On Finding a Small Fly Crushed in a Book

POEM TEXT

Some hand, that never meant to do thee hurt,
Has crushed thee here between these pages pent;
But thou hast left thine own fair monument,
Thy wings gleam out and tell me what thou wert:
Oh! that the memories, which survive us here,
Were half as lovely as these wings of thine!
Pure relics of a blameless life, that shine
Now thou art gone. Our doom is ever near:
The peril is beside us day by day;
The book will close upon us, it may be,
Just as we lift ourselves to soar away
Upon the summer-airs. But, unlike thee,
The closing book may stop our vital breath,
Yet leave no lustre on our page of death.

SUMMARY

Someone who didn't mean you any harm, little bug, has squashed you in this book, leaving you trapped eternally between these pages. But you've made your own beautiful memorial: your shining wings speak of the bug you once were. Oh, if only the memories we human beings leave behind were even close to as beautiful as your pressed wings! Those wings gleam like a saint's sacred relics, showing that you were innocent of any wrongdoing, still shining now that you're dead. Everyone is always close to death; it's near us all the time. It's possible that the metaphorical book of life will slam shut on us at just the moment when we think we're about to fly off into the lovely summery air. But we're not like you, little bug: when death's book closes on us, it might well kill us without our leaving anything beautiful behind.

THEMES

DEATH AND LEGACY

Death, this poem reflects, comes to everyone—and there's no telling when or where. When the poem's speaker opens a book and finds a fly pressed flat inside, they observe that all human lives are just as fragile as this poor little bug's: no one can predict when the metaphorical book of life will slam shut on them and they'll meet their own "doom." With that in mind, it would be wise for people to reflect on what kind of legacy they'll leave behind them. Since death is inevitable and can come at any moment, this poem suggests, people should think hard about whether their lives will leave a beautiful mark on the world.

The fly the speaker finds crushed in a book reminds them that death comes to every living thing—and that it often comes without warning. Addressing the fly, the speaker observes that it died completely by accident, squashed by a person "that never meant to do thee hurt." Just so, the speaker reflects, does death arbitrarily come to human beings: though people might feel as if they're more important than flies and more in control of what happens to them, that's only an illusion. The "book" of life could "close upon us" at any moment, for no reason at all.

In fact, not only are people just as subject to sudden death as bugs, they might have less to show for their lives than this fly does! The fly's wings, the speaker approvingly notes, "gleam out" even after its death, a shining "monument" to its innocent, "blameless" little life. People, on the other hand, often die and "leave no lustre on our page of death": in other words, they die without leaving a single good "memor[y]" or worthy deed behind them. (Perhaps, the poem implies, they even leave a nasty blot instead.)

In this tale of a squashed fly, then, there's an implied lesson: people should remember their own mortality, stay humble, and think about whether they'll leave anything good and beautiful behind them when they go.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Some hand, that never meant to do thee hurt,
Has crushed thee here between these pages pent;
But thou hast left thine own fair monument,
Thy wings gleam out and tell me what thou wert:

The speaker begins this sonnet with a tender address to a fly squashed between the pages of a book. In bothering to speak to a dead bug so respectfully, this speaker comes across as very thoughtful and gentle. They observe that whatever "hand" crushed the fly here, it "never meant to do thee hurt": this fly's death was a mistake, not malice. (Of course, if the book belongs to the speaker, perhaps the speaker is exonerating their own "hand" here.)

Take a look at the way the speaker structures these lines:

> Some hand, || that never meant to do thee hurt,
> Has crushed thee here between these pages pent;

The highlighted caesura in the first line interrupts the action before it even begins: the speaker has to make it clear to everyone involved that what happened here was not malicious before even saying what actually, well, *happened*.

Accidents, the poem thus hastens to assure the reader, sometimes happen; flies are squashed through no fault of their own, and by people who never meant to do any harm. This is just life's way. But there's some consolation in this fly's death, too. Take a look at the speaker's metaphor here:

> But thou hast left thine own fair monument,
> Thy wings gleam out and tell me what thou wert:

The fly's pressed wings, in other words, are perfectly preserved on the page—and thus form the fly's own "fair monument," its beautiful tomb.

Readers who, like the speaker, have found a fly pressed in a book, will be able to imagine this moment clearly. Flies' wings do often look fresh, lively, "gleam[ing]," and rather beautiful flat on a page, even when that fly has been gone for a long time. And they do speak of what the fly was: its fly-ness is plain to see in those preserved wings.

But the speaker's comparison of these wings to a "monument" suggests that there might be more to see in these wings than just a pretty, poignant reminder of a little life. As this poem goes on, the speaker will treat this fly and its wings as a metaphor for people and what they leave behind them when they die.

These opening lines follow an ABBA rhyme scheme (line 1 rhymes with line 4, while line 2 rhymes with line 3). This is the standard pattern for the first quatrain of a Petrarchan sonnet (though the poet won't stick to this form exactly throughout.) They're also written using iambic pentameter, a meter with five iambs (poetic units that follow an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern) in a row:

> Some hand, | that ne- | ver meant | to do | thee hurt,

It's possible to read that opening foot as a spondee (two stressed beats in a row, "Some hand"), but, for the most part, the meter is steady.

LINES 5-8

> *Oh! that the memories, which survive us here,*
> *Were half as lovely as these wings of thine!*
> *Pure relics of a blameless life, that shine*
> *Now thou art gone.*

The sonnet's second quatrain begins with a sigh, a simile, and a surprising change in the rhyme scheme:

- Judging by the ABBA rhyme scheme of the first four lines (hurt / pent / monument / wert), readers might have expected this poem to be a typical Petrarchan sonnet, whose first two quatrains always rhyme ABBA ABBA.
- But this quatrain uses a whole new set of rhymes: it will run CDDC (here / thine / shine / near).

Keep an eye out for even more experimentation with rhyme as the poem goes on; this speaker will keep the sonnet form on its toes.

Returning to the action: the sight of the fly's squashed wings seems to have given this speaker grander thoughts. Take a look at this simile:

> Oh! that the memories, which survive us here,
> Were half as lovely as these wings of thine!

The speaker, in other words, laments that *people* who die rarely leave behind any "memories" half so beautiful as this fly's "gleam[ing]" wings. And the speaker doesn't just mean that people don't build fabulous tombs for themselves (as they certainly sometimes do). There's a *moral* question here. To the speaker, the fly's wings seem to be:

> Pure relics of a blameless life, that shine
> Now thou art gone. [...]

The fly's wings here are metaphorically transformed into "relics," like the holy bones of a saint. And like a saint, this fly has lived a "blameless," innocent life.

The implication here is that the fly's preserved wings tell the speaker what it was ("what thou wert") in a moral way, not just an entomological one! The beauty of these wings, to the speaker, is like the beautiful memory of a life well-lived.

But very few people, the speaker laments, *leave* these kinds of memories behind. And perhaps that's because so few people are "blameless." The mark people leave on the world, the speaker implies, is much more likely to be an ugly blot of bad feeling than a gleaming "monument" to their characters.

LINES 8-12

> *Our doom is ever near:*
> *The peril is beside us day by day;*
> *The book will close upon us, it may be,*
> *Just as we lift ourselves to soar away*
> *Upon the summer-airs.*

Reflecting on the squashed fly seems to have put the speaker in a thoughtful mood. Take a look at the transition that happens at

the caesura in line 8:

> Now thou art gone. || Our doom is ever near:

From sadly sighing that few people leave any "memories" behind them so beautiful as the fly's preserved wings, the speaker abruptly turns to the idea that death is always hovering nearby.

Perhaps, in other words, people are quite like this fly in ways they might not find comfortable to think about: they, too, might be squashed without warning at any moment, and through no fault of their own. Listen to how the speaker uses parallelism to hammer this idea home:

> [...] Our doom is ever near:
> The peril is beside us day by day;
> The book will close upon us, [...]

The repeated sentence structure here shows that the speaker is also repeating variations on the same idea over and over, culminating in the pungent metaphor of the closing book—a book that has become the Book of Life itself, slamming shut to bring an end to everyone's "day[s]." (And notice the diacope of "day by day," too, which reminds readers that every day of life is a day closer to death.)

What's more, that "book" might bang down on our heads just when we least expect it, the speaker continues:

> The book will close upon us, it may be,
> Just as we lift ourselves to soar away
> Upon the summer-airs. [...]

Once again, the speaker sees an analogy between people and flies, here. Just as that fly might well have been about to—well—*fly* when the book closed on it, people might die just when they feel freest, easiest, and most in control of their lives. The blissful warmth of the "summer-airs"—an image that might suggest the "summer," or prime, of one's life—is no guarantee of safety.

Perhaps there's a darker implication here, too. The image of "soar[ing]" might evoke what souls are sometimes said to do when they head off to the afterlife. The speaker might be suggesting that people shouldn't be too sure their souls will fly straight to heaven when the book of life closes on them, either—especially if they've unrepentantly led lives that were far from "blameless." They might have a surprise waiting for them even beyond the surprise of death.

And speaking of surprises, take a look at what the rhyme scheme is doing now:

- Having started in a roughly Petrarchan form, the sonnet's rhymes now switch to the alternating pattern of an English (a.k.a. Shakespearean) sonnet: EFEF (day / be / away / thee).
- And looking ahead, the poem will also *close* in the English style, with a rhymed couplet, GG (breath / death).

This unexpected change in the form reflects precisely the unpredictability the poem describes.

LINES 12-14

> *But, unlike thee,*
> *The closing book may stop our vital breath,*
> *Yet leave no lustre on our page of death.*

The speaker has thoroughly explored how people are like flies: they're fragile, mortal, and always close to death, even when they don't know it. (And Turner is far from the only poet to symbolically link flies and death in these ways.) In these last lines, with another strong caesura, he turns to the ways in which people *aren't* like flies:

> [...] the summer-airs. || But, unlike thee,
> The closing book may stop our vital breath,
> Yet leave no lustre on our page of death.

In other words: just about every fly that gets squished in a book leaves behind the beautiful "monument" of its wings. But *people* who get squished by the Book of Life often "leave no lustre" behind them: that is, they've done nothing beautiful or worth remembering, and the "memories" they leave, if any, might be rather nasty ones.

And notice the way the speaker uses alliteration to underscore this contrast:

> The closing book may stop our vital breath,
> Yet leave no lustre on our page of death.

The movement from strong /b/ sounds—which thump like a book falling shut—to gentle, drawn-out /l/ sounds suggests both the finality of death and the delicate traces of "lust[rous]," shining memory.

There's an implied lesson here, clearly. The sight of this poor little fly has led the speaker to reflect that death is always near—and that people often don't have much to show for their lives. The "blameless" fly's legacy can outclass the legacies of plenty of selfish, thoughtless humans.

Yet the poem's tone remains gentle. This isn't a thunderous sermon, but an "Oh!", a sigh of sad resignation. This tender speaker, who extends such affectionate appreciation to this fly's corpse, seems more resigned to human folly than appalled by it.

SYMBOLS

THE FLY

Here as in many poems, the fly symbolizes mortality and the fragility of life.

Crushed in a book, the poem's fly reminds the speaker that death is always a lot nearer than people like to think. Think of the idiom "to drop like flies": flies' short, easily-squished lives remind the speaker that people never know when or where death will strike them down. (And though this connotation isn't right there on the surface of this poem, flies also suggest death because they lay their eggs on corpses.)

In some sense, though, this fly has it easy: it led a "blameless" life and leaves an imprint of its beautiful wings behind in death. People, the speaker reflects, should be so lucky: not every fleeting human life leaves such lovely memories behind it.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8

POETIC DEVICES

METAPHOR

The poem's metaphors give concrete form to the speaker's thoughts on death and memory.

When a little fly gets smashed between the pages of a book, the speaker sees its body as a "fair" (or beautiful) "monument" to its life. In other words, its "gleam[ing]" wings, perfectly preserved, become its own tombstone, a reminder of its life.

More than that, though, the speaker sees these wings as "pure relics of a blameless life," remnants that speak of the fly's innocence. The word "relics" here might even suggest there's something *holy* about the fly: it's a word also used to describe the venerated remains of saints.

People, the speaker suggests, might well take a lesson from this fly, seeing themselves in the same position. Though we might often forget this, the "book will close upon us," the speaker says—a metaphor in which the literal book in which the fly got pressed becomes the metaphorical Book of Life itself, bringing an end to a life's story as it closes.

And people aren't unlike flies in other ways, either. Just as the fly got smashed in an unsuspecting moment, the "book" might slam shut on a person just as they're about to "soar away," the speaker says. This metaphor might suggest the illusion of freedom that persuades people their lives are totally in their own control—that they can just fly off about their business without worrying about death. But it might also darkly hint at a vision of a person blithely believing that their soul will fly away to heaven, warning that less-than-"blameless" behavior might get in the way of that final flight.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "thou hast left thine own fair monument,"
- **Line 7:** "Pure relics of a blameless life"
- **Line 10:** "The book will close upon us"
- **Lines 11-12:** "Just as we lift ourselves to soar away / Upon the summer-airs"

SIMILE

One strong simile sits at the heart of this poem, linking a fly's pressed wings to the legacy a person leaves behind them when they die.

The speaker introduces this simile with a wistful cry:

> Oh! that the memories, which survive us here,
> Were half as lovely as these wings of thine!

The fly's wings, in other words, remain shimmery, lovely, and perfectly preserved—a little flicker of posthumous beauty. But people, the speaker feels, rarely leave behind any "relics" so delightful.

The implication here is that people simply tend to be less "blameless" than flies: they make mistakes, and they leave ugly memories behind them as often (or more often) than they leave beautiful ones. Many people, the speaker gravely observes, "leave no lustre" (that is, no shine) behind them when they go—an image that suggests they might well leave an ugly blot instead.

In the speaker's sad sigh, then, there's an implied moral warning. Every living creature, fly or human, will get squished by the closing pages of the book of life one day, the speaker suggests, so it might not be a bad idea to consider whether the memories one leaves behind will be beautiful as a fly's wings or ugly as a splotch of bug guts.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "Oh! that the memories, which survive us here, / Were half as lovely as these wings of thine!"

REPETITION

Repetitions help to give the speaker's thoughts on mortality a grand, prophetic tone.

In lines 8-10, a passage of parallelism (with a speck of diacope to help it along) makes the speaker sound grimly insistent on the inevitability (and unpredictability) of death:

> [...] Our doom is ever near:
> The peril is beside us day by day;

> The book will close upon us, it may be,

Similar sentence structures introduce all the speaker's pronouncements about our "doom," an everpresent "peril," and the threatening, closing "book"—that is, three different ways of saying "death"! All these angles on the same thing make it sound as if the speaker is insisting: *I'm not kidding, death might strike at any time*. The diacope of "day by day," meanwhile, reminds readers that every day alive is a day closer to dying.

More subtly, the speaker also repeats the word "wings" a couple of times across the poem: once in line 4, and once in line 6. This repetition helps to track the development of the speaker's thoughts. First, the speaker *sees* the wings; then, the speaker *reflects* on what those lovely wings, still "gleam[ing]," have to teach people about life, death, and legacy.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "wings"
- **Line 6:** "wings"
- **Line 8:** "Our doom is"
- **Line 9:** "The peril is," "day," "day"
- **Line 10:** "The book will"

CAESURA

Caesurae help to give the poem a gentle pace and reflect new developments in the speaker's thoughts.

The poem's first caesura slows down its momentum before it's even had time to work up a head of steam:

> Some hand, || that never meant to do thee hurt,

The little pause here gets the poem off to a slow, reflective, thoughtful start. Before even saying what the "hand" here has done, the speaker stops to assure readers that it didn't *mean* to do any harm. This quick pause for clarification makes the speaker seem like a fair-minded and careful thinker.

Later on, though, the poem's caesurae get more emphatic. Take a look at what happens in line 8, for instance:

> [...] that shine
> Now thou art gone. || Our doom is ever near:

Here, a firm full stop marks a big transition: the poem moves from the speaker's *specific* thoughts about the fly's beautifully preserved wings and into the speaker's *general* thoughts about mortality.

Something similar happens in line 12:

> Just as we lift ourselves to soar away
> Upon the summer-airs. || But, unlike thee,
> The closing book may stop our vital breath,

The solid period here again marks a segue into a new idea. The speaker has finished describing how people are *like* flies, and is now prepared to describe how they're *unlike* flies—a comparison in which people will come out the worse!

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "hand, that"
- **Line 5:** "memories, which"
- **Line 7:** "life, that"
- **Line 8:** "gone. Our"
- **Line 10:** "us, it"
- **Line 12:** "summer-airs. But,"

ENJAMBMENT

This poem uses only two enjambments in a sea of firm end-stops. These two unusual moments thus draw some special attention to themselves. They also help to alter the poem's pace, evoking what the speaker describes.

The first turns up in lines 7-8, where the speaker describes the fly's preserved wings as:

> Pure relics of a blameless life, that shine
> Now thou art gone. [...]

Leaving that "shine" hanging out in the air for a moment, this enjambment asks readers to draw the word out a little, to really sit with the image of those tiny, glinting wings. That long moment also mimics precisely what the poem describes, preserving that "shine" long after the fly itself is "gone."

The second enjambment also reflects the very action the speaker is talking about. Here, the speaker says that the "book" of life might "close upon us":

> Just as we lift ourselves to soar away
> Upon the summer-airs. [...]

Carrying this thought across a line break, this line evokes smooth, joyous flight—but also suggests that such flights might be cut off in the middle by death's unexpected blow.

These two enjambments thus shape the poem's lines to the speaker's thoughts, helping readers to envision both lingering beauty and unpredictable disaster.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "shine / Now"
- **Lines 11-12:** "away / Upon"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration gives this poem some wistful music and helps to emphasize important moments.

For example, listen to the gentle sounds in lines 1-2:

> Some hand, that never meant to do thee hurt,
> Has crushed thee here between these pages pent;

The soft, breathy /h/ sounds here evoke the speaker's tenderness and sympathy: it's as if the speaker is whispering to the poor crushed fly. The firm, plosive /p/ of "pages pent," meanwhile, suggests the (literally) flat reality here; those thumping /p/ sounds might even evoke the sound of the fatal book closing on the unsuspecting bug.

And listen to what happens in the poem's closing couplet:

> The closing book may stop our vital breath,
> Yet leave no lustre on our page of death.

These paired /b/ and /l/ sounds help to stress these lines' contrast between the fly and humanity. Once again, a blunt sound—a /b/ rather than a /p/ here—suggests the sudden impact of the "closing book" of life as it lands on some unsuspecting creature's head. Then, a long, elegant /l/ sound suggests the delicate, "lustr[ous]" beauty of the fly's wings—and invites readers to wonder if their own lives will leave any traces even "half as lovely" behind.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "hand," "hurt"
- **Line 2:** "Has," "here," "pages pent"
- **Line 4:** "what," "wert"
- **Line 11:** "soar"
- **Line 12:** "summer"
- **Line 13:** "book," "breath"
- **Line 14:** "leave," "lustre"

ASSONANCE

Assonance, like alliteration, gives the poem music and meaning.

For example, listen to the echoing sounds in line 7:

> Pure relics of a blameless life, that shine

That long, clear /i/ sound suggests all kinds of high, bright, mighty beauties: in the speaker's eyes, this fly's wings aren't just pretty, they're images of saintly goodness.

The first lines, meanwhile, use chains of assonance to evoke the speaker's reflective mood:

> Some hand, that never meant to do thee hurt,
> Has crushed thee here between these pages pent;

This musical movement from /eh/ to /ee/ sounds creates some gentle music; it's as if the speaker is singing this fly a quiet little funeral hymn.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "never meant"
- **Line 2:** "thee here between these"
- **Line 3:** "left," "monument"
- **Line 4:** "gleam," "me"
- **Line 7:** "life," "shine"
- **Line 12:** "summer," "unlike"

APOSTROPHE

The speaker's apostrophe to the fly honors this squashed bug as an equal—or perhaps even a better.

Talking to a fly pressed between the pages of a book, this speaker behaves as if the insect were practically a saint: a "blameless" creature who's left behind a shining "monument" (in the form of its preserved wings) that speaks not just to its life, but its *goodness*. The beauty of the "relics" this fly has left on the page, the speaker tells it, makes its death a better one than the deaths of a lot of human beings, who often leave only nasty "memories" behind them when they go.

Readers might feel there's something both sincerely poignant and ruefully funny about the speaker's apostrophe. Few squished bugs get memorialized so grandly, addressed so directly, or treated so respectfully. The apostrophe thus characterizes the speaker as a thoughtful, sensitive soul, a person who's able to see the value even in a fly's life. (Maybe the speaker feels a touch guilty, too: if this book is theirs, they might have committed accidental fly-slaughter.)

But the apostrophe also suggests that this poem might be ever-so-slightly tongue-in-cheek. The mild sorrow the speaker feels over this fly (and the world-weary regret the speaker feels over human folly) gets spun into a grand address to a fallen saint.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 6-8
- Lines 12-14

VOCABULARY

Thee, Thou, Thine, Thy (Line 1, Line 2, Line 3, Line 4, Line 6, Line 8, Line 12) - All of these words are old-fashioned ways of saying "you" (thee and thou) or "yours" (thine and thy).

Pent (Line 2) - Trapped, caught, confined.

Hast (Line 3) - An old-fashioned or literary way of saying "have."

Fair (Line 3) - Beautiful.

Monument (Line 3) - In this context, a gravestone or tomb.

What thou wert (Line 4) - In other words, "what you were."

Relics (Line 7) - Remnants, especially holy or sacred ones.

Peril (Line 9) - Danger.

Vital (Line 13) - Living, to do with being alive.

Lustre (Line 14) - A shine, a gleam.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"On Finding a Small Fly Crushed in a Book" is a sonnet—but a rather peculiar one. Turner, who often wrote in the sonnet form, has played around with his rhyme scheme here, creating a hybrid of an Italian sonnet and an English sonnet:

- An Italian sonnet (like this one) always starts with an eight-line passage (or octave) rhymed ABBA ABBA and ends with a six-line sestet of varied C, D, and E rhymes.
- An English sonnet (like this one), meanwhile, uses three stanzas of alternating rhymes (ABAB CDCD EFEF), and a closing couplet (GG).

This sonnet starts by using the Italian ABBA shape in its first quatrain, then introduces an unusual second quatrain rhymed CDDC, then switches to traditional English sonnet rhymes for its final quatrain (EFEF) and closing couplet (GG).

But besides that innovative rhyme pattern, this poem sticks to sonnet tradition: it's 14 lines long in total and written in iambic pentameter (that is, lines of five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm: "The per- | il is | beside | us day | by day").

Perhaps this poem's hybrid form reflects one of its themes. Death, the speaker might subtly be warning readers, comes to everyone alike, and pays no attention to human ideas of order: be you English or Italian, the book of life will smash you flat, too!

Perhaps, though, this experimentation is just Turner's way of flexing his poetic muscles, pushing the boundaries of his favorite form.

METER

Like most sonnets, "On Finding a Small Fly Crushed in a Book" is written in iambic pentameter. That means it's built from lines of five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm. Here's how that sounds in line 4:

Thy wings | gleam out | and tell | me what | thou wert:

The poem sticks pretty steadily to this pulsing meter. But sometimes (as in a lot of sonnets), the speaker breaks from this rhythm for effect. For example, look what happens in line 5:

Oh! that | the mem- | ories, which | survive | us here,

The first foot here isn't an iamb, but its opposite: a trochee, a foot with a DUM-da rhythm. That means a strong, right-up-front stress gives extra punch to the speaker's wistful "Oh!"

RHYME SCHEME

This sonnet uses a variation on a traditional rhyme scheme. Most English (or Shakespearean) sonnets start with three quatrains of alternating rhymes, then close with a final rhymed couplet. (See this famous sonnet for an example of how that sounds.) This one does something a little different:

ABBA CDDC EFEF GG

This reads like a hybrid of an English sonnet and an Italian (or Petrarchan) sonnet, whose first two quatrains always rhyme ABBA ABBA. Turner, an experienced sonneteer, seems to be experimenting here, playing with the possibilities of this old form.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is a thoughtful, reflective person. Finding a tiny fly pressed between the pages of a book, this speaker is led to think about the way that every living creature will be smashed flat by death one time or another—and to observe that most of us can only dream of leaving so beautiful an impression as this little bug has. At once sensitive to natural beauty and gently resigned about human failings, this speaker might easily be imagined as Charles Tennyson Turner himself, who, in his work as a priest, saw plenty of death and plenty of folly.

SETTING

There's no clear setting in this poem; all readers know is that the speaker is sitting down with a book and finds a fly pressed between its pages. In a sense, though, the poem's setting could be imagined as the whole world: death, as the speaker points out, is a universal fate.

While the poem is never explicit about its setting, its distinctly Victorian tone—lofty, moral, mournful—might lead readers to picture Charles Tennyson Turner's own place and time: 19th-century England. Plenty of 19th-century poetry reflected on mortality; more than a few poems did so through the image of a fly!

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

The English poet Charles Tennyson Turner (1808-1879) was a

member of an illustrious literary family. Two of his many siblings were poets, too; most notably, his younger brother Alfred, Lord Tennyson was one of the best-known and best-beloved poets of the Victorian age. (Turner and Alfred Tennyson don't share a surname because Turner adopted an uncle's name when that uncle left him his estate.)

These siblings weren't rivals, but close companions and enthusiasts for each other's work. Turner's first publication was a collaborative book with Alfred, the 1829 book *Poems by Two Brothers*. Turner also developed a poetic career of his own. While he primarily worked as a priest, he also became a distinguished sonneteer; this poem comes from his 1873 collection *Sonnets, Lyrics, and Translations*, one of several books (mostly of sonnets) that he published.

While sonnets are a perpetually popular flavor of poem, Turner's allegiance to them marks him as a pretty traditional poet (even though he liked to play with the sonnet form—witness this very poem's peculiar rhyme scheme). While much Victorian-era poetry was rather nostalgic, it could also be innovative; Victorian writers like Gerard Manley Hopkins and Robert Browning, for instance, were experimenting with form in unprecedented ways. Turner, meanwhile, stuck to the classics.

While Turner never became as widely known a poet as his younger brother, his gentle, reflective sonnets made an impression on writers as distinguished as the great Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge (who provided notes for one edition of Turner's work).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Turner lived in a time of drama and turmoil. During his lifetime, proverbially, the "sun never set on the British Empire": Britain had colonial holdings across the world, and was *the* major world power. At the same time, the new wealth (and new difficulties) of the Industrial Revolution were changing the face of Britain, as what was once a primarily rural nation quickly became primarily urban. Staggering poverty and staggering luxury coexisted in the newly crowded cities.

Perhaps in response to all this uproar, Victorian English social mores, especially among the upper classes, were marked by a strong sense of propriety and conformity. The Victorians considered themselves models for the world, and their strict social, moral, and sexual codes meant that people today sometimes use the word "Victorian" to mean "prudish." This poem's gently sorrowful reflections on death and memory are a pretty nonconfrontational example of Victorian morality in art! (Of course, what people *say* and what they *do* is quite different: it would be a big mistake to imagine that Victorians were all buttoned-up prudes. Victorian England was also full of revolutionary ferment and sexual liberation.)

This poem's interest in death might also reflect a very Victorian preoccupation with mourning, which became almost a national hobby after Queen Victoria's beloved husband Albert died. Victoria mourned lavishly and publicly until the day she died, and her citizens followed suit. Victorian mourning was a ritualized affair, with strict rules about clothing and conduct. This poem's reflections on what kind of "monument" we leave behind us when we die fit right into a culture obsessed with grief.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Short Biography — Read a brief 1917 biography of Turner. (https://www.bartleby.com/library/prose/5336.html)
- Early Publications — Read a newspaper article from 1880 that discusses the publication of a collection of Turner's sonnets. (https://www.theguardian.com/news/1880/jan/19/mainsection.fromthearchive)
- A Portrait of Turner — See a portrait of Turner as a young man. (https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/charles-tennyson-turner-18081879-82107)
- The Tennyson Family — Read an article that discusses Turner's relationship with his brothers—including the more famous poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson. (https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/cambridgeauthors/tennyson-and-the-apostles/)

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