Incident

SUMMARY

The speaker says that they (the speaker and their family/community) retell the same story year after year. This is the story of how they peeked out their windows, around the shades that had been pulled down. They retell the story even though nothing too significant happened, the speaker says, adding that the grass that got burnt that night has since regrown.

The speaker repeats that they peeked out their windows, around the shade that had been pulled down, now adding that they saw a cross that had been tied up like a Christmas tree wound with lights. This was before the green grass was burnt. Then they turned out the lights in their rooms and lit the oil lanterns that they used during hurricanes.

A group of men (from the Ku Klux Klan) were gathered around the cross that had been tied up like a Christmas tree, the speaker continues, wearing robes as white as angels'. The speaker says again that they turned out the lights in their rooms and lit oil lamps, the wicks of which shook in their reservoirs of oil.

The white men looked like a group of angels in their white robes. When they had finished (burning the cross), they went away in silence. Nobody came back after that. All night, the speaker says, their lamp wicks shook in their reservoirs of oil; the flames had all died down by dawn.

The speaker says once more that when the men had finished (burning the cross), they men went away in silence. Nobody came back after that. Nothing too significant happened. By dawn, all the flames had died down. The speaker retells the same story year after year.

THEMES

RACIAL TERRORISM AND TRAUMA

Natasha Trethewey's "Incident" recounts a terrifying event in hauntingly indirect language. The poem's speaker, part of a Black American family, remembers the night the Ku Klux Klan burned a cross outside their home in order to terrorize and intimidate them. Though the speaker claims that "nothing really happened" that night, it's clear the incident was traumatic: the family darkens their rooms to avoid being seen by the Klan, "tremble[s]" while holding candlelit lamps, and "tell[s] the story every year" afterward. Like the Countee Cullen poem its title alludes to, Trethewey's poem shows how racial violence, even when it's not physical, leaves deep psychological scars.

The speaker vividly describes a scene of racial terrorism but omits or reframes some of the details a conventional narration might include. In the process, the poem reflects the way people often struggle to relate traumatic experiences, or choose to relate them in a roundabout manner.

For example, the poem doesn't mention the Klan or racism, nor does it directly narrate the cross-burning itself. Instead, it evokes the scene through indirect details, such as the patch of "charred grass" left in the speaker's yard. The speaker describes the Klan members simply as "a few men" who look "white as angels in their gowns," a description that highlights both their whiteness and the irony that they're doing evil while dressed in "angel[ic]" robes.

It also raises the possibility that the main speaker (i.e., whichever family member is describing "our" shared experience) witnessed the cross-burning when they were too young to grasp exactly what was happening. The incident was so harrowing, the poem suggests, that the speaker would rather not describe it straightforwardly; instead, they report certain facts and hint at their long-term impact.

Indeed, the poem illustrates how the horror of this night has caused lasting, continuous trauma for the family. At the beginning and end of the poem, the speaker emphasizes that "We tell the story every year," implying that the incident has become an important part of their family history. They retell the incident even though "Nothing really happened"—presumably in the sense that no one was physically hurt, and there was no direct confrontation between the family and the Klan. Yet while there was no physical violence, it's clear that this terrorism inflicted a psychological wound. Even the "hurricane lamps" the family lit that night suggest, symbolically, that they survived a kind of disaster. And by comparing the burning cross to "a Christmas tree"—one that the family recalls "every year"—the speaker ironically links the incident with family and holiday rituals. The poem thus evokes how the trauma of racism can become embedded in Black communities, uniting families ("we") around the commemoration of shared pain.

Broadly, the poem suggests that racial terrorism and hate crimes are inherently violent even when they don't involve physical attacks. The emotional scars they leave can last for entire lifetimes, or generations. In this way, Trethewey's "Incident" (2006) consciously echoes the theme of Countee Cullen's "Incident" (1925), whose speaker describes being called an anti-Black slur as a child and remembering the pain for the rest of his life.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

We tell the ...
... now green again.

Lines 1-4 introduce a "story" that the speaker—a plural "We"—retells "every year." This first quatrain sets the scene but, apart from a few hints, doesn't reveal the subject of the story. Meanwhile, the title has set up the story by calling it an "Incident": a word that could refer to just about anything. From the start, the poem creates dramatic tension by withholding key information.

During this incident, the speaker "peered from the windows" with "shades drawn." It seems the speaker (most likely a family, but perhaps multiple families or a neighborhood) watched something from the windows (of their home?) without wanting to be seen themselves. It's unclear, so far, if they were watching in fear, curiosity, or both.

After this detail comes the strange claim, or disclaimer, that "nothing really happened." The speaker supports this claim by observing that "the charred grass" is "now green again." In other words, the grass outside the home was burned, but now it's grown back. Immediately, this image raises further questions: who or what burned the grass? If this "Incident" involved fire, why does the speaker dismiss it as "nothing really"?

The apparently conflicting claims in this stanza reflect a psychological conflict within the speaker. Perhaps the speaker wants to believe, on some level, that the incident meant "nothing"—but clearly it meant something, because they talk about it every single year. In fact, the charred and healed grass may be more than a factual detail: it may symbolize the speaker's *emotional* damage and healing.

LINES 5-8

We peered from ...
... the hurricane lamps.

In lines 5-8, it becomes clear that the poem is a *pantoum*. The second and fourth lines of the first quatrain repeat (with a few variations) as the first and third lines of the second quatrain. This pattern of repetition is characteristic of the pantoum form and will continue throughout the poem. (For more context, see the Form section of this guide.)

This stanza begins to reveal what the speaker "peered" at from their windows: "the cross trussed like a Christmas tree, / the charred grass still green." The combination of a "cross" and grass that's soon to be "charred," or burned, brings the scene into clearer focus.

Cross-burnings are strongly associated with the Ku Klux Klan, a violent American hate group that has historically lit crosses on fire in front of Black homes, businesses, and churches as an intimidation tactic. (Often their goal has been to discourage Black community members from voting or protesting, or to bully Black families out of predominantly white neighborhoods.) Thus, the "we" of the poem appears to be a Black family that watched from their windows as local Klan members burned a cross on their lawn.

As they watched, the speaker kept the "shades drawn," "darkened [their] rooms," and "lit the hurricane lamps." That is, they pulled the window shades down, turned off the lights, and lit oil lanterns (which are dimmer than electric lights) in order to see. These precautions would have made them less visible—maybe even made it look as if no one was home—thus reducing the likelihood that the Klan would directly confront and/or violently attack them.

Symbolically, the "hurricane lamps" suggest that the speaker weathered something as brutal and frightening as a terrible storm. This hate crime may have caused relatively little physical damage (a patch of burnt grass), but it left lasting psychological scars.

The harsh /kr/, /tr/, and /gr/ alliteration in these lines ("cross"/"Christmas," "trussed"/"tree," "grass"/"green") helps convey the ugliness and horror of the scene. "The cross trussed like a Christmas tree" is a deeply ironic simile: both cross and tree are Christian symbols, but the one is being used here to signal violence and hate, while the other traditionally represents peace and love. Even the word "trussed" (tied up) evokes violence, since it's usually applied to captured animals or people, not a cross. (Here, it indicates that the cross has been secured to the ground and/or wrapped in flammable material.)

Finally, notice that lines 7-8 contain the poem's only enjambment:

> [...] the charred grass still green. Then
> we darkened our rooms, lit the hurricane lamps.

Amid so many end-stopped lines, this single enjambment stands out, creating a moment of suspense ("Then" *what?*) as the horrific incident begins.

LINES 9-12

At the cross ...
... fonts of oil.

Lines 9-12 continue to narrate the cross-burning in stark, ironic language. After again comparing the tied-up cross to "a Christmas tree" (in keeping with the repetitive structure of the pantoum), the speaker recalls:

> [...] a few men gathered, white as angels in their gowns.
> We darkened our rooms and lit hurricane lamps, the wicks trembling in their fonts of oil.

Like the "Christmas tree" comparison, the simile "white as angels in their gowns" is loaded with irony. It refers to the white robes historically worn by the Ku Klux Klan, a violent hate group. Ironically, then, these men in "angel[ic]" costumes are perpetrating evil. They may believe that they're acting in the name of Christianity (hence their cross), but from the poem's perspective, they're acting in the name of bigotry. At the time of the "Incident," moreover, the speaker might have been too young to understand who the Klan were, and might have mentally compared their robes and cross to more familiar items.

The word "white" is ambiguous in this context; though it primarily describes the color of the "gowns," it could also suggest the race of the men themselves. (The variation on this phrase in line 13 will make clear that both meanings are intended.) Notably, white artists have tended to portray angels as light-skinned throughout the history of Western art and media. If the simile has a secondary meaning—"racially white, like most angels in Western art"—then it contains another layer of irony, since the poem clearly does *not* believe there's anything angelically virtuous about racial/cultural whiteness. (In fact, it shows how the idea of racial/cultural whiteness can prompt acts of cruelty.)

The speaker again mentions the family's "darkened [...] rooms" and "hurricane lamps," this time adding another key detail: "the wicks trembling in their fonts of oil." This detail suggests that the hands *holding* the lamps may have been trembling, causing the wicks to move around in their oil reservoirs. In other words, the family may have been deeply frightened as they watched the cross-burning.

LINES 13-16

> *It seemed the ...*
> *... had all dimmed.*

The fourth stanza describes the aftermath of the "Incident":

> It seemed the angels had gathered, white men in their gowns.
> When they were done, they left quietly. No one came.
> The wicks trembled all night in their fonts of oil;

The "angels" simile becomes even more ironic the second time around. In line 10, "white as angels in their gowns" referred mainly to the Klansmen's robes (and implied their race), but here, "white men in their gowns" focuses directly on their race. By now, it's clear that these "white men" in their robes were committing a racist hate crime—basically, acting like the opposite of angels. The "tremb[ling]" lamp "wicks" again evoke the fear they caused inside the speaker's home. (Perhaps members of the family were holding the lamps and trembling themselves, or perhaps they noticed and remembered the tiny detail about the wicks because it seemed to reflect their emotions at the time.)

"When they were done" burning a cross on the lawn, the Klansmen "left quietly." (Notice that the speaker never describes the cross-burning directly, perhaps because they're treading lightly around a traumatic memory.) Although "No one came" back to do further harm, the observation "The wicks trembled all night" implies that the speaker stayed awake all night out of fear and vigilance.

In line 16, the speaker adds that "by morning the flames had all dimmed"—referring to the flames in the lamps, but evoking the flames on the cross as well. These images of "quiet[]" and "dimm[ing]" bring the frightening incident to an eerie, subdued conclusion.

LINES 17-20

> *When they were ...*
> *... story every year.*

Following the classic structure of a pantoum, the final stanza repeats lines from both the previous stanza (lines 14 and 16) and the first stanza (lines 1 and 3). This closing quatrain also places the cross-burning "Incident" in a long-term perspective.

As if reassuring themselves after all these years, the speaker repeats that the Klansmen "left quietly," and that "No one came" afterward to commit further crimes. The speaker concludes:

> Nothing really happened.
> By morning all the flames had dimmed.
> We tell the story every year.

Even though these statements echo earlier lines (with minimal variations), each sounds more loaded the second time around. "Nothing really happened" now sounds deeply ironic; it's clear that the speaker is downplaying the horrible event they witnessed, or at least grimly recognizing that it could have been even worse. (Historically, the Klan has often perpetrated acts of physical violence.)

Since the speaker doesn't mention lamp "wicks" this time around, the phrase "all the flames had dimmed" seems to refer *both* to the lamp flames and the flames on the cross. (Once again, the poem evokes the cross-burning through indirect language, as if it's still too painful or disturbing to describe directly.)

Finally, "We tell the story every year" drives home the lasting impact of the incident. It has become such an unforgettable

part of this family's history that they relive it, ritually, year after year. The speaker may claim that "Nothing really happened" that night, but this final line suggests otherwise. This ending also builds on the allusion in the title, since Countee Cullen's classic poem "Incident" (1925) involves a painful memory of racist hostility. Just as Cullen's speaker will never forget being called a racial slur as a child, Trethewey's speaker will never forget the hate crime they witnessed all those years ago.

SYMBOLS

HURRICANE LAMPS

The "hurricane lamps" in the poem are oil lanterns, which the speaker uses for lighting while their "rooms" are "darkened." As their name implies, such lanterns are typically used during storms or other natural disasters. In the poem, however, the family ("We") uses them in lieu of electric lighting while the Ku Klux Klan is burning a cross on their lawn. On a practical level, the dim glow of these lamps makes the family less visible and therefore less vulnerable to attack. Symbolically, their presence implies that the family is surviving a *man-made* disaster: in other words, that this hate crime is as dangerous, destructive, and life-altering as a hurricane.

More subtly, the poem seems to link the lamps with memory and ritual. With grim irony, the speaker compares the burning cross (a symbol of hate and violence) to "a Christmas tree" (traditionally a symbol of love and peace). In context, this reference to a holiday ritual also calls to mind holiday ceremonies (for Christmas, Hanukkah, etc.) that involve the lighting of lamps and candles. It might even recall certain idioms that link memory and ritual with flames: "burned into memory," "carrying the torch," etc.

In a terrible way, the "story" of the cross-burning has become a "year[ly]" ritual for this family, uniting them (as a close-knit "We") around a shared traumatic experience. The "flames" of the lamps and the cross alike have seared themselves into the family's collective memory. Thus, the burning lamps may symbolically suggest the way the speaker has kept these memories alive—and the way such memories continue to haunt many Black American communities.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "we darkened our rooms, lit the hurricane lamps."
- **Lines 11-12:** "We darkened our rooms and lit hurricane lamps, / the wicks trembling in their fonts of oil."
- **Lines 15-16:** "The wicks trembled all night in their fonts of oil; / by morning the flames had all dimmed."
- **Line 19:** "By morning all the flames had dimmed."

CHARRED GRASS

The "charred grass" mentioned in lines 4 and 7 seems to symbolize the searing, traumatic impact of the cross-burning. Likewise, the renewal of the grass represents at least partial (or surface-level) healing.

The speaker observes that "the charred grass [is] now green again" just after claiming that "nothing really happened" on the night of the "Incident." But the poem shows that the cross-burning wasn't "nothing" at all; it was a terrifying event that the family relives to this day. So if the grass that was first "green" (healthy), then "charred" (damaged), then green again represents the speaker's damaged and healed psyche, it's clear that the damage was significant, and the healing has taken some time. (Also, as the poem's first and last lines make clear, healing isn't the same as forgetting.)

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "the charred grass now green again."
- **Line 7:** "the charred grass still green."

POETIC DEVICES

REPETITION

"Incident" is a *pantoum*, a poetic form that's built on repetition. In a conventional pantoum, the second and fourth lines of the first quatrain recur as the first and third lines of the second quatrain; the second and fourth lines of the second quatrain recur as the first and third lines of the third quatrain; and so on. Also, the first and third lines of the opening quatrain often come back as the fourth and second lines of the last quatrain, as they do here. (For more details, see the Form section of this guide.)

In "Incident," as in many pantoums, the lines don't always repeat word for word; some contain variations the second time around. Here, the variations relate to the poem's thematic focus on memory and storytelling. That is, the way the lines alter slightly as they repeat mirrors the way memories and stories tend to alter slightly with each repetition.

Sometimes the changes also illustrate time shifts in the narrative, as when "the charred grass **now** green" (line 4) becomes "the charred grass **still** green" (line 7), signaling a flashback to the moments before the cross-burning scorched the grass.

Even when words repeat exactly, their meaning can subtly differ. In line 16, for example, "the flames had [...] dimmed" refers only to the flames in the hurricane lamps, whereas in line 19, "the flames had dimmed" could refer *both* to the flames in the lamps and the flames on the cross. This subtle shift is an example of the careful, indirect language through which the

poem narrates a traumatic event.

Finally, some lines repeat verbatim. For example, the first and last lines—"We tell the story every year"—are the same, suggesting that some things (like the emotional significance of the memory) *don't* change.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20

SIMILE

The poem's similes are loaded with irony (see the Irony section of Devices for more). One simile gets repeated exactly, as part of the poem's pantoum structure, while one repeats with small but significant variations.

In lines 6 and 9, the speaker recalls "the cross trussed like a Christmas tree." This simile indicates that the cross the Klansmen burned was tied with cords or ropes, likely to hold it in place and/or make it more flammable. By comparing this cross to a Christmas tree wound with strings of lights, the speaker ironically compares a symbol of hatred and intimidation to a symbol of love and celebration. Both symbols are part of a ritual, but one ritual is a hate crime against families and the other is a family holiday. Both claim some association with Christianity, but whereas Christmas trees promote togetherness in the name of this faith, the Klan's cross promotes violent division. (Even the word "trussed" evokes violence; it often describes a tied-up person or animal.)

Similarly, the speaker states that the "men" burning the cross were "white as angels in their gowns" (line 10). This simile refers to the traditional white robes of the Ku Klux Klan, and it also hints at the *racial* whiteness of the men.

The variation on this simile in line 13 makes the racial component explicit: "It seemed the angels had gathered, white men in their gowns." Once again, this simile ironically links something horrific (the Klan) with something innocent and peaceful ("angels in their gowns"). The irony deepens the horror of the scene, as other details in the poem show how frightened the speaker was during this event. (The men didn't actually seem beautiful, comforting, etc.) Together, the images of "a Christmas tree" and "angels" make the cross-burning sound almost like a bizarre Christmas pageant—but both speaker and reader know that it was something far more sinister.

Another possible reason for these jarring comparisons is that the speaker, who is now older, was too young on the night of the "Incident" to understand it fully. If the person speaking for "we" was a child at the time of the cross-burning, they may have tried to relate this strange and frightening ceremony to familiar things like Christmas trees and angels.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "at the cross trussed like a Christmas tree,"
- **Line 9:** "At the cross trussed like a Christmas tree,"
- **Line 10:** "a few men gathered, white as angels in their gowns."
- **Line 13:** "It seemed the angels had gathered, white men in their gowns."

END-STOPPED LINE

All but one line in the poem is end-stopped. A single enjambment occurs at the end of line 7 ("Then / we darkened our rooms"); otherwise, every line ends with a comma, dash, semicolon, or period.

The consistent end-stopping gives the poem a slow, stately, sometimes even staccato rhythm that matches its somber subject. Listen to the final stanza, for example:

> When they were done, the men left quietly. No one came.
> Nothing really happened.
> By morning all the flames had dimmed.
> We tell the story every year.

The punctuation at the end of each line gives the stanza a choppy rhythm, as well as a flat tone. It breaks up the poem's traumatic narrative into short fragments, which the speaker seems to lay out slowly, piece by piece, in an effort to process what happened.

Amid all this end-stopping, the one enjambment stands out sharply and adds tension to the story. The word "Then" begins a sentence *and* ends an enjambed line, so it seems to hang suspensefully, or ominously, in the air for a moment. It's no coincidence that this dramatic effect occurs just as the main action of the poem (the family hiding and the Klan burning a cross) is about to begin.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-6
- Lines 8-20

IRONY

The poem's narration of the cross-burning is full of grim irony. Twice, for example, the speaker claims that "nothing really happened" during the incident—which appears to mean that the Klansmen didn't directly confront or harm anyone, or cause permanent property damage. (The speaker observes that "the charred grass" under the burnt cross is "now green again.") In a larger sense, however, something significant clearly *did* happen. The speaker was the target of a hate crime, one that may have been intended to suppress their political activity or bully them

out of the neighborhood. The experience scarred them so much that they've never stopped reliving it through family stories. The gap between the breezy claim and the traumatic reality generates powerful irony.

There's also irony—including, perhaps, dramatic irony—in the speaker's description of the Klansmen and their cross. The speaker mentions that the "white men" looked "white as angels in their gowns," and compares the cross they tied down and burned to "a Christmas tree." If not for the surrounding context, these similes would make the men sound pious and innocent, as if they were players in a Christmas pageant. In context, of course, they're perpetrating serious evil.

It's possible that the speaker, who is retelling the story as an adult, was too young to understand who the Klansmen were during the "Incident" itself. Having no other frame of reference, they may have likened these white-robed figures and their fiery cross to things they understood (angels and Christmas trees). Regardless, the gap between appearance and reality is once again ironic.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "though nothing really happened,"
- **Line 6:** "at the cross trussed like a Christmas tree,"
- **Lines 9-10:** "At the cross trussed like a Christmas tree, / a few men gathered, white as angels in their gowns."
- **Line 13:** "It seemed the angels had gathered, white men in their gowns."
- **Line 18:** "Nothing really happened."

ALLITERATION

"Incident" uses a great deal of alliteration, particularly in lines 4-14. This middle section of the poem contains the most dramatic tension, and alliteration helps heighten its emotional impact.

The first alliterative phrase appears in line 4: "the charred grass now green again." The two /gr/ sounds draw attention to a key image: the burnt grass outside the speaker's home. Although the speaker is insisting that "nothing really happened" (line 3) on the night of the "Incident," this ominous detail suggests otherwise.

Alliteration ramps up significantly in lines 6-14:

> [...] at the cross trussed like a Christmas tree,
> the charred grass still green. Then
> we darkened our rooms, lit the hurricane lamps.
>
> At the cross trussed like a Christmas tree,
> a few men gathered, white as angels in their gowns.
> When they were done, they left quietly. No one
> came.

Notice that most of this alliteration uses hard or guttural consonants and consonant pairs: /kr/, /tr/, /gr/, /g/, /k/. These sounds add a harsh intensity to a horrifying image: the Ku Klux Klan burning a cross outside a family's home. (It's worth noting that the only softer alliterative sounds here—the liquid /l/s in "lit [...] lamps"—describe the actions of the family rather than the Klan.)

After these lines, alliteration diminishes, like the "dimm[ing]" flames or the incident itself receding into the past. Still, it reappears in the final stanza ("[...] the men left quietly. No one came. / Nothing really happened"), much as the incident lingers in memory and reappears in the family's stories.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "grass," "green"
- **Line 6:** "cross," "trussed," "Christmas," "tree"
- **Line 7:** "grass," "green"
- **Line 8:** "lit," "lamps"
- **Line 9:** "cross," "trussed," "Christmas," "tree"
- **Line 10:** "gathered," "gowns"
- **Line 11:** "lit," "lamps"
- **Line 13:** "gathered," "gowns"
- **Line 14:** "quietly," "came"
- **Line 17:** "quietly," "No," "came"
- **Line 18:** "Nothing"

ALLUSION

The title of Trethewey's "Incident," published in 2006, alludes to a famous Countee Cullen poem by the same title. Cullen's "Incident" appeared in his collection *Color* (1925), one of the most influential books of the Harlem Renaissance. The poem's first-person Black speaker remembers being called a racial slur while visiting Baltimore as an eight-year-old boy. Here's the final stanza:

> I saw the whole of Baltimore
> From May until December;
> Of all the things that happened there
> That's all that I remember.

Like Trethewey's speaker, Cullen's speaker finds that racism has a lasting psychological impact on its targets. (In Trethewey's poem, the impact extends to a whole family, or possibly a wider community.) Even though both "Incident[s]" are technically non-violent, both leave their victims shaken. Trethewey's choice of titles signals that she's consciously echoing Cullen's themes.

Trethewey's poem also alludes to several elements of Christian symbolism and tradition: "the cross," "Christmas tree[s]," and "angels." These references are loaded with grim irony and (in the case of the burning cross) historical significance. Far from

doing something "angel[ic]," charitable, or celebratory, the men in the poem are doing something hateful: cross-burning is a tactic that the Ku Klux Klan has historically used to threaten Black community members.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20

VOCABULARY

Peered (Line 2, Line 5) - Looked at something curiously or with difficulty (e.g., through a narrow opening).

Charred (Line 4, Line 7) - Burnt; scorched.

Trussed (Line 6, Line 9) - Tied up; bound with cords or ropes.

Hurricane lamps (Line 8, Line 11) - Oil lanterns whose design shields the flame from high winds. Traditionally kept for use in storms and other emergencies.

Gowns (Line 10, Line 13) - A reference to the white robes of the Ku Klux Klan, here ironically compared to the gowns of angels.

Fonts of oil (Line 12, Line 15) - The reservoirs of oil that fuel the flames in the hurricane lamps.

White men (Line 13) - Here referring to men in the Ku Klux Klan, a white supremacist hate group.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Incident" is an example of a pantoum, a fixed poetic form adapted into English from the Malayan pantun.

Throughout a pantoum, pairs of lines repeat according to a fixed pattern. The second and fourth lines of the first stanza repeat (often in slightly altered form) as the first and third lines of the next; the second and fourth lines of the second stanza repeat as the first and third lines of the next; and so on.

In addition, the first line of the first stanza becomes the last line of the last stanza, and the third line of the first stanza becomes the second line of the last stanza.

In other words, the form is cyclical; everything in it comes back around. The overall pattern of lines in "Incident" (where A is line 1, B is line 2, etc.) goes as follows:

ABCD BEDF EGFH GIHJ ICJA

This cyclical form evokes the speaker's "year[ly]" repetition of the "story" (line 20), as well as the haunting, recurring memory of the "Incident" itself. Most of the poem's lines change slightly with repetition, perhaps reflecting the way stories and memories alter with time, or the speaker's struggle to describe the experience precisely.

METER

"Incident" doesn't follow a meter. At the same time, it's not free verse; it follows the form of a pantoum, which is governed by a pattern of repetition rather than a metrical pattern. (It's possible to write a metrical pantoum, but meter isn't standard or required.)

In this poem, the cyclical pantoum form evokes the cyclical nature of storytelling and memory. At the same time, the poem's lack of meter gives it a certain flexibility: both the length of lines and the wording of certain "repeated" lines vary. For example, "the wicks trembling in their fonts of oil" (line 12) repeats as "The wicks trembled all night in their fonts of oil" (line 15), which is two syllables longer. These subtle variations reflect the way stories and memories evolve over time.

RHYME SCHEME

"Incident" doesn't have a rhyme scheme, exactly; it follows the pantoum form, which repeats entire lines rather than just line-ending sounds. (See the Form section of this guide for more.)

Technically, this repetition does involve a lot of identical rhyme (for example, the word "drawn" at the end of lines 2 and 5), and also includes a single example of end rhyme ("again"/"Then" in lines 4 and 7). But to call "Incident" a rhyming poem would be an oversimplification. The point of the pantoum form is that nearly *everything* in the poem repeats—like the disturbing story the speaker can't stop telling.

SPEAKER

The speaker is a plural "We": a Black American family, or perhaps multiple Black American families. This "we" has been targeted by the Ku Klux Klan, a notorious hate group known for dressing in white robes and terrorizing Black communities. It's implied that several local Klansmen burned a cross outside the speaker's home(s) as a racist threat. (Historically, the Klan has burned crosses as an intimidation tactic, often in an effort to keep neighborhoods racially segregated or deter Black people from voting. Some cross-burnings have been accompanied or followed by physical violence against Black community members.) Though this "Incident" happened years ago, it left lasting psychological scars; the speaker continues to "tell the story every year."

The poem raises the possibility that whoever is speaking for "We"—that is, on behalf of the whole family—was fairly young at the time of the incident. The indirect descriptions of the Klan members, including their ironically angel-like "gowns," suggest that the speaker may not have fully understood, at the time, what the Klan was. They clearly understood, however, that these "white men" were causing fear in their home.

In her public comments on the poem, Natasha Trethewey has said that "Incident" was based on a real-life incident, which took place outside her grandmother's house in Mississippi in the late 1960s.

SETTING

The poem takes place at the speaker's home in a residential neighborhood. The geographical setting isn't specified, but it may be suburban or rural, given the "grass" outside. (Historically, the Ku Klux Klan and other racist vigilantes have burned crosses on Black families' lawns as a threat or intimidation tactic.)

The speaker also mentions "peer[ing] from the windows" with "shades drawn" and "darken[ing] our rooms." While this response could encompass more than one family/home, it's easiest to imagine as the response of a single family: a close-knit "We" that retells "the story" among themselves afterward. (According to the poet, the poem is based on a real-life incident that took place at her grandmother's home in Mississippi.)

The poem unfolds over the course of a single night, an unspecified number of "year[s]" ago. The nighttime setting heightens the fear and tension of the scene. The "Incident" causes the speaker to lose sleep: they observe that "No one came [back]" after the cross-burning and witness "[t]he wicks trembl[ing] all night in their fonts of oil."

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Incident" appears in Natasha Trethewey's third collection of poems, *Native Guard* (2006), which won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. Many of the poems in *Native Guard*, including the title poem, explore intersections between American history and Trethewey's personal/family experience as a Black writer from the American South. Widely acclaimed throughout her career, Trethewey has served as both the Poet Laureate of her home state of Mississippi (2012) and the U.S. Poet Laureate (2012-2014).

The title of "Incident" alludes to a famous Countee Cullen poem by the same name, from the groundbreaking 1925 collection *Color*. Both poems follow a fixed form: Cullen's is a ballad; Trethewey's is a pantoum. In Cullen's "Incident," a Black speaker remembers being called a racial slur as an eight-year-old child. The speaker stresses the lasting pain of this experience, which overshadows their other memories from the same period.

By echoing one of the best-known poems of the Harlem Renaissance, Trethewey connects her speaker's experience to the broader history of American racial conflict, as well as a long tradition of Black literature that portrays, processes, and opposes racism. Specifically, her "Incident," like Cullen's, illustrates how even supposedly non-violent acts of racism—such as slurs and hate crimes—can scar their victims psychologically. (The Black American poet/playwright Amiri Baraka also borrowed the title "Incident" for a 1969 poem, though this one depicts a very violent scenario.)

Trethewey's use of the pantoum—a form adapted into English from the Malayan pantun—recalls other poems in which the pantoum's cyclical structure evokes the repetitions of memory and storytelling. A well-known example is Donald Justice's "Pantoum of the Great Depression" (1995), which also features a "We" speaker and explores family and community history.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The poem depicts a cross-burning of the kind historically associated with the Ku Klux Klan and other racist vigilantes. A form of racial terrorism (in modern terms, a hate crime), the practice is typically intended to threaten Black individuals and families.

Since the early 20th century, the Klan has burned crosses to harass Black families in primarily white neighborhoods, threaten Black activists and interracial couples, and generally intimidate community members of color. As depicted in the poem, these incidents have often involved local "white men" in "white [...] gowns" (i.e., the white robes of the Klan) burning large crosses on the lawns ("grass") of Black-owned homes. Black-owned businesses and historically Black churches have been targets as well. Some incidents have been accompanied or followed by other forms of racist violence. Though cross-burnings have declined since the early-to-mid-20th-century, due in part to federal hate crime laws, they still occur in America at the rate of roughly a few dozen per year.

As Trethewey explains in her introduction to the poem here, "Incident" is based on a real-life incident. Vigilantes burned a cross on her grandmother's lawn in the late 1960s, either to intimidate her family or to intimidate the church next door, which was leading a registration drive for Black voters.

Since Trethewey was born in 1966, she would have been very young at the time: a possible explanation for the speaker's unusual descriptions in the poem. For example, the memory of the cross-burners looking like "angels in their gowns" is clearly ironic, but the irony may stem from a child observer's confusion about what they were witnessing. Both the adult poet and the reader associate the "gowns" (Klan robes) with hatred and evil, but a small child wouldn't have understood their meaning.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Trethewey, Poet Laureate — Browse the Library of

Congress's online feature on Natasha Trethewey, the 19th Poet Laureate of the United States. (https://www.loc.gov/programs/poetry-and-literature/poet-laureate/poets-laureate/item/no00088459/natasha-trethewey/)

- The Poem Aloud — Natasha Trethewey reads "Incident." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rebLipAjkJs)
- An Interview with the Poet — Watch an interview with Trethewey, courtesy of PBS NewsHour. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ueJTVIhkHk)
- The Poet's Life and Work — Read a short biography of Trethewey at Poets.org. (https://poets.org/poet/natasha-trethewey)
- Trethewey's Introduction — The poet reads "Incident" with an introduction about the incident it's based on. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/podcasts/76197/incident)
- Poetry and Racial Justice — Browse the Poetry Foundation's selection of poems about racial justice and equality, including "Incident." (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/155298/poetry-and-racial-justice-and-equality)

HOW TO CITE

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