Suburban Sonnet

SUMMARY

The poem opens with a housewife practicing a musical composition called a fugue, despite the fact that her performance is destined to be unappreciated. Her two children, who are playing on the floor next to her, start screaming at each other, and she has to stop her practice to quiet them down. A pot on the stove then starts boiling over. The woman runs to the pot but it's already too late, and she feels overwhelmed with nausea and pain. As she vigorously scrubs the burnt, scalded milk from the pot, her joy and liveliness seem to trickle down the drain alongside the soapy water. She feels a dull pain deep inside. She remembers performing in front of Rubinstein, a famous pianist, but he seemed bored and unimpressed. Her children, meanwhile, are hovering around a dead mouse caught in a mousetrap. When the mouse's lifeless body just lies there, still, they get scared. The woman tends to her children while she disposes of the dead mouse by wrapping it up on some newspaper, which displays an article featuring recipes to use up old, dry bread.

THEMES

THE STRUGGLES OF SUBURBAN MOTHERHOOD

"Suburban Sonnet" explores the domestic life of a woman trying to balance her musical aspirations with her obligations as a housewife. The speaker suggests that the expectations of suburban motherhood are oppressive and stifling, draining women of their ambitions and even their identities themselves—which get subsumed by the demands of caring for their homes and children.

The poem establishes that this woman once had musical ambitions but has been forced to abandon them upon becoming a mother. She opens the poem practicing the piano and later reflects on how she "[o]nce [...] played for Rubenstein," a famous composer. This is a far cry from her current domestic life, however, where she's surrounded by screaming children and tedious domestic tasks like scouring the stove clean.

Now, the speaker explains that "it can matter / to no one now if she plays well or not." The woman's aspirations have been rendered meaningless and futile because she has two children to look after. Illustrating this, she has to stop practicing her music to break up a petty quarrel between her kids. The demands of domesticity and motherhood, the poem implies, have usurped her personal desires.

The poem goes on to reveal the psychological pain that this contrast between the woman's inner identity and her social persona as a housewife has caused. This struggle is dramatized through a metaphorical description of the woman's visceral reaction to a pot of hot water boiling over, in which the speaker says that "a wave of nausea overpowers / subject and counter-subject." These are musical terms that refer to different components of a type of composition called a fugue. On a figurative level, though, the "subject" could be interpreted as representing the woman's outer identity as a mother while the "counter-subject" represents her innermost ambitions to become a musician. Notably, *both* subject and counter-subject are overwhelmed by "a wave of nausea," demonstrating that *both* sides of the woman's persona are ultimately unsatisfied with her life as a suburban mother. The metaphorical references to music powerfully portray the pain and suffering of a human being who has not lived up to her full potential.

The poem concludes with the image of a dead mouse caught in a mousetrap, which functions as a symbol of the woman's fate. The woman's children "seem afraid" when "the soft corpse" of the mouse remains still. The speaker introduces some ambiguity by using the word "seem," which suggests the emotional distance between the mother and her children. While the woman "comforts them" and attends to her children consistently, there is no underlying intimacy or connection. The children might appear to feel a certain way, but she is not able to directly empathize with them. She is simply going through the motions of what society expects her to do, leading to the death of her individuality and inner spirit.

The dead mouse represents the woman's extinguished musical aspirations and the deeper spiritual death that resulted from this personal tragedy. The reader is thus left with a sense of dread as the poem ends on a pessimistic note and strongly implies that the woman's dreams, like the trapped mouse, eventually die with her. The social obligation to be a dutiful mother and wife effectively becomes the "trap" that ensnares (and ultimately destroys) the woman's career and, most of all, her spirit.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

She practises a ...
... well or not.

The speaker begins by describing a woman who is playing a fugue, a type of composition where a short melody is introduced and successively taken up by other interweaving parts. This literal depiction of a fugue will take on a metaphorical function as the poem continues.

The speaker proceeds to say that "it can matter / to no one if she plays well or not," suggesting that the woman's efforts to master the fugue are completely in vain. Right away, then, the speaker portrays the woman's practice as aimless, futile, and doomed for failure. As much as the woman strives for mastery, the rest of the world is indifferent to her progress as a musician (or lack thereof). Overall, these lines imply a strong sense of hopelessness as they demonstrate the contrast between the woman's ongoing investment in her crumbling aspirations and society's apathy towards her struggles.

The two opening lines also include the poem's first instances of caesura and enjambment, which eventually become two of the most prominent devices used throughout the poem. In the first line, the use of caesura creates a division between the first part of the sentence referencing her musical practice and the second part that addresses its significance to the world at large. The comma conveys both a physical and figurative gap between the woman's efforts and society's attitude. Moreover, the enjambment between the first and second lines capture the distinction between the woman's mindset and her social climate: as the first line ends with the phrase "though it can matter" and the second line begins with "to no one," the separation between these two becomes strikingly clear.

LINES 3-5

Beside her on ...
... to the stove

This set of lines introduces the woman's two children, who become a source of endless distractions and disruptions throughout the poem. The fact that the children are sitting on the floor next to her demonstrates how she can't spare a moment being apart from them, as they require her constant attention and supervision.

The speaker explains how the "children chatter" before breaking out into a fight, which the woman has to stop by hushing them. The use of alliteration ("children chatter") emphasizes the powerful influence of the children's presence, which causes the woman to be distracted from her performance. The phrase "chatter" specifically refers to trivial small talk, thus highlighting the petty nature of these disruptions.

These lines are also characterized by the frequent use of short, clipped sentences and caesura as the children's interruptions continue to escalate and impair the woman's ability to practice. Immediately after breaking up the fight, her attention is further diverted by a pot boiling over on the stove. Significantly, each line flows over into the next line through the continuous use of enjambment, chopping up the lines in a jarring and dramatic manner. The heavy presence of caesura and enjambment encapsulates the nature of the woman's predicament. Without the space or time to practice her music undisturbed, the woman is never able to make consistent progress towards her goal. Constantly caught up in the petty distractions and disruptions of domestic life, her motherly duties consume her innermost aspirations over and over again.

By this point the poem's rhyme scheme becomes clear. Despite the non-traditional subject, the poem is, as its title says, a sonnet—a very traditional form. It's first four lines, or quatrain, follow an ABAB rhyme scheme, with rhymes between "matter"/"chatter" and "not"/"pot." This pattern will then repeat (albeit with new rhyme sounds) in the next four lines.

The poem also follows iambic pentameter as well, which is standard for sonnets. This means that each line has five iambs, poetic feet with a da-DUM rhythm. The poem is not *perfect* in its adherence to this meter, but is generally pretty stead. The main exception is that some lines have an extra unstressed syllable dangling at the ends—as is the case in line 1, and again here in line 3. Look at the meter of lines 3-4:

> Beside her on the floor two children chatter,
> then scream and fight. She hushes them. A pot

The unstressed ending of "chatter" subtly suggests the way that the woman's children disrupt her concentration, adding a little hiccup in her otherwise steady meter—which falls back into perfect iambic pentameter in the next line.

LINES 6-8

too late, a ...
... as she scours

The woman's internal conflict is demonstrated through her visceral reaction to a pot of hot water boiling over. The speaker says that "a wave of nausea overpowers / subject and counter-subject." In these lines, the speaker makes use of musical terms, subject and counter-subject, to refer to different components of a fugue. The subject and counter-subject become a metaphor for the contrast between the woman's inner identity and her outer, social persona as a housewife, with the "subject" representing the woman's outer identity while the "counter-subject" represents her ambitions to have a life and career outside her role as a mother. The speaker explains that both subject and counter-subject are overwhelmed by "a wave of nausea," demonstrating that both sides of the woman's persona are ultimately unsatisfied with her life as a suburban mother.

As the woman starts cleaning up the mess, the speaker explains how "Zest and love / drain out with soapy water as she scours." The "zest" and "love" referenced here assume two meanings. The woman's zest and love for music, which she was practicing immediately prior to the disruption, is "drained" away with the

soapy water as she abandons her practice for household duties. The love for her own children is also depleted as her passion for life dwindles during this experience.

Enjambment and caesura continue to be used in addition to the rhyme scheme for thematic effect. The rhyming of "overpowers" and "scours" demonstrates how the woman's responsibilities as a wife and mother (represented by scouring or cleaning) actually overpowers her drive and ambition as an aspiring musician. These words also have unstressed, or "feminine," endings, once again disrupting the poem's iambic meter by ending the lines on an unstressed beat: "powers" and "scours." In line 3, the children's "chatter" did the same thing. Altogether, it seems the responsibilities of motherhood repeatedly throw the woman off balance.

LINES 9-12

the crusted milk. ...
... they seem afraid.

The speaker describes the woman's physical and emotional pain as she finishes cleaning up the mess, saying "Her veins ache." This instance of caesura is particularly striking as it is a complete sentence that occurs right in the middle of the verse, eliciting the reader's attention. The physical pain of her overworked veins parallels her psychological pain of being constantly barred from her goals. The same veins in her hands and arms, that are being used in the service of housework, will now be too worn out for any further practice.

After this line, there is a shift in the woman's thought process as she recalls a memory of playing "for Rubinstein, who yawned." This allusion to Arthur Rubinstein, a classical pianist in the mid-20th century who is widely regarded as one of the best pianists in history, is the only line in the poem that gives the reader a glimpse into the woman's skill level. While the woman is clearly still bogged down by Rubinstein's lackluster response, the mere fact that she was good enough to play in front of such a renown pianist speaks to her relatively high level of musical prowess.

The woman appears to look back on this memory regretfully for two reasons:

1. She missed the opportunity to impress such a major figure and advance her career when she had the chance.
2. She continually misses opportunities to improve her skills because of her all-consuming role as a housewife.

Unlike everything else in the poem, which is occurring in real time, this memory from the past suddenly intrudes on the present moment, sending the woman back to a time and place when she was extremely close to making her big break.

Just as soon as the poem shifts towards an old memory, it rapidly returns to the present moment as the woman's focus is once again redirected towards her children. In this moment, her "children caper" around the corpse of a mouse stuck in a mousetrap. The use of the word "caper," which means to skip or dance around in a lively way, stands in stark contrast to the morbid image of the dead mouse. The mouse becomes a symbol of the woman's greatest aspirations, which have been diminished and destroyed during the humdrum of motherhood. The children dancing around this symbol of death dramatizes the cruel and twisted nature of the woman's fate: her personal misery and her children's happiness go hand-in-hand.

Then the speaker comments that the children “seem afraid” when “the soft corpse” of the mouse remains still. The speaker introduces some ambiguity by using the word “seem,” which emphasizes the emotional distance between the woman and her children. The children might appear to feel a certain way, but she’s not able to directly empathize with them. She is simply going through the motions of what society expects her to do, leading to the death of her individuality and inner spirit. Thus, the mousetrap represents the constraints of suburban motherhood, effectively trapping the woman and killing her future in the process.

LINES 13-14

She comforts them; ...
... from stale bread.

In the final lines of the poem, the speaker offers a bleak look into the woman's destiny. After comforting her children, who are now afraid of the dead mouse, she wraps up the mouse in an old newspaper. The last line emphasizes the article that she uses to do the job, the title of which is "Tasty dishes from stale bread."

Notably, both of these lines are marked by a specific type of caesura that is not used anywhere else in the poem—namely a colon and semi-colon. This causes the reader to slow down and pay particular attention to the meaning and symbolism packed into these last two lines. The dead mouse, which represents the demise of the woman's musical aspirations, is concealed by a symbol of domestic concerns (the newspaper article). The title of the article is a representation of the woman's dismal existence: she is constantly trying to make the best of her boring and demoralizing circumstances, much like making tasty food from stale bread.

As she comforts her children and obscures the ghastly symbol of her own destiny, the woman sinks deeper into her outer persona as a housewife, ultimately concealing her own inner nature. The speaker ends the sonnet on this unsatisfying and realistic note, leading the reader to conclude that the mouse's entrapment and death predicts the woman's own depressing fate.

SYMBOLS

THE MOUSE

The last few lines of "Suburban Sonnet" are marked by the death of a mouse, which is killed by a mousetrap set up in the woman's home. The dead mouse symbolizes the demise of the woman's musical aspirations, which she is constantly barred from pursuing because of her all-consuming duties as a housewife. The woman's domestic life entraps her in the same way that the mousetrap ensnares the hapless mouse, destroying her hopes and future.

Considering the fact that the woman most likely set up the mousetrap herself, the symbolism takes on another layer of meaning: by choosing the stability of the suburban life, the woman has effectively set a "trap" for herself and compromised her own future. The mouse and the woman could be viewed as equally unsuspecting victims, both lured into a trap that would be too tantalizing for most to avoid.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-14:** "The children caper / round a sprung mousetrap where a mouse lies dead. / When the soft corpse won't move they seem afraid. / She comforts them; and wraps it in a paper / featuring: Tasty dishes from stale bread."

MUSIC

When the poem opens, the woman is practicing a fugue, which eventually becomes symbolic of her circumstances in life. A fugue is a type of musical composition where one short melody (known as the subject) is introduced and taken up by the other melodies (known as the counter-subject), ultimately interweaving the various melodies.

This is, on a figurative level, what happens in the poem more broadly. As the woman is trying to practice, she is interrupted by her two children, who break out in a fight right next to her (their chatter becoming another "melody"). This disruption is followed by another as a pot on the stove boils over and the woman has to attend to the mess (yet another "melody"). While doing so, the speaker invokes the fugue once again, metaphorically stating that "a wave of nausea overpowers subject and counter-subject" in reference to the woman.

The musical terms "subject" and "counter-subject," in turn, become a representation of the division between the woman's outer persona as a housewife (the subject) and her inner nature as an aspiring musician (the counter-subject). The speaker explains how both sides of the woman's personality are sickened by this experience, demonstrating the superficiality of her housewife identity.

By the end of the poem, the children's disruptions have completely consumed the woman's time and attention, just as the melodies are subsumed by the larger pattern in a fugue. The poem concludes with the image of a dead mouse, symbolizing the demise of the woman's future goals. By framing the woman's predicament in the context of a fugue, the speaker effectively uses musical metaphors to capture the inner turmoil of an aspiring musician who simply can't catch a break.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "She practises a fugue, though it can matter / to no one now if she plays well or not."
- **Lines 6-7:** "a wave of nausea overpowers / subject and counter-subject."
- **Lines 9-10:** "Once she played / for Rubinstein, who yawned."

POETIC DEVICES

METAPHOR

Musical language and references take on symbolic weight in the poem, with the fugue specifically coming to represent the woman's circumstances in life (for more on this, look to the "Symbols" section of this guide). Within this broader symbolism, however, there is a more explicit metaphor as well. This comes in lines 6-7, where the speaker says:

> [...] a wave of nausea overpowers
> subject and counter-subject. [...]

In the type of musical composition known as a fugue, one short melody (known as the subject) is introduced and taken up by the other melodies (known as the counter-subject). The speaker uses these musical terms to represent two different parts of this woman's identity: the "subject" here represents the woman's outer persona as a housewife, while the "counter-subject" represents her more authentic inner self, an aspiring musician. That both parts of the woman's identity are "overpower[ed]" by "nausea" demonstrates just how sickening and demoralizing she finds the demands of being a housewife.

Another metaphor follows directly on the heels of this one, as the speaker says:

> [...] Zest and love
> drain out with soapy water as she scours
> the crusted milk. [...]

In other words, as the woman vigorously scrapes burnt, crusty milk off the pot, she feels as though her own zest for life is getting sucked down the drain along with the soapy, dirty water. The metaphor here reveals how the demands of caring

for a home drain the woman of her vitality, and perhaps even of the love she has to offer her children.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-9:** "a wave of nausea overpowers / subject and counter-subject. Zest and love / drain out with soapy water as she scours / the crusted milk."

ALLITERATION

This poem is not particularly alliterative, which makes sense: it is meant to sound grounded and conversational, rather than overly-poetic. This, in turn, reflects the woman's mundane life as a housewife and mother. That said, the poem does feature some striking alliteration in line 3. Here, the speaker explains that the "children chatter" beside the woman during her musical practice. This /ch/ sound is rather harsh and loud, and intentionally draws readers' attention to the children. The use of alliteration emphasizes the powerful influence of the children's presence, which causes the woman to be distracted from her performance. The phrase "chatter" specifically refers to trivial small talk and highlights the petty nature of these disruptions.

Another moment of alliteration comes in line 8, with the shared /s/ of "soapy" and "scours." This sibilance again draws readers attention to the words at hand, this time emphasizing the tedium of the woman's work. The hard /c/ at the start of "scours" is also echoed in the next line with "crusted," together adding a rather harsh sound to the description of hard, dried up milk stuck to the stove.

Finally, alliteration between that same hard /c/ sound appears in lines 12 and 13 with "corpse" and "comfort." This is no coincidence. The dead mouse represents, on a symbolic level, the death of the woman's musical ambitions and identity separate from that of a mother and housewife. Here, the "corpse" is linked to "comfort," connecting the woman's metaphorical death, via sound, to the act of caring for her children.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "children chatter"
- **Line 8:** "soapy," "scours"
- **Line 9:** "crusted"
- **Line 11:** "mousetrap," "mouse"
- **Line 12:** "corpse"
- **Line 13:** "comforts"

ALLUSION

The allusion to Arthur Rubinstein, a famous classical pianist, is significant for a few reasons. This allusion is cushioned in the middle of all the distractions that take place throughout the course of the poem. It appears to be a passing thought, intruding on the woman's consciousness as she scrambles to keep her household clean and orderly.

Upon recalling the memory, the woman is reminded of her lost opportunities in life. While Rubinstein yawned during her performance and appeared unimpressed, the fact that the woman had a chance to play in front of such a famous musician would suggest that she was a fairly accomplished pianist at one point in her life. The woman clearly regrets missing this opportunity of a lifetime, knowing that if she had been able to impress the great Rubinstein, her life would have probably turned out very differently.

This allusion is the only part of the poem that transcends time and space, removing the woman from the chaos of the present and transporting her back to the past. The reader is able to sympathize with the woman on a deeper level with this additional context. It is evident that this woman came fairly close to fulfilling her dreams at one point in time, but she is now further away from those dreams than ever before. Her life as a mother has created an ever-widening gap between the woman's current situation and ideal universe that can no longer be bridged.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-10:** "Once she played / for Rubinstein, who yawned."

ENJAMBMENT

The poem frequently uses enjambment, which occurs at the end of almost every line. The near-constant use of enjambment creates a choppy and fragmented structure, with each line appearing as broken and incomplete. This, in turn, mirrors the woman's situation, where she is being constantly interrupted and pulled away from her musical practice because the demands of maintaining a household never cease.

The pattern of enjambment also relates to the broken and compromised state of the woman's dreams to become a professional musician. This is demonstrated in the first instance of enjambment when the speaker is describing the woman practicing a fugue and then says "though it can matter / to no one now if she plays well or not." The enjambment between the first and second line conveys the split between the woman's personal investment in her music versus the world's complete indifference to the future of her career.

Later on in the poem, there is a shift in focus as the woman recalls a memory, stating "Once she played" and then flowing over into the next line that specifies her audience: Rubinstein, a famous pianist. By leaving "Once she played" as a standalone thought, the speaker emphasizes how music is part of the woman's past, thereby implying that it won't be a part of her future. This implication is capitalized on in the following line, as

the reader learns that Rubinstein was bored by the woman's performance at the time. Overall, the ongoing use of enjambment serves as a larger representation of the woman's struggle while foreshadowing her doomed fate as a perpetual housewife.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "matter / to no one"
- **Lines 4-5:** "A pot / boils over."
- **Lines 5-6:** "stove / too late,"
- **Lines 6-7:** "overpowers / subject"
- **Lines 7-8:** "Zest and love / drain"
- **Lines 8-9:** "scours / the"
- **Lines 9-10:** "played / for"
- **Lines 10-11:** "caper / round"
- **Lines 13-14:** "paper / featuring:"

CAESURA

The poem uses caesura in nearly every line. The consistent pattern of caesura helps to slow the reader down and to place emphasis on specific moments in the poem. The type of caesura used is quite diverse, ranging from periods and commas to colons and semi-colons. The creative and varied use of caesura, in addition to the constant enjambment, supports an overall structure that is as fragmented and disruptive as the woman's daily experience.

Caesura becomes especially pronounced in the last two lines of the poem, imbuing them with particular significance. When the children realize that the mouse caught in the trap isn't alive and become fearful, the speaker say:

> She comforts them; and wraps it in a paper
> featuring: Tasty dishes from stale bread.

The combination of a semi-colon and colon is very noticeable both because it is unusual and grammatically awkward. As a result, the lines encourage the reader to carefully consider a variety of possible interpretations as the poem reaches its conclusion. The title of the newspaper article is brought into the focus, and the fact that the paper is being used to dispose of the dead mouse (which symbolizes the demise of the woman's musical aspirations) has broader implications for the woman's own life. As long as she continues to be a suburban mom, she will be doomed to make the most of her "stale" and boring existence.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "fugue, though"
- **Line 4:** "fight. She"
- **Line 5:** "over. As"
- **Line 6:** "late, a"
- **Line 7:** "counter-subject. Zest"
- **Line 9:** "milk. Her," "ache. Once"
- **Line 10:** " Rubinstein, who yawned. The"
- **Line 13:** "them; and"
- **Line 14:** "featuring: Tasty"

CONSONANCE

The poem uses consonance to emphasize certain concepts and images. In the second line, for example, the insignificance of the woman's musical practice is highlighted by saying it matters to "no one now" if her performance is good "or not." The ongoing consonance of the /n/ sound stresses the overwhelming indifference of other people towards this woman's music.

In the third line, consonance emerges again in the alliterative phrase "children chatter," bringing attention to the ultimate source of distractions within the poem. The woman's frantic attempts to quell these disruptions in emphasized by the consistent use of /sh/ sounds in the fourth and fifth lines, with the consonants of "she hushes" and "she rushes" blending together. These soft sounds are then immediately exchanged for a series of hard sounds in lines 7-9, representing the rigidity of the woman's household routine as she "scours" the "crusted milk" at the bottom of the pot and her "veins ache." The hard /c/ and /k/ sounds throughout these lines reflect the woman's toil and pain.

The consonance in lines 10-12 are especially pronounced and focused on the /r/, /m/, and /s/ sounds. These lines contain one of the most important symbols in the poem, the dead mouse caught in the mousetrap, and the heavy consonance effectively brings this image to the forefront of the reader's mind:

> round a sprung mousetrap where a mouse lies dead.
> When the soft corpse won't move they seem afraid.

The /r/ sounds are caught in the back of the throat, almost like a growl, while the /m/ sounds sap the air from the line. The sibilant /s/ sounds add to the sinister hush here as well, perhaps subtly evoking the silence of death and the smothering nature of motherhood.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "no one now," "not"
- **Line 3:** "children chatter"
- **Line 4:** "She hushes"
- **Line 5:** "she rushes"
- **Line 7:** "subject," "counter-subject," "Zest"
- **Line 8:** "with soapy water," "scours"
- **Line 9:** "crusted milk," "ache"
- **Lines 10-11:** "children caper / round"
- **Line 11:** "sprung mousetrap where," "mouse"

- **Line 12:** "soft corpse," "move," "seem"
- **Line 14:** "Tasty," "stale"

PARATAXIS

There are two main instances of parataxis in this poem. In the first moment, the speaker is describing the woman's reaction to her children fighting and says:

> [...] She hushes them. A pot
> boils over. [...]

All of this commotion takes place as the woman is practicing her music, diverting her focus away from her work and towards the unnecessary distractions of domestic life. By having these two phrases placed next to each other, the speaker demonstrates the quick and rapid succession of these disruptions, which continually pull the woman away from her personal goals. The short verses deliver a sense of fragmentation and choppiness that mirrors the woman's experience of desperately trying to balance her musical practice with her duties as a mother. The image of the pot boiling over is representative of her emotional state, overwhelmed and "over-flowing" by the stressful demands of being a housewife.

In the next instance of parataxis, which happens immediately after the woman starts cleaning up the mess from the overflowing pot, the speaker says:

> [...] Her veins ache. Once she played
> for Rubinstein, who yawned. [...]

Once again, by juxtaposing these two ideas side-by-side through parataxis, the speaker creates a broader picture of the woman's emotional experiences. While her veins are literally aching from the effort of scouring the pot, this physical pain represents her psychological suffering. The veins in her arms and hands, which would normally be used in the service of music, are being actively compromised by the intensive labor of maintaining a household. This sentiment is followed by the woman's memory of once playing for the famous pianist Arthur Rubinstein, who was clearly bored by her performance. This embarrassing memory, coupled with the physical sensation of her veins aching, work together to intensify the woman's misery and hopelessness.

Where Parataxis appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "She hushes them. A pot / boils over."
- **Lines 9-10:** "Her veins ache. Once she played / for Rubinstein, who yawned."

VOCABULARY

Fugue (Line 1) - A type of musical composition in which a short melody is introduced and successively taken up and developed by interweaving melodies.

Chatter (Line 3) - To talk rapidly or excessively about trivial matters. In the poem, the children's pointless chatter stands in sharp contrast to their mother's serious dedication to developing her musical skills.

Subject (Lines 6-7) - In music, this term refers to a recognizable melody upon which part or all of the composition is based. In the poem, the phrase is used to simultaneously refer to one side of the woman's identity while referencing the fugue she was playing in the preceding lines.

Counter-subject (Lines 6-7) - In music, this term refers to the melody that contrasts with the main theme or "subject" of the composition. The speaker uses this term in the poem to refer to another side of the woman's identity.

Scours (Lines 8-9) - To clean the surface of something by rubbing it hard, usually with a detergent.

Rubinstein (Lines 9-10) - This is a reference to Arthur Rubinstein, a Polish-American classical pianist who is widely regarded as one of the greatest pianists in history. The speaker explains how the suburban mother once had the opportunity to play in Rubinstein's presence; judging by his lackluster response (yawning), it appears he wasn't too impressed with her musical skills at that time.

Caper (Lines 10-11) - To skip or dance about in a lively and playful way.

Stale (Line 14) - No longer fresh or pleasant to eat.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

As the title would suggest, this poem is an Italian or Petrarchan sonnet. It thus consists of an octet/octave (the first eight lines) and a sestet (the second six lines), which can further be broken down into two quatrains (four-line stanzas) and two tercets (three-line stanzas). The poem also follows the rhyme scheme and meter of a sonnet (though both feature some deviations from traditions; more on those in the relevant sections of this guide). In some ways, then, the poem is a pretty standard in its form.

At the same time, "Suburban Sonnet" is unique in its focus and subject. Traditionally, sonnets were written to celebrate courtship, romance, chivalry, and other topics that endorsed and perpetuated traditional gender roles. Harwood challenges the traditional literary function of sonnets by re-contextualizing it in the modern world and using it in the

service of feminist ideas.

This unconventional use of the sonnet form also becomes apparent during the sestet, which traditionally resolves whatever situation or conflict is established during the octet. Rather than reach a resolution, however, the poem concludes with a message of despair and death, signaling the end of the woman's innermost dreams. Such a dark ending is fairly unusual in the sonnet tradition, making "Suburban Sonnet" (and other sonnets written by Harwood) truly one of a kind.

METER

Like most sonnets, this poem is primarily written in iambic pentameter. This means lines have five iambs, feet with alternating unstressed (a.k.a. short) and stressed (a.k.a. long) syllables. The meter is steady throughout but does contain variations and substitutions—some of which simply keep the poem from sounding overly rigid or formal, and others of which serve a thematic purpose. For example, here is the meter of lines 3-4:

> Beside her on the floor two children chatter,
> then scream and fight. She hushes them. A pot

The first line here has 11 syllables instead of the 10 expected in iambic pentameter, and that final syllable is also unstressed. Because iambic lines end are meant to end with a strong stressed beat, this makes things feel unsteady or incomplete. Not coincidentally, the word that interrupts the poem's rhythm is "chatter"–implying that the children's idle talking is what throws the woman's steady rhythm, her music, off.

The same thing happens with lines 1 ("matter"), 6 ("overpowers"), 8 ("scours"), 10 ("caper"), and 13 ("paper"), each of which subtly suggests a disruptive intrusion of motherhood and domesticity—cleaning the pot, the children hovering around the mouse, and so forth.

Other moments are evocative as well. Take the fourth foot of line 9, which is a spondee (stressed-stressed):

> the crusted milk. Her veins ache. Once she played

By adding more stressed beats to this line, the speaker essentially turns up the volume on the poem for a moment—a moment that references the woman's deep pain, no less. Her aching veins—a sign of her misery as a housewife—impede her smooth rhythm.

"Suburban Sonnet" again breaks away from strict iambic pentameter in the last line:

> featuring: Tasty dishes from stale bread.

This final departure from the poem's regular meter again has a jarring effect on the reader. The meter falls apart when the woman's musical aspirations become totally unraveled—tossed away like a dead mouse wrapped in paper.

RHYME SCHEME

Like most sonnets, "Suburban Sonnet" has a fairly consistent rhyme scheme. The octave (the first eight lines), follows the pattern:

ABABCDCD

The sestet, the last six lines in the sonnet, follows the pattern:

EFGEFG

This rhyme scheme is distinct from traditional Italian sonnets, which typically have an octet that follows an ABBAABBA pattern. Instead, it looks more like the rhyme scheme of a Shakespearean sonnet in the octet.

All the end rhymes are full and clear, with the exception of the fifth and seventh lines, which contain the slant rhymes of "stove" and "love." Many of the rhymes are also feminine rhymes, meaning that multiple syllables rhyme. This is the case with "matter"/"chatter," "overpowers"/"scours," and "caper"/"paper." As noted in our discussion of the poem's meter, the unstressed final beat of all these feminine rhymes makes the poem feel slightly unsteady.

By deviating from the traditional sonnet form in certain respects, Harwood brings a modern spin to a classic form of poetry. The structure and rhyme scheme mirrors the poem's focus on contemporary social issues that have emerged with the rise of suburban life in the mid-20th century.

SPEAKER

The speaker serves the role of an omniscient, third-person narrator, describing the woman's thoughts and feelings from an outside (yet all-knowing) perspective. The speaker's commentary appears to mirror the woman's deepest anxieties about the outcome of her musical ambitions. Emerging as a detached observer of the woman's emotional state, the speaker explores the conflict between her innermost aspirations and her current circumstances. In addition to providing the reader with an exposition of the woman's psyche, the speaker's tone becomes increasingly morbid and foreboding as the sonnet progresses. The speaker concludes the poem with a symbol of death (the mouse stuck in the trap), foreshadowing the demise of the woman's professional aspirations. This establishes the speaker's opinion of the woman's fate, leaving the poem on a bleak and wistful note.

SETTING

The setting is established by the poem's title, which directly references the woman's suburban household. A suburb is an

outlying district of a city that is usually dedicated to private residences and neighborhoods. Historically and culturally speaking, suburbs have been associated with an upper middle-class lifestyle and a fairly privileged position in society. Suburban life is also typically associated with conformity to social traditions, especially gender norms. This poem highlights the role of suburban gender norms in generating the woman's inner conflict.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Gwen Harwood is widely regarded as one of the greatest Australian poets in history. She was active in the 1960s through the 1980s, publishing several collections of poetry that prominently featured sonnets. Harwood's poetry frequently revolves around feminist themes of women's oppression, especially in the context of motherhood. Music is another common motif in Harwood's poetry. "Suburban Sonnet" is clearly no exception to this general pattern, featuring both feminist themes and musical motifs throughout. Published in 1968, "Suburban Sonnet" was released at the peak of Harwood's career as she gained a reputation among both feminist and literary circles for her important work.

"Suburban Sonnet" was published alongside two other sonnets, "In the Park" and "Suburban Sonnet: Boxing Day." All the sonnets appear to follow the story of the same mother of two who is struggling with the constraints that society has placed on her as a woman. While "Suburban Sonnet" stands on its own, reading it in its full context gives a broader picture of the woman's predicament. These sonnets are considered one of Harwood's greatest accomplishments, putting her on the map and establishing her reputation as an important figure in feminist poetry. In fact, Harwood's mark on the literary landscape in Australia was so influential that one of the country's highest poetry prizes is named after her.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As the title suggests, "Suburban Sonnet" is a product of the modern-day suburban environment that emerged in the mid-20th century. The suburbs typically consisted of residential areas established on the outskirts of urban areas, providing the middle-class an alternative to living in the inner city. Along with reinforcing socioeconomic divisions between those living in the city and those residing in the suburbs, the rise of suburban systems also strengthened traditional gender roles for men and women.

In this traditional system, men were generally regarded as the breadwinners while women were expected to dedicate their entire lives to raising their children and maintaining the household. As the suburbs were becoming more widespread, a new wave of feminism was also proliferating in both academic and political circles. Unlike first-wave feminism, which primarily focused on securing women's right to vote, this second wave of feminism was geared towards exploring complex social problems such as women's access to the labor force, career opportunities, and upward mobility in society. "Suburban Sonnet" echoes these concerns through the internal struggles of its subject, the housewife who never has the opportunity to pursue goals outside her role as a mother.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Gwen Harwood's Biography — An overview of Gwen Harwood's life and work. (https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/harwood-gwen)
- Throughlines in Hardwood's Work — A discussion of themes, motifs, and ideas that are common in Harwood's poetry. (https://www.smh.com.au/education/gwen-harwood-selected-poems-20130211-2e7lg.html)
- Gwen Harwood's Sonnets — An analysis of "Suburban Sonnet" in the context of two other sonnets written by Harwood. (https://taughtalesson.wordpress.com/2016/03/05/gwen-harwoods-sonnets-love-and-romance-anything-but/)
- The Women's Movement — A discussion of the women's movement in Australia, especially as it relates to second-wave feminism (which heavily influenced Harwood's poetry). (https://collections.museumsvictoria.com.au/articles/2829)
- Texts in the City: Collected Poems of Gwen Harwood — A talk about Gwen Harwood's life and work. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_J-ie1YEndQ)

HOW TO CITE

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