

Death of a Teacher



SUMMARY

The large trees once again rustle outside the window as if they're playing poker. Their leaves shuffle against each other like cards, drop onto the lawn, and drift away on the wind. Yesterday you died.

When I heard the exact hour that you passed—which was the same time of day that school used to end—I shut my eyes and remembered sitting in your English class three decades ago.

I was 13 years old. You were sitting at your desk and dangling your legs off its edge while reciting a W. B. Yeats poem.

The other girls in class were bored by this, but my heart skipped a beat as I felt myself falling in love with the poem's beautiful language.

Listening to you recite, I suddenly became aware of the fact that the old wooden desk beneath my hands was once a living tree. I also noticed a bird in an oak tree outside the window and listened to it chirp into the air.

I felt more present in the classroom itself—we were right there with you, Miss. Later, smoke trailed from your cigarette while you read lines from John Keats's poems.

Teaching is like giving someone a gift of never-ending love. I remember learning the poems by heart as if they were magic spells, and the wonderful feeling of learning and reciting new words.

You were right—these lessons have been useful throughout my entire life. Beneath the rustling trees outside my window, the evening light dims as it warmly shines onto an open book—a book with treasured pages just waiting for me to turn them.

love. Unlike her classmates, who were “bored” while the teacher read, the speaker found herself overcome by the intricate language of poetry to the point that her “heart stumbled and blushed.” The words she uses here are romantic and sentimental, making it seem like she’s recalling her first romantic experience. This, in turn, reflects the flush of passion and the excitement that comes from experiencing poetry for the first time.

Poetry even changed the way the speaker saw the world itself in that moment. All of a sudden, she felt acutely “present” in the classroom and found herself attuned to even the smallest details of her surroundings, like a bird “in the oak outside scribb[ing] itself on the air.” In the same way that new lovers often feel as if everything is brighter and more alive, poetry appears to have changed the speaker’s entire perspective, putting her in touch with a surprisingly vibrant world.

But “Death of a Teacher” isn’t just about poetry itself—it’s also about how profoundly education can impact a person’s life. After all, the speaker underwent this transformative experience *because* her teacher showed her the beauty of poetry. And the poem’s final image hints at why, exactly, teaching someone to love poetry is so meaningful. The speaker looks at the pages of an open book and sees them as “precious” things of beauty just “waiting to be turned.” This image indicates that, though the teacher is dead, the love of poetry she instilled in the speaker will live on. The teacher has given her a gift of “endless love” that will sustain the speaker throughout her entire life.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 5-18



THEMES



THE POWER OF POETRY AND EDUCATION

“Death of a Teacher” is at once a celebration of poetry and of the power of education. The fact that the speaker so vividly remembers her former English teacher reading poems in class reveals that this was a transformative experience. Teaching poetry, the speaker implies, is like offering somebody a precious gift that can open them up to an entirely new way of seeing the world. This poem itself thus acts as an ode to the art form that the speaker so loves, and to the teacher who introduced her to it.

For the speaker, first hearing the words of famous poets like William Yeats and John Keats in the classroom was like falling in



DEATH, LOSS, AND MEMORY

“Death of a Teacher” is, as the title suggests, a poem about death. But it’s also a poem about the power and consolation of memory. Upon abruptly learning that her beloved childhood English teacher has died, the speaker vividly recalls sitting in the teacher’s classroom and listening to said teacher recite poetry. The poem transports readers back to this moment in time, and in doing so suggests that even as the loss of loved ones is a painful part of life, memories of shared experiences can offer lasting comfort.

The news of the teacher’s death seems both inevitable and sudden. The “big trees” outside the speaker’s window shed their leaves in a way that symbolically acknowledges life’s impermanence; the falling leaves represent the fact that things are constantly changing and that nothing lasts. But then the speaker bluntly says, “You died yesterday.” This abrupt

transition feels a little shocking, suggesting that even though the speaker recognizes the inevitability of death, it's still really hard to accept loss on a personal level. There is, in other words, no good way to prepare for something like this.

And yet, "Death of a Teacher" doesn't just dwell on the reality of death and loss. Instead, the poem honors the power of memory to bring precious people and experiences back to life in a way. For example, it has been three decades since the speaker last sat in the teacher's classroom, but all she needs to do is close her eyes and she's suddenly back in that room. She even remembers small, vivid details like the sound of a bird outside or how the desk felt beneath her hands. These memories are so precise that it seems as if the speaker never really left this experience behind, instead carrying it with her into adult life.

The immediacy of this memory suggests that beloved people and experiences are never completely lost to time. Moments pass and people die, but they don't simply disappear—rather, they live on in memory.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-18



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

*The big trees ...
... You died yesterday.*

The speaker [personifies](#) the trees outside her window, talking about them as if they're gamblers playing poker. This makes the poem's setting feel alive, as if the speaker's surrounding world is full of life and activity.

However, this bustling sense of life profoundly changes in line 4 ("on a [...] yesterday"), when the speaker suddenly says:

You died yesterday.

This blunt statement [juxtaposes](#) the previous [imagery](#) of trees rustling in the wind and playing poker, changing the poem's tone from playful to somber.

And yet, the first three lines ("The big [...] ace high") do hint at this somber feeling. After all, the image of trees scratching against each other and shedding their leaves isn't necessarily all that joyful to begin with. In fact, this imagery brings to mind the passage of time, since leaves "turning" and dropping is [symbolic](#) of autumn. The fact that these leaves "float[] away" on the wind also adds a feeling of impermanence, as the speaker implies that nothing lasts forever. Before the speaker even says "You died yesterday," then, the poem subtly acknowledges that life is full of loss and change.

The speaker doesn't say who the "you" is, but the poem's title makes it clear that the speaker addresses her former teacher, who has just died. The [caesura](#) in line 4 highlights the sudden shift in focus, as the speaker goes from talking about the trees to acknowledging the teacher's death:

on a breeze. || You died yesterday.

Not only does the speaker pause before saying this, but she also [end-stops](#) the line so that the phrase "You died yesterday" feels like a very matter-of-fact statement. This emphasizes just how abrupt it can feel when loved ones die, as if death comes out of nowhere to claim them.

LINES 5-8

*When I heard ...
... poem by Yeats*

Upon learning the exact time her teacher died, the speaker instantly thinks of her school days. The implication here is that the teacher died at the end of the day ("last bell"), when school used to let out and all the students headed home for the evening.

As the speaker thinks about school, a more specific memory comes to mind: she imagines sitting in the teacher's English class. All the speaker needs to do, it seems, is shut her eyes, and suddenly she'll find herself transported back to the teacher's classroom—an indication that this is an important or formative memory, one that still feels very immediate. Even though "three decades" have passed since the speaker was a 13-year-old in the teacher's class, she still vividly remembers the image of the teacher sitting on the desk and "swinging [her] legs" as she read a poem by W. B. Yeats (the famous 20th-century Irish poet) out loud to the students.

The [assonance](#) in these lines makes the language sound pleasant and, in that way, illustrates the speaker's fondness for this memory. Consider, for example, the /ee/ sound that appears in lines 7 and 8:

three decades back, and me thirteen. You sat on your desk,
swinging your legs, reading a poem by Yeats

This assonance gives the lines a song-like quality that is satisfying to the ear, in turn conveying the speaker's positive associations with this memory. Although the teacher has died, it's clear that the speaker is still able to call up what it felt like to listen to her read poetry aloud—an experience that was so pleasing and important to her that it has remained with her even after 30 years.

LINES 9-12

to the bored ...

... on the air.

The speaker relives the memory of sitting in the teacher's classroom and listening to her recite poetry. The end of line 8 is [enjambéd](#) with line 9, creating a moment of anticipation:

[...] reading a poem by Yeats
to the bored girls, [...]

The stanza break inserts a brief pause that helps the speaker call attention to an important detail: namely, that her classmates are completely uninterested in listening to the teacher read poetry by [W. B. Yeats](#). In contrast, the speaker is clearly enthralled by this experience, as evidenced by the simple fact that she can remember it so vividly after all these years.

The [juxtaposition](#) between the speaker's enthusiasm and her classmates' boredom becomes even more pronounced when the speaker says that her "heart stumbled and blushed / as it fell in love with the words." This use of [personification](#) presents her heart as if it's love-drunk and giddy. The idea of her heart "blush[ing]" because of the poetic language makes it seem as if this moment is similar to what it's like to experience romance or intimacy for the very first time.

Building on this idea, the poem implies that the speaker's immediate environment suddenly feels much more vibrant and alive. Listening to poetry, in other words, opens her up to the world and helps her notice things she usually overlooks—such as, for example, the fact that her desk used to be a real, living tree. Everything now seems connected to the speaker. This again echoes something that sometimes happens to new lovers whose romantic outlook unexpectedly rearranges the way they move through life, making it feel as if even the most mundane things are full of meaning.

The speaker also says that a bird in an oak tree outside the window "scribble[s] itself on the air"—a somewhat vague description that either refers to the way the bird sings or perhaps the way it flutters its wings in the air as it takes off from the tree. Regardless, the word "scribble[s]" links the bird's actions to writing and poetry, as if poetry is suddenly everywhere the speaker looks.

LINES 12-14

*We were truly ...
... lines from Keats.*

The speaker uses a [pun](#) in these lines, saying, "We were truly there, // present, Miss [...]." The speaker's *main* point is that listening to the teacher read poetry made her feel more in touch with her surroundings, but the word "present" also mimics how students respond when a teacher takes attendance: when a teacher calls a student's name, that student might say, "Present, Miss."

This pun adds a bit of playfulness to the poem, but it also demonstrates the speaker's love of language. The memory she recounts here is of the first time she found herself exhilarated and enthralled by language—now, though, she's so adept at cleverly choosing her words that she has no problem sneaking a little pun into a poem about death!

The speaker doesn't just remember what it was like to listen to her teacher read aloud; she strongly associates poetry itself with the memory. This becomes clear when the speaker references the image of the teacher's cigarette smoke "braid[ing] itself with lines" from the Romantic poet [John Keats](#), as if certain physical aspects of this memory have become intertwined with poetry. Whenever she hears Keats, in other words, she most likely remembers the way her teacher smoked cigarettes while reciting his poems. Above all, this is a testament to the fact that loved ones and important experiences stay with people for a long, long time.

LINES 14-17

*Teaching ...
... for life.*

These lines include one of the poem's most important messages, which frames the act of teaching as a gift. The speaker's assertion that teaching is "endless love" not only suggests that educating someone can be an affectionate, caring gesture, but also that it's something that can last forever. To put it another way, teaching is the gift that keeps on giving, one that lasts "for life."

This certainly seems to be the case for the speaker, who was so affected by her teacher that she can still vividly recall the feeling of sitting in her classroom and learning about poetry. Everything about this experience was meaningful for her. Although some of her "bored" peers presumably disliked that they had to learn certain poems "by heart," the speaker relished this activity, liking the way poetic terms and words felt on her "learning tongue."

To that end, the speaker liked memorizing poems so much that she subtly compares them to magical enchantments or "spells," as if each poem contained its own enticing sorcery. The speaker sees poetry as alluring and fascinating, framing it as a passion that has stayed with her "for life."

[Alliteration](#) adds to the satisfying sound of the speaker's language in these lines. Take, for example, the alliterative /l/:

is endless love; the poems by heart, spells, the lists
lovely on the learning tongue, the lessons, just as you
said,
for life. [...]

This alliteration highlights the most important words in this section, spotlighting "love," "lists," "lovely," "learning," "lessons,"

and "life"—all words that call attention to the idea that teaching someone to love poetry is a lesson that will stay with them throughout their lives. The alliteration also combines well with the speaker's use of [sibilance](#) in words like "endless," "spells," "lists," and "lessons" (to name a few). This soft, hissing sound is soothing and pleasant, thus capturing poetry's satisfying musicality, which is what made the speaker fall in love with it in the first place.

LINES 17-18

*Under the gambling ...
... to be turned.*

In the poem's final [couplet](#), the speaker returns to the present. She once again [personifies](#) the trees outside her window, calling them "the gambling trees" and, in doing so, reminding readers that the poem began with the speaker observing the trees as they shifted in the wind and gradually dropped their leaves.

Now, though, the focus isn't on the trees themselves, but on a book that the sunlight "thins and burns" as it shines through the window. The phrase "thins and burns" suggests that the book's pages wither in the light, as if the book itself is quite old—perhaps, one might think, it's a book the speaker has owned since she was a student in the teacher's class. This would suggest that in the process of mourning the teacher's death, the speaker has turned to the books she first discovered under the teacher's loving guidance.

There is, however, not quite enough evidence in the poem to say with any certainty whether this is the case. What *is* clear is that the speaker has turned to books in general, and this is yet another illustration of how profoundly the teacher impacted her life. When something goes wrong, the speaker looks to poetry and language for comfort—something she learned from the teacher.

The phrase "gold light" also implies that it's now evening and that the sun is setting ("thins and burns" might even apply to the quality of light, not the book's pages). This gives readers the feeling that time has passed, as the poem acknowledges that life is constantly slipping away. Rather than letting this upset her, though, the speaker turns her attention to the future, saying that the "precious" pages of her book are just "waiting to be turned." This proves that teaching people to love poetry is a gift that lasts "for life," since there will always be more pages to "turn[.]" no matter how old a person gets or how many loved ones they lose.



SYMBOLS



THE TREES AND LEAVES

With their leaves "turning" and "dropping," the trees [symbolize](#) the passage of time and the fleeting nature of life. The poem clearly takes place in autumn, a time of transition and perhaps a bit of nostalgia for warmer days. This perfectly encapsulates the speaker's own nostalgia for when she sat in her teacher's classroom and fell in love with poetry for the first time. And though this memory is so strong and vivid, there's no changing that it took place "three decades" ago and—more to the point—that the speaker can never truly return to it.

The fact that the leaves "drift[]" away "on a breeze" also serves as a reminder that nothing lasts. This is particularly meaningful because the speaker has just lost her favorite teacher. In the same way that the leaves blow away on the wind, then, the teacher has moved on from life, leaving the speaker with nothing but her memories.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "The big trees outside are into their poker game again, / shuffling and dealing, turning, folding, their leaves / drifting down to the lawn, floating away, ace high, / on a breeze."
- **Line 17:** "Under the gambling trees,"



POETIC DEVICES

PERSONIFICATION

The speaker [personifies](#) the trees outside her window, presenting them as gamblers in the middle of a poker game. This makes the poem's setting feel particularly alive, as if everything around the speaker bustles with energy and life. When the speaker turns her attention to the teacher's death, then, there's a stark [juxtaposition](#) between the liveliness of the surrounding world and the idea of loss and death.

But the personification of the trees also contains a hint of sadness. Presenting them as poker players gives them personal agency and thus makes them seem alive, but the speaker's description of their leaves brings to mind a sense of impermanence. The passage of time is clear in the opening lines, as the speaker says that the leaves "drift[] down to the lawn" and "float[] away" on the wind, illustrating that the external world is always changing. This [symbolizes](#) the fact that life is fleeting, so it makes sense that the speaker goes from talking about the personified trees to saying, "You died yesterday"; their changing leaves make her think of the teacher's death.

The speaker also personifies her own heart when she recalls what it felt like to fall in love with poetry. Her heart, she says, "stumbled and blushed / as it fell in love with the words" that her teacher read aloud. This presents the heart as someone drunk on love and completely overcome by affection. In other words, hearing beautiful poetry for the first time had a huge impact on the speaker, and this use of personification helps her illustrate just how enamored and exhilarated she felt during this important moment in her life.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "The big trees outside are into their poker game again, / shuffling and dealing, turning, folding, their leaves / drifting down to the lawn, floating away, ace high, / on a breeze."
- **Lines 9-10:** "my heart stumbled and blushed / as it fell in love with the words"
- **Line 17:** "Under the gambling trees,"

PUN

The speaker uses [pun](#) when she says, "We were truly there, // present, Miss, [...]." In this moment, the speaker suggests that listening to the teacher read poetry aloud made her feel more immediately engaged with her surroundings, putting her in touch with everything around her. But the word "present" is also a pun because it mimics what students say when teachers call their names while taking attendance: "Present, Miss."

This pun adds playfulness to the poem, and they also show readers that the speaker has a way with words. This makes sense, considering that she has been in love with language since she first fell for poetry at the age of 13. By planting a clever pun, then, the speaker provides readers with tangible evidence of the teacher's impact on her life, making it clear that the teacher's poetry lessons impacted her in profound, long-lasting ways—after all, her love of language clearly hasn't faded.

Where Pun appears in the poem:

- **Lines 12-13:** "We were truly there, / present, Miss,"

IMAGERY

The poem's [imagery](#) makes the setting feel vivid and full of life. This is the case in the beginning of the poem, when the speaker describes the way the trees "shuffl[e]" in the wind—a description that is both visual and auditory, since readers can envision the swaying trees and imagine the sound their leaves and branches make as they rustle together. This imagery evokes the sights and sounds of autumn, helping the speaker hint at the shifting seasons and, thus, the idea of impermanence and change.

Elsewhere, imagery helps the speaker suggest that falling in

love with poetry made her feel, as a 13-year-old student, that the world had suddenly come alive in new ways. For example, while listening to the teacher recite poetry, she found herself attuned to small things like the sound a bird made in an oak tree outside the classroom as it "scribble[d] itself on the air." It's hard to say, of course, what exactly it means for a bird to "scribble itself on the air"; perhaps this is a description of the song it sings, or maybe it describes the sound it makes as it rustles its wings. Either way, what's clear is that falling in love with poetry helped the speaker tap into even the most subtle sounds of nature, implying that poetry opened her up to the world.

On an even more basic level, the poem's precise imagery shows just how vividly the speaker remembers what it was like to sit in the teacher's classroom. Everything about this experience, it seems, has stayed with the speaker, right down to the way the smoke from the teacher's "black cigarette" twirled in the air as she recited poetry by [John Keats](#). There's a sense of immediacy here, as if nothing about this memory has faded over the years—a fact that illustrates just how important the teacher's class was for the speaker and, moreover, the extent to which she has carried this memory with her throughout her entire life.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-4:** "shuffling and dealing, turning, folding, their leaves / drifting down to the lawn, floating away, ace high, / on a breeze."
- **Lines 11-12:** "heard the bird / in the oak outside scribble itself on the air."
- **Lines 13-14:** "the smoke from your black cigarette / braided itself with lines from Keats."
- **Lines 17-18:** "the gold light thins and burns, / the edge of a page of a book,"

JUXTAPOSITION

[Juxtaposition](#) appears early in the poem. After somewhat playfully describing the trees and their leaves, the speaker creates an abrupt shift in tone by saying, "You died yesterday."

Again, the lines that lead up to this startling phrase focus on the trees outside the speaker's window, which the speaker [personifies](#) as gamblers playing poker. The poem initially doesn't give readers the impression that the speaker is upset, making the blunt recognition of the teacher's death feel all the more sudden and shocking.

There's also juxtaposition between the speaker's description of her former classmates and her description of herself. Whereas her classmates were "bored" as the teacher read poetry to them, the speaker herself was enthralled by the experience, feeling as if her "heart stumbled and blushed / as it fell in love with the words." This difference highlights the fact that some

people connect very meaningfully to certain lessons or art forms while others find themselves completely unmoved.

This isn't intended to discount the teacher's educational skills. Instead, the juxtaposition between the speaker and her peers simply suggests that the speaker's newfound love of poetry was unique and special, not something that necessarily happens to everyone. This, it seems, is probably why the teacher's death has affected the speaker so much, since the speaker felt so profoundly connected to her. In other words, the teacher showed the speaker something that not everyone understands (the joys of poetry), and this has stayed with the speaker for her entire life.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "The big trees outside are into their poker game again, / shuffling and dealing, turning, folding, their leaves / drifting down to the lawn, floating away, ace high, / on a breeze. You died yesterday."
- **Lines 8-10:** "reading a poem by Yeats / to the bored girls, except my heart stumbled and blushed / as it fell in love with the words"

APOSTROPHE

[Apostrophe](#) appears here and there throughout the poem, as the speaker periodically addresses her former teacher. The first time this happens is somewhat startling, since the speaker abruptly shifts from describing the trees outside her window to saying:

You died yesterday.

It's almost as if the speaker talks to the teacher in her head as a way of coping with this loss. This is something people often do when they lose loved ones, privately addressing them as a way of maintaining a sense of connection. It's a comforting thing to do, and it also helps the speaker go back in time, as if she's rehashing old memories while the teacher listens. "You sat on your desk, / swinging your legs, reading a poem by Yeats," the speaker remembers, again talking to the teacher as if she's listening.

The speaker also implies that the teacher once told her that the lessons they covered in class would last "for life." Now that the teacher has died, the speaker confirms that she was right about this, saying that the lessons were, "just as [the teacher] said, // for life." The speaker thus shows the teacher how meaningful her influence was—and though the teacher can't actually hear any of this, using apostrophe in this way clearly gives the speaker a sense of closure surrounding the teacher's death.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "You died yesterday."
- **Lines 7-8:** "You sat on your desk, / swinging your legs, reading a poem by Yeats"
- **Lines 12-14:** "We were truly there, / present, Miss, or later the smoke from your black cigarette / braided itself with lines from Keats."
- **Lines 16-17:** "the lessons, just as you said, / for life."

CONSONANCE

The [consonance](#) in "Death of a Teacher" draws attention to important words while adding musicality to the language. Consider, for example, the way the consonant /r/, /b/, and /l/ sounds work their way through lines 9 and 10:

to the bored girls, except my heart stumbled and
blushed
as it fell in love with the words [...]

The consonant /bl/ sound is particularly noticeable in the words "stumbled" and "blushed," calling readers' attention to the speaker's [personified](#) heart bumbling around as if drunk on its newfound love of language. The /r/ sound also emphasizes the phrase "bored girls," underlining the fact that the speaker's excitement about poetry is special and unique to her experience.

Elsewhere, consonance gives the words a pleasant sound that aligns with the speaker's fondness for poetic language, which she finds satisfying and beautiful. Lines 15 and 16, for example, feature the /l/ and /p/ sounds alongside the [sibilant](#) /s/, as the speaker says that teaching is:

[...] endless love; the poems by heart, spells, the lists
lovely on the learning tongue, the lessons, just as you
said,

The /l/ sound runs throughout these lines, appearing close together in phrases like "endless love." This emphasizes the idea that teaching is like a gift that will last forever. On an even more basic level, the repetition of the /l/ just sounds good. And this pleasant sound helps the speaker convey her love of poetry, since listening to poetic language makes her heart "stumble[]" and blush[]." By using consonance to make the poem sound satisfying, then, the speaker helps readers understand why, exactly, she fell head over heels for poetry in the first place.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Line 3
- Line 4

- Line 5
- Line 6
- Line 7
- Line 8
- Line 9
- Line 10
- Line 11
- Line 12
- Line 13
- Line 14
- Line 15
- Line 16
- Line 17
- Line 18

ALLITERATION

Like [consonance](#), [alliteration](#) makes the poem's language sound pleasant and musical. This makes it easier to understand why the speaker fell in love with poetry as a 13-year-old student. Take, for example, lines 15 through 17, in which the speaker alliterates the /l/ sound while talking about how satisfying it was to memorize poems in the teacher's class:

[...] the poems by heart, spells, the lists
lovely on the learning tongue, the lessons, just as you
said
for life. [...]

The alliteration in the phrase "lovely on the learning tongue" is particularly strong, spotlighting the words "lovely" and "learning"—two words that call attention to just how much the speaker enjoyed learning about poetry. This use of alliteration also simply lends a musical quality to the language, illustrating that poetry often entices people like the speaker with its lush sounds.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "drifting down"
- **Line 4:** "You," "yesterday"
- **Line 5:** "heard," "hour – home," "last"
- **Line 6:** "late"
- **Line 7:** "three," "thirteen"
- **Line 10:** "with," "words"
- **Line 11:** "hands, heard"
- **Line 13:** "smoke," "cigarette"
- **Lines 15-16:** "lists / lovely"
- **Line 16:** "learning," "lessons"
- **Line 17:** "life," "gambling," "gold," "burns"
- **Line 18:** "page," "book," "precious"

ASSONANCE

The [assonance](#) in "Death of a Teacher" functions similarly to the poem's [consonance](#) and [alliteration](#), at least insofar as it calls attention to important words and adds a pleasant sound to the language. For example, the assonant /uh/ sound highlights three critical words in lines 9 and 10:

[...] except my heart stumbled and blushed
as it fell in love with the words [...]

The assonance here places emphasis on the words "stumbled," "blushed," and "love," spotlighting the idea that listening to poetry made the speaker feel overcome by a romantic passion—a passion that caused her heart to skip as it "fell in love with the words."

The speaker's use of assonance also simply makes the poem sound good, adding, for example, a faint musicality to the last line: note the long /ay/ sounds in "page" and "waiting." This gives the poem's final moment a satisfying feel that stays with readers. This use of assonance helps readers understand what it feels like to get swept up in the sounds of poetry itself.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "dealing," "leaves"
- **Line 3:** "away, ace"
- **Line 6:** "my eyes"
- **Line 7:** "three," "back," "thirteen," "sat"
- **Line 9:** "stumbled," "blushed"
- **Line 10:** "love"
- **Line 11:** "heard," "bird"
- **Line 12:** "scribble itself," "air," "there"
- **Line 14:** "Keats. Teaching"
- **Line 16:** "lovely," "tongue"
- **Line 18:** "page," "waiting"

SIBILANCE

[Sibilance](#) works a lot like [consonance](#) in "Death of a Teacher," highlighting certain words while also adding a general sense of musicality to the language. However, true sibilance doesn't *really* appear until the speaker fully loses herself in the memory of sitting in the teacher's classroom, saying:

[...] You sat on your desk,
swinging your legs, reading a poem by Yeats
to the bored girls, except my heart stumbled and
blushed

This sibilance infuses this memory with a pleasant, soothing sound that is quite satisfying to the ear. And this, in turn, helps convey the speaker's fondness for this memory.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** “sat,” “desk”
- **Line 8:** “swinging,” “Yeats”
- **Line 9:** “except,” “stumbled”
- **Line 11:** “scratched,” “desk”
- **Line 12:** “outside scribble itself”
- **Line 13:** “Miss,” “smoke,” “cigarette”
- **Line 14:** “itself,” “Keats”
- **Line 15:** “endless,” “spells,” “lists”
- **Line 16:** “lessons,” “just,” “said”

ENJAMBMENT

The [enjambment](#) in "Death of a Teacher" gives the poem a sense of forward momentum, especially when the speaker extends a phrase over a stanza break. For example, there's a moment of suspension between the first two [couplets](#), when the speaker enjambes line 2 so that it carries over to line 3:

shuffling and dealing, turning, folding, their leaves
drifting down to the lawn, floating away, ace high,

It's appropriate that the phrase "their leaves // drifting down to the lawn" is enjambed, since it describes the act of falling; in the same way that the leaves "drift[]" to the ground, this moment almost makes readers feel like they're falling through the poem.

A similar thing happens in lines 14 and 15, when the speaker once again uses enjambment to draw readers through the poem:

[...] Teaching
is endless love; [...]

This not only pulls readers from one stanza to the next, but also isolates the word "teaching" and inserts a brief moment of anticipation, as readers wait to learn what, exactly, the speaker is about to say. It's all the more noticeable, then, when the speaker finishes the sentence by saying "is endless love," calling attention to the idea that teaching is a caring gesture and a gift that keeps on giving. Enjambment therefore not only impacts the overall pace of the poem, but also helps the speaker emphasize certain ideas.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** “leaves / drifting”
- **Lines 8-9:** “Yeats / to”
- **Lines 9-10:** “blushed / as”
- **Lines 10-11:** “tree / in”
- **Lines 11-12:** “bird / in”
- **Lines 13-14:** “cigarette / braided”
- **Lines 14-15:** “Teaching / is”

- **Lines 15-16:** “lists / lovely”

CAESURA

There are a number of [caesuras](#) in "Death of a Teacher," all of which help the speaker control the pacing of the language. Take the bold caesura in line 4:

on a breeze. || You died yesterday.

The previous sentence, in which the speaker playfully described the way that leaves fall from the trees, ends in the middle of this line, and the speaker's seeming joy ends with it. The phrase that follows the full stop—"You died yesterday"—is extremely matter-of-fact and blunt, almost shocking readers with its unflinching recognition of the teacher's death. The fact that the line is [end-stopped](#) also emphasizes this meaningful sentence, since "You died yesterday" is isolated between the caesura and the end-stop. This makes the phrase impossible to ignore, perhaps reflecting the fact that the speaker can't distract herself from thinking about her beloved teacher's death.

More generally, caesuras simply break up the language and, in doing so, give the poem a casual, contemplative overall feel; the speaker's memories flow naturally down the page, one leading to the next. Take, for instance, the two caesuras in line 16, in which the speaker reminisces about how enjoyable it was to memorize poems in the teacher's class:

lovely on the learning tongue, || the lessons, || just as
you said,
for life. [...]

These caesuras slow down the language as the speaker adds more detail to her own recollections.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “dealing, turning,” “folding,” “, their”
- **Line 3:** “lawn, floating,” “away, ace”
- **Line 4:** “breeze. You”
- **Line 5:** “hour – home,” “time, last”
- **Line 6:** “afternoon – I,” “eyes. English,” “, of”
- **Line 7:** “back, and,” “thirteen. You”
- **Line 8:** “legs, reading”
- **Line 9:** “girls, except”
- **Line 11:** “hands, heard”
- **Line 12:** “air. We”
- **Line 13:** “present, Miss,” “, or”
- **Line 14:** “Keats. Teaching”
- **Line 15:** “love; the,” “heart, spells,” “, the”
- **Line 16:** “tongue, the,” “lessons, just”
- **Line 17:** “life. Under,” “trees, the”

- **Line 18:** "book, precious," "waiting"

ALLUSION

The speaker [alludes](#) to two famous poets in "Death of a Teacher." First, she mentions the Irish poet [William Butler Yeats](#), remembering that the teacher read "a poem by Yeats / to the bored girls" all those years ago. Yeats is considered one of the most famous poets of the late-19th and early-20th century and won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1923.

Later, the speaker alludes to [John Keats](#), one of the most famous [Romantic](#) poets (alongside people like [William Wordsworth](#), [Samuel Taylor Coleridge](#), and [Percy Bysshe Shelley](#)). Although he's one of the best-known poets of the Romantic period, Keats died at the age of 25, meaning that he made an enormous impact on the trajectory of literature in just a handful of years.

It makes sense that the speaker would name-drop these poets, since their work is usually at the center of any literary education; they are, in other words, very popular poets to study! The fact that the speaker only calls them by their last names (without mentioning their first names) suggests a sense of familiarity, as if she's used to talking about them. The casual nature of these allusions therefore illustrates just how much the teacher's lessons impacted the speaker—so much, it seems, that she has become well acquainted with the poets she first encountered in the teacher's class.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "reading a poem by Yeats"
- **Line 14:** "lines from Keats"



VOCABULARY

Shuffling (Line 2) - Mixing up playing cards so that they're in random order. In this context, "shuffling" is used as a subtle [pun](#), since it also describes the gentle movement of leaves on the tree outside the speaker's window.

Dealing (Line 2) - In poker, to "deal" is to distribute cards to the players. To the speaker, the falling leaves look like they're playing a poker game.

Folding (Line 2) - In poker, to "fold" is to withdraw from a hand. The word is a subtle [pun](#) in this context, since the speaker also uses it to describe the leaves on the tree outside her window, suggesting that, as they die, they crease onto themselves.

Ace High (Line 3) - A term used in card games to clarify that the ace counts as the highest value in the card deck.

Yeats (Line 8) - [William Butler Yeats](#), an Irish poet who published some of the most famous poetry to come out of the

late-19th and early-20th centuries.

Oak (Lines 11-12) - A kind of tree.

Braided (Lines 13-14) - Twisted and intertwined.

Keats (Line 14) - The Romantic poet [John Keats](#).

Spells (Line 15) - In this context, "spells" likely refers to magical enchantments.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Death of a Teacher" is an 18-line poem divided into nine couplets. These [couplets](#) give the poem a sense of structure even though it's written in [free verse](#), making the speaker's words come across as somewhat controlled and evenly paced.

At the same time, the speaker occasionally uses [enjambment](#) to extend phrases over stanza breaks. Take lines 14 and 15 when she says:

[...] Teaching
is endless love; [...]

This creates a rush of momentum, and keeps the poem from feeling overly rigid or strict. In other words, couplets help the speaker organize her thoughts, but those thoughts themselves aren't constrained by the poem's form.

The speaker also uses a framing technique in which the [imagery](#) at the beginning of the poem comes back at the very end. This gives readers the sense that they've gone on a journey of sorts with the speaker, since the middle of the poem plunges into her past while the beginning and end are both set in the present.

METER

"Death of a Teacher" is written in [free verse](#), meaning it doesn't follow a set [meter](#) or [rhyme scheme](#). This keeps the poem feeling intimate and conversational, like readers are getting a peek directly into the speaker's mind. Free verse also mirrors the nature of memory, which may flow unbidden and lead people to unexpected places.

Free verse allows the speaker to play with rhythm in striking ways as well. Take lines 3 and 4:

drifting down to the lawn, floating away, ace high,
on a breeze. You died yesterday.

In comparison to line 3 (which is relatively long), line 4 feels quite short. This shift emphasizes the blunt statement "You died yesterday," which rings out all the more powerfully because the line stops short. This, in turn, helps to spotlight the [juxtaposition](#) between the speaker's seemingly casual remarks about the trees and the much more serious, somber

statement about the teacher's death. The fact that line 4 is unexpectedly short thus hints at the same feeling of shock that people feel when they first learn about a loved one's death.

By contrast, the poem's longest lines come in the final [couplet](#), when the speaker stops thinking about the past and, returning to the present, looks at a book whose "precious" pages are just "waiting to be turned." Whereas the speaker used short, declarative sentences when talking about the teacher's death, now she uses longer, more fluid lines when looking toward the future. In this way, free verse allows the speaker to control the pacing of the poem in ways that align with her state of mind.

RHYME SCHEME

As a poem written in [free verse](#), "Death of a Teacher" doesn't have a [rhyme scheme](#). As with the lack of meter, this keeps the poem feeling loose, free-flowing, and unfussy. The poem is casual and relatable—which, in turn, becomes a sort of meta-commentary on poetry itself. For the speaker, it seems, poetry doesn't have to follow a strict pattern to be meaningful. The speaker's love for poetry is deep and all-encompassing—not something that can be boxed in by arbitrary rules or patterns.



SPEAKER

Carol Ann Duffy wrote "Death of a Teacher" after her beloved former English teacher died. It's reasonable, then, to conclude that the poem's speaker is Duffy herself, a well-known British poet.

Even without this knowledge, though, it's clear that the speaker is somebody who loves poetry and cherishes the value of education, seeing it as a gift that lasts "for life." The poem centers around the speaker's discovery that her childhood English teacher has died—news that prompts her to recall the experience of falling in love with poetry while sitting in the teacher's classroom. And though it's clear she will miss the teacher, it's *also* clear that the teacher will live on in memory, especially since the speaker can still turn to the poetry her teacher taught her to love.



SETTING

The poem begins and ends in what is most likely the speaker's house, as the speaker herself looks out the window and listens to trees rustling in the wind and watches them dropping their leaves. This is a pretty common setting that isn't necessarily specific to a particular country or time period, but because "Death of a Teacher" is considered an autobiographical poem, it's reasonable to assume that it takes place in England (where Duffy lives) in contemporary times. The speaker's memories, though, are set in a schoolroom, perhaps in the late 1960s, which is when Duffy would have been 13 (back when it was

acceptable for English teachers to smoke cigarettes in class!).



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Carol Ann Duffy published "Death of a Teacher" in her collection *New Selected Poems 1984-2004*. It's generally seen as an autobiographical poem, since Duffy has spoken publicly about how her teacher showed her the joys and wonders of poetry (which is, of course, the memory that the speaker recounts in "Death of a Teacher"). In fact, the poem itself is a eulogy of sorts for this very same teacher, since Duffy appears to have written it in the aftermath of the teacher's death.

Carol Ann Duffy is one of the most famous contemporary poets in the United Kingdom. Having served as the UK's Poet Laureate from 2009 to 2019 (as the first woman *and* the first openly LGBTQ+ person to hold the position), she has had a remarkable impact on contemporary poetry. Tackling a wide range of topics in, she writes in accessible language, often using [free verse](#) to give her poems a casual, but still quite poetic, sound.

Of course, Duffy isn't the first poet to write about learning poetry or about school in general. There are many poems about these topics, including "[Introduction to Poetry](#)" by Billy Collins, "[Theme for English B](#)" by Langston Hughes, or "[The Hand](#)" by Mary Ruefle. However, "Death of a Teacher" is unique in that it is first and foremost a celebration of a specific teacher and, through this celebration, a testament to the lasting impact teachers can have on their students—something that aligns with Duffy's own experience of benefitting from a great poetry teacher.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The poem was published in 2004, but it doesn't really engage with any historical events of that era. Instead, the majority of the poem takes place in the speaker's memory, as she recalls what it was like to be in school in the 1960s and '70s. Just like many other countries during this period, England—where Duffy spent the majority of her childhood—underwent a number of social revolutions in the late '60s and early '70s, as people called for peace, love, and freedom in all aspects of daily life.

The counter-cultural movement of the '60s and '70s also led to a renewed interest in artistic expression, as people saw art as a way to bring about change and progress. Music, art, and literature took off during this period, with bands pioneering pop music and poets breaking away from the serious, high-brow nature of Modernist poetry.

It's possible that these cultural shifts affected Duffy as a student, since she took an active interest in writing during this time and was encouraged by her teachers to pursue her talents in poetry. "Death of a Teacher" is actually about her own

experience of falling in love with the written word. Her English teacher, June Scriven, even encouraged her to submit poems to a publisher when she was just 15 years old—poems that were accepted and subsequently published, marking the beginning of her long and fruitful career.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Duffy's Biography](#) — For more information about Carol Ann Duffy, check out this brief overview of her life and work. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/carol-ann-duffy>)
- [The Poker Turn](#) — A brief explanation of what it means to "turn" in poker (a term the speaker uses in the poem's first stanza). (<https://www.dummies.com/games/card-games/flop-turn-river-cards-texas-holdem/>)
- [John Keats](#) — A look at the life of John Keats—another famous poet that the speaker mentions in "Death of a Teacher." (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/john-keats>)
- [Duffy on Poetry and Education](#) — An interesting read on Carol Ann Duffy's attempt to get young people interested in poetry, including some background information about her own literary education. (<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2011/sep/05/carol-ann-duffy-poetry-texting-competition>)
- [William Butler Yeats](#) — A short biography of William Butler Yeats, whom the speaker mentions in "Death of a Teacher."

(<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-butler-yeats>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER CAROL ANN DUFFY POEMS

- [Before You Were Mine](#)
- [Education For Leisure](#)
- [In Mrs Tilscher's Class](#)
- [Little Red Cap](#)
- [Medusa](#)
- [Mrs Midas](#)
- [Originally](#)
- [Prayer](#)
- [Valentine](#)
- [Warming Her Pearls](#)
- [War Photographer](#)
- [We Remember Your Childhood Well](#)



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