# Between the World and Me

## SUMMARY

The speaker describes walking through the woods one morning when he suddenly came upon what he calls "the thing," in a grassy clearing surrounded by oak and elm trees. As he pieced together the details of the scene, they created a sort of barrier between the speaker and his surroundings.

There was an abandoned pile of white bones sleeping on a pillow of ashes, and the burnt stump of a small tree pointed into the air like a finger accusing the sky of something. There were broken tree branches, the stems of burnt leaves, and the seared loop of an oily rope. There was a shoe with no foot to go in it, a necktie with no neck to go around, a shirt that had been torn, a hat without a head to sit on, and a pair of pants crusty with dried blood. On top of the grass, which had been flattened by all the feet standing on it, there were buttons, used-up matches, cigar and cigarette butts, peanut shells, an empty flask of gin, and a sex worker's lipstick. Bits of tar had been left behind, alongside feathers ruffling in the breeze and the scent of gasoline. The sun shone through the morning air, pouring a shock of yellow into the skull's empty eye sockets.

As the speaker stood there looking at all of this, his mind felt stunned—as if frozen—with sorrow and sympathy for the person who died. He felt as though he were stuck to the ground, while his heart was surrounded by ice-cold terror. Then the sky went dark and wind ruffled the grass and leaves. The woods filled with the howls of starving dogs, eager and bloodthirsty voices screamed in the darkness, and the people who watched this murder reappeared.

The speaker describes the victim's body then merging with his own: the bones shook to life, rising from the ground and fusing with the speaker's bones, while the victim's ashes turned into solid, black flesh that melded with the speaker's own skin. The scene appeared before the speaker, who saw the flask of gin being passed around the crowd, cigars and cigarettes burning in the dark, the sex worker putting on her red lipstick, and a thousand faces circling around him, calling for him to be burned alive.

Then the mob ripped off the speaker's clothes and brutally beat him, bashing his teeth into his throat and making him swallow his own blood. No one could hear the speaker's cries over the crowd's shouting. They fumbled with his body, Black and wet with blood, while tying him to a tree. Then boiling hot tar melted the speaker's skin, which sloughed off of his body in pieces. The quills of white feathers stabbed his tender skin, and he cried out in suffering. Then came the cool relief of gasoline, which poured over the speaker like baptismal water. Then they lit him on fire; the red flames of his body jumped toward the sky as pain surged inside him, like water boiling his arms and legs. Breathing hard and pleading, he grabbed the sides of the blazing tree like a child, helplessly clinging to the scalding sides of death itself. Now he is the pile of bones in the clearing, his face nothing but an empty skull in the yellow daylight, looking up in shock at the sun.

## THEMES

### THE HORROR AND INHUMANITY OF RACIST VIOLENCE

"Between the World and Me" is a poem about the immense horror and cruelty of racist violence. Upon finding the bones of a Black person who was lynched by a racist mob, the speaker envisions the intensely disturbing scene that preceded the victim's death. The trash that litters the ground—cigarette butts, a tube of lipstick, an empty gin flask, peanut shells—reveals that spectators treated this person's brutal murder as a form of entertainment. In juxtaposing this notion with gruesome, terrifying depictions of the victim's final moments, the speaker illustrates the monstrous inhumanity of racism.

The scene that the speaker "stumble[s] / suddenly upon" is so horrific that it seemingly takes him a moment to even recognize what he's seeing. He calls the pile of bones "the thing," as if he can't bear to acknowledge that he's looking at the remains of a human being whose "white bones [are] slumbering forgottenly upon a cushion of ashes."

The speaker then pieces together what happened from the items left at the scene, painting a vivid picture of a horrifically painful and gruesome murder. He mentions "trousers stiff with black blood," a "charred stump," "scattered traces of tar," and the "lingering smell of gasoline," which call to mind a racist mob tar-and-feathering its victim.

So overwhelmed is the speaker by this scene that he feels himself merging with the victim, whose "bones" begin "melting themselves into" the speaker's own. He feels his own skin "falling from [him] in limp patches," his limbs "boiling," and his teeth being "batter[ed] into his own throat." These descriptions are intentionally shocking in their brutality, and are meant to highlight the cruelty of this murder.

This makes it all the more terrifying, then, when it becomes clear that the crowd took perverse pleasure in enacting such violence. In reliving the lynching, the speaker sees glowing cigars, a flask "passed from mouth to mouth," and a sex worker with "smeared lipstick red upon her lips" (whose presence suggests that the crowd sees this as a raucous, rowdy event).

The racist mob, the poem implies, saw this person's agony as a spectacle. They were "thirsty" for violence, "clamoring that [his] life be burned" for their entertainment.

This contrast—between the mob's pleasure and the victim/speaker's gruesome pain—illustrates the horror of racist violence, which strips Black people of their human dignity and treats Black life as disposable. The speaker's empathy cuts through the mob's monstrous cruelty, forcing readers to look at the brutal, bloodthirsty, and barbaric reality of racism head-on.

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

- Lines 1-25

### THE TRAUMA OF RACISM

"Between the World and Me" not only highlights the horror and inhumanity of racist violence itself, but also shows the devastating and traumatic *impact* that racism has on Black people moving through society. When the speaker comes across the horrific aftermath of a lynching, the "details" of the gruesome scene come "between" him and "the world." In other words, the terrible reality of racism stands in his way, interrupting his walk in the woods and "circl[ing]" him with "icy walls of fear." Racism, the poem thus reveals, isn't something the speaker can just move past or ignore; instead, it "thrusts" itself onto his lived experience, denying his right to move freely and safely through the world without a very real and incapacitating sense of fear.

The speaker obviously doesn't go out *looking* for this scene, but he can't ignore it after he stumbles upon it. This presents racism as an extremely unwelcome intruder, one that forces itself upon the speaker. "And the sooty details of the scene rose," he says, "thrusting / themselves between the world and me." The word "thrusting" spotlights the intrusive way that the sight of this racist violence inundates the speaker, making him feel like he can't escape.

As much as he might like to, the speaker can't look away from the pile of bones and the "charred" surroundings. He stands "frozen" in this scene, stopped in his tracks by the unavoidable reality that has shoved its way between him and everything else, forcing him to reckon with the deeply troubling fact that the world is "clamoring that" Black people "be burned."

With this in mind, the speaker starts to feel the victim's bones "melting themselves" into *his* bones, an image that shows the connection he feels with this victim. Suddenly the speaker *becomes* the victim, narrating the violence as if it's happening to him in real-time. The lynching is no longer an abstract thing that happened to a stranger, but a terrible, immediate, and inescapable reality.

This melding of the speaker's and the victim's experiences suggests that racist violence causes a *collective* kind of trauma, as the victim's pain engulfs the speaker so completely that it actually becomes his own. Racism, the poem indicates, puts Black people in a state of constant danger, creating a barrier of fear that stands "between" them and the world.

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

- Lines 1-25

## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-3

*And one morning ...*
*... world and me...*

The speaker begins as if in mid-sentence. Beginning with the word "and" throws readers right into the scene in an abrupt, almost startling way that reflects the speaker's own surprise as he "stumble[s] suddenly upon the thing." The beginning of the poem, in other words, plunges readers into the scene in the same way that the speaker unwittingly finds himself staring at something unexpected in the middle of the woods.

But it's not yet clear what, exactly, this "thing" is that the speaker has found. Readers only know that this thing is in a "grassy clearing guarded by scaly oaks and elms"—that is to say, a secluded place outside the public eye. This gives the poem's atmosphere an ominous quality, as if the speaker has come across something hidden and sinister.

The fact that the speaker calls whatever he's looking at "the thing" doesn't necessarily mean he doesn't know what it is. Instead, this vague description hints that whatever he's come across is so startling that he hasn't quite wrapped his head around it yet. He's looking at something deeply troubling—so troubling, in fact, that he can't bring himself to fully recognize it or even name it in the poem itself.

Readers will later learn that the speaker has come across the scene of a lynching, where a racist mob tar-and-feathered a Black man before burning him alive. Given the shockingly gruesome nature of this crime, it makes sense that the speaker is hesitant—or even unable—to quickly come to terms with what he's seeing.

And yet, he can't keep the reality of this scene at bay for very long. Soon enough, the "sooty details of the scene" jump out at him. He suggests that these "details" cut him off from the rest of the world, "thrusting themselves between" him and everything else—basically overwhelming him so intensely that it's impossible for him to look away, keep walking, or really do anything other than take in the horrific reality of this violence. The word "thrusting" is especially telling here, as it presents racist violence as an intrusive, unrelenting force, something that essentially assaults the unprepared speaker.

There's quite a bit of alliteration and assonance in these opening lines. Note, for example, all the /w/, /s/, /g/, /uh/, and /ee/ sounds:

> And one morning while in the woods I stumbled
> suddenly upon the thing,
> Stumbled upon it in a grassy clearing guarded by
> scaly oaks and elms.
> And the sooty details of the scene rose, thrusting
> themselves between the world and me...

These devices add emphasis to the speaker's words, elevating the language in a way that immediately snaps readers to attention. This heightened poetic sound thus draws readers into the poem, pushing them into the scene with the same kind of abruptness that the speaker himself experiences when he suddenly stumbles upon the corpse.

## LINES 4-6

*There was a ...*
*... of greasy hemp;*

The speaker takes in the scene before him. At first, he broadly referred to the dead person as "the thing," maybe as a subconscious way of emotionally protecting himself from the horror of this violence. Now that the scene has "thrust[]" itself upon him, though, he can't help but take in every last detail.

He notices a small, delicate pile of bones resting atop a pile of ashes, indicating that the victim was, in the end, burned to death. He describes these bones as "slumbering forgottenly upon a cushion of ashes," personifying them and, in doing so, subtly reminding readers of the victim's humanity; he emphasizes the simple fact that the victim was a living, breathing person. In this way, personification ensures that readers don't just see the victim as an abstract and inanimate pile of remains, but as a human being whose life was unjustly taken from him.

Despite the victim's humanity, there's a certain feeling in the poem that nobody—other than the speaker—really cares what happened. The speaker hints at this by saying that the personified bones sleep "forgottenly" on the ashes, implying that the world has moved on from and even overlooked this loss. The word "forgottenly" also adds to the remote, secluded quality of the scene, serving as a reminder that the speaker has *unexpectedly* stumbled upon this atrocity in a sleepy part of the woods—he didn't go out looking for it.

In lines 5 and 6 ("There was [...] greasy hemp"), the speaker continues to describe what he's found, using vivid imagery to set the scene: there's a "charred stump," "torn tree limbs," and "burnt leaves"—all of which imply that the victim was burned to death (that "coil" of rope might be the remnants of a noose). There's more personification in this moment, as the speaker says that the "charred stump of a sapling" points a "blunt finger accusingly at the sky."

Personifying the natural elements here helps the speaker bring the environment to life, adding to the poem's ominous, unsettling atmosphere. This personification also implies a sense of disapproval, as if the natural world itself is aware that what has happened in this small clearing is a crime against humanity. With this in mind, the personified "sapling" points "accusingly at the sky"—an image that perhaps invites readers to ask themselves how God could let something so brutally evil happen to a human being.

## LINES 7-9

*A vacant shoe, ...*
*... smell of gasoline.*

The speaker looks beyond the pile of bones and the "charred" trees and lists the various objects surrounding the victim's remains. Surveying the scene, he sees things like a lone shoe, a necktie, a ripped shirt, and a hat. But he doesn't just give a laundry list of these objects. Consider the adjectives he uses:

> A vacant shoe, an empty tie, a ripped shirt, a lonely
> hat, [...]

Words like "vacant," "empty," and "lonely" all remind readers that a life has been taken away. The victim has left behind his clothes, which are eerily "empty" now that he's gone. The fact that the shirt is "ripped" speaks to the brutal struggle that must have taken place just before this person died, conjuring images of a merciless crowd tearing at his clothing.

The mention of "black blood" has a double meaning here:

- On one level, it refers to the dark color of the dried blood that makes the victim's "trousers stiff." Losing enough blood to make pants "stiff," in turn, tells readers just how gruesome and horrific this murder was.
- But "black blood" also can be read as referring to the blood of a Black person. In this sense, the phrase reminds readers that this was specifically a *racist* lynching.

In line 8 ("And upon [...] lipstick"), the speaker turns his attention to the things that the mob—rather than the victim—left behind:

- These items are basically trash, polluting an already horrible scene with "buttons," "cigars and cigarettes," and "peanut shells."
- Their presence further suggests that the people watching the lynching perversely saw it as a form of entertainment, as a kind of public spectacle worthy of snacks and cigarettes.
- The mention of "drained gin-flask" and a "whore's

lipstick" imply a particularly raucous atmosphere.

The poet is drawing from real life here: in the Jim Crow era, when this poem was written, the public lynching of Black people was indeed sometimes treated like some kind of community event.

In order to underscore the immense horror and monstrous cruelty of this fact, the speaker then juxtaposes all this seeming revelry with the "scattered traces of tar, restless arrays of feathers, and the lingering smell of gasoline" that also were left behind. The presence of "tar" and "feathers" indicates that the mob tar-and-feathered its victim (a torture method used to humiliate people by pouring hot tar on them and then covering them in feathers). This mob not only burned the victim alive, but also made a point of dehumanizing him before his death.

## LINES 10-12

*And through the ...*
*... walls of fear—*

The speaker continues to use vivid imagery to convey the horror of the scene before him. He juxtaposes the fresh "morning air" with the way the sunlight shines into the "eyes sockets of the stony skull"—contrasting the beautiful morning with a horrible remnant of the victim's violent death.

The fact that the sunlight pours "yellow surprise" into the skull further emphasizes the astounding shock of finding the bones. It also possibly suggests that even the victim couldn't believe what was happening to him, perhaps suggesting that the utter inhumanity of this kind of violence is hard to accept even as it's happening.

The mention of the "morning air" and the "yellow" sunlight also reminds readers that the speaker was simply enjoying a pleasant walk in the woods on a nice morning before stumbling upon this terrifying scene, which has now shoved itself "between" him and the rest of the world. This might speak to the way that racism thrusts itself upon Black people, impeding on their right to live free of fear.

The sight of the lynching has incapacitated the speaker, who feels like his mind is "frozen with a cold pity"—stuck to the spot, unable to turn away. He didn't go looking for this scene, but now that he's found it, he has no choice but to confront the reality of a racist world full of hatred and violence.

He feels rooted by sheer terror. "The ground gripped my feet and my heart was circled by icy walls of fear," he says, making it clear that what he's seen is so profoundly traumatic that it renders him immobile. The mention of "walls of fear" echoes the line from the beginning of the poem about the "details of the scene [...] thrusting themselves between the world and" the speaker. Again, the reality of racism creates a sort of barrier between the speaker and the world, preventing him from living his life fully and freely.

## LINES 13-15

*The sun died ...*
*... into my flesh.*

There's a shift in the poem here as the speaker, frozen to the spot and surrounded by "icy walls of fear," seems to be transported back in time to the scene of the murder itself. The world changes, the sunny day suddenly growing dark and windy, and the sounds of hungry dogs and an eager mob growing louder.

The sky doesn't just get dark, in fact, but the sun *dies*, infusing everything (even the natural world, which previously "poured" forth rich sunlight) with death. Meanwhile, the sibilance of words like "sun," "sky," and "grass" creates a hissing sound that brings to mind the rush of the wind. The world rustles with ominous, frightening energy as "thirsty voices" yell out in "darkness" (note how the menacing sibilance continues in these words).

The mention of "hungry [...] hounds" and "thirsty voices" evoke the mob's eagerness to hurt its victim. These "witnesses" to the lynching suddenly reappear, "thirsty" for violence, "hungry" for pain.

And then, the victim comes back to life—and fuses with the speaker himself:

> The dry bones stirred, rattled, lifted, melting
> themselves into my bones.

The speaker *becomes* one with the victim, inhabiting this person's body and going through the horror that this person went through. He goes on to say that the ashes form "flesh firm and black" that enters *his* flesh—confirmation that he, like the victim, is Black. The speaker isn't literally melding with the bones; he's speaking metaphorically to illustrate how, as a Black man, he feels the victim's pain as something visceral and immediate. This, in turn, implies that racist violence doesn't just hurt its specific, individual victims. Rather, the trauma of this kind of violence is a burden to all Black people living under the threat of racism.

## LINES 16-17

*The gin-flask passed ...*
*... life be burned...*

Having *become* the victim himself, the speaker now experiences the lynching firsthand, narrating it in vivid detail using a first-person perspective. As if it's not disturbing enough that the racist mob wants to beat and kill him, it once again becomes clear that this group of people sees the lynching as a form of entertainment—they pass the "gin-flask" around and smoke "cigars and cigarettes," treating this horrifically violent event like a party.

The speaker uses diacope in line 16, saying:

> The gin flask passed from mouth to mouth, [...]

The phrase "passed from mouth to mouth" emphasizes the perverse sense of community and camaraderie that these "witnesses" to murder seem to feel with each other, bonded by their racist hatred.

There's also a moment of polyptoton, when the speaker says that the sex worker "smeared the lipstick red upon her lips." This sexualized image is juxtaposed against the intense violence, again implying there's a perverse sense of pleasure in the air even as the mob has gathered to torture and kill another human being. That red lipstick also symbolizes the crowd's hunger for blood, recalling the "thirsty voices" mentioned earlier in the poem.

At the center of this raucous scene, the speaker confronts "a thousand faces swirl[ing]" around him—a hyperbolic description that emphasizes just how outnumbered he feels (and perhaps speaks metaphorically to how prevalent racism is; while there probably aren't *literally* thousands of people in this particular mob, there are certainly thousands in the "world" at large).

The intensity of this moment illustrates the extent to which the horror of the lynching has pushed itself "between the world" and the speaker. At first, he saw nothing more than a pile of bones bathed in sunlight on a fresh morning. However, he soon gets so swept up in what happened in this clearing in the woods that he actually *experiences* it himself. The lynching is no longer some abstract injustice that happened to a stranger, then, but a very real and immediate threat.

## LINES 18-21

> *And then they ...*
> *... in my agony.*

The speaker describes the mob's violence in brutal, visceral detail that is intentionally difficult to stomach. Not only does the mob beat him senseless by "battering" his teeth "into [his] throat," they also go out of the way to humiliate and dehumanize him by ripping off his clothes. The mob clearly has no regard for Black life.

The speaker again calls attention to his own Blackness, saying that his "black wet body slipped and rolled" in the mob's hands. This is a horrific image that suggests his body is slick with blood, and which reminds readers that this gruesome violence is based on racist hatred. To that end, the mob goes out of its way to degrade the speaker/victim. After they rip off his clothes, they tie him to a small tree—the same "charred" "sapling" the speaker saw pointing a "blunt finger accusingly at the sky" when he first walked into the clearing.

From there, they pour hot tar on him and cover him in feathers, a torture method called "tar-and-feathering" that dates back to the Middle Ages and was fairly common during the American Revolution. Tar-and-feathering doesn't usually kill a person in and of itself, so one of its primary purposes is to publicly humiliate victims by defiling their bodies. The mob's method of torturing the speaker/victim is thus an attempt to strip him of his humanity in a way that blatantly defiles his "black [...] body." And in yet more excruciating imagery, the speaker describes the way that his own skin fuses "to the bubbling hot tar" and then—horrifically—falls off in "limp patches."

This section of the poem is intentionally disturbing thanks to the speaker's unflinching narration. He doesn't temper the violence in any way, nor turn to poetic metaphors. Instead, he relies on clear, lurid descriptions to relate his utter "agony." The speaker's use of anaphora and polysyndeton also adds a certain intensity:

> And then they had me, [...].
> And my skin clung to the bubbling hot tar, [...].
> And the down and quills of the white feathers sank
> into my raw flesh, and I moaned in agony.

The sense here is that the poem—just like the mob itself—won't let up: readers have no choice but to bear witness to these heinous acts of violence, which just keep coming.

## LINES 22-25

> *Then my blood ...*
> *... at the sun...*

The speaker says that he's "cooled by a baptism of gasoline." This metaphorically compares being doused in gasoline to the Christian tradition of symbolic purification before a person joins the church. The speaker apparently *welcomes* the gasoline in the same way that people might welcome God into their lives—even though the gasoline is a precursor to the excruciating pain of burning alive. While this might seem strange, it also makes a lot of sense: the speaker is in so much "agony" because of the molten tar that he welcomes *any* kind of relief, even the temporary relief of "cool[]" gasoline on his skin.

But this relief is short-lived. "And in a blaze of red I leaped to the sky as pain rose like water, boiling my limbs," the speaker says. The simile comparing the speaker's pain to rising water builds on the baptism metaphor. At first, the speaker has a momentary feeling of relief that perhaps feels like some kind of religious salvation. Now, though, the mob lights him on fire, and the metaphorical baptism turns into nothing but another form of torturous pain, as the baptismal water "boil[s]" him alive. This stresses the complete horror and injustice of this scene, since the speaker can't even feel a sense of religious salvation before death—instead, he experiences an all-consuming pain.

The speaker tries to jump "to the sky" in pain, thus moving toward heaven, but he can't because he's tied to the scalding-hot sapling. He is, in other words, helpless, which he emphasizes by saying that he clings "childlike" to the "hot sides

of death." All he can do, the poem implies, is fully experience the terrible pain of burning alive.

When it's all over, the speaker has died and, in doing so, has become the pile of bones he first came upon in the woods at the beginning of the poem. In this way, the poem comes full circle. The speaker doesn't just feel empathy for the victim, but actually takes on the victim's pain. Encountering a horrific act of racism leads to a shared kind of trauma, the poem indicates—trauma that is still visceral and disturbing even when experienced vicariously.

To spotlight his transformation, the speaker uses repetition, bringing back the phrases "dry bones," "stony skull," and "yellow surprise," all of which he originally used to describe the pile of bones. Now, though, he has *become* this pile of bones:

> Now I am dry bones and my face a stony skull staring
> in yellow surprise at the sun...

These repeated phrases bring the poem to a conclusion, signaling to readers that it has ended where it began—the only difference, of course, is that the pile of bones belongs to the speaker. The ellipsis after the final word hints that this process of transformation will most likely happen again; now that the speaker's bones are piled in the clearing, they will someday shock another Black person walking through the woods—just like the victim's bones first shocked the speaker. The effects of racist violence, therefore, reach beyond individual victims, creating lasting cycles of fear and trauma.

## SYMBOLS

### EMPTY CLOTHING

The empty clothing in the poem represents the victim's absence from the world. Each item the speaker comes across speaks to the fact that this person is *gone*. For example, the speaker doesn't just mention the victim's shoe, but specifically calls it a "vacant shoe"; there's no foot there to fill it. Similarly, he notices an "empty tie" and a "lonely hat," all things that now seem incomplete and meaningless without their owner. There presence testifies to the fact that a life has been needlessly ripped away from the earth.

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

- **Line 7:** "A vacant shoe, an empty tie, a ripped shirt, a lonely hat, and a pair of trousers stiff with black blood."

### THE CROWD'S POSSESSIONS

All the things that members of this mob bring to the lynching represent their perverse appetite for violence. The speaker sees peanut shells, people passing a "gin-flask [...] from mouth to mouth," the glow of cigarettes, and a sex worker "smear[ing] the lipstick red upon her lips." Notice how many of these things are items to be consumed—to drink, inhale, or eat. All these items imply that violence stirs these people's appetites, that it gets them excited and riled up. The crowd is as "hungry" for violence, like those "hounds" that the speaker hears "yelping" in the woods.

Also note how the "lipstick" here is "red"—not coincidentally, the color of blood. It represents the mob's blood-lust, the terrible "thirst[]" in their "voices" while "clamoring that [the speaker/victim's] life be burned."

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

- **Line 8:** "butt-ends of cigars and cigarettes, peanut shells, a drained gin-flask, and a whore's lipstick;"
- **Line 16:** "The gin-flask passed from mouth to mouth, cigars and cigarettes glowed, the whore smeared the lipstick red upon her lips,"

## POETIC DEVICES

### IMAGERY

The speaker uses intense imagery from start to finish, making the brutal murder horrifyingly visceral and immediate for readers. The stark, intense imagery emphasizes the horror of the racist violence depicted in the poem.

The poem starts with the speaker describing a seemingly peaceful "grassy clearing" on a sunny morning, making what comes next feel all the more shocking and horrible—like some perversion of this fresh, natural world. The speaker notes the "design of white bones" on "a cushion of ashes," for example, the "charred stump of a sapling," the "torn tree limbs," the "tiny veins of burnt leaves," and "a scorched coil of greasy hemp." Readers can immediately envision the remnants of a great fire and tell that something terrible has happened here.

The speaker evokes the scents of the scene as well, noting the toxic, "lingering smell of gasoline" that hangs in the morning air. The frank description of torn, bloody clothes and a crowd's trash helps the reader piece together the scene just as the speaker does—one of horrible torture turned into entertainment.

Other bone-chilling details make it easier for readers to really *feel* the speaker's fear. As the scene of the lynching overwhelms him, the sun suddenly goes dark and a "night wind mutter[s] in the grass and fumble[s] the leaves in the trees." The speaker describes not just the rustling sound of leaves but also the "hungry yelping of hounds" in the distance and "thirsty voices" that yell out from the surrounding "darkness."

As the poem goes on, the details get more and more gruesome and disturbing. Feeling his own body merge with that of the victim, the speaker says, "And my skin clung to the bubbling hot tar, falling from me in limp patches." The idea of skin fusing with "bubbling hot tar" is truly awful and sickening, as is the image of that skin falling off a person in "limp patches."

These excruciating descriptions are so intense that readers can almost understand why the speaker would experience relief when the mob pours gasoline on him—this, at least, "cool[s]" him down for a moment. But then the mob lights him on fire and his body goes up in a "blaze of red": another instance of visual imagery that makes it impossible for readers to overlook the speaker's staggering pain and trauma.

**Where Imagery appears in the poem:**

- Line 2
- Lines 4-10
- Lines 11-17
- Lines 18-25

## JUXTAPOSITION

The poem juxtaposes the calm, seemingly peaceful natural world and the horrific details of the lynching. It also juxtaposes the brutality of this murder with the crowd's seeming enjoyment of what happened.

When the poem starts, the speaker is walking into what *would* be a pleasant "clearing" in the woods if it weren't for the disturbing remnants of a ruthless murder. The speaker describes the clearing as a "grassy" area "guarded by scaly oaks and elms," creating a picture of an idyllic, serene place—the sort of place people might kick back to enjoy some sunshine.

And yet, the area is littered with signs of violence. There's a pile of bones atop a bed of ashes, a "charred" stump, and "torn tree limbs." There are also "dead matches, butt-ends of cigars and cigarettes, peanut shells, a drained gin-flask, and a whore's lipstick." These things hint at the chaos surrounding the lynching, as if it were a wild party. This starkly contrasts the woods' otherwise calm atmosphere.

The evidence of such horrible violence is so at odds with what the speaker expected to find in the woods that it's hard, at first, for him to even process what he's looking at. "And one morning while in the woods I stumbled suddenly upon the thing," he says, apparently unable—or unwilling—to fully recognize what, exactly, he's looking at. This illustrates how jarring this troubling scene is in comparison to the sunny, quiet woods—so jarring, it seems, that it's nearly incomprehensible.

**Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 4-10
- Line 13
- Lines 14-17
- Lines 18-25

## PERSONIFICATION

The speaker uses personification in suggesting that the "details" of the lynching scene "thrust[] themselves" before him. This presents the terrible reality of the lynching (and of racism more generally) as an overbearing, profoundly unwelcome intruder in the speaker's life.

Although at first the "details" of the scene are abstract and strange, they soon take on a life of their own and terrorize the speaker. Take, for example, the "charred stump of a sapling pointing a blunt finger accusingly at the sky." The burnt sapling is, of course, just a "charred" tree, not an actual human being. And yet, the speaker gives it personal agency by suggesting that it points "accusingly at the sky." This adds a sinister feeling to the entire scene, alerting readers to the fact that there has been a crime against humanity in this clearing.

Elsewhere, the speaker uses personification by suggesting that the victim's bones come back to life. These resurrected bones fuse with the *speaker's* bones, becoming part of him. By bringing the victim back to life, the poem implies that terrible acts of racist violence don't just fade into the past; instead, they continue to haunt and even directly impact people in the present.

**Where Personification appears in the poem:**

- **Line 3:** "And the sooty details of the scene rose, thrusting themselves between the world and me..."
- **Line 4:** "There was a design of white bones slumbering forgottenly upon a cushion of ashes."
- **Line 5:** "There was a charred stump of a sapling pointing a blunt finger accusingly at the sky."
- **Line 7:** "a lonely hat"
- **Line 13:** "the darkness screamed with thirsty voices"
- **Lines 14-15:** "The dry bones stirred, rattled, lifted, melting themselves into my bones. / The gray ashes formed flesh firm and black, entering into my flesh."

## METAPHOR

The poem builds on a metaphor that the speaker introduces at the end of the first stanza ("And one [...] and me..."). In this metaphor, the speaker suggests that the horrific details surrounding the scene of the lynching overwhelm him so much that he's essentially cut off from the rest of the world:

> And the sooty details of the scene rose, thrusting themselves between the world and me...

The idea here is that what he's found in the clearing is so disturbing that it feels like an intrusive force, one that makes it impossible for him to move on. The speaker can't look away and continue his walk through the woods now that this scene has violently "thrust[]" itself upon him. Seeing evidence of such harrowing racist violence, in other words, is so traumatizing that it plunges the speaker into an unbearable prison of fear.

The speaker addresses this fear in another metaphor, saying, "And while I stood my mind was frozen with a cold pity for the life that was gone." This metaphor suggests that the gruesome details of the lynching completely stun the speaker, stopping him in his tracks and thus making it impossible for him to go about his normal life. The speaker adds to this feeling of sudden immobility with yet another metaphor:

> The ground gripped my feet and my heart was circled by icy walls of fear—

The image of the ground grabbing the speaker's feet stresses his feeling of helplessness, as if he has no choice but to take in the terrifying scene before him because he literally cannot turn away. There's also the metaphor of "icy walls of fear" encircling his heart, further illustrating not just his fright, but also the sense that he's trapped—the horror of this scene has him in its icy clutches, and there's nothing he can do to save himself from it.

On a broader level, the poem uses an extended metaphor in which the speaker actually *becomes* the victim. The speaker doesn't just vividly imagine what must have happened to the victim but experiences the victim's pain firsthand.

**Where Metaphor appears in the poem:**

- Line 2
- Line 3
- Line 4
- Line 5
- Line 10
- Line 11
- Line 12
- Line 13
- Lines 13-15
- Lines 16-17
- Line 19
- Line 22
- Line 23
- Line 24
- Line 25

## PARALLELISM

Parallelism is an important device in "Between the World and Me," as the speaker repeats the same sentence structure (and often the same words) again and again throughout the poem.

The poem is filled with lists, and the parallelism of these lists makes the horror pile up to the point that it becomes overwhelming.

Some of this parallelism contains the more specific device anaphora, as when the speaker first lists the "details of the scene" near the start of the poem:

> There was a design of white bones slumbering forgottenly upon a cushion of ashes.
> There was a charred stump of a sapling pointing a blunt finger accusingly at the sky.
> There were torn tree limbs, tiny veins of burnt leaves, and a scorched coil of greasy hemp;

The repetition of "there was" at the beginning of each line here gives the sentences a parallel structure, as the speaker straightforwardly presents everything he sees in the clearing. This leads to a certain simplicity that allows the actual images themselves to take center stage—the speaker doesn't get caught up in fancy turns of phrase that might distract readers from important details.

And yet, at the same time, this use of anaphora also gives this section a relentless quality, as if disturbing details just keep jumping out at the speaker; the signs of violence just keep coming. This reinforces the poem's central metaphor, which suggests that the "sooty details of the scene" bombard the speaker, making it impossible to focus on anything else.

The same thing happens with the parallelism later in the poem, as the scene suddenly shifts and the speaker seems to be transported to the actual moment of the murder. Details keep coming and coming, each following the same grammatical structure:

> The ground gripped my feet [...]
> The sun died in the sky [...] the woods poured forth [...] the darkness screamed [...] the witnesses rose and lived:
> The dry bones stirred [...]
> The gray ashes formed flesh firm and black [...]
> The gin-flask passed from mouth to mouth [...]

**Where Parallelism appears in the poem:**

- **Line 4:** "There was a"
- **Line 5:** "There was a"
- **Line 6:** "There were"
- **Line 7:** "A vacant shoe, an empty tie, a ripped shirt, a lonely hat, and a pair of trousers stiff with black blood."
- **Line 12:** "The ground gripped my feet"
- **Line 13:** "The sun died in the sky;," "the woods poured forth," "the darkness screamed," "the witnesses rose"
- **Line 14:** "The dry bones stirred"

- **Line 15:** "The gray ashes formed flesh"
- **Line 16:** "The gin-flask passed from mouth to mouth"
- **Line 19:** "My voice was drowned," "my black wet body slipped"
- **Line 20:** "And my skin clung"
- **Line 21:** "And the down and quills of the white feathers sank," "and I moaned"
- **Line 23:** "And"

## ASYNDETON

The speaker uses asyndeton to speed up certain parts of the poem. For example, consider the way the speaker omits the word "and" in line 14:

> The dry bones **stirred, rattled, lifted,** melting themselves into my bones.

This streamlines the language, pulling readers through the line. It also increases the general intensity of this moment—an appropriate effect, since this is the point at which the speaker *becomes* the victim. Asyndeton makes this feel like a rapid, unexpected transformation, as the speaker gets so swept up in the scene that he actually experiences it firsthand.

A similar thing happens later, when the speaker uses asyndeton while describing the merciless beating he receives from the racist mob:

> And then **they had me, stripped me,** battering my teeth into my throat till I swallowed my own blood.

The speaker doesn't say, "And then they had me **and** stripped me." Instead, he uses asyndeton to create a much more direct, fast-paced flow that conveys a sense of alarm. This is also the case in line 24, when the speaker says, "**Panting, begging** I clutched childlike, clutched to the hot sides of death." This reflects the speaker's breathless, "panting" narration. Asyndeton therefore helps readers tune into the speaker's sense of urgency, fear, and desperation.

**Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:**

- **Line 14:** "The dry bones stirred, rattled, lifted,"
- **Line 18:** "And then they had me, stripped me, battering my teeth into my throat till I swallowed my own blood."
- **Line 24:** "Panting, begging I clutched childlike,"

## END-STOPPED LINE

Every line in "Between the World and Me" is end-stopped. (This isn't necessarily apparent at first glance, since many of the lines are so long that they look like *multiple* lines due to there not being enough space on the page.) This means that the speaker comes to some kind of pause at the end of each line. Take, for example, lines 4 and 5:

> There was a design of white bones slumbering forgottenly upon a cushion of **ashes.**
> There was a charred stump of a sapling pointing a blunt finger accusingly at the **sky.**

Each of these lines contains its own sentence. The end-stops give this moment a straightforward, declarative feeling, as the speaker simply states what he sees. Rather than complicating things by allowing his observations to run from one line to the next, the speaker uses end-stops to reign in the poem's otherwise sprawling descriptions.

In lines 14 and 15, the end-stops are even more noticeable because the lines are relatively short:

> The dry bones stirred, rattled, lifted, melting themselves into my **bones.**
> The gray ashes formed flesh firm and black, entering into my **flesh.**

These lines are self-contained and steady, with nothing to distract readers from the unsettling image of the victim's bones "melting" into the speaker's and the ashes "entering" his "flesh." By using end-stopped lines to keep the poem's flow relatively simple, then, the speaker allows the disturbing imagery to take center stage.

**Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "thing,"
- **Line 2:** "elms."
- **Line 3:** "me..."
- **Line 4:** "ashes."
- **Line 5:** "sky."
- **Line 6:** "hemp;"
- **Line 7:** "blood."
- **Line 8:** "lipstick;"
- **Line 9:** "gasoline."
- **Line 10:** "skull..."
- **Line 11:** "gone."
- **Line 12:** "fear—"
- **Line 13:** "lived:"
- **Line 14:** "bones."
- **Line 15:** "flesh."
- **Line 16:** " lips,"
- **Line 17:** "burned..."
- **Line 18:** "blood."
- **Line 19:** "sapling."
- **Line 20:** "patches."
- **Line 21:** "agony."
- **Line 22:** "gasoline."

- **Line 23:** "limbs."
- **Line 24:** "death."
- **Line 25:** "sun..."

## ALLITERATION

The speaker uses alliteration to make its imagery all the more striking and to add force and emphasis to certain moments. Take the opening two lines, which feature alliterative /w/, /s/, and /g/ sounds:

> And one morning while in the woods I stumbled
> suddenly upon the thing,
> Stumbled upon it in a grassy clearing guarded by
> scaly oaks and elms.

The alliteration here spotlights phrases like "stumbled suddenly," underlining the fact that the speaker didn't go looking for this horrific scene—instead, he abruptly found it in an unexpected clearing in the woods. The alliteration of the /g/ sound, on the other hand, calls attention to the beautifully secluded "grassy" setting, which is "guarded" by trees (and this, in turn, brings out the juxtaposition between the quiet, idyllic environment and the violent event that took place there).

In another striking moment of alliteration, the speaker refers to "trousers stiff with black blood." This blood is black in the sense that it's dark in color, and its presence illustrates the sheer violence of the scene. At the same time, it's "black blood" in the sense of being the blood of a Black person, and thus tells readers that this was specifically an act of *racist* violence. Alliteration ensures that this important moment stands out to the reader's ear.

Elsewhere, the speaker uses alliteration simply as a way of adding intensity to a given moment. For instance, the /f/ sound appears in rapid succession in line 15:

> The gray ashes formed flesh firm and black, entering
> into my flesh.

These rapid /f/ sounds don't just call attention to the image of ashes fusing together and melding into the speaker's "flesh"—they also create a subtle hissing sound that feels reminiscent of sizzling coals. In this sense, alliteration adds power to the language while building on its vivid imagery.

The final stanza features alliteration of the /b/ sound: "battering," "black," "body," "bound," "bubbling," "blood," "baptism," "blaze," "boiling," "begging," and "bones." Though many of these /b/ words are spread out, the bold sound still echoes throughout the entire stanza. This is a loud, percussive sound, and it adds a drum-like intensity to the speaker's horrific description of the victim's final moments.

**Where Alliteration appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "one," "while," "woods," "stumbled suddenly," "the thing"
- **Line 2:** "Stumbled," "grassy," "guarded," "scaly"
- **Line 3:** "sooty," "scene," "thrusting themselves"
- **Line 5:** "stump," "sapling," "sky"
- **Line 6:** "torn tree," "tiny"
- **Line 7:** "shoe," "shirt," "black blood"
- **Line 9:** "traces," "tar," "restless arrays"
- **Line 10:** "sun," "surprise," "sockets," "stony," "skull"
- **Line 12:** "ground," "gripped," "feet," "fear"
- **Line 13:** "sun," "sky," "hungry," "hounds"
- **Line 15:** "formed flesh firm," "flesh"
- **Line 16:** "flask," "cigars," "cigarettes," "smeared"
- **Line 17:** "be burned"
- **Line 18:** "battering," "blood"
- **Line 19:** "black," "body," "bound"
- **Line 20:** "bubbling"
- **Line 22:** "blood," "baptism"
- **Line 23:** "blaze," "boiling"
- **Line 24:** "begging"
- **Line 25:** "bones," "stony skull staring," "surprise," "sun"

## CONSONANCE

The poem is filled with consonance, which, like alliteration, draws attention to certain moments by adding intensity and emphasis to the speaker's language. Consider, for example, the mixture of hissing /s/, popping /p/, crisp /t/, and sharp /k/ sounds in line 5:

> There was a charred stump of a sapling pointing a
> blunt finger accusingly at the sky.

All these sounds seem harsh to the point of cacophony—which is appropriate given the jarring scene at hand. The /p/ sound also makes the phrase "stump of a sapling pointing" jump out at readers, emphasizing the image of the personified tree and the way it blames some kind of higher power for the crime against humanity that took place in this clearing.

Here's another striking moment of consonance:

> [...] and my black wet body slipped and rolled in their
> hands as they bound me to the sapling.
> And my skin clung to the bubbling hot tar, falling from
> me in limp patches.

The mixture of liquid /l/ and /s/ sounds with bubbling /b/ and spiky /k/ sounds makes the imagery all the more vivid and intense for the reader.

**Where Consonance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** “one,” “while,” “woods,” “stumbled suddenly,” “upon”
- **Line 2:** “Stumbled,” “upon,” “grassy,” “clearing guarded,” “scaly oaks,” “elms”
- **Line 3:** “sooty,” “scene,” “thrusting”
- **Line 4:** “slumbering,” “forgottenly upon,” “cushion,” “ashes”
- **Line 5:** “stump,” “sapling pointing,” “blunt,” “accusingly,” “sky”
- **Line 6:** “torn tree,” “tiny veins,” “burnt,” “leaves,” “scorched coil,” “greasy”
- **Line 7:** “empty tie,” “trousers stiff,” “black blood”
- **Line 8:** “trampled,” “buttons,” “cigars,” “cigarettes,” “peanut,” “lipstick”
- **Line 9:** “Scattered traces,” “tar,” “restless arrays,” “lingering smell,” “gasoline”
- **Line 10:** “sun poured,” “surprise,” “sockets,” “stony skull”
- **Line 11:** “frozen,” “life,” “gone”
- **Line 12:** “ground gripped,” “feet,” “circled,” “icy,” “fear”
- **Line 13:** “sun,” “sky,” “grass,” “darkness screamed,” “thirsty voices,” “witnesses”
- **Line 14:** “dry,” “stirred,” “rattled,” “lifted,” “melting themselves”
- **Line 15:** “ashes formed flesh firm,” “flesh”
- **Line 16:** “flask passed from mouth,” “mouth,” “cigars,” “cigarettes,” “whore smeared,” “lipstick red upon,” “lips”
- **Line 17:** “faces swirled,” “clamoring,” “be burned”
- **Line 18:** “battering,” “teeth,” “throat till,” “swallowed,” “blood”
- **Line 19:** “black,” “body,” “slipped,” “rolled,” “bound,” “sapling”
- **Line 20:** “skin clung,” “bubbling,” “falling from,” “me,” “limp patches”
- **Line 21:** “feathers,” “flesh”
- **Line 22:** “blood,” “cooled mercifully, cooled by,” “baptism,” “gasoline”
- **Line 23:** “blaze,” “red,” “leaped,” “sky,” “pain,” “rose,” “like,” “water,” “boiling,” “limbs”
- **Line 24:** “begging,” “clutched childlike,” “sides,” “death”
- **Line 25:** “dry bones,” “face,” “stony skull staring,” “yellow surprise,” “sun”

## SIBILANCE

Much of the alliteration and consonance in the poem is more specifically the sibilance. Take the opening lines:

> [...] I stumbled suddenly upon the thing,
> Stumbled upon it in a grassy clearing guarded by
> scaly oaks and elms.
> And the sooty details of the scene rose, thrusting
> themselves [...]

Here, sibilance subtly evokes the clearing's eerie, haunted silence. But sibilance can also feel like a cruel taunt (especially given that it's associated with treachery and snakes), and it's thus perhaps unsurprising that the speaker turns to it when talking about the "witnesses" to this murder:

> the darkness screamed with thirsty voices; and the
> witnesses rose and lived:

Ironically, /s/ is a quiet sound—once can't "scream" it. But here, readers get the sense of swirling, hissing hatred that surrounds the speaker. The same thing happens as the scene comes to life before the speaker's eyes:

> The gin-flask passed from mouth to mouth, cigars
> and cigarettes glowed, the whore smeared the
> lipstick red upon her lips,

The poem's final line is particularly sibilant as well:

> Now I am dry bones and my face a stony skull staring
> in yellow surprise at the sun...

That /s/ ends the poem on an eerie note, and might evoke both the hiss of flames being put out and the bitterness at being reduced to a "stony skull."

**Where Sibilance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** “stumbled suddenly”
- **Line 2:** “Stumbled,” “grassy,” “scaly,” “oaks”
- **Line 3:** “sooty,” “scene,” “thrusting themselves”
- **Line 4:** “slumbering,” “cushion,” “ashes”
- **Line 5:** “stump,” “sapling,” “sky”
- **Line 9:** “Scattered traces,” “restless,” “smell,” “gasoline”
- **Line 10:** “sun,” “surprise,” “sockets,” “stony skull”
- **Line 13:** “darkness screamed,” “thirsty voices,” “witnesses”
- **Line 16:** “gin-flask passed,” “cigars,” “cigarettes,” “smeared,” “lipstick,” “lips”
- **Line 17:** “faces swirled”
- **Line 25:** “face,” “stony skull staring,” “surprise,” “sun”

## ASSONANCE

Much like alliteration and the other sonic devices in the poem, the speaker uses assonance to make the language gripping and poetic. Take line 13, which includes the assonant /y/, /u/, /ee/, /o/, and short /i/ sounds:

> The sun died in the sky; a night wind muttered in the
> grass and fumbled the leaves in the trees; the woods
> poured forth the hungry yelping of hounds; the
> darkness screamed with thirsty voices; and the
> witnesses rose and lived:

This moment has a nightmarish quality, as the events of the lynching begin to take shape—and even recreate themselves—before the speaker's eyes. The assonance in these lines makes the language sound especially intense, spotlighting the fact that the sun "died in the sky" or the sound of "leaves in the trees" rustling in a restless wind.

**Where Assonance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "stumbled suddenly upon"
- **Line 2:** "Stumbled upon," "grassy clearing," "scaly"
- **Line 3:** "sooty details," "scene," "between," "me"
- **Line 4:** "design," "white," "slumbering," "upon"
- **Line 5:** "blunt," "accusingly"
- **Line 8:** "upon," "grass," "buttons," "matches," "butt-ends," "flask"
- **Line 13:** "died," "sky," "muttered," "fumbled," "leaves," "trees," "poured forth," "hungry," "screamed," "thirsty," "witnesses," "lived"
- **Line 14:** "melting themselves"
- **Line 16:** "gin-flask passed," "lipstick," "lips"
- **Line 20:** "clung," "bubbling"

## REPETITION

In addition to anaphora and general parallelism, the poem is filled with broad repetition that reflects the transformation of the scene before the speaker.

Many of the objects that the speaker lists when he first observes the scene of the lynching cycle back later in the poem, when he's in the throes of becoming the victim himself. For example, at first the speaker notices a "gin-flask," "cigars and cigarettes," and a tube of "lipstick" lying on the ground. Later, these things return when the witnesses of the lynching suddenly reappear. This time, though, they're not just forgotten remnants that have been left behind:

> The gin-flask passed from mouth to mouth, cigars and cigarettes glowed, the whore smeared the lipstick red upon her lips,

By returning to these objects, the poem helps chart the fundamental change that has taken place. The entire scene has gone from a hauntingly still, quiet atmosphere to something terrifyingly real and threatening, as evidenced by the fact that these left-behind objects are once again put to use.

There are also multiple mentions of "tar," "feathers," and "gasoline" in the poem, all of which the speaker noticed when he first stumbled upon the scene. Now, though, the hot tar, feathers, and gasoline aren't just leftover signs of violence—rather, they wash over the speaker's skin, emphasizing that this horrific scene is no longer abstract or removed from the speaker's own experience.

**Where Repetition appears in the poem:**

- **Line 5:** "sapling"
- **Line 8:** "butt-ends of cigars and cigarettes," "a drained gin-flask, and a whore's lipstick;"
- **Line 9:** "Scattered traces of tar, restless arrays of feathers, and the lingering smell of gasoline."
- **Line 10:** "the sun poured yellow surprise into the eye sockets of the stony skull..."
- **Lines 14-15:** "The dry bones stirred, rattled, lifted, melting themselves into my bones. / The gray ashes formed flesh firm and black, entering into my flesh."
- **Line 16:** "The gin-flask passed from mouth to mouth, cigars and cigarettes glowed, the whore smeared the lipstick red upon her lips,"
- **Line 19:** "sapling"
- **Line 20:** "the bubbling hot tar"
- **Line 21:** "the down and quills of the white feathers"
- **Line 22:** "a baptism of gasoline."
- **Line 25:** "a stony skull staring in yellow surprise at the sun..."

## DIACOPE

One specific repetitive device the speaker turns to again and again is diacope. This quick repetition of words often reflects strong emotion. Take the repetition of "stumbled" and "upon" in the poem's opening, which suggests the speaker's surprise; he's so taken aback by what he sees that he needs to repeat himself:

> And one morning while in the woods I stumbled
> suddenly upon the thing,
> Stumbled upon it [...]

The diacope (or, technically, anadiplosis) of "cooled" towards the poem's end works similarly, suggesting the speaker's (brief) respite from his pain:

> Then my blood was cooled mercifully, cooled by a baptism of gasoline.

And just two lines later, the repetition of "clutched" suggests the vigor with which the speaker does this "clutching":

> Panting, begging I clutched childlike, clutched to the hot sides of death.

Elsewhere, diacope works to illustrate the connection between the speaker and the victim:

> The dry bones stirred, rattled, lifted, melting themselves into my bones.
> The gray ashes formed flesh firm and black, entering into my flesh.

Repeating the words "bones" and "flesh" in each line emphasizes the fact that two people are becoming one in this image. Finally, the repetition in "My voice was drowned in the roar of their voices" shows how the speaker's cries are subsumed by those of the racist mob.

**Where Diacope appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "stumbled suddenly upon"
- **Line 2:** "Stumbled upon"
- **Lines 14-15:** "The dry bones stirred, rattled, lifted, melting themselves into my bones. / The gray ashes formed flesh firm and black, entering into my flesh."
- **Line 19:** "My voice was drowned in the roar of their voices"
- **Line 22:** "cooled mercifully, cooled"
- **Line 24:** "clutched childlike, clutched"

## VOCABULARY

**Scaly** (Line 2) - The word "scaly" usually describes something covered in scales. Here, though, the speaker seems to use it to describe the dry bark of oak and elm trees.

**Sooty** (Line 3) - Covered in soot, which is a black powder. In this context, the speaker means that the details of the scene are dark and hazy, or hard to make out at first.

**Sapling** (Line 5, Line 19) - A small, young tree.

**Blunt** (Line 5) - Uncompromising and frank. Also, when applied to physical objects, rounded or dull.

**Veins** (Line 6) - Slender ribs or stems that run through leaves. "Veins" also applies to blood vessels in human beings, so the word subtly foreshadows the gory details that appear later in the poem.

**Scorched** (Line 6) - Burned—specifically, burned by *flames*.

**Coil** (Line 6) - Loop.

**Vacant** (Line 7) - Empty or unoccupied.

**Trousers** (Line 7) - Pants.

**Gin-Flask** (Line 8, Line 16) - A small container full of gin.

**Lingering** (Line 9) - Lasting a long time before fading away.

**Fumbled** (Line 13) - Lazily or clumsily moved.

**Clamoring** (Line 17) - Loudly demanding.

**Down and Quills** (Line 21) - "Down" describes the soft part of a feather, while "quills" describes a feather's sharp, pointed shaft.

**Baptism** (Line 22) - A symbolic Christian ritual in which a person is purified by holy water before fully joining the church.

## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"Between the World and Me" is a 25-line poem broken into three stanzas of varying length. The poem doesn't follow a set form or structure. The lines themselves fluctuate in length, though all of them are pretty long—so long, in fact, that some of them feel like little paragraphs in and of themselves. This allows the speaker to stretch out his descriptions, especially in stanza 2, when he describes in vivid detail everything he sees in the clearing.

Overall, the lack of a consistent form gives the speaker space to control the pacing of the poem. Instead of following a rigid pattern, the poem feels unpredictable and unconfined, thus keeping readers on their toes in the same way that the speaker himself becomes suddenly alert to his disturbing surroundings when he walks into the clearing.

### METER

"Between the World and Me" is written in free verse, which means it doesn't follow a specific metrical pattern (or rhyme scheme, for that matter). Instead, the lines all fluctuate in length and contain loose, wide-ranging rhythms. Consider, for example, the variation between lines 16 and 17:

> The gin-flask passed from mouth to mouth, cigars
> and cigarettes glowed, the whore smeared the
> lipstick red upon her lips,
> And a thousand faces swirled around me, clamoring
> that my life be burned...

Line 17 is long but goes by at a fast clip, as the speaker quickly lists off descriptions of the mob. There's no metrical consistency here, but sonic devices like assonance and sibilance ("gin-flask passed") add a certain intensity to the line. In comparison, the next line feels noticeably shorter, and this kind of fluctuation helps to propel readers from line to line.

### RHYME SCHEME

"Between the World and Me" doesn't follow a rhyme scheme. One reason for this could be that it almost functions as a prose poem, since the lines are so long. In any case, the lack of rhyme scheme means the speaker isn't tied to a rigid structure, making it easier to let the language develop and unfold naturally.

The lack of rhyme in the poem doesn't mean the speaker's language isn't poetic. It's just that the speaker uses sonic devices like assonance and consonance instead of rhymes to add intensity to his words, staying away from an obvious rhyming pattern that might make the poem feel too simple or song-like—effects that might work against the fact that this is a very serious, disturbing poem.

## SPEAKER

The speaker of "Between the World and Me" is a Black man taking a walk in the woods one morning who comes across the site of a lynching. The speaker feels overwhelmed by the details of this horrific scene—so overwhelmed, in fact, that he actually *becomes* the victim himself, going on to narrate the lynching from a first-person point of view.

The speaker feels the horrific trauma of this lynching on a deeply personal level, which speaks to the idea that racist violence doesn't just affect its direct victims. The fact that the speaker feels the "details of the scene" as a kind of barrier between himself and the world, in turn, suggests that racism breeds a kind of terrible trauma and fear that affects the way Black people move through society.

## SETTING

The poem takes place in a "clearing" in the woods on a sunny morning, where the speaker happens to come upon the scene of a lynching. The natural environment is peaceful and serene, leading to a sense of juxtaposition between nature's beauty and the horror of this racist violence. Sunlight filters through the victim's skull, the "morning air" smells like gasoline, and the "trampled" grass is littered with things like a "gin-flask" and cigarette butts. In short, this otherwise calm, soothing setting is overshadowed by ugly signs of violence.

## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

Richard Wright published "Between the World and Me" in 1935, just three years before the publication of his first book, *Uncle Tom's Children*—a collection of short stories that explore the Black experience during the Jim Crow era. "Big Boy Leaves Home," which is the first story in this collection, has some thematic overlap with "Between the World and Me," since it culminates in a racist mob tar-and-feathering a young Black man before burning him alive.

It was also around this time that Wright began making a name for himself as a writer, especially when he won the *Story Magazine* prize in 1938 for his story "Fire and Cloud" (also included in *Uncle Tom's Children*). In this period, he wrote for a communist newspaper called *The Daily Worker*, where he covered a wide range of topics and often focused on the predominantly Black neighborhood of Harlem in New York City.

Wright's work is often discussed alongside other prominent Black American authors writing about race and racism in the United States in the early to mid-1900s, including Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Zora Neale Hurston (among many others). Wright's own work has had a lasting impact. In fact, the contemporary writer Ta-Nehisi Coates named his epistolary work of nonfiction, *Between the World and Me*, after Wright's poem of the same name. Published in 2015, it won the National Book Award for nonfiction.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Between the World and Me" depicts a lynching, or a public murder in which a mob kills an individual (often by hanging, though not always). From the late 18th century all the way up to the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s, this was a disturbingly common practice in the United States—particularly the South, where Wright spent the first 19 years of his life. These lynchings predominantly (though not exclusively) targeted Black people. (This was especially the case in the years during and after the Civil War, when racist mobs viciously persecuted formerly enslaved Black people.)

Lynching was a pointedly public kind of violence. These weren't covert, mysterious murders, but big public affairs that were often treated like entertainment spectacles. Lynching photography even became a gruesome new genre, as racist mobs would pose with the victim's lifeless body. There were also lynching postcards that usually featured a drawing or photograph of a specific lynching and were often accompanied by racist poems. These were sold as souvenirs, emphasizing the casual and voyeuristic attitudes surrounding such extreme acts of racist violence.

## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Hear the Poem — Listen to a reading of the poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NmF30fwjjE8)
- Original Publication — Take a look at a digital version of the Partisan Review issue in which the poem was first published ("Between the World and Me" begins on page 18). (http://archives.bu.edu/collections/partisan-review/search/detail?id=283895)
- The Poet's Life — Learn more about Richard Wright in this overview of his life and work. (https://www.britannica.com/biography/Richard-Wright-American-writer)
- Lynching in the United States — A short video that unpacks the racist history of lynching in the United States. (Please beware that this video contains disturbing photographs of actual lynchings.) (https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/video/origins-lynching-culture-united-states?utm_term=&utm_campaign=DSA&utm_source=adwords oKJPp4sAljQHaXLbbryU1TezznrNjuX_czumI020tfWCBGXwU

- "Between the World and Me" by Ta-Nehisi Coates — Check out the LitCharts guide to Ta-Nehisi Coates's book of the same, which borrows its title and epigraph from Richard Wright's poem. (https://www.litcharts.com/lit/between-the-world-and-me)

## HOW TO CITE

### MLA

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### CHICAGO MANUAL

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