

Gretel in Darkness



SUMMARY

We're living in the world we hoped for. All the people who wanted to kill us are dead themselves. At night, I can still hear the witch's screams coming through a windowpane made of sugar. God blesses us. I see the witch's tongue as it withers and evaporates in the oven...

Now, far away from any women or even the mere memory of women, in our father's little house, we can rest and are well fed. So why can't I forget what happened? My father locks the door and keeps danger away, and it's been years since my experience with the witch.

Nobody else remembers what happened. Even you, Hansel, look at me on summer afternoons as if you're going to leave me, as if none of the terrible things that happened to us ever happened. But I murdered the witch to save you. I can see menacing trees, and the towers of the shining oven...

At night, I reach out to you, Hansel, for a hug, but you aren't there. Am I the only one dealing with this? I hear spies whispering in the quiet, Hansel; we're still in the witch's cottage, and the dark forest and the terrible fire are real.

Gretel's predicament is made even worse by her family's failure or refusal to understand what she's going through. Hansel seems to have willfully forgotten what happened in the witch's cottage—perhaps because he wasn't the one who pushed the witch into the oven. Gretel feels his forgetfulness as an abandonment. He's leaving her all alone with her memories, which remain vivid and physical: she remembers the witch's burning kiln and the dark forest in threatening detail, even imagining the trees "armed" like soldiers. This suggests her trauma is exacerbated by her inability to work through it, or even discuss it, with anyone else.

When Gretel wonders, "Am I alone?" her question is at once poignant and threatening. She is alone in the sense that she's been abandoned by Hansel; she's not alone in the sense that she feels the vengeful presence of the person she's killed, hovering around her like a host of "spies." Guilt is thus part of the equation here too; though Gretel killed the witch in order to save herself and Hansel, she still feels terrible guilt and responsibility for having committed murder.

Gretel wants to reach out for real comfort but can't find any. In her mind and in her heart, she's still right back in the moment of her trauma, which can't be dispelled by simply pretending it's not there. The gruesome fire and the dark forest remain more real to her than all of the efforts her family have made to deny these memories or shut them out.



THEMES



THE PERSISTENCE OF TRAUMA

"Gretel in Darkness" complicates life after the happily-ever-after ending of a fairy tale. The poem's speaker, Gretel (of the fairy tale "Hansel and Gretel") is tormented by her memories of her ordeal in the witch's cottage, where she shoved the witch into a burning oven to save herself and Hansel from being devoured. As Gretel grapples with a terrible reality, the poem implies that just because a horrific trauma is in the past doesn't mean it's gone.

In the first stanzas, Gretel lays out her situation: the witch is dead, she and her brother Hansel are safe, and they've gotten everything they hoped for. But right from the start, the reader gets the feeling that not all is well. Despite the fact that Gretel and Hansel are living in "the world we wanted," vivid images of the witch's grisly death shoot through that world like arrows.

Reflecting on her new circumstances, Gretel realizes that though her father has made a protected, fortified home for them, nothing seems truly safe there. Gretel and Hansel have been removed from immediate danger, yet even in this stark, isolated safety, Gretel can't just forget and move on from the terrible things that have happened to her. The trauma of her experience in the forest has left her in a constant state of fear.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24



MISOGYNY AND REPRESSION

Claiming they're trying to protect Gretel, the men of "Gretel in Darkness" ignore and deny her pain. In doing so, they also reject Gretel herself in a deeper and more insidious way, failing to recognize that she, like the witches and the evil stepmothers they intend to protect her from, is a woman—complicated, self-aware, and, indeed, capable of harm. The poem implicitly critiques the sexism that underlies paternalistic concern for women, subtly revealing how such efforts are often rooted in misogyny and a denial of women's full humanity.

Gretel's father and brother attempt to lock danger and pain out of his house, but in doing so they also lock out Gretel's emotional reality. Their motivations, then, have more to do with fear than kindness. There's thus a double meaning in Gretel's observation that her father "bars harm from this house": he's trying to protect her physically, but he's also refusing to see or hear that Gretel is traumatized.

Gretel also remarks that she and Hansel are safe from “women’s arms” in this house. The women who endangered her are her evil stepmother and the witch—but she, of course, is also a woman. In keeping out dangerous female influence, Gretel’s father is also keeping out a big part of Gretel herself: the tormented part of her that needs to come to terms with having committed murder—of one of the only other women she’s known, no less.

Gretel is thus alone in a world where all women are perceived as dangerous. Indeed, the poem doesn’t say that Gretel is now far from the “witch” or “wicked step mother”; it uses the blanket “women.” This reads like a rejection of women—their embrace and even their “memory”—altogether, and by default a rejection of Gretel herself.

Hansel, meanwhile, is deep in denial of everything that he and Gretel went through. The poem associates him with “summer days” and daylight; he withdraws from and refuses the “darkness” that Gretel suffers in, even though she’s traumatized because she was trying to save his life. Hansel and his father thus force Gretel to carry the burden of pain all by herself, under the guise of chivalrously caring for her. Guilt and rage are passed down from woman to woman, the poem suggests, and can’t be relieved so long as they are denied and ignored by men.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

*This is the ...
... are dead.*

Before diving in, a quick recap of “Hansel and Gretel,” the Grimm fairy tale that the poem is playing with: Hansel and Gretel live with their poor woodcutter father and stepmother. Insisting that the children are too costly to feed, the stepmother convinces the woodcutter to abandon them in the forest. Later, lost and hungry, the siblings come across a house made of gingerbread and other sweets. They’re lured inside and then imprisoned by the owner of the house, a witch who intends to fatten Hansel up and eat him. Before she can follow through on this wicked plan, however, Gretel outwits the witch and pushes her into a fiery oven. The witch burns up, the stepmother randomly dies, and Hansel and Gretel live happily ever after.

Like many fairy tales, it’s a dark story when you really think about it—filled with poverty, child abuse, cannibalism, and horrific death via oven. “Gretel in Darkness” latches onto this, well, darkness, and opens with unease. “This is the world we

wanted,” full stop, could be the beginning of a poem about fulfilled wishes—a happily-ever-after poem. But already the reader has a sense that this wanted world isn’t all it was cracked up to be.

Part of the clue is in the past tense: the world “we wanted” is not the same as the world “we want.” Another hint is in the use of the [end-stopped line](#), which brings the thought to a swift, dull close. It’s worth remembering the title of the poem, too: the reader knows that the speaker is the Gretel of fairy tale fame. “Darkness” doesn’t seem to be suiting her.

The unease of this first line only deepens in lines 2 and 3, where Gretel elaborates on the nature of this wanted world she lives in. “All who would have seen us dead / are dead” is hardly a joyful celebration of life: Gretel’s world is permeated with death, and it seems it’s kill or be killed here. The [enjambment](#) of this sentence drives this point home. Line 2 could be the beginning of a very different kind of sentence, maybe “All who would have seen us dead... realized the error of their ways, apologized, and moved to a different forest!” But again, grim reality lands with a thump in line 3 with the repetition of the word “dead.” Enjambment and [diacope](#) set this unpleasant surprise up like a dark joke.

Speaking of set-ups: there’s a hint of menace in the strong [alliteration](#) on /w/ sounds here (“world we wanted”), which will come to a climax in the rest of line 3. All of those /w/ sounds build up to the arrival of a nasty character: the witch.

LINES 3-6

I hear the ...

.....

In one sense, the [caesura](#) in the middle of line 3 (in the form of a full stop after “dead”) marks a break between two different thoughts: Gretel’s description of the “world we wanted,” and the gruesome shrieks of the dying witch. But by keeping these two thoughts in the same line, separate but together, the caesura suggests the twisted difficulty of Gretel’s situation. While her enemies are all dead, she still hears the witch’s screams. Her use of the present tense here drives this point home. In one sense, the witch’s death is in the past; in another, it is right here in the “world we wanted” with her.

Gretel’s memory of the witch’s screams as she burned to death in her own oven is vivid and tangible. Those cries are strong enough to “break [...] through a sheet / of sugar,” to physically alter the world. That “sheet of sugar” is a memory of the witch’s candy cottage with its sugar-glass windows, but it’s also a [metaphor](#) for Gretel’s own emotional situation. The fragile sweetness of the world she finds herself in now can’t hold up in the face of those screams.

Gretel shows a flash of ink-black humor about this situation, as the reader sees at the point of another meaningful caesura midway through line 5. Gretel’s description of the witch’s cries

comes to an [ironic](#) climax: "God rewards," she remarks. Her ambivalence is clear here. If the life Gretel lives now is God's reward, it feels an awful lot like a punishment. Gretel's sense of having done something deeply wrong in killing the witch—a thing she had to do to survive, but still wishes had never happened—comes bleakly through in this line.

Line 6 gives the reader a sense of the movements of Gretel's thoughts. Unable to look away from her memories for more than a moment, she's forced back into imagining the witch's death. Her imagination is horrifically intimate: she can see the witch's tongue shriveling as if she were in the oven herself. It's a gruesome image, and it's also an ominous one: a gas, after all, escapes into the air. And the [sibilance](#) of these lines—"a sheet of sugar," "Her tongue shrivels to gas"—suggests the hissing as that gas diffuses through Gretel's agonized mind.

LINES 7-12

*Now, far from ...
... it is years.*

The continuing tension between the expected happily-ever-after world of a fairy tale and Gretel's reality is even sharper in the second stanza. Here, Gretel begins by describing her safety in terms of being far away from women. There's good reason for this: her evil stepmother abandoned her and Hansel to die in the woods, and the witch tried to devour them both.

But there's also unease, on more than one level. On the one hand, without women, Gretel lacks the care and comfort of a mother—the sort of love that culture associates strongly with femininity. On the other, Gretel herself is going to be a woman one day—and she has already committed a murder to save herself from these other murderous women. Gretel, guilt-ridden and terrified at once, feels herself as both a victim and a perpetrator of a dangerous chain of female violence.

She describes her new safety in her father's home in terms of physical rather than emotional safety. She and Hansel have all their bodily needs taken care of: they're well-fed and well-rested, and their father "bars the door." But there's a hint of further trouble in what Gretel's father expects this door-barring to do when Gretel goes on:

My father bars the door, bars harm
from this house [...]

The strong [asyndeton](#) and the echoing [diacope](#) here link door-barring and harm-barring, suggest that Gretel's father believes that locking the physical door is all one needs to do to stay safe—and also that he refuses to admit that harm might still be in the house anyway. In "barring harm," he also bars Gretel, whose suffering is still right there with her, no matter how many years it's been.

The reader can see the effect this familial denial has on Gretel in her struggle to understand why she's still suffering in the

aftermath of her trauma. Her painful question in line 10—"Why do I not forget?"—suggests that she's desperately *trying* to forget, as her father would wish her to. But of course, trying to forget is like trying not to think of an elephant: a self-defeating effort.

LINES 13-16

*No one remembers. ...
... it never happened.*

In this stanza, Glück's choice to use the fairy tale of "Hansel and Gretel" to explore trauma takes on special significance. The story is so well-known that it's hard to hear "Gretel" without thinking "Hansel"; the two characters are deeply bound in most readers' imaginations.

Within the story's world, Hansel is perhaps the person who should have the best chance of understanding what Gretel is going through. He's the one the witch was fattening up to eat, and it's for his sake that Gretel killed her; he has seen all the horrors Gretel has. Perhaps this is why Gretel, in this stanza, addresses Hansel in a direct [apostrophe](#), reaching out to him in her pain and confusion.

Hansel's denial is associated in these lines with "summer afternoons"—sunny, warm, broad-daylight times to be alive. These afternoons make him look at Gretel "as though / you meant to leave." In a sense, by participating fully in these summer afternoons and denying Gretel's suffering, Hansel has *already* left Gretel, who is, as the title says, "in Darkness." In fact, Hansel acts like their horrific experience in the woods "never happened" at all—a stark contrast from Gretel's ever-present trauma.

Gretel's pain registers in these lines' [enjambments](#), which break her thoughts into ragged, jolting gasps. It's if she were fighting for breath, or crying.

LINES 17-18

*But I killed ...
... that gleaming kiln—*

The ragged [enjambments](#) of the first half of the third stanza come to an end, and with another [caesura](#), Gretel makes another blunt statement: "But I killed for you." Again, as in line 3, the thought of death and murder throws Gretel back into an immediate, present-tense experience of her terror and guilt.

Here, it's not just the witch or the stepmother who mean Gretel harm, but the whole world. The trees of the forest where the witch's cottage stood are [personified](#), becoming "armed firs"—a line that suggests the trees have both weaponry and actual arms, grasping arms that might capture and hurt. (Those arms might also link back to the dangerous "women's arms" in line 7.) The [alliteration](#), [assonance](#), and [consonance](#) between "killed" and "kiln" also ties the witch's death and the instrument of her death closely together; Gretel can't think of

killing the witch without thinking about *how* she killed the witch.

In these lines, it's as if Gretel's imagination is a camera in a horror movie, slowly zooming in on the thing she really doesn't want to see. From the menacing armed forest, she's dragged toward the oven where she murdered the witch. Here, that oven has become as big as a building, boasting "spires" like a castle or a church—and it's "gleaming," glowing menacingly in the light of the fire inside it.

The shape of this stanza parallels the shape of the first stanza. Aside from the caesura that throws Gretel back into the awful memory, there's also a feeling of her trailing off into silence when the memory gets too horrific to speak. In the first stanza, there's an ellipsis as she falls silent after describing the witch's shrivelling tongue. Here, there's a sharper break at the dash that ends line 18.

The poem moves like Gretel's patterns of thought. Something triggers her, she's thrown right back into the immediacy of her memories, and then they get too awful for words. The sharper end of this stanza as compared to the first helps to evoke the downward spiral of this process. It's a vivid evocation of what it's like to have PTSD: Gretel's flashbacks repeat, the same every time and worse every time.

LINES 19-21

*Nights I turn ...
... Am I alone?*

During the night, Gretel says, she reaches out to Hansel, but he is not there. Here, just as Hansel was associated with daylight and summer, Gretel herself is associated with the darkness. Hansel is inaccessible in both the literal darkness of the night and the figurative darkness of Gretel's trauma. Her pain and guilt over what she had to do to rescue her brother [ironically](#) cuts her off from him. The [enjambment](#) between lines 19 and 20, splitting Gretel's reaching out for comfort from her discovery that her brother isn't there, reflects this feeling of separation:

[...] I turn to you to hold me
but you [...]

Gretel asks a second question in this stanza. Back in line 10, she wondered, "Why do I not forget?" Now she asks, "Am I alone?"

This poignant question is double-edged. It could be read as plaintive, directed at her withholding, remote family. But it could also be a fearful question. Here the poem uses another sharp caesura, separating "Am I alone?" from "Spies." Gretel is certainly alone emotionally. But, nightmarishly, she's certainly not alone in her head. She has the constant company of the murdered witch—and something more than the murdered witch, as the lines beginning with "Spies" will explore.

LINES 21-24

*Spies ...
... fire in earnest.*

Gretel is haunted not only by memories of the witch's grisly death, but by "spies," which, in a [sibilant](#) reminder of the shriveling tongue of line 6, "hiss in the stillness." Like the "armed firs," these spies feel like a [personification](#) of Gretel's own inner voices, accusing, malicious, desperate, and always watching.

The "stillness" these spies hiss in appears in a different form in line 23: "we are there **still**." This echo again returns to Gretel's feeling that her supposedly safe home is poisoned by her denied agony: the "stillness" of a secure night in the family hut is one syllable away from being in the witch's cottage "still." Both in the sense of silence (the trauma that Gretel isn't allowed to express) and motionlessness, stillness freezes Gretel in one tormented moment.

The chilling final lines of the poem weaves a net of sounds that emphasize Gretel's paralysis and terror:

we are there **still** and it is **real, real**,
that black **forest** and the fire in **earnest**.

These lines are dense with repeating sounds: not only the echo of "still" from line 22, but the [epizeuxis](#) of "real, real," the [alliteration](#) of "forest" and "fire," and the [sibilance](#) and [consonance](#) on /s/ and /t/ sounds. The "fire in earnest" is an especially potent line. Gretel insists on the reality of her experience, and in doing so also hints again at the ugly specifics of the murder she can't forget. "Fire in earnest" sounds almost like "fiery furnace"—a common term for Hell taken from an Old Testament story. Gretel is in the "fire in earnest" as much as the witch: she's trapped in an inner Hell as the witch was thrown into a real fiery furnace.



SYMBOLS



THE WITCH

In fairy tales (and culture more generally), women are often associated with love, nurturing, gentleness, and beauty—which is often why the villains in fairy tales are wicked witches and stepmothers; their coldness and cruelty is meant to be a chilling subversion of traditional femininity. Witches thus often [symbolize](#) anxiety about femininity and motherhood, and the same is true in this poem. What could be creepier than a good, kind, sweet, beautiful person who turns out to be secretly murderous? A witch who lives in a tempting candy cottage is an especially potent symbol here: sweetness literally conceals malice in the story of "Hansel and Gretel."

The fairy-tale witch in this story also has an unspoken twin: the stepmother who originally insisted that Hansel and Gretel

should be thrown out into the woods and left to starve. The witch is left to take on the full symbolic anxiety that these two women represent, an anxiety surrounding female power and its corruption.

Gretel, the one surviving woman in this story, is left to deal with that power on her own. After all, she, too, has proven herself cunning and capable. She, too, has committed murder—a killing of necessity, but clearly an act that weighs on her conscience nonetheless. Perhaps this is because it suggests some shared trait between herself and the women who failed her, and perhaps because it has revealed her own darkness. In killing the witch Gretel has taken on immense guilt and trauma; on a symbolic level, this might suggest the way that such suffering is passed from one woman to the next in a world that denies their power and humanity.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "I hear the witch's cry"
- **Line 6:** "Her tongue shrivels into gas . . ."



FIRE

Fire plays a complicated [symbolic](#) role in "Gretel in Darkness." Fire saved Gretel and Hansel from the witch, but fire is also a major image of Gretel's own torment. Her memory keeps taking her back to the hideous sight and sound of the witch burning to death; the "fire in earnest" closes the poem, reiterating the continued [metaphorical](#) burning in Gretel's mind.

Fire's ability to burn, consume, and transform is thus symbolic of the suffering at the heart of the poem. It's as if Gretel is burned up by her trauma as the witch was burned up in the literal flames of the oven. The fact that the witch died in her own oven—the oven in which she would have cooked Hansel—is also symbolically relevant here. Gretel, in burning the witch, also metaphorically puts *herself* into her own oven—burning up her innocence, her peace of mind, and replacing it with suffering.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "Her tongue shrivels into gas . . ."
- **Line 18:** "the spires of that gleaming kiln—"
- **Line 24:** "that black forest and the fire in earnest."



LOCKED DOORS

The locked door of Gretel's family's hut is, in theory, a way of keeping safe. But the danger that Gretel faces can't be locked out by a physical door—and the locking may even be doing more harm than good.

Unfortunately for Gretel, her male family members seem to

believe in both literally and [symbolically](#) barring doors. The barred door of the hut is *also* the barred door of their memories and their sympathy—their way of locking up the capacity for empathy and comfort. Hansel and the father have shut out the whole incident with the stepmother and the witch; in doing so, they're also locking out Gretel, who can't banish her own experience to oblivion and thus is forever separated from her family.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-12:** "bars the door, bars harm / from this house,"



NIGHT AND DARKNESS

As the poem's title would suggest, darkness is important here. It [symbolizes](#) the weight of Gretel's trauma and guilt, which envelop her "years" after the incident with the witch. Notice how the "witch's cry" comes through "the moonlight"—that is, at night. Gretel also turns to her brother at night for comfort, for this is when the traumatic memories come through the most sharply.

If darkness represents Gretel's ongoing trauma, then it makes sense that Hansel is associated with "summer afternoons." Hansel seems to have totally moved on from what happened, and thus is free of the symbolic darkness that surrounds his sister. Thus when she wants comfort from him at night, he isn't there; she must wade through her darkness, her pain, alone.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "I hear the witch's cry / break in the moonlight"
- **Lines 13-15:** "Even you, my brother, / summer afternoons you look at me as though / you meant to leave,"
- **Lines 19-20:** "Nights I turn to you to hold me / but you are not there."



POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

"Gretel in Darkness" is as dense with [alliteration](#) as a forest with trees. In this poem of terror and trauma, that alliteration helps to evoke Gretel's claustrophobia. Walls of matched sounds spring up around her, trapping her in her terrible memories.

The alliteration here often points out associations between words, drawing Gretel's mind helplessly back to her horrific experience in the witch's cottage. In the third stanza, for instance, alliteration on the /k/ sounds of "killed" and "kiln" lead

Gretel back to the fact, never directly stated in the poem, that she killed the witch by burning her alive in her own oven. (See the entry on [assonance](#) for more on these linked words.)

Similarly, the /f/ sounds in "far from," "father," and "forget" in the second stanza emphasize Gretel's dilemma: though her father wants her to believe that she's far from all harm, she still can't forget what happened, and the alliterative link between these words helps to suggest Gretel's difficulty in fitting her father's reality together with her own deeply-felt experience of the world.

Back in the first and second stanzas, alliteration on /w/ sounds draws a sinister connection between "women" and "witch"—a connection that ties Gretel herself into a legacy of female murderousness. Those /w/ sounds also spring up densely in the very first lines, so that the "world we wanted" and "all who would have seen us dead" are linked to these dangerous witch-women. The linkage of sounds here supports Gretel's feeling that, though the external danger is apparently gone, the internal danger is as present and real as ever. Escape, it turns out, isn't so easy.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "world we wanted"
- **Line 2:** "would"
- **Line 3:** "witch's"
- **Line 4:** "sheet"
- **Line 5:** "sugar," "God"
- **Line 6:** "shrivels," "gas"
- **Line 7:** "far," "from," "women's"
- **Line 8:** "women," "father's," "hut"
- **Line 9:** "we," "hungry"
- **Line 10:** "Why," "forget"
- **Line 11:** "father," "harm"
- **Line 12:** "house"
- **Line 14:** "look"
- **Line 15:** "leave"
- **Line 17:** "killed"
- **Line 18:** "kiln"
- **Line 19:** "Nights"
- **Line 20:** "not"
- **Line 21:** "Spies"
- **Line 22:** "stillness"
- **Line 23:** "still"
- **Line 24:** "forest," "fire"

ALLUSION

"Gretel in Darkness" is set in the world of "Hansel and Gretel," and rather than retelling that story, it [alludes](#) to it over and over. To understand "Gretel in Darkness," readers need to know their fairy tales.

In order to fully grasp the poem, the reader must know that

Hansel and Gretel's stepmother abandons them in the woods, believing them too costly to feed; that they find a gingerbread cottage there, and start to eat it; that that cottage is inhabited by a terrible witch, who captures them, forces Gretel to work as her servant, and starts fattening Hansel up to devour him; and that Gretel defeats the witch by shoving her into her own wood stove, where she burns to death.

In writing this poem, Louise Glück knew she could call upon a shared frame of cultural reference. If the reader grew up in the world Glück grew up in, they almost certainly know this story and recognize what the poem is referencing with lines about witches, windows made of sugar, burning tongues, forests, and hunger.

Glück's use of allusion in this poem suggests that Gretel's experiences might be just as widespread as a fairy tale, and that the American fondness for "fairy-tale endings" is delusional. Just as everyone knows the story of "Hansel and Gretel", everyone knows—or perhaps *is*—a Gretel, grappling with traumas that the world doesn't want to acknowledge.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-5:** "I hear the witch's cry / break in the moonlight through a sheet / of sugar:"
- **Line 6:** "Her tongue shrivels into gas . . ."
- **Lines 7-9:** "Now, far from women's arms / and memory of women, in our father's hut / we sleep, are never hungry."
- **Line 13:** "Even you, my brother,"
- **Lines 17-18:** "But I killed for you. I see armed firs, / the spires of that gleaming kiln—"
- **Lines 21-24:** "Spies / hiss in the stillness, Hansel, / we are there still and it is real, real, / that black forest and the fire in earnest."

APOSTROPHE

"Gretel in Darkness" is one long [apostrophe](#), an address to a brother who isn't willing to listen. The "you" of this poem is Hansel, and the "we" is Hansel and Gretel together. A big part of the speaker's pain is her sense that she's split off from the brother who went through this terrible experience with her. No reader who knows their fairy tales could hear the name "Gretel" without thinking "Hansel"—but here, trauma splits Hansel and Gretel apart.

In addressing Hansel, the Gretel of this poem reaches out for understanding that just isn't forthcoming. Direct apostrophe doesn't appear until the third and fourth [stanzas](#) of the poem, after Gretel has described her own unease and her feeling of being pursued by her horrible memories, even in the supposed security of her home. When she finally turns to Hansel, it's with disbelief: "Even you," she says, with the implication being: *Even you, the person who went through everything I went through, seem*

to be tired of my suffering, and to want to believe that nothing bad happened. Gretel underlines her sense of betrayal with a blunt, accusing sentence in line 17: "But I killed for you."

Gretel's apostrophe to Hansel makes it clear that trauma has cut Gretel off from all that she once loved and trusted. Even the brother whose life she saved refuses to meet her in her continuing pain.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-17:** "Even you, my brother, / summer afternoons you look at me as though / you meant to leave, / as though it never happened. / But I killed for you."
- **Lines 19-23:** "Nights I turn to you to hold me / but you are not there. / Am I alone? Spies / hiss in the stillness, Hansel, / we are there still "

ASSONANCE

[Assonance](#), like [alliteration](#), is a very common poetic device, and it can serve very different purposes depending on what poem it's in. A lot of the time, assonance is [euphonious](#)—that is, it just sounds good. But in this uneasy poem, the sound-linkages that assonance provides work in rather the same way as the dead witch's candy cottage. The patterns of vowel sounds here form an even, pleasant surface, beneath which horrors lurk.

The reader might notice this effect in the third stanza, where assonance weaves related images together. There's assonance between the /uh/ sounds of "brother" and "summer," connecting the seemingly untroubled Hansel to sunny days and warmth—a landscape that Gretel, who is, as the title of the poem reminds us, "in Darkness," can't find her way into. Later in this same stanza, "killed" and "kiln" are likewise linked, and in fact linked even more strongly: these words aren't just assonant on short /ih/ sounds, they're alliterative and [consonant](#), too. The sounds associated with Gretel's murder of the witch weave together tight as a net.

Those /ih/ sounds turn up again in some of the most chilling moments of the last stanza. Here, "hiss," "stillness," and "still" link up not only through assonance, but through sinister [sibilance](#). All that Gretel can hear pulls her back into her traumatic memories.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "moonlight," "through"
- **Line 7:** "far," "arms"
- **Line 8:** "women," "in," "father's," "hut"
- **Line 9:** "are," "hungry"
- **Line 10:** "Why," "I"
- **Line 11:** "father," "bars," "bars," "harm"
- **Line 13:** "brother"

- **Line 14:** "summer," "me"
- **Line 15:** "leave"
- **Line 17:** "killed"
- **Line 18:** "gleaming," "kiln"
- **Line 22:** "hiss," "stillness"
- **Line 23:** "still," "it is"

CAESURA

[Caesura](#) turns up frequently in this poem, and it helps both to create an anxious mood and to set up jarring, uncanny [juxtapositions](#).

Caesuras like the ones that break up lines 3 ("are dead [...] cry"), 5 ("of sugar [...] rewards."), and 17 ("But I killed [...] fir,") are rhythmically startling, giving the reader a sense that Gretel's mind is flitting from one horrible memory to another, unable to rest.

In the first stanza, these caesuras also provide some dark [irony](#). If the idea that "All who would have seen us dead / are dead" is meant to be comforting, that comfort is speedily undermined by the caesura in line 3. "All who would have seen us dead / are dead. I hear the witch's cry" takes readers straight from the illusory reassurance of defeated enemies to the immediate presence of the witch. Just because she's dead doesn't mean Gretel can't hear her screams. The caesura in line 5 has a similar effect. That break at the colon between the witch's screams and the bitterly ironic "God rewards" produces a shivery shock.

The caesuras of the final stanza have similarly shocking effects. Take a look at the last few lines:

Am I alone? Spies
Hiss in the stillness, Hansel,
we are there still and it is real, real,

The leap between "am I alone?" and "Spies" might make the reader imagine Gretel jolting with fear, looking around for invisible enemies. Meanwhile, the caesura in "real, real" (also an example of [epizeuxis](#)) sounds more like a wail of despair.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "dead. I"
- **Line 5:** "sugar: God"
- **Line 7:** "Now, far "
- **Line 8:** "women, in"
- **Line 9:** "sleep, are"
- **Line 11:** "door, bars"
- **Line 12:** "house, and"
- **Line 13:** "remembers. Even you, my"
- **Line 17:** "you. I"
- **Line 21:** "alone? Spies"

- **Line 22:** "stillness, Hansel"
- **Line 23:** "real, real"

END-STOPPED LINE

The many [end-stopped lines](#) in "Gretel in Darkness" create a dead, flat, sinister mood—and, sometimes, a dark irony.

The very first line makes use of this emphatic technique. By introducing a poem about enduring psychological horror with "This is the world we wanted," full stop, the speaker crystallizes her dilemma. In theory, she's safe and well and has gotten her happily-ever-after; in reality, she lives in a nightmare. The flat weight of the period at the end of that sentence strengthens the mood of black humor.

Something similar is going on in line 5 with the end-stopped "God rewards." Here, the [irony](#) is even bleaker. God's reward, here, follows hard on the heels of the witch's awful shrieks, the memory of which Gretel is unable to escape. If this is a reward, it sounds an awful lot like a punishment.

End-stopped lines recur and recur throughout the poem, and reflect Gretel's misery. Just as these lines end with the flat thud of a period, Gretel's efforts to imagine a way out of her pain—through sharing it with her brother, for instance—all come to nothing. The end-stops are like the walls of a prison she can't escape.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "wanted."
- **Line 5:** "rewards."
- **Line 6:** "gas..."
- **Line 9:** "hungry."
- **Line 10:** "forget?"
- **Line 12:** "years."
- **Line 13:** "brother,"
- **Line 15:** "leave,"
- **Line 16:** "happened."
- **Line 17:** "firs,"
- **Line 18:** "kiln—"
- **Line 20:** "there."
- **Line 22:** "Hansel,"
- **Line 23:** "real,"
- **Line 24:** "earnest."

ENJAMBMENT

There's a fair amount of [enjambment](#) in "Gretel in Darkness," which varies the pace of the poem. Enjambment creates a sensation of anticipation and momentum that at times makes the poem feel hypnotic, inevitably pulling the reader forward only to slam into a harsh end-stop. Take the first stanza, where lines 2-3 are explicitly enjambed, pushing the reader through Gretel's dark memories before landing with a thud on the

firmly [ironic](#) declaration that "God rewards":

All who would have seen us dead
are dead. I hear the witch's cry
break in the moonlight through a sheet
of sugar: God rewards.

The enjambment in the rest of the poem helps to create a sense of continuous misery, running from line to line as it runs from day to day in Gretel's life. The onward pull of enjambment works together with the halting choppiness of [caesura](#) and [end-stopped lines](#) to evoke a pain that feels both endless and jarring.

It can also evoke a line's content more specifically. In the lines above, the enjambment after "dead" creates a brief moment of anxiety and anticipation for the reader—all those who wanted to see Hansel and Gretel killed are... what? Repentant? Nope: they're dead too.

In the next line, the enjambment after "cry" suggests the sound of the witch's voice breaking across the page, just as it breaks through the "moonlight" in Gretel's mind. And in lines 19-20, enjambment reflects the painful separation between Gretel and her brother, lingering on either side of the line break:

Nights I turn to you to hold me
but you are not there.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "dead / are"
- **Lines 3-4:** "cry / break"
- **Lines 4-5:** "sheet / of"
- **Lines 7-8:** "arms / and"
- **Lines 8-9:** "hut / we"
- **Lines 11-12:** "harm / from"
- **Lines 14-15:** "though / you"
- **Lines 19-20:** "me / but"
- **Lines 21-22:** "Spies / hiss"

PERSONIFICATION

There's only one moment of [personification](#) in "Gretel in Darkness," but it's a rich one. It appears in line 17, when Gretel, surrounded by inescapable visions of her ordeal in the woods, sees "armed firs." Here, the trees have become people—and not just people, but angry, violent people. Even nature, which in other contexts might be comforting, or at the very least neutral, has turned on Gretel in her suffering.

Gretel's description of the firs as "armed" is doubly meaningful. In the most obvious sense, the word "arms" would suggest that the firs are carrying weapons, like soldiers. But the word "armed" also raises the image of firs with human arms, their boughs turned into terrifying grasping limbs. These are

ominous, dangerous, and purposeful trees that intend both to hurt and to capture, and they emphasize Gretel's predicament. She's caught in a mental landscape in which everything means to do her harm. And, not coincidentally, this creepy reference to "armed firs" echoes the line about being "far from women's arms" earlier on.

This moment of personification suggests that the whole world has, in Gretel's mind, come maliciously to life. Hearing the murdered witch's screams everywhere, she also feels the murdered witch's spite everywhere. There's no safety available to her any more: even the woods themselves are possessed by malignant spirits.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 17:** "I see armed firs,"

REPETITION

"Gretel in Darkness" uses a few flavors of repetition: [anaphora](#), [epizeuxis](#), and [diacope](#). An early example pops up in lines 2 and 3, where the repetition of "dead" introduces a subtle [irony](#) into the poem: anyone who wanted Hansel and Gretel dead is now dead themselves. The mention of death twice, however, doesn't mean Gretel is safe from such people; instead, now they simply haunt her memory.

Repetition also often appears in this poem alongside [asyndeton](#), and the two devices in tandem give the reader a sense of Gretel's struggle. For example, the anaphora of "bars the door, bars harm / from this house" and "as though / you meant to leave, / as though it never happened" makes these lines feel anxious, as if Gretel, panicking, is desperately running through the same thoughts over and over.

In the final stanza, the use of diacope brings Gretel out of panic to a point of real despair. Speaking to Hansel, she says, first, that when she reaches out to him, "you are not there"; a few lines later, though, she insists that "we are there still." Here, diacope makes her predicament clear: the nightmarish past is realer and more tangible to her than the uneasy present.

Gretel drives that feeling home with epizeuxis in line 23. When she says, "it is real, real," she's both insistent and horrified. Repeating the word "real" to Hansel, she asserts that her suffering, though invisible to him, exists. Repeating the word "real" to herself, she reinforces her own despair over the depth of her trauma.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "All who would have seen us dead / are dead."
- **Lines 7-8:** "far from women's arms / and memory of women"
- **Line 11:** "bars the door, bars harm"
- **Lines 14-16:** "as though / you meant to leave, / as though

it never happened"

- **Line 20:** "you are not there"
- **Line 23:** "we are there," "real, real,"

SIBILANCE

The hiss of [sibilance](#) in "Gretel in Darkness" evokes Gretel's terror. Haunted by the past, she feels her terrifying ordeal as a whispering presence that pursues her everywhere.

This effect is strongest in the last stanza, specifically lines 21-24:

Am I alone? Spies
hiss in the stillness, Hansel,
we are there still and it is real, real,
that black forest and the fire in earnest.

"Spies hiss in the stillness" is textbook sibilance. This line's hushed, repeated /s/ sounds both describe and sound like menacing whispers. (Notice that one can't even describe a "menacing whisper" without using sibilance!) Sibilance is likewise a dangerous presence earlier in the poem—for instance, when the witch's screams break through a "sheet / of sugar" and her tongue "shrivels into gas." Here the /sh/ sound, which is often recognized as a form of sibilance, joins the /s/ sounds to evoke the harsh screech of the witch's cry, as well as the way that cry peters out "into gas."

Sibilance is a quiet effect—you can't yell a hiss—and that quiet contributes to the feeling that Gretel's suffering is imperceptible or incomprehensible to the people around her. All her pain now is internal. Her family's hut has been secured and locked, the witch and the evil stepmother are dead, but the ghosts of the past still linger, whispering, just out of earshot of Gretel's willfully deaf father and brother.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "seen," "us"
- **Line 4:** "sheet"
- **Line 5:** "sugar"
- **Line 6:** "shrivels," "gas"
- **Line 17:** "see," "firs"
- **Line 18:** "spires"
- **Line 21:** "Spies"
- **Line 22:** "hiss," "stillness," "Hansel"
- **Line 23:** "still"
- **Line 24:** "forest," "earnest"

ASYNDETON

[Asyndeton](#), in "Gretel in Darkness," helps to communicate confusion and panic. Often appearing alongside moments of [repetition](#) (discussed in their own entry in this guide), it evokes

Gretel's struggle to work through what's happening to her and her helplessness before her own tortured imagination.

Moments of asyndeton often travel in pairs in this poem. In the second [stanza](#), the device is used to suggest a frantic accumulation of evidence. The lines "we sleep, are never hungry" and "My father bars the door, bars harm / from this house" give the reader the impression of Gretel sorting anxiously through her thoughts, not pausing for conjunctions, just piling up reasons that her persistent dread doesn't make sense. It's as if she's trying (and failing) to reassure herself.

Then, in the third stanza, the accumulative feeling of asyndeton takes on a darker tone. It appears when Gretel confronts Hansel's withdrawal from her and from their shared experience: "you look at me as though / you meant to leave, / as though it never happened." Here, asyndeton links the two flavors of Hansel's abandonment. He might actually physically leave Gretel alone, and he's definitely left her alone emotionally by denying the reality of what they went through.

The final moment of asyndeton is, like Gretel's earlier recitation of reasons to not be frightened, an accumulation—but a horrific one. Here, Gretel is thrown back into vivid and ugly memories: "I see armed firs, / the spires of that gleaming kiln—". There's an almost cinematic quality to this moment, as if the camera of Gretel's imagination is zooming in, moving from outside the witch's cottage to right in front of the dreadful oven. The implied, unspoken next shot is the witch's burning body. Asyndeton here evokes the terrible, inexorable flashing of nightmare images.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "we sleep, are never hungry."
- **Lines 11-12:** "bars the door, bars harm / from this house"
- **Lines 14-16:** "as though / you meant to leave, / as though it never happened"
- **Lines 17-18:** "I see armed firs, / the spires of that gleaming kiln—"



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Gretel in Darkness" is built pretty regularly, consisting of four [stanzas](#), each with six lines. While the stanza lengths are consistent, the poem's use of [free verse](#) helps to evoke Gretel's inescapable trauma. Within those repeating [sestets](#), all kinds of metrical madness break loose. The poem's lines use varied and unpredictable stresses, halting [enjambments](#), and choppy [caesuras](#) to keep the reader off-balance.

The shape of the poem thus resembles Gretel's experience. Gretel's shocking, disorienting, unmanageable experience of pain and fear (reflected in the irregular meter) is at odds with four solid stanzas, as regular in number as the walls of a cottage.

METER

"Gretel in Darkness" is written in [free verse](#), so it doesn't have a regular [meter](#). However, it does use strong rhythms to evoke Gretel's unshakable fear.

For a good example, take a look at lines 21-24:

Am I alone? Spies
hiss in the stillness, Hansel,
we are **there still** and it is **real, real**,
that **black forest** and the **fire** in earnest.

Here, stress falls hard on the words that Gretel insists on. In line 23, the strong beats of "**there still**" and "**real, real**" emphasize Gretel's claustrophobic fear and hopelessness: the events at the witch's cottage are not just "real," they're "real, real."

Moments like this stand in contrast with more flowing rhythms in the passages where Gretel describes the deceptive normality of her life now. In the second stanza, for instance, the stresses fall into a gentle evenness, leveling out to a steady [iambic](#) trimeter by line 9:

Now, far from **women's arms**
and **memory of women**, in our **father's hut**
we **sleep, are never hungry**.

But Gretel breaks in on this calm rhythm with an insistent question, leaning hard on her first word:

Why do I **not forget**?

Rhythm, in this poem, sets up a contrast between Gretel's calm surroundings and the horrors of her inner world.



VOCABULARY

Shrivels (Line 6) - Withers and shrinks.

Armed (Line 17) - Carrying weapons.

Firs (Line 17) - Evergreen trees.

Spires (Line 18) - Tapering towers, like one might see atop a church.

Kiln (Line 18) - A furnace or oven.

Earnest (Line 24) - Genuinely; seriously.

RHYME SCHEME

"Gretel in Darkness" uses [free verse](#), so there isn't a regular [rhyme scheme](#) here. However, there are a few subtle moments of rhyme and [slant rhyme](#) that help to weave together the poem's themes.

For example, check out the second stanza, where "arms" in line 7 rhymes with "harm" in line 11. This is a quiet effect; the rhyming words are separated by enough lines that the reader might not even notice them. But by subtly linking "women's arms" and "harm," the speaker evokes the trauma she's suffered at the hands of her stepmother (who first insisted that Hansel and Gretel be thrown out into the woods) and the witch. "Women's arms," which in another context might suggest motherly or romantic love, here only bring danger.

The slant rhyme between "hut" and "forget" in the same stanza has a different effect, creating a feeling of incomplete or broken connection. Here, the safety of the "hut," whose door is securely locked, can't make Gretel "forget"—and the slight mismatch of the sounds helps the reader to understand that Gretel feels displaced and alienated in this house that's meant to keep her safe.



SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is Gretel from the well-known fairy tale "Hansel and Gretel." The younger sister to Hansel, Gretel saves herself and her brother from being eaten by an evil witch by shoving said witch into an oven. This all happens before the poem begins, and is context that the poet expects the reader to already know.

Gretel has a big problem that is also a virtue: she, unlike her brother and her father, can't deny reality. Tormented by gruesome memories of the witch's death, Gretel can't live the normal, secure life her family wants her to accept.

Gretel is tortured, but she also has courage. In this poem, she speaks directly to her brother Hansel, who's deep in denial of the trauma they've been through together. While she can feel that her suffering isolates her from Hansel, she can't just pretend that everything is fine. In the last lines of the poem, Gretel's insistence that "it is real, real" demonstrates both her helplessness and her power. She can't get away from the memories of the murder she committed and the abuse she suffered, but she does have the strength to put them into words.



SETTING

"Gretel in Darkness" takes place in a world that contains two worlds. There's the anxious safety of the family hut, where the doors are locked against all danger, but pleasant summer days

still come. This is the physical world, where Gretel's body lives. But there's also the world of the witch's cottage in the dark forest, where Gretel's mind is trapped. It's this world that feels real to Gretel, and it's a nasty one, full of death-shrieks and hissing spies. Even the trees there are menacingly "armed," ready to grab or to attack. The horrors of Gretel's internal world are forever at odds with the security of her external world, and they make the external world itself into a mockery of comfort.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Written in the 1970s, Louise Glück's *The House on Marshland* (in which "Gretel in Darkness" first appeared) emerged from an experimental poetic landscape marked by feminist themes and revolutionary conviction. The intersection of the personal and the political is clear in "Gretel in Darkness," in which one woman's trauma exemplifies a deeper struggle: Gretel's male family members, in denying and repressing her experience (and treating all female influence as dangerous), only traumatize her further.

The House on Marshland was Glück's second collection, and forms the foundation of her continuing interest in exploring trauma and suffering through myth and folklore. For instance, her later *October* reads the September 11th attacks through the lens of Greek mythology. Her contemporaries [Margaret Atwood](#) and [Angela Carter](#) share her interest in retold and reimagined fairy tales, and like her also examine these old stories from a feminist perspective. Her poetry's rich, condensed, vivid language also shows the influence of earlier American poets like [Emily Dickinson](#).

Louise Glück's long and successful poetic career continues to this day. She has served as the Poet Laureate of the United States, and her work has won the Pulitzer Prize and a Guggenheim fellowship, among other awards.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The marks of a number of troubled historical eras appear in "Gretel in Darkness." Written in the 1970s, the poem is influenced by second-wave feminism and its fight for women's equality in all areas of life, as well as its rejection of male-dominated institutions and cultural practices. Such feminist thought is reflected in a reading of Gretel's suffering as due in part to male repression. Gretel is traumatized by murderous women, but is also herself a murderous woman: anger, guilt, and trauma are inherited, the poem suggests, moving from woman to woman, and will endure so long as men deny and ignore their existence.

But there are also hints here of an earlier trauma in the poem's witch, whose hideous death in an oven might bring to mind the

victims of the Holocaust. Glück, born in 1943, was the granddaughter of Hungarian Jewish immigrants, and while she herself was too young to fully understand the last years of World War II as they unfolded, the horrors of that time were fresh as she was growing up.

The freedom and revolutionary ferment of the 60s and 70s in America emerged, in part, in response to the traumas of World War II, and the reactionary conservatism that followed it. "Gretel in Darkness," with its interest in the persistence of trauma—and the necessity of speaking it—fits right in with Glück's historical moment.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Poems Out Loud](https://youtu.be/5_Gq-HZTie4) — Louise Glück herself reads a selection of her poetry. (https://youtu.be/5_Gq-HZTie4)
- [Hansel and Gretel](https://americanliterature.com/childrens-stories/hansel-and-gretel) — The fairy tale that inspired this poem. (<https://americanliterature.com/childrens-stories/hansel-and-gretel>)
- [Little Red Riding Hood](#) — For another poem that tackles a classic fairy tale from a woman's perspective, check out our guide on Carol Ann Duffy's "Little Red Cap."

(<https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/carol-ann-duffy/little-red-cap>)

- [In the Poet's Own Words](#) — Hear Glück talk about her work in this 1982 interview. (<https://youtu.be/PAB-JqABvq8>)
- [Glück's Life and Work](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/louise-gluck) — A short biography and links to more of Glück's poems from the Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/louise-gluck>)



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