

The Road



SUMMARY

The speaker declares that they made the moon appear to reverse its rising course in the sky and move behind the hills next to the road. The speaker drove east along the road for so long and at such a high speed that it felt as though time itself stopped.

The stars looked like a swirling cluster of insects behind the trees, but the speaker drove as fast as those stars. The speaker states they had the potential to control the movement of the sun and, therefore, to make the night become day once again (i.e., by making the sun rise once again).

The speaker compares the darkness of the night to a long black carpet being unfurled behind the wheels of the speaker's car and across the rest of the landscape. However, everything in front of the speaker was still sunlit.

The speaker kept driving, making the fence-posts that lined the road appear to swiftly swing along the electrical wires between them. The speed at which the posts rushed by reminded the speaker of days that end too quickly. Passing by the tall telephone poles that hovered over the road reminded the speaker of the way that years slide away into the past.

As the speaker drove, all the forces and objects around them—light, motion, the sky, the road, time, and life itself—combined into a single, unified entity. Meanwhile, the speaker continued to drive urgently through the night in the direction of the sunrise.

appears as though the speaker is making the earth's spinning—and thus the passage of time—stop or even reverse itself. Holding back the darkness of the night also suggests, on a [symbolic](#) level, that the speaker is holding back death itself.

Of course, this is really just a trick of perspective. In reality, the speaker is still moving forward both through both space and time, as the "telephone poles" and "fence-posts" along the road remind them. Because these objects are planted in place, it looks like they're being whisked backward as the speaker drives ahead, and they remind the speaker of the fact that "days" and "years" continue to slip through their fingers with every passing moment.

And yet, the speaker also says that "life and time" are "one," meaning that, [paradoxically](#), they can't keep living without also accepting the passage of time (and thus the approach of death). While a human life may feel fleeting, always "fly[ing]" by "too fast," the speaker seems to take comfort in the idea that being alive—rushing down the [metaphorical](#) road of life towards the light of a new dawn—means embracing one's place within the natural rhythms of the universe.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20



THE POWER OF HOPE

"The Road" is more than a poem about the thrill of an early morning (or late night) drive. Roads often [symbolize](#) life itself, while the night and darkness typically symbolize death, despair, and the unknown. As such, driving away from the dark night and "towards the sun" can be read as an [extended metaphor](#) for the speaker's attempt to outrun their own negative emotions (and perhaps even their own mortality). The "long black carpet" of night might always be right on the speaker's heels, but the speaker's determination to drive towards the light suggests the enduring power of hope in the face of looming darkness.

Throughout the poem, the speaker urgently attempts to avoid the night. They make the "rising moon go back" and only travel towards the brightness of the sun. The speaker moves with boldness and perhaps even franticness, "rac[ing]," rushing, and speeding down the road.

The night itself, meanwhile, comes across as distinctly threatening in the poem. The speaker says the stars "swarmed," for example, as though they were a cluster of bugs in the sky. Calling the night a "long black carpet" that unrolls right "behind the wheels" of the speaker's car is another ominous image. It further suggests that the speaker isn't just out for a joyride but



THEMES



LIFE, DEATH, AND TIME

"The Road" illustrates the exhilaration of speeding down a road towards the sunrise. Straddling the border between night and day, the speaker feels a sense of control over the heavens; it's as though, in speeding as "fast as" the stars above, they've made "time itself [stand] still." The speaker seems all too aware that this thrilling power is illusory, however—that moments continue to slip too quickly "into the past" as the speaker drives down this road because "life and time" are "one." Neither can exist without the other, the speaker ultimately implies, because to live is also to move forward.

Driving down a dark road seems to grant the speaker power over the movement of the moon, stars, and sun. The speaker imagines making "the rising moon go back / behind the shouldering hill" and states that they "could have made the sun arise / and night turn back to day." In controlling the skies, it

trying to outrun negative emotions and perhaps even escape the reality of death.

The poem doesn't focus on this darkness for long, however, and ends with the triumphant image of the speaker driving toward the sun. As light is often a symbol of life, hope, and joy, this closing [imagery](#) suggests the speaker has not lost their determination to live and seek joy with whatever time they have.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

*I made the ...
... the shouldering hill,*

The first two lines of the poem introduce the speaker and the poem's lively, natural setting. The speaker's voice is strong and powerful: they declare that they "made" the moon itself reverse its normal, natural course in the night sky.

At first, this image might seem confusing: how could someone make the "rising moon" dip down in the sky and hide "behind" a "hill"? Things make more sense when readers realize that the speaker is driving along a road: the speaker is actually the one who was moving, and their shifting position makes it look like the moon was sinking.

Note how the [enjambment](#) between lines 1-2 emphasizes the moon's movement, as one line seems to fall into the next:

I made the rising moon go back
behind the shouldering hill,

The word "shouldering" indicates that these hills border the road on which the speaker drives. At the same time, this word subtly suggests the land is akin to a body. Already, then, readers get the sense that the landscape is a living thing, a dynamic force not too different from the speaker themselves.

LINES 3-4

*I raced along ...
... itself stood still.*

The next two lines again begin with the speaker taking strong, forceful action. The [anaphora](#) of "I" (which appears at the start of lines 1 and 3) emphasizes the speaker's power and authority.

Now, the speaker is the one moving, racing "along the eastern track." The words "raced" and "track" suggest that the speaker is in some sort of competition; readers might wonder where the finish line for this "race" is and/or who (or what) the speaker is

racing against.

Meanwhile, the adjective "eastern" implies that the speaker is heading towards the sun (which rises in the east). Given that the speaker previously made the moon disappear and is now barreling towards the sun, readers might guess that their competition in this race is the night itself (and all the things night often [symbolizes](#) in literature, such as death, despair, fear, and the unknown).

The speaker drives so fast and for so long that "time itself [stands] still." The word "till" further suggests that the speaker drove with this specific goal in mind—that is, that stopping time was their *intention*.

The [enjambment](#) of line 3 ("track / till") evokes the continuous speed with which the speaker drives, as the poem moves swiftly and smoothly down the page. By contrast, the firm [end-stop](#) after "still" mirrors that stillness itself.

Note, too, how the crisp /t/ [alliteration](#) and [consonance](#) of these lines ("eastern," "track," "till time itself stood still") might call to mind the ticking of a clock.

At this point, readers get a sense of the poem's form. Each stanza is a [quatrain](#) (meaning it has four lines) that uses [common meter](#). This means the poem alternates between lines of [iambic tetrameter](#) (four da-DUMs in a row) and iambic trimeter (three da-DUMs), and that each stanza follows either an ABAB or ABCB [rhyme scheme](#):

I raced | along | the east- | ern track
till time | itself | stood still.

The steady rhyme and bouncy meter fill the poem with some pleasing, familiar music.

LINES 7-8

*I could have ...
... back to day.*

The speaker next says that the "stars swarmed on behind the trees," implicitly comparing these stars to a cluster of annoying insects (note how the [alliteration](#) of "stars swarmed" even subtly calls to mind the hiss and buzz of a bunch of bugs).

The speaker wants to swat those stars away, the poem implies, because they, like the moon, are associated with the night sky. The speaker thus speeds "fast at they," rushing forward down the road as if to disperse this swarm.

The repetition of the word "I" (in both "I sped [...] I could") again calls attention to the speaker's sense of agency over their surroundings. The speaker boasts the extent of their power in line 7: had they so desired, they "could have made the sun arise." That is, they could have made the sun come up, therefore transforming the looming night "back" into "day."

The phrase "could have" might also make readers wonder why

the speaker did not, in fact, "make the sun arise." One possibility is that the speaker only *felt* they had this sense of power, but knew deep down that, in reality, this action was not possible.

Again, the speaker is really describing the thrilling *perspective* granted by speeding down a country road. Depending on how fast the speaker drives and in which direction, it *appears* as though they're controlling the moon and stars. The speaker seems aware that this is an illusion, but it's a thrilling sensation nonetheless.

LINES 9-12

*And like a ...
... ahead was bright.*

The speaker said in the first stanza that they're driving made "time itself [stand] still," yet here readers see that that's not literally true: the night is still starting to fall. The speaker describes what this looks like through an evocative [simile](#) that compares the darkness of night to "a long black carpet" unfurling "across the countryside."

This "carpet" is right "behind the wheels" of the speaker's car, an ominous image that perhaps suggests the night is catching up with the speaker—and thus that the speaker must keep racing forward if they want to outrun it. Read [symbolically](#), this image suggests that the speaker is swiftly moving away from despair, fear, and their own mortality.

The liquid /l/ [alliteration](#) and [consonance](#) of these lines evoke the smooth, fluid motion of the night as it "unroll[s]" across the landscape: "like," "long," "black," "wheels," "unrolled." Note, too, how this image unfolds over three lines. By contrast, both of the prior stanzas were essentially split in half, the speaker devoting just two lines to each image/idea. The expansion here perhaps evokes the night's power as it takes over the landscape, in turn adding a sense of tension and urgency to the poem.

Line 12 then [juxtaposes](#) this looming darkness against the brightness of the sun towards which the speaker drives. The speaker says that "all ahead was bright." Literally, the speaker is driving in the direction of the sunrise and a new day; symbolically, this suggests that the speaker chooses to embrace hope and optimism about the future.

LINES 13-16

*The fence-posts whizzed ...
... into the past.*

The speaker turns their attention to the "fence-posts" that line the side of the road. These are connected by "wires"; as the speaker drives by, it looks like the posts themselves are "whizz[ing] along" these wires. In reality, the posts aren't moving at all. They're stuck in the ground, and it's the speaker's forward motion that makes it *appear* as though the posts are sliding backward.

Using a [simile](#), the speaker compares the posts' movement to "days that fly too fast." Again, days themselves don't actually move; it's the person living them who moves forward in time. The [alliteration](#) in the phrases "whizzed on wires" and "fly too fast" subtly speeds up the lines, in turn mimicking the speaker's (and time's) swift movement.

Next, the speaker uses another simile to compare the "telephone poles" that "loom[] up" on the side of the road to "years" that "slipped into the past." The word "loomed" implies that these poles, and the years the speaker compares them to, are frightening or intimidating to the speaker. Perhaps this is because each new year means that more time has gone by and the speaker is thus closer to death. "Slipped," meanwhile, suggests that these years are difficult to hold onto; the implication is that the speaker feels time slipping through their fingers.

Earlier in the poem, the speaker's speed seemed to be the secret to their power—the thing that would make time itself [stand] still." Yet here, that same speed only emphasizes time's passage; living—moving forward—invariably means leaving something behind.

LINES 17-20

*And light and ...
... towards the sun.*

The speaker begins the final stanza with a grand declaration. Notice how many times the speaker uses the word "and" here:

And light and movement, sky and road
and life and time were one,

This first "And" continues the [anaphora](#) begun in the previous two lines ("and telephone [...] and slipped"), linking the stanzas and speeding up the poem. Readers get the sense that this revelation is hitting the speaker quickly and perhaps that it overwhelms them. All those connecting conjunctions also emphasize the connections the speaker is describing between these seemingly disparate elements.

On one level, the speaker is describing the way the world seems to literally blur together when you're driving very, very fast. But this is also a broader philosophical statement about the interconnected nature of human life, time, and the universe. Looking back on the poem, readers can see an illustration of each of these pairs on the speaker's drive:

- "Light and movement" come together in the first and second stanzas, where the speaker's direction and speed of travel seem to make the stars, moon, and sun shift in the sky.
- "Sky and road" become one in the third stanza, as the darkness of the night "unroll[s]" onto the land below.

- "Life and time" are linked in the fourth stanza, where the speaker accepts that living involves leaving moments in the past.

In the final two lines of the poem, the speaker then continues their journey. Time might slip "too fast" into "the past," but the speaker insists here that that's simply part of being alive—of traveling down the [metaphorical](#) road of life.

The word "while" might suggest that this grand truth doesn't actually matter all that much; what matters is living in the moment, "rush[ing]" in the direction of warmth and light. Note, too, how the speaker echoes the [parallelism](#) of the poem's opening stanzas, returning to "I [verb]" phrases with "I rushed and sped" and "I drove." In the first two stanzas, these "I" statements emphasized the speaker's sense of power and agency. They work similarly here, suggesting that the speaker accepts their place in the vast, interconnected universe and focuses their energy on the main thing that's within their control: their perspective. They can choose to see the light.



SYMBOLS



THE ROAD

On the one hand, the speaker in Cato's poem is describing an actual late night/early morning drive down a country road. When speeding quickly through a landscape, it really can seem like your surroundings blur together to the point that "light and movement, sky and road" become "one." But this road is also [symbolic](#): it represents the path of life itself, which people travel on as they go from birth to death. "Life and time" are "one" in the sense that to live is to move forward on this road of life.

The speaker builds on this symbolism with the description of "fence-posts" and "telephone poles" in stanza 4, which act as symbolic markers of time on the road. Because they're stationary, they appear to "slip[] into the past" as the speaker speeds by them. The speaker compares these objects to "days" and "years" that end too soon, conveying the sense that the speaker feels like life is passing by too quickly. Note, too, how the speaker says that those tall telephone poles "loomed," suggesting that the passage of years is frightening or intimidating to the speaker (because it brings them closer to death).

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "eastern track"
- **Lines 13-14:** "The fence-posts whizzed along wires / like days that fly too fast,"
- **Lines 15-16:** "telephone poles loomed up like years / and slipped into the past."

- **Line 17:** "sky and road"



THE SUN/LIGHT

In literature, the sun often [symbolizes](#) life, joy, and hope, and it also often acts as a guiding figure or god (which makes sense, given that the sun's light is critical for life on earth). "The Road" leans into this symbolism, as the speaker drives "toward the sun"—towards life, joy, hope, and so forth.

Note that "The Road" places the sun in opposition to the moon and the darkness of night, which usually represent despair, death, and the unknown. That the speaker strives to outrun the darkness that "unroll[s]" over the countryside symbolically suggests that the speaker is rushing away from these things—and towards the warmth and promise of a new day.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "I could have made the sun arise, / and night turn back to day."
- **Line 12:** "but all ahead was bright."
- **Line 20:** "I drove towards the sun."



NIGHT/DARKNESS

Again, the darkness of night is often associated with death, despair, fear, and the unknown. "The Road" [juxtaposes](#) this darkness against the brightness and warmth of the sun, towards which the speaker drives. The speaker seems to delight in being able to make "the rising moon go back / behind the shouldering hill" and to speed "as fast as" the stars, suggesting that the speaker wants to keep the darkness—and all of its frightening connotations—firmly in their rear-view. The fact that the "long black carpet" of the night unrolls "behind the wheels" of the speaker's car, however, suggests that the speaker can never really stop moving; if they want to stay clear of the darkness, they must keep driving towards the light.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "I made the rising moon go back / behind the shouldering hill,"
- **Line 5:** "The stars swarmed on behind the trees,"
- **Lines 9-11:** "And like a long black carpet / behind the wheels, the night / unrolled across the countryside,"



POETIC DEVICES

SIMILE

"The Road" contains three [similes](#), and they each help make this late night/early morning road trip more vivid for readers.

For example, when the speaker states the night is “like a long black carpet” that “unrolled across the countryside,” the reader might imagine dark material falling from the sky, laying itself across the landscape and casting the world in shadow. In comparing the vast “night” to a “carpet,” the speaker subtly links the human world with the universe. This mention of a dark carpet right at the wheels of the speaker’s car also adds a sense of tension to the poem, as the speaker must out-pace the night as it unfurls across the earth below.

The other similes in the poem similarly describe the poem’s setting while also offering a window into the speaker’s inner thoughts, fears, and desires. As the speaker speeds down the road, “fence-posts” seem to whoosh past, as though “whizz[ing] along wires” that link them. Because the car is moving swiftly forward and these posts are stationary, it appears as though they’re being sucked backward. Ditto the “telephone poles” the speaker mentions in the next line, which rise up high above the road and quickly “slip[] into the past”—that is, remain behind the speaker’s car as it rushes forward.

That the speaker compares these fence-posts to “days that fly too fast” indicates that the speaker wishes that time itself would slow down—that is, that the speaker could hold onto “days” a little longer. Similarly, comparing the telephone pole to “loom[ing] years” reflects the speaker’s anxieties about years too quickly “slipping” away. These similes reveal that the speaker at once fears time and desires more of it.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-11:** “And like a long black carpet / behind the wheels, the night / unrolled across the countryside,”
- **Lines 13-16:** “The fence-posts whizzed along wires / like days that fly too fast, / and telephone poles loomed up like years / and slipped into the past.”

ANAPHORA

[Anaphora](#) (and broader [parallelism](#)) play a major role in “The Road.” Most obviously, the speaker repeatedly begins lines and clauses with the word “I,” often followed by an active verb: “I made,” “I raced,” “I could,” “I sped,” “I drove.” This language keeps the speaker at the center of the poem, reflecting their sense that the world suddenly revolves around their whims. All those “I”s highlight the speaker’s feelings of power and control over their surroundings.

There’s more anaphora with the word “and,” which begins multiple successive clauses in the poem (and often overlaps with the device called [polysyndeton](#)). Because “and” works to add to or extend a sentence, its repetition calls attention to the *connections* between everything the speaker is experiencing, and its insistence also highlights the relentless passage of time.

For example, look at the repetition of “and” in lines 15-18:

and telephone poles loomed up like years
and slipped into the past.

And light and movement, sky and road
and life and time were one,

The intense repetition of “and” creates the feeling of time passing by very quickly; it’s as though the speaker is excitedly saying, *This happened and then this happened and then this happened...* As opposed to “but,” which places things in opposition, “and” brings things together. As such, all those “and”s also create a piling-up sensation, reflecting the fact that everything the speaker is experiencing all these different sights and sensations at once.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “I made”
- **Line 3:** “I raced”
- **Line 6:** “but I sped”
- **Line 7:** “I could”
- **Line 8:** “and night”
- **Line 9:** “And like”
- **Line 15:** “and telephone”
- **Line 16:** “and slipped”
- **Line 17:** “And light”
- **Line 18:** “and life”
- **Line 20:** “I drove”

ALLITERATION

[Alliteration](#) adds exciting music to the poem, helping to evoke the thrill the speaker feels while speeding down this road.

For example, listen to the crisp /t/ and hissing /s/ sounds in lines 3-4 (note that “itself” can be considered alliterative because the shared /s/ sound falls at the start of a stressed syllable):

I raced along the eastern track
till time itself stood still.

[Consonance](#) (or the repetition of sounds within words) adds to the effect (“raced,” “eastern,” “itself”). Together, these devices make the speaker’s description sound all the more intense. Those /t/ sounds might also evoke the ticking of a clock.

The sounds of the poem also help to bring its images to vivid life. For example, the [sibilance](#) of “stars swarmed” suggests the hiss and buzz of a mass of insects. Similarly, the smooth, liquid /l/ sounds of the following stanza subtly evoke the smooth, relentless unfurling of that “long black carpet” of darkness. Sharp /c/ and bright /b/ sounds, meanwhile, add some spiky energy to these lines:

And like a long black carpet
behind the wheels, the night

unrolled across the countryside,
but all ahead was bright.

Again, there's plenty of consonance here as well ("black," "wheels," "unrolled," "all"), which adds to the lines' sonic power.

In the next stanza, note how the speaker uses alliteration when specifically referencing speed: "whizzed along wires" and "fly too fast." The shared sounds here make the words blur together, in turn evoking the blurring of the landscape as the speaker rushes by.

Finally, shared sounds can call attention to *thematic* connections between words, as with "light" and "life" in the final stanza. The /l/ alliteration and long /i/ [assonance](#) here underscore the speaker's idea that these things are "one."

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "track / till time"
- **Line 4:** "itself stood still"
- **Line 5:** "stars swarmed"
- **Line 9:** "like," "long," "black"
- **Line 10:** "behind"
- **Line 11:** "across," "countryside"
- **Line 12:** "but," "ahead," "bright"
- **Line 13:** "whizzed," "wires"
- **Line 14:** "fly," "fast"
- **Line 15:** "loomed," "like"
- **Line 17:** "light"
- **Line 18:** "life"

ENJAMBMENT

"The Road" makes frequent use of [enjambment](#). As this device pulls readers from one line to the next without pause, it adds momentum to the poem and often evokes the actual movements the speaker describes.

Look at the enjambments of the first stanza, for example:

I made the rising moon go back
behind the shouldering hill,
I raced along the eastern track
till time itself stood still.

The enjambment after "back" mimics the movement of the "rising moon," which is effectively pulled *down* by the line break (i.e., it's no longer "rising"). Then, in line 3, the enjambment after "track" pushes readers across the white space of the page without pause, evoking the speaker's swift movement along the road.

The [end-stop](#) in line 4, by contrast, halts that movement, reflecting the speaker's sensation idea that time has "stood still." The speaker sprinkles in plenty of end-stop like this throughout, ensuring that it never seems like the speaker has

lost control. The mixture of fluid enjambments and structured end-stops reflects the speaker's sense of power over the natural world and even time itself.

For example, in stanza 3, enjambment mirrors the smooth unfurling of the "long black carpet" of the night. The lines themselves seem to "unroll" down the page, before coming to a soft end-stop in line 11 after "countryside":

[...] a long black carpet
behind the wheels, the night
unrolled across the countryside,

In the next line, the speaker describes traveling towards the sunrise: "but all ahead was bright." This shift from multiple enjambed lines to an end-stop subtly underscores the power of the speaker's forward motion (and, [symbolically](#), of hope): the night might be lapping at the speaker's "wheels," but the speaker keeps the night contained by continuing to drive "ahead." The end-stopped line provides a clear *separation* between darkness and light, past and future.

The fourth stanza uses yet more enjambment, now conveying the speed with which the telephone poles and wires (and, by extension, the days and years these objects bring to mind) slip suddenly "into the past":

The fence-posts whizzed along wires
like days that fly too fast,
and telephone poles loomed up like years
and slipped into the past.

Again, there's an end-stop at the end of the stanza. Here, that firm full stop after "into the past" perhaps conveys the sense that these posts/poles/days/years are gone for good.

Finally, note that there's no comma separating lines 17-18 ("And light [...] were one;"), even though, grammatically, one would be appropriate. There's thus no pause between these lines, and this enjambment emphasizes the unity of "light and movement, sky and road / life and time."

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "back / behind"
- **Lines 3-4:** "track / till"
- **Lines 9-10:** "carpet / behind"
- **Lines 10-11:** "night / unrolled"
- **Lines 13-14:** "wires / like"
- **Lines 15-16:** "years / and"
- **Lines 17-18:** "road / and"

JUXTAPOSITION

"The Road" [juxtaposes](#) multiple things: night and day, darkness and light, fear and hope, life and death, stillness and motion.

Yet, somewhat [ironically](#), the speaker uses all this juxtaposition to emphasize the *unity* of everything they've encountered on the road.

Take the first stanza, for example, where the speaker contrasts the way they "raced along the eastern track" with the sense that "time itself stood still." The speaker is describing the exhilarating feeling of driving so quickly down a road that the landscape itself seems to lag behind. It's *movement*, here, that creates *stillness*.

Similarly, the speaker describes how they're moving so fast that stationary "fence-posts" and "telephone poles" they pass by seem to slip "into the past." The way these objects slip away reminds the speaker of days and years that end too soon. Yet, again, juxtaposition highlights *connection*: the posts/poles (and the "days"/"years" they represent for the speaker) move backward, into the past, only because the speaker is moving *forward*, and into the *future*. To live, the poem suggests, is to necessarily create moments that get left behind.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 3-4
- Lines 9-12
- Lines 13-16
- Lines 17-20

IMAGERY

The [imagery](#) in "The Road" brings the setting to life and keeps the reader engaged in the speaker's journey. The speaker's descriptions specifically fill the landscape with movement: the moon is "rising," for example, and it moves "behind the shouldering hill" as the speaker rushes forward. Meanwhile, the speaker says that "stars swarmed behind the trees"—a vivid description that makes the stars seem like a pesky, swirling group of insects, which the speaker then [metaphorically](#) swats away by speeding "at" them. Both of these images convey the sense of control the speaker feels over their surroundings.

The night is "like a long black carpet," the speaker continues, evoking the way darkness seems to luxuriously drape itself across the landscape. Had the speaker simply said, "night fell across the countryside," the line wouldn't seem nearly so striking (or, perhaps, ominous). The mention of "unroll[ing]" evokes how the darkness of night slowly but surely makes its way across the earth and towards the speaker, who keeps rushing forward.

The images of "fence-posts" and "telephone poles" whipping past are again striking, helping readers to imagine the way one's surroundings can seem to streak by while driving.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "I made the rising moon go back / behind the

shouldering hill,"

- **Line 5:** "The stars swarmed on behind the trees,"
- **Lines 9-12:** "And like a long black carpet / behind the wheels, the night / unrolled across the countryside, / but all ahead was bright."
- **Line 13:** "The fence-posts whizzed along wires"
- **Line 15:** "and telephone poles loomed up like years"



VOCABULARY

Shouldering (Line 2) - The speaker is referring to a hill along the side of the road.

Eastern track (Line 3) - The road going east. This term implies that the speaker is driving towards the sun, which rises in the east.

Swarmed (Line 5) - To "swarm" is to move in a large cluster. People generally use "swarm" (both as a noun and a verb) to refer to describe the way that insects, such as gnats or mosquitos, gather and fly in groups.

Whizzed (Line 13) - Rushed by.

Loomed (Line 15) - Appeared or emerged as large, threatening, or frightening form.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Road" consists of 5 [quatrains](#), or 4-line stanzas. These are more specifically [ballad](#) stanzas: the quatrains rhyme either ABAB or ABCB, and they alternate between lines of tetrameter (four poetic feet) and trimeter (three poetic feet).

Ballads were traditionally narrative poems, and their predictable rhythms made them easier to remember and share. Folk narratives were also typically grand love stories, dramatic adventures, or tales of heroism. In using this form, Cato elevates her subject. Though the poem describes a common, even mundane, experience (driving down a country road), this event takes on almost mythic proportions. This reflects the fact that the speaker feels power over and a deep connection with their surroundings, sensing in this drive fundamental truths about the nature of existence and humanity's place in the universe.

METER

Like most [ballads](#), "The Road," uses something called [common meter](#). This means that its lines alternate between eight and six syllables and that these syllables follow an [iambic](#) rhythm (they move from unstressed to stressed beats: da-DUM). In other words, they alternate between iambic tetrameter (four iambs per line, eight beats total) and iambic trimeter (three iambs per

line, six beats total). For example, take a look at lines 3 and 4:

I raced | along | the east- | ern track
till time | itself | stood still.

This pattern remains relatively consistent throughout the poem, lending its lines a bouncy, musical rhythm. This, in turn, adds energy and excitement to the speaker's description of their drive.

There are some variations, however, which keep the poem from becoming too predictable and also call attention to important moments. For example, line 15 contains an extra syllable:

and te- | lephone poles | loomed up | like years

The second foot here scans most natural as an [anapest](#) (da-da-DUM), subtly extending the line in a way that might evoke the intimidating height of those looming poles. And in line 13, readers might hear a [spondee](#) in the second foot (two stressed beats in a row) and another anapest in the final foot:

The fence- | posts whizzed | along wires

The meter at the tail-end of the line is ambiguous, but the double stress in the center adds intensity to this image of "fence-posts" whooshing past.

These variations are minor, however, and they don't detract from the overall iambic rhythm of the poem.

RHYME SCHEME

The first stanza of "The Road" rhymes:

ABAB

Each of the remaining stanzas of the poem uses the more conventional ballad [rhyme scheme](#) of:

ABCB

The change in rhyme scheme is very subtle, and, overall, the poem's consistent pattern of rhyme makes its lines pleasant to read and easy to remember.

Note, too, that line 11 ends with the word "countryside," which forms a subtle [slant rhyme](#) with the surrounding lines (which end with the words "night" and "bright"). Likewise, "wires"/"years" and "road"/"sped" in the final two stanzas create subtle echoes of rhyme that add to the poem's music.

experience the speaker describes.

What readers do know is that this speaker feels immensely powerful as they race "along the eastern track," boasting of their ability to control celestial objects and to even make time itself stop. At the same time, the speaker displays a clear awareness of the fleeting nature of life. Rushing by "fence-posts" and "telephone poles" reminds them of the way "days" and "years" seem to slip away too quickly "into the past." The speaker might be an older person, thinking about the way time flies by.

At the poem's end, the speaker's determination to keep driving "towards the sun" (and towards the new dawn it signals) perhaps signifies their determination to stay focused on the good things in life and their hopes for the future.



SETTING

"The Road" takes place on a country road very late at night or very early in the morning. This seems to be a quiet, pastoral setting: there are hills, trees, and stars. The road down which the speaker drives isn't totally separate from signs of civilization, however: the speaker also passes "fence-posts" and "telephone poles," which also indicate that this drive is happening in the modern-day.

The speaker calls the road along which they drive "the eastern track," meaning that they're traveling in the direction of the sunrise. The darkness of night is behind them, unfurling from the sky "like a long black carpet," but the speaker barrels forward towards the brightness ahead. This [juxtaposition](#) between darkness and light might suggest the contrast between life and death, past and present, joy and despair, and so forth.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Nancy Fotheringham Cato (1917-2000) was an Australian poet, novelist, and environmental activist. She included "The Road" in her second collection, *The Dancing Bough*. Published in 1957, this collection features many poems that, like "The Road," muse on the nature of life, death, and time. Both *The Dancing Bough* and Cato's first poetry collection, *The Darkened Window*, have also been praised for their lively descriptions of the natural world. Cato is most widely known, however, for her historical fiction trilogy *All Rivers Run*, which vividly illustrates the ecological and social history of the Murray River in southeastern Australia.

Cato was one among many authors attempting to promote a uniquely "Australian" literature in the mid-20th century. After World War II, writers wanted to present their continent's



SPEAKER

The first-person speaker of "The Road" doesn't have a name, age, or gender in the poem, and this helps keep the poem's message feeling universal. That is, anyone who has sped down a country road toward the sunrise can identify with the

literature as more than, according to influential novelist Patrick White, "dreary, dun-colored journalism." Authors including Cato, Judith Wright, and Douglas Stewart began infusing their intricate descriptions of the Australian landscape with deeper moral and philosophical ideas.

It's also worth noting that roads themselves are an extremely common [symbol](#) in literature, where they typically represent the journey of life. Many poems have drawn inspiration from roads, the most famous example being Robert Frost's "[The Road Not Taken](#)."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Cato wrote and published "The Road" in the mid-20th century, a time when Australia was concerned with making a name for itself on the world stage. Officials felt that the nation had only narrowly avoided being invaded during World War II; Prime Minister Ben Chifley declared that Australia must "populate or perish," warning that a threat from Asia may come again.

The development of a massive immigration program led to more than 20 million people coming to Australia throughout the 1940s, '50s, and '60s. The country also began to promote a distinct sense of what it meant to be "Australian" during this time. Cato herself played a role in this, as her work often focused on Australia's unique heritage and environment.

Australia's population boom also led to rapid industrial development and, unfortunately, the destruction or endangerment of many of the country's natural landmarks. Cato's focus on the landscape in her work reflects her devotion to environmental activism; she was in fact named an honorary park ranger by the Noosa Parks Association in Queensland for her conversation efforts. With its declaration that "light and movement, sky and road, life and time were one," "The Road" perhaps suggests that humanity must accept its place within, rather than apart from, its surroundings.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Australian Literature in the Mid-20th Century](#) – Learn more about important figures and events in Australia's literary history from 1940 to 1970. (<https://www.britannica.com/art/Australian-literature/Literature-from-1940-to-1970>)
- [More About Cato](#) – Read a brief biography on Cato from the University of Queensland. (<https://alumni.uq.edu.au/story/1502/dr-nancy-cato-am>)
- [Driving Through the Countryside](#) – See what it's like to drive through Australia's countryside in this YouTube video. (https://youtu.be/mgeVC_szFgo)
- [Roads in Poetry](#) – Peruse more excellent poems inspired by roads. (<https://interestingliterature.com/2017/07/10-of-the-best-poems-about-roads/>)



HOW TO CITE

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