

To a Daughter Leaving Home



SUMMARY

The poem opens with the speaker talking directly to the daughter, recounting what it was like to teach the daughter how to ride a bike. The speaker recalls what it was like to awkwardly walk next to the daughter as she tried to find her balance on two wheels. The speaker's mouth opened in an expression of surprise, growing round like the wheels of the bike, when the daughter finally rode forward and left the speaker behind by rolling around the gentle curve of the park pathway. Unable to keep up, the speaker nervously worried something bad might happen, fearing that the daughter might slam to the ground while the speaker was still running to reach her. While thinking this, the speaker watched the daughter get farther and farther away, and the farther she went, the more the speaker worried that she might get hurt. The daughter, however, started pedaling hard and fast, triumphantly yelling out and laughing in exhilaration while her hair blew in the wind as if she were using a handkerchief to wave goodbye to her parent.

she might crash.

Of course, watching the daughter ride away distresses the speaker, but it's worth keeping in mind that this is a dilemma of the speaker's own making. After all, the reason the speaker taught the daughter how to balance and pedal in the first place was so the daughter could eventually ride on her own. In this way, the speaker's effort to give the daughter independence ends up making the speaker very anxious.

With this in mind, it's worth considering that the poem is called "To a Daughter **Leaving Home**." Indeed, the poem is addressed to the daughter, who is now older and about to move away from home. Because the daughter is setting off on her own once and for all, the speaker remembers what it was like to watch her wobble away on the bike, since that experience required the speaker to step back and let the daughter be independent. And though the speaker vividly remembers the fear of watching the daughter ride away, the memory isn't completely negative. Rather, the speaker also remembers the daughter's exhilarated laughter and the image of her hair blowing in the wind, memories that are positive and full of happiness. In turn, readers see that, although teaching children to be independent is difficult and scary, it's also deeply rewarding for parents to see their children flourish on their own—even if this means letting them go.



THEMES



PARENTING AND LETTING GO

"To a Daughter Leaving Home" spotlights how hard it can be for parents to step back and let their children experience the world on their own. The speaker recalls teaching the daughter how to ride a bike, a memory that illustrates the mixture of support and worry that often defines parenting. To that end, the speaker wants to help the daughter learn to ride on her own, but as soon as the daughter actually rides away, the speaker starts to worry about her. In turn, the poem invites readers to consider the [irony](#) inherent to parenting, which is that many parents who want to give their children independence find it difficult to let go when the children actually strike out on their own.

It's clear that the speaker wants to help the daughter become self-sufficient. While the daughter "wobble[s]" on the bicycle, the speaker remains by her side, following her but letting her balance on her own. The fact that the speaker doesn't actually hold the daughter up further suggests that the speaker genuinely wants the daughter to learn how to do this by herself. However, this doesn't mean it's *easy* for the speaker to actually let go of the daughter. In fact, the speaker is startled and scared when the young girl finally rides ahead. In this moment, the daughter ventures beyond the safety of the speaker's presence, causing the speaker to run after her, worrying all the while that

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

*When I taught ...
... you wobbled away*

Readers can assume from the poem's title that the "you" being addressed in this opening line (an example of [apostrophe](#)) is the speaker's daughter, and that she is about to move out of the speaker's home for the first time.

The fact that the daughter is about to strike out on her own prompts the speaker to remember another time, years earlier, when the daughter similarly demonstrated her independence, albeit on a smaller scale: when she first learned to ride a bike at age eight.

Pay close attention to what actually happens in this memory. The speaker doesn't physically help the daughter balance on the bike even though the young girl is "wobbl[ing]" as she rides. Instead, the speaker simply stays nearby, "loping along" without

steadying the daughter.

This is important because it suggests that the speaker wants to give the daughter space to learn how to do this by herself. After all, if the speaker physically helped the daughter balance, then the daughter would never figure out how to balance on her own. In turn, these opening lines demonstrate the fact that granting children a certain amount of independence is an important part of childhood.

The speaker's tone is contemplative and somewhat emotional. This is made evident by the [caesura](#) in line 3, as the speaker pauses briefly before thinking more specifically about what it was like to stand by the daughter while she learned to ride a bike on her own:

a bicycle, || loping along
beside you

The pause between the words "bicycle" and "loping" draws attention to the speaker's nostalgic tone, giving the poem a slow, thoughtful sound that suggests the speaker is melancholy because the daughter is about to leave home.

The poem doesn't have a set meter or [rhyme scheme](#), instead relying on [enjambment](#) to create its rhythm. The speaker stretches single phrases over multiple lines, creating a sensation of forward momentum that evokes the feeling of the speaker's daughter moving further and further away. The reader is pulled down the page, just as the daughter is pulled forward on her bicycle.

LINES 6-10

*on two round ...
... of the park,*

The speaker points out the "two round wheels" of the daughter's bike. This is a clarification that might seem unnecessary but is actually an important distinction; learning to ride a bike without training wheels is usually a significant event in a child's life.

Figuring out how to balance on just two wheels allows children a certain amount of freedom, to roam beyond their parents' protection. This, it seems, is exactly what happens once the daughter manages to balance and suddenly pulls ahead of the speaker, whose mouth opens in surprise.

The speaker uses [repetition](#) to illustrate the of this moment, using the words "round" and "rounding" within the space of just two lines:

on two **round** wheels,
my own mouth **rounding**

This repetition calls attention to the image of the speaker's mouth forming a circle, thereby emphasizing the speaker's

astonishment and fear as the daughter rolls away. The repetition also directly links the speaker's emotional state to the bike's form—that is, to the daughter's means for her newfound freedom and independence. Suddenly, the speaker is less interested in helping the daughter learn to be independent and is, instead, worried that something bad might happen to the little girl.

Because this is an intense moment in the poem, the sound of the language intensifies to reflect the speaker's anxiety. The speaker uses loud [consonance](#), repeating the hard /k/, /p/, and /d/ sounds:

in surprise when you pulled
ahead down the curved
path of the park

The intensity that this consonance brings to the poem helps readers pick up on the speaker's discomfort. This, in turn, highlights the [irony](#) of parenting, since the speaker originally wanted to teach the daughter how to ride a bike but becomes terrified and worried as soon as the daughter actually manages to ride on her own. In this way, the speaker's use of language brings itself to bear on the poem's primary message, which is that it can be hard for parents to let go of their children once those children begin to branch out on their own.

LINES 11-14

*I kept waiting ...
... to catch up,*

The speaker is unable to do anything to protect the young girl from falling and hurting herself as she peddles away. It is particularly noteworthy that the speaker says, "I kept waiting / for the thud / of your crash," since this suggests that the speaker fully *expects* the daughter to fall. In other words, the speaker isn't optimistic that the daughter will actually be able to ride the bike on her own. This, in turn, implies that the speaker wasn't truly ready to let the daughter go, even if the speaker's original goal was to give the daughter the freedom and independence that comes along with riding a bike.

The [enjambment](#) of these lines emphasizes the speaker's feeling of nervous anticipation:

I kept waiting
for the thud
of your crash as I
sprinted to catch up

By stretching this sentence over four lines, the speaker forces readers to wait to discover what is going to happen next, thereby inviting them to feel the very same thing the speaker feels while watching the daughter and waiting for her to crash. What's more, inserting line breaks after "waiting" and "thud"

makes them stand out as particularly important words, thereby accentuating the fact that the speaker is nervously awaiting disaster.

LINES 15-19

*while you grew ...
... for your life,*

In these lines, the speaker's worries become even clearer. Watching the daughter recede into the distance, the speaker starts to feel as if the girl is more fragile than ever. This illustrates the speaker's desire to be close to the daughter, whom the speaker isn't ready to let go of. Although the speaker wasn't helping the daughter balance when the daughter was still near her, the speaker at least knew it would be *possible* to keep the daughter from falling. Now that the daughter has ridden away, it would be impossible for the speaker to protect her, which is why the daughter suddenly seems so "breakable."

This sheds light on the inherent [irony](#) of parenting: parents want to teach their children to be independent, but they often have a hard time stepping back when the children actually grow into this independence. Although the daughter's success on the bike is what the speaker inevitably hoped for in the first place, it's difficult for the speaker to do anything but worry when the daughter zooms away on her own.

This dynamic is especially emphasized by the speaker's use of [epizeuxis](#) in line 18, in which the speaker repeats the word "pumping" twice in a row as a way of describing the daughter's furious pedaling. This emphasis on the daughter's pedaling implies that the speaker feels quite left behind, as if the daughter is racing away at an uncontrollable speed.

Once again, the language intensifies in these lines to reflect the speaker's agitation. Indeed, the [consonant](#) /l/, /r/, /m/, and /p/ sounds particularly stand out:

while you grew
smaller, more breakable
with distance,
pumping, pumping,
for your life

By sprinkling consonance throughout these lines, the speaker's words become contoured and muscular, creating a sound that ultimately aligns with the heightened sense of urgency and fear that the speaker experiences while worrying about the daughter's safety and well-being.

LINES 19-24

*screaming ...
... goodbye.*

These lines feature a shift in the speaker's mood. In the lines directly before these, the speaker is worried and scared that the daughter will fall and hurt herself, feeling powerless while

watching the daughter speed away. Now, though, the speaker notices that the daughter is thrilled and overjoyed by her success on the bike, yelling and laughing as her hair blows in the wind. This image seems to overshadow the speaker's worries, perhaps signaling a return to the speaker's original desire to help her daughter achieve the joyous freedom of riding a bike by herself.

At the same time, though, the [simile](#) the speaker uses—in which the daughter's blowing hair is compared to a "handkerchief waving" farewell—suggests that the speaker's emotions are a bit complicated in this moment. Of course, the speaker recognizes the daughter's happiness and is most likely glad to see that the young girl is so thrilled by her newfound independence. And yet, this independence means something else, too: that the speaker has to no choice but to step back and let the daughter flourish on her own.

This is a rather melancholy idea, but it is an unavoidable part of parenting. No matter how much parents want to hold onto their children, the poem implies, they can't protect them forever. Because of this, there is a certain [irony](#) that comes along with the task of raising children, since parents actively encourage their kids to become self-sufficient but then end up getting sad when the children actually do this. This, it seems, is why the speaker feels as if the daughter's hair looks like it is waving goodbye: the speaker has just realized that there is no way to stop the girl from growing up.

With this dynamic in mind, the title of the poem becomes especially relevant. Indeed, the speaker thinks about this memory of teaching the daughter to ride a bike because it is a [metaphor](#) for parenting; in the same way that the speaker couldn't protect the daughter once the daughter rode away on the bike, the speaker also won't be able to protect the daughter once she moves away from home.

The only thing to do, then, is to simply embrace the fact that children grow up, gain independence, and live their own lives. And though this is perhaps difficult for parents to accept, it's also, ironically enough, what most parents want for their children in the first place. As such, watching the daughter recede into the distance is a moment that is both sad *and* happy.



POETIC DEVICES

APOSTROPHE

The entire poem is a direct address to the speaker's daughter and uses [apostrophe](#) throughout. If the title itself weren't enough to establish that the poem is addressed to a specific person, the first three lines make it abundantly clear:

When I taught **you**
at eight to ride
a bicycle [...]

By beginning the poem this way, the speaker strikes a nostalgic tone. This tone is emphasized by the fact that the speaker is addressing the daughter directly, wanting to fondly remember the time the speaker taught her how to ride a bike. In this way, the speaker allows readers to observe what otherwise feels like a private conversation about a cherished and important memory. Knowing that the poem has been written to mark the daughter's departure from home makes it seem even more personal and special, as if readers have been given the opportunity to witness a momentous occasion in the speaker's relationship with the daughter.

From a technical standpoint, the speaker's use of apostrophe is also made clear by the simple fact that the words "you" and "your" appear frequently. This, in turn, serves as a constant reminder of the speaker's desire to communicate directly with this young woman.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24

CAESURA

There are not very many [caesuras](#) in "To a Daughter Leaving Home," which for the most part flows down the page with a sense of unstoppable momentum. This makes the caesuras that are present all the more noticeable. For instance, the way the speaker pauses while describing what it's like to watch the daughter ride away is especially resonant, since there are very few pauses in the rest of the poem:

while you grew
smaller, || more breakable
with distance

By inserting a caesura after the word "smaller," the speaker slows down the overall pace of this section. In turn, the speaker's emotions shine through a bit more prominently, as the speaker's worry and fear about the daughter's well-being becomes apparent in this tonal shift. In other words, the caesura here makes the speaker sound concerned and cautious, thereby highlighting the speaker's anxiety surrounding the daughter's safety.

Similarly, lines 18 and 19 contain caesuras that slow readers down and encourage them to consider the speaker's emotional state:

pumping, || pumping
for your life, || screaming

One thing that's particularly notable is that the speaker's pace becomes slower and more patterned even though this is the most intense and exciting moment in the entire poem. Indeed,

the daughter has just sped away, but instead of accelerating the language of the poem to reflect this, the speaker actually starts speaking *slower* by inserting caesuras in the middle of these two lines. Accordingly, it's reasonable to conclude that the speaker is hesitant to celebrate the daughter's newfound freedom, instead wishing it were possible to keep the young girl from zooming away on her own. With this in mind, then, this use of caesura reflects the speaker's internal struggle to let go of the daughter.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "bicycle, loping"
- **Line 16:** "smaller, more"
- **Line 18:** "pumping, pumping"
- **Line 19:** "life, screaming"

CONSONANCE

The speaker uses [consonance](#) to draw connections between certain words and to generally accentuate important moments in the poem. For instance, the /b/, /l/, and /w/ sounds are particularly apparent in lines 3 through 5:

a bicycle, loping along
beside you
as you wobbled away

By repeating the /l/ sound, the speaker links the words "bicycle," "loping," and "along." What's more, the /b/, /l/, and /w/ sounds are all rather rounded and blunt, sounding somewhat awkward when placed near each other. In this way, the speaker gives the entire passage an unsteady, clumsy sound that brings to mind the daughter's "wobbl[ing]" on the bike.

Later, in lines 8 to 10, the consonance of plosive /p/ and hard /k/ sounds lends a sort of roughness to the poem, perhaps reflecting the speaker's panic and fear as the daughter suddenly rides away on her own:

in surprise when you pulled
ahead down the curved
path of the park,

The same sounds continue through the next few lines in words like "kept," "crash," "sprinted," and "catch up," continuing the speaker's panicked tone.

In other moments, the speaker uses consonance a bit more subtly. For instance, there is a small amount of [sibilance](#) in lines 16 through 19, as the speaker weaves the /s/ sound throughout the words without ever letting it fully take over:

smaller, more breakable
with distance,

pumping, pumping
for your life, screaming

Although the /s/ sound isn't all that prominent in this section, it does have a certain effect on the way these lines flow, as it creates a soft hissing sound that connects the words "smaller," "distance," and "screaming" with one another. The hissing sound is also somewhat unstable and loose, and this ultimately aligns with the speaker's anxiety about not being able to control the daughter and keep her safe—as if the unwieldy, slippery feeling of the /s/ sound reflects the speaker's inability to fully protect the daughter from danger.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "bicycle," "loping," "along"
- **Line 4:** "beside"
- **Line 5:** "wobbled," "away"
- **Line 6:** "wheels"
- **Line 8:** "surprise," "pulled"
- **Line 9:** "ahead," "down," "curved"
- **Line 10:** "path," "park"
- **Line 11:** "kept"
- **Line 13:** "crash"
- **Line 14:** "sprinted," "catch," "up"
- **Line 16:** "smaller," "more," "breakable"
- **Line 17:** "distance"
- **Line 18:** "pumping," "pumping"
- **Line 19:** "for," "your," "life," "screaming"
- **Line 20:** "laughter"
- **Line 21:** "hair," "flapping"
- **Line 22:** "behind"
- **Line 23:** "handkerchief"

ENJAMBMENT

The vast majority of the lines in "To a Daughter Leaving Home" are [enjambéd](#). The speaker stretches most of the phrases out over the course of multiple lines, inserting breaks in the middle of certain clauses. This affects the flow of the poem, making it seem at times as if readers are tumbling forward. This sense of forward momentum reflects the daughter's movement as she rides away from her parent.

Enjambment urges readers to move quickly from one line to the next, and it also creates a certain amount of anticipation and suspense. This is because cutting one phrase into separate parts can actually delay the delivery of important information. For example, the enjambment in lines 11 through 14 ends up heightening the drama that takes place when the daughter goes careening away from the speaker:

I kept waiting
for the thud
of your crash as I

sprinted to catch up,

At the end of each of these lines (except, of course, the last one, which is [end-stopped](#)), the speaker leaves readers hanging, forcing them to race to the next line to learn what, exactly, the speaker did in this moment.

Similarly, the enjambment that occurs in the last two lines is worth noting, as the speaker compares the daughter's "flapping" hair to a "handkerchief [waving / goodbye](#)." By enjambing the second-to-last line like this, the speaker subtly delays the word "goodbye," which is the last word of the entire poem. In this way, the speaker is able to give "goodbye" its own line, accentuating its importance and reminding readers that the speaker now must say farewell to her daughter once again as she prepares to move away from home for the first time.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "you / at"
- **Lines 2-3:** "ride / a"
- **Lines 3-4:** "along / beside"
- **Lines 4-5:** "you / as"
- **Lines 5-6:** "away / on"
- **Lines 7-8:** "rounding / in"
- **Lines 8-9:** "pulled / ahead"
- **Lines 9-10:** "curved / path"
- **Lines 11-12:** "waiting / for"
- **Lines 12-13:** "thud / of"
- **Lines 13-14:** "I / sprinted"
- **Lines 15-16:** "grew / smaller"
- **Lines 16-17:** "breakable / with"
- **Lines 18-19:** "pumping / for"
- **Lines 19-20:** "screaming / with"
- **Lines 21-22:** "flapping / behind"
- **Lines 22-23:** "a / handkerchief"
- **Lines 23-24:** "waving / goodbye"

REPETITION

The speaker uses [repetition](#) twice in "To a Daughter Leaving Home." The device functions in the poem both as a way of emphasizing a certain word *and* as a way of altering a word's meaning. The first instance of repetition appears in lines 6 and 7 ("on two ... mouth rounding"), when the speaker uses [diacope](#) to repeat the word "round." However, the speaker doesn't just say the word "round" twice—instead, the speaker uses [polyptoton](#) to subtly alter the word:

on two round wheels,
my own mouth rounding

The first time "round" appears, it is used as an adjective to describe the shape of bicycle wheels. The second time, however, it is used as a verb to describe the speaker's look of

surprise, as the speaker's mouth forms a circle when the daughter suddenly pulls ahead on the bike. All in all, this repetition calls attention to the word "round" while also demonstrating how the daughter's actions have a direct impact on the speaker's emotions: as the daughter rolls away, the speaker's face conveys a sense of distress, and the use of polyptoton helps highlight the fact that these two things are linked.

The second time repetition appears in the poem is when the speaker uses [epizeuxis](#) in line 18, which reads: "pumping, pumping." In this moment, the speaker uses the word "pumping" to describe the way the daughter pedals. By repeating the word twice in a row, the speaker communicates the energy and excitement that the daughter applies to the pedals, making it easier for readers to imagine the young girl furiously pedaling so that she won't fall. In turn, the speaker's repetition acts as an intensifier, adding drama to this already exhilarating moment.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "round"
- **Line 7:** "rounding"
- **Line 18:** "pumping," "pumping"

METAPHOR

The entirety of "To a Daughter Leaving Home" can be thought of as an [extended metaphor](#). This is because the speaker's memory of teaching the daughter to ride a bike is, above all, a [metaphor](#) for what it's like for parents to learn to let go of their children. The speaker's daughter is about to leave home for the first time, and the memory recounted in the poem illustrates the experience of watching a child learn to live independently.

The use of this memory as an extended metaphor is particularly notable at the end of the poem, when the speaker uses a [simile](#) to compare the way the daughter's hair blows in the wind to a "handkerchief waving / goodbye." In this moment, the poem's central metaphor becomes explicit, as the speaker directly acknowledges that the hardest part of teaching children how to be independent is the fact that this means they will someday strike out on their own, leaving behind the very people who encouraged this independence in the first place.

In the same way that the speaker taught the daughter to ride a bike when she was a little girl, then, the speaker has presumably encouraged the daughter to grow up and establish her own life—which means moving away from home. Accordingly, the entire memory of teaching the daughter to ride a bike is metaphorical, helping readers understand what it's like to step back and let children flourish on their own.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24

IRONY

Because the poem focuses on the contradictory motives and feelings that often come along with parenthood, there is a certain sense of [irony](#) at play in the memory the speaker recounts. Recalling what it was like to teach the daughter to ride a bike, the speaker remembers encouraging the daughter by standing nearby to make sure she didn't fall. In this moment, the speaker seems to want nothing more than to help the daughter gain the confidence necessary to balance on a two-wheeled bicycle. As soon as the daughter manages to do this, though, the speaker realizes that it's no longer possible to fully protect the little girl, and this makes the speaker both worried and melancholy. As a result, the poem outlines the irony that is typical of parenthood, since most parents try to teach their children independence but then are sad when the children actually manage to go off on their own.

Nowhere is this irony more apparent than in lines 5 through 14 ("as you ... catch up"), when the speaker's face forms an expression of utter surprise when the daughter finally pulls ahead on the bicycle. Even though the speaker just been actively trying to teach the girl to ride a bike by herself, the speaker is beside herself when this actually happens. As soon as the daughter rides away, the speaker is gripped by fear and worry. And yet, this is the exact result the speaker aimed for in the first place by teaching the daughter to balance on the bike. Similarly, parents who teach their children independence often find themselves quite sad and worried when their children eventually grow up and establish their own lives—an irony that is central to the experience of parenthood.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24

SIMILE

As mentioned in our discussion of the poem's use of [extended metaphor](#), this is a single [simile](#) that appears at the end of the poem:

the hair flapping
behind you **like a**
handkerchief waving
goodbye.

Here, the speaker compares the daughter's hair, which billows out behind her as she rides her bike, to a handkerchief, a square of fabric, being waved goodbye. The image here might feel strange to modern readers, but historically people (usually women) would wave handkerchiefs at public events (like

parades or rallies) so show their approval for something. The image here also brings to mind the way people might wave handkerchiefs while standing at the docks and watching a ship depart. It's a symbol of respect and farewell, but also something that suggests joy and excitement.

The simile here helps readers understand that the poem is about more than the daughter simply learning to ride a bike. Instead, the bike riding is representative of the daughter growing up and becoming more independent in general. That her hair waves "like a handkerchief" reminds readers that the occasion for the poem is the daughter leaving home; the speaker understands that the daughter is growing up and leaving her parent behind.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 21-24:** "the hair flapping / behind you like a / handkerchief waving / goodbye."



VOCABULARY

Loping (Line 3) - Running or moving quickly in long strides.

Rounding (Line 7) - The word "rounding" is used in this context to describe the circular shape of the speaker's mouth as it forms a look of surprise.

Thud (Lines 12-13) - A heavy sound caused by some kind of impact.

Pumping (Line 18) - In this context, the speaker uses the word "pumping" to refer to the act of pedaling a bike.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"To a Daughter Leaving Home" does not adhere to any particular poetic form. Instead, it develops over the course of 24 unstructured lines, all of which are quite short. Many of these lines are [enjambéd](#) and run easily into each other, creating a fairly smooth flow that pulls readers down the page. This creates a sensation of forward momentum that reflects the daughter moving away from her parent. That the poem has no formal constraints is also notable because the easy, unbothered organization of the lines reflects the unchecked independence and freedom the daughter achieves by learning how to ride a bike.

METER

The poem is written in [free verse](#), meaning that it lacks a consistent metrical pattern. However, the lines are all roughly the same length, though the number of syllables varies from line to line, ranging from a line with just two syllables to a line

with eight syllables. This use of free verse aligns with the free-flowing feel that ultimately mirrors the young daughter's newfound sense of freedom and independence.

RHYME SCHEME

"To a Daughter Leaving Home" does not have a set [rhyme scheme](#). There are a few rhymes in the poem, but most of these are [slant rhymes](#). For example, take the slant rhyme that occurs between "crash" and "catch" in lines 13 and 14 ("of your ... catch up"). As a result, the various qualities that define the poem have very little to do with rhyming, as the speaker is more interested in recounting the memory of teaching the daughter to ride a bike than creating lines that sound particularly musical. The poem is loose and unstructured, reflecting the freedom the daughter finds as she learns to ride a bike.



SPEAKER

The speaker of "To a Daughter Leaving Home" is a parent who remembers teaching a daughter how to ride a bike. The speaker's gender is never made clear, but many readers will perhaps assume that the speaker is a woman, attributing the voice to Linda Pastan herself, since Pastan does indeed have a daughter. However, there isn't quite enough identifying information in the poem to conclude that the speaker is actually Pastan. In any case, what's most important to grasp is that the speaker is a parent who nostalgically rehashes this memory of the daughter as a child. In doing so, the speaker reveals a mixture of sadness, worry, and pride, emotions that arise when parents let go of their children once and for all by sending them off into the adult world.



SETTING

The memory that the speaker recounts in the poem takes place on the pathway of a public park, as the speaker teaches the daughter how to ride a bike. Beyond this, it is difficult to draw conclusions about the surrounding context, since the speaker doesn't include any details that illuminate the time or specific location in which this scene plays out. After all, the poem's focus on the joys and anxieties of parenthood is universal, and the story the speaker recounts could take place almost anywhere.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"To a Daughter Leaving Home" belongs to a category of poetry devoted to exploring the ins and outs of parenthood. This topic has interested poets for quite some time, as made apparent by poems like Ben Jonson's 1616 poem "[On My First Son](#)," William

Butler Yeats's 1919 poem "[A Prayer for My Daughter](#)," or Langston Hughes's 1922 poem "[Mother to Son](#)."

However, "To a Daughter Leaving Home" has a much more contemporary sensibility than these older poems, since it was published in 1998. To that end, the poem uses the kind of unencumbered [free verse](#) that became especially popular during Postmodernism and became even *more* widespread at the beginning of the 21st century.

In keeping with this, the poem's focus on memory, familial relationships, and everyday life aligns it with contemporary poetry's interest in exploring that which is ordinary but nonetheless full of emotion and beauty. In this way, her work is comparable to the work of poets like Mary Oliver, Billy Collins, or Ross Gay, since all of these poets pay close attention to the small, seemingly mundane moments that make life feel poignant—moments that are often recreated or recalled using free verse and a lyrical tone of voice.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As previously mentioned, "To a Daughter Leaving Home" was originally published in 1998. On the whole, the 1990s was a relatively stable, calm decade in the United States, at least considering that the country wasn't *actively* at war for the majority of the decade and that the economy was healthy—two measures that, however noteworthy, don't ultimately make up for the countless socioeconomic and racial injustices that were very much alive during the time. Still, many people view the 1990s as a time of stability, which is why it's unsurprising that contemporary poetry began to look more and more at the nuances of everyday life.

It is in this context that "To a Daughter Leaving Home" was published. Though the poem doesn't include any details to suggest when, exactly, it takes place, the fact that it was written in the 1990s makes sense, since the poem's interests align with contemporary poetry's renewed focus on family and home life—a focus that has remained intact throughout the 2000s and 2010s (though in the last decade contemporary poetry has once more begun to address social justice issues that in some ways recalls the kind of poetry that emerged from the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s). "To a Daughter

Leaving Home," then, is a strong representation of the calm, introspective poetry that was often typical of the late 1990s.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [The Poet Reads Her Work](#) — Listen to Linda Pastan herself read several of her most popular poems. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jlmKVno4NBc&t=13s>)
- [In Conversation](#) — To hear more about Pastan's approach to poetry, check out to this conversation between her and the poet Lucille Clifton. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ueCd4CvY1II>)
- [The Poem Out Loud](#) — Check out this reading of the poem. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rPXk2ZAK59k>)
- [More About Pastan](#) — To learn more about Linda Pastan, take a look at this concise overview of her life and work. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/linda-pastan>)
- [The Poet at Home](#) — A window into Pastan's enviable home, where she lived and wrote until 2018. (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/where-we-live/wp/2018/06/22/potomac-homes-magical-setting-inspired-a-poet-laureate/>)



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