

Fallen nests: an
exploration of
personal and political
realities in fall 1961



Robert Lowell's *Fall 1961* crystallizes in words the sense of nuclear paranoia that lurked in both private and public spheres of the United States during the Cold War. From a dark, personal perspective the poem takes an unsettling look into the unease of the individual during this time. Despite its egocentric perspective, however, Lowell allows the poem to make vague allusions to the greater political situation surrounding the nuclear threat. Through these allusions he frames the individual experience of the poem's speaker in a greater political context. Like the hazy background of a watercolor painting, this backdrop is indistinct compared to the crisp individual presented in the foreground of his work, but nonetheless its presence contributes to the lurking weight of nuclear paranoia that gives the poem its ambience of ominousness and uncertainty.

The movement of the poem is fairly arrhythmic, with sporadic and unpredictable rhyming. The effect is a deliberate awkwardness in its sound and the creation of a feeling of anticipation as the reader waits for the each possible rhyme to deliver. In this way the form of the poem captures the unease of the individual and society as a whole during its time setting and plays on the anxiety of the people of the United States as they wait for the inevitable first missile strike. Rhyme is additionally used to inject moments of personality into the poem. The couplet half rhyme of "minnow" and "window" on lines 9 and 10 creates an almost whimsical affect, a darkly humorous snicker that undercuts the menacing three lines that precede it. On occasion, rhymes in the poem string together loosely connected details of the scene being described. This loose linkage occurs in the half rhyming of "shield" and "wild" that ties imagery of crying spiders to the helplessness of

a protective father in protecting his child against a nuclear threat. Another example occurs in the half rhyme of “ mirror” and “ summer”, which connects the mirror-like clock face to the metaphorical mirror of introspection that nature provides within the world of the poem.

In addition to his use of rhyming connections, Lowell joins his thematically linked images and ideas together through the recurrence of certain motifs throughout the poem. These motifs find their commonalities in shielding qualities and circular as well as spherical imagery. The “ bland, ambassadorial/face of the moon” shares its shape with the fish tank face of the studio window that seals off the speaker from the outside world. The circular and spherical imagery extends to include the diver’s “ glass bell”, which is connected through its shape and its function as a protective barrier to the studio window, the father’s shield and the “ oriole’s swinging nest” at the end of the poem. The result of this thematic linkage is an egocentric view of the poem’s world; the reader gets the sense that they are seeing through the eyes of the speaker as he freely associates any and all elements of his surroundings with the all-pervading paranoia that he feels. In this way, the poem feels personal and very sharp and complete in its foreground depiction of the individual’s apprehension at the possibility of nuclear war.

The main way in which this personal anxiety is projected through the assorted image catalogue of the poem is through jarring quakes of poetic disruption that ripple through the speaker’s thoughts. The face of an alien orange moon reflecting off the clock disturbs one of the speaker’s expected sources of familiarity and comfort as he looks towards it. Metaphorically, this comfort disruption is extended to the political level by connotations evoked <https://assignbuster.com/fallen-nests-an-exploration-of-personal-and-political-realities-in-fall-1961/>

from the additional descriptions of the moon's reflection as "bland" and "ambassadorial". These descriptions suggest metaphorically that the higher political problem that the moon represents has been hidden behind a bland, unfeeling face in the form of political discussion. The monotony of such discussion is encapsulated in the droning "tock, tock, tock" of the grandfather clock. Thus the government's address of the possibility of a nuclear strike is indirectly criticized as insufficient back-and-forth quibble and the former comfort offered by higher politics is thus removed as a source of comfort to the individual. The disturbing removal of comfort in light of the unsettling new nuclear threat again peaks at the political level in the third stanza:

Our end drifts nearer,

the moon lifts,

radiant with terror.

The state,

is a diver under a glass bell.

In this stanza the comfort and protection offered by the state against a nuclear attack is shown to be as inadequate as a transparent glass bell shutting out the "terror" of moonlight. Lowell recasts this same sentiment elsewhere in the poem in line 8, "we have talked our extinction to death", a line that reminds the reader that, no matter how much political banter goes on, the immense destructive potential of a nuclear threat is too perilous and unpredictable to be talked down.

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An additional disrupted image comes with the lines, “ We are like a lot of wild/spiders crying together, but without tears”. The most jarring component of this eerie fallout shelter imagery is the bizarre idea of crying without tears. Through this idea the lines metaphorically hush the public’s anxiety in a kind of disruptive stasis that bends fear into a silent role. The public’s silence thus changes the very purpose of fear by placing anxiety into individuals but not allowing them to share its burden with one another, again resulting in the removal of a possible comfort source in the poem. A third such removal comes through the disruption of the father’s shielding ability over his child, which is reduced to inadequacy against the massive destruction of a nuclear attack. Yet another disruption of comfort arises from the line “ One swallow makes a summer.” This reversal of proverbial wisdom disrupts the reader’s expectations, thus allowing the poet to declare that, under the looming threat of nuclear war, the truths that we take comfort in may reverse to their opposites – in this case, the detonation of a single swallow warhead could certainly lead to an entire nuclear summer.

The completeness with which the poem’s world is disrupted shows the extent to which nuclear paranoia extends past the level of the poem’s individual speaker. The disturbance of reality in the poem affects the whole of society through its alteration of even the most fundamental and universal truths comfort sources. Even the passing of time becomes seen through displaced and paradoxical perception as the agonizing “ tock, tock, tock” of the seconds continues indefinitely from stuck clockhands. Additionally, the linking of the clock to the passage of months through the moon’s reflection

and the setting of the poem in autumn suggest that this stopping of time extends upwards into an entire era of paralyzed paranoia.

The framing of the individual experience against a society and time period through metaphorical political criticism and universal connections is important in creating a full picture of the nuclear threat in Fall 1961. The poem requires the entire situation to be at least vaguely framed in order to create a true feeling of the weight and magnitude behind the anxiety of the Cold War. Ultimately, however, despite its upward sweeping exploration of nuclear anxiety at the level of the individual and up to the realms of society and politics, the poem finds its escape from nuclear anxiety in a place that is neither personal nor political, but rather natural. The speaker's "one point of rest", his one sanctum where time is not oppressive and paranoia is not overwhelming, "is the orange and black/oriole's swinging nest". It is important that this one source of comfort shares characteristics of the other images in the poem. It is orange like the moon, and fits under the spherical and circular motif category. It is a protective barrier of sorts. Most importantly, its swinging motion has put it into a state of disruption. Yet even in its disrupted state the nest manages not to fall. It thus continues its role as a protective shield – not only to what eggs may lie inside it, but also to the speaker's state of mind. Perhaps this is the poet's way of acknowledging nature's resilience. In a sense it is a declaration that nature is more permanent than both the individual and society, and a hopeful prediction that some part of nature will probably survive even the most destructive human catastrophes, no matter how uncertain the future of humanity itself may be.