The City Planners

A Lesson for **Literature in English 0475**

Poetry Anthology – Volume 1 (2025)

Volume 1

0475 Literature in English

Songs of Ourselves - Vol 1:

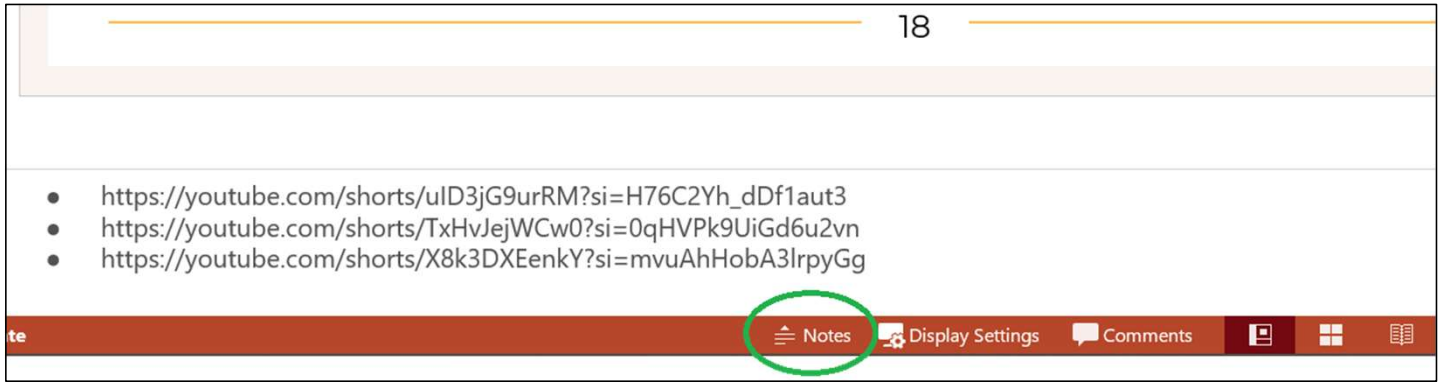
- Margaret Atwood, ‘The City Planners’
- Boey Kim Cheng, ‘The Planners’
- Thom Gunn, ‘The Man with Night Sweats’
- Robert Lowell, ‘Night Sweat’
- Edward Thomas, ‘Rain’
- Anne Stevenson, ‘The Spirit is too Blunt an Instrument’
- Tony Harrison, ‘From Long Distance’
- W H Auden, ‘Funeral Blues’
- Thomas Hardy, ‘He Never Expected Much’
- Fleur Adcock, ‘The Telephone Call’
- Peter Porter, ‘A Consumer’s Report’
- Judith Wright, ‘Request To A Year’
- Charles Tennyson Turner, ‘On Finding a Small Fly Crushed in a Book’
- Percy Bysshe Shelley, ‘Ozymandias’
- Stevie Smith, ‘Away, Melancholy'

Note to teachers

Please check the **notes section** of this PowerPoint for some additional information and alternative links to videos.

If you spot any mistakes or any broken links, please let me know so I can find a solution for you: **sarah@taughtly.co.uk**

Feedback and suggestions for improvements are welcome!



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The City Planners

Margaret Atwood

14 April 2024

LO: To understand the explicit meaning of an anthology poem

Challenge: Write the opening line of a poem by the same name.

Do Now:

Guess what today's poem might be about based on its title:

The City Planners

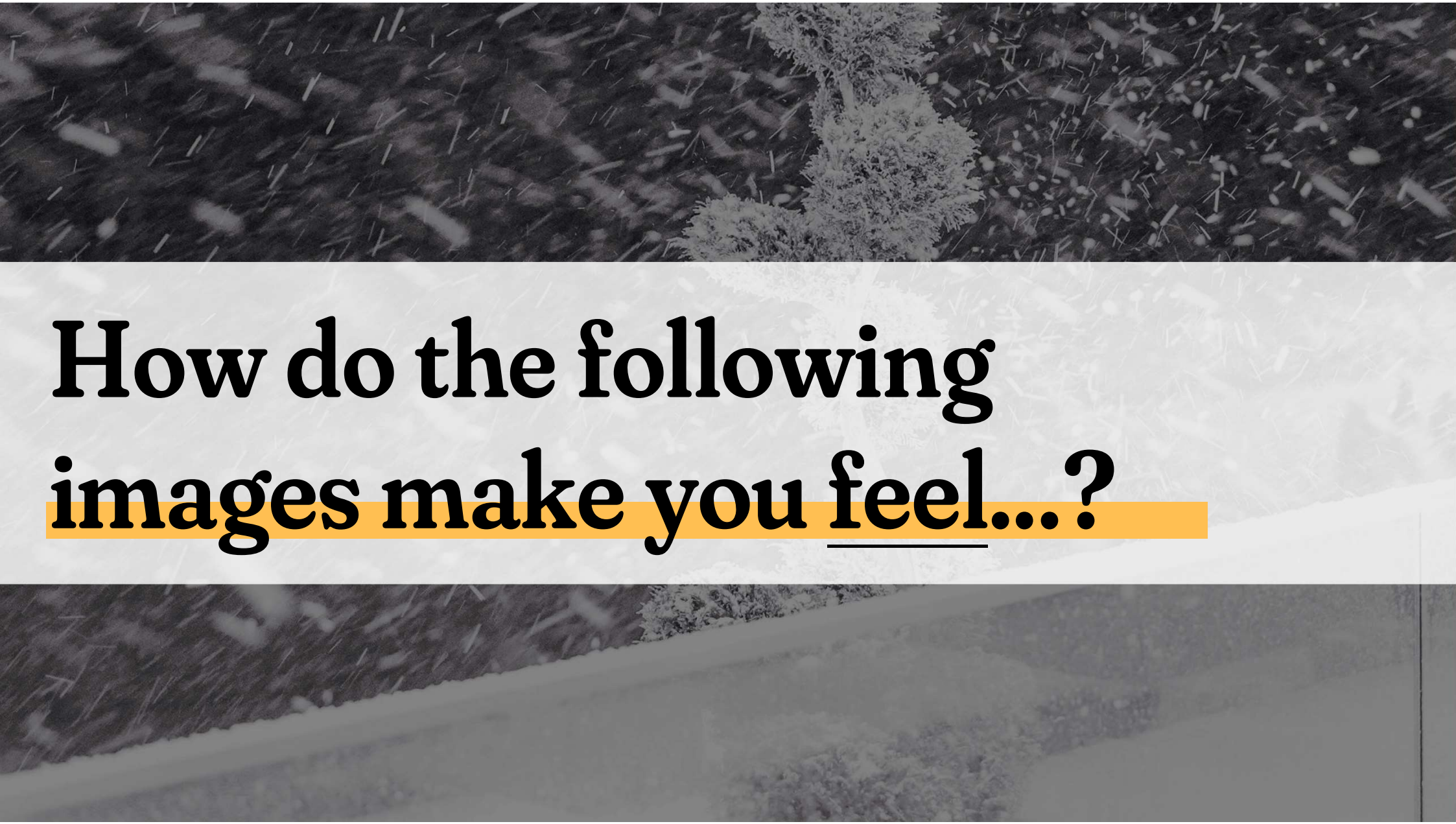
- What **themes** might the poem have?
- What **tone** might the poem have?

Context

About Margaret Atwood

- Acclaimed Canadian author and poet
- Known for her insightful exploration of dystopian themes and social commentary
- Environmentalist
- Pioneering feminist writer with a distinct narrative style
- Renowned for works such as "The Handmaid's Tale" and "Oryx and Crake“

Hook



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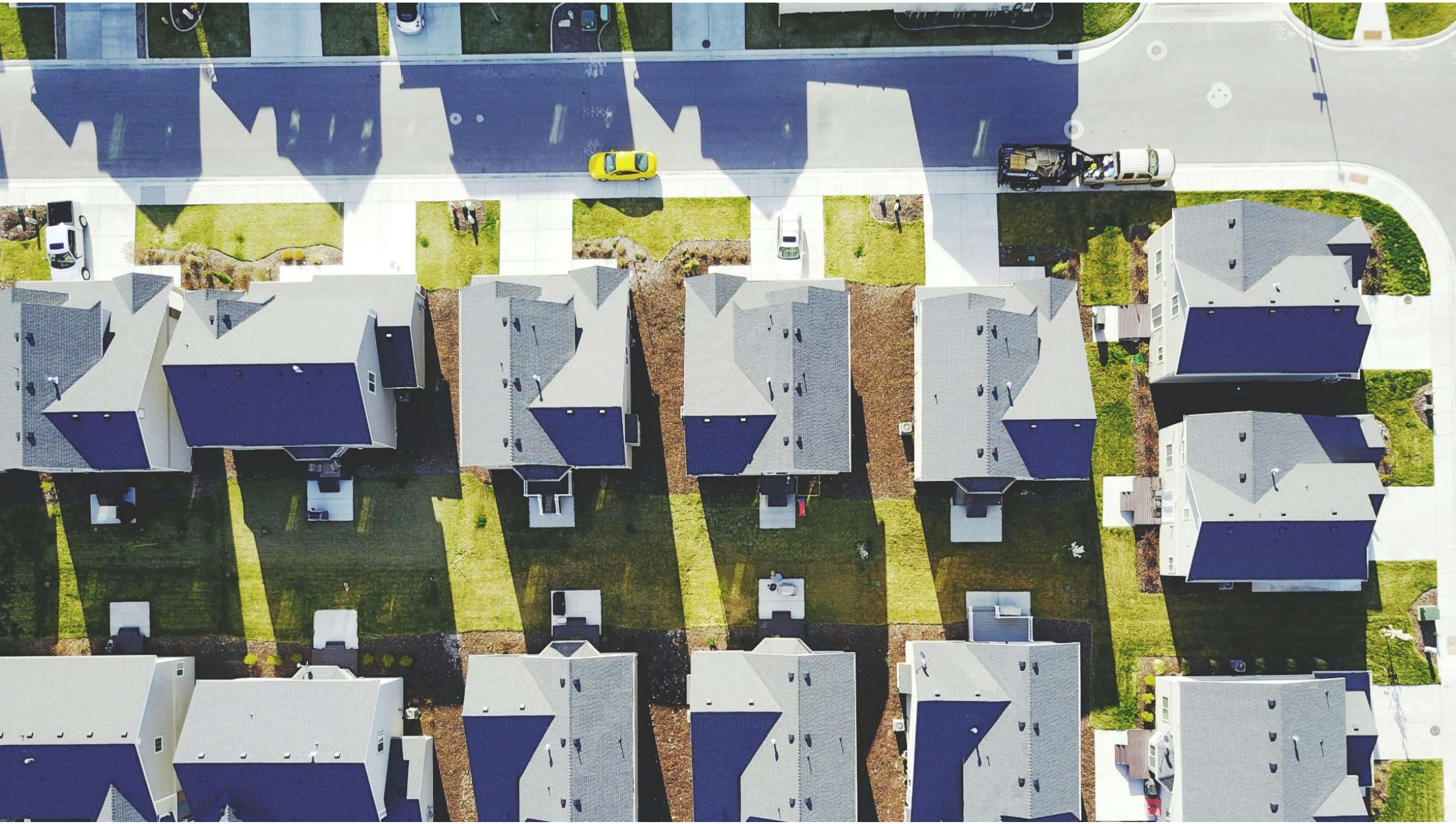


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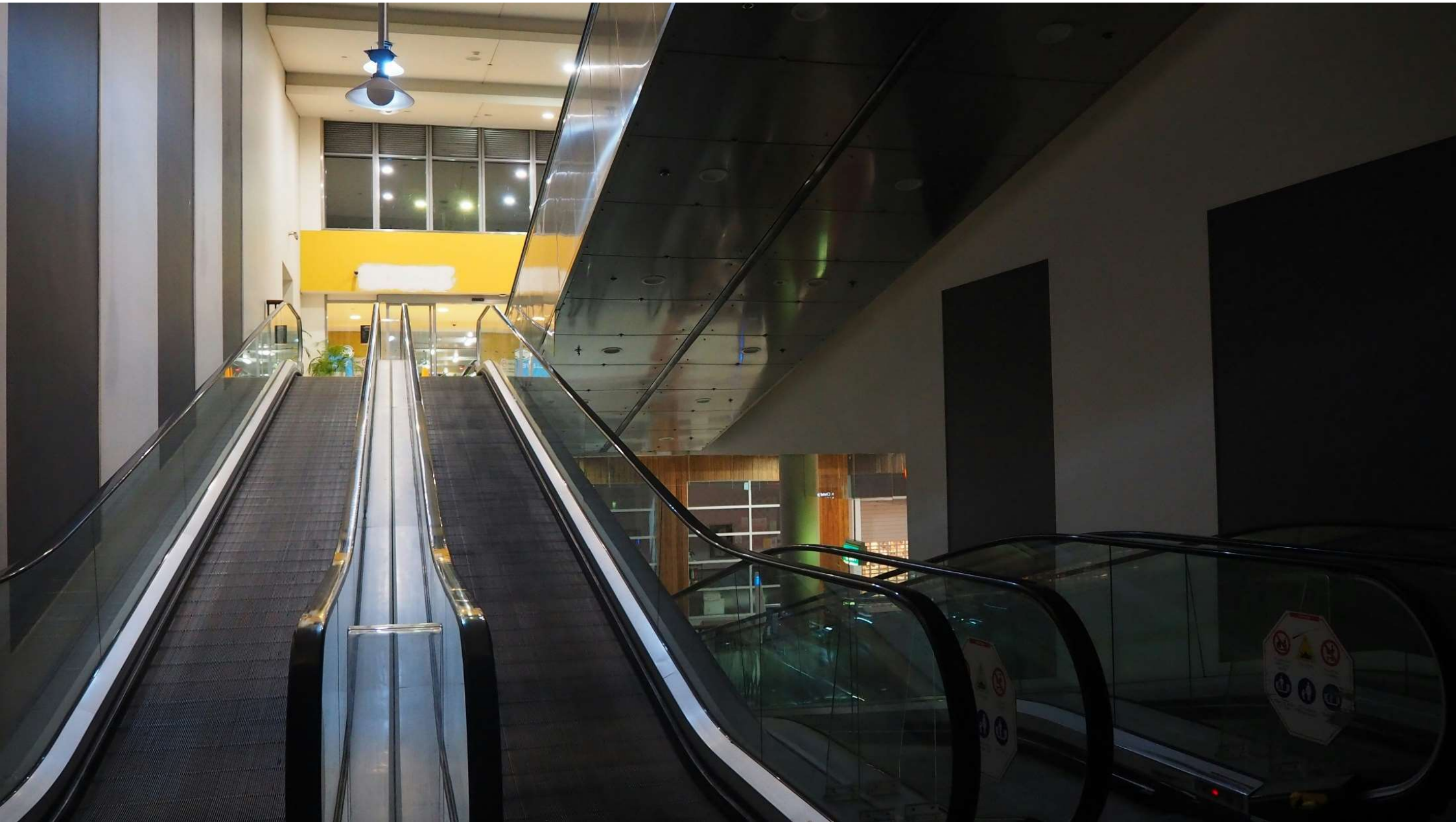


EXPRESS
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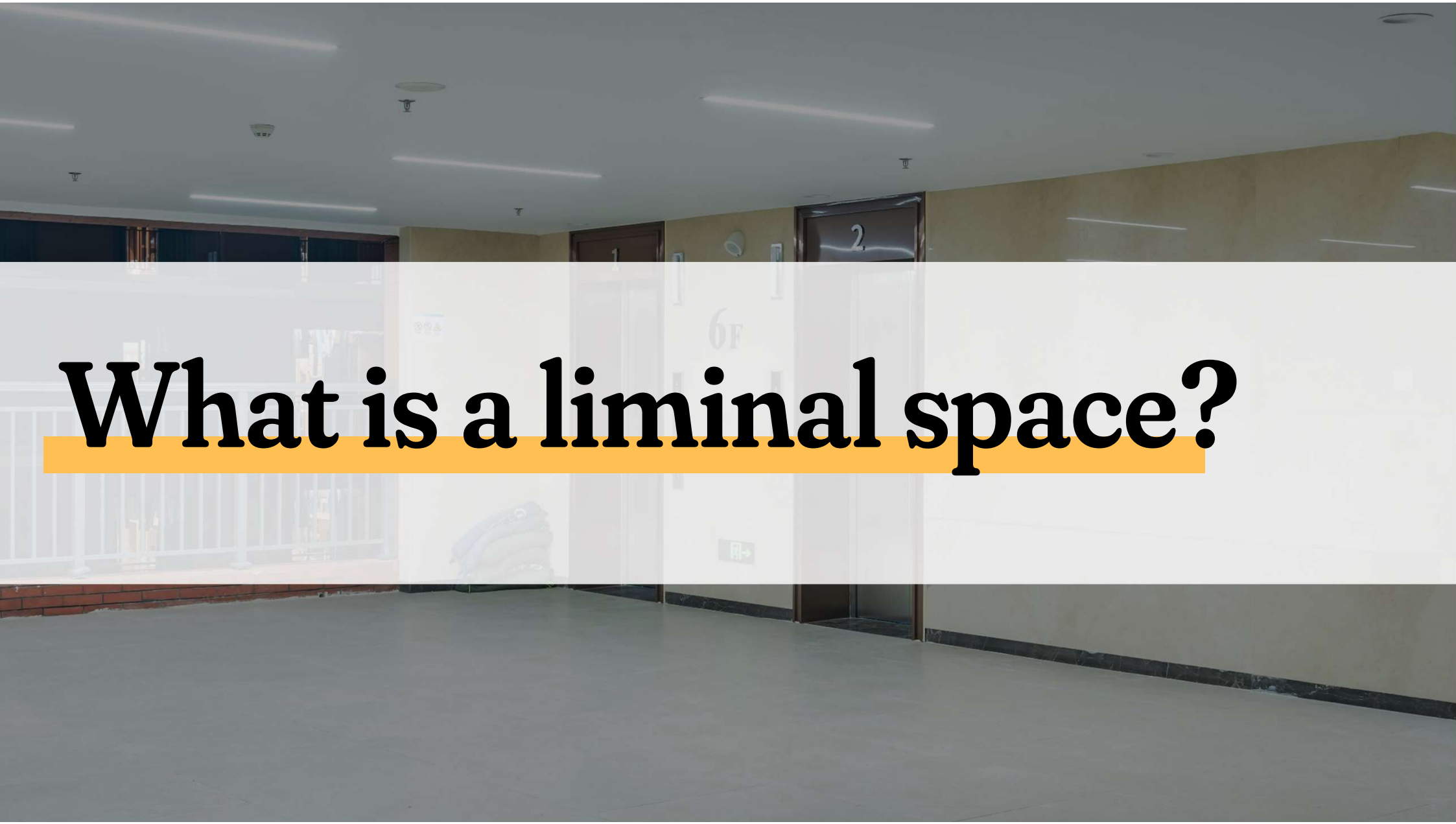
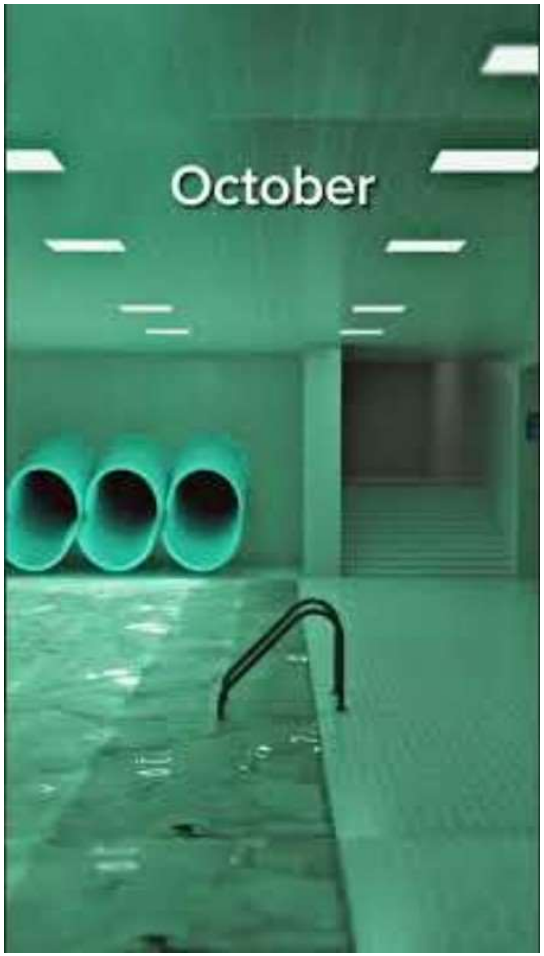


What is a liminal space?

Liminal spaces

- A liminal space is a boundary between two points in time, space, or both.
- They are places we pass through but don't occupy permanently, like corridors, staircases, elevators, airports.
- These places feel **unsettling yet familiar**.
- They often evoke feelings of disorientation because they break our typical understanding of time and space.



The poem

The City Planners

Cruising these **residential** Sunday
streets in dry August sunlight:
what offends us is
the sanities:
the houses in **pedantic** rows, the planted
sanitary trees, assert
levelness of surface like a rebuke
to the dent in our car door.
No shouting here, or
shatter of glass; nothing more abrupt
than the rational whine of a power mower
cutting a **straight swath** in the discouraged grass.

The speaker drives through an eerily and orderly suburb devoid of people. Even the items here seem to want the speaker to leave.

Residential – domestic, a place where people live

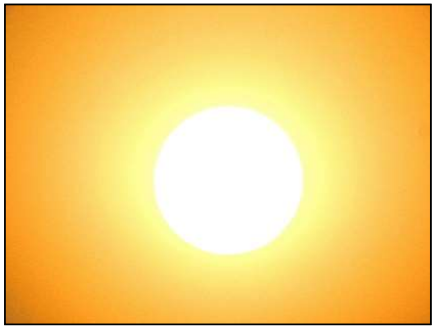
Pedantic – overly precise

Sanitary - hygienic

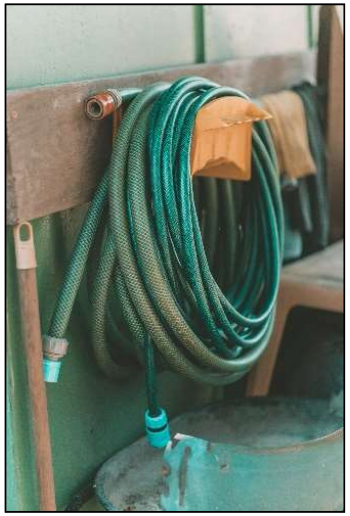
Straight swath - direct path

The City Planners

But though the driveways neatly
sidestep **hysteria**
by being even, the roofs all display
the same slant of avoidance to the hot sky,
certain things:
the smell of spilled oil a faint
sickness **lingering** in the garages,
a splash of paint on brick surprising as a bruise,
a plastic **hose** poised in a vicious
coil; even the too-fixed stare of the wide windows

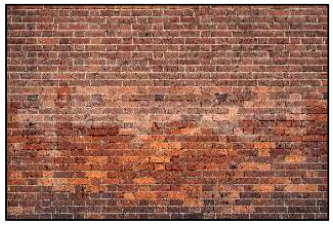


Despite the apparent orderliness of the suburbs, signs of life are still present, like the smell of spilled oil, paint splashes and hosepipes.



Hysteria – frenzy, craziness

Lingering – endure, remain, persist, hang around



The City Planners

give momentary access to
the landscape behind or under
the future cracks in the plaster

when the houses, **capsized**, will slide
obliquely into the clay seas, gradual as
glaciers
that right now nobody notices.

The speaker reflects these flaws enable you to see beneath the city planners' enforced designs, to the untamable nature hidden below the surface. They think of a day in the future when the houses will no longer stand, and nature will regain control.

Capsized – flipping of a boat

Glacier – ice sheet formed over many year of accumulated snow that move slowly over land

The City Planners

That is where the City Planners
with the insane faces of **political conspirators**
are scattered over unsurveyed
territories, concealed from each other,
each in his own private **blizzard**;

guessing directions, they sketch
transitory lines rigid as wooden borders
on a wall in the white vanishing air

tracing the panic of suburb
order in a **bland** madness of snows.

The speaker then imagines a future in which an environmental shift has destroyed this suburb with a new ice age, yet the city planners attempt to control this world too.

Political conspirator – secret plotter aiming to manipulate political events for their own agenda

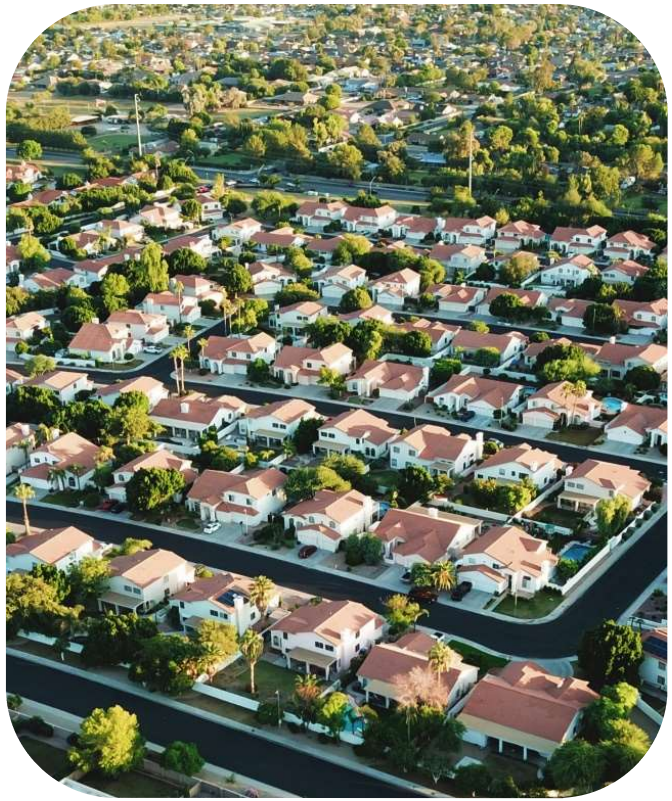
Blizzard - snowstorm

Transitory - temporary

Bland – plain, boring, unremarkable, unexciting

Does The City Planners have features of a liminal space?

- A boundary between two points in time, space, or both.
- Places we pass through but don’t occupy permanently
- These places feel unsettling yet familiar.
- Evoke feelings of disorientation, breaking our typical understanding of time and space.



Liminal space in The City Planners

- The speaker is an unknown passerby
- The streets are empty
- Suburbs are familiar to most readers
- There is a sense of transition between the present and the future
- Boundaries of the known and unknown are ambiguous: what will this suburb become in the future?
- Lines between the normal and abnormal are blurred with many objects being **personified** in a sinister manner: “sanitary trees” and “too-fixed stare of the wide windows”

Quick write!

How and why does Atwood initially present the suburbs as a liminal space?

- Features of liminal spaces include... and **evoke feelings** of... in the viewer because...
- In The City Planners, the descriptions of the suburbs **conjure a sense of liminality** with the phrases “[quote]” and “[quote]” because...
- Atwood may have done this to suggest that...
- Whilst the eerie atmosphere produced by **an atmosphere of liminality** implies that the suburbs are... and the speaker is...

A lesson by taughtly.co.uk

The City Planners

Margaret Atwood

14 April 2024

LO: To analyse the **language** an anthology poem

Challenge: Why not name the poem “The Suburbs”?

Do Now:

Analyse the significance of the title:

The City Planners

- What connotations do the words have?
- Why choose this title?

The title

The City Planners

The planners are nameless, faceless, unemotive

Planners has connotations of order yet even this free verse poem cannot be contained

The planners even overlook the words of this poem

Cities have connotations of life yet the suburb in the poem is empty

Language

Annotate language features

Word choice

- Which words are particularly powerful?
- What are their connotations?
- What semantic fields can you identify?
- What is the overall tone of the poem?

Language devices

- Symbolism
- Simile
- Metaphor
- Personification
- Imagery
- Oxymoron
- Pun

Sound

- Alliteration
- Sibilance
- Onomatopoeia
- Assonance
- Consonance
- Plosives

Suggestions… how many did you identify?

The City Planners

Cruising these residential Sunday
streets in dry August sunlight:
what offends us is
the sanities:
the houses in pedantic rows, the planted
sanitary trees, assert
levelness of surface like a rebuke
to the dent in our car door.
No shouting here, or
shatter of glass; nothing more abrupt
than the rational whine of a power mower
cutting a straight swath in the discouraged grass.

Scene setting is immediately eerie: we do not associate August with "dry" sunlight, suggesting unpleasantness. Yet sunlight usually associated with happiness.

Semantic field of uncanny order: Though the suburbs are orderly, there is something unnatural and unsettling about this. E.g. dry, pedantic, levelness, rational.

Pun: Play on words with "sanities" and "sanitary", giving a sense of sanitary cleanliness but also insanity – e.g. how too much order can send one insane.

Personification: Whilst there are no people, items in the suburbs are personified with hostile verbs: trees assert, surfaces rebuke, power mowers whine and the trees are discouraged.

The City Planners

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streets in dry August sunlight:
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than the rational whine of a power mower
cutting a straight swath in the discouraged grass.

Simile: As though the suburb is scolding the speaker for bringing disorder into the orderly suburbs

Devoid of life: Although suburbs are residential areas, it is eerie that the streets are completely empty.

Sanitised: The only signs of nature are rigid and sanitized – grass cut in "straight swath[s]" and "sanitary trees". Shows the City Planners desires to constrain nature and the artificiality of the suburbs.

The speaker: Appears disillusioned with suburbia and seems to imply that too much order is a madness in itself.

The City Planners

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No shouting here, or
shatter of glass; nothing more abrupt
than the rational whine of a power mower
cutting a straight swath in the discouraged grass.

Sibilance: Repeated ‘s’ sound is like a snake hissing, associating with evil. This suggests there’s something sinister lurking beneath the perfect exterior of the suburbs.

The City Planners

But though the driveways neatly
sidestep hysteria
by being even, the roofs all display
the same slant of avoidance to the hot sky,
certain things:
the smell of spilled oil a faint
sickness lingering in the garages,
a splash of paint on brick surprising as a bruise,
a plastic hose poised in a vicious
coil; even the too-fixed stare of the wide windows

But: Stanza begins with a shift as they suggest that although the suburbs look orderly, something is wrong here, something off-putting and irrational about the orderliness

Personification: Objects continue to be personified, but now to show that the objects' uniformity is a deliberate attempt to sidestep the chaos of the natural world inherent in human nature. It as though the residents are willfully trying to ignore the reality of the world around them by maintaining control over lawns and sideways.

Symbolism: The chaos of human nature is shown by the "spilled oil", "sickness lingering" and "splash of paint". No matter how we try to assert control on the world around us, we will never succeed.

The City Planners

[...] even the too-fixed stare of the wide windows

give momentary access to
the landscape behind or under
the future cracks in the plaster

when the houses, capsized, will slide
obliquely into the clay seas, gradual as glaciers
that right now nobody notices.

Illusion shattered: The illusion of order the city planners create is shattered when the speaker sees a future when the “wide windows” of a house will be destroyed by nature.

Metaphor: “houses, capsized, will slide” may mean the houses may literally slide into the seas in the future with environmental change, or could be a metaphor to represent that all human creations will one day be overtaken by nature.

Imagery: “capsized” is also usually used to describe a boat flipping over, so once again imagery of the violent power of nature is evoked.

Simile: “gradual as glaciers” shows that ultimately human existence is brief in comparison to the vast history of our planet.

The City Planners

That is where the City Planners
with the insane faces of political conspirators
are scattered over unsurveyed
territories, concealed from each other,
each in his own private blizzard;

guessing directions, they sketch
transitory lines rigid as wooden borders
on a wall in the white vanishing air

tracing the panic of suburb
order in a bland madness of snows.

Anonymity: The City Planners finally appear, as we realise who is responsible for the uncanny nightmare of the suburbs. They are unnamed, faceless beings that lurk behind closed doors, attempting to exert control over human nature.

Pronouns: Much like the speaker, we don't know who these City Planners are. It's interesting then that Atwood uses the male pronoun "he". Perhaps this is because most political power is typically wielded by men in patriarchal societies.

Semantic field of futility: The speaker suggests that all the City Planners' attempts to control nature are futile. Words like "guessing", "transitory" and "vanishing" let us known the fragile nature of their creations in the face of nature and the passing of time.

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A world unmade: The speaker suggests in the future all human architecture will have fallen apart in the face of nature, yet the City Planners will still be looking for land to exert control and order over.

Pun: Just as earlier, we had the pun of “sanitary” and “sanities”, now we hear the City Planners have “insane faces”. This suggests attempting to control the uncontrollable (nature, the passing of time, chaos) is its own form of insanity.

Metaphor of disconnection: Each City Planner is “in his own private blizzard” which shows that not only are they disconnected from nature and reality, but from each other. Implies they are self-serving, with no community between them, aiming only to have power and profit.

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Metaphor: The City Planners attempt to bring the blizzard and nature into “suburb order”. This shows that attempting to control nature is just a gut reaction to fear of the future of our planet and humanity itself.

Oxymoron: The phrase “blind madness” show the contradictory nature of the City Planners’ pursuit. Perhaps it shows that madness can sometimes be bland and sterile (like the suburbs). A desire for control can often manifest in extreme dullness. Notice how this also links to previous vocabulary related to madness and sanity.

Speaker

Who is the speaker of the poem?

- Literally, **who** are they?
- How would you characterise their personality?
- What are their attitudes and beliefs?

Who is the speaker of the poem?

- Literally, **who** are they?
- How would you characterise their personality?
- What are their attitudes and beliefs?

Some clues... what can you infer?

Cruising these residential Sunday streets

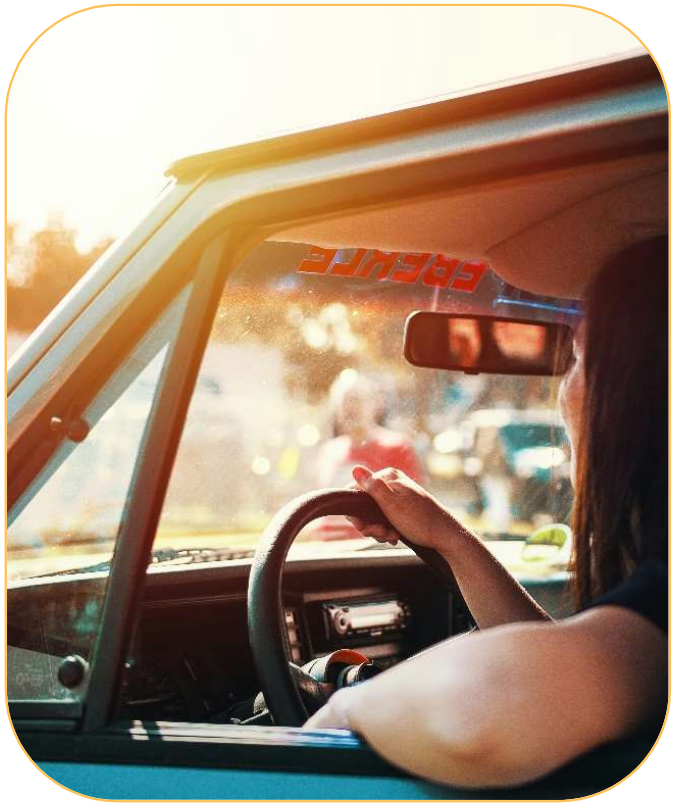
That is where the City Planners with the insane faces of political conspirators are scattered

What offends **us** is

Like a rebuke to the dent in **our** car door

Under the future cracks in the plaster when the houses, capsized, will slide

The speaker



- The speaker is **unnamed**: we don't know their age, gender, nationality or any personal details
- They are driving through the suburbs on a "Sunday" in "August"
- They aren't from the suburbs, but passing through
- Perhaps with others in the car: "what offends **us** is..."

Could the speaker be a stand-in for Atwood herself, who campaigned on environmental issues? Or simply a universal representative of humanity?

The speaker's attitudes

- The speaker seems to be an **outsider** who isn't welcomed by the objects in the suburbs that "whine" at them as they pass through
- The imperfections, like the "dent" in the speaker's car door, is another symbol of **not belonging**
- They dislike the "pedantic" orderliness of the suburbs, saying it "**offends**" them
- Has **disdain** for city planners and politicians who attempt to exert control over people's lives through the environment
- Seems to be more in **harmony** with the natural world than others, able to see beneath the illusion of control

Quick write!

How does Atwood use language to express the speaker's attitudes towards the suburbs?

- The speaker implies that the suburbs are [adj] and [adj] using [technique] in the line "[quote]".
- This technique creates the effect of... and is used to show that the speaker believes the suburbs are...
- Furthermore, the speaker **contrasts** with the suburbs as they are [adj], as shown by the [technique] in line "...".
- The word "..." has **connotations** and has been used to show...
- Overall, Atwood **critiques**...

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The City Planners

Margaret Atwood

14 April 2024

LO: To analyse the **form** and **structure** an anthology poem

Challenge: Consider the tone of The City Planners in your response.

Do Now:

Write the opening of a poem describing school that suggests chaos. Use enjambment and caesura.

Or

Explain whether enjambment or caesura is better suited to symbolising chaos, and why?

Form and Structure

What features fit under form and structure?

Language	Form	Structure
• Simile, metaphor, personification, oxymoron • Imagery • Symbolism • Sound devices: alliteration, sibilance, assonance, consonance, onomatopoeia, plosives		

Form & structure annotation

Language	Form	Structure
• Simile, metaphor, personification, oxymoron • Imagery • Symbolism • Sound devices: alliteration, sibilance, assonance, consonance, onomatopoeia, plosives	What **type** of poem it is: • Free verse, rhyming couplets, haiku, ballad, elegy, ode, villanelle Features of that type of poem: • Rhyme scheme • Metre (syllable pattern, like iambic pentameter) • Verse form (e.g. a sonnet has three quatrains and a rhyming couplet)	• Number and length of stanzas and lines • Use of enjambment, caesura and end-stop lines • Repetition • Organisation of ideas • Cyclical structures • Volta (turning point) • Juxtaposition • How a poem flows or fragments • Visual appearance on page

What's the difference?

Language	Form	Structure
• Simile, metaphor, personification, oxymoron • Imagery • Sound devices: alliteration, assonance, consonance, onomatopoeia • Symbolism	What **type** of poem it is: • Free verse, rhyming couplets, haiku, ballad, elegy, ode, villanelle Features of that type of poem: • Rhyme scheme • Metre (syllable pattern, like iambic pentameter) • Verse form (e.g. a sonnet has three quatrains and a rhyming couplet)	• Number and length of stanzas and lines • Use of enjambment, caesura and end-stop lines • Repetition • Organisation of ideas • Cyclical structures • Volta (turning point) • Juxtaposition • How a poem flows or fragments • Visual appearance on page

So... what's the difference between form and structure?

Form versus structure

In poetry, "form" and "structure" are related concepts but they refer to different aspects of a poem.

- **Form** refers to what type of poem it is and features of that type of poem.
    - For example, the form of *On Finding a Small Fly Crushed in a Book* is a **sonnet**.
    - Features of sonnets include: fourteen lines total made up of **three quatrains** and ending with a **rhyming couplet**; uses **iambic pentameter**; has an ABAB/CDCD/EFEF/GG **rhyme scheme**; associated with themes of love.
- **Structure** refers to the arrangement and organisation of the content or elements within the poem.

What form is The City Planners?

[...] even the too-fixed stare of the wide windows

give momentary access to
the landscape behind or under
the future cracks in the plaster

when the houses, capsized, will slide
obliquely into the clay seas, gradual as glaciers
that right now nobody notices.

How to check form:

- Is there a set **rhyme scheme**? E.g. AABB
- What is the **metre**? Is there a regular syllable pattern?
- Do the stanzas have a regular **number of lines**?
    - Two lines – couplet
    - Three lines – tercet
    - Four lines – quatrain

A free verse poem

[...] even the too-fixed stare of the wide windows

give momentary access to
the landscape behind or under
the future cracks in the plaster

when the houses, capsized, will slide
obliquely into the clay seas, gradual as glaciers
that right now nobody notices.

Free verse:

- No regular **rhyme scheme**
- No regular **metre**
- No regular length of stanzas

Why did Atwood choose to use free verse for this poem?

Free verse poems follow no rules. They are often associated with poems that are rebellious, experimental, challenging conventional ideas, or representing the free and uncontrolled flowing of ideas.

Why did Atwood use free verse?

- Represents that chaos and disorder at the heart of human nature and nature itself
- Symbolises the way that ultimately humanity cannot control its environment forever
- The poem refuses to controlled and orderly in the way the City Planners force the suburbs to be
- Rejects rules and rigid order in favour of a free-flowing form that is better suited to humanity's natural chaos, mess and imperfection

Annotate form structural features

Features of free verse

- No regular rhyme scheme
- No regular metre
- No standard length of stanza

Free flowing, breaking rules, uncontained.

Features of structure

- Use of enjambment, caesura and end-stop lines
- Repetition
- Organisation of ideas
- Cyclical structures
- Volta (turning point)
- Juxtaposition
- How a poem flows or fragments
- Visual appearance on page

Suggestions... how many did you identify?

The City Planners

[...] even the too-fixed stare of the wide windows

give momentary access to
the landscape behind or under
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when the houses, capsized, will slide
obliquely into the clay seas, gradual as glaciers
that right now nobody notices.

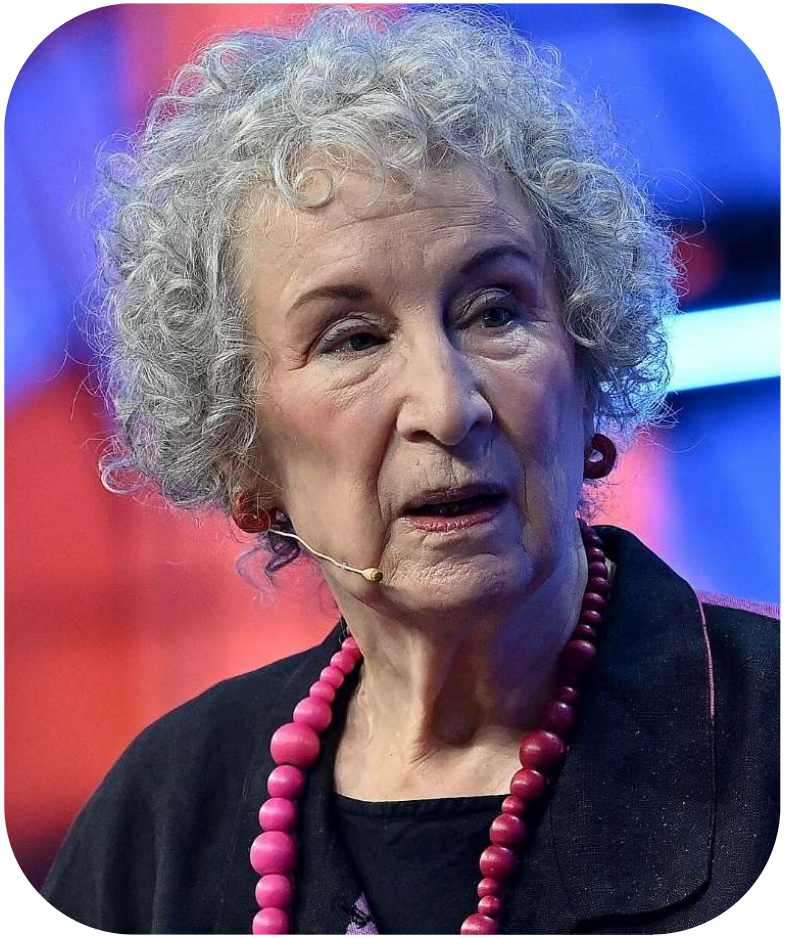
Enjambment: Just as the City Planners cannot control nature, words cannot be contained from line-to-line, stanza-to stanza. Shows poem is as uncontainable as the environment.

Caesura: Lines are fragmented mid-line just as the City Planners have broken nature into unnatural stops and pauses.

Flowing stanzas: Stanzas flow onto the next, perhaps mirroring the journey of the houses that will “slide” into the sea or the slow journey of glaciers across continents.

Stanzas grow shorter: First stanza has 12 lines while the last stanza has 2. Could represent disconnection and fragmentation of people away from communities, or the destruction of our environment.

Central message



Bringing this all together...

What is Atwood's central message?

- What **point** is she trying to make?
- What does she want the reader to **reflect** on?
- What ideas is she **challenging**?

Challenge: What evidence could you find to support these interpretations?

The central message

- The poem highlights the **absurdity** and **superficiality** of attempts to impose uniformity and control on the natural landscape.
- The relentless pursuit of uniformity and perfection ultimately leads to a **loss of individuality**, creativity, and connection to the natural world.
- Being too fixed and rational is its own kind of **madness**.
- How **urbanisation** seeks to exert control over our lives, constraining humanity, but this is short-sighted as climate change has revealed the **brief existence** human civilisations have.
- The illusion of order that city planning attempts to exert over humans who are **innately chaotic**.

How does this clip relate to the poem’s central message?

Quick write!

How does Atwood use form and structure to explore her central message?

- The **central message** in The City Planners is... or perhaps...
- This explored through form, as this poem uses **free verse** to suggest...
- Furthermore, using **enjambment**, Atwood implies... while the use of **caesura** could mean...
- Finally, the length of the poem's stanzas **gradually fragments** from twelve to two, which may represent...
- Overall, these techniques are used effectively to **critique**...

The City Planners

Margaret Atwood

14 April 2024

LO: To **unpick** a model answer and **plan** an essay response

Challenge: Consider language, form and structure.

Do Now:

List your initial ideas for how you could respond to this past paper question:

In what ways does Atwood convey her strong emotions about the City Planners?

Exam question

Unpick the question: what do you need to do?

In what ways does Atwood convey her strong emotions about the City Planners?

In what ways: using what techniques of language, form and structure?

Atwood: what were the writer's intentions?

Convey her strong emotions: what emotions specifically?

About the city planners: what is her central message expressed through the city planners?

Model essay analysis

Read my model essay for The City Planners:

- Where do I address Atwood's **central message**?
- How do I **structure** the essay as a whole?
- How do I **structure** each analysis paragraph?
- Highlight my **terminology**
- Highlight my **quotations**

Assessment Objectives

AO1 Knowledge	• You understand **explicit meaning** of the poem • You use well-chosen **quotations** and references to support your argument
AO2 Inference	• Understands the main ideas and **themes** in the poem • Understands the **deeper implications** of the poem through **inference** • Understands how the significance of smaller sections of the poem in relation to the text as whole
AO3 Analysis of techniques	• You analyse how **language, form and structure** create an impact on the reader • You consider the **writer's intentions** and their central message
AO4 Personal response	• Giving a personal and **informed** response to the question • Your **perspective is unique** and thoughtful when weighing up the poem's possible meanings

Tip: No matter what structure you decide on, ensure you fully cover language, form and structure in your essay.

Some essay structures:

Overall central message:

- Language
- Form
- Structure

Overall central message:

- Beginning
- Middle
- Ending

Overall central message:

- Theme
- Theme
- Theme

Overall central message:

- At first,
- However,
- Ultimately,

One method...

Stay focused on the exam question

Central message

Roadmap

Language

Analysis paragraph
Pick out **three language** techniques, explain the effect, what this shows about the writer's central message and link back to your question.

Form

Analysis paragraph
Pick out **two form** techniques, explain the effect, what this shows about the writer's central message and link back to your question.

Structure

Analysis paragraph
Pick out **two structural** techniques, explain the effect, what this shows about the writer's central message and link back to your question.

Restate argument in your conclusion
What lessons can be learnt from this poem?

Complete your planning sheet

In what ways does Atwood convey her strong emotions about the City Planners?

- Fill in your planning worksheet to respond to the exam question
- Ensure you cover the beginning, middle and ending of the poem
- Ensure you always give the effect of any technique you identify
- Link all your analysis back to the question: what emotions are being conveyed about the City Planners and why?
- Link all your analysis back to the central message of the poem

Essay planning

Introduction	• What's the central message of the poem? • What will your roadmap be?
Language	• X3 techniques, e.g. simile, metaphor, imagery **+ effect** • Link to the central message of the poem
Form	• What type of poem is it and link to the central message of the poem • X2 features of the poem type, e.g. iambic pentameter, rigid rhyme scheme **+ effect**
Structure	• X2 structural features of the poem, e.g. caesura, enjambment, volta **+ effect** • Link to the central message of the poem
Title & Speaker	• What is the significance of the title of the poem? • Who is the speaker of the poem and what can we learn from this?
Conclusion	• Summarise your arguments and draw a final answer to the essay question

Timed practice – 45 minutes

Central message phrases

- absurdity and superficiality
- impose uniformity
- the natural landscape.
- The relentless pursuit of uniformity
- loss of individuality,
- brief existence of human civilisations
- The illusion of order
- humans are innately chaotic.

Emotion vocabulary

- Disdain, contempt, derision, concern, fears
- Critiques, lambasts, lampoons, warns, disapproves
- Looming, sinister, eerie, liminal, uncanny, unsettling

LFS terminology

- **Language:** simile, metaphor, pun, symbolism, personification, sibilance
- **Form:** free verse, no rhyme scheme, no set meter
- **Structure:** enjambment, caesura, juxtaposition, stanza structure and length, fragmentation

Self-marking

CM	Central Message
T	Terminology
Q	Quotations
E	Effect of technique
L, F, S	Language, form and structure (write only L, F, or S depending on which you're analysing)
B, M, E	Beginning, middle and ending of the poem (write only B, M or E depending on which section of the poem you're analysing)

Highlight and annotate

Highlight and annotate your work, writing the letters of this marking code in the margins of your books.

After you've finished, write a couple of sentences reflecting on:

- What went well?
- What could you do to improve next time?

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