

Trees



POEM TEXT

- 1 I think that I shall never see
- 2 A poem lovely as a tree.
- 3 A tree whose hungry mouth is prest
- 4 Against the sweet earth's flowing breast;
- 5 A tree that looks at God all day,
- 6 And lifts her leafy arms to pray;
- 7 A tree that may in summer wear
- 8 A nest of robins in her hair;
- 9 Upon whose bosom snow has lain;
- 10 Who intimately lives with rain.
- 11 Poems are made by fools like me,
- 12 But only God can make a tree.

The speaker talks plainly of poetry's inability to capture the true beauty of nature; no poem can be "lovely as a tree," the speaker says, before going on to describe precisely what makes trees so wonderful. For one thing, the speaker presents the tree as an essential part of a peaceful, harmonious natural world. When the tree needs nourishment, it simply drinks directly from "the earth's sweet flowing breast." In turn, the tree itself becomes a home for birds, and has a close "intima[cy]" with snow and rain. The tree's loveliness thus comes in part from its interconnectedness with other parts of nature. In other words, the tree is part of a perfectly balanced natural ecosystem. And this awe-inspiring majesty, the poem insists, could only be the work of God.

The tree thus stands in testament to God's power. To emphasize this, the speaker [personifies](#) the tree as offering up its "arms" (a.k.a. branches) towards heaven in prayer. Life, in this image, seems to offer thanks to God for its own existence. This is something that the speaker implies human art—which however beautiful, will always be inanimate—can never do. Poems, it follows, simply can't hope to compete with such natural wonder and beauty. They are not the work of God, but rather of "fools"—people who are crazy enough to try and mimic God through an act of creation, yet who will always come up short.

The speaker includes themselves in this category, acknowledging the shortcomings of this very poem! That said, this *is still* a poem, a piece of art that the speaker felt compelled to write despite its inevitable failure to match God's creation. This suggests that though human art cannot meet God's unparalleled standards, it still has a role to play. Namely, the poem suggests that art is valuable because it is a way of appreciating and praising the divine wonder of the world. This poem itself provides a way for other people to reflect on the majesty of God's creation, drawing the reader's attention to the way trees express and embody God's will.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12



SUMMARY

I don't think I'll ever read a poem that's as beautiful and perfect as a tree.

Thirsty trees drink from the earth's delicious soil like a baby drinks from its mother's breast.

Trees look up to the heavens all day, their leafy branches seemingly raised in prayer.

In the summer, trees play host to nests of robins, which sit like crowns atop the trees' leaves.

Snow falls on trees' breasts, and trees have a close, nurturing relationship with the rain.

Fools like me might try to write poetry, but our work will never match the glory of something created by God.



THEMES



HUMAN ART VS. DIVINE CREATION

"Trees" celebrates the majesty of nature, insisting that no art that humankind makes can match even the simple beauty of a tree. The poem can thus be read as a hymn of praise to God's creation, celebrating both the wonder of the natural world and its maker.



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

*I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as a tree.*

"Trees" opens with a candid admission of the poem's insufficiency: the speaker is a poet who, while clearly dedicated

to the act of writing poetry, feels that no "poem" could ever live up to the "love[liness]" of a tree. In two short lines, then, the poem sets up a contrast between human creativity and the natural world. For all the efforts of the human imagination, the simple beauty and majesty of a tree will always prove superior.

In theory, the poem could end here! But it doesn't, of course, hinting that there may yet be a purpose to writing poetry after all—even if it can't hope to compare to the natural world. And though the speaker has begun with a confession of inferiority, the poem still strives to construct its own form of "love[liness]." There are a number of ways in which the poem does this, even in this seemingly simple opening [couplet](#).

First, there's a lot of sound patterning at work here, through both [alliteration](#) and [consonance](#):

I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as a tree.

It's a subtle effect, but because the lines are so short and the vocabulary so simple, the /th/ (voiced and unvoiced here) and /l/ sounds shine through. Both are gentle and soft, perhaps embodying how the speaker feels humbled before the divine presence of a tree.

Second, the [meter](#) is technically perfect. If readers scan "poem" as having two distinct syllables (as the speaker seems to intend), then both lines conform exactly to the poem's [iambic tetrameter](#) scheme (meaning each line has five poetic feet in a da-DUM rhythm):

I think | that I | shall nev- | er see
A po- | em love- | ly as | a tree.

The steady meter here creates a sense of simplicity, grace, and balance. This is intended to make the reader feel that they are in the presence of the perfection. Every syllable is placed with specific intent, hinting at God's design for the world.

Finally, it's also worth noting how the pure, simple rhyme of "see" and "tree" *also* suggests harmony and simple beauty. The poem thus simultaneously stresses its own inevitable failure *and* takes on the challenge of creating something that is "lovely"—even if it won't end up as lovely as a tree.

LINES 3-4

*A tree whose hungry mouth is prest
Against the sweet earth's flowing breast;*

Having established that poetry can never be as "lovely as a tree," the speaker goes on to describe what, exactly, makes a tree so lovely. Specifically, the speaker focuses on the relationship between the tree and other elements in the natural world. The poem draws the reader's attention to the tree's place in an ecosystem—how it's in harmony with its

environment.

The speaker [personifies](#) the tree as well, portraying it as a thirsty, living being that must drink from the "sweet earth" in order to survive. In fact, the tree seems like a baby here, nursing at the "earth's flowing breast." The tree's needs, then, are perfectly met by the earth from which it grows; it exists in a perfect system.

Like the first stanza, these two lines are built with delicate [consonance](#) that is intended to convey the harmonious relationship between the tree and the rest of nature—and thus the majesty of God. The stanza uses two main sounds—/s/ and /t/:

A tree whose hungry mouth is prest
Against the sweet earth's flowing breast;

The /t/ here is a gentle sound formed by placing the tongue against the roof of the mouth, while the more fluid /s/ sound subtly evokes thirst and flowing water; think about how [sibilance](#) often gets associated with the sound of the sea. The sheer amount of this particular sound in line 4 suggests that the tree has an abundance of what it needs to live. By association, the poem is praising God's ability to provide for life on earth.

It's also worth noting how the earth is also personified. Just like a mother's breast provides milk for the baby, the earth offers nourishment to its trees and plants. This gestures towards the concept of Mother Nature, a kind of caring love flowing through all life on the planet. This love, of course, is drawn from—and expresses—God's love.

LINES 5-6

*A tree that looks at God all day,
And lifts her leafy arms to pray;*

The third [couplet](#) marks a key moment in the poem: its first mention of God. So far the poem has claimed that trees are lovelier than poems, and that trees are in an intimate, nurturing balance with the earth from which they grow. Now the speaker makes it clear that the simple but awe-inspiring beauty of the tree is down to the work of God.

It's worth noting that the poet, Joyce Kilmer, was a Roman Catholic. The poem definitely gestures towards the key Catholic idea of divine *immanence*, which suggests that God is expressed, and celebrated, by the world itself. In other words, God's divinity flows through all created beings.

The speaker continues to [personify](#) the tree, acknowledging how it "looks at God all day." Remember, this is all an elaboration on what makes the tree "lovely." The [anaphora](#) of "a tree" turns the middle section of the poem into a kind of list of loveliness. Here, the speaker says that the tree's magnificence is drawn from the fact that it has a closer and purer relationship with God than do people, who might get distracted from

"look[ing]" at God by sin or earthly woes. The tree, on the other hand, faces the heavens as if in constant admiration of God's majesty.

In line 6, the poem makes use of a familiar poetic image, comparing the tree's branches to arms. Those branches reach towards the sky in what looks like a gesture of prayer. And remember—this is what the tree does pretty much *all day* and *every day*, making it a subject of the Lord with an almost nun-like devotion.

Finally, it's worth noting how this couplet again makes use of the gentle /l/ sound, which has already been linked with "love[liness]" in line 2. The tree "looks at God" and "lifts her leafy arms" in prayer "all day." The poem thus combines [alliteration](#) with [consonance](#) to reinforce the tree's simple beauty, which in turn hints at God's majesty. The /l/ sound is soft and elegant, associating the tree with God's divine perfection. The sound forms slowly in the mouth, hinting at the tree's unhurried dedication to expressing and celebrating God.

LINES 7-8

*A tree that may in summer wear
A nest of robins in her hair;*

In the fourth and fifth [couplets](#), the poem depicts the tree's relationship with the seasons. This helps show the tree as one component in a perfectly balanced ecosystem. Again, the poem discusses the perfection and interconnectedness of this system in order to prove the majesty of God's creative powers.

The tree remains [personified](#) as a female figure, which allows for a greater sense of intimacy between the tree and other parts of nature. The tree is like a friend, or perhaps a loving mother, to the world around her. So, in lines 7 and 8, the tree provides a home for a "nest of robins" in "her hair" (her leaves and branches). Having been nurtured by the "sweet earth's flowing breast," the tree can in turn offer nourishment and shelter to others. Life, in other words, is a network of glorious interdependencies—a system so complex, and yet paradoxically simple in the way it actually works, that it could only be the design of an ultimate creator (in the speaker's mind, at least). And just as God protects life, the tree gives security to the robins.

These lines begin with the [anaphora](#) of "A tree," meaning that this section also forms part of the evidence that supports the tree's desperation as "lovely"—and more "lovely" than any poem—in line 2. The lines also use delicate [consonance](#) to suggest the harmony between the tree in summer and the robins who live in her.

Note, for example, the humming /m/ and /n/ sounds of "may in summer" and "nest of robins in." The sounds here lend music and lyricism to the lines. Throughout this poem, such sonic devices aim to capture the loveliness of God's divine creation. Finally, both of these lines feature perfect [iambic](#) tetrameter,

again suggesting harmony, balance, and the beauty of God's design.

LINES 9-10

*Upon whose bosom snow has lain;
Who intimately lives with rain.*

The fifth [couplet](#) forms a pair with the fourth, focusing on the tree relationship with the seasons. While in summer the tree provides a home for robins, in winter and autumn it shares an intimate existence with snow and rain. The poem depicts the tree as a key part of a beautiful natural structure, one which proves both the "lovel[iness]" of the tree and God's unrivaled skill in making such a perfect world.

Snow and rain are both significant in terms of their [symbolism](#) (as well as their more literal function of helping the trees of the world quench their thirst). Both represent purity, and snow is also associated with innocence. In Isaiah 1:18, God tells humankind that the scarlet (red) of human sin will be turned "white as snow" through faith and trust in their religion. The tree has already been depicted as a devoted subject of the Lord (stanza 3), and the poem seems to map further innocence and goodness—in a word, loveliness—onto it here. The tree has a caring, nourishing relationship with every other aspect of nature that it encounters. And, of course, this all proves the brilliance of God's creation.

Also note that the Bible often depicts rain as a blessing because it aids the growth of crops. A delicately balanced ecosystem thus provides humankind—and plants and animals, of course—with the resources they need to survive. Rain, then, is just one of many of God's gifts. The tree's intimate relationship with rain reflects the harmony of the natural world God created.

The sounds of the lines once again reflect the beauty of God's creation. Note the gentle /l/ of "lain" and "intimately lives," as well as the [assonance](#) of "intimately lives with."

LINES 11-12

*Poems are made by fools like me,
But only God can make a tree.*

In the poem's final [couplet](#), the speaker moves away from the specific focus on the tree and back to the comparison between human creativity and God's. Even though the speaker has used a poem to marvel at simple majesty of tree, the speaker nevertheless feels that poetry is a fool's errand; the speaker even says that it's the work of "fools like me."

Poets can make elaborate, beautiful structures out of language—think about the complexity of a sestina, for example. They can draw eye-opening connections through figurative devices like [metaphor](#) and [simile](#), and they can enthrall listeners through epic tales of heroism and mythology. And yet, no poet "can make a tree." In fact, poets can't create any living creature

at all, and therein lies their inferiority (in the speaker's mind). God creates an intricate ecosystem that works in harmony to nourish and sustain life—something poetry can never do.

This all leads to an important question—why did the poet bother to write this poem? If all poems are characterized by their inferiority and inherent failure, surely it's a waste of time to write them. The poem implicitly answers this question because it has used its own existence to argue *against* itself. That is, the poem becomes a vehicle not for creative superiority but for the creative *proof* of God's majesty.

Like a poet in a medieval court singing a song to praise the king, the speaker turns the poem into a small offering to God. The poet has used multiple poetic techniques to bring the harmony and balance of the natural world to life on the page, giving the reader a sense of the tree's awe-inspiring interconnectedness with everything around it. Poetry can celebrate God's creation, the speaker implies.

The final rhyme of the poem, "me"/"tree," [juxtaposes](#) the speaker against the tree itself—the humble servant of God side-by-side with one proof among many of God's supreme divinity. As with the other rhymes in the poem, this one suggests balance, harmony, and connection.



SYMBOLS



SNOW AND RAIN

Snow and rain are mentioned in the fifth couplet and [symbolize](#) the purity and nourishment provided by God. The Bible associates snow with spiritual cleanliness in passages like Isaiah 1:18, in which the Lord cleanses people's "scarlet" sins and turns them white as snow. Rain, for its part, is essential for life on earth to survive. It also often signifies the coming of the harvest, which in turn represents growth and nourishment.

The symbolism here is subtle, but it chimes with the way that the poem presents the tree as a kind of devotional subject, looking up toward the heavens and offering its "leafy arms" in prayer. In a way, then, the tree lives a life of spiritual commitment that makes it deserving recipient of the purifying qualities associated with snow and rain.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-10:** "Upon whose bosom snow has lain; / Who intimately lives with rain."



POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

[Alliteration](#) appears here and there in "Trees," adding to its general musicality. One important example is in the poem's third [couplet](#), lines 5 and 6:

A tree that looks at God all day,
And lifts her leafy arms to pray;

The [consonance](#) of "all" helps sustain the sound between the lines here as well.

There are a couple of key effects produced by this particular sound. First, the /l/ here recalls an earlier prominent /l/ sound in the poem—"lovely" (in line 2). Remember, loveliness, as the speaker sees it, is the tree's defining feature—and /l/ is the defining sound of the word that *denotes* its defining feature. The /l/ sound is thus linked directly to loveliness, which, in turn, is linked to godliness. Just like, for example, the hard /k/ in "spikiness" seems to embody the attribute that it describes, the soft, gentle /l/ sound suggests to beauty, balance, and grace throughout the poem.

Second, the prominent use of alliteration here also helps depict the tree as in good, leafy health. Think about how leaves grow along the length of a branch; the many /l/ sounds here subtly suggest leafy abundance.

Later in the poem, the /l/ sound reappears in lines 9 and 10 ("lain" and "lives"), with consonance (here of "intimately") once again bolstering the effect. These /l/ sounds evoke the gentleness of snow coming to rest on the tree, and the close relationship—or natural harmony—between the tree and rain.

Another example of alliteration is in line 8's "her hair." Here, the speaker describes how robins come to nest in the [personified](#) tree during the summer months. The /h/ sound, which requires rapid exhalation on the reader's part, suggests the breathlessness of the hottest time of year—as though the poem itself momentarily tries to cool itself down.

The poem's final moment of alliteration is the shared /m/ of "made" and "me." The shared sound here reflects the fact that the speaker, as a poet, is a kind of creator—though the poem makes clear that the speaker's creative power pales in comparison to God's.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "think that"
- **Line 5:** "looks"
- **Line 6:** "lifts," "leafy"
- **Line 8:** "her hair"
- **Line 9:** "lain"
- **Line 10:** "lives"

- **Line 11:** “made,” “me”

ANAPHORA

[Anaphora](#) helps support the speaker's argument that trees are lovelier than poems. Starting with line 3, the speaker opens three successive clauses with the phrase "A tree" (two more specifically repeat "A tree that"). This anaphora structures the list of evidence supporting the speaker's statement that no poem will ever be as "lovely as a tree." Anaphora, then, is part of how the poem proves the tree's loveliness.

Each line that uses this anaphora introduces another aspect of the tree's loveliness. Generally speaking, repetition is a powerful, hypnotic device, and here the anaphora takes on a spell-like quality, emphasizing the awe-inspiring power of God's creation.

It's also worth considering how the anaphora suggests harmony, balance, and order. The anaphora suggests deliberate choice, design, and structure—all qualities that the speaker sees in God's divine creation. Anaphora makes the poem feel neat and logical, rather than chaotic and unpredictable. As a device, then, it creates a subtle parallel with God's own ability to make a perfect world.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** “A tree”
- **Line 5:** “A tree that”
- **Line 7:** “A tree that”

CONSONANCE

[Consonance](#) appears throughout "Trees," and it does two main things: it brings the poem's images to life on the page, and, more generally, evokes the kind of harmony and balance that the speaker sees in the natural world.

As noted in the [alliteration](#) section of this guide, one of the most common sounds in the poem is the /l/—a soft, gentle sound that imbues the poem with the kind of loveliness it describes. But there are other examples of consonance as well. Take, for example, the many /s/ and /t/ sounds in lines 3 and 4:

A tree whose hungry mouth is prest
Against the sweet earth's flowing breast;

The [sibilant](#) /s/ sounds here add a gentle, reverent hush to the lines. Sibilance also perhaps brings to mind water (think about the sound of ocean waves), and thus subtly reflects the image of the tree drinking from the earth. The /t/ sound, meanwhile, suggests a gentle biting motion that ties in with the image of breast-feeding, with the tree's "hungry mouth" gently nursing from the "earth's flowing breast."

Another moment of consonance comes in lines 7 and 8:

A tree that may in summer wear
A nest of robins in her hair;

To make the /n/ sound, the reader must nestle their tongue against the roof of the mouth. In a way, then, this consonance subtly evokes the way that the birds come to rest snugly in the tree. The /n/ sound continues in the following stanza in words like "lain" and "rain," also suggesting the coming-to-rest of snow or rain. The humming /m/, meanwhile, simply adds to the resonance of the lines.

More broadly, consonance is the poem's way of showing that it is a *crafted* object, something *designed* by a creator. The speaker, despite think that poetry is inferior to nature, nevertheless uses consonance (and other devices) to provide an analogy for God's design. That is, the careful placement of sounds throughout this poem tries to subtly mimic God's creative perfection, and suggests a balanced, interconnected world full of beauty, majesty, and "loveliness."

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “lovely”
- **Line 3:** “prest”
- **Line 4:** “Against,” “sweet,” “earth's,” “breast”
- **Line 5:** “looks,” “God,” “all,” “day”
- **Line 6:** “lifts,” “leafy”
- **Line 7:** “may,” “summer”
- **Line 8:** “nest,” “robins,” “in,” “her hair”
- **Line 9:** “whose bosom,” “snow,” “lain”
- **Line 10:** “intimately lives,” “rain”
- **Line 11:** “made,” “me”
- **Line 12:** “make”

ENJAMBMENT

"Trees" is made entirely of [couplets](#), with nearly every stanza forming one unit or phrase. [Enjambment](#) helps the poem establish this form, in which sentences (or phrases) are essentially divided into two equal lines of [iambic](#) tetrameter. Take the first stanza:

I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as a tree.

Notice how the full sentence—"I think I shall never see a poem lovely as a tree"—is split *exactly* in half by the enjambment, with each line getting exactly eight syllables and four stressed beats. In this way, enjambment allows the speaker to preserve the poem's steady form throughout, splitting lines where necessary to keep the meter regular.

In the second stanza, enjambment places greater emphasis on

the word "against" (line 4). The sentence's grammar is briefly suspended by the line-break, making the nourishing relationship between the tree and the earth seem all the more instinctive, vital, and life-giving. Much like the tree needs the earth's "breast" to live, line 3 needs line 4 to make sense!

Enjambment thus aids a sense of perfect interconnectedness—exactly what the speaker sees in the tree and, therefore, in God. The fourth stanza achieves a similar effect, breaking the line at "wear." For a brief moment, the speaker wonders what the tree wears "in summer," before line 8 releases the tension.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "see / A"
- **Lines 3-4:** "prest / Against"
- **Lines 7-8:** "wear / A"

PERSONIFICATION

"Trees" uses [personification](#) to turn the tree into a woman-like figure, which helps the poem show the tree as one part of a perfect, Godly ecosystem. Personification also allows the poem to emphasize the tree's "love[liness]"—to demonstrate what it is about the tree that makes it so lovely (and so much lovelier than any poem!).

Stanzas 2 to 4 personify the tree throughout. In lines 3-4, for example, the personified tree suckles on the "sweet earth's flowing breast" (note that the earth is also personified here). In other words, the earth is like a mother to the tree, providing nourishment so that the tree can survive and thrive. This sets up the tree as part of an interconnected natural system, showing the "take" part of its give-and-take relationship with its environment.

In the third stanza (lines 5 and 6), the personification turns the tree into a praying woman. In a familiar poetic image, the tree's branches are likened to arms thrust towards heaven in a gesture of devotion. Personification here thus shows that nature is not just an expression of God's will, but also a kind of celebration of that will. By its mere existence, the tree praises God, facing the heavens to offer thanks.

In the fourth stanza, the tree becomes a provider. During summer, robins make their home in the tree's branches. This shows that the tree essentially passes on the care and kindness that it receives from the earth (in stanza 2), showcasing God's divine talent for creating a perfectly interconnected world in which life supports other life. The following stanza does something similar, though it's a little more abstract. Here, the tree becomes a place of rest and intimacy for snow and rain—as though all of nature exists in a kind of loving kinship.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- Lines 3-10

JUXTAPOSITION

[Juxtaposition](#) is an essential part of "Trees," which pits the foolishness of human poetry against the perfection of God's creation. The speaker insists that no human act of creation can come close to what God can make. After declaring poetry's inherent failure in the first-stanza, the speaker uses the bulk of the poem to expand on what makes a tree so "lovely." It seems what really sets the tree apart from poems is how full of life it is—how it draws nourishment directly from the earth and, in turn, provides for other forms of life. This contrasts with poetry, which, however beautiful, can't sustain life nor aspire to the perfect harmony and balance of the natural world.

The poem's juxtaposition is clearest in the last stanza, which describes poets as "fools" and God as the only being who "can make a tree"—that is, the only being who can create life itself. Human creators simply can't compete with God's power. Juxtaposition, then, forms an important part of how the speaker humbles themselves before God, and turns the poem into an offering of praise towards God's majesty.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "I think that I shall never see / A poem lovely as a tree."
- **Lines 11-12:** "Poems are made by fools like me, / But only God can make a tree."



VOCABULARY

Shall (Line 1) - Will.

Prest (Line 3) - Archaic spelling of "pressed."

Bosom (Line 9) - Chest/breast.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Trees" has a tight, formal structure consisting of six couplets (two-line stanzas). It's a highly organized poem, with each couplet containing a rhyming pair of lines. This rigid structure makes the poem feel more traditionally *poetic*; people don't casually speak in rhyming couplets, and thus the structure here reminds readers that this is a poem. This, in turn, emphasizes the fact that, though the speaker says poetry is the work of fools, the speaker feels compelled to write it anyway!

The form of the poem also suggest harmony, balance, and order. Every thing feels like its in the right place, and the neat structure of the poem mimics in the perfection of a world

designed by God. Like the tree—with its specific, God-given place in nature—every formal aspect of the poem is chosen deliberately.

It's also worth noting how the poem is book-ended by two couplets that set up and restate the [juxtaposition](#) between poetry and trees (and, by extension, between human art and divine creation). This creates a subtle sense of symmetry that again evokes the beauty and perfection of God's design for the world.

METER

"Trees" uses [iambic](#) tetrameter throughout its 12 lines. This means there are four iambs, feet with a da-DUM rhythm, per line. The first [couplet](#) offers a typical example (and note that "poem" is meant to be read as having two distinct syllables here):

I think | that I | shall nev- | er see
A po- | em love- | ly as | a tree.

The simple, reliable sound of the meter isn't the poet's way of showing off his own skill; it's instead meant to evoke the way that God made the world. Through creating a metrically faultless poem, the speaker actually *praises* God's divine creation. Because, though all the stresses seem to be placed meticulously in the poem, the speaker denies that any poem can ever be as "lovely" as a tree. That is, no poetic structure, however well executed, can match God's ability to create life and natural beauty.

For the most part, the poem is meant to be read with iambic stresses throughout. There are, however, two variations worth noting. Line 4 is mostly intended as iambic tetrameter, but it's also possible to read a cluster of stresses in the phrase "**sweet earth's flowing breast.**" Arguably, these words slow the poem down, making the reader pause to consider the nurturing relationship between the soil and the tree.

The other variation is in line 11, which features a trochee (**stressed-unstressed**) in the first foot:

Poems | are made | by fools | like me,

It's no coincidence that this happens on the word "poems." It's like a technical flaw in the text, deliberately introduced to emphasize the inferiority of human creativity when compared to God's divine powers.

RHYME SCHEME

"Trees" uses rhyming [couplets](#) throughout, setting up a [rhyme scheme](#) that goes:

AA BB CC DD EE AA

These are all perfect rhymes, ringing out loud and clear. This steady, predictable rhyme scheme suggests harmony and order.

As with the tight [meter](#) and formal structure of the poem, the neatness of the rhyme scheme here isn't about the poet showing off. Instead, the apparent perfection of all these rhymes stands in as a small tribute to God's perfect design for the world. Just as every living creature has its place in the perfect ecosystem designed by God (according to the speaker, at least), every rhyming word falls in exactly the expected place here.

One rhyme deserves a special mention—"me"/"tree" in lines 11 and 12. This supports—and neatly represents—the poem's [juxtaposition](#) between human art and divine creation. The speaker is on one side of the rhyme with all the other "fools" who write (and write about!) poetry, while God, with the ability to create a life, is in a totally different category all of His/Her own.



SPEAKER

The speaker in "Trees" is a poet. Through the poem's focus on nature and, in turn, how nature reflects God's majesty, it's reasonable to say that the speaker is also a religious believer. Other than that, though, the speaker intentionally shifts the focus away from themselves, preferring to use the bulk of the poem as a space to praise the "love[liness]" of the natural world.

The speaker also takes the unusual step of stressing the *failure* of their own craft. Though a committed and skilled poet, the speaker believes that no poem will ever match the simple beauty of a tree. Trees are alive and in perfect harmony with the world around them, and could only have been created by a divine being like God. Poems, on the other hand, are the work of "fools" like the speaker. The speaker thus feels humbled before God, and in awe of the way that nature expresses God's majesty. It's thus no wonder that most of the poem focuses on a tree rather than the speaker themselves.

Joyce Kilmer himself, of course, was a poet, and the poem is typical of his style. He was also a Catholic, and the poem is often interpreted as an expression of his own view of the world.



SETTING

The poem doesn't have a strongly defined setting beyond the natural world itself. There is no suggestion that this is one particular tree, though it does seem to exist in a seasonal climate: the fourth stanza depicts the tree in summer, offering its branches as a nesting place for robins, while in the fifth, the poem alludes to winter and autumn. The tree is one element in a divinely designed ecosystem. It's always in touch with its surroundings, both drawing nourishment from them and, in turn, providing shelter.

It's also worth noting that there is something distinctly Eden-like about the poem's setting. There is no hint of the modern

world—no human technology, or, apart from the speaker, even any human beings. This creates an atmosphere of natural paradise, drawing the reader's focus to the divinity of God's creation.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Trees" was first published in 1913 in an early issue of *Poetry* magazine, and was subsequently included in Joyce Kilmer's 1914 collection *Trees and Other Poems*. It is by far Kilmer's most popular poem.

Critics often deemed Kilmer's poetry to be slight and sentimental. His style—with its pure rhymes and reliable [meter](#)—is curiously out of step with the artistic atmosphere of his time. Kilmer's poetry has more in common with the strict, stilted tone of Victorian poets than it does with the innovations of his Modernist contemporaries like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound.

In fact, Kilmer himself cited the Victorian poet and critic Coventry Patmore as a major influence, and also drew inspiration from the religious sensibilities of 17th-century Metaphysical poets like John Donne. In his focus on and idealization of the natural world, Kilmer also has something in common with poets of the Romantic era—writers like William Wordsworth, William Blake, and so on.

"Trees" also sits neatly in the middle of a Venn diagram between two rich poetic traditions: nature poetry and religious poetry. In this poem, Kilmer praises nature in order to celebrate of God, seeing evidence of a divine hand in nature's glory. The poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins often does something similar (though Hopkins performs considerably more risky feats with his language). It's worth comparing this poem to "[Pied Beauty](#)" or "[The Windhover](#)" to see another take on the idea that nature demonstrates, expresses, and even praises God's majesty.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Trees" was published in an era of vast, wide-sweeping societal changes. In October 1913, the year the poem appeared in *Poetry* magazine, Ford Motors Inc. established the first moving assembly line, decreasing the turnaround time of their flagship Model T car and ushering in an era of mass production and industrialization. Not long before that, the ideas of Frederick Taylor, an American engineer, had started to change the nature of work and labor towards a more science-based, goal-oriented system—to the detriment, some would say, of the quality of working life.

Of course, none of this appears in Kilmer's poem, but it's notable that, in order to present a vision of godly majesty, the speaker presents a scene that has little to do with the modern world. "Trees" represents a perhaps naive longing for a return to a natural, Eden-like paradise.

The poem also appeared not long before the onset of the First World War. It's impossible to know how the sheer devastation of that conflict would have influenced Kilmer's poetry; he was killed in action in the Second Battle of the Marne in France in the summer of 1918.

Kilmer was a Roman Catholic, and his religion clearly influenced the worldview presented by the poem. In the third couplet, for example, the tree raises its "arms" (i.e., its branches) towards the heavens in a gesture of prayer. The tree, then, is both a product of God's supreme creation *and* an expression or celebration of it at the same time. The idea that God's majesty is expressed and manifested in the world itself is known as *divine immanence*. In other words, God is both the creator of all things, and *in* all things.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Kilmer's Life and Work](#) — Read a longer biography of Joyce Kilmer over at the Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/joyce-kilmer>)
- "[Trees](#)" [Out Loud](#) — Listen to a reading of the poem, complete with illustrations. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E3zfX1hvJml>)
- [More Poems About Trees](#) — Trees have a long, rich tradition in poetry; check out more poems on the subject here. (<https://discoverpoetry.com/poems/poems-about-trees/>)
- [The Tragedy of Joyce Kilmer](#) — An in-depth article about Kilmer's life, work, and tragic early death. (<https://www.americamagazine.org/arts-culture/2018/07/27/tragedy-joyce-kilmer-catholic-poet-killed-world-war-i>)
- [The Platters Sing "Trees"](#) — Listen to a musical version of the poem by The Platters, a famous American vocal group formed in 1952. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KThO_07laOw)



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