Constantly Risking Absurdity

SUMMARY

The poet is like a tightrope walker in the sense that he's always at the risk of looking ridiculous, and even dying, every time he performs over the heads of his spectators. The poet uses rhyme to climb up to a high wire that he himself has created. The lines of sight from the sea of faces below are like balance beams that the poet slowly walks across, executing difficult leaps involving intricate footwork and other theatrical techniques, all while being careful not to confuse anything for something it's not.

Because he's devoted to representing things the way they actually are, he has to discern solid truth before he assumes each new position or takes a step in his presumed climb toward that even higher ledge, where Beauty herself solemnly waits, like a trapeze artist ready to begin her dangerous and mesmerizing leap.

And the poet is like a comedic figure who may or may not actually catch her beautiful, ever-lasting shape as it spreads out in the vacant air of existence.

THEMES

THE DIFFICULTY AND BEAUTY OF POETRY

"Constantly Risking Absurdity" compares the poet's process to that of a tightrope walker. Like an acrobat, the speaker says, a poet must take chances and risk failure in order to achieve something worthwhile. Writing a poem can feel like performing on a "high wire": trying to communicate profound truths, the poet is always at risk of making a wrong move and "falling" into the trap of being silly and false. But it is only by risking the possibility of such a failure, the speaker argues, that the poet stands any chance of capturing something beautiful and lasting.

Comparing the poet to an acrobat on a "wire of his own making," the speaker suggests that poets are always risking a dangerous fall into "absurdity." Like an acrobat performing "entrechats" (fancy and dangerous mid-air footwork), the poet must at once be entertaining and careful: if their language doesn't land exactly right, they'll find themselves plummeting into embarrassing and dishonest writing. In other words, poets are always at risk of making fools of themselves! Their writing may amount to no more than show-offy clowning if they make the mistake of valuing flashy style over the truth the poem is trying to reveal.

Writing poetry, the speaker suggests, is thus a careful balancing act: poets must at once perform elegantly and never lose contact with their central sense of what is true. The speaker says the poet must be a "super realist" and keep their eyes fixed on truth with every step—or artistic choice—they make. If the poet can indeed balance "high theatrics" with the "taut truth"—all while facing the possibility that things could go terribly wrong at any moment—then they'll have the chance to produce art of real beauty and lasting value.

To that end, the speaker describes "Beauty" as a trapeze performer who is waiting on all the other elements of the act to fall into place before she can "start her death-defying leap." The poet needs to make it to the right place at the right time to "catch" her. This illustrates the fact that every little piece of the poem must work in order for it to even have a *chance* at capturing lasting beauty.

The poet also has to recognize their own limits! The speaker calls the poet a "little charleychaplin man," a comical figure trying to make his way to Beauty. Even when he's doing the most careful, precise work, he's still a little bit of a clown—and he may or may not actually be able to capture beauty's "eternal form." Beauty itself has to do some of the work here, too. In other words, no matter how good the poet is, there is still an element of chance. If the poet has done everything right *and* is lucky, then the poem will capture a moment of fleeting beauty—and in doing so, "defy[]" death, preserving something lovely forever.

> **Where this theme appears in the poem:**
> - Lines 1-33

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

> *Constantly risking absurdity …*
> *…   of his audience*

The poem begins in midair, so to speak—immediately diving into its extended metaphor of the poet as an acrobat. The reader doesn't arrive at the main clause of the poem's winding opening sentence until line 6, however; until then, they'd be forgiven for thinking the poem was about an actual acrobat.

Such a performer is, indeed, risking death when doing tricks up in the air, "above the heads / of his audience." And by "risking absurdity," the speaker means that this performer is in danger of looking ridiculous. Once readers know that the poem is actually using all this acrobat imagery to talk about the process of writing poetry, these lines take on a different meaning. The

poet is always at risk of looking like a fool or even metaphorically dying (perhaps in the sense of their work being such a failure that they're forgotten).

The poem's winding syntax (or arrangement of words) and use of enjambment create an immediate sense of momentum and anticipation, breathlessly pulling the reader down the page and perhaps even evoking the tension one might feel while watching a trapeze artist perform.

The complete lack of punctuation allows these lines to flow freely, without obstruction. The poem also plays with white space, indenting lines far from the left-hand margin. All this space reflects the image of a figure performing up in the air, surrounded by empty space.

While the poem is visually striking, the speaker also plays with sound to great effect. Note all the sharp /k/ and /t/ consonance and hissing sibilance in line 1, for example:

> Constantly risking absurdity

The line feels crisp and clear, but also slippery because of that /s/. The sounds of the line evoke the way both the poet and the acrobat must strike a balance or else "fall" into "absurdity."

LINES 6-8

> *the poet like ...*
> *... his own making*

Line 6 finally reveals the subject of the sentence that spanned the poem's first five lines: "the poet." Line 6 also presents the simile that the rest of the poem revolves around: "the poet [is] like an acrobat."

While this line is a simple simile (one thing is like another), the poem quickly begins to expand on the comparison until it soon becomes an extended metaphor: the whole poem becomes an elaborate illustration of the idea that the poet is like an acrobat. The poem then uses a series of smaller metaphors within this broader one to bring this comparison to life.

The first of these is that the poet "climbs on rime" rather than ropes. Where the acrobat uses his body and ropes to get where he's going, the poet uses words and sounds. This metaphor might also be a subtle pun: the word "rime" is both an alternative spelling of "rhyme" and a word meaning "frost." The pun implies that words can be slippery—if the poet isn't careful, he might fall before reaching the "high wire" on which he is to perform.

Lines 6-8 continue to use sound in clever ways. For instance, the internal rhyme between "climb" and "rime" showcases one of the poet's tools even while talking about it. These lines also feature clear assonance ("like," "climbs," "rime," "high," "wire"), another device that elevates the poem's language, making it sound more *poetic*.

All these shared sounds reflect the poet's dexterity and agility.

They suggest that the poet can never just write *about* something: he must also pay attention to the sounds and textures and rhythms of the language he's using to say whatever it is he wants to say.

LINES 9-12

> *and balancing on ...*
> *... side of day*

Lines 9-12 continue to build on the extended metaphor of the poet as an acrobat. While an acrobat performs on a balance beam, the speaker says, a poet balances on "eyebeams"—that is, on the reader's gaze. This is another subtle pun, as the poet plays with the use of the word "beam."

These lines contain a wealth of sound, again drawing attention to the poet's medium; where the trapeze artist uses his body to enthrall the audience, the poet uses language.

There's the internal rhyme between "faces" and "paces," for example, the end rhyme between "way" and "day," as well as consonance, assonance, and sibilance:

> and balancing on eyebeams
> above a sea of faces
> paces his way
> to the other side of day

The mixture of deep /b/ sounds and smooth /s/ sounds seems to suggest confidence and carefulness; the poet/acrobat's art requires both bravery and laser-focused concentration. He will only make it "to the other side of day" if he stays focused on the work ahead of him. If he stops to consider the "sea" of people he's performing for, he may lose his courage.

LINES 13-18

> *performing entrechats ...*
> *... may not be*

Again drawing on the world of acrobatics, the speaker says that the poet metaphorically performs his own "entrechats" (a kind of complicated leap involving fast footwork in midair) and "sleight-of-foot tricks."

The point is that, like the acrobat, the poet must find ways to dazzle his audience. Except, unlike the acrobat, the poet's dextrous tricks involve the use of sound. To that end, note the consonance and sibilance driving these lines, with their many /t/, /k/, /s/, and /r/ sounds:

> performing entrechats
> and sleight-of-foot tricks
> and other high theatrics
> and all without mistaking

These sounds have a sharpness and force to them, as though the poet is proceeding with more and more power and

ambition in his performance. The end rhyme between "tricks" and "theatrics" also draws attention to the relationship between the poet's skill and the art of the performance—that is, the way the poet uses "tricks" like the consonance and sibilance noted above to grasp his readers' attention.

"Sleight-of-foot tricks" is, of course, a play on the phrase "sleight-of-hand," which refers to manual dexterity and also skillful deception. The acrobat uses his feet in addition to his hands, thus the change from "hand" to "foot," but the expression still implies a level of fakery. Both the poet and the acrobat must use artificial "tricks"—or devices—to convey something that *feels* real. Thus, the speaker says, the poet must proceed with using these devices cautiously, never confusing them for what's really at the heart of the poem.

LINES 19-21

> *For he's …*
> *   … taut truth*

In the second stanza, the speaker switches gears: despite all the "tricks" and "theatrics" the poet has at his disposal for wowing his reader, the speaker says, ultimately the poet must remember to keep his work grounded in reality.

Yet even as the speaker touts the necessity of recognizing "truth" in the midst of all this showmanship, the poem is still using a variety of sonic devices to keep things fun and entertaining:

> For he's the super realist
> who must perforce perceive
> taut truth

This combination of sounds—/r/, /p/, and /t/ consonance, sibilance (the repetition of /s/ sounds), and /p/ and /t/ alliteration—is crisp and obvious, drawing attention to the speaker's own nimble and playful ability with words. It seems to imply that even though it is important for the poet to keep himself grounded in reality and truth, he also can't take any of this too seriously—doing so might risk the "absurdity" mentioned in line 1.

Also note that the word "super" here is a subtle pun: "super" means both very/excellent/great and also above/beyond (as in supernatural). The poet thus must be both a strong realist and go beyond realism. After all, at the end of the day, it won't matter if he has something important or real to say if no one's stuck around long enough to hear it. Like the acrobat, the poet must draw the reader in with his "tricks." And just as the acrobat must eventually return to having both feet on the ground, the poet too must never lose track of what is real.

LINES 22-24

> *before the taking …*
> *… still higher perch*

This sense of reality and truth must be considered, the speaker says, "before the taking of each stance or step." The combination of sibilance and sharp /t/ consonance in this line evokes the rapt silence of the audience and the crisp sounds of the trapeze artist landing various difficult maneuvers. The sibilance also seems to suggest a heightened awareness, as if the poet must be careful and alert as he "advances" through the poem—any misstep and he might lose his reader, or the truth, entirely.

The internal rhyme between "stance" and "advance" adds to the feeling that the poet is hyper-aware of every little sound; he knows how to use language just as the acrobat knows how to shape his body into various poses. There is again a sharpness to this "ance" sound which suggests the tension and anticipation of the trapeze artist making his way toward the final act.

The use of the word "stance" is also a pun, as it refers to both the posture of the acrobat while also suggesting the attitude or point of view of the poet. In other words, a poet can't contort his body into different shapes, but he can express a variety of different attitudes or opinions within the poem, each bringing him a little closer to that "higher perch" (that is, the lasting Beauty that is his ultimate goal).

LINES 25-27

> *where Beauty stands …*
> *… her death-defying leap*

At the top of this "perch," the speaker says, is Beauty, who "stands and waits / with gravity / to start her death-defying leap." Beauty is being personified as another acrobat, seemingly a trapeze artist, who must wait for the poet to find his position before she dives off of her perch and into the air.

This seems to suggest that Beauty isn't really something the poet *creates* so much as something he might catch, or capture, if he manages to get everything else right. Beauty has some agency of her own here; the poet's skills carry him right up to the end of the performance, but it seems there is something a little more elusive there at the end, something that will make or break the poem.

There is also yet another pun with the use of the word "gravity," which on the surface suggests a solemnity (to wait "with gravity" means to wait with seriousness or a sense of significance). On the other hand, gravity is a literal, physical force that will pull Beauty to the ground if the poet doesn't catch her in time.

This more literal definition suggests that all too easily the whole performance could fall apart; it hearkens back to the "risk" mentioned in the first line of the poem, as does Beauty's "death-defying leap." The two things that the poet risks every time he writes—absurdity and death—linger over this final act. If the poet isn't in the right place at the right time, he'll make a fool of himself and the poem will be forgotten—a metaphorical

death.

LINES 28-31

> *And he ...*
> *... fair eternal form*

In the poem's final stanza, the speaker describes the poet as "a little charleychaplin man." This alludes to Charley Chaplin, a famous silent film actor known for his physical comedy, and paints the poet as a slapstick performer, deliberately flinging his body into ridiculous and embarrassing shapes in order to get a reaction from the audience.

Like a comedian, the poem seems to imply, the poet is always in danger of taking things a little too far, of crossing the line into absurdity or vulgarity. It also suggests an innate clumsiness on the part of the poet, who "may or may not catch" Beauty as she flies through the air. This suggests that there is an element of chance in all this writing: the poet's skills can only take him so far, positioning him in front of Beauty, but there is no guarantee that he will catch her.

Where "Beauty" is capitalized, "charleychaplin man" is all lowercase and smooshed together as if to imply that in the end, the poet isn't all that important. What *is* important is whether or not he's able to capture Beauty's "fair eternal form" in the space of the poem. The /f/ alliteration connecting "fair" and "form" and /r/ consonance in "fair," "eternal," and "form" adds subtle music to this final moment, again suggesting that one way the poet might capture Beauty is through sound.

LINES 32-33

> *spreadeagled in the ...*
> *...   of existence*

The final two lines depict Beauty "spreadeagled in the empty air / of existence." The poet must "catch" Beauty in this fleeting moment during which she hovers in midair. Like a trapeze artist, this is where beauty performers her "death-defying leap"; the magic of the moment is gone once she touches the ground.

The short /eh/ assonance in "spreadeagled," "empty," and "existence" adds speed and a sense of openness to the line, evoking that airy space. The imagery here is a bit ironic, however, given that Beauty's "spreadeagle" pose is a little silly and undignified. It's as though the poet has taken a snapshot when she's making a funny face.

Of course, the poem has one last sly trick up its sleeve—fitting for a poem that's interested in the "theatrics" of craft. Because of the twisty syntax and lack of punctuation, it's actually not entirely clear whether the last two lines of the poem are referring to Beauty or to the poet himself. It's technically just as accurate to interpret *the poet* as the one who is "spreadeagled in the empty air / of existence."

This makes sense, as the speaker has said that the poet "may or may not catch" Beauty's "form." If he *has* caught Beauty, then it

is Beauty's form that is spreadeagled, captured forever by the poem. But if he *hasn't* caught Beauty, then it is the poet himself who is suspended in air, made forever vulnerable by his failure.

In this way, the poem continues to play with the idea of risk and failure, suggesting perhaps that the final measure of success lies not with the poet or even the poem, but with the reader.

⚒ POETIC DEVICES

CONSONANCE

The poem uses plenty of consonance to fill its line with musicality, and also to add emphasis to certain words and phrases. For example, note how crisp /t/ and /k/ sounds in the opening line mix with slippery /s/ sounds, perhaps evoking the poet/acrobat's highwire balancing act:

> Constantly risking absurdity

As the poet moves forward in this act, consonance combines with alliteration and assonance to build up the poem's intensity and momentum. Take likes 7-11, with their slew of /m/ and /s/ and long /ee/, /i/, and /ay/ sounds:

> climbs on rime
> to a high wire of his own making
> and balancing on eyebeams
> above a sea of faces
> paces his way

The burst of consonance goes hand-in-hand with the description of the poet "climb[ing]" and "performing" like an acrobat. The poet uses sound the way that an acrobat uses their body; consonance is essentially one of the poet's "tricks" that can be used to captivate an audience.

Consonance also helps to evoke certain moods and feelings depending on the particular sounds being used. Lines 19-21, for example, feature sharp /p/ and /t/ sounds mixed with growing /r/ and hissing /s/ sounds:

> For he's the super realist
> who must perforce perceive
> taut truth

The lines feel tense and forceful. The sounds themselves might even seem pulled "taut" here, tightly woven into the lines.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Constantly risking absurdity"
- **Line 2:** "death"
- **Line 7:** "climbs," "rime"

- **Line 9:** "balancing," "eyebeams"
- **Line 10:** "above," "sea," "faces"
- **Line 11:** "paces"
- **Line 12:** "side," "day"
- **Line 13:** "entrechats"
- **Line 14:** "sleight," "tricks"
- **Line 15:** "theatrics"
- **Line 16:** "mistaking"
- **Line 19:** "super realist"
- **Line 20:** "perforce perceive"
- **Line 21:** "taut truth"
- **Line 22:** "taking," "stance," "step"
- **Line 23:** "supposed advance"
- **Line 24:** "toward," "still"
- **Line 25:** "Beauty stands," "waits"
- **Line 26:** "gravity"
- **Line 27:** "to start," "death-defying"
- **Line 29:** "little charleychaplin"
- **Line 30:** "catch"
- **Line 31:** "her fair eternal form"
- **Line 32:** "spreadeagled," "empty"
- **Line 33:** "existence"

ASSONANCE

Like consonance, assonance adds musicality to the poem and elevates the speaker's language. In lines 7-9, for example, note how the long /i/ sounds bring the image of the poet/acrobat climbing a high wire (which, metaphorically, represents writing poetry) to life:

> climbs on rime
> to a high wire of his own making

The long /ay/ sounds of "faces / paces his way / to the other side of day" similarly creates a sense of movement and momentum that reflects the action being described. An in the final two lines of the poem, the open /eh/ sounds in "spreadeagled," "empty," and "existence" evoke the spread figure of "Beauty" in midair.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "climbs," "rime"
- **Line 8:** "high," "wire"
- **Line 9:** "eyebeams"
- **Line 10:** "sea," "faces"
- **Line 11:** "paces," "way"
- **Line 12:** "day"
- **Line 14:** "tricks"
- **Line 15:** "theatrics"
- **Line 20:** "perforce," "perceive"
- **Line 22:** "stance"
- **Line 23:** "advance"

- **Line 32:** "spreadeagled," "empty"
- **Line 33:** "existence"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration works just like consonance and assonance, adding music and intensity to the speaker's language. It's another one of the poet's "tricks" or "high theatrics" that keeps readers engaged.

As an example, note how the repeated /p/ (and /er/) sound in "perforce" and "perceive" gets quickly followed with the /t/ sounds in "taut truth" and then by the /st/ sounds in "stance" and "step." Altogether, these lines feel sharp, crisp, and precise, which makes sense: this is the poet/acrobat performing for the audience/reader. The rhythm created by all this staccato alliteration almost feels like someone carefully putting one foot down in front of the other.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 20:** "perforce," "perceive"
- **Line 21:** "taut," "truth"
- **Line 22:** "stance," "step"
- **Line 23:** "supposed"
- **Line 27:** "death," "defying"
- **Line 29:** "charleychaplin"
- **Line 31:** "fair," "form"
- **Line 32:** "empty"
- **Line 33:** "existence"

IMAGERY

The poem draws on imagery from the world of acrobats and circus performers in order to dramatize the writing process. The poem's imagery all works in the service of its extended metaphor, of course; the speaker isn't describing an *actual* circus but drawing on familiar scenes to bring the writing process to life.

For example, the speaker describes the poet climbing up rhyme in order to reach "a high wire of his own making." Here rhyme is akin to the ladder that a tightrope walker ascends before reading the wire that he will walk across. In another striking image, the speaker presents the "eyebeams"—or lines of sight/looks—from the audience as a kind of balance beam that the poet "paces" across, performing fancy footwork all the while.

Again, this image isn't literal. Instead, it's meant to evoke the difficulty of the poet's task. By painting a scene in the reader's mind in which the reader can picture the poet "balancing [...] / above a sea of faces," the poem also illustrates exactly what a poet is capable of doing—*if* he gets it right: creating a scene that feels real to the reader. He can captivate the reader—draw their "eyebeams"—with words.

> **Where Imagery appears in the poem:**
>
> - Lines 3-14
> - Lines 22-27
> - Lines 31-33

PUN

There are a few subtle puns throughout the poem. In line 7, for example, "rime" is both an antiquated spelling of "rhyme" and a word meaning frost. The implication is that the poet's path up the ladder of "rhyme" is a dangerous, slippery one.

The word "super" is another possible pun. "Super" as an adjective can mean very, great, excellent, etc. When the speaker describes the poet as a "super realist," then, this means that the poet is a strong realist—that he's tied to depicting reality. At the same time, the word "super" can mean above or beyond, as in supernatural—which means that something is beyond the natural. Here, then, the speaker might also be saying that the poet is beyond a realist, that he goes above realism (in essence, that he's not all that realistic at all). This reflects the nature of poetry, in the speaker's mind, which is at once concerned with "taut truth" and using "high theatrics" to present that truth.

Later, the word "stance" creates another pun:

> before the taking of each **stance** or step

"Stance" is a reference to both the posture of the acrobat and to the poet's attitude or point of view.

Finally, the speaker uses a pun towards the end of the poem, describing "Beauty" as waiting "with gravity / to start her death-defying leap." Beauty here is personified as another acrobat (and, it seems, more specifically a trapeze artist) waiting on a platform far above the speaker, ready to leap into the air.

The word "gravity," then, is a subtle play on words: it means gravity in the sense of the seriousness or solemnity with which Beauty waits for the speaker to arrive in order to "catch" her, and it also refers to the physical force that will pull "Beauty" toward the ground—that will literally bring "Beauty" down to earth.

On the one hand, then, the speaker seems to be saying that the work of writing poetry—of capturing beauty—is serious stuff. On the other hand, the fact that the word "gravity" itself is a pun subtly undercuts that seriousness. It adds playfulness to this moment in the poem and evokes the sentiment presented in line 1: that poets are "constantly risking absurdity" when they write. Take themselves too seriously—treat the pursuit of "Beauty" with too much "gravity"—the poem suggests, and they risk having everything come crashing down.

> **Where Pun appears in the poem:**
>
> - **Line 7:** " climbs on rime"
> - **Line 19:** "For he's the super realist"
> - **Line 22:** "before the taking of each stance or step"
> - **Lines 25-27:** "where Beauty stands and waits / with gravity / to start her death-defying leap"

EXTENDED METAPHOR

The entire poem is an extended metaphor—or, perhaps more accurately, an extended simile. The speaker compares "the poet" to "an acrobat" early on and then spends the rest of the poem elaborating on this statement, illustrating all the ways in which the poet's job is much like an acrobat's or tightrope walker's.

There are many small metaphors within this broader one. The speaker describes the poet "climb[ing] on rime" rather than on a rope, for example, illustrating the way that the poet uses words and sound to create a "high wire" on which to balance. Likewise, whereas the acrobat performs on a balance beam, the poet "balances on eyebeams." In other words, the poet's support is the reader's attention; the poet's "high theatrics" happen in the space between the reader's eyes and the page.

The metaphors continue into the second stanza. Now, the poet is "performing entrechats / and sleight-of-foot tricks"—fancy footwork and leaps across the page (which might refer to the use of poetic devices like alliteration, anaphora, and, of course, metaphor).

Death, in this poem, is also metaphorical and represents the failure of the poet, or of the poem itself, to capture something beautiful and meaningful. An acrobat performing in midair risks an actual, *literal* death if they fall from their perch, but if the poet "falls," they won't actually die. Instead, the poem will not achieve a lasting presence in the "audience['s]"—or reader's—imagination, and therefore will "die," or be forgotten. (The poet themselves may also be forgotten, and their obscurity may be a kind of death as well: a death of the ego, and of their career, their name, etc.)

The speaker adds that the poet must also factor in reality and truth into this performance. Only the combination of "high theatrics" (big, showy moves—perhaps like this complicated metaphor itself!) and a grounding, steady "truth" can result in the obtainment of "Beauty," which is the poet's ultimate goal (according to this speaker, at least). The speaker personifies Beauty as another acrobat—seemingly a trapeze artist—who's standing at the ready on a platform high above, waiting for the poet to arrive in order"catch / her fair eternal form" as she flies through the air. The poet's job here is to capture Beauty's metaphorical leap—beauty in action—on the page.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-33

ENJAMBMENT

The poem is arguably [enjambed](#) from top to bottom. While there are slight pauses implied between each stanza, the poem lacks any punctuation whatsoever—meaning that even these subtle [end-stops](#) are very minor.

All this enjambment creates momentum, pushing the reader right on past line endings without pausing for a breath. On the one hand, this breathlessness suggests the anticipation of the enthralled audience. On the other hand, it evokes the fluid movement of an acrobat moving through various tricks and positions in midair. There is no stopping and starting; each movement bleeds into the next.

The enjambment also works with the white space on the left-hand margin of the poem (the byproduct of the speaker's indenting lines) to add to the poem's sense of suspended animation. All this blank space also evokes "Beauty" dangling "spreadeagled in the empty air / of existence."

Were the poem to feature clearly end-stopped lines (or any punctuation at all, for that matter), things would likely feel different—perhaps more steady and grounded. The poem would lose the sense of tension, the idea of the poet performing a tricky balancing act "above the heads / of his audience." The enjambed lines suggest the opposite: the poet walking across a "high wire" and taking a "death-defying leap" into the air.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 2-3
- Lines 3-4
- Lines 4-5
- Lines 6-7
- Lines 7-8
- Lines 8-9
- Lines 9-10
- Lines 10-11
- Lines 11-12
- Lines 12-13
- Lines 13-14
- Lines 14-15
- Lines 15-16
- Lines 16-17
- Lines 17-18
- Lines 19-20
- Lines 20-21
- Lines 21-22
- Lines 22-23
- Lines 23-24
- Lines 24-25
- Lines 25-26
- Lines 26-27
- Lines 28-29
- Lines 29-30
- Lines 30-31
- Lines 31-32
- Lines 32-33

VOCABULARY

Absurdity (Line 1) - Ridiculousness, foolishness, or stupidity.

Acrobat (Line 6) - In the poem, the speaker is more specifically referring to a tightrope walker, or a person who performs gymnastic feats.

Rime (Line 7) - An obsolete spelling of "rhyme." The word also means frost.

Eyebeams (Line 9) - Lines of sight, glances.

Entrechats (Line 13) - A leap in classical ballet in which the dancer crosses and uncrosses their ankles repeatedly in midair.

sleight-of-foot (Line 14) - A play on "sleight-of-hand," which is a phrase for skillful deception or dexterity in performing tricks.

Theatrics (Line 15) - Exaggerated, dramatic performances.

Perforce (Line 20) - Necessarily or by force of circumstance.

Taut (Line 21) - Stretched or pulled tight, firm.

Stance (Line 22) - Position, pose, or posture. Alternatively, an opinion or viewpoint.

Charleychaplin man (Line 29) - A comedic figure; someone who is reminiscent in some way of Charlie Chaplin, who was known for his slapstick humor.

Fair (Line 31) - Beautiful, lovely.

Spreadeagled (Line 32) - To be positioned with one's arms and legs spread out.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Constantly Risking Absurdity" is made up of three [stanzas](#) of different lengths. Visually, the poem is quite striking: only five of its 33 lines begin on the left-hand margin of the page, while the rest are indented to varying degrees.

The poem's use of white space creates a sense of movement and dynamism that captures the careful balancing act of an acrobat in midair. The lines that float the furthest into the right-hand margin look almost like they're floating and may evoke the feeling of watching someone perform at a great height. The

reader can visualize the vulnerability of the acrobat-poet climbing "to a high wire of his own making" and "Beauty" waiting to begin her "death-defying leap" in part because of the way these particular lines extend out into white space.

The back-and-forth look of the lines also evokes the sense of "high theatrics" the speaker describes in the poem. Like an acrobat, the poet uses every tool at his disposal to captivate the "audience"—or reader.

METER

The poem is written in free verse, meaning it doesn't stick to any set meter. The use of free verse allows the poem to focus on its fresh imagery and to create organic and surprising rhythms. The poem is unpredictable throughout, resulting in a sense of tension that evokes the feeling of watching an acrobat balancing on a tightrope.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem is written in free verse and thus follows no set rhyme scheme. That said, the poem does make use of occasional rhyme. In lines 6-15, for example, there are internal rhymes between "climbs"/"rime" and "faces"/ "paces," as well as end rhymes between "way"/"day" and "tricks"/"theatrics." By using rhyme intermittently rather than in a fixed pattern, the speaker allows for a sense of spontaneity and surprise. There's a sense of anticipation, as the reader doesn't know when a rhyme is going to appear.

👤💬 SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is someone making a comparison between writing poetry and performing acrobatics. The speaker isn't really *present* in the poem, however (unless one assumes the speaker to be the "poet" being described). This is because the poem isn't about any particular person; it's about the art of writing poetry.

Because this is a poem about writing poetry and it's by written, of course, by a poet, it's probably fair to conflate the speaker with Ferlinghetti himself. The poem, then, represents Ferlinghetti's ideas about what the work of poetry is. For him, poetry is a balancing act, and while its goal is truth and beauty, one can't expect to get there without "constantly risking absurdity."

🏞 SETTING

The setting of the poem is an imaginary one. The speaker is comparing a poet to an acrobat so that the reader can better visualize the poet's work—something that is rather difficult to do, given that, unlike *actual* acrobats, poets don't literally perform on a wire over the heads of their audience!

The poem borrows the *sense* of a physical world from the imagery associated with acrobats, such as "balancing [...] / above a sea of faces" and "performing entrechats / and sleight-of-foot tricks." In this way, the reader can visualize the world of a circus performer: the "high wire," the audience, the "death-defying leap." Again, though, the setting isn't describing a real place but rather is being used in the service of metaphor. The poem uses the *language* of acrobatics to illustrate the process of writing (and, to an extent, reading) poetry.

ℹ CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Lawrence Ferlinghetti published "Constantly Risking Absurdity" in his 1958 collection *A Coney Island of the Mind*. Ferlinghetti's work is associated with the Beats, a counterculture literary movement that developed in the wake of WWII. The Beats rejected the materialism and conformity of mainstream American culture and were influenced by jazz rhythms, French surrealism, and eastern religions.

Ferlinghetti played an important role in the Beat movement (the bookstore he co-founded in San Francisco, City Lights, was in fact a gathering place for Beat writers), but he personally identified more as a "Bohemian" (a title referring not to a literary movement so much as an unconventional, nonmaterialistic lifestyle). Ferlinghetti is also linked to the San Francisco Renaissance, which was the name given to a diverse variety of poetic communities that rejected the formalist poetry of the mid-20th century. Such poetry, these communities felt, had regressed to traditional formalism in the wake of World War II, forsaking the revolutionary changes brought about by Modernism in the early 19th century.

However one chooses to categorize Ferlinghetti, his work is notably unacademic and anti-establishment, aiming instead for accessibility and authenticity. Ferlinghetti valued poetry that didn't just appeal to the highly educated and instead could be shared among ordinary people.

A painter as well as a poet, Ferlinghetti was also deeply influenced by the Spanish Romantic painter Goya (whom he wrote about in his poem "In Goya's Greatest Scenes We Seem to See..."). In fact, much of Ferlinghetti's poetry is occupied with other art forms (such as acrobatics in "Constantly Risking Absurdity"), most often with painting or jazz music.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Beat movement developed in response to the general disillusionment that permeated much of the world after the senseless horrors of World War II. Ferlinghetti himself had served in the U.S. Navy and was present for the 1944 invasion of Normandy, where he served as a skipper and a submarine chaser.

After the war, Ferlinghetti took advantage of the G.I. bill to obtain a master's degree in English literature from Columbia University and then went on to earn a Ph.D. in comparative literature at the Sorbonne in Paris, France. Shortly after, he returned to the United States, where he moved to San Francisco and opened City Lights Bookstore.

The bookstore quickly became a gathering place for Beat writers, some of whom Ferlinghetti would go on to befriend and even publish through the City Lights Pocket Poets series. This included the first edition of Allan Ginsberg's popular and controversial book *Howl and Other Poems*, published in 1956.

The publication of *Howl* led to one of the most famous freedom-of-speech trials in modern American history, as Ferlinghetti was arrested for printing and selling "obscene" material (Ginsberg's book described psychedelic drug use and homosexual intercourse, which at the time was considered shocking). The American Civil Liberties Union defended Ferlinghetti and ultimately won the case.

📚 MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The San Francisco Renaissance — An introduction to the Bay area poets (including Ferlinghetti) that sprang up in opposition to mainstream poetry in the 1940s and '50s. (https://poets.org/text/brief-guide-san-francisco-renaissance)

- A Reading of the Poem — Hear the poem read aloud by the poet himself. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ss7nAQiu46o)

- A Coney Island of the Mind — A review of Ferlinghetti's first collection of poems, written 50 years after its publication, for The Guardian. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2008/aug/19/revisitingconeyislandofthe)

- Lawrence Ferlinghetti's Biography — Read a short biography the poet via City Lights, the book shop and publishing house Ferlinghetti founded. (http://www.citylights.com/ferlinghetti/)

- The Flying Trapeze — Watch circus acrobats in action. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ArLI_ZrcgBg&ab_channel=RinglingBros.andBarnum%

💬 HOW TO CITE

MLA

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CHICAGO MANUAL

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