

Poem at Thirty-Nine



SUMMARY

The speaker misses her father, who presumably has passed away, and expresses the desire that he'd had more energy when she was born.

Whenever the speaker writes a check, she's reminded of her father because he's the one who taught her practical skills growing up, including how to fill out paperwork. These lessons taught the speaker to view writing as a means to overcome the poverty and adversity that plagued her father all his life. She even opened a savings account when she was still in high school.

The speaker's father taught her that she could be honest with him without fearing harsh punishment, though a lot of the speaker's beliefs ultimately conflicted with his own values.

Reiterating how much she misses her father, the speaker goes on to describe his cooking as both a kind of dance and yoga meditation. He also loved to share the delicious food he made.

The speaker proclaims that now, as an adult, she has picked up these tendencies from her father, and both resembles and cooks like him. She approaches cooking (and life in general) as a free spirit, casually throwing ingredients into a pot and always trying out new seasonings, glad to share food with anyone who passes through her orbit.

Her father would be proud of the woman she is today—a person who spends her time cooking, working on her writing, chopping wood, and looking deeply into the fire.

man who encouraged his daughter to be financially responsible. She goes on to say that she even had a “savings account” by the time she was in high school, laying a solid foundation for the future thanks to her father's influence. Her father's practical lessons gave her the opportunity to pursue a better life than the one he had, she insists, declaring that “I learned to see / bits of paper / as a way / to escape / the life he knew.”

The speaker then goes on to explain the way her father informed her philosophy of life and, in turn, her approach to writing. She says that her father empowered her to tell the truth, claiming “He taught me / that telling the truth / did not always mean / a beating.” This suggests that her father encouraged his daughter to use her voice without fear, which implicitly fostered a sense of independence in the budding young writer and facilitated her development as a creative person.

She then adds the qualification that many of her “truths,” or beliefs and life choices, conflicted with those of her father “in the end.” This only further illustrates the strength of their connection, however; that the speaker immediately follows this qualification with another strong declaration of how much she misses her father implies that such conflicts didn't sever their bond. In fact, the speaker herself becomes a testament to her father's character and to the enduring love they share even after death.

Now approaching middle-age—and thus getting closer to her father's age when she was still living under his roof—she says that she “look[s] and cook[s] just like him,” having inherited not only her father's work ethic, but also his capacity for spontaneity, joy, and generosity. The speaker thus ends the poem on a high note, remarking that her father would be proud of the woman she is today, thanks to his positive influence. Overall, the speaker's nostalgic reflection on her childhood results in a renewed appreciation for her role model as well as her own accomplishments.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-45



THEMES



THE BOND BETWEEN PARENTS AND CHILDREN

“Poem at Thirty-Nine” is a nostalgic poem in which the speaker explores the role her father played in shaping her life. Despite not always agreeing with her father, the speaker arrives at the realization that she would not be who she is today without him. The speaker honors her father's memory by celebrating all the pieces of him that she has inherited, and in doing so illustrates the profound bond between parents and children.

The speaker starts by describing the lessons her father taught her throughout her life, demonstrating how he shaped her into the woman she would eventually become. First, the speaker touches on the practical skills she gained from her father, saying that he taught her to write “deposit slips and checks.” She explains how her father was a prudent and hard-working



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

*How I miss ...
... born.*

The poem opens with the speaker declaring how much she misses her father, who has presumably passed away. She then

expresses a desire that he was not "so tired" when she was born. This is almost certainly a reference to the real career of Alice Walker's father, who was a sharecropper (a kind of tenant farmer). The speaker acknowledges that her father was already exhausted from his labor-intensive and emotionally-draining job by the time she entered the world.

As the poem progresses, all of her father's contributions will be considered in this context. Despite his own fatigue, he was still extensively involved in the speaker's life and upbringing, promoting her personal and spiritual growth.

In addition to setting the stage for the rest of the poem, the first stanza also establishes the poem's overall [stream of consciousness](#) style. [Enjambment](#) plays a big role in this. All the lines here apart from the first and last are enjambed, allowing the speaker's thoughts to bleed into each other. This makes sense, given that people tend to think and remember things in bits and fragments, rather than in complete and coherent sentences.

The speaker will continue this pronounced use of enjambment throughout the poem as she explores her memories and thoughts in relation to her upbringing. This approach allows the poem to read like a constant flow of someone's inner thoughts and feelings that actually resembles the loose structure of human consciousness.

LINES 6-11

*Writing deposit slips ...
... it is done.*

In the second stanza, the speaker begins to delve into specific memories of her relationship with her father growing up. She claims that she thinks of him when "Writing deposit slips and checks" because he was the one who taught her how to do these tasks—how to fill out financial paperwork, forms, and so forth.

She recalls her father walking her through the process, and follows this up with the remark, "he must have said." This line is a powerful reminder that the speaker is recalling memories from a long time ago, which are bound to be fragmented, imperfect, and incomplete. That is, she might not be able to remember her father's *exact* words, but she can make a reasonable inference about them.

She goes on to say that her father showed her "the way it is done," which can be interpreted as a reference to the specific activity mentioned (writing deposit slips and checks), but it can also be seen as a broader comment about the impact of her father's lessons in general. The speaker implies that her father taught her "the way it is done" for many topics throughout her life, financial and otherwise.

The mention of deposit slips and checks also introduces the imagery of paper and writing, which will continue to become more significant as the stanza progresses.

Also note how these lines feature more [end-stops](#) than appeared in the previous stanza. Lines 7-11 ("I think of him [...] done.") are all strongly end-stopped, with clear pauses and punctuation creating a steady, authoritative cadence that evokes the speaker's respect for her father. (Note that line 6—"Writing deposit slips and checks"—might be taken as end-stopped as well, given the implied pause after the word "checks"; that said, the lack of punctuation and incompleteness of the thought means readers might also experience it as being [enjambéd](#).)

LINES 12-19

*I learned to ...
... account.*

In the second half of this stanza, the speaker explains how her father's practical lessons gave her the opportunity to pursue a better life than the one he had, declaring that "I learned to see / bits of paper / as a way / to escape / the life he knew."

This notion that "bits of paper" could be a means of escaping poverty and hardship refers to two different functions of writing. The first one, which the speaker's father taught her directly, involved practical skills like bookkeeping. The speaker implies that the other function of writing, as a creative and intellectual pursuit, became a part of her life because of this example set by her father.

She goes on to say that "even in high school" she was putting money into a savings account as a direct result of her father's influence. This shows how her father emphasized frugality and financial responsibility at an early age, which laid the foundation for her professional success later in life. Thus, in the speaker's mind, the imagery of "bits of paper" is directly associated with such important lessons.

The speaker effectively gives her father credit for inspiring her career as a writer, suggesting that these lessons gave her the first glimpse into the powers and benefits that writing has to offer. By introducing the speaker to one aspect of writing, she became more invested in mastering the art of writing as a whole.

LINES 20-26

*He taught me ...
... before the end.*

The speaker states that her father empowered her to tell the truth without facing undue punishment—to speak up without fear of "a beating." This suggests that her father had a relatively gentle and egalitarian approach to parenting, choosing not to discipline his child with corporal punishment (which was common in past generations) and instead encouraging his daughter to have a voice and pursue the development of her own creativity.

She then adds the qualification that "many of [her] truths / must

have grieved," or upset, her father, acknowledging that her own beliefs and life choices conflicted with his. By using the phrase "must have grieved him," rather than "did grieve" or simply "grieved," the speaker implies that her father never raised any explicit objections and allowed her to live her life according to her own truth, even when it contradicted his own. This speaks to the strength of their bond, which surpassed ideological differences.

Given that most readers take the speaker of this poem to be Alice Walker herself, the reference to "my truths" might be interpreted as a specific [allusion](#) to Walker's sexuality. While Walker has always refused to put a specific label on her sexuality, she has been involved in romantic relationships with both men and women throughout her life. This was still a radical lifestyle during her own generation, let alone her father's generation.

In this stanza, Walker might be acknowledging how this was difficult for her father to accept given this generational gap, but he still embraced who she was out of love and respect for his daughter. Of course, the language is broad enough that the "truths" mentioned here could be about anything regarding the speaker's identity or lifestyle, but this detail from Walker's life seems relevant nonetheless.

This stanza is particularly poetic, with [alliteration](#), [consonance](#), and [repetition](#) infusing the lines. Take the shared /t/, /m/, /h/, and /v/ sounds of "taught" and "telling the truth," "many of my [...] must have grieved him." There's also [assonance](#) of the long /ee/ sound, in "mean / a beating" and "grieved." This is a stanza where the speaker talks about the importance of using her voice for what she believes in, so the elegance of the language makes sense.

Meanwhile, the repetition of "truth" (specifically a kind of repetition called [diacope](#)) draws readers' attention to the importance of the speaker's closely-held beliefs.

LINES 27-33

*How I miss ...
... of good food.*

In the preceding stanza, the speaker discusses her appreciation for her father's ability to accept her true self, even when it conflicted with his own traditions or beliefs. Here, she demonstrates her gratitude by reiterating the opening line of the poem, proclaiming "How I miss my father!"

After this, the speaker delves into her father's relationship with food and how it informed her own pursuits. Using a [simile](#), the speaker compares her father's behavior while cooking to both dancing and practicing yoga, saying he looked like someone "dancing / in a yoga meditation."

This description is striking because it reveals that her father was a lively and spiritual person. Although he is doing something considered relatively mundane and arguably a chore

for most people (cooking), he goes about it in a uniquely artful way. The combination of yoga and dancing also stands out because people are generally only capable of doing one or the other, but the speaker's father is portrayed as doing both simultaneously, epitomizing his whimsical and graceful nature.

This stanza takes on a sensual tone as the speaker continues to describe her father's love of cooking, stating that he "craved the voluptuous / sharing / of good food." The use of the term "voluptuous" is usually a reference to an attractive, sensual person, but appears to be a description of the pleasures derived from "good food" in this specific context. The reader gets the sense that her father was a sensual person who knew how to enjoy every aspect of life to its fullest.

The sounds of the stanza reflect that sensuality and lust for life. Notice, for example, all the smooth [sibilance](#) here, with the /s/ and /sh/ sounds in "miss," "dancing," "meditation," "voluptuous," and "sharing."

LINES 34-40

*Now I look ...
... strays my way.*

The speaker suggests that her father's vivacious attitude was passed down to her, saying "I look and cook just like him" now that she's reached adulthood. The [internal rhyme](#) here—"look"/"cook"—reflects that sense of unity and connection.

She implies that these behaviors are rooted in spiritual and emotional tranquility when she follows up this sentiment by saying "my brain light." The speaker's father was a spiritual role model as well, it seems. He not only modeled positive practical behaviors, but he also encouraged his daughter to adopt a philosophy of life that maximizes happiness. In this way, her father laid the foundation for her success, both professionally and spiritually.

The speaker's passion for cooking actually represents her philosophy of life in general. She approaches life the same way she approaches cooking, exhibiting creativity and energy in everything she pursues. Just as spices and seasoning introduce new flavors into a dish, the speaker is constantly "seasoning" her life by embracing new experiences and immersing herself in pursuits that bring her joy.

She extends the [metaphor](#) by saying that she is "happy to feed / whoever strays my way." While this line can be interpreted literally, it is also a metaphor for the speaker's approach to personal relationships. She welcomes people into her life with open arms, demonstrating her generosity and goodwill towards other people. This line also speaks to the speaker's open-minded attitude and willingness to connect with all the people she happens to cross paths with. The reader can see how the speaker's father influenced her relationship with food in particular and the world in general.

LINES 41-45

*He would have ...
... into the fire.*

In the final stanza, the speaker celebrates the person she has become due to her father's positive influence throughout her life. She comments that her late father "would have grown / to admire" her.

The specific language she uses echoes the sentiment of the third stanza, where the speaker acknowledges that her father "must have" been upset by "many of [her] truths. By saying that her father "would have grown" to admire who she is today, she recognizes that it *possibly* would've been a challenging process due to their differences, but that her father's nature would've ultimately led to complete acceptance of his daughter's identity.

In the last two lines of the poem, the speaker uses [asyndeton](#) to depict the different facets of her identity. She mentions cooking and writing, activities that have been explored extensively throughout the poem, but she also mentions "chopping wood" and "staring into the fire."

The speaker chopping her own wood to keep herself warm exemplifies the independence and self-sufficiency that her father emphasized throughout her upbringing. The final image of her "staring into the fire" encompasses the type of person she has become due to her father's influence. Because of her father, she moves through life without fear or shame, boldly "staring into the fire" and pursuing endeavors that are meaningful to her. She can sit in the "heat" of the moment because of the fiery and passionate personality that her father emulated and that she eventually adopted as an adult.

These concluding lines solidify the bond between the speaker and her father, which continues despite the fact that her father has passed away. His spirit and approach to life are survived by his daughter, who continues to move through the world just as her role model taught her. By ending the poem on this note, the speaker expresses both gratitude for her father and pride for the "woman" he helped her become.

the speaker uses to describe her own culinary endeavors refers just as much to how she approaches her life as to her time in the kitchen. She is creative and spontaneous, "tossing this and that / into the pot," constantly filling her life with new and exciting "seasoning."

Meals are also often eaten with other people, making food a common symbol of community and connection. Here, that idea is echoed in the fact that both father and daughter love to share their "good food" with others—symbolically, to offer some of their own warmth and joy to those around them, to "whoever strays [their] way."

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 28-30:** "He cooked like a person / dancing / in a yoga meditation"
- **Lines 31-33:** "and craved the voluptuous / sharing / of good food."
- **Line 34:** "Now I look and cook just like him:"
- **Lines 36-37:** "tossing this and that / into the pot;"
- **Lines 38-40:** "seasoning none of my life / the same way twice; happy to feed / whoever strays my way."
- **Line 44:** "cooking"



FIRE AND CHOPPING WOOD

At the end of the poem, the speaker describes the "woman" she has "become" simply: she is someone who spends her time "cooking, writing, chopping wood," and "staring into the fire."

She does *literally* do all these things, but they are also [symbolic](#) of the way she lives her life more generally. Her cooking represents her zest for life and generosity of spirit; her writing represents the way she "escape[d]" her father's fate; and her chopping wood symbolizes her independence and self-sufficiency. In other words, it represents the fact that she can take care of herself. This is something, of course, that the speaker's father sought to teach her how to do, and the closing image of the speaker "staring into the fire" emphasizes the idea that she absorbed her father's teachings.

Fire itself often symbolizes trials or struggles of a sort (think of the phrase "a baptism/trial by fire," which refers to having to quickly adapt to a difficult situation or do well under pressure). The speaker is saying here that she is strong and capable, the kind of woman who will boldly look directly "into the fire"—into the difficulties of life—and face them head on.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 44-45:** "chopping wood, / staring into the fire."



SYMBOLS



FOOD AND COOKING

Cooking and food in the poem [symbolize](#) warmth, vitality, and generosity. Cooking and food are commonly associated with these things in literature, which makes sense; think how comforting a home-cooked meal can be.

The way the speaker's father approaches cooking— "like a person / dancing / in a yoga meditation"—reflects his own zest for and appreciation of life. Similarly, the [extended metaphor](#)



POETIC DEVICES

ASYNDETON

[Asyndeton](#) appears in the second-to-last stanza as the speaker describes the way she goes about her life, and again in the final two lines of the poem as she describes the multiple dimensions of her personality. In the first instance, she details the ways she "look[s] and cook[s] just like" her father, describing "tossing" things into a pot willy-nilly, "seasoning none of [her] life / the same way twice," and so forth.

Later, after remarking that her father would admire "the woman I've become," the speaker uses asyndeton to elaborate on the activities that essentially define the kind of person she is. She mentions cooking and writing, which have already been described several times throughout the poem, but she also brings up "chopping wood" and "staring into the fire."

In both instances of asyndeton, the lack of conjunctions builds excitement by speeding up the lists, and suggesting the speaker's confident, self-assured tone. It also subtly suggests that there may be more aspects of her identity (the lack of conjunction means the list doesn't really have an end), but these are the most important. Overall, the reader gets the sense that her father played a pivotal role in shaping the speaker's multi-faceted personality, allowing her to become a complex, nuanced, and well-rounded individual.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 35-40:** "my brain light; / tossing this and that / into the pot; / seasoning none of my life / the same way twice; happy to feed / whoever strays my way."
- **Lines 44-45:** "cooking, writing, chopping wood, / staring into the fire."

SIMILE

There are two [similes](#) in this poem, both of which occur when the speaker is discussing her father's relationship with cooking and how it shaped her own passion for preparing and enjoying food.

In the first simile, the speaker compares her father's mannerisms in the kitchen to both a dancer and yoga practitioner, describing his behavior as someone "dancing / in a yoga meditation." This description is striking because it reveals that her father was a deeply-fulfilled person, someone who approached life with such joy that his cooking resembled dancing—and someone who was so grounded and fulfilled that this dancing seemed like a kind of meditation. Generally speaking, people don't dance and do yoga at the same time, but her father's approach to cooking is so graceful and whimsical that he appears to do both at once.

The speaker then suggests that her father's vivacious attitude

was passed down to her, saying, "I look and cook just like him" now that she's reached adulthood. She implies that these behaviors are rooted in spiritual and emotional tranquility when she follows up this sentiment by referring to the "light[ness]" of her brain (a [metaphor](#) within this simile). In other words, she wasn't weighed down or burdened by the trials of life, but rather able to approach things with a level head and a positive attitude.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 28-30:** "He cooked like a person / dancing / in a yoga meditation"
- **Line 34:** "Now I look and cook just like him:"

EXTENDED METAPHOR

As noted in this guide's discussion of the poem's [symbols](#), the speaker's relationship with food and cooking, which was inspired by her father's own passion, is a recurring motif in this piece. While food and cooking have broad symbolic associations, here let's focus on the [extended metaphor](#) that the speaker develops related to cooking in the poem's penultimate stanza.

Here, cooking comes to metaphorically represent the speaker's approach to life in general. The speaker says that her father taught her the practice of "seasoning none of my life / the same way twice." In other words, she approaches life the same way she approaches cooking, exhibiting creativity and energy in everything she pursues. Just as spices and seasoning introduce new flavors into a dish, the speaker is constantly "seasoning" her life by embracing new experiences and immersing herself in pursuits that bring her joy.

She extends the metaphor by saying that she is "happy to feed / whoever strays my way." While this line can be interpreted literally, it is also a metaphor for the speaker's approach to personal relationships. She welcomes people into her life with open arms, demonstrating her generosity and goodwill towards others. This line also speaks to the speaker's open-minded attitude and willingness to connect with the many different people that she happens to cross paths with.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 34-40:** "Now I look and cook just like him: / my brain light; / tossing this and that / into the pot; / seasoning none of my life / the same way twice; happy to feed / whoever strays my way."

REPETITION

The most obvious example of [repetition](#) in the poem is the speaker's repetition of the opening line: "How I miss my father." This line immediately sets the nostalgic tone for the rest of the

poem.

The speaker is reflecting on her memories of her father, who has since passed away. By declaring this sentiment from the very beginning, the speaker frames the poem as a kind of ode to or eulogy for her father, who had an enormous impact on her life as a child and as an adult. The fact that the speaker repeats the opening line midway through the poem reflects the strength of this impact.

Also note how, in this second appearance of the phrase, the speaker is more enthusiastic: where the first line ended with a period, here it ends with an exclamation point. This suggests that the speaker's process of sifting through cherished memories with her father and contemplating the positive influence he's had on her life actually reinforced and strengthened her overall impression of him. The repetition of this line stands as a reaffirmation of the speaker's respect and admiration for her father, which he consistently reciprocated throughout her life. It's clear why the speaker misses her father and their relationship so profoundly.

Another, smaller moment of repetition is the [diacope](#) of "truth[s]," which appears in lines 21 and 24:

that telling the truth
[...]
though many of my truths

This repetition creates continuity between the father's teachings and his daughter's actions. He taught her to tell the truth, and then she does just that.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "How I miss my father."
- **Line 21:** "truth"
- **Line 24:** "truths"
- **Line 27:** "How I miss my father!"

METAPHOR

In an addition to the [extended metaphor](#) related to cooking discussed elsewhere in this guide, there are some smaller [metaphors](#) as well.

One of the poem's main themes centers on the speaker's journey as a professional writer, which was heavily influenced by her father's presence. In the second stanza, the speaker says that she "learned to see / bits of paper / as a way / to escape / the life he knew."

This notion that "bits of paper" could be a means of escaping poverty and hardship is both literal and metaphorical. The speaker is not literally saying that blank scraps of paper will be her ticket out of poverty, but rather that her writing will help her overcome her circumstances.

The phrase refers to two different functions of writing. The first one, which the speaker's father taught her directly, involved practical skills like bookkeeping. The speaker implies that the other function of writing, as a creative and intellectual pursuit, became a part of her life because of this example set by her father. She began to see writing as a potential career opportunity that could lift her out of her humble origins. While her father taught her how to use writing as a way to *manage* income, the speaker learned how to use writing as a way to *generate* income and increase her status in the world.

As noted in this guide's discussion of the poem's [similes](#), another metaphor appears in line 35 with the phrase "my brain light." This is simply the speaker's way of saying that her approach to life is optimistic and joyful, not weighed down or burdened by heavy thoughts.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-15:** "bits of paper / as a way / to escape"
- **Line 35:** "my brain light;"
- **Lines 38-39:** "seasoning none of my life / the same way twice"

ENJAMBMENT

Most of the lines in the poem are [enjambéd](#), and this helps portray the thoughts and feelings of the speaker as though they are occurring in real time. The poem presents the speaker's thought process in an unstructured and free-flowing manner, and enjambment allows the speaker's thoughts to run together and bleed into each other. This makes sense when considering that the poem is a recollection of sorts, and people tend to remember things in bits and pieces.

Because the poem is so heavily enjambéd, the moments of [end-stop](#) feel all the more powerful. The poem's opening line is of course strongly end-stopped, with the speaker's declaration that she misses her father feeling declarative and final; this longing for him isn't going anywhere.

Another particularly striking moment of end-stop comes at the start of the second stanza. The shift is sharp: every line apart from the first and last is enjambéd in the first stanza, yet arguably every line from line 7 ("I think of him.") until line 11 ("the way it is done.") is end-stopped. Not coincidentally, the speaker here talks about how her father taught her to write checks and handle bookkeeping—methodical, patience-requiring activities. That need for a methodical, patient approach is reflected by the steady end-stops here, which also add a sense of power and authority to the father's words.

When the father finishes his lesson, the speaker returns to the enjambment that will characterize most of the poem. The entire rest of the stanza features enjambéd lines (apart from the final line), and this creates a sense of building momentum and freedom as the speaker details how she decided to "escape" her

father's fate.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "been / so"
- **Lines 3-4:** "tired / when"
- **Lines 4-5:** "was / born"
- **Lines 6-7:** "checks / I"
- **Lines 12-13:** "see / bits"
- **Lines 14-15:** "way / to"
- **Lines 15-16:** "escape / the"
- **Lines 16-17:** "knew / and"
- **Lines 17-18:** "school / had"
- **Lines 18-19:** "savings / account"

ASSONANCE

Although this poem does not have a regular [rhyme scheme](#), it does make use of [assonance](#). These moments of assonance contribute to the overall flow and rhythm of the poem without making it feel too structured or stiff.

The speaker also uses assonance to emphasize certain ideas throughout the poem. For example, in the second stanza, the long /ay/ of "paper" repeats soon after in "escape." Combined with the [consonance](#) of the plosive /p/ sound here ("paper," "escape"), the two words feel connected sonically—reflecting the idea that, for the speaker, writing will be a means to overcome poverty and hardship.

There's a stronger moment of assonance in the third stanza, when the speaker repeats the long /ee/ sound to stress the importance of her father's gentle approach to parenting. Her father showed her that speaking her truth "did not always mean / a beating" despite the fact that her truths "must have grieved him / before the end." The assonance in these lines highlights the significance of her father's teachings, which empowered the speaker to pursue her truth as a woman in general and as a writer in particular.

Later, the [internal rhyme](#) of "Now I look and cook just like him" (created through both assonance and consonance) emphasizes the similarities between herself and her late father. These short instances of assonance serve to strengthen the comparison between the speaker and her beloved role model while improving the flow and rhythm of the poem as a whole.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 13:** "paper"
- **Line 15:** "escape"
- **Line 22:** "mean"
- **Line 23:** "beating"
- **Line 25:** "grieved"
- **Line 34:** "look," "cook"
- **Line 38:** "my life"

- **Line 39:** "same way twice"
- **Line 40:** "strays," "way"



VOCABULARY

Deposit slip (Line 6) - A form used when placing cash with a bank.

Escape (Lines 14-15) - To break free from confinement or control. In the poem, the act of writing is portrayed as a method for rising above and breaking free from one's circumstances.

Grieved (Line 25) - In this context, "grieved" means to cause great distress to someone. The speaker believes that her personal beliefs and choices probably distressed her father before his death, but he still accepted and loved her for who she is.

Meditation (Line 30) - To think deeply or focus one's mind for a period of time, usually for spiritual or relaxation purposes. The speaker compares her father's mannerisms while cooking to a yoga meditation, implying that he was a graceful, thoughtful man.

Yoga (Line 30) - A spiritual discipline that includes deep breathing, specific body positions, and meditation that is meant to promote health and relaxation.

Voluptuous (Lines 31-32) - In this context, "voluptuous" refers to luxury or pleasure. The cooking and sharing of meals was considered one of life's greatest pleasures in the speaker's household.

Seasoning (Line 38) - This line uses two definitions of seasoning: adding spices to food and adding a quality/feature to something, especially to make it more lively. The speaker suggests that her father's creative approach to cooking, which was passed down to her, has also contributed to "spicing up" her own life.

Strays (Line 40) - To deviate from the proper course. In the poem, the speaker explains her generosity towards those who stray in her direction, suggesting that this mindset was the product of her father's gracious upbringing.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem does not follow a traditional form, which is in keeping with its overall [stream of consciousness](#) style. Its 45 lines are broken into six stanzas that vary significantly in length. The loose structure of the stanzas visually demonstrates the ebb and flow of the speaker's memories throughout the poem. As the speaker's thoughts move between the past and the present, the stanzas also fluctuate in length and shape, mirroring the

shifts in her thought process.

METER

The poem is written in [free verse](#) and thus has no steady [meter](#). What is consistent, however, is that all the lines are relatively short—some made up of just a single word or phrase. This reflects the poem's content: since memories often appear as partial thoughts and incomplete ideas, the loose, fragmented language captures the speaker's experience of navigating her recollections as they organically emerge. The reader gets the sense that they are traveling through the speaker's mind during her process of self-reflection.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem is written in [free verse](#) and thus has no consistent [rhyme scheme](#). This keeps things feeling loose and fresh throughout. A strict rhyme scheme might make the speaker's memories come across as artificial-sounding, rather than organic and free-flowing.

Despite the lack of a formal rhyme scheme, there are a few moments of [internal rhyme](#) (or near rhyme) interspersed throughout the poem. For example, in the penultimate stanza, the speaker describes the similarities between herself and her late father by saying, "Now I look and cook just like him." The internal rhyme of "look" and "cook" emphasizes the connection between their personalities and stresses the influence that the speaker's father had on her life.



SETTING

The setting of this poem takes place within the speaker's mind as she explores different memories of her childhood and the relationship she had with her father. The speaker continually drifts between memories of her past and her experiences in the present throughout the poem. Notably, the end of the poem is marked by a return to the present day, with the speaker on the cusp of turning 40 years old. The ongoing shift between past and present echoes the self-reflective nature of the poem as a whole.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Alice Walker wrote this poem in 1983 when she was 39 years old. "Poem at Thirty-Nine" was first published in an issue of *Ms. Magazine* (co-founded by famed feminist activist Gloria Steinem). This came directly on the heels of Walker's most famous novel to date, [The Color Purple](#), which was released in 1982 and earned the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction the following year.

"Poem at Thirty-Nine" was thus published when Walker was at the height of her career, and, of course, approaching the milestone of turning 40. Given these circumstances, it makes sense that Walker would use this opportunity to reflect on her life.

Walker would go on to write many more critically-acclaimed novels, short stories, and poems following the publication of "Poem at Thirty-Nine." She continues to be an influential figure in the literary field to this day, giving voice to many of the experiences and struggles that Black people, and particularly Black women, have faced in the U.S. throughout history.

Many other poets have used also their work to reflect on the intense, and often fraught, bond between parents and children. Mervyn Morris's "[Little Boy Crying](#)" and Robert Hayden's "[Those Winter Sundays](#)" both focus on fathers in particular, while Langston Hughes's "[Mother to Son](#)," "[Mother, any Distance](#)" by British poet Simon Armitage, and "[Mother](#)" by Vuong Pham all turn towards mothers. For an entirely different take on approaching middle age, readers may want to check out "[On This Day I Complete My Thirty-Sixth Year](#)" by the Romantic poet Lord Byron.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This poem effectively covers two generations: the speaker's generation and her father's generation. Since the speaker here is based on Alice Walker herself, her own life is a reasonable reference point.

Walker's father was a sharecropper, which she alludes to in the



SPEAKER

As the title indicates, the speaker is a 39-year-old woman who is reminiscing about her relationship with her father while she faces the transition from young adulthood to middle age. The speaker presents herself as someone who both appreciates her origins and embraces the woman she has become.

In this particular poem, the speaker and the poet are considerably similar. Like the speaker, Walker also pursued a professional writing career and ultimately achieved success. Walker also had a close relationship with her father, and she spoke publicly about his importance in her life and the impact that his death had on her.

The speaker's poverty and humble origins parallel Walker's own biography as well. In fact, Walker's father made a living as a sharecropper, an occupation that the speaker seems to allude to when she says of her father "I wish he had not been / so tired / when I was / born." Given such consistencies between the speaker's narrative and Walker's personal life, it is fair to say that Walker is using this poem as a way to explore her own relationship with her father and how it influenced her career and personality as an adult.

first stanza when she describes him as "so tired" when she came into the world. Walker's family thus directly experienced the historical transition from slavery to sharecropping. For generations after slavery was officially abolished, Black people continued to be oppressed and economically exploited in the U.S. through other mechanisms that were technically legal, and sharecropping was one of them.

Under this system, sharecroppers would rent small plots of land from a landowner and return a portion of their crop at the end of each year. Although this system allowed many to feed their families and survive, it also kept them indebted to white landowners and perpetuated a cycle of poverty and economic stagnation. In "Poem at Thirty-Nine," the speaker delves into how this system impacted her family and her upbringing, as her father is committed to making sure his children have a better life (and better career prospects) than the one he had to endure.

By the time Alice Walker was born in 1944, the United States was still a harsh and oppressive climate for Black people, who were continually subjected to economic, political, and social discrimination. Walker's father's determination to provide a stable life for his daughter and support her growth and upward mobility was a response to the oppression they were experiencing on a daily basis.

- [Alice Walker in Ms. Magazine](#) — A 2011 birthday tribute from the feminist publication, featuring links to Walker's stories and short speech by Gloria Steinem. (<https://msmagazine.com/2011/02/09/happy-birthday-alice-walker/>)
- [Biography of Alice Walker](#) — A discussion of Walker's life and literary career, including her relationship with her father and the impact of his death. (https://salempress.com/Media/SalemPress/samples/walker_pgs.pdf)
- [The Poem Out Loud](#) — Listen to a reading and analysis of the poem, delivered by an English instructor. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=THVb1KKFMHc>)
- [An Interview With Alice Walker](#) — Alice Walker discusses her life, work, and activism. (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/mar/09/alice-walker-beauty-in-truth-interview>)



HOW TO CITE

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MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [From Poor Childhood to Pulitzer Prize](#) — This article provides an overview of Alice Walker's success in the literary world as well as a discussion of her personal life. (<https://news.amomama.com/212543-alice-walkers-rise-poor-childhood-pulitz.html>)