The Bright Lights of Sarajevo

SUMMARY

The speaker observes Sarajevans trying to get by during the terrible Siege of Sarajevo. During the day, the speaker notes, Sarajevans spend many hours waiting in line to refill gas cans (which they take home in strollers), avoiding sniper fire to pick up their bread rations, and hauling heavy containers of water up the stairs to their apartments. After all that, the speaker says, one might expect that no one would go out into the bombed-out streets in the evenings. But one would be wrong!

Though people who don't live in wartime might find it surprising, young people in Sarajevo still go out at night to walk calmly and confidently through the streets. In the dark, they appear as vague shadows that can't be categorized by ethnic group (in spite of the fact that supposed ethnic divisions drive this war). In these dark streets, you can't tell who speaks what language or belongs to what group. Young people of all backgrounds amble through the streets at an unhurried pace, with no flashlights to light the way. Even though it's dark, they don't crash into each other unless it's on purpose, a way of flirting when a boy likes a girl's looks.

In the dark, the speaker observes, the boys have to judge by the sound of the girls' voices whether they're open to flirting or not. The boys light cigarettes just to get a glimpse of the girls' eyes in the brief flicker of light, to check if they're getting somewhere.

Now, the speaker sees a young couple who are clearly already into each other. They looks like they're about to go look for a nicer place to hang out than the one where they stand now: on the craters of a mortar attack that happened in 1992. In this attack, bombs killed and wounded people who were standing in line to buy bread. In the aftermath, torn, bloody bread lay among torn, bloody bodies. The holes created by that attack are still at the young couple's feet, and now full of rain water. It's been raining for half the day, although now there isn't a cloud in the sky. In fact, the night sky is clear and full of stars—perfect conditions for bomber pilots. In the deep, dark shell-hole puddles, the boy can see broken reflections of the stars.

As the speaker watches, the boy leads the girl through the dark to a dimly lit café, where they'll have a coffee together until they have to go home (because of the curfew). The boy takes the girl's hand as they sit behind sandbags that were once full of flour rations.

THEMES

THE PERSISTENCE AND POWER OF LOVE

In "The Bright Lights of Sarajevo," love survives and perhaps even flourishes under the most difficult of circumstances. In the war-torn Bosnian city of Sarajevo, the speaker says, everyone lives with the knowledge that they could be killed at any moment by bombs or snipers. And yet, at night, the city's young people come out to flirt with each other, determined to live some semblance of a normal existence—and to do so *together*. The poem thus portrays romance as both a heroic choice and a hopeful, transformative force.

Life under the Sarajevo siege is fraught with constant danger. The Sarajevans try to go about their daily lives as normally as possible, but they're always aware that they might be killed at any moment. The streets are scarred with the "death-deep, death dark wells" of shell craters and bullet holes. And just to get basic supplies, people must dodge the snipers hidden away in hotels and surrounding mountains. Merely to try and live is to risk dying. Given the circumstances, the speaker says, one might expect the people of Sarajevo to hide themselves away.

But even these dangers can't stop young people from heading out into the streets at night looking for love. In fact, the promise of love seems to transform the whole atmosphere of the city at night. As the young people go out to look for romance, the night's darkness stops feeling so threatening: instead, it turns the young people into mysterious and alluring shadows who bump "flirtatious[ly]" into each other, almost as if the sunset signals the start of a masquerade ball.

Love, or its promise, thus transforms the city. One particular young couple meets on a street where, not so long ago, civilians were massacred while waiting to get bread—and even the shell-holes reflect the "splintered" image of the stars, classic symbols of fate and romance. The young people's determination to find love both persists in the face of terrible violence and briefly transforms the hellish city into a more hopeful and beautiful place.

But the poem isn't naïvely idealistic. Love *does* change the world for the better. But that doesn't erase the reality of violence, tragedy, and terror. The poem balances its images of young couples flirting with stark reminders that any day or night could be those couples' last—and that the war forces people to endure awful circumstances on a daily basis.

For instance, the speaker observes a young man and woman going for a coffee, which would be a perfectly regular date except for the fact they have to sit behind "AID flour sacks refilled with sand"—put there to absorb the shock of an

explosion. The poem thus celebrates, not just love's ability to bring people together, but the young people's bravery in daring to love even in the most appalling circumstances. Love, the poem suggests, can be an act of hope and courage, and even rebellion.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 8-46

WARTIME LIFE

Set during the longest-running siege of the modern era and based on first-hand experience, "The Bright Lights of Sarajevo" chronicles the terrible everyday reality of war for those unlucky enough to live through it. It shows how life as a civilian during wartime becomes a strange kind of routine, an attempt to get by from day to day made terrifying by the ever-present possibility of death. One of the horrors of war, the poem suggests, is the way that its absurdities and terrors come to seem almost routine.

The poem's details about regular people's lives during the siege of Sarajevo (which ran from April 1992 till February 1996) suggest that people try to go about their regular business even when they're surrounded by constant and terrifying violence: war makes getting by much more difficult, but life still goes on. The Sarajevans spend their days trying to supply themselves with the necessities of life: fuel, water, and food. They queue for "meagre grams" of rationed bread, wheel gas canisters home "in prams," and "struggl[e] up sometimes eleven flights/ of stairs with water" (because the supply to their apartments has been cut off). For the Sarajevans, then, the war shapes every aspect of their lives—in particular the things people living in peacetime take for granted.

But the Sarajevans also continue to try to enjoy their lives: the young people, for instance, go out to flirt at night despite all the hardship and suffering around them. The war, then, gets absorbed into everyday reality, becoming a strangely mundane presence. In other words, life goes on—just in a different form. Despite the people's admirable efforts to live somewhat normal lives, they still have to deal with the fact that they might die at any moment—and that the reasons for all this terror and violence are, at their heart, absurd. For all that war becomes ordinary, the poem suggests, it's also meaningless and deeply wrong.

A beautiful clear night sky, for example, should be something for Sarajevans to enjoy. But such a "star-filled" evening also creates the perfect conditions for the "bomber's eye,"—that is, the Sarajevans are more likely to get killed when the pilots overhead can see where they're aiming. And such violence, the poem notes, is built on supposed differences so meaningless that they disappear as soon as the night falls: in the dark, the cultural markers that would "distinguish" an enemy from a friend completely vanish, and only *people* remain. The poem underscores that point by describing an attack in which Sarajevans—not specifically Muslims, Serbs, or Croats, but people from any or all of these warring groups—are killed by mortars while waiting to get bread. A grotesque image of crusts of bread "dunked" in the blood of the dead reminds the reader that this *isn't* normal life, no matter how familiar people get with it.

Normalizing daily life during a war might be the only way for people to survive—but the poem also stresses that this shouldn't be the case. The contrast between the Sarajevan's struggle to live, love, and be happy and the terrible bloodshed all around them suggests that one of the real horrors of war is the way it makes fear, violence, and meaningless death part of people's everyday lives.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-46

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

After the hours ...
... on the way,

This poem takes place during the siege of Sarajevo, a terrible and bloody war that ran from 1992-1996. (See the Context section for more on the complex history of this war.) The speaker—who seems to be an outside observer—opens the poem with a description of the lived daily reality of regular Sarajevans, those people who are just trying to survive from day to day and aren't fighting in the conflict itself.

Lines 1 to 6 act like a kind of report from Sarajevo, telling the reader what life during the siege was actually like. (And indeed, the poet, Tony Harrison, was sent to Sarajevo on assignment by a newspaper.) The details are observational and devoid of any flowery poeticism—this is just a plain description of daily reality.

Life under siege is predictably terrible. Getting the resources most people in peacetime take for granted (fuel, food, and clean water, for instance) all become struggles: Sarajevans risk their lives just to refill their "canisters of gas" or to collect "precious meagre grams" of bread to help them survive.

The poem's first stanza is mostly one long, heavily enjambed sentence—an effect that captures the Sarajevans' tension, restlessness, and exhaustion as they try to get through the day. The poem's rhyming couplets also create a quick and nervous pace, making the poem feel like a quickly sketched report from the heart of the action.

There is also a strange sense of routine at work here. This speaks to the way that wartime life becomes normalized. Determined to survive, people in wartime find a weird rhythm and kind of get used to the experience, even if that experience is tragic, unjust, and absurd.

For instance, the Sarajevans "wheel home" their refilled gas canisters "in prams" (or baby carriages) like grotesque babies: the prams are repurposed for an environment that can't really support regular family life. And they queue like shoppers—but instead of purchasing the goods they want, they take whatever "meagre grams / of bread" they can get.

Bread will play a symbolic role in this poem: it's a food so commonplace that it *should* symbolize everyday life and the communal experience of eating (breaking bread) together. Here it's a symbol of how little the Sarajevans possess, and later in the poem it reappears to devastating effect. Keep an eye out for it.

LINES 7-11

or struggling up ...
... the case —

In these lines, the poem completes its long opening sentence. The speaker observes another typical activity in the everyday life of Sarajevans: dragging containers of water up to their apartments (because they don't have running water anymore). It's one more aspect of daily life to go with queuing for rations and dodging sniper fire.

The clunky meter of line 7 suggests just how tiring and difficult this chore is. So far, the poem has been written in iambic pentameter: that is, each line uses five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm. But listen to what happens here:

or strugg- | ling up | sometimes | elev- | en flights

Here, the word "sometimes" isn't an iamb, but a spondee, a foot that goes DUM-DUM. The effect is like a heavy, sloshing canister of water knocking against a climber's weary knees.

In line 8, the poem makes a direct address to the reader: "you'd think," the speaker says, that after days like these, the Sarajevans would want to hide away in their homes for the night, grateful for simply making it through another day. This direct address means readers can't be bystanders: the speaker is inviting readers deeper into the lived reality of the Sarajevans.

The streets themselves are a total wreck, as observed in line 10:

of people walking streets Serb shells destroyed,

This harsh, clustered consonance evokes the chaos and rubble.

But as line 11 points out, the Sarajevans are defiant. "Tonight," and presumably on many nights, they refuse to cower away inside, despite the threat of death. The stanza break here indicates both a shift in direction *and* the Sarajevans' acts of defiance, which the following stanza describes.

LINES 12-20

The young go ...
... fancied by some boy's.

Tonight, then, "the young" people of Sarajevo don't huddle inside, but go out to search for romance. They walk "at a stroller's pace," refusing to lose their cool and be hurried by the threat of death. Their very way of walking the streets becomes a small act of defiance, and an insistence that youthful love can survive in the most trying of circumstances.

The end-stop after "dark" in line 14 is the poem's first real pause, and represents the thrilling quiet of the night (though, of course, a shell could still land at any moment). Night-time, these lines suggest, creates a strange break in the trials and fears of wartime life.

Though it has a complex history, Sarajevo once had a reputation for being a truly multi-cultural city in which Bosnian Muslims, Serbs, and Croats coexisted in peace. The darkness of the night seems to restore that aspect of the city's character. In the dark, the people are transformed into "black shapes impossible to mark" as one particular ethnic group or another. The poem here points to the absurdity of the ethnic divisions that fueled the Bosnian War.

In reality, the poem notes, there is little difference between a "Muslim, Serb or Croat"—or any other human being, for that matter. In the equalizing and exciting atmosphere of the night, it doesn't really matter what word people use for bread, whether it's "*hjleb*" (Bosniak), "*hleb*" (Serbian), or "*kruh*" (Croatian). In other situations, saying the wrong word might give you away and get you killed. Note that this is the second mention of bread, which symbolizes both normal, communal life *and* the tragic absurdity of the Sarajevo situation.

The fact that the young people are "black [shadowy] shapes" also relates to their hopes for romance: shrouded in the mystery of the night, they're also alluring, mysterious potential lovers!

Line 17—"All take the evening air with a stroller's stride"—effectively restates line 12. This repetition signals the young Sarajevans' refusal to be hurried—even as they walk without torches (or flashlights) to guide them, because torches might make them a target for a gunman. But in spite of the dark, they "don't collide"—unless they're colliding on purpose as a "flirtatious ploy."

In other words, the Sarajevans aren't letting war get in the way of romance. The relative security of the dark night becomes a kind of masquerade ball.

LINES 21-24

Then the tender ...
... made progress yet.

These lines show the next stage in the young Sarajevans' courtship. Here, the poem borrows language from the world of warfare and uses it as metaphor:

> Then the tender radar of the tone of voice
> shows by its signals she approves his choice.

In other words, young Sarajevans *target* one another at night. The besiegers of Sarajevo might use actual radars to attack the city, but these youngsters have much more humane radars at work, scanning the cool night air for a potential match. The young woman thus gives a signal—another military reference—that she is interested in the young man who approached her. By using these metaphors, the poem portrays the Sarajevans' behavior as an act of defiance. They are reclaiming their city space, and their lives, from those who seek to destroy them.

Lines 23 and 24 show the next part of the ritual:

> Then match or lighter to a cigarette
> to check in her eyes if he's made progress yet.

The anaphora of "Then" shows that this flirtation is a process with distinct stages, and also suggests sexual tension by slowing the poem down (the end-stop in the previous line helps too). The youngsters don't use torches because to do so would put them at risk of being fired on, but they are happy to use a "match or lighter" to create a tiny, intimate light by which to see one another. This light is symbolic, both of the potential passion of love *and* of the determination to remain human in the face of such inhumane terror. Indeed, perhaps *these* are the real "bright lights of Sarajevo."

LINES 25-32

And I see ...
... the broken dead.

The poem now focuses on one particular young couple who, as the speaker points out, have "progressed beyond" the voice and "match-flare test" described in the lines above. In other words, this man and woman have taken quite a liking to one another!

These lines are all enjambed, quickening the poem's pace and mirroring the charged excitement between the two lovers. In this section, too, the speaker announces their own first-person perspective (e.g. "I" in line 25), which confirms that this is an observational poem. The speaker is a kind of reporter, except that this reporter writes in rhyming couplets rather than shorthand.

To the speaker, it looks like the young couple are about to go somewhere more private. What's significant here is that they stand on the site of "two shell splash scars"—that is, places where bombs landed and "massacred the breadshop queue," an allusion to a real incident in 1992. The speaker remembers this incident in grotesque and shocking detail, reflecting the way that the mundane and the horrific co-exist side by side in wartime.

The reader has been lured into a false sense of security by the focus on the young lovers—and, then, within the very same sentence, learns that these lovers stand where:

> Serb mortars massacred the breadshop queue
> and blood-dunked crusts of shredded bread
> lay on this pavement with the broken dead.

These details are made all the more visceral and unsettling by the sudden increase in sound patterning. The alliterative "mortars massacred" and "bread shop...blood-dunked," the strong assonance of "blood-dunked crusts," the consonance/assonance of "shredded bread," and the gruesome rhyme between "bread" and "dead"—all of these are shocking, confrontational, and suggest the mortar's indiscriminate destruction. The end-stop after "dead" brings the section to a crashing halt, creating a painful and sudden silence. This mirrors the suddenness of the attack itself, and the emptiness that it left in the lives of those who lost loved ones.

And note, once more, the symbolic role that "bread" plays here. The food of daily life is ripped apart and "dunked" in blood.

LINES 33-42

And at their ...
... Serb mortar shells.

The young couple stand right next to the mortar holes the grisly '92 attack left behind. These are full of rain water, though the sky is now completely clear. These kinds of observations make the poem feel spontaneous, as though written in a hurry at that specific moment. And that's appropriate, because the young man and woman here, like everyone in else in Sarajevo, have to live from one instant to the next knowing that death could strike at any time. Their romance, then, becomes an affirmation of the present and the determination to live life to the fullest however possible.

While for most lovers a starry sky provides the perfect backdrop, the speaker points out that this type of night is *also* the ideal set of conditions for bomber pilots flying overhead. Romance and danger are thus strangely linked. The alliteration in line 38's "bright" and "bomber's eye" captures this tension: these pleasing, musical sounds also feel like miniature explosions.

Lines 39-42 describe what the boy can see in the shell-hole puddles:

> in those two rain-full shell-holes the boy sees
> fragments of the splintered Pleiades,
> sprinkled on those death-deep, death-dark wells
> splashed on the pavement by Serb mortar shells.

The /l/ consonance in "rain-full shell-holes" is quite a mouthful, conveying the fullness of the puddles themselves. The water reflects the view of the night sky (specifically the group of stars known as the Pleiades) in fragments and "splinter[s]." This fragmentation could signal that the water has been disturbed, but it also speaks to the destructive effects of the war itself, the "splintered" sky acting as a kind of reflection of the shattered city below.

The stars are metaphorically "sprinkled" in the mortar holes, which the speaker describes alliteratively as "death-deep, death-dark wells." The prominent /d/ sound is intense, almost hypnotic, as though the horrors of the war remain present as a kind of psychic energy in the architecture of Sarajevo. Repeating "death" only highlights its strong, enduring presence in the city. These holes have been "splashed" on the pavement by a rain of bombs, a metaphor which is an unsettling reminder that these puddles were once the site of extreme violence.

LINES 43-46

> *The dark boy ...*
> *... refilled with sand.*

The last four lines of the poem constitute their own stanza, and provide one last image of the young couple. The "dark boy shape" leads the corresponding "dark girl shape" into a candlelit café to have a coffee—a normal, romantic kind of date. But the reminder that the pair are both murky "shape[s]" speaks to the risks involved. They can't romance one another freely, but have to remain in the shadows as much as possible. There is a tension, here, between the sweet—and fairly standard—romantic scene and the fact that it's taking place under such extreme and terrifying conditions.

Alliteration heightens this juxtaposition in lines 44 to 45:

> The dark boy shape leads dark girl shape away
> to share one coffee in a candlelit café
> until the curfew, and he holds her hand

The /h/ alliteration conveys a sense of breathless excitement based on mutual attraction—but those hard /c/ sounds make the whole scene seem brittle and fragile, as if it could be broken by violence at any moment.

The last line of the poem emphasizes not the normality of the date, but the challenging atmosphere in which it takes place. The young couple stand or sit behind "AID flour sacks refilled with sand." That is, sacks which were once part of the food rationing program—and that remind readers, once again, of all that symbolic bread—have been repurposed to absorb the shock of explosions. This detail reminds the reader that the young couple could be killed at any moment, while also implicitly praising the Sarajevans' stubborn determination to go on living.

The flour sacks demonstrate the city's resourcefulness in the face of great adversity. And the young couple—whoever they may be—testify to the importance of love, offering a brief but shining example (a "bright light") of life beyond the war.

SYMBOLS

BREAD

In normal life, bread is a symbol of, well, normal life! Bread is about as ubiquitous and commonplace as food can get. It's cheap, versatile, and very easy to *share:* it's thus a common image for life and community.

The changing relationship between the Sarajevans and bread thus reveals the traumatic influence of the war on every aspect of their lives. For the Sarajevans, bread is no longer easy and cheap to obtain—it's something that citizen have to queue for, and even "dodg[e] snipers" to get. In wartime, bread becomes a precious commodity and a means of survival.

Bread also symbolizes ethnic division (the main driver of the conflict itself). Whether people call bread *hjleb*, *hleb*, or *kruh*—that is, whether they speak Bosniak, Serb, and Croat respectively—makes a big difference in a place being torn apart by ethnic violence.

The poem also refers to a tragic incident in 1992 in which a mortar hit a breadshop queue, killing and injuring many. The poem's grotesque imagery—"blood-dunked crusts of shredded bread/ lay on this pavement with the broken dead" (lines 31 and 32)—shows the reader how, in war, the mundane and the tragic exist side by side.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-6:** "or queuing for the precious meagre grams / of bread they're rationed to each day, / and often dodging snipers on the way,"
- **Lines 15-16:** "In unlit streets you can't distinguish who / calls bread / hjleb / or / hleb / or calls it / kruh."
- **Lines 29-32:** "in '92 / Serb mortars massacred the breadshop queue / and blood-dunked crusts of shredded bread / lay on this pavement with the broken dead."

LIGHT

The poem's titular "bright lights" symbolize hope in dark times.

When people refer to the "bright lights" of a city, they're usually

talking about that city's glamour and excitement. But war-torn Sarajevo doesn't have a lot of glamour and excitement to go around. In fact, its people have to put out even the "bright lights" of their "torches" (or flashlights) at night, for fear they'll become more visible to a sniper.

The real "bright lights" of Sarajevo, then, are the flickers of matchlight that young lovers use to illuminate each other's faces for a moment, in defiance of all the suffering and danger around them. These bright lights are moments in which people reach out to each other in spite of it all.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 18:** "no torches guide them"
- **Lines 23-24:** "Then match or lighter to a cigarette / to check in her eyes if he's made progress yet."
- **Line 26:** "Match-flare test"
- **Line 44:** "a candlelit café"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration dramatizes the poem's images, bringing them to vivid life on the page.

In line 17, for instance, the speaker describes the "stroller's stride" with which the young Sarajevans walk. The two /st/ sounds one after the other mimic the confident one-two "stride" of these courageous kids, who go out to flirt in spite of the danger.

Meanwhile, in the fourth stanza, the speaker switches focus from the young lovers to the aftermath of a terrible mortar attack:

> [...] they stand
> on two shell splash scars, where, in '92
> Serb mortars massacred the breadshop queue
> and blood-dunked crusts of shredded bread
> lay on this pavement with the broken dead.

This intense alliterative burst of harsh /s/ sounds, plosive /b/ sounds, and muffled /m/ sounds conveys violence, surprise, and chaos, evoking the shock and misery of this "massacre."

In the same stanza, the speaker mentions "the Sarajevo star-filled evening sky/ ideally bright and clear for bomber's eye" (lines 37-38). Here, alliteration underlines the tension the young lovers live with: the /s/ sound feels whispery and hypnotic, like some kind of love spell being cast over the city—but it also sounds like bullets whistling through the air. And the /b/ sounds again feel shocking and explosive, just like the bombs that "bomber" might drop at any moment.

And the young couple stands by "death-deep, death-dark wells" (line 41), the /d/ alliteration sounding powerful and relentless, as though the city has been permanently changed by what it has witnessed.

When the young couple goes for a coffee, the poem uses a few more moments of alliteration:

> The dark boy shape leads dark girl shape away
> to share one coffee in a candlelit café
> until the curfew, and he holds her hand
> behind AID flour sacks refilled with sand.

The /c/ sound here could be read as quiet and intimate, but it's also a little harsh and cutting, perhaps signalling that, for all the young couple's attempt to have a normal date, this is a deeply strange situation. And the /h/ sounds might feel either like a loving sigh or a gasp of fear.

Alliteration thus makes the Sarajevans' predicament feel vivid and immediate.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "streets Serb"
- **Line 17:** "stroller's stride"
- **Line 21:** "tender," "tone"
- **Line 28:** "stand"
- **Line 29:** "shell splash scars"
- **Line 30:** "mortars massacred," "breadshop"
- **Line 31:** "blood-dunked," "bread"
- **Line 33:** "mortar"
- **Line 34:** "massacre"
- **Line 37:** "Sarajevo star-filled," "sky"
- **Line 38:** "bright," "bomber's"
- **Line 40:** "splintered"
- **Line 41:** "sprinkled," "death-deep, death-dark"
- **Line 44:** "coffee," "candlelit café"
- **Line 45:** "curfew," "he holds her hand"
- **Line 46:** "sacks," "sand"

ASSONANCE

Assonance helps make the poem's images vivid and striking.

For instance, in lines 30 and 31, the poem shocks the reader by describing a 1992 mortar attack—and, simultaneously, unleashing some very strong sound patterning:

> Serb mortars massacred the breadshop queue
> and blood-dunked crusts of shredded bread

These low /ur/, guttural /uh/, and thin /eh/ sounds evoke the sheer mindless violence of the attack: they're blunt and ugly as the sudden violence of the mortar.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "canisters," "gas"
- **Line 6:** "often dodging," "on"
- **Line 7:** "struggling up"
- **Lines 16-16:** "bread / hjleb"
- **Line 16:** "hleb"
- **Line 17:** "stride"
- **Line 18:** "guide," "collide"
- **Line 30:** "Serb mortars massacred"
- **Line 31:** "blood-dunked crusts," "shredded bread"
- **Line 38:** "ideally bright"
- **Line 41:** "death-deep, death-dark"
- **Line 46:** "sacks," "sand"

CAESURA

Caesurae mostly support the poem's conversational tone by allowing sentences with multiple clauses to take place over multiple lines. Sometimes, though, they have a more noticeable effect on the poem's pace.

In the second stanza, for example, the speaker observes young lovers walking the city at night. These young men and women *intentionally* walk slowly, refusing to be hurried by the everpresent threat of violence. Caesura captures this leisurely, "stroller's pace" in line 18:

> All take the evening air with a stroller's stride,
> no torches guide them, || but they don't collide

This graceful little comma also creates balance, with four words on each side.

Sometimes caesura makes the poem's tone hesitant, as in lines 27 and 29 shown below:

> and he's about, || I think, || to take her hand
> and lead her away from where they stand
> on two shell splash scars, || where, || in '92

These caesurae evoke the slow but methodical courtship ritual between the two young lovers, each step tentatively leading to the next step, but they also say something about the speaker's perspective. The poem essentially unfolds in real time, and commas like these make it seem like the speaker is responding to events happening right in front of him (almost like a news reporter talking live on camera).

Later in the poem, the speaker describes the "death-deep, || death-dark wells" (line 41) left behind by mortar attacks. This caesura here works as an intensifier, making these holes in the ground seem like reservoirs of psychic pain—small memorials to the tragedies of war.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 14:** "Muslim, Serb"
- **Line 18:** "them, but"
- **Line 27:** "about, I think, to"
- **Line 29:** "scars, where, in"
- **Line 34:** "massacre, now"
- **Line 41:** "death-deep, death-dark"
- **Line 45:** "curfew, and"

CONSONANCE

Abundant consonance gives the poem energy and music, and it also helps readers to imagine themselves alongside the speaker in Sarajevo.

For instance, the poem's frequent sibilance evokes the whistle of bombs and bullets in the air, as in this moment when one of the young loves sees:

> fragments of the splintered Pleiades,
> sprinkled on those death-deep, death-dark wells
> splashed on the pavement by Serb mortar shells.

Collectively, these /s/, /z/, and /sh/ consonants start to sound sinister, like a hiss. But the gentler /s/ sounds also evoke the hushed excitement of the Sarajevo nights as the young people go out looking for one another.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "meagre grams"
- **Line 10:** "streets Serb shells destroyed,"
- **Line 17:** "stroller's stride"
- **Line 21:** "tender radar," "tone"
- **Line 23:** "match," "lighter to," "cigarette"
- **Line 28:** "stand"
- **Line 29:** "shell splash scars"
- **Line 30:** "mortars massacred"
- **Line 31:** "and blood-dunked," "shredded bread"
- **Line 33:** "made," "mortar"
- **Line 34:** "massacre"
- **Line 36:** "clouds," "cleared"
- **Line 37:** "Sarajevo star-filled," "sky"
- **Line 38:** "bright," "bomber's"
- **Line 39:** "rain-full shell-holes," "sees"
- **Line 40:** "fragments," "splintered Pleiades"
- **Line 41:** "sprinkled," "death-deep, death-dark"
- **Line 42:** "splashed," "Serb," "shells"
- **Line 43:** "shape," "shape"
- **Line 44:** "share," "coffee," "candlelit café"
- **Line 45:** "curfew," "he holds her hand"
- **Line 46:** "flour," "sacks," "r," "efilled," "sand"

END-STOPPED LINE

In such a long poem, it's surprising there aren't *more* end-stopped lines! Frequent enjambment makes most of the poem read as if it were written quickly and observationally. When end-stops do occur, then, they have a dramatic impact on the poem's pace.

The first stanza, for example, is one long sentence that concludes with an end-stop in line 11:

> but tonight in Sarajevo that's just not the case —

This em-dash end-stop signals a dramatic break—an effect that captures the young Sarajevans' spirit of defiance. You, the reader, argues the speaker, would think everyone would hide inside when the night falls—but they don't. The end-stop breaks the stanza at the same point that the young lovers of Sarajevo break readers' expectations.

In the following stanza, the speaker describes how the youngsters walk slowly and confidently, refusing to be hurried by the wartime conditions. Three end-stops in this stanza make it travel at the very "stroller's pace" these lines describe—much more slowly than the previous stanza.

And take a look at the end-stops in lines 21-24:

> Then the tender radar of the tone of voice
> shows by its signals she approves his choice.
> Then match or lighter to a cigarette
> to check in her eyes if he's made progress yet.

These end-stops mark out the slow, measured, almost formal stages of this flirtation.

Other end-stops effectively highlight the other side of the story: the pain and destruction of the war. For instance, when the speaker describes the victims of a mortar attack lying "broken" in the street, the line ends with a full stop after the word "dead," creating a brief pause in which the horror of what's being described can echo.

End-stops thus help readers to feel the pace—and shocks—of life in Sarajevo during the siege.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "prams,"
- **Line 5:** "day,"
- **Line 10:** "destroyed,"
- **Line 11:** "case —"
- **Line 12:** "pace,"
- **Line 14:** "dark."
- **Line 16:** "kruh."
- **Line 17:** "stride,"
- **Line 20:** "boy's."
- **Line 22:** "choice."
- **Line 24:** "yet."
- **Line 32:** "dead."
- **Line 35:** "day,"
- **Line 36:** "away,"
- **Line 38:** "eye,"
- **Line 40:** "Pleiades,"
- **Line 42:** "shells."
- **Line 46:** "sand."

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment makes the poem feel hurried and breathless. Most lines in "The Bright Lights of Sarajevo" are enjambed, giving the verse intense momentum. This captures the chaos of everyday reality during the siege and makes the poem read like a kind of poetic dispatch from the front line—which, in fact, it was.

The first stanza, for example, is one long sentence that doesn't reach its main verb until line 8, and many of its lines are enjambed. Take a look at just a small section of this breathless rush of lines:

> After the hours that Sarajevans pass
> queuing with empty canisters of gas
> to get the refills they wheel home in prams,
> or queuing for the precious meagre grams
> of bread they're rationed to each day,

This section sums up the unrelenting hardship of daily life, portraying how tiring it is for Sarajevans to survive from day to day. Enjambment on this scale helps the reader to really feel the Sarajevans' exhaustion and tension.

Later in the poem, enjambment creates visceral and violent surprise. The speaker observes two young flirtatious lovers ("And I see [...] in '92" running from lines 25 to 29)—and then, in the same enjambed sentence, points out that they stand on the site of a massacre (lines 30 to 32). When the speaker describes that event, it's all the more shocking because of the enjambment, which makes the shift in focus seamless and sudden.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "pass / queuing"
- **Lines 2-3:** "gas / to"
- **Lines 4-5:** "grams / of"
- **Lines 7-8:** "flights / of"
- **Lines 8-9:** "nights / of"
- **Lines 9-10:** "devoid / of"
- **Lines 13-14:** "mark / as"
- **Lines 15-16:** "who / calls"
- **Lines 18-19:** " collide / except"

- **Lines 19-20:** "ploys / when"
- **Lines 21-22:** "voice / shows"
- **Lines 23-24:** "cigarette / to"
- **Lines 25-26:** "progressed / beyond"
- **Lines 26-27:** "test / and"
- **Lines 27-28:** "hand / and"
- **Lines 28-29:** "stand / on"
- **Lines 29-30:** "'92 / Serb"
- **Lines 30-31:** "queue / and"
- **Lines 31-32:** "bread / lay"
- **Lines 33-34:** "mortar / that"
- **Lines 34-35:** "water / from"
- **Lines 37-38:** "sky / ideally"
- **Lines 39-40:** "sees / fragments"
- **Lines 43-44:** "away / to"
- **Lines 44-45:** "café / until"
- **Lines 45-46:** "hand / behind"

IMAGERY

This is a visual, evocative poem that situates the reader in Sarajevo through the controlled use of imagery. In lines 13 and 14, for example, visual description provides night-time atmosphere:

> The young go walking at a stroller's pace,
> black shapes impossible to mark
> as Muslim, Serb or Croat in such dark.

"Black shapes" has multi-layered meanings here.

- As an image, it suggests that, in reality, there is very little difference between the different ethnic groups involved in the Bosnian war—even if those supposed differences are the fuel that keeps the war burning. Reducing people to "black shapes" weirdly re-humanizes them, making the visual markers of cultural identity impossible to see.
- The image also captures the thrill of young romance, the idea that anybody could become *someone* given the right chance encounter.
- Thirdly—and most morbidly—the "black shape" image also suggests that these shadowy presences could soon become absences; that, at any moment, any one of these Sarajevans could be killed.

The poem's most shocking image comes as in lines 31 and 32, catching the reader off-guard. The speaker notices a young couple flirting with each other, and then points out that they stand on the site of a mortar attack in which:

> Serb mortars massacred the breadshop queue
> and blood-dunked crusts of shredded bread
> lay on this pavement with the broken dead.

If this image makes readers feel unsettled, that's exactly the point! The sudden intrusion of grotesque details mimics the sudden, indiscriminate violence of the explosion. Bread, the staple of everyday life, becomes a symbol of the absurd, tragic nature of war. The mundane and the horrific quite literally overlap.

The poem also mixes in imagery of the night sky, describing the interaction between starlight and the puddles formed in the craters of previous mortar attacks:

> leaving the Sarajevo star-filled evening sky
> ideally bright and clear for bomber's eye,
> in those two rain-full shell-holes the boy sees
> fragments of the splintered Pleiades,
> sprinkled on those death-deep, death-dark wells
> splashed on the pavement by Serb mortar shells.
> (lines 37-42)

"[F]ragments" and "splinter[s]" of stars, the "rain-full shell-holes"— these observational details are powerfully evocative, situating the reader right there on the pavement, seeing what the boy (and the speaker) can see. The fractured sky's reflection speaks to the brokenness of Bosnia more generally, the fragmentation along ethnic lines. But the stars also carry connotations of romance, even fate. The "death-deep, death-dark wells" are like reservoirs of psychic energy, as if they remember the horrors that they have witnessed.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-14:** "black shapes impossible to mark / as Muslim, Serb or Croat in such dark."
- **Lines 31-32:** "and blood-dunked crusts of shredded bread / lay on this pavement with the broken dead."
- **Lines 37-38:** "leaving the Sarajevo star-filled evening sky / ideally bright and clear for bomber's eye,"
- **Lines 39-41:** "in those two rain-full shell-holes the boy sees / fragments of the splintered Pleiades, / sprinkled on those death-deep, death-dark wells"
- **Line 42:** "splashed on the pavement by Serb mortar shells."

REPETITION

Repetition comes in a variety of forms in this poem.

In the first stanza ("After the hours [...] just not the case"), which is one long sentence, numerous lines begin with "or" or "of." This anaphora captures the drudgery and sheer difficulty of everyday life for the Sarajevans, which is an unsettling mix of mundane chores and potential danger. The reader has to work harder through these lines, the anaphora making the situation seem ongoing and exhausting.

Later in the poem, the anaphora of "Then" in lines 21 and 23 shows how the young lovers' courtship takes place in distinct—and exciting—stages: the voice test, the match-flare, then the coffee, and so on.

The poem also uses parallelism, and in one instance even makes a near-repeat of an entire line:

> The young go walking at a stroller's pace,
> [...]
> All take the evening air with a stroller's stride,

These two lines are almost identical in meaning: by "All," the speaker means "the young," and by "take the evening air," the speaker means "go walking." But the mere fact of this repetition signals that the young folk of Sarajevo refuse to be hurried in their pursuit of romance. The repeat quite literally takes up more space and time in the poem. The parallelism/diacope of "dark boy shape" and "dark girl shape" (line 43) also contributes to the romantic (if dangerous) atmosphere, the shapes suggesting the thrill of the unknown.

The penultimate stanza—the poem's longest—repeats multiple words: "mortars massacred" (line 30) / "mortar [...] massacre" (lines 33 and 34), "Serb mortar shells" (line 42); and then "holes" (line 33), "shell-holes" (line 39). Even "death-dark wells" in line 41 is a kind of reconfiguration of the shell-holes. These repeats pepper the stanza, almost like the blast impacts of a bomb, subtly showing how the effect of mortar attacks are everywhere in Sarajevo.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "or queuing"
- **Line 7:** "or struggling"
- **Line 8:** "of stairs"
- **Line 9:** "of Sarajevo"
- **Line 10:** "of people"
- **Line 12:** "a stroller's pace"
- **Line 16:** "calls," "calls"
- **Line 17:** "a stroller's stride"
- **Line 21:** "Then"
- **Line 23:** "Then"
- **Line 30:** "mortars massacred"
- **Line 33:** "holes," "mortar"
- **Line 34:** "massacre"
- **Line 39:** "shell-holes"
- **Line 41:** "sprinkled on"
- **Line 42:** "splashed on," "Serb mortar shells"
- **Line 43:** "dark boy shape," "dark girl shape"

VOCABULARY

Sarajevans (Line 1) - Citizens of Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia.

Canisters (Line 2) - Containers.

Prams (Line 3) - Baby carriages, strollers.

Meagre (Line 4) - Paltry, insufficient.

Snipers (Line 6) - Long-range gunmen.

Serb (Line 10) - In this case, the "Serbs" are the Bosnian Serbs, one of the warring factions in the Bosnian War—a group that identifies itself with Serbia.

Croat (Line 14) - A Bosnian Croat, e.g. a Bosnian who wishes to identify with the nation of Croatia.

Hjleb (Lines 15-16) - The Bosnian word for bread (as opposed to the Serbian or Croatian words, both of which are also spoken in Bosnia and are closely related).

Hleb (Lines 15-16) - The Serbian word for bread.

Kruh (Lines 15-16) - The Croatian word for bread.

Ploy (Line 19) - A cunning plan or scheme.

Pleiades (Line 40) - A star cluster in the Taurus constellation, sometimes known as the Seven Sisters.

Splintered (Line 40) - Fragmented / broken apart.

Curfew (Lines 44-45) - An order for people to be inside by a certain time of day/night.

AID Flour Sacks (Line 46) - Sacks that were part of the U.N. aid/ration program for Bosnia, once containing flour—here repurposed as sandbags to absorb the shock from explosions.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Bright Lights of Sarajevo" is broken up into five stanzas of varying length, the longest being eighteen lines and the shortest just four. In other words, it doesn't use a standard poetic form, but invents its own!

Still, there's a sound logic to this shape. The poem reads like a dispatch from the frontline of Sarajevo, a sketch that focuses on the things the speaker can see and hear in the moment. If these observations were shaped into neat, ordered, equal-length stanzas, the poem would probably feel less representative of the chaotic, unpredictable nature of the Sarajevo situation itself.

METER

The poem uses iambic pentameter: that is, lines of five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm. Here is the meter at work in line 18:

no torch- | es guide | them, but | they don't | collide

Generally speaking, the meter gives the poem a strong forward momentum, making it feel like the poem takes place almost in

real-time, the poet jotting down notes about the scene. This meter reflects the fact that Sarajevo is a dynamic, ever-changing environment, and people live moment to moment.

That said, the poem also often varies its meter—a choice that actually adds to the on-the-ground, journalistic feeling. Pure iambic pentameter can start to sound a bit stately and controlled, which probably wouldn't suit the poem.

The first two lines, for example, both start with trochees (feet that go DUM-da) rather than iambs. This gets the poem off on a heavy footing, which mirrors the frazzled exhaustion of the Sarajevans themselves.

Sometimes the poem loads stresses into a small space, as in line 29:

> on two shell splash scars, where, in '92

All four of the words highlighted could receive a stress, making this line tough on the ear. This makes sense, because it's describing a violent event—a much more extreme version of stress and power.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem uses rhyming couplets from start to finish—AABBCC, and so on. These singsongy rhymes have an incongruous comic quality, as if gesturing towards the unspeakable madness of war. They also come thick and fast, making the poem feel quick and dynamic.

And in a way, the whole poem is about a different kind of "coupling"—the search for romance and love. Sarajevo's bright young things go out looking for each other, hoping to find a match and maybe, for a brief moment, think about something other than simply surviving. The choice of couplets, then, mirrors the poem's focus on these Sarajevan pairings.

Sometimes, these couplets are shocking, too: by pitting two unlikely words against each other, they remind the reader that daily life in wartime is never ordinary. The rhyme between "bread" and "dead" in lines 31 and 32, for example, is visceral and unsettling—which fits with the subject matter.

SPEAKER

It's not too much of a stretch to read the speaker as Tony Harrison himself, though this isn't essential for understanding the poem. Harrison was sent to Sarajevo by the Guardian newspaper and wrote three poems based on his experiences.

Regardless of whether one reads the speaker as Harrison himself, the speaker is a closer observer of life in Sarajevo, first providing a sketch of daily life and then focusing on the nighttime activities of the young.

The speaker strikes a conversational tone, addressing the reader directly in line 8 ("you'd think that the nights [...]"). This has a gently confrontational effect, bringing the speaker closer to the action—and horror—of wartime Sarajevo.

And in lines 25 ("And I see...") and 27 ("and he's about, I think..."), the speaker uses the first person, which increases the sense that this poem takes place in real time, while the speaker's right there.

The speaker implicitly admires the ordinary Sarajevans for living their lives in the face of terrors—terrors he also drawing the reader's attention to through vivid descriptions of struggles and massacres (e.g. the reference to the 1992 mortar attack).

SETTING

The poem is set at nighttime in Sarajevo, the capital city of Bosnia-Herzegovina. At the epicenter of the Bosnian War, Sarajevo suffered the longest siege in modern history: it ran from April 5, 1992 until February 29, 1996. "The Bright Lights of Sarajevo" provides an insight into daily—and nightly—life during this time.

The city is an extremely tough place to live. Basic supplies are running low, and the inhabitants have to risk their lives just to get fuel, food, and water. They live under constant fear of death and are meant to stay at home after the evening curfew. The speaker captures the dangerous drudgery of everyday war in the first stanza, in which "dodging snipers" (line 6) is as much a part of a Sarajevan's day as queuing for rations. Existence is an exhausting combination of the mundane and the tragic, as the reference to the bread shop massacre and its "broken dead" in lines 29 to 32 makes clear.

With that said, Sarajevo is also a resilient place. At night, the youngsters go out looking for love, walking slowly and confidently in a spirit of defiance. A small flame of hope survives against the odds. On this particular night, the young walk the streets and flirt with one another, striking matches or flicking lighters in order to see each other's faces. Perhaps these, then, are the "bright lights of Sarajevo"—small acts of rebellion that prioritize romance over fear.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Tony Harrison (1937-present) is a prominent English poet and playwright. His work is widely read and performed around the world. Harrison grew up in Leeds in the north of England. A working-class kid, he won a school scholarship and went on to study Classics at university. The early influence of classical literature—particularly the idea of the poet as a kind of public servant—runs throughout his work.

Harrison has travelled widely through his career, living in places as varied as the Czech Republic, Cuba, and Nigeria. "The Bright Lights of Sarajevo" was part of an assignment for the Guardian newspaper, which sent Harrison to Bosnia to provide an eyewitness account of the Bosnian War (1992-1995). This poem is one of a trio of Bosnia poems published in the 2000 collection *Laureate's Block and Other Poems*; the poems also feature prominently in the newspaper around the time of the war.

This is the best known of those three poems, the other two being "The Cycles of Donji Yakuf" (which describes a party of looters after a battle) and "Essentials" (which focuses on a man trying to decide which of his books to use as fuel for fire). All of these poems are, in a way, reportage. Sarajevans really did often have to sprint across "Sniper Alley" in order go about the business of their day, and the breadshop queue massacre described in lines 29-32 was a real-life event.

Harrison was, of course, far from the only poet writing during the siege of Sarajevo. Readers might be interested to check out the work of Bosnian poets like Semezdin Mehmedinović and Goran Simić , both of whom lived and wrote during the longest-running siege in modern history.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Bosnian War, which ran between 1992 and 1995, had complicated motivating factors informed by centuries of grievances over ethnic and religious divisions. These rifts date back to Ottoman times and beyond, but the more immediate causes of the conflict relate to the fall of Yugoslavia—or, more accurately, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

The death in 1980 of Yugoslavia's dictator, Josep Tito, ushered in an era of economic hardship and exposed the fault lines between the Yugoslavian republic's various nations: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Slovenia.

Soon enough, Croatia and Slovenia declared independence, leaving the future of the entire region uncertain. Bosnia held a referendum on its own independence which was largely boycotted by Serbs, and this provided the corrupt Serbian president Slobodan Milošević with his reason to launch what would become the infamous siege of Sarajevo. As the poem points out, civilians were gunned down by snipers hiding in hotels and the surrounding hillside, and the city was mercilessly shelled, first by the Yugoslav People's Army and, soon after, by the Army of Republika Srpska (the official army of a Serbian breakaway state within Bosnia). The city was decimated and thousands were killed.

Sadly, the Bosnian war was also marked by the first genocide since World War II. The Army of Republika Srpska conducted a widespread genocidal campaign against Bosniak Muslims, killing thousands in Srebrinica in 1995. After much clamor for international intervention, the conflict was brought a tense end by the Dayton Accords in November 1995 (though violence continued afterwards). Many of the main players in the war have since been tried for war crimes by the United Nations.

Though it's now known for being the site of one of the bloodiest—and the longest—sieges in modern history, Sarajevo was once a great example of community cohesion and multiculturalism. Muslim Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats had, for a while at least, lived there together in relative peace.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Bosnian War — Learn more about the history of the wider conflict in which the siege of Sarajevo took place. (https://www.britannica.com/event/Bosnian-War)
- Harrison's Influence — Read a discussion of the collection in which this poem was published. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/apr/01/poetry.theatre)
- The Siege of Sarajevo — Read an overview of the longest-running siege in modern history. (https://www.theguardian.com/world/from-the-archive-blog/2018/jul/13/siege-of-sarajevo-ian-traynor-maggie-okane-1993)
- The Poet In His Own Words — Watch a conversation between Tony Harrison and fellow poet Simon Armitage. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gXjMm6pjxNw)
- Tony Harrison's Life — Read a biography of Harrison from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/tony-harrison)

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