

Resumé



POEM TEXT

- 1 Razors pain you;
- 2 Rivers are damp;
- 3 Acids stain you;
- 4 And drugs cause cramp.
- 5 Guns aren't lawful;
- 6 Nooses give;
- 7 Gas smells awful;
- 8 You might as well live.

sound like they're not too committed to the idea: they're not grappling with big questions about death, but worrying about "stain[s]."

When the speaker at last concludes that "you might as well live," then, this closing line seems both cynical and hopeful. It paints a comic picture of a person who's thinking about suicide with about the same level of energy as they might try to make plans on a lazy Sunday: "it's too hot out, might as well stay home." But this line also reaches out to the poem's readers—"you"—and suggests that perhaps going on living is a better solution to one's problems than going to all the trouble of dying. The poem's sense of humor itself offers a good reason to live: at least existence, as painful as it can be, is often absurdly funny.



SUMMARY

The speaker runs through a list of ways that one might end their own life, rejecting each in turn: cutting your wrists hurts too much, the speaker says, and drowning is unpleasantly wet. Acid ruins your clothes, and taking an overdose gives you a stomachache. It's illegal to buy a gun, ropes don't always hold, and poisonous gas smells disgusting. The speaker concludes that death by suicide is so unpleasant and difficult that it seems easier to go on living.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

*Razors pain you;
Rivers are damp;
Acids stain you;
And drugs cause cramp.*

"Resumé" cuts right to the chase: in the first four lines of this short, snappy poem, a speaker considers and rejects four different suicide methods. That might sound grim, but everything about the way this poem is shaped makes it clear that this speaker is telling not a tale of despair, but a pitch-black, [ironic](#) joke.

First off, there's the speaker's ridiculous [understatement](#). In real life, any of the suicide methods the speaker describes here would be agonizing; in this poem, they're presented simply as *inconvenient*. When the speaker objects that burning yourself to death with acid would "stain you," for instance, it's as if they're tsk-ing over the laundry bill they'd rack up, not trembling in fear over a horrific demise. The same is true for the unpleasant "damp[ness]" of rivers and the "cramp" of an overdose: these mild objections sound like the words of a parent warning a kid not to go swimming too soon after eating, not a person in despair.

All this ironic understatement also starts to paint a picture of a person who's so jaded about life that even suicide just sounds like a bit of a chore.

Notice how the way the speaker uses [parallelism](#) and [end-stopped lines](#) throughout the poem to make it seem as though



THEMES



LIFE AND DEATH

The speaker of Dorothy Parker's tongue-in-cheek "Resumé" runs through a list of ways people might end their own lives, rejecting methods one by one as too messy, uncomfortable, or difficult. In the end, the speaker concludes, one "might as well live": death by suicide is just too much of a bother! This witty, cynical poem has a core of genuine warmth, suggesting that, on balance, living isn't really *that* bad—or at least, it's certainly not as bad as dying.

Every means of death that the speaker can think of strikes them as a hassle, suggesting that perhaps the speaker's despair isn't quite as deep as they might think. One by one, the speaker rejects these grisly methods for comically understated reasons: drowning is too "damp," acid burns ruin one's clothes, and poisonous gas smells just "awful."

On the one hand, these excuses make the speaker sound deeply jaded and world-weary, as if their life feels so meaningless that suicide itself seems like just another irritating chore. On the other hand, imagining suicide this way also makes the speaker

the speaker is rejecting suicide methods as easily as one might decide against choices on a menu. The speaker begins each straightforward line by introducing a suicide-adjacent noun (razors, rivers, acids, drugs) and then wraps things up quickly and definitively, leaving no room for argument.

The accentual meter here makes the speaker sound even *more* casual. Accentual poetry doesn't use any one kind of [metrical](#) foot; instead, it just uses a certain number of stresses (or strong beats) per line. Each of these lines uses a mere two stresses, like this:

Razors pain you;
Rivers are damp;

The combination of a strong beat and a changing rhythm means this speaker sounds both firm and casual: both attitudes one wouldn't necessarily expect from a person contemplating suicide!

In just 13 witty words, then, the first half of this poem creates a dramatic situation and paints a vivid portrait of a drawing, jaded speaker whose feelings about suicide seem to be, in essence, "But it sounds like such a *bore*." This is all funny in itself—but it's also clearly the setup to a joke, and readers can feel that a killer punchline is on its way.

LINES 5-8

Guns aren't lawful;
Nooses give;
Gas smells awful;
You might as well live.

The poem's second [quatrain](#) builds on the same pattern the first quatrain set up: four snappy two-beat lines, all structured the same way, all considering and rejecting forms of suicide. But the subtle way this pattern *changes* in the second half prepares the reader for a twist in the tail, the punchline that has made this poem famous.

Readers might notice that there's a teeny-tiny change in [tone](#) in lines 5 and 6. The speaker's previous objections to suicide have been that all the methods just sound unpleasant (a pretty dramatic [understatement](#)). Here, though, the speaker's concerns seem to be more to do with the *difficulty* and *unreliability* of suicide. There's still something pretty silly about the idea that it isn't "lawful" to shoot yourself—after all, nobody's going to arrest a dead body. But it's a silliness with a little more edge.

There's something even bleaker about the two-word line "Nooses give." In other words, the reason not to hang oneself isn't that one should embrace life, or even that hanging is uncomfortable, but that one just can't *count* on a noose—it might not do the trick!

These are subtle tonal changes, but they do give the poem a bit

more bite as it goes on. That intensification keeps the second stanza from feeling like a plain old reiteration of the first and builds the joke's tension even more: by now, readers can feel that a punchline must be on the way.

That punchline itself then fires off like a two-stage rocket:

- First, the speaker undercuts the sharper tone of lines 5 and 6 with the most absurd complaint yet: poisonous gas just "smells awful."
- With that, the speaker is forced to conclude: "You might as well live."

That final line releases all the poem's built-up energy in one go. Since suicide just sounds so terribly dreary, the speaker seems to conclude, going on living seems like the path of least resistance, the easiest thing to do. The change in the [meter](#) here from a two-beat line to the *rat-a-tat-tat* of "You **might as well live**" makes this speaker's decision to stay alive after all sound as brisk and casual as choosing to stay in rather than go out this weekend.

In the end, then, this poem is a pitch black joke, with a finely-tuned setup and payoff that waste absolutely no words. But there's also a bit of a twinkle in this poem's eye: a "resumé" can mean a summation, and in summing up all the disadvantages of suicide, this jaded-sounding speaker might have some sincere hope to offer. That closing "you" suggests that the speaker is nudging their reader right in the ribs, saying: "Sure, life might sometimes seem exhausting and pointless—but at least it's funny."



POETIC DEVICES

IRONY

This whole poem is built on the speaker's [ironically](#) casual tone. Contemplating suicide with a world-weary air, this speaker suggests that staying alive is really just the path of least resistance. Suicide, to them, isn't so much a horror as a *bother*.

If readers were given a sealed envelope and told it contains a poem about suicide, they'd be likely to predict something pretty grim: a tale of deep misery, perhaps some heartbreak or tragedy, a farewell or two to loved ones, maybe a few worries about what might come after death. (Not for nothing is the most famous piece of suicide poetry Hamlet's "[To be, or not to be](#)" speech.) They'd be pretty surprised if they opened that envelope and found this poem instead.

"Resumé," then, is all about undercutting readers' expectations—something it does in the space of about three words. The first few lines of the poem set up a pattern of ludicrous [understatement](#) that catches readers off guard: "acids," for instance, do things a lot worse than merely "stain[ing]" you. All that absurdity softens readers up to laugh

at the closing punchline: "You might as well live."

The ironic presentation of suicide here suggests that this poem's witty author doesn't have much time for people who take themselves and their lives too seriously. In this poem's eyes, life might be a pain sometimes—but it's certainly not as big a pain as death.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8

END-STOPPED LINE

The [end-stops](#) that close every line give this poem its comically blasé [tone](#).

Every line but the last one here considers—and rejects—a form of suicide. By shutting these lines down with firm end-stops, the speaker makes it clear that they've completely ruled each of these methods out:

Razors pain you;
Rivers are damp;
Acids stain you;
And drugs cause cramp.

The solid pauses at the end of each of these lines work like a silent "nope." All these end-stops also help to pace the poem, setting readers up for its punchline.

The first four lines here introduce readers to the basic pattern they're dealing with here: the speaker will raise, and then shut down, a bunch of suicide methods. As this pattern develops, readers start to wonder where the speaker is going: will they finally find a method that suits them, for instance?

At last, the speaker satisfies their curiosity:

You might as well live.

That firm, unemotional period sends the joke zooming home: in the end, the speaker suggests, it seems like less trouble just to go living, all things considered. The end-stop here is a huge part of what makes the poem funny, making the speaker sound as casual about their decision not to kill themselves as they would be about deciding not to go to the movies this afternoon.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "you;"
- **Line 2:** "damp;"
- **Line 3:** "you;"
- **Line 4:** "cramp."
- **Line 5:** "lawful;"
- **Line 6:** "give;"
- **Line 7:** "awful;"

- **Line 8:** "live."

PARALLELISM

[Parallelism](#) is this poem's backbone: it's what makes the speaker's voice sound so absurdly matter-of-fact about suicide, and it's a big part of what makes the final line so funny.

The poem is one long series of parallel sentences. Every line starts with a means of suicide, and then summarily rejects it for causing some kind of (usually petty-sounding) hassle:

Razors pain you;
Rivers are damp;
Acids stain you;
And drugs cause cramp.

The repetitive structure of these lines make the speaker sound ridiculously pragmatic, as if they were running through a catalogue of suicide options, crossing them off one by one. But they also make readers brace for a surprise: the poem can't just go on rejecting suicide methods forever, can it?

And, indeed, this parallel setup finally delivers a parallel punchline:

Guns aren't lawful;
Nooses give;
Gas smells awful;
You might as well live.

Switching the last line's first word from a suicide method to a sudden "you," the speaker catches readers off guard—and that surprise is what makes this joke work. Parallelism thus shapes the poem both by creating a pattern and by making it clear that this pattern is going to have to break sometime.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8

UNDERSTATEMENT

The poem's constant [understatement](#) about the pains and horrors of suicide evokes the speaker's world-weary character.

The speaker of this poem rejects a whole list of suicide methods, not because the speaker is [fretting about the afterlife](#)—or even afraid of the pain of dying—but because everything just sounds a little bit inconvenient or unpleasant. Try to burn yourself with acid and you'll only "stain" your clothes; overdose, and you'll have terrible indigestion; throw yourself into the river and you'll just get "damp."

Of course, every single one of these objections dramatically underplays the actual agony one would suffer if one tried any of

these methods. It's as if the speaker is turning down a series of ideas about what to do this weekend, not trying to decide how to shuffle off this mortal coil. The distance between the grim realities the speaker refers to and the speaker's casual phrasing is a big part of what makes this poem funny!

The understatement here also paints a remarkably vivid picture of who this speaker is, even though they never tell readers anything about themselves directly. They sound absurdly world-weary, so jaded that nothing really matters to them any more: whether they live or die seems to concern them about as much as whether they decide to go to the zoo or stay home this Saturday.

Where Understatement appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "pain you"
- **Line 2:** "damp"
- **Line 3:** "stain you"
- **Line 4:** "cause cramp"
- **Line 7:** "smells awful"

ALLITERATION

[Alliteration](#) gives this poem a brisk, punchy quality that fits in with the speaker's tongue-in-cheek [tone](#).

Take a look at the way alliterative sounds thread through this poem:

Razors pain you;
Rivers are damp;
Acids stain you;
And drugs cause cramp.
Guns aren't lawful;
Nooses give;
Gas smells awful;
You might as well live.

All the repetitions here are either clipped or forceful. The /r/ sound of "razors" and "rivers," for instance, feel zippy, sharp, and sudden as the suicides these lines describe. And the hard /c/ sounds in "cause cramp" sound as crisp and final as if the speaker were slamming the book closed on a catalogue of suicide options. These sounds make it clear that the speaker isn't composing a lament about their despair: they're approaching death with brisk efficiency.

The strong /g/ sound that appears in every line of the closing [quatrain](#), meanwhile, sounds similarly final. But it also helps to support the poem's gathering momentum. As each new /g/ word—"guns," "give," "gas"—thumps into place, the reader can feel that a punchline is on its way.

Alliteration thus helps to make this poem memorable, satisfying, and funny: it both reflects the speaker's personality and subtly shapes readers' expectations.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Razors"
- **Line 2:** "Rivers"
- **Line 4:** "cause cramp"
- **Line 5:** "Guns"
- **Line 6:** "give"
- **Line 7:** "Gas"



VOCABULARY

Lawful (Line 5) - Legal.

Nooses (Line 6) - Ropes used for hangings.

Give (Line 6) - Come undone, fail.

Gas (Line 7) - That is, gas that's poisonous to breathe, like the kind in ovens or cars.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

Dorothy Parker was a master of bite-sized, [epigrammatic](#) light verse, and "Resumé" is perhaps one of her most famous: in its eight extremely short lines, this poem packs a punch.

While it's presented as one eight-line stanza (or octet), this poem really breaks down into two four-line stanzas (or [quatrains](#)): the first quatrain sets up a pattern, raising and rejecting different suicide options, and the second quatrain starts to repeat that pattern, only to break it with the poem's witty closing line.

In other words: with its setup and punchline, this poem essentially takes the form of a joke! It's short, snappy, and built to deliver a laugh.

METER

"Resumé" is written in accentual meter. That means that it uses a certain number of strong stresses per line, but it doesn't stick to any one metrical foot, like the [iamb](#) or the [dactyl](#).

Take a look at how that works in the first four lines:

Razors **pain** you;
Rivers are **damp**;
Acids **stain** you;
And **drugs** cause **cramp**.

All the lines here are in dimeter: they use two stresses each. (It's *possible* to scan the fourth line as "And **drugs** cause **cramp**," but two stresses feel more natural in our read.) Those stresses feel pretty forceful in such short lines, giving the speaker's voice a brisk, dismissive quality. But the irregular number of

unstressed syllables here means these lines also sound conversational and casual, making the speaker seem [ironically](#) calm and chatty about suicide.

Meter also plays an important role in landing this poem's punchline. Here's what happens in the second half of the poem:

Guns aren't **lawful**;
Nooses **give**;
Gas smells **awful**;
You **might** as **well live**.

Notice the change? The very last line has *three* stresses, giving it a snappy rat-a-tat-tat rhythm that draws extra attention to the closing joke.

RHYME SCHEME

The [rhyme scheme](#) in "Resumé" runs like this:

ABABCD CD

That singsongy pattern is all part of this poem's witty tone, and feels pretty incongruous in a poem about suicide: it's a scheme more likely to appear in a nursery rhyme than a tale of despair.

But of course, this *isn't* a tale of despair: in some sense, it's an *anti*-suicide poem, suggesting that dying might sound appealing sometimes, but it's almost certainly a lot more of a hassle than living. The simple, cheery rhymes here thus help to make this poem feel funny and light.



SPEAKER

The speaker of "Resumé" is world-weary in more than one sense. They seem to be pretty miserable: they're busily ticking off all the possible ways they could die by suicide. But in the end, every one of those methods just sounds like a pain or a bore: to this speaker, even ending it all seems like too much effort.

The speaker's fastidiousness about "stain[s]," bad "smells," and the uncomfortable "damp" of rivers gives readers a sense that this speaker might be a jaded, hedonistic 1920s socialite, a person with one eye on pleasure and comfort even as they ponder death itself. In the end, they're put off suicide, not by some epiphany about the beauty of life, but by the thought that killing oneself sounds like it'd put a burden on one's laundry bill.

This speaker's willingness to make a joke out of despair conceals a little sparkle of hope: their exasperated decision that they "might as well live" suggests that, buoyed by their own sense of absurd humor, they may find something to live for after all. (And they seem to hope that their reader—"you"—might come to the same conclusion.)

This witty speaker might easily be read as a version of Dorothy Parker herself, who was famous for her [cynical epigrams](#) (and

who genuinely went through some pretty dark times in her life, and survived them).



SETTING

There's no particular setting in "Resumé," but the poem's tone suggests it belongs to the time and place it was written: 1920s New York. The speaker's cynical, world-weary voice comes straight out of the Roaring 20s, the decade in which the younger generation rejected the stiff morality of their Victorian parents and embraced living for the day, drinking, dancing, and generally having a good time.

All that fun had an underpinning of sorrow, though: a lot of this wild energy was a reaction against the horrors of World War I (1914-1918), which killed millions. (More on that in the Context section of this guide.) Making a joke out of despair, this poem thus fits right in with its times.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Dorothy Parker (1893-1967) was one of the brightest lights of the literary scene in 1920s New York. Best known for her brilliant, cutting poetry, she also wrote journalism, short stories, plays, and screenplays. In later life she became a devoted supporter of the emerging Civil Rights movement, willing her literary estate to [Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.](#)

Parker was a founding member of the [Algonquin Round Table](#), a group of writers and actors whose habit of lunching together at the Algonquin Hotel slowly transformed into a legendary art scene. The members of the Round Table were known for sly, witty, and often cynical writing, and especially for their [Oscar-Wilde-ish epigrams](#). Parker's crisp, snappy poems remain some of the most famous works to come from that circle.

But Parker later remembered finding the atmosphere of the Round Table a little too smug and jokey for her tastes. Even her comic poetry often came from a place of melancholy; "Resumé" is just one good example. She was deeply influenced by both the light and heavy verse of [Edna St. Vincent Millay](#) and admired contemporary novelists like [F. Scott Fitzgerald](#) and [Ernest Hemingway](#).

While Parker was often dismissive of her own talents, her poems remain famous and beloved to this day—and some of her blistering one-liners have become almost proverbial.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Resumé" is a poem straight out of the Roaring '20s, a post-war period during which the younger generation roundly dismissed the rigid morals and scruples of their Victorian parents. Women in particular embraced a whole new way of being, rejecting old-

fashioned ideals of feminine modesty. Dorothy Parker, a working journalist and unapologetic hedonist, was just one of a generation of women who publicly embraced previously unheard-of economic and sexual freedoms.

While this decade opened up wild new possibilities, a lot of its devil-may-care freedom had an underpinning of deep sorrow: the generation that partied in the '20s were the survivors of World War I (1914-18), a bloody (and pointless) conflict that killed millions of young soldiers and civilians. This futile war shook many people's faith in their countries, and in the social order in general. When the young people of the '20s decided to tear up the cultural rulebook and start afresh, they were in part defying a social order that could produce such misery and carnage.

The black humor of "Resumé" is thus very 1920s: it's one way of laughing in the face of death.

- [The Dorothy Parker Society](http://www.dorothyparker.com/) – Visit the website of the Dorothy Parker Society to learn more about Parker's legacy. (<https://dorothyparker.com/>)
- [A Brief Biography](https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20170605-dorothy-parkers-stunning-wit-and-tragic-life) – Learn about Parker's life. (<https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20170605-dorothy-parkers-stunning-wit-and-tragic-life>)
- [More of Parker's Poetry](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/dorothy-parker#tab-poems) – Read more of Parker's witty verse. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/dorothy-parker#tab-poems>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER DOROTHY PARKER POEMS

- [One Perfect Rose](#)



HOW TO CITE

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CHICAGO MANUAL

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MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [The Poem Aloud](https://youtu.be/T4G0YPv8s3U) – Listen to a recording of Dorothy Parker herself reading the poem out loud. (<https://youtu.be/T4G0YPv8s3U>)
- [Enough Rope](https://archive.org/details/enoughropepoems0000park/page/60/mode/2up) – See images of a first edition of *Enough Rope*, the collection "Resumé" first appeared in. (<https://archive.org/details/enoughropepoems0000park/page/60/mode/2up>)