A Martian Sends a Postcard Home

SUMMARY

Books, which were first printed by William Caxton, are shaped like birds; each page is like a wing. There are words inside books, some of which are special.

Sometimes those words make readers cry, laugh, or make other exclamations.

These birds don't actually fly, but I have seen them rest in readers' hands the same way real birds perch on trees.

When there's mist outside, it's like the sky wants to settle onto the ground because it got tired of holding itself in the air.

Mist makes the world grow dim and blurry, like the atmosphere of a dark library, recalling the way engravings seem softer when viewed through a sheet of tissue.

When it rains, the world looks like imperfect images on TV. The rain makes colors dimmer.

Cars, like Ford's Model T, resemble rooms that you lock when you get inside. When you turn the key, the world starts moving.

Outside the window, it looks like a movie displays the world passing by as you drive.

Humans keep time through watches on wrists, or through clocks that tick constantly, as if waiting for something.

At home, humans have devices—telephones—that seem haunted by ghosts. When humans pick up these devices, they make noise that sounds like snoring.

When they ring, humans silence the ring by raising the phone to their face to talk, so that they seem to be lulling the phone to sleep.

At other times, however, humans activate phones by touching them with their fingers, as though tickling them.

Children can cry (or relieve themselves) openly, but adults can only express their pain (or relieve themselves) in private.

All adults have to visit the bathroom, which is a room with water but no food. Once inside, they lock the door and suffer an experience that is painful and smelly—so unpleasant that it seems like a form of punishment.

At night, when it's dark out, humans sleep in rooms together, two to a bed.

When they dream, it's like they're reading books about themselves. The stories they experience have color, even though their eyes are closed.

THEMES

THE POWER OF PERSPECTIVE

As the poem's title reveals, Raine's speaker is a Martian writing a letter home (that is, back to Mars) about what they have witnessed on Earth. By describing Earth from a Martian's perspective, Raine makes human activity seem strange and alien. To this Martian speaker, even the most mundane parts of modern life—from answering the phone to going to the bathroom—seem weird or downright inexplicable. At the same time, the Martian's surprising, imaginative metaphors for rain, books, dreaming, and other everyday phenomena might encourage a deeper appreciation of things that people take for granted. In this way, the poem speaks to the power of perspective, demonstrating how seeing the world through fresh, unfamiliar eyes can cast life in a new light.

Throughout the poem, the Martian describes the human world in a way that makes everyday life seem odd and unfamiliar. For example, the Martian compares books to birds and a Model T to a "room with a lock inside," in which turning the key makes the world passing by become a movie. And, presumably in reference to wristwatches and clocks, the Martian says that "time is tied to the wrist" or "kept in a box."

It's not just human-made objects that seem strange to the speaker either, but the Earth itself. Rain, for example, is something that makes "colours darker" (i.e., by getting them wet), while mist looks like the sky settling onto the ground to "rest." The speaker seems especially confused by human bodily functions, describing crying as the eyes "melt[ing]" and calling the bathroom as a "punishment room" where adults "suffer the noises alone."

All the Martian's descriptions are funny and strange, yet each also has some element of truth. Readers can recognize what the Martian is talking about, even if they would never describe these things in the same way. In defamiliarizing the world, then, the Martian might prompt readers to reevaluate modern life—to see everyday objects and events a little differently.

The speaker's description of watches and clocks, for instance, might make readers wonder why humans are so beholden to, or think that they can contain and control, time. Likewise, the speaker's description of a cellphone as a "haunted apparatus," which "snores," "cries," and wakes up when tickled, makes humans' relationships to our phones seem even more absurd, as though these devices were babies or pets. And when the speaker notes that "Only the young are allowed to suffer openly," readers might wonder why human culture pushes adults to suffer in silence.

Raine's poem isn't necessarily meant to criticize modern society. Rather, it shows how a shift in perspective can offer new insight into, and perhaps an appreciation of, even the most mundane parts of life. To that end, many of the Martian's descriptions are quite beautiful and profound: rain is the earth being transformed into "television"; the world viewed through car mirrors is a "film"; and dreams are colorful books about people's own lives.

At the same time, the Martian hints at the importance of approaching other cultures with an open mind. What seems normal to one society (in this case, Western human civilization) might seem totally weird to another (visitors from Mars). Similar contrasts in perspective can apply across human societies; the difference between human and Martian is just an extreme example.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-34

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

Caxtons are mechanical ...
... their markings –

The very first word of the poem reveals that this speaker is unusual. The Martian calls books "Caxtons," referring to William Caxton, the English merchant, diplomat, and writer who introduced the printing press to England in 1476. Without that background knowledge, however, the reader might not realize right away that the speaker is talking about books, because the metonymy of "Caxtons" for "books" is unusual and rather vague.

The metaphor that follows compares books to "mechanical birds"—the word "mechanical" alluding again to the printing press—whose pages resemble "many wings." From this description, it becomes clear that the speaker has virtually no familiarity with human civilization, let alone with inventions as old as books. The speaker can merely observe the shape of books and notice that they have "markings"—words or pictures, presumably—that elicit various reactions. Some markings cause humans to "treasure" certain books, the speaker notes, while others cause humans to cry or laugh.

From the very first stanza, then, it's obvious that the speaker doesn't come from Earth. The Martian's tone is blunt; even if they seem to speak in metaphor, they don't seem interested in rhetorical or poetic flourishes, but rather in sharing information. After all, they jump right into these observations about "Caxtons," offering no context beyond the poem's title. Presumably, this first description and everything that follows are the speaker's attempt to report on the human world to Martian readers. However, the speaker's strange word choices turn the poem into a kind of puzzle.

LINES 3-4

they cause the ...
... shriek without pain.

The second stanza reveals that the speaker isn't just unfamiliar with human objects, like books, but also with human behavior. The Martian describes crying as the eyes melting. Although most people would never think of crying in this way, the Martian's description is close enough to reality to be recognizable: when humans cry, it *does* look like our eyes are melting. Again, the Martian's direct tone might prompt the reader to do a double-take, to realize for the first time that crying is a rather strange human behavior.

When books aren't making humans cry, the Martian notes, they can cause "the body to shriek without pain." Here, it's not clear whether the Martian refers to the amusement or sadness that humans can experience while reading. This may be a description of laughter, for example, or simply of an intense emotional reaction.

More importantly, the Martian seems to find it strange that humans can have physical reactions to the "markings" in books, even if nothing actually *happens* to their physical bodies. Through this line, the Martian offers an interesting critique of the human psyche, inviting the reader to view psychology from a new perspective. It is curious, after all, that humans display their emotions outwardly, even when those emotions come merely from "markings" in books.

LINES 5-6

I have never ...
... on the hand.

In the third stanza, the Martian completes their description of books, or "Caxtons." They speak in the first person for the first and only time in the poem: "I have never seen one fly."

By using the word "I," the speaker introduces their personal voice; even if the reader can't picture what the Martian looks like, now the Martian at least has an embodied, individual self. In other words, the Martian is evidently on Earth, observing human life with their own eyes, and the poem is a document of those observations.

Continuing to compare books with birds, the speaker notes that these "birds" never seem to fly—a ridiculous statement to humans, who know that books obviously cannot fly, but another hint that this Martian views earthly objects from an alien perspective.

In line 6, the speaker notes that books sometimes "perch on the hand," just as birds perch on branches. The speaker may not intend to sound imaginative (or metaphorical), but the idea of books perching like birds might prompt the reader to see the

act of reading in a fresh, joyful way—to draw new connections between nature and humanity, for example. In describing an object that humans take for granted, the speaker offers an outsider's perspective that may inspire new ways of imagining the world.

LINES 7-10

Mist is when ...
... under tissue paper.

Turning now to the natural world, the Martian attempts to describe "Mist." Mist often looks like a cloud, or a piece of the sky, that has fallen to ground level. Accordingly, the Martian writes:

> Mist is when the sky is tired of flight
> and rests its soft machine on ground.

Just as the speaker imagined that books could fly, they now imagine the sky as something in flight—at least, until it gets tired and "rests" on Earth. This description makes the sky seem alive, like an animal or human, since the Martian endows the sky with feelings of fatigue. To the Martian, the world must seem very lively and dynamic: a place where even the sky can experience weariness. (Notice that poets, too, often ascribe human feelings to nonhuman things, through devices such as personification and the pathetic fallacy.)

The speaker uses the word "machine" to describe mist, recalling the "mechanical birds" metaphor in line 1. The Martian seems particularly interested in the texture of earthly things, and they draw unexpected connections between books and the natural world. Mist makes the world appear "dim and bookish," according to the Martian, "like engravings under tissue paper." For some reason, the Martian seems preoccupied with printing, or the mechanical process of creating words and images on solid material; in the first five stanzas, the Martian spends a surprising amount of time discussing books, machines, engravings, and paper.

Through this image of "engravings under tissue paper," the Martian aptly portrays the mood and appearance of a misty day. Mist causes the world to look blurry and soft, just as an engraving will look blurrier when covered with tissue paper. For someone who thinks books are birds, the Martian seems quite familiar with the atmosphere and textures you might find in an old library. Regardless, the Martian's descriptions of earthly weather are imaginative and poetic, inviting the reader to consider everyday phenomena from a fresh perspective.

LINES 11-12

Rain is when ...
... making colours darker.

As in the previous description of mist (the sky's "soft machine"), the Martian offers a new way to think about rain. According to the Martian, "Rain is when the earth is television."

This metaphor makes little sense if taken at face value; humans know that rain and TV have little to do with each other. Step back, however, and it's clear what the Martian means. Rain animates the world, filling everything with action and motion. Like TV, it can be entertaining, transforming the world into a lively scene that people enjoy watching (e.g., from windows). Sometimes, rain might even look like static on a broken TV set, making the world flicker and blur. In one brief sentence, the Martian presents an entirely fresh take on weather.

The Martian also notices that rain "has the property of making colours darker," presumably referring to the fact that objects look darker when wet. The Martian's phrasing here—"has the property of"—sounds almost scientific, suggesting that the speaker studies Earth like a scientist taking notes on an unfamiliar environment. The short, one-line sentences in this stanza further add to the tone of scientific objectivity. Above all, this tone underscores the speaker's distance from the things they describe: to the Martian, the human world is an alien subject.

LINES 13-16

Model T is ...
... for anything missed.

The Martian's description of a car is particularly odd. Just as the Martian called books "Caxtons," after the man who introduced the printing press to England, they now use metonymy to identify cars as "Model T," referencing the Ford automobile considered the first affordable car.

The Martian's tendency to call inventions by their original version shows a mix of familiarity and unfamiliarity with the human world. On the one hand, the Martian knows that Model T was the first popular car in America. On the other hand, the Martian doesn't know that humans now call later versions of this machine either "automobiles" or "cars." It seems as if the Martian has collected many facts about Earth, but lacks a coherent understanding of human life. The result is a quirky framing of objects most people take for granted.

The Martian also describes cars as "a room with the lock inside." As with the Martian's other metaphors, this line isn't strictly metaphorical; cars *are* rooms of a kind, and you do turn a key once you get inside. The Martian's perspective is flipped, however: they think the world becomes "free [...] for movement" when you turn the key, when in fact it's the car that begins to move. Once again, the Martian views the world as a show, describing how there is "a film to watch for anything missed." In other words, the Martian seems to think that the windows and/or mirrors of the car display a film of everything one "misses," or passes quickly, while driving. This idea again turns the mundane world into entertainment, if one only learns to experience a car ride with the open-minded innocence of a Martian.

LINES 17-18

But time is ...
... ticking with impatience.

At this point in the poem, the speaker turns to more critical descriptions of human behavior—though each description remains at least somewhat ambiguous, so it's not clear whether the Martian is ridiculing humanity or just making uninformed observations.

Line 17 begins with the word "But," indicating this shift in tone and subject. First, the speaker discusses time. According to the speaker, time takes two forms: "tied to the wrist," in watches, and "kept in a box," or in clocks, where it's constantly "ticking with impatience." Enjambment between lines 17 and 18, as well as /t/ consonance in "time," "tied," "to," "wrist," "kept," and "ticking," links these lines into a continuous statement about time. The repeated /t/ sounds even evoke the noise of a ticking clock.

Implicitly, the speaker seems critical of humans' attachment to time—our need to keep time on our wrists and in devices that make impatient-seeming sounds, so that we can never forget time's passage. The Martian doesn't say anything overtly negative, but the description of watches and clocks as nagging objects "tied" to human bodies might prompt readers to rethink their own relationship to time.

LINES 19-24

In homes, a ...
... with a finger.

The Martian spends three stanzas describing phones—which perhaps makes sense, given how much time and attention phones most humans devote to their phones. Unsurprisingly, the Martian's description completely defamiliarizes these common objects. In fact, this section may be the most cryptic in the poem (it's never completely clear that the speaker *is* describing phones).

First, the Martian calls phones "a haunted apparatus," recalling the machine imagery that dominated the first part of the poem while adding a hint of the paranormal. Does the Martian think ghosts live in phones? Apparently so, since the following stanza refers to "the ghost." Unfamiliar with modern human technology, the speaker calls attention to the incredible, potentially spooky forces contained within phones.

However, the speaker also makes phones seem like living creatures that require care, like children or pets. According to the Martian, a phone "sleeps" and "snores when you pick it up," an image that might bring to mind a purring cat. (Most likely, the Martian is *really* describing the dial tone that landline phones make when you lift the receiver.)

The fact that humans "carry it to their lips and soothe it to sleep," meanwhile, brings to mind human babies, whose parents soothe them with lullabies. (But the Martian's *really* describing the way humans talk after picking up a ringing phone; the Martian mistakenly assumes that talking causes the phone to hush, or return to sleep.) When the Martian observes humans "tickling" these devices "with a finger," it sounds even more like a description of babies. But the details are just strange enough—who *wakes a baby* with tickling?—to show that the Martian is describing something very different.

In fact, the Martian hints at their own bewilderment by writing, "And yet, they wake it up deliberately." The words "And yet" suggest confusion as to why humans would try to hush their phones as soon as they ring, yet sometimes *cause* phones to "wake" and make noise. Put this way, our relationship to our phones does seem puzzling.

Because the Martian's understanding of phones is so different from ours, the description here feels confusing, then comical, then potentially insightful. After all, the Martian points to some deeper questions: why do humans give our phones as much attention as we give babies and pets? Why are we so anxious to silence phones when they "cry," and why do these ghost-like, powerful devices have such a prominent place in modern life?

LINES 25-26

Only the young ...
... openly.

The Martian pivots away from phones in lines 25-26, turning to a blunt, insightful observation about human culture: "Only the young are allowed to suffer / openly."

Perhaps this means that only children cry in public; adults suppress their emotions, and only cry or express pain when they're alone. The Martian assumes that this is because only children are *allowed* to cry openly, as if adults are *forced* to hold in their tears. The Martian thus highlights what's usually an unspoken social rule, at least in much of Western culture. By putting it so plainly, the Martian invites readers to think twice about this rule. Why do adults feel like they can't cry in public? Who created this rule? If it *is* a rule, why does it usually take the form of unspoken social pressure?

The following lines suggest another potential meaning, too. In lines 26-30, "punishment," "suffer," and "pain" refer to using the bathroom. Perhaps, then, "Only the young are allowed to suffer / openly" means that only small children are allowed to relieve themselves outside the bathroom (i.e., in diapers).

If the poem intends to convey *both* of these possible meanings, it may be making a broader point about shame—implying that both tears and excretion are bodily functions that adults consider shameful (and maybe shouldn't).

Intentionally or not, the Martian invites readers to think critically about norms that most people take for granted. Their voice demonstrates the value of looking at life through multiple lenses: perhaps humans would realize that some of our rules and habits are unhealthy if we saw them from an outsider's

perspective.

LINES 26-30

Adults go to ...
... a different smell.

The Martian's description of a bathroom is both cryptic and thought-provoking. The Martian calls it a "punishment room," which makes sense given the Martian's notion that *using* the bathroom is a form of "pain." Interestingly, the Martian stresses that "Adults" have to go to this place—presumably because babies urinate and defecate in their diapers—but this leaves the status of older children unclear. Does the Martian not realize that between infancy and adulthood, humans become children, and that children, too, use the bathroom? Again, this small detail points to the Martian's general unfamiliarity with life on Earth.

As in the rest of the poem, subtle word choices reveal what the speaker's describing. These "punishment room[s]" have "water but nothing to eat." Since they contain no food, the speaker can't be discussing a kitchen, and the bathroom is typically the only other space in a home that offers water. Plus, people "lock the door" in these rooms; they go there "alone"; they make "noises"; and they cause a "smell." (The Martian's ability to distinguish "different smell[s]" seems especially acute—perhaps another marker of Martians' difference from Earthlings?) Finally, the speaker notes that "No one is exempt": going to the bathroom is a universal activity, something all humans must endure.

This part of the poem is quite comical, especially for readers who enjoy bathroom humor. But even if the Martian's view of the bathroom seems ridiculous, it sheds new light on human experience. To someone unfamiliar with human bodily functions, the bathroom might well seem like a "punishment room," where people have disgusting, unpleasant experiences. Coming just after the observation that adults must "suffer" in private, this description perhaps critiques (again) the cultural rules that force people to suffer the same experiences in isolation. The gap between the speaker's understanding and the reader's loads the poem with dramatic irony, but it also opens the way for social commentary.

LINES 31-34

At night, when ...
... their eyelids shut.

In the final lines of the poem, the speaker offers a characteristically bizarre perspective on sleep and dreaming. Recalling an earlier description of colors darkening in the rain, the Martian now identifies "night" as the time "when all the colours die"—a strange, but perhaps poetic, way to think about darkness.

The Martian is clearly preoccupied with color (or "colour," to use the British spelling). In the last four lines alone, the speaker mentions color twice: color disappears at night, then reappears when humans dream. These moments might prompt readers, too, to see day and night, rain and sunshine, as fluctuations in the world's display of color—a new, arguably beautiful way to see our everyday surroundings.

To the Martian, humans appear to "hide in pairs" when they go to sleep in shared beds. More interestingly, the Martian writes that humans "read about themselves," describing dreams as books or stories that people read in their sleep.

Here, the Martian circles back to their earlier interest in books. For the first time, too, the speaker reveals that they have access to human consciousness. Previously, the Martian seemed to view humans from a purely external vantage point. They could see humans making noises and performing actions, but they couldn't explain how tears related to emotion, for example, or what caused humans to "tickle" their phones. Now, however, the Martian apparently has access to humans' dreams, though the Martian doesn't know that these nighttime stories *are* dreams.

As a result, the Martian's perspective is alien, yet oddly intimate. Their "outsider" view of dreams—as colorful stories that humans read "with their eyelids shut"—comes from some kind of close access to human experience, suggesting that readers, too, could adopt this view. Physical distance isn't necessary; simply reimagining everyday activities can make life newly interesting and inspiring.

SYMBOLS

COLOR

The speaker repeatedly refers to color when describing life on Earth. Though the speaker never says so explicitly, they seem to associate color with life: people seem most alive when they're moving through a colorful world, or when they "read" stories (i.e., dream) about themselves in color.

When it rains, the Martian notes that the rain makes "colours darker," because objects look darker when wet. But in keeping with the color symbolism throughout the poem, this darkening of colors might also signal life itself becoming drearier or duller in the rain. And "At night," the Martian writes, "all the colours die," signalling a rest from daily life. That humans dream "in colour," meanwhile, suggests the vivacity of those dreams.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** "It has the property of making colours darker."
- **Line 31:** "At night, when all the colours die,"
- **Lines 33-34:** "read about themselves – / in colour, with their eyelids shut."

POETIC DEVICES

METONYMY

Part of the puzzle of this poem comes from the speaker's use of metonymy to refer to everyday things. Metonymy is a way of referring to something by naming something closely associated with it.

The very first word of the poem is "Caxtons," by which the Martian means "books." The Martian uses this term because William Caxton, a 15th-century merchant, diplomat, and writer, introduced the printing press to England and became the first English retailer to sell printed books. So, in a sense, Caxton invented the printed book, and for some unexplained reason, the Martian identifies all books with Caxton's name. Combined with the Martian's description of these "mechanical birds" and their "markings," the term "Caxtons" is enough to identify these objects as books.

Similarly, the Martian uses metonymy when describing cars, opening line 13 with the words "Model T." The Model T was the famous Ford automobile, first produced in 1908, that made car travel affordable for middle-class Americans.

Most readers probably know that the Model T is a type of car, so the Martian's use of metonymy here isn't too puzzling. What's strange, however, is the fact that the Martian knows about the Model T and William Caxton. Where does the Martian get such deep knowledge of human history? Yet the Martian's terminology points also to their *unfamiliarity* with human life, since no one actually calls books "Caxtons" or cars "Model T." Ultimately, it seems this Martian's knowledge of Earth derives much more from background research than everyday experience!

Where Metonymy appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Caxtons are mechanical birds"
- **Line 13:** "Model T is a room with the lock inside"

METAPHOR

The Martian uses several metaphors to try to explain things on Earth to their audience—presumably, other Martians. Because the Martian knows so little about the human world, however, many of these metaphors might not be metaphors *to the speaker*, even if they feel metaphorical to human readers.

For instance, in the first stanza, the Martian writes that "Caxtons are mechanical birds with many wings," comparing books to birds in order to convey their physical form. Humans read this as a metaphor, but the Martian seems to take the comparison more literally. They note that "I have never seen one fly, but sometimes they perch on the hand," suggesting that they believe books really *are* some strange form of bird that might fly off at any moment.

Other, smaller metaphors likewise capture the speaker's alien perspective toward Earth. The Martian compares mist to the sky's "soft machine," and writes that "Rain is when the earth is television." For the reader, these metaphors might introduce a new way of thinking about weather; for the Martian, these metaphors are perhaps the *only* way to understand what happens in Earth's atmosphere.

Next, the Martian calls cars "a room with the lock inside." This metaphor isn't strictly metaphorical, even for humans: it's easy to see cars as rooms, and they do, in fact, lock from the inside. But the Martian may be referring specifically to the car's ignition switch—a device that's turned by a key, but isn't really a lock—so this description, too, helps defamiliarize a common Earth object.

Similarly, the Martian's metaphorical description of the bathroom as "a punishment room / with water but nothing to eat" isn't technically false, even if it sounds absurd. However, the Martian's choice of descriptions again shows that they view Earthly inventions and phenomena from an outsider's perspective—a perspective that might help readers, too, see the world with fresh eyes.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Caxtons are mechanical birds"
- **Line 8:** "rests its soft machine on ground"
- **Line 11:** "the earth is television"
- **Line 13:** "Model T is a room with the lock inside"
- **Lines 26-27:** "Adults go to a punishment room / with water but nothing to eat."

SIMILE

The Martian most often uses metaphors to describe objects and phenomena on Earth, but they also use a simile in stanza 5. Explaining to readers back on Mars that mist occurs when the sky "rests its soft machine on ground," the Martian adds that mist makes the world look "dim and bookish / like engravings under tissue paper." This simile recalls the Martian's description of books in lines 1-6 of the poem.

For some reason, the Martian seems particularly interested in books, paper, and printing; they even call books "Caxtons," after the inventor of the printing press. Given this interest, it's not all that surprising that the Martian compares misty scenery to "engravings under tissue paper." ("Engravings" usually refer to illustrations made using an engraving process; such illustrations are sometimes found in books.) The Martian suggests that mist makes the world look blurry, soft, and vague. One doesn't need to have direct experience with "engravings under tissue paper" to imagine what that looks like.

Besides adding a poetic touch to the Martian's description of Earthly weather, this simile hints at the Martian's particular frame of reference. Even if mist is unfamiliar to the Martian,

engravings, along with other "mechanical" and physical objects, are more tangible and understandable to this visitor from another world.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-10:** "then the world is dim and bookish / like engravings under tissue paper."

ANTHROPOMORPHISM

When describing the human world, the Martian has a curious tendency to anthropomorphize everyday things, accentuating the Martian's alien point of view. Most notably, the Martian uses anthropomorphism when discussing clocks and cell phones.

According to the Martian, time lives in two places: "tied to the wrist or kept in a box," where it's constantly "ticking with impatience." Of course, the reader knows that time can't actually feel impatience, or any other emotions. By describing time this way, however, the Martian evokes the nagging, annoying feeling one can experience while listening to a ticking clock. Perhaps the Martian also subtly critiques how humans are so beholden to time—scheduling our lives around its perceived impatience, always rushing from one thing to the next.

The Martian's description in lines 19-24 gives telephones such animal-like and human qualities that it's not clear at first whether the Martian's referring to a pet, a child, or an object. The Martian writes that this "haunted apparatus sleeps" and "snores," like a living creature, and "cries" until "soothed" back to sleep like a baby. The Martian also notes that humans "wake" their phones "by tickling with a finger," just as one might tickle a child. Together, these details are enough to suggest that the Martian is talking about phones, yet individually, each detail seems more apt to describe a baby than a lifeless device.

By anthropomorphizing phones, the Martian humorously critiques the way humans seem to coddle these devices, devoting as much care and attention to their phones (i.e., to their work and social life) as parents do to their children.

Where Anthropomorphism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 17-18:** "But time is tied to the wrist / or kept in a box, ticking with impatience."
- **Lines 19-24:** "In homes, a haunted apparatus sleeps, / that snores when you pick it up. / If the ghost cries, they carry it / to their lips and soothe it to sleep / with sounds. And yet, they wake it up / deliberately, by tickling with a finger."

CAESURA

The speaker uses caesura several times throughout the poem. This is partly a result of the poem's form: the speaker writes in complete sentences, but the sentences don't always correspond with the stanza structure. In other words, some sentences are exactly one line long (like line 11: "Rain is when the earth is television."), while other sentences end in the middle of a line (like in line 23 "with sounds. And yet [...]"). When the speaker pauses in the middle of a line, the reader must pause, too, before jumping to the next idea.

In many cases, these pauses juxtapose phrases in interesting ways. For example, in line 15, the speaker pauses between two phrases. The reader has just enough time to pause and wonder, how does turning a key "free the world for movement"?—before the next phrase, "so quick there is a film," further confuses this description of automobiles.

In line 26, the period after "openly" juxtaposes two similar, yet seemingly unrelated facts: that only children can cry in public, and that adults "go to a punishment room," or bathroom, in private:

> openly. Adults go to a punishment room

That these two ideas appear in the same line subtly links them, setting up a stronger contrast between behavior and expectations for children and adults in Western societies. (By the time the description of going to the bathroom is complete, it's clear that "suffer / openly" in lines 25-26 could refer to relieving oneself as well as crying.)

At other times, caesura sets apart strange or surprising phrases, adding to the quirky tone of the poem. By ending the sentence after "alone" in line 29, for example, the speaker emphasizes that going to the bathroom is a very private activity for adults:

> alone. No one is exempt.

And in the poem's final line, the comma between "colour" and "with their eyelids shut" might prompt the reader to think twice about what the speaker means. How can humans "read about themselves" and see "colour" with their eyes closed? The pause, though subtle, invites the reader to think curiously and imaginatively about dreaming, inspired by the Martian's unexpected description.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "fly, but"
- **Line 15:** "movement, so"
- **Line 18:** "box, ticking"
- **Line 19:** "homes, a"
- **Line 21:** "cries, they"
- **Line 23:** "sounds. And," "yet, they"
- **Line 24:** "deliberately, by"

- **Line 26:** "openly. Adults"
- **Line 29:** "alone. No"
- **Line 31:** "night, when"
- **Line 34:** "colour, with"

ENJAMBMENT

Similar to caesura, enjambment is a natural result of the poem's form, which includes full sentences divided—seemingly at random—across two-line stanzas.

Generally, enjambment adds to the surprising quality of the Martian's observations by highlighting the transition from one unexpected detail to the next. For instance, in stanza 3, the speaker breaks the line after the word "but," creating a brief, suspenseful pause before the next strange observation: that books sometimes "perch on the hand":

> I have never seen one fly, but
> sometimes they perch on the hand.

Similarly, the speaker ends line 15 after "film," inviting the reader to wonder briefly what "film" has to do with a Model T before revealing that this film is simply the world passing by the moving car. (In particular, it may refer to the passing scenery reflected in the rearview mirror, which the Martian mistakes for a movie.):

> for movement, so quick there is a film
> to watch for anything missed.

Later in the poem, enjambment makes the speaker's observations even more surprising and puzzling—as when the speaker ends line 25 after "suffer," seemingly suggesting that only children can feel pain. Only in line 26 does the word "openly" add some clarity: the Martian means that only children can cry (or perhaps, if they're infants, relieve themselves) *in public*.:

> Only the young are allowed to suffer
> openly. Adults go to a punishment room

Overall, enjambment serves both to guide readers through the poem, encouraging them to keep reading until the end, and to give the Martian's descriptions their peculiar rhythm and tone. Sudden line breaks also indicate when the Martian hasn't quite finished a thought, so that potentially confusing details (e.g., how humans "soothe" and "tickle" their "haunted apparatus") can make more sense when consumed as one long, broken-up statement.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "wings / and"
- **Lines 3-4:** "melt / or"
- **Lines 5-6:** "but / sometimes"
- **Lines 7-8:** "flight / and"
- **Lines 9-10:** "bookish / like"
- **Lines 14-15:** "world / for"
- **Lines 15-16:** "film / to"
- **Lines 17-18:** "wrist / or"
- **Lines 21-22:** "it / to"
- **Lines 22-23:** "sleep / with"
- **Lines 23-24:** "up / deliberately"
- **Lines 25-26:** "suffer / openly"
- **Lines 26-27:** "room / with"
- **Lines 28-29:** "noises / alone"
- **Lines 32-33:** "pairs / and"

CONSONANCE

Raine uses consonance a few times throughout the poem, suggesting perhaps that the Martian has an interest in how words sound, and in the poetic *effect* of these verses on the reader.

For example, in stanza 4, the speaker repeats /s/ sounds in the words "Mist," "sky," "rests," "its," and "soft," creating an almost hissing effect if one reads this stanza aloud. In fact, these repeated /s/ sounds (a form of consonance known as sibilance) evoke the sound of rain: they are indeed "soft" sounds, which help the speaker capture the atmosphere of a misty, rainy day.

Later, the repeated /t/ sound in the speaker's description of time has a similar, almost onomatopeic effect. The /t/ occurs in the words "but," "time," "tied," "to," "wrist," "kept," and "ticking." As the speaker describes time's "ticking with impatience," this repeated /t/ evokes a ticking sound. In other words, while explaining how time works on Earth, the Martian conveys the annoying tick of watches and clocks through actual sounds in the verse.

Finally, the description of the telephone is full of /s/ sounds in close succession: "apparatus sleeps" and "snores" (lines 19-20); "lips," "soothe," "sleep," and "sounds" (lines 22-23). This quiet, soothing sibilance evokes both the "sleep[ing]" phone itself and the humans who "soothe" it by speaking into its receiver.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "Mist," "sky"
- **Line 8:** "rests its soft"
- **Line 12:** "making colours darker"
- **Line 17:** "But time," "tied to," "wrist"
- **Line 18:** "kept," "box," "ticking"
- **Line 19:** "homes," "haunted," "apparatus sleeps"
- **Line 20:** "snores," "pick," "up"
- **Line 21:** "cries," "carry"

- **Line 22:** “lips,” “soothe,” “sleep”
- **Line 23:** “sounds”

SIBILANCE

When the Martian describes mist in lines 7-8, repeated /s/ sounds give the verse a whispering or hissing quality. This sibilance enhances the speaker's description, as it reflects the soft hissing of rain—the spooky, quiet atmosphere of a misty day.

Similarly, the many /s/ sounds in the Martian's description of the telephone (lines 19-24)—including "apparatus," "sleeps," "snores," "ghost," "lips," "soothe," "sleep," and "sounds"—create a quiet, ghostly effect that corresponds with the imagery.

This sibilance may also suggest the Martian's interest in capturing life on Earth poetically, using literary devices to create an accurate—even beautiful—representation of the human world to share with readers back on Mars.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** “Mist,” “sky”
- **Line 8:** “rests its soft”
- **Line 19:** “apparatus sleeps”
- **Line 20:** “snores”
- **Line 21:** “ghost”
- **Line 22:** “lips,” “soothe,” “sleep”
- **Line 23:** “sounds”

DIACOPE

In the last two stanzas, the Martian mentions color twice. First, the speaker notes that "colours die" at night, meaning that everything appears colorless in the darkness. Second, the speaker writes that humans "read about themselves" (i.e., dream about themselves) "in colour" while they sleep.

This close repetition of "colour" emphasizes the contrast between the darkness at night and the vividness of humans' dreams. Perhaps the Martian means to marvel at humans' ability to conjure colorful dreams, even when the world around them is dark and their "eyelids" are "shut." Or perhaps the Martian means to emphasize that *life on Earth* is colorful and that this colorful life continues even when humans are sleeping—a phenomenon that might seem incredible to a visitor from Mars.

Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Line 31:** “colours”
- **Line 34:** “colour”

ALLITERATION

There are only a few notable instances of alliteration in the poem. The first appears in lines 17-18. When describing humans' relationship to time, the speaker repeats the initial /t/ sound three times in quick succession (in the phrase "time is tied to the wrist") and again in the word "ticking" in the next line. The alliteration is further enhanced by the /t/ consonance in "But," "wrist," and "kept." By repeating /t/ sounds, the Martian evokes the actual ticking of a clock, embedding time's perceived impatience into the very sound and mood of the stanza.

Later, alliterative /s/ sounds sprinkle the Martian's description of the telephone in lines 19-24: "sleeps," "snores," "soothe," "sleep," "sounds." This quiet sibilance helps convey the image of a sleeping phone, startled awake and "soothe[d]" back to sleep by a human speaking into it.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 17:** “time,” “tied to”
- **Line 18:** “ticking”
- **Line 19:** “homes,” “haunted,” “sleeps”
- **Line 20:** “snores”
- **Line 21:** “cries,” “carry”
- **Line 22:** “soothe,” “sleep”
- **Line 23:** “sounds”

VOCABULARY

Caxtons (Line 1) - William Caxton is credited with introducing the printing press to England in 1476. Born around 1422, Caxton was a successful English merchant, diplomat, writer, printer, and bookseller. Here, the Martian uses Caxton's name to refer to books.

Perch (Line 6) - To alight or rest on something, especially like a bird.

Soft machine (Line 8) - The Martian uses the phrase "soft machine" to describe the sky as a kind of mechanism that moves elements like clouds and mist around in Earth's atmosphere.

Bookish (Line 9) - Relating to books or literature; scholarly.

Engravings (Line 10) - Designs or illustrations (often book illustrations) made through an engraving process.

Model T (Line 13) - The Model T was an automobile made by Ford from 1908 to 1927. Produced using new, efficient manufacturing processes, it's considered the automobile that first made car travel affordable for middle-class Americans. Here, the Martian uses "Model T" to refer to cars in general.

Apparatus (Line 19) - A technical instrument, device, or piece of equipment. Here, the Martian uses "apparatus" to refer to phones.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

Raine divides the poem into 17 couplets, or stanzas of two lines each. In general, the lines are of similar length, though some (e.g., line 12: "It has the property of making colours darker.") are substantially longer than others (e.g., line 32: "they hide in pairs").

The speaker writes in complete, fully punctuated sentences. Many of these sentences correspond to one stanza, as in lines 19-20 ("In homes [...] when you pick it up.") or to two stanzas that work as a pair, as in lines 1-4 ("Caxtons are mechanical birds [...] shriek without pain."). In other cases, a single sentence can stretch across multiple lines and stanzas, seemingly at random, as in lines 21-23 ("If the ghost cries [...] they wake it u").

Thus, not all of these couplets function as a unit, especially because Raine doesn't use rhyme or regular meter. However, the stanza breaks do generally help separate ideas and observations throughout the poem.

METER

Raine doesn't use any regular meter in "A Martian Sends a Postcard Home," which is a free verse poem. The lines vary in rhythm and length, even if many lines are generally around 10 syllables.

The lack of meter directs attention away from the formal qualities of the poem and toward the actual content of the Martian's observations. In other words, the Martian seems more interested in recording "informative" notes about life on Earth than in writing beautiful, flowing verses. As a result, readers focus on the Martian's odd word choices and descriptions rather than the sound of the poem. Plus, the lack of a fixed meter makes the poem's rhythm irregular, even choppy, contributing to the speaker's quirky tone.

RHYME SCHEME

Raine doesn't use a rhyme scheme in "A Martian Sends a Postcard Home." In fact, rhyme is used only very sparingly in the poem. In the first stanza, the end rhyme of "wings" and "markings" seems almost accidental, since there are no other instances of end rhyme in the poem. Similarly, the internal rhyme of "key" and "free" in line 14 might make the Martian's verse flow more smoothly, but such an isolated instance of rhyme can have only a subtle effect. Overall, rhyme plays a negligible role in the poem, perhaps suggesting that the Martian aims to write verses that feel more objective and informative than lyrical and "poetic."

SPEAKER

As the title suggests, the speaker of this poem is an alien visitor from Mars. Supposedly, this poem is what the Martian writes home (i.e., back to Mars) in a postcard describing life on Earth.

The fact that the speaker is a Martian provides the main conceit of the poem, as the speaker observes everyday objects, weather, and human activities from a completely alien perspective. In describing mundane things from a Martian point of view, the speaker gives readers a new way to view our everyday lives and surroundings.

Even though the speaker's Martian identity is crucial to the poem, the Martian's actual voice is rather muted. In other words, the Martian doesn't reveal much about themselves; they never announce their name, their gender, or anything about their physical appearance. The Martian uses the word "I" only once, in line 5, indicating that they have indeed spent time on Earth and observed the human world.

In describing life on Earth, the Martian seems to record their thoughts objectively, almost as if taking scientific notes for a field study about humans. This objective tone adds to the subtle humor of the poem, while also making the Martian sort of endearing. For example, it's funny that the Martian views bathrooms as "a punishment room," and it's sweet to hear an alien describe dreams as books that humans read while sleeping at night, "in pairs," especially because the Martian makes these observations in complete seriousness.

SETTING

The setting of this poem is, naturally, the Earth, as the Martian is clearly writing back to Mars about human life and the environment here on our planet. Otherwise, there are few concrete clues as to where or when the Martian is visiting Earth. The poem could take place anytime after the invention of the Model T—so after 1908—and it probably takes place after the widespread adoption of the telephone, which is most likely what the Martian means by "haunted apparatus." Additionally, the Martian seems familiar with Western culture, in particular: Caxton was English, and the Model T was invented in America. Given these references, it seems probable that the Martian landed somewhere in the Western Hemisphere when he came to explore Earth, and that the poem takes place around the time of its publication in the late 1970s.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

First published in the *New Statesman* magazine in 1977, "A Martian Sends a Postcard Home" is the most famous example of Martian poetry, a minor movement in British poetry spanning the 1970s and '80s. In this movement, writers describe everyday things and human life from an alien's (or

alien-like) perspective. In fact, the movement got its name from Raine's poem, which uses the Martian's point of view to turn descriptions of familiar objects into puzzles.

Craig Raine's works include poetry collections titled *The Onion, Memory*; *A Martian Sends a Postcard Home*; and, most recently, *How Snow Falls*. Other than Raine, the most prominent writer of Martian poetry is Christopher Reid, whose contributions to the Martian movement include the poetry collections *Arcadia* and *Pea Soup*. Another proponent of Martian poetry is Martin Amis, whose descriptions of everyday objects in the book *Other People: A Mystery Story* were allegedly influenced by Raine's work.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

While the poem doesn't occur in any specific place or time, Raine does seem to situate the Martian's visit in the contemporary Western world. The Martian is clearly interested in human inventions; the poem begins with a reference to William Caxton, the English inventor of the printing press, and devotes multiple stanzas to a curious description of phones. The Martian also makes references to television, timepieces, and indoor plumbing. As such, Raine's poem perhaps reflects a sense of bemusement or amazement at technological progress in the 20th century—the century when Western life modernized rapidly, from the invention of the Model T car to the introduction of phones and TVs into average households.

Though the Martian's confusion about modern inventions, and even much older inventions like books, is an obviously exaggerated version of how people might view new technologies, the Martian does potentially capture some of the surprise or awe that humans might have felt as modern technology progressed.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Read Aloud — Listen to a reading of "A Martian Sends a Postcard Home." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d35UEu8bzQU)
- Martian Poetry — Read more context on Martian poetry, the movement spawned by Raine's poem. (https://www.britannica.com/art/Martian-school-of-poetry)
- History of the Model T — Get caught up on the history of the Model T, the car that Raine's speaker identifies with all automobiles. (https://www.history.com/topics/inventions/model-t)
- Biography of Craig Raine — Learn more about the author's background and other works. (https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/craig-raine)
- Biography of William Caxton — Learn about William Caxton, the first English printer, whose name gives the Martian a curious new word for books. (https://www.bl.uk/people/william-caxton)

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