11:** "high"
- **Line 12:** "sky"
- **Line 13:** "Down now"
- **Line 14:** "that"
- **Line 15:** "rat"
- **Line 16:** "I might"
- **Line 18:** "These," "trees," "them," "stem"
- **Line 19:** "When," "men," "Whoas," "whole"
- **Line 21:** "planes"
- **Line 22:** "my life," "beat," "these," "rains"
- **Line 23:** "May," "breeze"

- **Line 24:** “great gales,” “came,” “great,” “seas”
- **Line 25:** “quiet,” “rain,” “they,” “dying”
- **Line 26:** “flying”
- **Line 27:** “creeping creatures,” “they,” “lying”
- **Line 28:** “I,” “day,” “I,” “angel,” “crying”

ASYNDETON

“The Trees are Down” employs [asyndeton](#) primarily as a means to control the poem’s pace. This method first appears in lines 2-4, which list the various sounds that the speaker hears emanating from the worksite. The use of commas rather than conjunctions creates the impression of distinct sounds set side-by-side. At the same time, [repetition](#) in the form of [parallelism](#) (“grate of the ... swish of the ...” etc.) and [anaphora](#) (“the loud common ... the loud common”) build speed through recurring rhythms. As a result, one [onomatopoeic](#) term surges into the next, creating a chorus of discordant sounds. Plus, the only mention of time or duration in this stanza is the phrase “for days.” Asyndeton contributes to the portrayal of sustained, ongoing action by shifting the poem’s focus seamlessly from one image of the trees’ demolition to another.

A similar effect occurs in lines 22-24, which take stock of the many shared experiences between the speaker and the trees. This passage features a familiar combination of parallelism, asyndeton, and anaphora that results in repetitive rhythms. In turn, momentum mounts alongside the list of weather conditions. This momentum both builds anticipation and gives the impression of one month or season cycling into the next over and over again. The fluid cadence of these lines implies a persistent, longstanding relationship between the speaker and the trees, validating their connection and giving it depth.

The pace of stanza 3 breaks with that of the rest of the poem. It reads far choppy, due to shortened lines, [enjambment](#), and various forms of punctuation, all of which create a starting and stopping effect. These lines discuss workers cutting down the lone remaining tree and resemble the trunk that they describe. The decision to use commas over conjunctions in line 10 allows for a somewhat longer line, so that the shape of the poem gradually tapers without sacrificing the choppy rhythm. Furthermore, the asyndeton bridges this section with the preceding text, easing the reader into the shifting tempo.

Finally, the asyndeton in line 18 directly links the trees’ greatness to the Spring that is “in them from root to stem.” This connection reinforces the speaker’s characterization of Spring as a powerful and essential force of life. As a result, the speaker’s assessment that springtime deaths “unmake” or undermine the Spring rings true. It follows that the trees’ own springtime death appears ever more unjust.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** “the grate of the saw, the swish of the branches as they fall, / The crash of the trunks, the rustle”
- **Line 4:** “the ‘Whoops’ and the ‘Whoas,’ the loud common talk, the loud common laughs”
- **Line 10:** “On the roped bole, in the fine grey rain,”
- **Line 18:** “These were great trees, it was in them”
- **Lines 22-24:** “in the sun, in the rains, / In the March wind, the May breeze, / In the great gales”

CAESURA

Largely due to its long-limbed structure, this poem contains many examples of [caesura](#). The abundance of internal punctuation serves two main purposes. First, it commands the pace of the poem, and second, it visually and structurally reflects the poem’s main ideas.

With regard to the first effect, caesurae can both aid and inhibit the poem’s natural flow, causing its pace to gain momentum or become fragmented. In the first and last stanzas, caesurae replace conjunctions, a device known as [asyndeton](#), and enable repetitive sentence structures, known as [parallelism](#). Both of these passages (lines 2-4, “For days ... it all” and lines 22-24 (“Half my life ... great seas”)) consist of lists that unfold over the course of several lines but are contained within one sentence. The rhythmic repetition within these strings of sounds and images builds increasing momentum, while the commas that connect them result in a seamless flow. Therefore, in this context, caesurae quicken the poem’s pace.

However, brief interjections separated by commas—such as “in May” in line 8, “for me” in line 20, and “all day” in line 28—break the poem’s cadence. Such abrupt interruptions slow the reader down, drawing additional attention to these isolated phrases and the important ideas that they qualify. Moreover, the pervasiveness of internal punctuation causes the lines that lack caesurae to feel very long, further manipulating the poem’s pace. The straightforward structures of these lines—take lines 1, 5 (“I remember ...”), and 26 (“They must have heard the sparrows ...”), for example—cause their messages to come across as direct and authoritative.

Caesurae also visually and syntactically fragment the poem’s lines, whose variations in length resemble the organic growth of a tree. In general, the poem has a substantial amount of punctuation, including [end stops](#), parentheses, dashes, and colons, all of which segment the text. Therefore, much like the workers who cut down the trees, caesurae fracture the poem’s lines.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “saw, the”
- **Line 3:** “trunks, the”
- **Line 4:** “‘Whoas,’ the,” “talk, the,” “men, above”

- **Line 6:** “cart, and”
- **Line 7:** “thinking: alive,” “dead, a”
- **Line 8:** “least, in May, that”
- **Line 9:** “done. There”
- **Line 10:** “bole, in”
- **Line 16:** “once, for,” “moment, unmake,” “Spring, I”
- **Line 18:** “trees, it”
- **Line 20:** “Spring, for me, will”
- **Line 21:** “now, and”
- **Line 22:** “these, in,” “sun, in”
- **Line 23:** “wind, the ”
- **Line 28:** “I, all day, I”

CONSONANCE

[Consonance](#) appears throughout the poem, often in the form of [sibilance](#) and [cacophony](#), which play off of one another. While sibilance creates a soft, hissing sound that reflects the gentle movements of nature, cacophony creates chaos and discord with percussive /t/, /k/, and /p/ sounds. The harsh, violent nature of the latter effect can be interpreted as a manifestation of the workers’ cruel task, which disrupts nature’s majesty. Like the “crash of the trunks” and other noises that fill the gardens, the cacophonous sounds align with the actions they describe. Lines 21-22 illustrate the tension between sibilance and cacophony:

It is going now, and my heart has been struck with
the hearts of the planes;
Half my life it has beat with these, in the sun, in the
rains,

As the speaker both commemorates and mourns a close relationship with the trees, the brutality of their destruction interrupts the tenderness of the speaker’s sentiment. Another strong [juxtaposition](#) occurs in line 19, in which the men “carted the whole of the whispering loveliness away.” The harsh /c/ and /t/ sounds that describe the men contrast sharply with the gentle sounds—/w/, /l/, and /s/—that characterizes the trees.

Fittingly, the moment directly following the trees’ death is defined by an abundance of heavy /d/ and biting /t/ sounds, and a *lack* of sibilance:

And but for that,
If an old dead rat
Did once, for a moment, unmake the Spring, I might
never have thought of him again

Consonance serves a few additional functions within the poem. For example, in the above passage, the high concentration of /n/ and /m/ sounds draws attention to this important moment, which reveals the profound impact that the trees’ death has

had on the speaker. Anaphora also mirrors the [onomatopoeic](#) sounds of the trees falling in stanza one, intensifying their echo. Here is a closer look at the prevalence of the consonant sounds in “grate,” “swish,” “crash,” and “rustle”:

They are cutting down the great plane-trees at the
end of the gardens.
For days there has been the grate of the saw, the
swish of the branches as they fall,
The crash of the trunks, the rustle of trodden leaves,

In this context, consonance adds sensory detail to the setting, transporting the reader into the poem’s environment from its first lines.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “cutting,” “down,” “great,” “trees,” “end,” “gardens”
- **Line 2:** “days,” “grate,” “saw,” “swish”
- **Line 3:** “crash,” “trunks,” “rustle,” “trodden”
- **Line 4:** “With,” “Whoops,” “Whoas,” “loud common talk,” “loud common laughs”
- **Line 5:** “past”
- **Line 6:** “Turning,” “at,” “gate,” “getting,” “out,” “cart,” “finding,” “large,” “dead,” “rat,” “mud,” “drive”
- **Line 7:** “alive,” “dead,” “god”
- **Line 9:** “week’s work,” “good,” “done,” “bough”
- **Line 10:** “roped,” “bole,” “grey rain”
- **Line 11:** “Green”
- **Line 13:** “Down now”
- **Line 15:** “old dead”
- **Line 16:** “Did,” “once,” “moment,” “unmake,” “Spring,” “might,” “never,” “him,” “again”
- **Line 17:** “moment,” “unmade”
- **Line 18:** “great,” “trees,” “root to stem”
- **Line 19:** “When,” “men,” “with,” “Whoops,” “Whoas,” “carted,” “whole,” “whispering,” “loveliness,” “away”
- **Line 21:** “heart,” “hearts”
- **Line 22:** “Half”
- **Line 23:** “March,” “May”
- **Line 24:** “great gales,” “great”
- **Line 26:** “sparrows”
- **Line 27:** “small,” “creeping creatures”

ONOMATOPOEIA

This poem relies heavily on sound to depict its setting, so it is fitting that it opens with four examples of [onomatopoeia](#)—“grate,” “swish,” “crash,” and “rustle.” The soft, pleasant sounds of “swish” and “rustle” initially appear gentle and organic. However, they are the result of workers hacking violently at grand trees, and they’re accompanied by a harsh “grate” and “crash.”

As discussed in the above entries on [assonance](#) and

[consonance](#), the vowel and consonant sounds of these onomatopoeic terms resound throughout the poem's first stanza, adding additional texture and depth. Thus, the reader is immediately enveloped into an environment ringing with discordant noises. The tension between soft and hard sounds that these four examples of onomatopoeia introduce will persist throughout the poem, mimicking the brutality of humankind that interferes with nature's elegance and beauty.

The poem goes on to mention many other terms that denote sound, including "hear," "quiet," and "loud." Furthermore, the speaker quotes the workers' "Whoops" and "Whoas" as well as their command to chop down the final tree, which appears in line 13. The sounds of the worksite often take priority over its images, which gives the appearance of the speaker "turning away" from gruesome sights. This inclination to listen when it is too difficult to watch highlights the violence of the trees' death as well as the heartbreak that the speaker experiences.

There are two additional examples of onomatopoeia towards the poem's conclusion. "Whispering" in line 19 characterizes the trees as mild-mannered and communicative, while the percussive nature of "beat" in line 22 puts corporeal force behind an image of the trees' pumping hearts. Importantly, each occurrence of onomatopoeia within the poem describes the trees, bringing them to life. By contributing to the trees' [personification](#), onomatopoeia implicitly challenges readers to find greater empathy and respect for all living things.

Where Onomatopoeia appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "grate," "swish"
- **Line 3:** "crash," "rustle"
- **Line 19:** "whispering"
- **Line 22:** "beat"

PARALLELISM

This poem contains four repetitive lists and within each of them, [parallelism](#) establishes rhythm and builds momentum. In most cases, [asyndeton](#) aids this process by striking clunky conjunctions that would inhibit the poem's flow. Lines 2-3 contain the poem's first list, which records the sounds of the trees' demolition. Here, parallelism creates a metrical pattern (unstressed **stressed** unstressed unstressed **stressed**) that repeats four times:

For days there has been [the **grate** of the **saw**,] [the **swish** of the **bran-**] ches as they fall,
[The **crash** of the **trunks**,] [the **rustle** of **trod-**] den leaves,

The repetitive grammatical structure engrains this pattern of stresses, creating a unique cadence. In this way, parallelism builds momentum at the poem's outset, which both brings the

reader into its rhythms and drives the narrative forward.

The list that constitutes line 6 begins similarly, with the repetition of gerunds (turning, getting, finding) placed in a distinct metrical pattern [**stressed** unstressed **stressed** unstressed unstressed **stressed**], but its final item breaks from that pattern, calling attention to a shocking image:

[**Turning in** at a **gate**,] [**getting out** of a **cart**,] and [**finding a large dead rat**] in the mud of the drive.

Here, the momentum that results from parallelism crashes into an unexpected pattern of stresses. The metrical irregularity subtly draws the reader's attention to the list's final image—that of a dead rat, caked with mud—maximizing its impact.

The parallelism within lines 22-24 ("in the sun, in the rains / In the March wind, the may breeze, / In the great gales ...") builds speed and anticipation in a similar manner to the parallelism within lines 2-3.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "the grate of the saw, the swish of the branches as they fall, / The crash of the trunks, the rustle of trodden leaves"
- **Line 6:** "Turning in at a gate, getting out of a cart, and finding a large dead rat"
- **Lines 22-24:** "in the sun, in the rains, / In the March wind, the May breeze, / In the great gales"

PERSONIFICATION

Over the course of the poem, the speaker uses four phrases that [personify](#) the trees, describing them in human terms to evoke the reader's empathy. Such descriptions suggest that the trees are sentient, or capable of feeling, and therefore have deeply painful experiences, raising the emotional stakes of the poem.

For example, line 12 describes the last tree standing as "lonely," as if the tree feels abandoned and pitiful following the death of its companions (this can also be thought of as a moment of [pathetic fallacy](#)). This term also indicates that these deaths pain the tree, painting it as helpless and devastated. Line 19 describes the workers carrying off fallen trees, which are called "the whole of the whispering loveliness." This image of the trees murmuring softly amongst themselves suggests that they can respond to their experiences. But their attempts to communicate are muffled, reflecting humankind's disregard for the adversities that confront the trees (and other living things).

In lines 21-22, the speaker's heart and those of the trees are "struck," after having "beat" together for many years. Such graphic, carnal imagery casts the workers' actions as closer to human-on-human violence than human-on-plant violence,

which is typically not seen as unjust. This language also dramatizes the trees' tribulations by drawing on a grave human misfortune (i.e. one's heart stopping). Finally, in reference to the trees, line 26 states, "They must have heard the sparrows flying." Again, the speaker zeroes in on the trees' *experience* of their demolition, suggesting that they are aware of the violence being wielded against them. By describing the trees in human terms that the reader can relate to, personification emphasizes the trees' suffering and the injustice of their destruction. This strategy aligns with the poem's wider messages that all living things are connected, and all deserve a dignified death.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** "lonely"
- **Line 19:** "whispering"
- **Line 21:** "hearts"
- **Line 26:** "heard"



VOCABULARY

Revelation (Before Line 1, Line 29) - The final book of the Bible's New Testament that deals with the apocalypse. The quoted text that bookends the poem is spoken by an angel who is calling out to four other angels who hold back heaven's four winds from the corners of the earth. God's wrath will be realized by imminent environmental catastrophes, but the angel tells the others not to wreak havoc on the earth until certain pious individuals have been labeled and saved. Much like the poem, this passage advocates for the preservation of the natural world, while also recognizing the inevitability of its destruction due to the failures of humankind.

Plane trees (Line 1, Line 21) - A genus, or closely related grouping, of trees that grow very tall and wide at a rapid pace. These trees are resilient, largely because they are resistant to many diseases. They also help counteract air pollution and their large leaves provide shade.

Grate (Line 2) - This refers to one thing grinding against another, producing a harsh sound.

Trodden (Line 3) - Trampled. "Trodden" is a past form of the verb "tread," which means to walk on something—in this case, the leaves—crushing it with the feet.

Common (Line 4) - Vulgar, uncivil, and rough-around-the-edges. The term "common" is usually applied to something that is ordinary and widespread, and it can also indicate that something is shared amongst multiple parties. Therefore, the speaker's word choice implicitly suggests that the crude behavior described is not limited to one incident or one group of men.

Drive (Line 6) - A road or driveway.

God-forsaken (Line 7) - Wretched, unpleasant, and unworthy. To "forsake" something is to disown or abandon it, while the term's invocation of God contributes to the poem's Christian overtones.

Bough (Line 9) - A relatively large tree limb off of which smaller branches split.

Bole (Line 10) - A tree trunk.

Unmake (Line 16, Line 17) - To ruin or undo the creation of something, nullifying it. The speaker uses this term to express that untimely deaths, such as those of the rat and the trees, destroy spring's atmosphere of rebirth and renewal.

Gales (Line 24) - Very vigorous winds.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Trees are Down" is best thought of as an elegy on behalf of the fallen plane-trees described. Like many of Mew's poems, however, it has an unorthodox structure characterized by [stanzas](#) and lines of dramatically different lengths. The poem begins with a brief [epigraph](#) taken from the Book of Revelation. The epigraph is followed by the following five stanzas with the following structures:

1. Quatrain
2. Quatrain
3. Octave, which can be divided into:
 - Quatrain
 - Quatrain
4. Quatrain
5. 9-line stanza, which can be divided into:
 - Quatrain
 - Cinquain

While this poem is not technically a series of four-line stanzas, the longer stanzas naturally break apart in the pattern laid out above, as a result of both rhythm and the content they describe.

Each stanza contains both compact and sprawling lines. In fact, many of the poem's lines are so long that they are unable to be printed as contiguous strings of text in traditional publishing formats. The organic feel to the variance in length from line to line and stanza to stanza mimics a tree's growth and showcases the individuality of each tree. The drawn-out lines at the poem's outset and conclusion resemble roots and branches, which taper to create a "trunk" at the center. The narrow pillar in stanza 3 visually stands alone, much like the last remaining tree that it describes. Following this line of thinking, the short epigraph that precedes the poem reads almost like a seed from which the verse has sprouted. As mentioned above, most publishing formats require the awkward curtailment of long

lines. These unnatural divisions reflect the actions of the workers, who thoughtlessly chop down the trees, forcing nature to comply with society's shortsighted interests.

METER

"The Trees are Down" doesn't follow a consistent pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables, known as [meter](#). Instead, the poem is written in [free verse](#); it rides its own rhythms, building speed and slowing down to reflect the corresponding text's meaning and stress important ideas. Still, the poem's pace relies heavily on the [anapest](#), a poetic [foot](#) consisting of two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed syllable. Line 6 is a straightforward example of this effect:

Turning in | at a gate, | getting out | of a cart, | and fin |
ding a large | dead rat | in the mud | of the drive.

The overarching anapestic rhythm of the poem creates mounting speed, ultimately crashing into the phrase "large dead rat," which contains three stresses in a row. The drawn-out stress pattern causes the gruesome image to linger, while its break from the established meter draws the reader's attention. Furthermore, this line and others heavily feature [repetition](#) and lists, often in conjunction, which build momentum and contribute to the poem's rhythmic force.

RHYME SCHEME

While this poem does not adhere to a conventional [rhyme scheme](#), it contains an abundance of both [internal](#) and [end rhyme](#). Each stanza follows its own pattern, though in general the stanzas begin with AB pattern and end on a B rhyme:

- Stanza 1: ABCB
- Stanza 2: ABAB
- Stanza 3: ABCCADDB
- Stanza 4: ABAB
- Stanza 5: AABBCCCCB

Although the last word of nearly every line rhymes with that of another, some groups of rhymes are far more noticeable than others, due to variations in line lengths and rhyme schemes.

For example, in stanza 3, "rain" and "again" are separated by a considerable amount of text, while the resemblance between "that" and "rat" is much more apparent due to their proximity to one another. Unsystematic internal rhymes—for example, "them" and "stem" in line 18 ("it was in **them** from root to **stem**") as well as the [homophones](#) "great" and "grate" in lines 1-2—create increased sonic interest.

The rhyme scheme's unpredictability serves several functions. First, it creates complex webs of rhyming words, which reflect the poem's message that every aspect of nature is linked—beings are quite literally living in harmony with one another. Second, identifying the patterns at play requires a

close reading and therefore ensures the reader's attention. Third, the varied rhyme scheme prevents the poem from becoming too sing-song-y, which would disrupt its solemn, reverent mood. Instead, the rhymes create a subtle musicality.



SPEAKER

This poem functions as an individual's unique account of an act that has been witnessed by many. Phrases such as "I remember thinking," "for me," and "my heart has been struck" emphasize the personal nature of the poem. But rather than revealing personal biographical details, the speaker focuses on the images and emotions that the trees' deaths bring about. As a result, the reader gains significant insight into the speaker's *experience* of the poem's events, evoking empathy.

The speaker describes the trees using terms such as "loveliness" and "great" to express reverence for the trees, while somber language such as "dying" and "lonely" shows the speaker's discomfort with their destruction. Furthermore, the last stanza brings to light the depth of the speaker's relationship with the trees, as their hearts have "beat" together over many years, through good times and bad.

The trees' death also changes the speaker, who now understands that all living things are valuable and deserving of a just and timely death. The speaker uses a memory of coming upon a dead rat, who once seemed insignificant, to explain this realization. Overall, by focusing on personal experience rather than biographical detail, the speaker calls for an empathetic, emotional understanding of the poem's events. Plus, because the sentiments described are divorced from an individual biography, they appear universally relevant, regardless of the reader's background.

Mew once lived near London's Euston Square Gardens, where plane trees were demolished in 1922 to make way for new construction. The speaker can be seen as an extension of the poet insofar as both witnessed the demolition of trees, which they found disturbing.



SETTING

This poem is set in a wooded garden during the rainy spring months. Apart from that, the speaker reveals very little information about the physical location and historical context of the poem's events. Furthermore, because the language is straightforward and many (if not most) people throughout history have seen trees fall, it seems as if the poem could have been written in any number of settings, across both time and place. In fact, it is the very commonness of the experience that the speaker describes that makes it so disturbing.

Which is not to say that the poem is devoid of sensory imagery. Indeed, the reader can hear the "grate," "swish," and "rustle" of

the trees and see the "large dead rat" lying in the muddy road. But these details are highly generalized and draw on common experiences. The speaker is then able to cast these shared experiences in a particular light, both exalting and mourning the setting with phrases like "whispering loveliness," "the great gales," and "the hearts of the planes." Thus, the nonspecific setting allows the reader to identify with the poem's speaker and events, provoking the reconsideration of a universal experience from a new perspective.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"The Trees are Down" is not the only poem Mew wrote about the demolition of plane trees in Euston Square Gardens. "[Domus Caedet Arborem](#)" also mentions this incident and uses similar language. Similar natural themes and ideas pervade many of Mew's other poems, such as "[May 1915](#)" and "[I so liked Spring](#)."

Mew's breakout poem, "[The Farmer's Bride](#)," is a dramatic monologue told from the perspective of a farmer who reflects on his fraught relationship with his young wife, who resents their union. The poem was first published in 1912 to great critical acclaim, and it served as the title poem for the one full collection of poetry that Mew released during her lifetime. "The Trees are Down" appears in Mew's 1928 posthumous collection of poetry, *The Rambling Sailor*, but *The Farmer's Bride* of 1916 remains her best-known work. Aside from poetry, Mew also wrote and published stories and essays. Death, human cruelty, ambivalence towards religion, and environmental concerns are themes throughout much of her work.

Mew prioritizes straightforward language in all her writings, and uses natural, conversational rhythms in her poetry. Mew's preference for everyday language and her careful contemplation of humankind's relationship to its environment can be traced back to William Wordsworth (as in his poem, "[Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802](#)") and the Romantic poets. The structure and [rhyme](#) of Mew's poems, however, is unconventional. The long, sprawling lines and natural [imagery](#) of "The Trees are Down" recall Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, which was first published in 1855.

The series of global cultural movements known as Modernism that gained momentum in the early 20th century burst open the door for experimental poetic structures. Thus, Mew can be seen as a poet who bridges the Victorian and the Modernist periods. Mew received praise from such literary figures as [Edith Sitwell](#), Siegfried Sassoon ("[Attack](#)"), A.E. Housman ("[To an Athlete Dying Young](#)"), and Virginia Woolf (*A Room of One's Own*). But the admirer who most influenced Mew was Naturalist poet and novelist Thomas Hardy (*The Mayor of*

[Casterbridge](#)), with whom she corresponded at length.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Mew once lived on the periphery of London's Euston Square Gardens and was greatly disturbed when, in 1922, workers began demolishing plane trees at the south side of the gardens in preparation for new construction. "The Trees are Down" can be understood as a fairly straightforward reaction to their death.

However, the poem contains echoes of Mew's broader experiences and preoccupations. Right around the time that the trees were demolished, Mew's mother passed away. Her father had been deceased for over two decades and three of her brothers had died in childhood, while two other siblings were committed to psychiatric asylums. Mew took her own life in 1928, shortly after this poem was written. She was distraught and paranoid following the death of her sister Anne, her sole remaining sibling, with whom she was very close. This poem reflects Mew's lifelong struggle to cope with such losses, as well as her profound awareness of death's inescapability, which is a common theme throughout her poetic work.

Furthermore, Mew's circle of friends contained many natural scientists, including pioneers of the emerging field of ecology. The Second Industrial Revolution, which took place about 1871 to 1914, saw an explosion in steel production, manufacturing, and railways, causing air and water pollution. Ever-expanding urbanization meant increasingly dirty and crowded cities and a changing landscape in the countryside. Mew was greatly influenced by her scientist friends and often expressed environmental concerns in her writings. In fact, she published a manifesto of sorts in the form of her 1913 "Men and Trees" essays, which argue for trees' centrality to human life and criticized their demolition, especially in urban spaces.

Mew can also be seen as an example of The New Woman, a term used around the turn of the century to describe women who pushed against the restrictive gender roles of the Victorian Era. The quintessential New Woman was well-educated, independent, and career-minded. Indeed, Mew supported her mother financially, dressed in men's suits, kept her hair closely cropped, and swore off marriage, citing her fear of passing on her family's hereditary disposition to mental illness. However, there is evidence that Mew engaged in same-sex relationships, which spiked among New Women, as a result of increased freedom.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- "[Not For That City](#)" in the *Guardian* — As short essay in the *Guardian* about one of Mew's sonnets. (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2019/>)

[dec/23/poem-of-the-week-not-for-that-city-by-charlotte-mew](#))

- **Poetry and the Environment** – A short history of environmental poetry with links to poems, articles, videos, and other online resources, via Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/146462/poetry-and-the-environment>)
- **A Profile of Mew** – An overview of Mew's life and works from the Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/charlotte-mew>)
- **Industrial Revolution** – A succinct history of the First and Second Industrial Revolutions, which helps contextualize Mew's depiction of nature. (<https://www.britannica.com/explore/savingearth/industrial-revolution/>)
- **The New Woman in the Victorian Fin de Siècle** – An exploration of the emergence of the New Woman, including the figure's presence in literature, with images of

primary source material from The British Library. (<https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/daughters-of-decadence-the-new-woman-in-the-victorian-fin-de-siecle>)



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