

# Prayer Before Birth



## SUMMARY

I haven't been born yet. Please listen to me. Don't let vampire bats, rats, stoats, or even ghosts with deformed feet get close to me.

I haven't been born yet. Please make me feel better. I'm afraid that people will imprison me, drug me, deceive me, torture me, and bathe me in the blood of those they massacre.

I haven't been born yet. Please give me water to play in, long grasses that will grow around me, trees that I can talk to, singing skies full of birds—and a sense of what's right to guide me through life.

I haven't been born yet. Please forgive me in advance for the bad things that the world will make me do—the horrible things I'll say, the terrible things I'll think. Forgive me for my betrayals, though they will be caused by others, and for the murders people will make me commit. Forgive me when I die for how my life turned out.

I haven't been born yet. Please teach me the role I will have to play in life, and how to respond when old men tell me what to think, when officials pressure me. Teach me what do when mountains are angry at me, or when lovers mock me. Teach me what I should do when the crashing waves ask me to be foolish, and the desert calls me to death and destruction. Teach me how to act when beggars reject my charity and my own children hate me.

I haven't been born yet. Please listen to me—I don't want violent, beastly men to come near me, nor those who think they are God.

I haven't been born yet. Please grant me the strength to resist the people who want to take away my humanity, and those who want to turn me into a killing machine. Don't let them force me to be one small part of some greater contraption, something with no individuality. Don't let them reduce me to a mere object, and don't let them dissolve my identity. I'm talking about those people who would blow me all over the place as if I were the fine hair on a thistle plant. I don't want to be like water spilling out of their hands.

Please don't let them turn me into a cold, hard-hearted stone or spill me. If you can't help me with this prayer, then don't let me be born at all.



## THEMES



### THE CORRUPTION OF HUMANITY

“Prayer Before Birth” is a bleak poem written from the perspective of an unborn child. The speaker makes a desperate plea (most likely to God, given that this is a “prayer”) asking for strength and guidance to navigate the world—a frightening, violent place in the poem, full of cruelty, greed, and outright evil. Through this prayer, the poem implies that humanity has lost its way, becoming stuck in a cycle of hatred, destruction, and denial that threatens to corrupt the innocence of each new generation.

The fact that the speaker is an unborn child means they're currently protected from humanity, safe inside the warmth of a womb. But the speaker knows that, in being born, they will become part of the human family—a prospect the poem presents like something out of a horror movie. The speaker begins by asking for protection from “bloodsucking bat[s]” and “ghouls” before moving on to concerns that are less macabre, yet no less terrifying. The poem refers to imprisonment, drugs, lies, murder, and torture as inevitable parts of the human experience.

The issue isn't only that the speaker is afraid of these things themselves, either; the speaker anticipates how there will be a conflict between the speaker's innocence and the corrupting influence of the humanity. That is, the speaker understands that in being born to the human world, the speaker will become a member of the “human race”—that same race that the speaker fears will drug, lie to, imprison, and torture them.

Before even being born, the speaker thus asks for forgiveness for the sins that the world is going to *make* the speaker commit, for the inevitable “treason” that comes from getting by in such a world. The speaker asks for practice when it comes to “the parts [they] must play” and “the cues [they] must take” in responding to the horrors the speaker will face, implying that a loss of innocence is practically inevitable and inescapable.

Yet even as the poem has an atmosphere of hopelessness, the speaker maintains a degree of grit and determination. The speaker asks for the “strength” to combat “those who would freeze [the speaker's] humanity,” for example. It isn't that humanity is *inherently* corrupt, then, but that it has *become* corrupt. Perhaps, if humanity had to *become* a self-destructive, there remains the possibility of change—the faintest glimmer of hope for a better world.

That said, the speaker senses that the chance of human civilization changing its ways is remote. The speaker wishes to retain their innocence—to not be made into a “stone”—but most

of the poem suggests that this is near-impossible. In the poem's powerful last line, the speaker states clearly that they would rather die than live in a world in which their innate humanity has to be corrupted, casting doubt on whether the speaker really wants to be born at all. In the end, then, the poem asks whether it's fair to bring new life into a world so full of death and destruction.

#### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-39



### NATURE VS. INDUSTRIALIZATION

The poem's speaker—an unborn child—ask for future help, strength, and guidance in the life that they're about to lead. The speaker's prayer is mostly defined *negatively*—that is, by things that the speaker actively wants to *avoid*, to be strong *against*. But there is one thing the speaker actively *wants*: a close relationship with the natural world. The poem implies that nature, unlike corrupted human society, is a loving, nurturing influence.

The poem then contrasts this powerful vision of nature with the harsh, unforgiving trends of industrialization and mechanization—a seismic societal shift that was, of course, caused by humanity. Given nature's nourishing power, the poem implies that industrialization—and people's resulting distance from nature—is in part to blame for humanity's dismal state.

Even as the speaker wants to avoid most of the world, the speaker prays to be “provide[d]” with water, grass, trees, the sky, and birds. Water will “dandle” the speaker—that is, swing the child playfully and lovingly. Trees will “talk” to the child, probably teaching better lessons about care and compassion than most of the human world that surrounds them. The sky itself will “sing” to the speaker, suggesting joyfulness and aesthetic beauty. Together, these aspects of nature would make the speaker a stronger and better person.

This relationship with nature, the speaker feels, goes hand-in-hand with a “white light / in the back of my mind to guide me.” White light here refers a kind of moral strength and virtue—one that, not incidentally, is [symbolically](#) linked to the warmth and life-giving light of the sun. The poem thus clearly portrays the natural world as a positive influence. In a poem mostly concerned with the worst aspects of humanity, this is a much-needed moment of hope.

But, as the speaker is fully aware, nature is just one of many potential influences on a new life. The speaker knows that the world in which they are about to arrive for the most part doesn't prioritize nature. Instead, it's full of damaging industrialization—factories, pollution, mass reproduction, the thirst for profit, and so on. This industrialization doesn't just

have a damaging effect on nature, but on people too.

Towards the end of the poem, the speaker asks not to become “a lethal automaton” nor a “cog in a machine.” Both of these images depict the way the modern world can dehumanize people through technology, by turning an individual into a kind of unthinking killing robot (the poem seems to be referring to soldiers) or just a part in some larger contraption built for hatred and violence.

The poem thus clearly equates humankind's appetite for destruction (remember, this was written during WWII) with the trend towards mechanization. Losing touch with nature, then, means losing touch with the better aspects of humanity itself.

Perhaps that's why the poem turns once more in its closing lines to an image of nature. The speaker seeks strength against those who “would / blow me like thistledown hither and / thither” or spill the speaker like water. Thistledown is the feathery material on thistles that gets blown about in the wind (to aid the spread of its seeds). The poem refers to it here as a symbol of the fragility of nature which, of course, relates to the unborn child's own vulnerability. It's a slightly confusing image because being “blown” is exactly what the thistledown is meant for, but it clearly refers back to the earlier vision of nature. The reader, then, is left with the impression that the natural world—like humanity itself—is under threat.

#### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 8-11
- Lines 20-23
- Lines 28-37



### MODERNITY, CONFORMITY, AND FREE WILL

While the poem for the most part focuses on humanity's capacity for violence and self-destruction, another concern is the way that the modern world erodes people's individuality and free will. The speaker fears that the world that they will be born into only allows for one type of person—a kind of mass-produced individual who does what they're told and never questions the larger systems at work around them.

The speaker fears being imprisoned, drugged, lied to, and tortured—but also fears becoming the *perpetrator* of such terrible acts. The speaker separates themselves from any actual agency, however, saying that the world will commit “sins *through* the speaker, that an ambiguous “they” will “murder by means of my hands.” That is, the speaker will become a helpless tool of the corrupt modern world, a kind of puppet forced to do terrible things just to conform and survive.

The idea that modern society demands total conformity finds its fullest expression in the fifth stanza, as the speaker asks to be “rehearse[d]” in the role that they must play in society. Life

here is presented as something that happens to the speaker, and which requires certain "cues" and results in unavoidable "folly" and "doom." The speaker anticipates being a kind of passive witness to their own life, following all the expected steps and unquestioningly putting up with all the expected indignities of the modern world. In other words, the speaker would be little more than an actor in the play of life, with no real agency or individuality.

The poem goes on to argue that there are those out there who would wish to turn the speaker into an unthinking killer (a "lethal automaton") or make the speaker a mere "cog" in some larger "machine" of death and destruction. Modern society threatens to completely efface the speaker's humanity—to turn them into an object, a "thing," that only deserves to exist so long as it can provide something useful to the larger contraption that is human society.

#### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 4-7
- Lines 12-24
- Lines 28-37



## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-3

*I am not ...  
... come near me.*

"Prayer Before Birth" establishes its unique perspective right away: that of an unborn child ("I am not yet born"). Immediately, then, the poem confronts the reader, asking them to suspend their disbelief and understand that the following "prayer" will be more [symbolic](#) than literal.

The speaker fears being born, and feels the need to pray—possibly to God, but maybe also to humanity itself—for future assistance, guidance, and protection. The particular fears contained in this stanza feel like they've been taken from a horror movie, however. Few people, generally speaking, are genuinely afraid of bats, rats, stoats, or "club-footed ghoul[s]!" These are more childlike fears, the stuff of ghost stories. The poem lures the reader into a false sense of security by suggesting that the speaker's fears are unfounded—that speaker's concerns are akin to those of a child scared of monsters in the closet or under the bed.

The sounds of these lines themselves make the fears feel childlike and maybe even a bit comical. Note the strong [consonance](#), [assonance](#), and [alliteration](#) at work in these lines, with the intense repetition of /b/, /l/, /t/, /s/, /k/, /uh/, and /ah/ sounds:

[...] the bloodsucking bat or the rat or the stoat or the

club-footed ghoul come near me.

These sounds, combined with the [polysyndeton](#) (the repeated "or"), could almost be lifted from a nursery rhyme. In a way, this opening stanza emphasizes the inherent innocence of the speaker, who seems to represent humanity in pure, uncorrupted form.

The first stanza also establishes the overall formula for the poem. Though the poem is written in [free verse](#) (without strict [meter](#)) and with varying stanza lengths, it nevertheless has a very repetitive structure.

Each stanza (apart from the last) starts with the [refrain](#) "I am not yet born" and ends with the word "me" (an example of [epistrophe](#)). In this sense, the first stanza sets in motion the prayer-like structure of the poem—think about how Christian prayers often start with an address to God, and end in "Amen." This is part of the poem's overall [parallelism](#), in which grammatical elements of individual sentences or phrases are frequently repeated.

### LINES 4-7

*I am not ...  
... blood-baths roll me.*

In the second stanza the speaker asks to be "console[d]" about the terrifying world that awaits them. Here, the poem focuses particularly on the human race—that is, the particular evils that humanity inflicts upon itself. Whereas the first stanza contained fears that were somewhat comic, the fears in this stanza are both frightening and sadly real. The speaker [alludes](#) to imprisonment, drugs, dishonesty, torture, and mass killings in quick succession.

It's worth noting here that the poem was written at the height of WWII—a war many felt proved that humankind itself hadn't really evolved, but that its technological capacity for self-destruction had. No wonder the speaker has a grim outlook on life!

Part of the poem's power comes from the fact that no child coming into the world has any say what they're being born into. The use of an unborn child's perspective thus allows the poem to make a general survey of humanity while simultaneously underscoring the innocence of anyone coming into the world anew—before the reality of life on earth has had a chance to corrupt them.

Structurally speaking, this stanza follows the formula set out by the first. The [refrain](#) "I am not yet born" (line 4) is followed by a [caesura](#) and then one of the speaker's specific requests. The request in this case—"console me"—has an air of desperation, as though the speaker knows that avoiding the horrors of humanity will prove impossible.

In line 5, one main verb—"I fear"—opens up a series of phrases that again feature strong [parallelism](#) in their structure. The

lines use [anaphora](#) ("with") and [epistrophe](#) ("me") to outline all the ways that humanity might inflict pain, misery, and terror on the speaker.

The grammatical similarity between these phrases—for example, "with strong drugs dope me" and "with wise lies lure me"—makes this section all the more frightening, as though the speaker is reading out a potentially endless list of human evils. [Asyndeton](#) makes the list feel relentless and, again, as if it has no end.

This section also makes use of strong and obvious sound patterning through [alliteration](#), [consonance](#), and [assonance](#). Also note the clear [internal rhymes](#) of "tall walls," "wise lies," and "black racks":

[...] tall walls wall me,  
with strong drugs dope me, with wise lies lure me,  
on black racks rack me, in blood-baths roll me.

The speaker also uses interesting repetition, using "wall[s]" and "rack[s]" as both nouns and verbs. Taken together, the sounds of these lines come thick and fast, creating a kind of inescapable sonic onslaught on the reader's ear.

## LINES 8-11

*I am not ...  
... to guide me.*

The third stanza focuses on the natural world, and is probably the most hopeful and positive part of the entire poem. Here, the speaker asks *for* something, rather than to be saved *from* something.

More specifically, the speaker wants water, grass, trees, the sky, birds—in other words, the speaker desires a harmonious relationship with nature. The speaker also prays for a "white light / in the back of my mind to guide me." White light is [symbolic](#) of moral and spiritual strength, and this [metaphor](#) implies that the speaker hopes to be a force for good in the world—someone who stands against all the unshackled evils listed in the previous stanza.

Mentioning both nature and moral virtue in the same stanza links them together, suggesting that the natural world is not merely the environment within which civilization plays out its human drama, but an integral part of how people see themselves and each other. Implicitly, then, a world that fails to value *nature* will also fail to value *humanity* itself.

This reciprocal relationship between nature and humanity is also represented in the [personification](#) of the trees and sky, which the speaker hopes will "talk to" and "sing to" them. The unborn speaker craves the nurturing influence of nature, sensing that the very existence of the natural world is under threat from human activity.

This stanza maintains the poem's now-familiar structure. After

the [caesura](#) that follows the usual [refrain](#) of "I am not yet born," the speaker prays for the provision of different elements of nature, with each phrase ending in "me" (more [epistrophe](#)). If an adult speaker were to keep referring back to "me" in this way, it might well seem egotistical and self-regarding. But because this is an unborn child speaking, the use of "me" keeps remind the reader that, though the poem's perspective is well-informed in the sense of what to expect from the world, this perspective is inherently innocent and uncorrupted. In other words, the poem appeals to the reader's own nurturing instincts, and, indeed, it is the *reader* who hears this fragile prayer.

Like a number of the other stanzas, this section uses strong sound patterning. The speaker wants:

[...] grass to grow for me, trees to talk  
to me, sky to sing to me [...]

The [alliteration](#) here rings out loud and true. It has a childlike playfulness in keeping with speaker's as yet uncorrupted point of view, and also suggests natural abundance. It's as though alliterative sounds are growing naturally on the poem's vines (its lines), receiving the warmth and nourishment of the same "white light" that the speaker hopes will serve as guide during life.

## LINES 12-17

*I am not ...  
... they live me.*

In the fourth stanza, the speaker asks for forgiveness for future sins. The poem also raises the question of who is *responsible* for those future sins. That is, the speaker feels that this future sinfulness is not something instinctive to *them*, but rather to the world itself. These are the sins that, in the life of the speaker, "the world shall commit" (line 13).

It's not that the speaker wants to be sinful, or is naturally sinful, but that humanity has created a world that is so full of pain and terror that sinning becomes an inevitability. In other words, the world as it is now (and/or the world in the 1940s, when the poem was written) corrupts new life, making innocence an impossible condition to sustain.

This is a deeply depressing scenario a far cry from the idyllic natural scenes described in the previous stanza. The state of the world (as humans have made it) here denies the speaker any future possibility of living a fully good, happy, and compassionate life. The speaker thus asks for forgiveness in advance for everything from their "words" to their "thoughts." Merely by trying to survive as an individual in the world, the speaker will commit all kinds of sinful acts.

But notice the strangeness of the grammatical construction in each of the phrases in lines 13-17 (which are replicated through [parallelism](#) throughout the stanza). In line 13 in the

speaker asks for forgiveness:

For the sins that in me the world shall commit

Here, it's actually not the *speaker* sinning—it's the world sinning *through* the speaker. The speaker anticipates *learning* immorality—that society, over time, will teach any newborn child to behave like everybody else, and thus that all this is *society's* fault. The structure in each of these clauses presenting immorality as something being *done to* the speaker rather than *by* the speaker. Take lines 13-14:

[...] my words  
when they speak to me, my thoughts when they think  
me,

This ambiguous "they" could refer to society, or to the words/thoughts themselves—which actively "speak to"/"think" the speaker, rather than the other way around. In other words, the speaker fears being conditioned to think and behave in a certain way—a loss of free will and independent thought.

This sentiment intensifies in lines 15, 16 and 17 ("my treason [...] live me"). Most people probably think they are unlikely to commit treacherous acts like murder, but the speaker views this as an inevitability. Yet again, the speaker is helpless; this "treason" is done by traitors "beyond," or outside, the actual speaker. Murder, too, is done "by means of [the speaker's hands]," meaning "they" murder using the speaker's hands like tools.

Such is the corrupting influence of humanity in its modern state that there is almost no chance the speaker won't do the same things of which the speaker, as an unborn child, is currently afraid. Treason and murder, of course, both relate to war and nationhood as well—and it is worth remembering that the poem was composed at the height of WWII, with fascism quite literally on the march throughout Europe.

Overall, then, this stanza paints a picture of alienation. Whatever an individual might want from life, no matter how they might want to be, the world that they live in will shape them. Perhaps that's what the poem means in the last phrase of this stanza: "[forgive me] my death when they live me." Here, "they" definitely refers to other people or society at large. The unborn child, then, wishes to be forgiven for inevitably failing to retain their individuality and moral convictions. The speaker fears living a life that, through its conformity, will actually be lived by the values, standards, and accepted norms of others.

### LINES 18-24

*I am not ...  
... children curse me.*

The fifth stanza stays on the theme established in the fourth—the question of agency and free will. But while the

previous stanza looked exclusively at responsibility for sinful acts (like murder), this stanza is more concerned with the totality of a life lived, the unborn speaker imagining the overall arc of their life journey.

This stanza sees the speaker asking, in the poem's clockwork-like [refrain](#), to be "rehearse[d ...] in the parts I must play and the cues I must take." If all the world's a stage, as Shakespeare famously wrote, then the speaker here asks to learn the lines. Again, this seems like a kind of assault on any chance that the unborn child has of living a free, creative, and individual life.

The speaker anticipates times in the future filled with constant harassment from all angles—old men, bureaucrats, even "mountains," here personified as "frown[ing]," will find reason to be disappointed in the speaker (contrasting with the more idyllic depiction of nature in stanza 3).

This section speaks to a kind of absurdity that comes with simply trying to live a good life. Even in older age, and with children of their own, the speaker will be misunderstood. The "white waves" and "desert" here speak to a kind of oblivion—the great void of being dead. The speaker actually looks on the world from a similar vantage point, viewing human life from a distant perspective, questioning whether being born is worth it. There is a kind of simplicity to both pre- and post-life—it is the part (or the role) in between that is difficult.

The [enjambment](#) in this section is quite erratic, splitting phrases without any obvious pattern. This gives the lines a chaotic feel that mirrors the stanza's vision of a life that never truly makes sense to the person living it.

### LINES 25-27

*I am not ...  
... come near me.*

Apart from the final [couplet](#) at the end, lines 25-27 form the shortest stanza in the entire poem. After the usual [refrain](#) of "I am not yet born," the speaker pleads to the addressee in spare and simple language: "O hear me." This same phrase appears in the poem's opening line, and poses the question of whether this is really a prayer to God at all. That is, the reference to hearing leaves open the possibility that the prayer takes place in a kind of void—that the poem is *not* heard.

This heightens the poem's intensity—there is already great drama and desperation in the poem's use of the unborn-child perspective, but the poem also offers no false comforts about the existence of God. There is a distinct loneliness to the speaker's request for help, protection, and guidance, heightened by the fact that perhaps no one is listening.

Here, the speaker's request is a simple one. The speaker wants to avoid both "the man who is beast" and the man "who thinks he is God." Both are presented as potential dangers and/or corrupting influences. While "beast" perhaps speaks to the atmosphere of violence in which the poem was written

(MacNeice composed the poem during WWII) and is a possible [allusion](#) to the Devil, the reference to those who think they are God could relate to people who in positions of power—people like politicians and religious leaders.

These people, the poem says here, act like they're omnipotent—like they have power over other human beings. Both "beast[s]" and power-hungry madmen, the poem says, increase the likelihood of violence, and it's quite plausible to draw a link between this stanza and stanzas 2 and 4 (which spoke of the horrors of humanity).

It's also worth noting that this stanza repeats the main rhyme found in the first. Back at the beginning of the poem, lines 1 and 3 rhymed "hear me" with "near me"—and the poem does the same again here in lines 25 and 27. The poem use a pair of rhymes at the start and end of each stanza, but sometimes they're not immediately noticeable because of the distance between them (e.g., stanza 7's "rehearse me" and "curse me"). Because this stanza, like the first, is so short, the rhyme rings out more clearly.

Both instances express the speaker's desire for to keep something at a distance (whether ghouls or beastly people), and so perhaps the nearness of the rhymes plays into this idea of proximity. That is, by having such a suddenly strong rhyme, the poem subtly expresses that everything the speaker fears is just around the corner—on the other side of birth.

### LINES 28-32

*I am not ...  
... face, a thing,*

In the seventh stanza, which is the poem's longest, the speaker asks to be filled "with strength" (line 29). Put simply, the speaker needs this strength in order to maintain a sense of individuality. The speaker feels that there are people in the world seek to "freeze" the humanity of others, a [metaphor](#) that suggests sterility and barrenness—a lack of life, in other words. The poem has already touched on free will and individuality in stanzas 4 and 5, suggesting that it's probably impossible to avoid conforming to the pressures and demands of modern human society.

Here, the speaker is particularly scared of becoming a "lethal automaton" or "a cog in a machine" (line 30). This relates to two defining factors of the 20th century, both of which are related to technology—modern warfare, and mass reproduction/automation.

"Automaton" has two meanings, both of which work here. The primary definition is a machine that acts like a human being. In other words, the speaker fears becoming a mere shell of a person—technically a human, technically alive, but with no genuine control over life. An automaton is also a word for a machine pre-programmed to perform a set of particular tasks—think about the different machines on a production line

for cars, for example. Both definitions speak to a loss of agency that definitely expresses the fear that mass industrialization poses a risk to people's "humanity"—their ability to think for themselves, to be compassionate towards others, to love and create.

The adjective, "lethal," relates this fear of mechanization and loss of humanity specifically to modern warfare. World War II, and the First World War before that, demonstrate humankind's incredible capacity to find innovative and more destructive ways of killing, so the poem is also gesturing towards the dehumanizing effects of war—the ability to see another human not as a fellow member of the human family, but as a target to be destroyed.

The "cog in a machine" metaphor relates more generally to industrialized labor and to the behavior of people *en masse*. The speaker fears that he or she will not be allowed to become their own person, but will instead perform one sole function on repeat. It's worth noting that the speaker's fears seem so immediate and powerful in part because this unborn child is yet to try and *become* a person—the unborn child is a kind of blank slate, yet to be shaped by the world around them.

After this metaphor, the speaker moves to an abstraction that develops the idea of dehumanization. In lines 31-32, the speaker worries about being nothing more than "a thing with / one face, a thing." Identity becomes completely effaced, leaving behind not a human—but a "thing," as the [diacope](#) here emphasizes. The [caesura](#) just before "a thing" makes it one of the shortest phrases in the whole poem, mirroring the way that to become "a thing" means the reduction of an individual's humanity to a state of mere functionality or usefulness.

### LINES 32-37

*and against all ...  
... would spill me.*

After the second [caesura](#) in line 32 (which begins with "one face"), the speaker asks for "strength" against anyone "who would dissipate my entirety." This follows on from the fears expressed in lines 30-32—fears of becoming an unthinking "cog" in the vast machine of the human race, and, worse still, of being turned into a killer.

This section doubles down on these fears, with the speaker feeling like the world might even cause them to disappear entirely. In other words, humankind has become so corrupted that the better parts of humanity—love, compassion, joy, individual creativity and freedom—struggle to survive.

Here, the poem makes use of two [similes](#), both of which relate to the fragility of the speaker as an unborn child. The speaker believes that the same people who would "dissipate [the speaker's] entirety" would also:

blow me like thistledown hither and

thither or hither and thither

Thistledown is a fine feathery material on the thistle plant, evolved to blow in the wind in order to aid the plant's distribution of its seeds (so that it can reproduce). Here, though, thistledown is not a symbol of nature's adaptability, but of the future pressures that the speaker will place. That is, *trying* to hold strong against humanity's corrupting influences is a near-impossible task. The poem asks whether one individual—the thistledown—can stand firm against the dominant negative aspects of humanity—the wind.

Though nature isn't being used to the same effect here as in stanza 3, the mention of "thistledown" does hark back to the earlier hopeful (and unlikely) vision of a life lived in joyful harmony with the natural world. The [repeated](#) "hither and thither" (meaning "here and there") chimes with "thistledown," and suggests the fragility of new life. The /th/ [consonance](#) and [alliteration](#) have a gentle, airy quality, while the [epizeuxis](#) combines with [enjambment](#) to suggest powerlessness, the poem moving swiftly backwards and forwards between the same two words. There is also a subtle kind of violence to the way "hither" is split from "thither" by the line break that speaks to the threatening world into which the speaker is about to be born.

The speaker uses the poem's other simile immediately after the second "thither" in line 35. This compares the speaker to water that, held in the wrong hands, would be spilled. Think about the way that hands can form a kind of vessel for water, but, at the same time, how difficult it is to actually keep the liquid inside the hands. That's how the speaker feels about their future identity. That is, the speaker wants to be a strong, morally good individual but fears that their container—the world into which the speaker is being born—isn't set up for that. Of course, this world is one largely shaped by the activities and behavior of humankind. Enjambment here once again suggests violence or danger, with the phrase started in line 36—"like water held in the / hand"—broken up at the most disruptive point, dividing an article from its object.

And although line 28 might seem to the reader like it happened a long time ago, there is an important rhyme at work here. As with all the preceding stanzas, this section rhymes an imperative verb + "me" in the stanza's first line with another imperative verb + "me" at the end of the stanza. Here, this produces "O fill me" and "would spill me." Though spaced far apart, this rhyming pair create a moment of [antithesis](#) that mirrors the speaker's thoughts in this stanza. The speaker wants to be *filled* with life—one that is fully of joy, empathy, and nature. This hope contrasts with the idea of being *spilled*, which, as suggested above, implies that life can be carelessly wasted.

### LINES 38-39

*Let them not ...*

*... Otherwise kill me.*

The last two lines (38 and 39) make up the shortest stanza in the poem and form a rhyming [couplet](#). While the sentiment is similar to earlier stanzas, there are some significant differences between this stanza and the rest of the poem.

First, the [refrain](#) disappears. Every other stanza begins with "I am not yet born," which emphasizes the speaker's vulnerability. Here, though, the speaker skips the refrain and asks:

Let them not make me a stone and let them not spill me.

This closely resembles lines 26-27 ("Let not the man who is beast or who thinks he is God / come near me"). Here, too, the poem uses [anaphora](#) ("let them now"), [diacope](#) ("me"), and [epistrophe](#) (the placement of "me" at the end of the line) to create a [parallel](#) structure. The repetitiveness of this line, and the way it echoes the earlier section, creates the impression that the speaker faces a future of relentless threat and danger—that everything that is bad in the world will be coming at the speaker from all angles all the time.

It's this sense of constant threat that permits the poem to place two quick-fire [metaphors](#) in the space of one sentence. The speaker wishes to be neither "a stone"—someone who is cold and hard-hearted—nor spilled water—someone whose sense of identity is lost or destroyed by the world they live in. The latter idea has already been introduced by the simile in lines 36 and 37 ("like water held in the / hands would spill me.").

The poem's final line offers the other key difference between the end of the poem and the stanzas that came before. The other stanzas make up a kind of list, noting all the aspects of life that the speaker wants help with in the future. This list has been built around the imperative verb that follows the refrain at the start of each stanza, meaning that in total the speaker asks to be heard, consoled, provided with nature, forgiven for sins, rehearsed for roles in life, heard (again), and filled with strength. Though these cover various aspects of life, they all amount to the same thing—a plea for guidance, compassion, understanding, and strength. It's only in the poem's last line that the speaker presents the alternative—that is, what the speaker would prefer if none of the above can be granted:

Otherwise kill me.

The speaker, then, would rather *never* be born than have to live in a world that is cold, punishing, and unforgiving—a world made up mostly of the worst aspects of humanity, not the best. Given that, obviously, the speaker is *not* an unborn child, the poem thus asks the reader to consider what kind of world *all* newborn children have to enter into. It questions whether, given humanity's apparent lust for suffering and self-destruction, it would be better to avoid living altogether.



## SYMBOLS



## NATURE

Nature in the poem represents nourishment and compassion—a harmonious, peaceful, and moral world that contrasts sharply with the many horrors of the modern industrialized society. In the third stanza, the speaker prays for:

water to dandle me, grass to grow for me, trees to talk  
to me, sky to sing to me, birds and a white light  
in the back of my mind to guide me.

This section proposes an alternative idea of what it means to be human that contrasts with the bleak vision of conformity, alienation, and violence offered elsewhere in the poem. The natural relationship depicted here is joyful and nurturing. The grass grows "for" the speaker, and the [personified](#) trees and sky talk and sing to the speaker—because this is a vision of life lived in partnership with nature. Where humanity is filled with deceit, torture, and violence, nature is generous and loving, uncorrupted by humanity's greed and appetite for destruction.

The "white light" the speaker mentions here is more specifically [symbolic](#) of a kind of moral backbone. Both the color white and light itself typically represent purity and morality in literature, and the speaker hopes to be guided by such morality upon navigating the decidedly immoral human world.

The poem returns to nature towards the end, comparing the speaker to the fine feathery material on a thistle (which gets blown about by the wind). This maps nature's fragility—in a world full of human violence—onto the speaker's own vulnerability as an unborn child.

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 8-11:** "provide me / With water to dandle me, grass to grow for me, trees to talk / to me, sky to sing to me, birds and a white light / in the back of my mind to guide me."
- **Lines 21-23:** "the white / waves call me to folly and the desert calls / me to doom"
- **Lines 33-37:** "would / blow me like thistledown hither and / thither or hither and thither / like water held in the / hands would spill me."
- **Line 38:** "Let them not make me a stone and let them not spill me."



## MACHINERY

One of the speaker's main fears about being born is that the world will deny them the best attributes of humanity (comparison, creativity, free will, and communion with nature) and emphasize the worst (violence, conformity, deception, and so on). The poem makes a clear link between these worst characteristics and modern technology, with an eye specifically on the technology-enabled horrors of war. Modern machinery in the poem [symbolizes](#) the erosion of free will, individuality, and humanity itself.

In lines 30 and 31, the speaker asks for "strength against those who [...] would dragoon me into a lethal automaton." Likewise, the speaker fears those who "would make me a cog in a machine." Both images relate to mass production, mechanization, and modern industrialization. The ability of the modern world to make identical versions of the same product maps onto the speaker's worry that they will have to be just like everybody else in order to survive.

The poem further associates the cold efficiency of modern technology with humankind's ability for self-destruction. The poem relates machinery—which can only do what it is specifically designed to do—with a fear that people will no longer think for themselves; that instead, they will simply do whatever they're told, like a programmed bit of machinery. This is what the speaker means in talking about being a "cog in a machine," a worry that human life has no value other than its usefulness in serving the status quo.

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 30-31:** "would dragoon me into a lethal automaton, / would make me a cog in a machine,"



## POETIC DEVICES

## ALLITERATION

[Alliteration](#) is a major feature of "Prayer Before Birth." Generally speaking, alliteration intensifies the poem's images and ideas, making scary things scarier and hopeful things more hopeful. The speaker uses language playfully, packing the poem full of similar sounds.

The first example of alliteration plays with this childlike tone. In the poem's second line, the speaker expresses a fear of "bloodsucking bat[s]," along with other quite cartoonish creatures (e.g., ghouls). This section might lure the reader into a false sense of security by listing things that aren't really, in truth, very frightening—the kind of threats and dangers found in children's horror stories. The alliteration here heightens that effect, almost as if Count Dracula is about to appear in the poem. Of course, this sets up the reader for a shock in stanza 2, in which the speaker lists threats that are far more terrifying

and real.

The second stanza, then, uses alliteration in all the phrases from line 5:

[...] tall walls wall me,  
with strong drugs dope me, with wise lies lure me,  
on black racks rack me, in blood-baths roll me.

While the alliteration in the first stanza was cutesy and fun, here it's much more sinister. It has a suffocating, violent effect, evoking the fears listed in the stanza. "Tall walls wall me" feels like a kind of imprisonment, while "strong drugs dope me" suggests the strength of these narcotics. Packing so many sounds in such a small space allows the reader no moment's rest, giving the poem a deep sense of unease and tension (which, of course, is exactly what the speaker feels).

In stanza 3, the poem reaches its most hopeful point. Here, the speaker asks to be granted a close relationship with the natural world. The alliteration in "With water," "grass to grow," "trees to talk," and "sky to sing," sounds happy and carefree, also suggesting a kind of natural abundance—as though the sounds are growing freely on the poem's lines.

This optimism is short-lived, however. "[T]reason" and "traitors" in line 15 re-establish the poem's sinister atmosphere, before lines 19 to 23 deploy alliteration similarly to the second stanza—as a kind of sonic weapon. The onslaught of sound is bolstered by strong assonance in this stanza as well:

In the parts I must play and the cues I must take  
when  
old men lecture me, bureaucrats hector me,  
mountains  
frown at me, lovers laugh at me, the white  
waves call me to folly and the desert calls  
me to doom and the beggar refuses

Here, the speaker worries that life will be one long, exhausting performance—a performance that will never really make sense. Alliteration combines with [assonance](#) and [consonance](#) that once again prevents the poem from having any breathing space, as though life is full of panic (even the laughing lovers seem sinister).

#### Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "bloodsucking bat"
- **Line 5:** "walls wall"
- **Line 6:** "drugs dope," "with wise lies lure"
- **Line 7:** "black racks rack," "blood-baths roll"
- **Line 9:** "With water," "grass to grow"
- **Lines 9-10:** "trees to talk / to"
- **Line 10:** "sky to sing"

- **Line 11:** "my mind"
- **Line 14:** "thoughts," "they think"
- **Line 15:** "treason," "traitors"
- **Line 16:** "my," "murder by mean," "s," "my"
- **Line 17:** "my"
- **Line 19:** "parts," "play"
- **Line 20:** "men," "me," "me, mountains"
- **Line 21:** "lovers laugh"
- **Lines 21-22:** "white / waves"
- **Line 22:** "desert"
- **Line 23:** "doom"
- **Line 36:** "held"
- **Line 37:** "hands"
- **Line 38:** "stone," "spill"

## APOSTROPHE

The poem uses [apostrophe](#) from start to finish—the device is built in to the poem's main idea. From the start, the reader is asked to take a big leap of the imagination—to interpret these words as if they were spoken by an unborn child. Throughout the poem, then, there is a tension between who is speaking and who is listening.

As this is titled a "Prayer," the presumed target of the poem is God—but the poem says nothing explicitly to imply or deny that God is listening. Indeed, as the speaker themselves is a kind of logical impossibility, the apostrophe works not just by undermining whether anyone can hear these words, but by whether they can really be spoken at all. That is, if they can't be spoken, they can't be heard.

This reminds the reader that the idea at the core of the poem is that unborn children *don't* have any say over what kind of world they are born into. In turn, this allows the poem to ask whether anyone would want to be born into the world if they had foresight about how it actually is.

That said, the use of apostrophe still maintains some of the usual effects of the device. It gives the speaker an air of desperation and drama, as though they really *want* to be heard. But as the poem progresses, and more and more things to be afraid of are listed, the sense that there is a listener who could actually do anything about the speaker's worries becomes increasingly absurd. Perhaps that's why the poem repeats its first imperative, "O hear me" (line 1), in line 25, highlighting the fact there is no stable figure to comfort the speaker, let alone provide guidance and support in life.

#### Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-39

## ASSONANCE

[Assonance](#) is a prominent feature throughout "Prayer Before

Birth." Assonance gives the poem a musical, hypnotic quality, drawing the reader deeper into its mysterious and uneasy atmosphere. Assonance also often intensifies the poems images and ideas, making them all the more striking and immediate.

The first example is a playful one. The assonance of "bloodsucking bat" and "rat" in line 2 (which is also an [internal rhyme](#)) gives the reader the false impression that the speaker's fears are somewhat cartoonish and not really all that threatening.

But this playfulness is short-lived. The second stanza is heavy on assonance, outlining some of the worst dangers of humanity—imprisonment, torture, murder, and so on. The assonance here is unrelenting. For example, look at the claustrophobic effect of "tall walls wall me" in line 5, or "black racks rack me" in line 7. Both examples are strong and loud, exerting a powerful presence on their respective lines. This makes them seem like a more present threat and danger.

In the third stanza, the speaker asks to be "provid[ed]" with nature (if the speaker does get born). This is the most hopeful section of the poem, and culminates with the speaker also praying for a [metaphorical](#) "white light / in the back of my mind to guide me" (lines 10-11). The long /i/ sound here gives the lines purpose and direction—which, in a moral sense, is what the speaker hopes for.

Another important example of assonance occurs in lines 20-23:

old men lecture me, bureaucrats hector me,  
mountains  
frown at me, lovers laugh at me, the white  
waves call me to folly and the desert calls  
me to doom and the beggar refuses

This section imagines the arc of an entire life from start to finish, the speaker fretting about the role that they will have to play. The speaker anticipates being put under pressure from all kinds of different directions, and that's exactly what is happening with the assonance here. Prominent vowel sounds push and pull the poem this way and that, capturing a sense of the speaker's anxieties for the future. Strong [consonance](#) and [alliteration](#) are at work here too, creating thick, inescapable sound patterning.

#### Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "bloodsucking," "bat," "rat"
- **Line 5:** "race may," "tall walls wall"
- **Line 6:** "wise lies"
- **Line 7:** "black racks rack," "baths"
- **Line 9:** "me, trees"
- **Line 10:** "white light"
- **Line 11:** "my mind," "guide"

- **Line 12:** "forgive"
- **Line 13:** "sins," "in," "commit"
- **Line 14:** "speak," "me"
- **Line 16:** "my life"
- **Line 17:** "death when"
- **Line 19:** "parts," "play," "take"
- **Line 20:** "men lecture," "hector me"
- **Lines 20-21:** "mountains / frown"
- **Line 22:** "call me to folly"
- **Lines 22-23:** "calls / me to doom"
- **Line 23:** "refuses"
- **Line 26:** "beast," "he"
- **Line 29:** "freeze"
- **Line 30:** "humanity," "me," "lethal"
- **Line 31:** "machine"
- **Line 33:** "my entirety"
- **Line 34:** "thistledown hither"
- **Line 35:** "thither," "hither," "thither"
- **Line 37:** "spill"
- **Line 38:** "Let them," "let them," "spill"
- **Line 39:** "kill"

#### ASYNDETON

Each stanza, apart from the last, forms a kind of list that threatens to overwhelm the speaker with fear and worry. To this end, the poem uses *both* [asyndeton](#) and [polysyndeton](#) to similar effect—to make these threats come thick and fast, as though the speaker is drawing them from a near-endless of human terrors.

Asyndeton, for example, is used in lines 5-7. Here, the speaker fears being imprisoned, doped, misled, tortured, and massacred. The asyndeton makes this a claustrophobic stanza:

I fear that the human race may with tall walls wall me,  
with strong drugs dope me, with wise lies lure me,  
on black racks rack me, in blood-baths roll me.

One fear bleeds into the next, seemingly without end. The speaker rightfully panics about the state of the world, and the lack of an "and" contributes to this sense of frantic anxiety.

Lines 12-17 achieve a similar effect, running from "forgive me" to "my death when they live me." Here, the asyndeton also intensifies the poem's uses of [parallelism](#)—similar grammatical structures in succeeding phrases. From "my words" in line 13, each clause of this long sentence starts with a "my" and "ends in a "me," usually with a mention of "they" in there too. This section, then, is about the corrupting influence of others in society, and how they will try to co-opt the speaker in the future. The rhythm of this section, in part created by the asyndeton, portrays this as a kind of future back-and-forth battle between "they" on one side and the speaker, "me," on the

other.

#### Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-7:** "I fear that the human race may with tall walls wall me, / with strong drugs dope me, with wise lies lure me, / on black racks rack me, in blood-baths roll me."
- **Lines 12-17:** "forgive me / For the sins that in me the world shall commit, my words / when they speak to me, my thoughts when they think me, / my treason engendered by traitors beyond me, / my life when they murder by means of my / hands, my death when they live me."
- **Lines 28-32:** "O fill me / With strength against those who would freeze my / humanity, would dragoon me into a lethal automaton, / would make me a cog in a machine, a thing with / one face, a thing,"
- **Lines 32-34:** "against all those / who would dissipate my entirety, would / blow me like thistledown hither"

I fear that the human race may with tall walls wall me,  
with strong drugs dope me, with wise lies lure me,  
on black racks rack me, in blood-baths roll me.

Caesura here shows the dangers of the human world to be numerous. Stanza 3, the most hopeful section of the whole poem, reverses this effect:

I am not yet born; provide me  
With water to dandle me, grass to grow for me, trees  
to talk  
to me, sky to sing to me, birds and a white light  
in the back of my mind to guide me.

Here, the caesurae create a sing-song, nursery rhyme effect, playing off the unborn child's innocent perspective. They help create a kind of swinging rhythm that seems to respond to the mention of dandling (to dandle a baby is to swing them up and down in an affectionate and playful way).

## CAESURA

[Caesura](#) is a key feature in "Prayer Before Birth." There are not many lines that don't use at least one caesura! They are an important part of the poem's rhythm and momentum.

There are two main effects created by the poem's use of caesura. First, there are the caesurae found in the poem's [refrain](#). Every stanza except for the last begins with "I am not yet born," followed by a caesura, in turn followed by an imperative verb + "me":

I am not yet born; O hear me (line 1)  
I am not yet born, console me (line 4)  
I am not yet born; provide me (line 8)  
I am not yet born; forgive me (line 12)  
I am not yet born; rehearse me (line 18)  
I am not yet born; O hear me (line 25)  
I am not yet born; O fill me (line 28)

Each caesura creates a brief but important pause after the word "born," emphasizing the unborn speaker's innocence and fragility. The caesurae also lend the imperative words a sense of urgency and desperation, as though the speaker, looking out on the world ahead, needs help as soon as possible. The uneasy silence after "born" also heightens the effect of the poem's [apostrophe](#)—asking the reader to consider who, if anyone, can hear the speaker's prayer.

Caesura also plays a role in the poem's many lists. Like different bullet points on a to-do list, commas mark the shift from one frightening aspect of the world to another (with each stanza working on a particular theme or idea). Look at lines 5-7, for example:

#### Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "born; O"
- **Line 4:** "born, console"
- **Line 6:** "me, with"
- **Line 7:** "me, in"
- **Line 8:** "born; provide"
- **Line 9:** "me, grass," "me, trees"
- **Line 10:** "me, sky," "me, birds"
- **Line 12:** "born; forgiv," "e"
- **Line 13:** "commit, my"
- **Line 14:** "me, my"
- **Line 17:** "hands, my"
- **Line 18:** "born; rehearse"
- **Line 20:** "me, bureaucrats," "me, mountains"
- **Line 21:** "me, lovers," "me, the"
- **Line 25:** "born; O"
- **Line 28:** "born; O"
- **Line 30:** "humanity, would"
- **Line 31:** "machine, a"
- **Line 32:** "face, a," "thing, and"
- **Line 33:** "entirety, would"

## CONSONANCE

[Consonance](#) is an important part of "Prayer Before Birth." Much of the poem's consonance is also [alliteration](#), for which there is a separate entry in this guide. Overall, consonance helps pack the poem with similar sounds, heightening its atmosphere of fear and danger.

In the first stanza, consonance helps create a playful sound that could be lifted straight out of a children's book:

Let not the bloodsucking bat or the rat or the stoat or

the  
club-footed ghoul come near me.

The intense consonance that runs through these lines combines with [assonance](#) to create a comic, almost cartoonish sound. The aim is to lure the reader into a false sense of security by listing childlike fears and providing sounds to match.

The cuteness of the first stanza makes the second all the more terrifying. Here, the speaker lists very real fears about the kind of terrible things humans do to one another:

I fear that the human race may with tall walls wall me,  
with strong drugs dope me, with wise lies lure me,  
on black racks rack me, in blood-baths roll me.

The density of sounds here makes the lines feel claustrophobic, as if there's no escape for the reader. In particular, notice how the harshness of the hard /c/ sound in line 7 suggests violence and pain. Contrast this with the pleasant alliteration in the following stanza, which is by far the most hopeful section in the entire poem.

The poem returns to this hard /c/ in lines 19 to 20, in which the speaker asks to be rehearsed:

In the parts I must play and the cues I must take  
when  
old men lecture me, bureaucrats hector me,  
mountains

The sharp /c/ combines with the biting /t/ to make these lines sound harsh and grating. Here the speaker describes having to put up with people who think they know best about how the world works, and demanding "bureaucrats" who are tasked, consciously or not, with making sure the world works in a way that diminishes people's individuality and creativity.

The penultimate stanza also features many prominent /t/ sounds, in words like "humanity," "into," "automaton," "dissipate," and "entirety." The sounds here have a machine-like, robotic quality. Later in the same stanza, the poem uses a gentle /th/ sound in "hither" and "thither" to suggest the speaker's fragility—how, as a newborn child, the speaker will have little chance of holding strong against the dominant forces in the world.

#### Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "born"
- **Line 2:** "Let not," "bloodsucking bat or," "rat or," "stoat or"
- **Line 3:** "club-footed," "come"
- **Line 4:** "console me"
- **Line 5:** "human race may with tall walls wall me"

- **Line 6:** "with strong drugs dope me, with wise lies lure me"
- **Line 7:** "on black racks rack me, in blood-baths roll me"
- **Line 9:** "With water," "grass," "grow"
- **Lines 9-10:** "trees to talk / to"
- **Line 10:** "sky," "sing," "white light"
- **Line 11:** "my mind," "me"
- **Line 12:** "forgive"
- **Line 13:** "For," "sins," "in me"
- **Lines 13-14:** "world shall commit, my words / when"
- **Line 14:** "me," "thoughts," "they think"
- **Line 15:** "treason," "traitors"
- **Line 16:** "murder," "means," "my"
- **Line 19:** "parts," "must play," "cues," "must take"
- **Line 20:** "old men lecture me, bureaucrats hector me, mountains"
- **Line 21:** "frown at me, lovers laugh at me, the white"
- **Line 22:** "waves call me to folly"
- **Lines 22-23:** "desert calls / me to doom and"
- **Line 23:** "beggar"
- **Line 24:** "my gift," "my children curse me"
- **Line 28:** "fill me"
- **Line 29:** "With strength against those"
- **Lines 29-30:** "freeze my / humanity"
- **Line 30:** "dragoon me into," "lethal automaton"
- **Line 31:** "make me," "cog," "machine"
- **Line 33:** "dissipate," "entirety"
- **Line 34:** "blow," "like thistledown hither"
- **Line 35:** "thither or hither," "thither"
- **Line 36:** "like water held"
- **Line 37:** "hands would spill"
- **Line 38:** "Let them not make me," "stone," "let them not spill me"
- **Line 39:** "kill me"

#### ENJAMBMENT

[Enjambment](#) occurs throughout "Prayer Before Birth." In fact, well over half of the poem's 39 lines are enjambed! In general, enjambment allows the poem to stretch its sentences over multiple lines, influencing the poem's pacing.

Every stanza apart from the last starts with the poem's [refrain](#)—"I am not yet born; [imperative verb] me"—followed by a sentence that lasts until the end of the stanza. These long sentences are made up of multiple clauses, meaning that [caesura](#) and enjambment often have to work closely together.

The second stanza, which is the most hopeful in the whole poem, finds the speaker wishing for a life lived in close harmony with the natural world—water, grass, trees, sky, birds, and so on. Here, the poem uses enjambment to denote clarity and purity. The entire stanza is enjambed, allowing it to flow comfortably, as though a gentle breeze is blowing through its lines.

The poem also uses enjambment for its ability to create surprise and/or disruption in a sentence. In the fourth stanza—which is far more sinister than the third—the enjambment is abrupt and violent. Here are lines 16 and 17:

my life when they murder by means of my  
hands, my death when they live me.

Notice how the enjambment separates "my" from "hands." This plays into the stanza's discussion of agency and free will. Here, the speaker asks for forgiveness for future sins that he or she will commit—not because the speaker is evil, but because the world makes people do terrible things. The "hands," which carry out this imagined killing, are separated from the word which expresses to whom the hands belong ("my").

The next stanza—the fifth—uses similarly abrupt enjambment:

I am not yet born; rehearse me  
In the parts I must play and the cues I must take  
when  
old men lecture me, bureaucrats hector me,  
mountains  
frown at me, lovers laugh at me, the white  
waves call me to folly and the desert calls  
me to doom and the beggar refuses  
my gift and my children curse me.

Here, the speaker frets over the demanding roles that life makes people play. These lines imagine the speaker being pushed and pulled this way and that by an entire lifetime's worth of external forces. The stanza is anxious and overwhelming, an effect created in part by the erratic enjambment. Notice how there is seemingly no real logic to the point at which the lines break, even though each clause of the sentence is pretty much identical grammatically (a technique known as [parallelism](#)). "When / old" breaks before the phrase's noun, while "mountains / frown" breaks before the phrase's verb. "White / waves" breaks between adjective and noun, while "calls / me" and "refuses / my" are different yet again. This intentionally disorients the reader.

The penultimate stanza, which runs from "I am not yet born; O fill me" to "hands would spill me," also uses enjambment throughout. The effect is similar, suggesting violence, fear, and powerlessness—everything that the speaker is praying for "strength against."

#### Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "the / club-footed"
- **Lines 8-9:** "me / With"
- **Lines 9-10:** "talk / to"
- **Lines 10-11:** "light / in"

- **Lines 12-13:** "me / For"
- **Lines 13-14:** "words / when"
- **Lines 16-17:** "my / hands"
- **Lines 18-19:** "me / In"
- **Lines 19-20:** "when / old"
- **Lines 20-21:** "mountains / frown"
- **Lines 21-22:** "white / waves"
- **Lines 22-23:** "calls / me"
- **Lines 23-24:** "refuses / my"
- **Lines 26-27:** "God / come"
- **Lines 28-29:** "me / With"
- **Lines 29-30:** "my / humanity"
- **Lines 31-32:** "with / one"
- **Lines 32-33:** "those / who"
- **Lines 33-34:** "would / blow"
- **Lines 34-35:** "and / thither"
- **Lines 35-36:** "thither / like"
- **Lines 36-37:** "the / hands"

## METAPHOR

"Prayer Before Birth" is full of fear, and often, it's the *lack of figurative language* ([metaphor](#), [simile](#), etc.) that makes the poem all the more frightening. The second stanza, for example, describes imprisonment, drugging, deceit, torture, and massacre—all of which existed in the world at the time of the poem's composition and, of course, still exist now. That said, the poem does use metaphor in a handful of key moments.

The first of these is in the third stanza, the most hopeful of the entire poem. Here, the speaker prays for a close relationship with the natural world. The metaphors at work here relate to the idea of "Mother Earth." Talking trees and singing skies provide (or would provide) the speaker with a nurturing and loving environment, one at odds with the world that likely lies ahead.

Nature is [personified](#) here (personification is a type of metaphor). The speaker wants to feel instinctive moral goodness and strength to match with the positive attributes of the natural world. Accordingly, the speaker prays for a guiding "white light / in the back of my mind." This relates to another common metaphor which links light with goodness. Think about what Jesus means in the Bible when he says "I am the light of the world."

The next metaphors are found in the fifth stanza ("I am not yet born; rehearses me [...] my children curse me"). This stanza also personifies nature: "the white / waves call me to folly and the desert calls / me to doom." But this more sinister depiction of nature seems to have its roots in the stanza's main metaphor—that to live life is to be an actor playing a role, a role which is constantly stressful and never makes sense. Even nature is in on the act, apparently, here perhaps calling the speaker (in the imagined future) towards destruction.

In line 26, the speaker expresses a fear of "the man who is beast." This is another familiar metaphor, and relates to humankind's ability to act violently and destructively, in denial of its supposed civilization. It also may be an [allusion](#) to the devil.

The following stanza also uses metaphor:

[...] O fill me  
With strength against those who would freeze my  
humanity, would dragoon me into a lethal automaton,  
would make me a cog in a machine,

Here there are three metaphors. The first perhaps relates the speaker's humanity—the speaker's virtue, individuality, compassion, and creativity—to a substance that can be frozen and thereby killed. Think about the barrenness of the coldest places on earth, where it's very difficult for anything to grow. Similarly, the speaker doesn't want to be turned into a machine—whether that's as a killing "automaton" (a mechanical device that imitates a human being) or as one small part in some greater (and undoubtedly sinister) technology. Both relate to how the modern world can dehumanize people through conflict, capitalism, and societal pressure.

Finally, the speaker begs in the penultimate line to not be made into a "stone." The speaker wants to be able to feel emotion—to not deny themselves the ability to feel just in order to achieve mere survival.

#### Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-10:** "trees to talk / to me, sky to sing to me"
- **Lines 10-11:** "white light / in the back of my mind to guide me."
- **Lines 18-19:** "rehearse me / In the parts I must play and the cues I must take"
- **Lines 20-21:** "mountains / frown at me"
- **Lines 21-23:** "the white / waves call me to folly and the desert calls / me to doom"
- **Line 26:** "the man who is beast"
- **Lines 28-30:** "O fill me / With strength against those who would freeze my / humanity"
- **Lines 30-31:** "lethal automaton, / would make me a cog in a machine"
- **Line 38:** "Let them not make me a stone and let them not spill me."

## PARALLELISM

"Prayer Before Birth" uses [parallelism](#) from start to finish. This makes the poem sound like what it is: a prayer, with the speaker's wishes to be protected from the world repeated over and over again.

The poem's main [refrain](#) uses parallelism by stating "I am not

yet born" before adding an imperative verb followed by "me." The effect of this refrain specifically is discussed in that section of the guide, but it's worth noting that the "me" in the refrain creates a parallel structure with the majority of the phrases that follow in each stanza—which also usually end with "me" (a technique known as [epistrophe](#)). The word "me" itself becomes like a bell ringing throughout the poem, bringing the reader's attention back time and again to the poem's point-of-view—an unborn child who is aware of what the world might hold in store but is ultimately powerless to do anything about it.

The second stanza also uses parallelism, created in part by the [anaphora](#) of "with" at the start of three of its phrases. This creates a contrast between the unborn child and the huge and frightening world that potentially awaits them. The parallelism in this stanza makes it clear that the speaker fears many things about humanity:

[...] with tall walls wall me,  
with strong drugs dope me, with wise lies lure me,  
on black racks rack me, in blood-baths roll me.

The grammar of every phrase relates to the stanza's main subject—the human race. In a grammatical sense, the human race is on one side of each phrase and the speaker ("me") on the other. The speaker anticipates conflict and opposition in the world, and the repeated grammatical structure reflects this. That is, these are all the things that the human race may force upon the speaker—imprisonment, drugging, deception, torture, massacre. These very real facts about the behavior of humanity are grammatically contrasted with the speaker's pure and innocent perspective.

In the third stanza—the most hopeful in the poem—parallelism instead suggests harmony and balance. The speaker imagines a close relationship with nature, and phrases like "grass to grow for me" and "trees to talk to me" show that there are potentially positive influences in the world too. Placed in the same grammatical position as "tall walls" and "strong drugs" in the stanza before, the poem contrasts the corrupting influence of war and violence with the nurturing influence of the natural world.

In stanzas 4 ("forgive me") and 5 ("rehearse me"), parallelism is used to suggest that the speaker, if born, also faces a loss of agency and individuality. Sins will be committed *through* the speaker, words and thoughts will "speak" and "think" the speaker, emphasizing the way that the world makes people fall in line with the dominant behaviors of the day. In the fifth stanza, the speaker again uses the repetitive placement of "me" at the end of individual phrases to suggest the way that life is full of external pressures pushing down on people. Phrases like "old men lecture me" and "bureaucrats hector me"—which are grammatically identical—portray life as grudgingly repetitive and tiresome.

In the seventh stanza (which starts "I am not yet born; O fill me"), the speaker reiterates fears about the worst aspects of humanity. The modern world, suggests this stanza, is full of people who "would" do terrible things to the speaker. In other words, there are people out there who would, given half a chance, reduce to the speaker to an unthinking killer, a mere component in humanity's great machine of death and destruction. The repetitive "would" makes these threats feel immediate and present, as though those who would "corrupt" the speaker are waiting around the corner for the speaker to be born. "Would" here works as anaphora, intensifying the poem's relentless atmosphere of anxiety and fear.

#### Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24
- Lines 28-38

## POLYSYNDETON

[Polysyndeton](#) is a minor feature of "Prayer Before Birth," and appears in the first and fifth stanzas. Generally speaking, polysyndeton and [asyndeton](#) help the poem construct its powerful rhythm and momentum, by either joining phrases together with conjunctions like "and," or deliberately avoiding them. When those words *aren't* there, the poem's catalog of fears and terrors sounds as though it may overwhelm the speaker.

The first use of polysyndeton is in lines 2 and 3:

Let not the bloodsucking bat **or** the rat **or** the stoat **or** the  
club-footed ghoul come near me.

The fears listed in this stanza are childlike and cartoonish, luring the reader into a false sense of security. The polysyndeton here in part helps space the words out, but also makes the stanza feel like something out of a nursery rhyme.

In the fifth stanza, which starts "I am not yet born; rehearse me," three phrases in a row use the "and" conjunction:

[...] the white  
waves call me to folly **and** the desert calls  
me to doom **and** the beggar refuses  
my gift **and** my children curse me.

Here, the speaker fears the overwhelming pressures that one person can face in life, and how the speaker will have to play a "role" in the world. The repeated "and" helps build a breathless stanza that almost feels like it could collapse under the weight of its own anxiety.

#### Where Polysyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "or the rat or the stoat or the / club-footed ghoul"
- **Lines 21-24:** "the white / waves call me to folly and the desert calls / me to doom and the beggar refuses / my gift and my children curse me."

## REFRAIN

Every stanza in "Prayer Before Birth," apart from the last, starts with the poem's [refrain](#). In the most literal sense, this simple sentence restates the poem's point-of-view: an unborn child. Hearing it at the start of each sentence, then, reminds the reader that the poem contrasts the innocence of an unborn child with the potential dangers of the world into which that child will be born.

But it's not just a reminder. The phrase—"I am not yet born"—makes the unborn child appear even more vulnerable. Indeed, the content between most appearances of the refrain is usually frightening, focusing on the what's scariest to the speaker about humanity and the world itself. The poem thus alternates between this simple affirmation of pure innocence and what might corrupt that innocence.

The refrain also works as a kind of marker of time. Think about how a bell repeats the same sound to indicate how many hours have passed, each ring representing another hour. Similarly, each instance of the refrain here marks out another small bit of time in which the speaker remains unborn. Of course, the poem is totally focused on what will happen when—if—the speaker does make it to the world. But this moment-to-moment refrain gives the impression that at some point soon the speaker *will* be a part of the world, another human trying to figure out how to live.

Indeed, the refrain does fall away right at the end. By the last stanza, the reader has become accustomed to the alternation between refrain and prayer. The sudden loss of the refrain thus comes as a shock:

Let them not make me a stone and let them not spill  
me.  
Otherwise kill me.

This lends great intensity to the poem's ending. Suddenly, the poem confronts the reader with a genuine alternative to everything the speaker has been worrying about—not being born at all. The refrain, which by now has become strangely comforting in its reliability, is suddenly gone. Likewise, the speaker wonders whether, if this prayer is going to go unheard, it's better to die before life even gets started.

#### Where Refrain appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I am not yet born"

- **Line 4:** "I am not yet born"
- **Line 8:** "I am not yet born"
- **Line 12:** "I am not yet born"
- **Line 18:** "I am not yet born"
- **Line 25:** "I am not yet born"
- **Line 28:** "I am not yet born"

## REPETITION

"Prayer Before Birth" uses [repetition](#) throughout the poem and in many ways. Two aspects of the poem's repetition are discussed in other sections of the guide. These are the "I am not yet born" [refrain](#), and the frequent use of [parallelism](#) in the poem's underlying grammatical structures. All this repetition makes the poem sound more like a prayer, with the speaker returning again and again to the desire for protection from the seemingly endless horrors of the world.

One word here occurs more than any other: "me." The speaker, an unborn child who has a kind of foresight about what the world might hold in store, asks for future help, guidance, and understanding. Perhaps the poem is a prayer in the conventional sense, an attempt to request God's assistance, but the poem also offers no reassurances that this prayer will be heard. Accordingly, the repetition of "me" functions like a kind of bell running throughout—and each time it rings the speaker seems more vulnerable and, perhaps, more alone. The placement of "me" is often at the end of a phrase, making this a type of repetition specifically known as [epistrophe](#) (which is also discussed in the "parallelism" entry of this guide, alongside [anaphora](#)).

Elsewhere, the poem deploys other specific types of repetition. In the second stanza, for example, the speaker use [polyptoton](#) twice, fearing that humanity may "with tall walls wall me" and/or "on black racks rack me." This repetitive language is at once playfully childlike *and* doubly sinister. Consider, for example, how much more claustrophobic "with tall walls wall me" sounds than "with tall walls imprison me." Polyptoton is also used in lines 14—"my thoughts when they think me"—and 15—"my treason engendered by traitors beyond me." Both of these relate to the speaker's feared loss of agency, as though in life the speaker will not be able to exert any significant control over what happens.

The poem also makes use of [diacope](#) in line 22 (quoted with 21 and 23 for context). The speaker asks for help in knowing what to do when:

"[...] the white  
waves call me to folly and the desert calls  
me to doom [...]"

Here, too, the speaker fears a loss of control. Though this is one of the more mysterious moments in the poem, the "call" of the

waves and the desert could represent something the speaker fears in the future—the "call" to madness or self-destruction.

The poem also uses [epizuxis](#) in the penultimate stanza, in which the speaker fears people who would

blow me like thistledown hither and  
thither or hither and thither

This image compares the speaker to something natural and fragile—the fine hairs on a thistle. The repeat of "hither and thither"—which means here and there—shows that the speaker is scared of being pushed in different directions, unable to find a gravitational center from which to lead a good, happy life.

### Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I am not yet born," "O hear," "me"
- **Line 2:** "Let not," "or the," "or the," "or the"
- **Line 3:** "me"
- **Line 4:** "I am not yet born," "me"
- **Line 5:** "with," "walls wall," "me"
- **Line 6:** "with," "with," "me"
- **Line 7:** "racks rack," "me"
- **Line 8:** "I am not yet born," "me"
- **Line 9:** "me"
- **Line 10:** "me," "me"
- **Line 11:** "me"
- **Line 12:** "I am not yet born," "me"
- **Line 13:** "me"
- **Line 14:** "me," "my," "thoughts," "think," "me"
- **Line 15:** "my," "treason," "traitors," "me"
- **Line 16:** "my," "my"
- **Line 17:** "my," "me"
- **Line 18:** "I am not yet born," "me"
- **Line 20:** "me," "me"
- **Line 21:** "me," "me"
- **Line 22:** "call me"
- **Lines 22-23:** "calls / me"
- **Line 24:** "my," "my," "me"
- **Line 25:** "I am not yet born," "O hear me"
- **Line 26:** "Let not," "who is beast or who thinks he is God"
- **Line 27:** "me"
- **Line 28:** "I am not yet born," "me"
- **Line 29:** "against," "would"
- **Line 30:** "would," "me"
- **Line 31:** "would," "me," "a thing"
- **Line 32:** "a thing"
- **Line 33:** "would," "would"
- **Line 34:** "me"
- **Lines 34-35:** "like thistledown hither and / thither or hither and thither"
- **Line 37:** "spill," "me"
- **Line 38:** "Let them not," "me," "spill me"

- **Line 39:** "me"

## SIMILE

There are two [similes](#) in "Prayer Before Birth," and both occur in the penultimate stanza. Here, the speaker fears people who would:

blow me like thistledown hither and  
thither or hither and thither  
like water held in the  
hands would spill me.

The first simile compares the speaker to the fine feathery hairs on a thistle flower, which are easily blown away by the wind. Of course, that's what the plant needs to happen in order to spread its seeds, whereas here the simile represents the speaker's vulnerability as an unborn child. At a stretch, though, maybe the speaker fears replicating the worst aspects of humanity through having children themselves. Either way, the image suggests the speaker has little chance of holding firm against the corrupting influences that await in the modern world.

The second simile, which compares the speaker to "held" water that could be spilled, also relates to the speaker's vulnerability. It's not easy to hold water in your hands without spilling it, and likewise it's not easy to maintain a strong sense of self—particularly as an empathetic, creative, and morally virtuous individual—in the vessel that is the world.

Finally, it's worth noting that the placement of two similes in quick succession is itself disorientating, giving the poem an anxious restlessness that fits with the speaker's fears about the world.

### Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 33-37:** "would / blow me like thistledown hither and / thither or hither and thither / like water held in the / hands would spill me."



## VOCABULARY

**Stoat** (Line 2) - A small, weasel-like animal.

**Club-footed ghoul** (Line 3) - A ghost with deformed feet.

**Console** (Line 4) - Provide comfort and reassurance.

**Dope** (Line 6) - Drug (as a verb).

**Racks** (Line 7) - A frame used for torturing someone, usually by stretching their body at both ends.

**Dandle** (Line 9) - Swing playfully.

**Treason** (Line 15) - Betrayal, often specifically of a country.

**Engendered** (Line 15) - Caused.

**Bureaucrats** (Line 20) - Officials, often those who work for the government.

**Hector** (Line 20) - Harass and bully.

**Folly** (Lines 22-22) - Foolishness.

**Dragoon** (Line 30) - Coerce/force somebody to do something.

**Automaton** (Line 30) - A machine made to look and behave like a human. Can also mean a machine with a small set of prescribed actions—like the robots on a factory line in a car plant.

**Dissipate** (Line 33) - Cause to disappear or fade away.

**Entirety** (Line 33) - The fullness of the speaker's existence.

**Thistledown** (Line 34) - The feathery material on a thistle plant.

**Hither** (Lines 34-35) - Here and there.



## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

The poem is a dramatic monologue told from the perspective of an unborn child. It lacks a specific form beyond this, however, with its 39 lines broken into eight stanzas of varying length.

Despite this lack of stanza consistency, the poem feels very structured and repetitive. This is thanks in part to the fact that every stanza except for the last begins with the poem's [refrain](#): the phrase "I am not yet born" followed by a request for help in the form of an imperative verb (e.g., "hear me").

The refrain has a somewhat hypnotic effect. The intense use of [repetition](#) and sonic devices like [alliteration](#), [consonance](#), and [assonance](#) throughout also make the poem feel like a spell or incantation, as though the speaker is trying to conjure the kind of God they need in order to have their prayer heard.

One stanza breaks with the refrain formula established by the rest of the poem: the last. This is a dramatic moment that relates what the speaker desires if their prayer can't be granted. The speaker says they would rather die than be made into a "stone" (an unfeeling person) or spilled like water (lose their sense of individuality and will). It's an unquestionably bleak moment, one that offers no suggestion that the speaker's prayers can be answered.

### METER

"Prayer Before Birth" doesn't follow any particular [meter](#). Instead, the poem mainly relies on its [refrain](#) ("I am not yet born") as well as intense [repetition](#), [alliteration](#), [assonance](#), and [consonance](#) to build a sense of momentum and direction throughout.

The poem often turns specifically to [parallelism](#) (the repetition of grammatical structures across different phrases), which sometimes this recreates the effect of meter. Take, for example, lines 5-7:

[...] with **tall walls wall** me,  
with **strong drugs dope** me, with **wise lies lure** me,  
on **black racks rack** me, in **blood-baths roll** me.

Though there is still no overarching meter in the poem, these lines have an obvious rhythm: unstressed-**stressed-stressed-stressed**-unstressed. Lines 6-7 are exact matches metrically, in fact, both with 10 syllables arranged in the same pattern. Notice how each clause packs **stressed** syllables tightly together (as though, perhaps, they are imprisoned in the line). This makes the repeated "me" sound weak, neatly representing the conflict at the heart of the poem: that of the unborn speaker vs. the entire world. The rhythm of each phrase suggests the speaker will have little chance of resisting the evils of the world.

Moments like this pop up throughout the poem, again creating a sense of rhythm and intensity in specific moments despite an overarching lack of regular meter. Lines 13-17 of the fourth stanza, for example, feature a da-da-DUM, da-da-DUM rhythm over and over again:

[...] my **words**  
when they **speak** to me, my **thoughts** when they **think**  
me,  
my **treason engendered** by **traitors beyond** me,  
my **life** when they **murder** by **means** of my  
**hands**, my **death** when they **live** me.

The erratic [enjambment](#) (which is, of course, intentional) means that these lines can't be neatly organized into specific feet (ignoring line breaks, these might all be called [anapests](#)). Still, a kind of galloping rhythm still fills these lines—surging forward, in a rapid, cascading motion, as though the speaker is hurtling into an abyss of worry.

## RHYME SCHEME

"Prayer Before Birth" has a strange [rhyme scheme](#). While the stanzas vary greatly in terms of length, each follows the same pattern: the first line and last line of the stanza always rhyme (with various numbers of non-rhyming lines in between). More specifically, the two words that appear after the [refrain](#) rhyme with the final two words of each stanza. For example, take stanza 1:

I am not yet born; O **hear me**.  
Let not the bloodsucking bat or the rat or the stoat or  
the  
club-footed ghoul come **near me**.

Stanza 4 has the same pattern, albeit with many more lines in between those rhymes:

I am not yet born; **forgive me**  
For the sins that in me the world shall commit, my  
words  
when they speak to me, my thoughts when they think  
me,  
my treason engendered by traitors beyond me,  
my life when they murder by means of my  
hands, my death when they **live me**.

These rhymes give the poem a sense of cadence and musicality that fits with the prayer form. Think about the way that established prayers sound different from regular speech—there is something strong, powerful, and moving about them.

The final stanza is then a little different. These two lines create a rhyming [couplet](#), which repeats the rhyme sounds from the previous stanza:

I am not yet born; O **fill me**  
[...]  
hands would **spill me**.  
Let them not make me a stone and let them not **spill**  
**me**.  
Otherwise **kill me**.

The repetition of "spill me" is called an identical rhyme. All this repetition adds a final, intense flourish to the speaker's plea.



## SPEAKER

The speaker in "Prayer Before Birth" is an unborn child praying for help for the life that lies ahead of them. Though they are unborn, the speaker knows a lot about the world that awaits—in particular, the speaker is aware of how much horror and suffering humanity inflicts upon itself, and how there will be societal pressure on the speaker to conform.

The speaker lists a wide variety of fears and worries, ranging from torture and massacre in the first stanza to more mundane worries about daily life in the fifth (what to do, for example, when "bureaucrats hector me"). Overall, then, the speaker provides a wide-ranging—and damning—perspective on humanity.

That said, the speaker does provide some hope the third stanza. Here, the speaker presents a vision of life lived in harmony with nature, offering a short-lived dose of optimism in an otherwise bleak poem. The third stanza reads more like what an unborn child deserves than what they should expect.

With the above in mind, it's worth acknowledging that poem is

obviously a logical impossibility. Unborn children know nothing of the world they are to be born into, nor do they have the ability to express thoughts about that world. Really, then, the poem is asking provocative questions of the reader—if an unborn child knew what awaited them, would they still want to live their life?



## SETTING

In a literal sense, the fact the speaker is unborn means that they are talking—rather, the reader is asked to imagine that they're talking—from the safety of a mother's womb.

However, the speaker also has a vantage point from which to view humanity and the world in general. This represents the second layer of the poem's setting: the modern world itself. According to the poem, this is a very bleak place—filled with torture and murder, conformity and mass consumerism, war and hatred, bureaucracy and false prophets. No wonder the child is afraid of being born!

The references to machinery reflect the increasing automation of work in the first half of the 20th century, when the poem was written, but many of the poem's problems can be ascribed to the contemporary world as well. The lack of specificity to the horrors described makes the poem feel more universal and urgent, relevant to readers young and old alike.

The poem also makes brief reference to the natural world in the third stanza, which provides a short-lived moment of optimism.



## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

"Prayer Before Birth" was published in Louis MacNeice's 1944 collection *Springboard*, but had been written in 1943—at the height of World War II. At the time, MacNeice was supporting the British war effort by writing and producing radio plays for the BBC aimed at bolstering public opinion in favor of the war.

MacNeice is considered a member of the Auden Group, a group of British and Irish writers including Stephen Spender, Cecil-Day Lewis, and, of course, W.H. Auden himself. The Auden Group (also called the Auden Generation) was lumped together based on being about the same age, having gone to Cambridge or Oxford, and leaning left in their politics.

MacNeice's work wasn't overtly political but often expressed a keen social awareness and used emotional, accessible language that proved very popular in his own lifetime. MacNeice also opposed totalitarianism, and while this poem doesn't mention war explicitly, there are clear gestures towards humankind's capacity for violence and self-destruction.

Accordingly, it's worth looking at the poem alongside with the work of some WWI and WWII poets. In its unblinking

bleakness, "Prayer Before Birth" has more in common with the poetry based on the direct experience of war's horrors—from poets like Siegfried Sassoon ("[Suicide in the Trenches](#)"), Wilfred Owen ("[Anthem for Doomed Youth](#)"), and Keith Douglas ("[Simplify Me When I'm Dead](#)")—than it does with more jingoistic poets like Rupert Brooke and Jessie Pope ("[Who's for the Game?](#)").

But the anxieties of "Prayer Before Birth" stretch far beyond any particular conflict, and confront readers with questions about modern life itself. In its concern for the way technology and mass production erode individuality, the poem finds common ground with one of the biggest films of the era—Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (in which Chaplin himself becomes a "cog" in a great machine).

Another important aspect of "Prayer Before Birth" is its perspective—that of an unborn child. The poem grants the speaker the innocence and vulnerability that are usually associated with childhood itself. William Blake wrote often on this subject, and was similarly concerned with the way that the world corrupts the humanity of those born into it. A number of contemporary poets have also written specifically about those who are unborn—that is, children growing in the womb. Readers might want to check out "[Something in the Belly](#)" by Deena Metzger, or "[Song for Baby-O, Unborn](#)" by Diane di Prima.

Finally, it's worth acknowledging that the poem is titled as a prayer and borrows snippets of biblical language. The most obvious of these is in the phrase "Let not" / "Let them not." This evokes the book of Job, in which the title character curses the day that he was born: "Let the day perish on which I was born." This, of course, ties in with the speaker's question about whether it's a good idea to enter the world, or if it would be better to die in advance.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Prayer Before Birth" was written in 1943, at the height of World War II. The poem doesn't make specific reference to the conflict, but it certainly lurks in the background.

World War II was a devastating conflict that killed an estimated 85 million people worldwide. And it was, of course, the *second* incredibly deadly conflict of the century. Though humankind had made huge technological and intellectual progress in the preceding centuries, that such brutal wars could take place undermined the sense that this was progress at all. Many felt that perhaps technology had merely made humankind more efficient and creative in its own self-destruction (a sentiment echoed in "Prayer Before Birth").

The poem also makes reference to the industrialization of the modern world. The 20th century saw big leaps in mass production and globalization. Fordism—the work philosophy pioneered by famed automaker Henry Ford—created jobs that were incredibly repetitive and time-pressured. The poem's

speaker worries that being "a cog in a machine" will erode their sense of individuality, thereby implying that these societal trends threatened the nature of humanity itself.



## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [MacNeice's Life and Work](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/louis-macneice) – A great resource on Louis MacNeice from the Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/louis-macneice>)
- [A Cog in the Machine](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6n9ESFJTnHs) – A clip from Charlie Chaplin's "Modern Times" that relates to the poem's second-to-last stanza. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6n9ESFJTnHs>)
- [The Poem Read Aloud](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=01pL35lSLsM) – Listen to a great reading of the poem by actor Ralph Cotterill. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=01pL35lSLsM>)
- [The Poet's Voice](#) – Hear MacNeice himself recite one of

his most famous poems, "Bagpipe Music."

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n72XebBaMel>)

- [MacNeice and the BBC](https://books.openedition.org/puc/544?lang=en) – An interesting article about MacNeice's work during World War II. (<https://books.openedition.org/puc/544?lang=en>)



## HOW TO CITE

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