Belfast Confetti

SUMMARY

Just as the riot police arrived, a bomb went off, causing shrapnel made up of small metal objects—nuts, bolts, nails, and car keys—to fall through the air, like a cascade of exclamation marks. It was like a fountain of broken punctuation marks bursting forth. The explosion radiated outward like the shape of an asterisk on a map. The quick burst of gunfire traveled horizontally, like a row of hyphens. I was trying to form a sentence in my mind, but the words just kept stopping and starting. All the alleyways and side-streets were blocked off, the same way periods and colons block off phrases.

I know this maze of streets very well—there's Balaclava, Raglan, Inkerman, Odessa Street—so why is it impossible to find a way out? Every move I make is blocked, just like punctuation marks block language. Crimea Street is another dead end. Various kinds of military equipment, like an armored tank, clear face shields, and walkie-talkies, are everywhere. Who am I? Where did I come from and where am I headed? Question marks bombard me.

THEMES

VIOLENCE AND CONFLICT

"Belfast Confetti" is set in Northern Ireland during the Troubles of the 1960s. Put simply, this was a period of violent conflict between those who wanted Northern Ireland to unify with the rest of Ireland and those who wanted it to remain part of the United Kingdom. The poem describes the confusion, shock, and horror immediately following the explosion of a bomb in the city of Belfast. ("Belfast confetti" was slang for homemade bombs.) Through the speaker's experience, the poem illustrates the devastating and dehumanizing effect that violent conflict has on people and places.

As if to show the way that violence can strike suddenly and indiscriminately, the poem starts with an explosion. The speaker gets caught up in a bomb blast and desperately seeks a way out. The presence of a "riot squad" suggests that this is a high-stakes conflict in which the state is involved (in this case, the British Army). The sheer horror and confusion of such an event are conveyed immediately by the "rain" of "exclamation marks," suggesting panic, alarm, and a desperate need to escape. Violence, then, has turned the speaker's hometown into a frightening war zone.

But what's most terrifying about the scene isn't that it's dangerous or surprising—it's the way that the bomb turns things that should be familiar into instruments of fear and destruction. For instance, the bomb that explodes is homemade, packed full of everyday objects that are now intended to maim and kill. These objects appear in line 2 in a cacophonous list: "Nuts, bolts, nails, car-keys." These are objects that are meant to have ordinary purposes, but their presence in the bomb shows the way that everyday life has been corrupted and transformed by the conflict.

Similarly, the explosion changes even the city streets into an unrecognizable landscape. Belfast is likely the speaker's home—these are streets that the speaker knows "so well." But the violence turns Belfast into a "labyrinth," a reference to the maze in the Greek myth of the Minotaur. This allusion to the labyrinth reveals how this violence has transformed the speaker's home into something unknown and monstrous.

What's more, these streets that offer no escape are named after a conflict that took place just over a century earlier. This was the Crimean War, fought between an alliance of Britain, France, the Ottoman Empire, and Sardinia, against the Russian Empire. It's a conflict long-forgotten in the context of this poem, but Belfast streets are still named after figures from this war. The list of streets in line 6—"Balaclava, Raglan, Inkerman, Odessa Street"—suggests that there is something permanent about the way that violence transforms the world; this city still carries the marks of this long-ago war, so perhaps it will always bear the burden of the explosion as well.

In the poem's final lines, it becomes clear that this sense of deep, disorienting transformation doesn't just apply to the city; it has also spread to the speaker. The speaker doesn't know where they are "coming from" or "going" anymore—violent conflict has totally disrupted the speaker's sense of place and purpose. In lines 8 and 9, the speaker even asks: "What is / My name?" This question shows that the violence has caused a loss of identity within the speaker on a personal level, in much the same way that it has transformed the city as a whole. By ending with this "fusillade of question marks" (line 9), the poem confirms that violence isn't just frightening—it can completely destroy any sense of normalcy and certainty.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-9

LANGUAGE, VIOLENCE, AND IDENTITY

"Belfast Confetti" takes place in the immediate aftermath of a bomb explosion. Through an extended metaphor comparing the speaker's experience to punctuation marks, the poem explores the relationship between violence,

language, and identity. The poem relies on familiar features of language (such as question marks and periods) to describe the speaker's experience, but at the same time, it also questions whether language can truly capture the horror of such violence. Furthermore, by showing how language breaks down in the face of violence, the poem suggests that violence has a disruptive effect on people's ability to understand both their own identities and the world more generally.

Starting from the title, the poem questions language's ability to capture the horrors of violent conflict: "Belfast confetti" is slang for homemade bombs. Confetti usually refers to small bits of paper thrown in celebration—but here, the word describes a deadly weapon. Already, then, language is unstable, as something that sounds lighthearted proves to be terrifyingly serious.

The speaker goes on to compare the violent destruction of the bomb with punctuation marks—which are fundamental tools of language. "Exclamation marks" are raining through the air—suggesting immediate danger—and gunfire is described as a "hyphenated line." All routes of escape are "blocked with stops and colons." Language and violence are thus presented as intimately linked, but notably, punctuation is meaningless without a clear context. Because the speaker presents these punctuation marks as chaotic and decontextualized, they seem to act as metaphors describing the way that language can't fully capture the horrors of violent conflict.

The speaker then explicitly acknowledges the way that violence can strain language to a breaking point. The speaker is trying to make sense of what's happening, but can't "complete a sentence in [their] head." This shows not just how difficult it is to think clearly in such situations, but also how integral language feels to making the world make sense. This line reinforces the idea that the explosion confuses language, but it also hints at a broader relationship between language and violence. That is, perhaps the violence is in part caused by the *failure* of language: the inability of both sides to talk and find common ground—and in turn avoid violent conflict.

In the second stanza, the speaker becomes further disorientated. The speaker no longer faces a barrage of exclamation marks, but rather of question marks. Violence seems to disrupt all the certainties of language: the speaker can no longer name themselves, nor where they came from or where they intend to go. At least temporarily, violence disrupts the speaker's linguistic hold on the world—and by extension, the speaker's understanding of their own identity: the speaker asks, "What is / My name?" In its last two lines, the poem seems to say that without language, it's impossible for people to understand themselves, so when violence disrupts language, it disrupts identity too.

Ending on a "fusillade of question marks," the poem shows that try as it might, language really can't capture the nature of the horrific violence the speaker experiences. However, the poem also hints at the power of language to draw attention to violence, even if it can never quite accurately describe it. People are still talking about this poem, and in turn are learning about the conflict it describes: the Troubles. And indeed, the peace process that eventually brought an end to the Northern Ireland conflict was one based on language: ongoing dialogue between the different parties. "Belfast Confetti," then, is a poem that shows violence's capacity to undermine language and identity *and* language's own capacity to address violence.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-9

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

Suddenly as the ...
... of broken type.

"Belfast Confetti" opens *in media res*—in the midst of the action. The verb "suddenly" signals that the poem depicts a frantic and changing situation, and by the first line's caesura, the reader knows that this involves some kind of civil unrest, since a "riot squad" is involved. The alliteration and consonance of /s/ and /k/ sounds throughout the first line and a half gives the opening a chaotic energy:

> Suddenly as the riot squad moved in, it was raining
> exclamation marks,
> Nuts, bolts, nails, car-keys.

The sense of immediate chaos in the opening serves one of the poem's main aims: recreating the confusion and fear in the immediate aftermath of a bomb.

But, as is also clear from the beginning, this is not a straightforward literal description of an event. The real-life explosion—the poem is set in the 1960s, during the Troubles in Northern Ireland—is also interpreted and represented through references to language, primarily an extended metaphor comparing the aftermath to punctuation. The fact that it is "raining exclamation marks" as well as the more usual shrapnel found in an improvised bomb sets up the poem's dual focus on violence and language.

The exclamation marks mentioned here work in two ways. First, they carry their usual literal meaning: an alert to danger and a mark of something dramatic happening. But the shape of the mark itself—!—also cleverly represents the bomb itself. This type of bomb has been made fairly crudely and is packed full of any objects that could maim or kill. As the bomb explodes, these objects radiate outwards in fragments—and the exclamation mark, with its separate long line and dot, represents the varied

shape of these fragments.

After this more symbolic representation of the bomb, line 2 tells the reader the kind of objects that are actually flying through the air. This moment uses cacophony, deliberately clustering heavy metrical stresses (underlined below) with harsh consonant sounds (in bold):

> Nuts, bolts, nails, car-keys.

The lack of conjunctions like "and" (a poetic device called asyndeton) in this list convey the way that these gathered objects were packed tightly into the bomb's casing and adds to the sense that they're densely filling the air.

After line 2's first caesura, the poem uses three more images that develop the link between violence and language. The "fount of broken type" plays with the word "font" (which refers to different typefaces). Throughout, the poem develops the idea that language, though useful, is somewhat unable to capture the true nature of violent experiences like these. So the "broken[ness]" of the "type" in line 2 sets up this anxiety about the inadequacy of language and hints to the reader that even though the poem is trying to describe the speaker's experience, it might fail to do so.

LINES 2-5

> *And the explosion ...*
> *... stops and colons.*

After the second caesura in line 2, the poem develops its extended metaphor further. Now, the "explosion itself" becomes an "asterisk on the map," and gunfire from an automatic weapon becomes a "hyphenated line." Both punctuation marks have a shape that relates to the thing being described. An asterisk ("*") represents the way that an explosion travels outwards from its center, while a hyphen ("-") shows the horizontal direction of bullets fired from a machine gun (or similar weapon). It's worth noting how both of these images—and the "fount of broken type" in line 2—are contained in grammatically incomplete phrases. This fragmented use of language emphasizes the shock and confusion of the explosion and also foreshadows the main idea of the following line.

In this next line (line 4, "I was ... stuttering."), the speaker relays the way that the explosion has stopped them from being able to think clearly. The sentences in the speaker's mind remain incomplete (just like the ones in lines 2 and 3). Here, the poem implies that it is through language that people understand the world—and that violence disrupts this understanding. The word "it" in the phrase "it kept stuttering" could refer to the sentence the speaker is trying to think, but it could also refer to the "burst of rapid fire" from line 3; in other words, it could be that the speaker can't think because the "stuttering" noise from the guns keeps interrupting.

Violence is thus a kind of senselessness in which the world suddenly seems confusing and impossible to explain; and, furthermore, resorting to violence is a kind of failure of language too. That is, if two groups resort to violence it is in part because they have been unable to resolve their differences through words. The impact on the speaker's thoughts described in line 4 conveys the idea that extreme violence and coherent language are inherently at odds with each other.

Line 5 continues with this idea, with the speaker trying to escape the scene of the blast but finding every route "blocked with stops and colons." Both lines 4 and 5 are full of cacophony and consonance that mirror the description of the bomb from line 2:

> I was trying to complete a sentence in my head, but it kept stuttering.
> All the alleyways and side-streets blocked with stops and colons.

These harsh sounds are like echoes of the initial explosion. Additionally, he assonance of the /aw/ sounds in "blocked" and "stop" (further echoed by the various /o/ sounds in "colons") makes the line end in a uniform vowel sound, conveying the way that the speaker keeps hitting walls in this attempt to escape.

With the poem breaking its stanza after line 5, this line creates a kind of cliffhanger. Whether or not the speaker *does* escape will be addressed in the following stanza—and the sense of danger and uncertainty conveys the frightening atmosphere that follows the explosion.

LINE 6

> *I know this ... Inkerman, Odessa Street—*

Line 6 opens with an allusion to classical Greek mythology: the "labyrinth." In mythology, this was a complex maze that housed the minotaur, a part-man part-bull monster. The speaker uses this structure as an analogy for what is happening in the poem: the speaker generally knows the streets of Belfast "so well" that escaping wouldn't usually be challenging. But now that the bomb has exploded, they are a labyrinth—because the chaos has made the unrecognizable and confusing, and because there is currently something monstrous dwelling at their center (the explosion and violent conflict).

The speaker then lists Belfast street names to show how well the speaker knows the city, making it all the more remarkable that the speaker cannot escape. But this list also serves a second purpose: all of the streets named are actually allusions too. All four names relate to the Battle of Crimea (1853-1856), either alluding to significant military men or to battle sites. The language of violence, then, is literally *written* into the streets of Belfast, showing how closely linked language and violence are, and also how violence can shape a place even far into the future.

Placed by side-by-side in this way, the street names in line 6 also echo the cacophonous sound of line 2 (when the poem listed the objects inside this particular bomb):

> Balaclava, Raglan, Inkerman, Odessa Street

This is the second of three such lists in the poem (the third occurs in line 8), and the asyndeton of each one increases the poem's sense of pressure and panic, as if the speaker doesn't even have time to stop and say the word "and."

LINES 7-8

> *Why can't I ...*
> *... Makrolon face-shields. Walkie-talkies.*

Line 7 opens with a rhetorical question, as the speaker wonders why they can't "escape." In the immediate present, the speaker needs to escape the area of the explosion and get to safety—but the question also relates to the ongoing cycles of violence that plague the city. Especially coming after a list of street names that themselves allude to conflict, line 7's question asks whether it is even *possible* to escape such deeply embedded brutality (and it's worth remembering that the Troubles were rooted in tensions stretching back over centuries).

The rest of line 7 then returns to the extended metaphor developed throughout the first stanza (violence and language). Here, the poem makes important use of caesura to illustrate the way in which the speaker's "every move is punctuated" (that is, thwarted or blocked). The line has three periods and one question mark, literally stopping every time it seems like it's about to get going. "Crimea Street" is distanced from the earlier list of street names to convey the speaker's confusion—the speaker seems not to know how they got to this particular street—and to show the way that "Crimea" ties together the previous names, since they all relate to the Crimean War. The speaker finds no escape, only "dead end[s]" symbolized by the periods throughout the line. These definitive punctuation marks also hint at the way a bomb causes literal endings through death, reminding the reader of the horrors the speaker is witnessing.

Line 8 is mostly made up of the poem's third list:

> A Saracen, Kremlin-2 mesh. Makrolon face-shields. Walkie-talkies.

These words have a harsh, cacophonous sound—just like the lists in line 2 and line 6. And like those two other lists, this one also relates to violence. While the first list described the contents of the bomb and the second noted Crimean War-inspired street names, the third consists of military equipment. For instance, a Saracen is a military vehicle used by the British Army (who were deployed in Northern Ireland during the Troubles). The presence of all these cold, menacing objects in the once-familiar streets emphasizes the way that the speaker's world has been completely transformed by violence. Additionally, the caesurae in line 8 continue the stop-start sound established in line 7, with each piece of military equipment sounding like a "dead end."

LINES 8-9

> *What is ...*
> *... of question marks.*

"Belfast Confetti" concludes with three rhetorical questions (and a final metaphor). These three questions in lines 8 and 9 go right to the heart of the speaker's identity: "What is / My name? Where am I coming from? Where am I going?" The explosion has disorientated the speaker, and these questions are in part a representation of the immediate confusion in its aftermath. The scene is chaotic, and trying to figure out where to go is a pressing problem. The enjambment between line 8 and 9 breaks the first question into two fragments, conveying both the destructiveness of the explosion and also the difficulty of answering the question amid such violence.

These questions also work on a deeper level. First, not being able to remember their own name shows the way that violence has deeply impacted the speaker's sense of identity and their ability to use language to shape that identity. Second, these questions also speak more widely to the violent conflict itself. Put crudely, the Troubles were a low-level war between two different identity groups: those who wanted to be defined as Irish and those who preferred to be part of the United Kingdom. "Coming from" a particular area, in such a conflict, is often indicative of which side a person is on, so the speaker seems to be saying that they don't even know where they stand in this debate—and in a way, it doesn't matter, because the violence affects everyone.

In essence, these concluding questions are more like philosophical conundrums: what does it mean to have a name, to come "from" somewhere, to be "going" somewhere? They feel somewhat unanswerable, like "dead end[s]" themselves, and have an air of desperation that seems fitting for the atmosphere of violence and confusion that dominates the poem.

The poem then ends similarly to how it began, with one final example of its main extended metaphor (which relates warfare to language, particularly punctuation). A "fusillade" is a sustained attack of multiple shots or bombs, so the speaker's point is that they have many more questions like the ones just listed. The speaker wants to make sense of the world by trying to find answers to these questions, but is confronted instead by the inexplicable senselessness of violence.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is used sparingly in "Belfast Confetti." It first appears in line 1, and then again in line 2:

> Suddenly as the riot squad moved in, it was raining exclamation marks,
> Nuts, bolts, nails, car-keys.

The two /s/ sounds quicken the pace of the poem's opening, emphasizing the franticness of the situation (just after a bomb has exploded). These combine with the /s/ sound in "as" too (this is also known as sibilance). The paired /n/ and /k/ sounds in the next line convey similarity. That is, the alliteration helps illustrate the basis on which the contents of the home-made bomb are selected: they're all chosen for their ability to maim and kill. The bomb contains small but heavy metal objects, which will fragment and pose a lethal threat when traveling through the air with the power of the explosion.

Another significant instance of alliteration is in line 5's "side-streets" and "stops." It's worth noting that this is one of two sets of pairs in this line, the other being "all the alleyways." While this latter example is not technically alliteration (more like almost-assonance and consonance combined), the pairing of sounds suggests a kind of familiarity. These pairs help evoke the speaker's knowledge of the Belfast streets—knowledge which doesn't seem to help the speaker in the aftermath of the explosion.

The three rhetorical questions in the poem's conclusion are also alliterative. Though the /w/ sounds are quite far apart, the repeated question format makes them chime together. The repeated sound emphasizes the speaker's anxiety and desperation, and intensifies the way that these questions seem difficult to answer in light of the violence that surrounds them.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "S," "s," "i," "i"
- **Line 2:** "N," "n," "c," "k"
- **Line 3:** "a," "a"
- **Line 4:** "t," "t"
- **Line 5:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 7:** "e," "E"
- **Line 8:** "m," "M," "W," "W"
- **Line 9:** "W," "W"

ALLUSION

"Belfast Confetti" makes two major allusions. Both of these come in line 6 (and the second of the two is also echoed in line 7).

The first allusion is: "I know this labyrinth so well." In Greek mythology, the labyrinth was a complex maze built to house a monster called the minotaur—and to prevent it from escaping. The speaker is actually referring to the streets of Belfast, which the speaker now finds almost impossible to escape in the immediate confusion after the bomb's explosion. But the connotation of the labyrinth adds the idea that there is something monstrous at the heart of Belfast. This can be interpreted as the bomb or, more abstractly, as the Troubles conflict itself—a violent center from which it is hard to escape.

The other allusion is part of the first. Indeed, this section is both literal and allusive: "Balaclava, Raglan, Inkerman, Odessa Street." These are actual Belfast street names, so in a sense this section is just the speaker reporting reality. But the names themselves—which long predate the speaker and the Troubles conflict—are also allusions to the Crimean War. This was a 19th-century war between the Russian Empire and an alliance of France, Britain, Sardinia, and the Ottoman Empire. "Raglan" alludes to a British military commander, and the other three names are particular battles or bombardments that took place during the war. The purpose of the allusion is to suggest that the violence experienced by the speaker is, in a tragic way, nothing new. A conflict from over a hundred years prior is literally written into the streets of Belfast, which indicates that the violence the speaker is experiencing may have similarly long-lasting consequences. The list of street names also hints at the poem's investigation into the way that language and violence intersect, by showing how wars can affect even the names a country uses to label itself.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "I know this labyrinth so well—Balaclava, Raglan, Inkerman, Odessa Street—"
- **Line 7:** "Crimea Street"

ASSONANCE

Assonance is used sparingly but effectively in "Belfast Confetti." The most prominent example of assonance is found across lines 3 and 4:

> ... This hyphenated line, a burst of rapid fire...
> I was trying to complete a sentence in my head, but it kept stuttering.

This repeating long /i/ sound seems to interrupt the flow of these lines in the same way that the sound of the violence interrupts the speaker's thoughts; the poem itself is also "stuttering" here.

Assonance is used to similar effect in line 5:

> All the alleyways and side-streets blocked with stops

and colons.

These /aw/ sounds (and to a lesser degree the other "o" in "colon") have the effect of clogging up the line with one particular sound. This section sees the speaker struggling to find an escape route away from the site of an explosion. Though the speaker knows the Belfast streets well, the city seems confusing and disorientating in the aftermath of the violence. The /aw/ sounds make the end of the stanza feel stuck on one particular sound, building tension.

The street names in line 6 are also assonant, and are real streets in Belfast:

> I know this labyrinth so well—Balaclava, Raglan, Inkerman, Odessa Street—

The poem uses them in part because they allude to the Crimean War (a much earlier conflict), but also because they use assonance. This mimics the use of vowel sounds in line 5 discussed above, creating a similarly oppressive effect on the poem's sound.

This technique is used subtly in one further instance: "Dead end again" in line 7. As with the previous examples, these vowels sound abrupt and stuck, conveying the speaker's inability to find an escape route (both literally and metaphorically).

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "i," "i," "a," "i," "i," "a"
- **Line 2:** "ai"
- **Line 3:** "a," "a," "y," "i," "a," "i"
- **Line 4:** "I," "y," "e," "e," "y," "ea," "e"
- **Line 5:** "o," "o"
- **Line 6:** "o," "o," "a," "a," "a," "a," "a," "a," "a," "O"
- **Line 7:** "y," "I," "e," "E," "ea," "e," "ai"
- **Line 8:** "e," "e," "e," "a," "ie," "a," "ie"
- **Line 9:** "o," "o"

CACOPHONY

"Belfast Confetti" is full of cacophony, and deliberately so. This isn't a poem about a pretty subject—this is about violence, conflict, and the question of how language and violence interact.

On a more immediate level, it's about an explosion in Belfast. This, of course, is a terrifying and chaotic event, and the poem uses the clustering of harsh consonants to convey the speaker's fear and confusion. Arguably, cacophony runs through the entire poem (note just how many hard /k/ sounds screech past in each line), but it's definitely ramped up three key places. The first of these is in line 2's description of the contents of the bomb:

> "Nuts, bolts, nails, car-keys."

The /t/ sounds clash with the /b/ and the hard /c/ and /k/ sounds. The /s/ sounds in each word also convey hissing, spitting intensity (this also an example of sibilance). It's also worth noting that all of these words are metrically stressed ("car-keys" can be either one or two stresses). This adds to the harsh intensity of the line, the sounds sharp like the objects they describe.

This cacophony reoccurs during the poem's other two lists. The next list comes up in line 6 and is made up of street names in Belfast (which also allude to the Crimean War):

> Balaclava, Raglan, Inkerman, Odessa Street

These sounds have an intentional sharpness to them, placed side-by-side to emphasize their harshness. The same is true of the final example, which is the poem's third list:

> A Saracen, Kremlin-2 mesh. Makrolon face-shields. Walkie-talkies.

Listing military equipment in this way makes the individual items seem foreboding, as though the speaker doesn't need to discuss what the equipment is for, instead letting the harshness of the words convey the grim uses that these items are put to.

Where Cacophony appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Nuts, bolts, nails, car-keys."
- **Line 6:** "Balaclava, Raglan, Inkerman, Odessa Street"
- **Line 8:** "A Saracen, Kremlin-2 mesh. Makrolon face-shields. Walkie-talkies."

CAESURA

Caesura plays an important role in "Belfast Confetti." In fact there is only one line that doesn't have at least one caesura (line 5). There are two key sentences in the poem that reflect the overall use of caesura. The first is line 4:

> I was trying to complete a sentence in my head, but it kept stuttering.

And the second is from line 7:

> Why can't I escape? Every move is punctuated. Crimea Street. Dead end again.

Both of these sentences are clear examples of the way the poem uses language (punctuation especially) as a metaphor for the violence of the explosion and its aftermath. The speaker feels trapped, and describes this feeling in terms of broken

sentences and oppressive punctuation. Accordingly, the sound of the sentences, aided greatly by the numerous caesurae, creates a sense of being stuck. Across lines 2 and 3, for example, the caesurae combine with the grammatically incomplete sentences to create a fractured and aborted sound, mimicking the way that the speaker tries this street after street to escape the site of the explosion.

This effect is pushed further in the second stanza. The commas that break up the street names in line 6 help the poem build its cacophonous sound, and periods in lines 7 and 8 deliberately upset any momentum that the poem might build. Indeed, caesurae serve an important function in the last line too, with the repeated question marks demonstrating the speaker's anxious state and fractured sense of identity.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "in, it"
- **Line 2:** "Nuts, bolts, nails, car-keys. A," "type. And"
- **Line 3:** "Itself—an," "map. This," "line, a"
- **Line 4:** "head, but"
- **Line 6:** "well—Balaclava, Raglan, Inkerman, Odessa Street—"
- **Line 7:** "escape? Every," "punctuated. Crimea Street. Dead"
- **Line 8:** "Saracen, Kremlin-2 mesh. Makrolon face-shields. Walkie-talkies. What"
- **Line 9:** "name? Where," "from? Where," "going? A"

CONSONANCE

"Belfast Confetti" is packed full of harsh sounds that represent the chaotic atmosphere of the poem's main event: a bomb explosion. These sounds are explored more specifically in the cacophony section of this guide. In many cases, the poem uses consonance to reinforce this sense of sonic chaos.

Line 4's use of consonance is especially effective. The line is punctuated with /t/ sounds that culminate in the word "stuttering:"

> I was trying to complete a sentence in my head, but it kept stuttering.

These /t/ sounds convey the speaker's inability to form a sentence, as though the speaker is tripping up on this one particular consonant. The next prominent example of consonance is at the end of line 7: "Dead end again." The dull-sounding /d/ and /n/ consonants make the line feel closed and claustrophobic, emphasizing the speaker's inability to escape.

The poem ends in a barrage of rhetorical questions. As well as alliterating, these questions in lines 8 and 9 are full of /m/ consonance:

> ... What is
> My name? Where am I coming from? Where am I going? ...

The dullness of these sounds reflects the consonance in line 7 discussed above. These questions are *also* inescapable, since they address the roots of the speaker's identity and question how to maintain it amid such violence.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "S," "dd," "s," "s," "q," "d," "d," "n," "n," "x," "c," "m," "n," "m," "k," "s"
- **Line 2:** "N," "ts," "b," "t," "s," "n," "s," "c," "k," "s," "n," "t," "b," "k," "n," "t," "n," "x," "p," "n"
- **Line 3:** "s," "n," "s," "s," "k," "n," "p," "n," "n," "b," "p"
- **Line 4:** "t," "t," "c," "p," "t," "s," "t," "c," "t," "t," "k," "p," "t," "s," "t," "tt"
- **Line 5:** "ll," "ll," "s," "s," "s," "t," "t," "s," "b," "ck," "st," "s," "c," "s"
- **Line 6:** "l," "ll," "l," "cl," "l," "n," "k," "n," "ss," "St," "t"
- **Line 7:** "c," "c," "p," "p," "c," "t," "t," "C," "D," "d," "nd," "n"
- **Line 8:** "S," "r," "c," "n," "K," "r," "m," "n," "m," "sh," "M," "k," "r," "c," "sh," "s," "W," "k," "k," "s," "W," "s"
- **Line 9:** "M," "m," "W," "m," "c," "m," "m," "W," "m," "s," "q," "s," "m," "s"

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment is used in just two lines. The first instance of enjambment is between lines 2 and 3. Here, the poem hangs on a fragment: "And the explosion / Itself ..." This means that the phrase itself is subjected to a kind of mini explosion, split into fragments across two lines. This conveys the fear and destruction that the bomb causes, and it also lets the reader experience the speaker's fractured state of mind for a moment, as the reader struggles to understand what's going on before reaching the end of the sentence.

The other enjambment is equally (and deliberately) awkward. It occurs across lines 8 and 9:

> Saracen, Kremlin-2 mesh. Makrolon face-shields. Walkie-talkies. What is
> My name? Where am I coming from? Where am I going? A fusillade of question marks.

Like the first example, this enjambment splits the phrase in two. This echoes the sense of fragmentation in the first example, and emphasizes the difficulty the speaker faces in answering these questions. That is, in an atmosphere of violence and division, the speaker isn't sure how to find a stable sense of identity—particularly without that identity becoming wrapped up in the hatred that motivated the violence in the first place.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "explosion / Itself"
- **Lines 8-9:** "is / My"

EXTENDED METAPHOR

"Belfast Confetti" uses one main metaphorical idea (which is then made up of smaller metaphors too). This extended metaphor essentially takes elements of violent conflict and presents them as elements of language, particularly punctuation marks.

For instance, the blast from the explosion is described in lines 1 and 2 as a "[rain] of exclamation marks" and a "fount of broken type." The mention of exclamation marks emphasizes the state of high alert, and the "broken type" relates to the devastation caused by the bomb. But both examples also set up the poem's investigation into the relationship between language and violence, one which ultimately leads to more questions than answers. Language is key to how people make sense of their world, but the violence this poem describes seems to undermine language's ability to keep a firm hold on reality. Through its extended metaphor, the poem digs into a rhetorical question about what good language can do if people still resort to such violence and hatred.

The explosion is described in line 3 as "an asterisk," continuing the relationship between violence/warfare and typography/punctuation. An asterisk ("*") has points that radiate outward from the center, much like a bomb blast. Similarly, in line 3 gunfire is likened to a hyphenated line because of its horizontal direction. The routes away from the blast are "blocked with stops and colons," emphasizing the speaker's two sources of confusion: how to get to immediate safety, and how to *understand* what is happening through language. This confusion is then summed up in line 7:

> Why can't I escape? Every move is punctuated.

"Every move" that the speaker makes seems to be interrupted and leads only to a "dead end again." Punctuation is meant to help people understand language more easily, but here it represents the way that things in Belfast feel deeply wrong, as if a period has been placed. randomly in a sentence.

The last example of these linked metaphors is the poem's closing phrase in line 9: "A fusillade of question marks." A fusillade is a bombardment of rapid fire, here relating metaphorically to the speaker's questions about their own identity. What's most interesting about this final example is that it's hard to tell which part of the metaphor is the literal subject (sometimes called the *tenor*) and which is the metaphorical element whose characteristics are borrowed (the *vehicle*). That is, are the question marks metaphorically describing an actual bombardment (similar to the "rain of exclamation marks"), or are the questions themselves transformed by borrowing the traits of a bombardment (like being destructive and unrelenting)? This confusion seems intentional, upsetting the poem's sense of reality and painting a picture of the speaker's fractured, uncertain state of mind.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Lines 2-3
- Line 4
- Line 5
- Line 7
- Line 9

RHETORICAL QUESTION

"Belfast Confetti" has four rhetorical questions.

The first of these appears in line 7 when the speaker asks: "Why can't I escape?" This is both a literal question and a philosophical one. The speaker is caught in some kind of battle zone just after a bomb blast, and is looking for a way out. But the speaker's question also refers more widely to the complicated nature of the Troubles conflict, which for a while seemed impossible to escape (and the hard-won peace remains tense even today).

The questions in the last two lines constitute what the speaker calls, in line 9, "a fusillade of question marks." They are a kind of bombardment of self-doubt and confusion, as the speaker's sense of self is destabilized by the chaotic and violent situation. The speaker asks: "What is / My name? Where am I coming from? Where am I going?" These questions strike right at the heart of the speaker's identity, with even their own name seeming like a mystery. Both "coming from" and "going [to] are questions of place, tying the speaker's sense of fractured identity with the very real disruption going on where they live.

Indeed, these three questions could also be applied to the conflict itself. That is, the Troubles were large part about identity—whether Northern Ireland was Irish or part of the United Kingdom—and about what people felt their national identity should be. These concluding questions thus point to the way that personal identity and broader identity can be closely linked, especially when violent conflict is involved.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "Why can't I escape?"
- **Lines 8-9:** "What is / My name? Where am I coming from? Where am I going?"

ASYNDETON

"Belfast Confetti" uses asyndeton often, and this has two overarching effects. First, the poem's asyndeton adds to the

stuttering, confused sound of the poem. Words and phrases are introduced and stopped short by punctuation, and without the use of coordinating conjunctions like "and" or "but," readers are often left to figure out the connection between words and phrases on their own. Take like 3:

> ... This hyphenated line, a burst of rapid fire

Readers must put together that this "hyphenated line" and "burst of rapid fire" are the same thing—both refer to the staccato sound of rapid gunshots. The lack of conjunction between these phrases seems to mirror the speaker's frantic and confused state of mind.

Secondly, the use of asyndeton creates a tense piling up effect, which is prominent in the speaker's use of lists in lines 2 ("Nuts, bolts, nails, car-keys."), 6 ("Balaclava, Raglan, Inkerman, Odessa Street—"), and 8 ("A Saracen, Kremlin-2 mesh. Makrolon face-shields. Walkie-talkies."). The asyndeton makes it feel like there are *so* many small metal scraps flying through the air, *so* many streets the speaker should know, and *so* much military equipment surrounding the speaker; these lists could go on and on. Asyndeton, then, again adds to the sense of chaos, confusion, and violence that suffuses the poem.

Additionally, the asyndeton of "Nuts, bolts, nails, car-keys" subtly reflects how all these metal pieces are packed tightly together within the casing of a home-made bomb. In line 6, the rapid list of street names reflects the speaker's rising feelings of pressure and panic. It feels in this moment as if the speaker is so frantic that they can't even pause to add the word "and."

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Nuts, bolts, nails, car-keys. A fount of broken type."
- **Line 3:** "This hyphenated line, a burst of rapid fire"
- **Line 6:** "Balaclava, Raglan, Inkerman, Odessa Street"
- **Line 7:** "Crimea Street. Dead end again."
- **Line 8:** "A Saracen, Kremlin-2 mesh. Makrolon face-shields. Walkie-talkies."

VOCABULARY

Riot Squad (Line 1) - These are state police tasked with trying to bring a big crowd under control.

Fount (Line 2) - A fount is a spring or fountain. There is a little play on the word "font" here in reference to the "broken type."

Type (Line 2) - Typed lettering, of the kind you're reading now! Or, at the time this poem was written, something printed or written on a typewriter.

Asterisk (Line 3) - An asterisk is this punctuation mark: *. It is most often used to mark a note, or to censor an expletive.

Hyphenated Line (Line 3) - This is a line of hyphens: ---------- The speaker uses this image as a way of conveying the horizontal "rapid fire" of a gun.

Stops (Line 5) - These are periods (often called *full stops* in Ireland and the UK), indicating the end of a sentence.

Colons (Line 5) - A colon is this punctuation mark — : . It is used in this context because it looks like two periods on top of one another, emphasizing the speaker's inability to escape.

Labyrinth (Line 6) - The labyrinth is a maze in Greek myth that was constructed to imprison a monster called the minotaur.

Balaclava, Raglan, Inkerman, Odessa, Crimea (Line 6, Line 7) - All of these street names allude to the Crimean War (1853-1856). This was a conflict between an alliance of Britain, France, the Ottoman Empire, and Sardinia, against the Russian Empire. Balaclava and Inkerman were battles, Raglan was a British military commander, and Odessa was a bombardment operation. These are also real street names in Belfast.

Sararcen, Kremlin-2 mesh, Makrolon face-shields, Walkie-talkies (Line 8) - These are all items of military equipment. A Saracen is an armored vehicle. "Makrolon face-shields" refers to face-shields often used by riot police that have clear plastic visors. Walkie-talkies are hand-held two-way radios. Finally, "Kremlin-2 mesh" refers to a protective covering for tanks.

Fusillade (Line 9) - A fusillade is a burst of rapid fire or shelling.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Belfast Confetti" is made up of nine lines broken into two stanzas—the first with five lines, the second with four. While it does not have a strict form, Carson himself called it a kind of "skewed sonnet." That is, the poem's division into two distinct stanzas, with the first a little longer than the second, subtly recalls the sonnet form (which is usually an octave, or eight-line stanza, followed by a sestet, or a six-line stanza). The brokenness of the sonnet form mirrors the types of breakdown displayed in the poem: the breakdown of language, of society, and of the speaker's sense of self.

The poem is disorientating for the reader. It's not clear exactly what's happening, and the poem's consistent use of metaphor—which relates violence and the aftermath of violence to punctuation and language—makes the poem structurally unsound. That is, it's hard to say if this is reporting a real event or if it's a metaphorical take on violent conflict. Either way, the poem seems to begin with an explosion, with the rest of the poem following in the immediate aftermath. The speaker tries to escape through streets that are normally familiar—they are the streets of the speaker's hometown—but doing so now seems impossible. This loss of stability undermines the speaker's sense of self too, resulting in the

closing rhetorical questions (and the mention of even more "question marks" in line 9).

METER

"Belfast Confetti" is written in free verse. That means it does not have a regular meter, and the *lack* of clear meter helps convey the poem's overall atmosphere of confusion and disorientation. However, the poem does make use of clusters of stressed syllables. These create a violent sound, which is clearest in line 2:

> Nuts, bolts, nails, car-keys.

With the possible exception of "keys," all five syllables here are stressed. This, combined with the harshness of the consonant sounds, creates cacophony. This effect makes perfect sense, because this is the moment in which the speaker describes the contents of the bomb that has just exploded; the cacophony helps the reader hear something similar to what the speaker is hearing.

RHYME SCHEME

"Belfast Confetti" almost never uses rhyme, so it doesn't have anything resembling a typical rhyme scheme. The poem is more focused on harsh sounds that help convey an atmosphere of violence and threat, so the steady and clear ringing-out of rhymes would probably make the poem too pleasant on the ear.

That said, the poem does use a combination of internal rhyme and slant rhyme to emphasize one key moment in line 7: "Dead end again." The repeated /e/ sound across those three words gives the phrase a sense of finality that reflects the speaker's frustrated attempt to escape, and the effect feels all the more forceful in contrast to the lack of rhyme elsewhere in the poem.

SPEAKER

The speaker is a Belfast resident, but that's about all readers know about this person. Otherwise, the speaker is unspecified in "Belfast Confetti"—given no name, age, or gender. The poem is told from a first-person perspective, and it seems to find the speaker caught up in a nearby bomb explosion.

But the reader isn't the only one who doesn't know the speaker's identity—it seems like the *speaker* is confused on that point as well. Such is the fear and terror of the situation, the speaker struggles to even form sentences in their head. And though the speaker is a Belfast resident and knows its streets "so well," the speaker nonetheless finds it impossible to escape. The violence actively undermines the speaker's sense of self and place.

This anxiety of identity is expressed especially clearly in the poem's closing rhetorical questions in lines 8 and 9: "What is / My name? Where am I coming from? Where am I going?" This doesn't necessarily mean that the speaker can't remember their actual name, but more that the speaker's way of making sense of the world—through language—has been utterly undermined by the atmosphere of violence and chaos. Similarly, these closing questions indicate that the speaker's home is also in question; technically, the speaker is from Belfast, but the violence has made the city feel like an increasingly unfamiliar and alien place, leaving the speaker feeling unmoored.

SETTING

The poem is set during the Troubles, a violent conflict in Northern Ireland that took place during the late 20th century (this is explained further in the Context section of this guide). According to Carson himself, the poem takes place in Belfast in August of 1969, though this level of specificity is not necessary to get a sense of the poem's violent atmosphere. Belfast, though, is certainly the poem's location. The streets listed in line 6 are actual Belfast streets (which allude to the Crimean War).

The poem seeks to capture something of the disorientation, fear, and chaos of violent conflict. This was not an out-and-out war between two armies taking place in a far-off land—rather, this conflict struck at the heart of everyday life, with regular streets suddenly becoming battle zones. That's why the speaker's sense of home and belonging is completely disrupted: Belfast becomes an almost alien place through the violence that takes place there.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Ciaran Carson was a poet born to an Irish-speaking family in Northern Ireland. He was born in Belfast in 1948, and his home city features prominently throughout his poetry. He studied English at Queen's University in Belfast, where his tutors included the foremost Irish poet of the late 20th century, Seamus Heaney. Another prominent poet, Paul Muldoon, was among his classmates. Carson had a strong interest in Irish culture, particularly its music, and later worked for the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, playing flute and tin whistle all over the island.

This particular poem is not from the collection of the same name (which was published in 1989), but appeared in the earlier *The Irish For No* (1987). It is part of a sequence of poems with similar structures and subject matter. Of course, Carson is not the only poet to write about the Troubles (as the late 20th century conflict in Northern Ireland is known). Paul Muldoon, Derek Mahon, and Sinead Morrissey, among many others, have all written powerful poems on the subject. Furthermore, "Belfast Confetti" is a poem about itself as a work of literature

as much as it is about the violence of Troubles-era Belfast. The speaker's anxious references to punctuation marks and sentences make the poem into an inquiry into language's role in conflict.

Carson also wrote prose and worked as a translator, work which included a translation of Dante's *Inferno*. He won numerous prizes throughout his literary career, including the Forward Prize and the prestigious T.S. Eliot Prize. He died in October 2019 from cancer.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Belfast Confetti" is set in Troubles-era Belfast, Northern Ireland. The Troubles was a conflict in Northern Ireland that ran from 1968 to 1998, but it had roots stretching back hundreds of years. The Troubles was a battle over the identity and status of Northern Ireland. Put simply, it was a fight between those who wanted Northern Ireland to unify with the rest of Ireland—the Republic—and those who strongly felt that Northern Ireland was a part of the United Kingdom (which remains its status to this day). The latter group are known as Unionists and are mostly Protestant, whereas the former group are known as Nationalists or Republicans and are generally Catholic, but it is not generally considered a primarily religious conflict.

The Troubles has been described as a "low-level war," not because it wasn't deadly and frightening, but because of the nature of the conflict. As with the bomb in this poem, explosives were often homemade, and fighting would break out on the same streets where people would usually go about their daily business. To this day, Belfast is divided by so-called "peace walls," attempts to keep the two communities apart. A hard-won and tense truce between the two sides culminated in the Good Friday Agreement, signed in 1998. This attempted to put into place a political power-sharing agreement, with the UK government relinquishing some of its powers to Northern Ireland. The Northern Irish situation remains fraught with difficulties, which are currently exacerbated by the problem of Brexit—the Republic of Ireland is and will remain a member of the European Union, regardless of the status of the United Kingdom (including Northern Ireland).

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Hear the poet recite "Belfast Confetti" out loud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xEI995TPKDw)
- Carson on the Flute — Carson was also a musician, playing traditional Irish music on the flute and tin whistle. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NS6RR_nE7Dc)
- More Poems and Info About Carson — A valuable resource on Carson from Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/ciaran-carson)
- Troubles Poems — More poems relating to the Troubles conflict. (https://theculturetrip.com/europe/united-kingdom/articles/the-poetry-inspired-by-belfast/)
- The Troubles and Poetry — An article that explores poets' responses to the Troubles conflict. (https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/northern-ireland/2017/12/songs-dead-children-poetry-northern-ireland-s-troubles)

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