The Ballad of the Landlord

SUMMARY

The speaker repeatedly addresses his landlord, saying that his roof is leaking. The speaker already reported this issue to the landlord a week ago.

The speaker repeatedly addresses the landlord again, this time saying that his front steps are broken. The speaker expresses surprise that the landlord doesn't trip and fall when he tries to climb up them.

The landlord, much to the speaker's indignation, demands that the speaker pay him ten dollars. The speaker incredulously repeats the fact that the landlord think's the speaker owes him ten dollars. The speaker refuses to pay at all until the landlord makes these repairs and the speaker's house is as good as new.

The speaker taunts the landlord, asking what he's going to do now that the speaker won't pay him. Will he kick the speaker out? Turn off his heat? Throw him and all his stuff out into the street?

The speaker notes that *now* the landlord is getting a snobby attitude and talking down to the speaker. The speakers tells the landlord to just keep on talking—but that he won't be able to say a word if the speaker punches him.

The landlord frantically calls for the police, saying: "Arrest this man! He's threatening the governmental order by threatening to not pay me and trying to spark a revolution!"

The policeman blows his whistle. The police car sounds its siren. The speaker is arrested.

The speaker is taken to the local police station and put in an iron cell. The media write about his arrest, with a headline stating that a man who threatened his landlord is now being held in jail with no option to get out on bail. The man is black, the headline notes, and has been sentenced by the judge to 90 days in jail.

THEMES

RACISM IN SOCIETY

In “Ballad of the Landlord,” the speaker, a black man, describes the discrimination he faces when making basic maintenance requests of his (presumably white) landlord. Yet while the landlord refuses to make repairs, demands payment despite not doing his job, and talks down to the tenant, it's the *tenant* who is ultimately arrested for supposedly putting the landlord at risk.

This irony illustrates the hypocrisy and absurdity of racism, which automatically treats black men like the speaker as criminals while letting *actual* criminals like the landlord off the hook. Such racism, the poem further argues, occurs not only on an individual basis but is reinforced at an institutional level—propagated by the government, law enforcement, and media.

The poem begins with the speaker politely declaring that his “roof has sprung a leak” and that his “steps is broken down.” The speaker apparently told his landlord about these issues “way last week,” and the lack of response indicates a lack of respect and concern on the landlord's part.

The speaker’s tone is still somewhat deferential throughout, however, framing the need for repairs as if they were for the landlord’s own safety: “It’s a wonder you don’t fall down.” This suggests that the speaker must couch his (entirely understandable) request within excessively polite language in order to not offend his landlord. Yet instead of addressing the speaker’s request, the landlord proceeds simply to demand money—a brazen response undoubtedly informed by the landlord's knowledge that he has all the power in this situation.

Specifically the landlord demands “Ten Bucks,” and the speaker knows that the landlord has the power to toss him and all his belonging out onto the street if he refuses to pay. And though the speaker began *his* approach by being polite, the landlord apparently talks “high and mighty”—rudely and snobbishly—from the get go. This again implies the landlord has no respect for his tenant, and also that he's aware that the tenant will have little recourse to actually fight back against the landlord's behavior.

That's because this behavior is supported by the racist society in which these men live. Indeed, as soon as the speaker stands up for himself and talks back to the landlord, the landlord's tone changes. Instead of being "high and mighty," he becomes indignant and frightened, frantically calling for the police to "arrest" the speaker for trying to spark a revolt and undermine the government.

This is a ridiculous accusation, of course. The speaker hasn't actually done anything wrong here, except threaten to punch the landlord. There's been no actual violence, and readers don't know what the landlord himself has been saying; given the speaker's escalating frustration, in all likelihood the landlord has been threatening the speaker as well.

Yet the police, when they arrive, waste no time in throwing the speaker in jail, without bail. The short lines towards the poem's end allow the action to unfold rapidly, reflecting just how quickly and unquestioningly the tenant is deemed a criminal by the justice system and the media, which automatically put the landlord's well-being above the speaker's. And in a final twist of

the knife, the media report about the situation furthers the racist stereotypes that landed the speaker in jail in the first place, painting him has nothing more than a dangerous "negro" even as the real criminal walks free.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-33

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Landlord, landlord, ...
... Way last week?

The poem's first line starts with the address to the landlord ("Landlord, landlord"). The use of caesura—that is, the pause that occurs within the line thanks to the insertion of the comma—adds emphasis to the call for the landlord. It works to slow down the reader, forcing the reader to pause and adding weight to each individual call for the landlord. The alliteration and assonance that occurs naturally within the repeated words allows for a smooth, lyrical reading nonetheless. These devices complement the caesura so that the pause is read as measured but not disruptive.

The speaker must call out to the landlord again and again in order to draw his attention to the leaky roof. The repetition makes it clear who the speaker is addressing while also creating a sense of urgency, as if the speaker is struggling to get the landlord's assistance. Lines 3 and 4 affirm this reading, as it becomes evident that this is already the speaker's *second* attempt to get the landlord's attention, as he asks:

> Don't you 'member I told you about it
> Way last week?

The question is rhetorical. The speaker *already* knows that the landlord is aware of the problems with the property—the speaker told him about it a week ago! However, the speaker must also operate within the social hierarchy that demands he, as a black man, show strict respect toward the landlord, who is presumably a white man. The tentative phrasing in the form of a question ("Don't you 'member ... ?") allows the speaker to take on a subservient role. However, the phrase "Way last week" suggests a hint of impatience—the speaker didn't just tell the landlord *yesterday*, he told him a full *week* ago. The alliteration in the phrase "Way last week" places emphasis on this fact.

The first stanza consists of four lines. The first six stanzas will mirror this structure, each one a quatrain (a four-line stanza). This pattern will be disrupted in the final seventh, eighth, and ninth stanzas, however, mirroring the increasing emotional intensity as the poem's story develops.

The first stanza also introduces patterns in rhythm and rhyme that will be carried on throughout the first six stanzas but disrupted in the final three. The poem's irregular use of iambic trimeter is introduced in line 2:

> My roof has sprung a leak.

There are three feet here, read in a da-DUM (unstressed—stressed) rhythm. This rhythm will continue to appear throughout the first six stanzas, always in the second line of each of the four-line stanzas.

The first stanza further introduces an ABCB rhyme scheme:

> Landlord, landlord,
> My roof has sprung a leak.
> Don't you 'member I told you about it
> Way last week?

This pattern will also be continued until the final three stanzas. The ABCB rhyme scheme is typical of an English ballad, a poetic form often used to tell a story. "Ballad of the Landlord" fulfills this requirement, even offering a dramatic climax. The first stanza sets the stage for the story to come, introducing the characters (landlord and tenant) and the problem at hand: the dilapidated property that the landlord refuses to fix.

LINES 5-8

Landlord, landlord, ...
... don't fall down.

The opening line's plea to the landlord is repeated exactly here. This repetition underlines the mounting pressure of the speaker's request as he must struggle to even get the landlord's attention again and again. Still, the pace remains measured thanks to the use of caesura with the comma in the middle of the line.

Nonetheless, the critical state of the situation is made clear by the content of the second stanza, as the speaker flags yet another issue in addition to the house's leaky roof: the broken steps. Again, however, the speaker takes a delicate approach. He frames the issue as if it were a problem for the *landlord*. In lines 7 and 8, he says:

> When you come up yourself
> It's a wonder you don't fall down.

Enjambment highlights a further attempt to capture the landlord's attention. The way the phrase is distributed over two lines leaves the reader—and the person being addressed, the landlord—hanging, wondering what happens "when you come up yourself." The curiosity and anticipation builds as the reader must continue to the next line in order to reach the conclusion of the thought.

Although the speaker has to remind the landlord yet again of the leaky roof and broken steps, his tone remains deferential. He recognizes that aggression won't help his case—a fact that becomes clear through the poem's dramatic conclusion. Unless he wants to end up in jail, the speaker must continue to operate within the "rules" of a society that gives a corrupt (white) landlord more clout than a poor (black) tenant.

This measured approach is mirrored by the crisply punctuated lines. Take the commas separating "Landlord, landlord," in line 5, for instance, or the period that comes at the conclusion of line 6: "These steps is broken down."

Even though the speaker's race has not yet been revealed at this point in the poem—and will only be confirmed in the final stanza—hints are given as to the speaker's status in society. His speech is casual and contains grammatical errors. In line 6 he says "These steps is broken down" ("is" instead of "are"). This suggests that the speaker is lacking in formal education. The opportunity for an education is often aligned with means—as in, having the time to study as well as money to cover the necessities of food and shelter needed to allow for learning. The speaker's implied lack of schooling thus suggests he is from a lower social class.

The second stanza carries on the ABCB rhyme scheme from the first stanza, thanks to the repetition of "down" at the conclusion of lines 6 and 8, allowing for a perfect end rhyme. The rhythmic pattern of the first stanza is also repeated in line 6, which offers another perfect example of iambic trimeter:

> These steps is broken down.

This rhythmic pattern is similar to a blues music pattern, in which the second and fourth beats of a four-beat count are emphasized while leaving the backbeat unstressed: 1-2-3-4 (similar to the da-DUM inflection of an iamb). Given that the poem is a ballad, this is appropriate. Ballads, which date back to the European Middle Ages, are traditionally set to music. "Ballad of the Landlord" thus offers a "modern" take with its link to American blues music.

LINES 9-12

Ten Bucks you ...
... house up new.

The casual tone set in the first and second stanzas is complemented by the use of colloquialisms in the third stanza, specifically the phrase "Ten Bucks." The word "bucks" is slang for "dollars."

The speaker poses rhetorical questions in this stanza to make use of aporia, a rhetorical device in which he expresses feigned doubt in order to prove a point. He poses the following questions to the landlord in lines 9 and 10:

> Ten Bucks you say I owe you?
> Ten Bucks you say is due?

The speaker is well aware that the landlord is simply trying to exploit him with the demand for money. He's not trying to get clarity or confirmation through his queries. Instead, through repetitive questions, the speaker is able to express incredulity at the demand and make clear just how exploitive the request is. His conclusion that "Well, that's Ten Bucks more'n I'll pay you" (line 11) proves that the speaker knew all along that the landlord's demand for money is essentially just extortion. Note that, "Ten Bucks" in 1940—the year the poem was published—would be equivalent to about $183.00 in 2020.

The way in which the "Ten Bucks" is capitalized, presenting the words as a single unit, suggests that it's not the *amount* of money that the landlord is asking for that's the issue—but the fact that the landlord is requesting *any* money. "Ten Bucks" can be replaced with another amount—or eliminated completely. Consider how line 9 would read without the monetary unit: "you say I owe you?" It's not the sum but the idea that the tenant *owes* the landlord *anything* that matters. Technically, the tenant pays rent in exchange for the right to live in a property that is safe—the landlord, as the property owner, is responsible for ensuring this. The landlord in this case is failing to fulfill a basic obligation.

The question marks exhibit the speaker's incredulity and hint at his mounting frustration. The speaker transitions from a polite tone of deference and takes a stand in lines 11 and 12:

> Well, that's Ten Bucks more'n I'll pay you
> Till you fix this house up new.

The enjambment here builds suspense—and leaves the speaker's final words reading almost like a threat. The message is one of "you had better fix this house up—or else." The speaker will not give in to the whims of the landlord and to his ludicrous request for "Ten Bucks." The speaker demands that his right to a safe home be respected and makes it clear that he won't cooperate with the landlord's exploitive measures so easily.

Although the tone begins to shift in the third stanza, becoming more confrontational, it still upholds certain formal patterns set out in the first two stanzas, in keeping with the poetic form of a ballad. It is still a quatrain and sticks to the ABCB rhyme scheme. It also makes use of iambic trimeter in the second line of the stanza (line 10):

> Ten Bucks you say is due?

Adherence to these formal rules will disintegrate gradually over the next three quatrains until they fall away completely in final three stanzas.

LINES 13-16

What? You gonna ...
... in the street?

The speaker's tone becomes increasingly aggressive as his understandable frustration mounts. He continues to ask rhetorical questions in order to communicate his annoyance, painting a hypothetical picture of what the landlord will likely do if the speaker refuses to hand over "Ten Bucks" as requested. In lines 13 and 14, he asks:

> What? You gonna get eviction orders?
> You gonna cut off my heat?

With these questions, the speaker is hypothesizing what will happen as a result of his refusal to pay the ten dollars the landlord is attempting to extort from him. Again, the speaker is embracing aporia: He isn't *really* wondering if this is what will happen—he knows full well that this *is* the inevitable action the landlord will take.

The abrupt caesura in line 13 after "What?" marks a turning point in the poem. The punctuation forces the reader into a full stop and suggests an angry, possibly challenging attitude—the speaker is saying, "What are you going to do about it [if I don't pay]?" The use of alliteration and consonance supports this sense of interruption. Notice how crisp, hard /g/, /k/, /t/, and /ch/ sounds throughout the stanza:

> What? You gonna get eviction orders?
> You gonna cut off my heat?
> You gonna take my furniture and
> Throw it in the street?

These sounds are harsh and biting, reflecting the speaker's anger. And although the conventions of the ballad form are maintained in terms of the ABCB rhyme scheme, the actual sounds of the stanza prevent it from feeling smooth or regular.

The anaphora of "you gonna" further reflects the speaker's frustration, as the list of actions the landlord is presumably going to take builds and builds, escalating in severity. The poem makes use of enjambment to further ramp up the suspense in lines 15 and 16:

> You gonna take my furniture and
> Throw it in the street?

Line 15 leaves the reader wondering, "*What* will the landlord do with the furniture?" The reader is left hanging at the end of the line. Line 16 then reveals that the landlord will throw it out, as if it were garbage. The reader thus gains a deeper understanding of how unjust the society the landlord and tenant are operating in is: for the landlord, this dispute is a question of maybe earning an extra "Ten Bucks." For the tenant, it's a question of possibly being homeless—and, as the poem will go on to make clear, ending up in jail.

LINES 17-20

Um-huh! You talking ...
... fist on you.

Line 17 contains another disruptive caesura: "Um-huh! You talking high and mighty." The exclamation mark forces the reader to make an abrupt full stop in the middle of the line. "Um-huh," similar to a modern-day "uh-huh," suggests incredulity and skepticism, and serves as the speaker's sarcastic rebuttal to whatever the landlord has just said.

This is complemented by the speaker's accusatory tone as he charges the landlord with "talking high and mighty." When someone is being high-and-mighty, they are being arrogant. The landlord is talking down to the tenant as if he were better than the tenant—which, in the eyes of the racist and classist society these two characters inhabit, is considered true.

Another instance of caesura is seen in line 18: "Talk on—till you get through." As is the case with line 17, the reader is again forced to stop in the middle of the line. The use of alliteration and consonance with /t/ sounds, plus the hard /k/ and /g/ sounds, further illustrate the speaker's firm and frustrated tone ("talk," "till," "get").

The tone in the fifth stanza becomes openly confrontational. The speaker's frustration has been building up in the previous four stanzas and here, it finally erupts. The tenant accuses the landlord outright of being arrogant. Then, the speaker goes on to threaten the landlord physically in lines 19 through 20:

> You ain't gonna be able to say a word
> If I land my fist on you.

The phrase "land my fist on you" suggests the threat of a punch. Still, however, the speaker is careful to keep this as a hypothetical, prefacing the phrase with an "if." He does not actually take any physical action against the landlord. However, even words will be enough to send the landlord calling for the police—as the following stanzas will reveal.

LINES 21-24

Police! Police! ...
... overturn the land!

The sixth stanza offers a distinct break from the previous five stanzas in terms of form. It is still a quatrain, consisting of four lines, and it still the ABCB rhyme scheme of an English ballad. However, instead of the *speaker's* voice, the *landlord's* voice is heard for the first time in the poem.

These lines also stand out because of their diction. There is no slang or colloquial phrases, as previously used by the speaker

(as in "Ten Bucks"). The landlord's language is crisp, clear, and grammatically correct. The landlord does not abbreviate words (as the speaker does, for example, with "ain't" in line 19 or "'member" in line 3).

The precise language of the landlord is complemented by the assertive punctuation. Four exclamation points appear in this stanza, suggesting a tone not only of urgency but also authority. Up until this point, the poem has depicted the voice of the speaker—whose words are frequently punctuated by question marks. Refer back to lines 3 to 4, for example:

> Don't you 'member I told you about it
> Way last week?

Instead of saying "I told you about it last week!" the speaker remains deferential, phrasing this fact as a less combative question. This contrasts sharply to the landlord's use of exclamation points in the sixth stanza. They are aggressive, urgent, and blatantly accusatory. The landlord exaggerates his exchange with the tenant significantly in lines 23 and 24, making the hyperbolic claim that the speaker is trying to spark a revolt:

> *He's trying to ruin the government*
> *And overturn the land!*

Keep in mind, all the speaker has done is request the landlord to make repairs to his property (as is the landlord's duty), refused to pay the landlord until those repairs are made, and finally, in growing frustration, wondered aloud what would happy if he were to punch the landlord. Equating this behavior with "trying to ruin the government" is ridiculous. The landlord is saying that the tenant is trying to overthrow the government (in this case, "the land" means the nation or the country, not a piece of physical land).

With these words, the landlord also *aligns* himself with the government. Even the fact that the term "the land" is used instead of government, country, or nation speaks to this fact. This suggests that the speaker isn't just failing to comply with the land*lord's* wishes; he's not complying with the wishes of the *land*—of the country—itself.

This stanza thus crystallizes the poem's ideas about racism in society. The landlord aligns himself with the government because he *can*: In the racist society that the landlord and speaker occupy, the government and its institutions (like the legal system, as represented by the police, and the judicial system, as represented by the judge in the poem) will side with the landlord against his black tenant, even if the landlord is the one acting unjustly.

LINES 25-29

> *Copper's whistle! ...*
> *... Iron cell.*

The first six stanzas of the poem uphold certain conventions of the poetic form of the ballad. Each of the first six stanzas is a quatrain and makes use of an ABCB rhyme scheme. The first six stanzas also demonstrate some regularity in terms of rhythm, making use of iambic trimeter and a tell-tale da-DUM pattern of unstressed-stressed syllables—which appears consistently in the second line of each quatrain. These formal rules are fully disrupted in the last three stanzas, reflecting the drastic actions and escalating emotions of the conclusion.

The seventh stanza is a tercet, consisting of just three short lines:

> Copper's whistle!
> Patrol bell!
> Arrest.

The short, snappy, punctuated lines reflect the rapid development of the ballad's narrative: The landlord calls for the police and then the police, seemingly without question, arrest the tenant (the speaker). The exclamation points emphasize the dramatic nature of this action sequence.

The "Copper's whistle" refers to a policeman's whistle—at the time of the poem's publication, 1940, law enforcement officers walking the streets on patrol would have whistles to get people's attention. The "Patrol bell" refers to the bell of a police car. At this time, emergency vehicles like police and ambulances didn't yet have sirens but bells.

The chain of events reaches an abrupt conclusion with the word "Arrest." The word closes out the seventh stanza and is punctuated by a period, creating a sense of finality—there is no way out of the arrest. The eighth stanza then continues the storyline, as well as the short, definitively punctuated phrasing:

> Precinct Station.
> Iron cell.

The irony of the poem becomes clear here. The speaker, the tenant, is the person who is being arrested as if he were a criminal—even though he technically didn't do anything wrong. Meanwhile, the landlord has acted not only unjustly but also, arguably, criminally (by attempting to extort money from the tenant in exchange for performing basic duties that the landlord should perform *anyway*). Ironically, however, society categorizes the speaker/tenant as the criminal while supporting the landlord.

LINES 30-33

> *Headlines in press: ...*
> *... IN COUNTY JAIL!*

Line 30 introduces one last "voice" in the poem: that of the

press. The ninth stanza then consists of the newspaper "Headlines" regarding the speaker's story.

This final stanza, like the two before it, then consists of three lines, making for another abrupt tercet. Lines 30 through 33 are also written using all capital letters, setting the media "headlines" apart from the rest of the poem and also adding force to the headline itself; the all caps is like the writerly form of shouting.

As with the seventh and eight stanzas, the formal rules of the ballad—such as an ABCB rhyme scheme and four-line quatrains—are absent here; any control the speaker had over the poem has disappeared. The content of the headlines themselves then hammer home the poem's overarching irony: complaining about unjust treatment gets the speaker himself arrested.

The media headlines present the "tenant" (the speaker) as a criminal who threatened his landlord. The fact that he is held without "bail" furthers the implication that he is dangerous. When a person is arrested, the courts may choose to set bail, which allows an arrested person to get out of jail by paying a defined sum of money. If a judge refuses to set bail, it's often because the arrested person would be considered a danger to society—for example, if they had committed a violent crime like murder. The speaker did nothing of the sort, and the fact that he's held without bail speaks to racist societal associations between black men and violence.

The reason for the speaker's deference to the landlord in the first stanzas thus becomes clearer—as does the reason for the landlord's feeling justified in attempting to exploit the speaker. As a property-owner, the landlord is presumably white, wealthy, and powerful—while the tenant is black, poor, and disadvantaged.

Both the landlord and the tenant are aware of the resulting power dynamic—and they act accordingly. The landlord and the speaker both know that the landlord will be protected by a racist society, in which the government, justice system, and media will all typically take a white person's word over that of a person of color.

Even the poem's title reflects the landlord's superior status in society, as it's the ballad of the *landlord*—not the *tenant*. And by the poem's end, the speaker's voice has completely disappeared from the poem, replaced by that of the media headlines that reduce him to a criminal.

SYMBOLS

THE LANDLORD

The landlord is, of course, an actual character in the poem. That said, he also functions as a symbolic figure. Put simply, the landlord represents racist society in general, and the way that such a society empowers white people like the landlord while disenfranchising black people like the tenant.

The landlord is notably corrupt in the poem, trying to demand payment from the tenant before doing his own part to provide a safe, habitable living space. Yet because the tenant is black and the landlord is implied to be white, the landlord faces no repercussions for his actions.

This reflects the way that society more broadly controls and exploits marginalized people, who in turn lack the means and protections to fight back. Indeed, when the speaker does try to stand up to the landlord, he just lands himself in jail; the landlord's word is automatically taken over the speaker's.

Even the poem's title is telling: it's not the ballad of the *tenant* but rather the ballad of the *landlord*, despite the fact that the tenant is the speaker of the poem. This reflects the fact that, in a racist society, white individuals have the power to control the narrative—and can use it to keep people of color down.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Landlord, landlord,"
- **Line 5:** "Landlord, landlord,"
- **Line 31:** "MAN THREATENS LANDLORD"

THE BROKEN HOUSE

The dilapidated property that sets off the chain of events depicted in "Ballad of the Landlord" might serve as a symbol for the racist society that the poem critiques. A functioning society treats people equitably; a dysfunctional society fails to guarantee this basic human right. The poem depicts a social order that unfairly empowers the corrupt landlord—presumably because he is white, wealthy, and powerful—while further disenfranchising the already marginalized tenant—a black man with limited power in society.

The house is falling apart: the roof "has sprung a leak" and the "steps is broken down." The landlord doesn't care about fixing the house, however—much like the institutions of power that uphold a racist society don't care about fixing that society. Instead, such institutions rely on keeping the oppressed down, on denying them their full rights and dignity.

As previously noted, the landlord can thus be thought of as representing governmental and social institutions—as he is aligned with the police, the courts, and the media. The landlord even connects himself directly to the government, claiming the tenant is "trying to ruin the government" just by challenging him.

Meanwhile, the tenant represents the disenfranchised members of such a society—including both black people and the poor. References to the "Copper's whistle," "Patrol bell," "Precinct Station," and "Iron cell" all represent forms of

oppression used to continue to keep the marginalized individuals down.

In this context, any attempt by the speaker to challenge the power dynamic of landlord/tenant—for example by even hinting at an act of physical aggression—is seen as revolt. It's akin to an attempt to "overturn the land," as the landlord claims in line 24. The individuals and organizations in power are happy to maintain the power dynamic. They don't want to fix the broken house that is their broken society, a society that keeps them in power.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "My roof has sprung a leak."
- **Line 6:** "These steps is broken down."
- **Lines 11-12:** "Well, that's Ten Bucks more'n I'll pay you / Till you fix this house up new."
- **Lines 13-16:** "You gonna get eviction orders? / You gonna cut off my heat? / You gonna take my furniture and / Throw it in the street?"

POETIC DEVICES

REPETITION

Repetition serves a variety of purposes throughout "The Ballad of the Landlord." The first instance is seen in line 1, of course, with the words "Landlord, landlord." This epizeuxis sets the stage for the poem's story, as it becomes clear to the reader that, despite its title, the ballad is actually being told from the perspective of the tenant. The repetition of the address also underscores the fact that the tenant—the speaker—must practically beg to get his landlord's attention, calling for him again and again.

This is further emphasized by the fact that the whole repetitive phrase is *itself* repeated in line 5. The fact that the tenant already tried to get the landlord to address the repairs to the property "way last week" makes it clear why the tenant is addressing the landlord with multiple calls for attention. The repetition adds a sense of urgency and pressure.

A similar use of repetition to convey urgency is seen in line 21. In this case, it's the *landlord's* voice, however, and he's calling for law enforcement: "*Police! Police!*" The epizeuxis reflects that, in the landlord's eyes, this is clearly a pressing matter.

There are other forms of repetition in the poem as well, such as the anaphora of the phrase "Ten Bucks" in lines 9, 10, and 11. In this case, repetition serves a different function in the poem. Instead of creating a sense of urgency, it serves to create a sense of incredulity–of sarcastic or dumbfounded doubt. The speaker uses a rhetorical question to express his disbelief, real or feigned, at the landlord's exploitive behavior:

> Ten Bucks you say I owe you?
> Ten Bucks you say is due?

It's not the *amount* of money that makes the speaker so incredulous but the fact that the landlord demands *any* money at all without bothering to do his own part and make the necessary repairs. By reiterating the landlord's ludicrous demand and reflecting it back at him with the repetition of "Ten Bucks," the speaker suggests just how incredible this request is. It's the landlord's duty to maintain the property so asking for cash for such essential repairs is simply criminal.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Landlord, landlord,"
- **Line 5:** "Landlord, landlord,"
- **Line 6:** "down"
- **Line 8:** "down"
- **Line 9:** "Ten Bucks," "you," "you"
- **Line 10:** "Ten Bucks," "you"
- **Line 11:** "Ten Bucks," "you"
- **Line 12:** "you"
- **Line 13:** "You gonna"
- **Line 14:** "You gonna"
- **Line 15:** "You gonna"
- **Line 21:** "Police! Police!"

COLLOQUIALISM

The poem's speaker uses a distinct diction throughout the poem, marked by certain colloquialisms and nonstandard English. In line 6, for example, he says "These steps **is** broken down" (instead of "are"). There is also the use of abbreviated phrasing of words, for example, like "ain't" ("are not," line 19), "'member" (instead of "remember," line 3), and "gonna" ("going to," lines 14 and 15).

The speaker also uses slang, such as "Bucks" as a replacement for "dollars" in lines 9, 10, and 11. Then there is the expression "Um-huh!" used in line 17, a sort of explosive expression of incredulity and skepticism—much like a modern-day "uh-huh" could be used sarcastically to express doubt or disbelief. Finally, there is the phrase "high and mighty," which suggests a person is arrogant and looks down on others.

This language helps the poem feel urgent and real, grounded in working or lower class speech and rhythms. The speaker's use of slang and colloquial language also sharply contrasts with the language attributed to the landlord, who is given a voice in the sixth stanza:

> *Police! Police!*
> *Come and get this man!*
> *He's trying to ruin the government*
> *And overturn the land!*

The words are set off by italics to indicate that it's the landlord talking here, but the speech itself makes it clear that this is no longer the tenant's voice. The language is prim and clear, free of slang, perfectly punctuated and grammatically correct. The colloquialisms and casual diction of the tenant, when contrasted by the supposedly proper English of the landlord, suggests a discrepancy between the characters' classes, further highlighting the different ends of the social spectrum the two figures inhabit.

Where Colloquialism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "Don't you 'member I told you about it / Way last week?"
- **Line 6:** "These steps is broken down."
- **Line 9:** "Ten Bucks"
- **Line 10:** "Ten Bucks"
- **Line 11:** "Ten Bucks"
- **Lines 13-16:** "You gonna get eviction orders? / You gonna cut off my heat? / You gonna take my furniture and / Throw it in the street?"
- **Line 17:** "Um-huh!," "high and mighty"
- **Line 18:** "Talk on—till you get through."

APORIA

Aporia is used throughout "The Ballad of the Landlord." The speaker specifically asks a series of rhetorical questions in order to cast doubt on the landlord's exploitive actions while also foreshadowing/suggesting the inevitability of those actions. Take lines 13 through 16 for example:

> What? You gonna get eviction orders?
> You gonna cut off my heat?
> You gonna take my furniture and
> Throw it in the street?

The speaker is posing questions, but they are questions he already knows the answers to—he's not *really* asking if this is what the landlord will do. He knows that this is, in all likelihood, exactly what the landlord intends to do.

This device allows the speaker to be subtly subversive, to point out the injustice of the landlord's response without being overtly aggressive or accusatory towards the landlord. Instead of saying something like, "I told you about it last week!" the speaker softens the statement with a more tentative question: "Don't you 'member I told you about it / Way last week?"

This reflects the speaker's awareness of the racist society he lives in. The tenant knows that if he were to overtly accuse or threaten the landlord, the tenant will be the one punished—unjust though that may be. The poem's conclusion confirms this, as the tenant is put in jail and the landlord remains free, protected by the racist society.

Where Aporia appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "Don't you 'member I told you about it / Way last week?"
- **Lines 9-10:** "Ten Bucks you say I owe you? / Ten Bucks you say is due?"
- **Lines 13-16:** "What? You gonna get eviction orders? / You gonna cut off my heat? / You gonna take my furniture and / Throw it in the street?"

CAESURA

The poem uses caesura for two main purposes. First, caesura is seen in the speaker's repeated appeal to the landlord: "Landlord, landlord." The repetition of the word "landlord" within the line, and later of the line itself, speaks to the urgency of the speaker's situation. He *already* tried contacting the landlord "last week" regarding the repairs needed—to no avail. The comma between the repetition of "landlord" slows the line down, adding emphasis to the speaker's plea; more weight is given to each "call" for the landlord as the reader is forced to pause.

In later stanzas, caesura acts as a more disruptive force. Take line 13: "What? You gonna get eviction orders?" The inclusion of a question mark forces the reader into a full stop after the line's first beat. It's a "record-scratch" moment and marks a turning point in the poem, when the speaker's tone shifts from one of seeming deference to one of more outright rebellion.

A similar effect appears in line 17: "Um-huh! You talking high and mighty." The inclusion of the punctuation mark in the middle of the line is disruptive, forcing the reader to take an abrupt and perhaps unsettling pause. The device thus paves the way for the frantic escalation of events that the following stanzas will bring, as the tenant is rapidly arrested, thrown into jail, and branded a criminal.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Landlord, landlord"
- **Line 5:** "Landlord, landlord"
- **Line 11:** "Well, that's"
- **Line 13:** "What? You"
- **Line 17:** "Um-huh! You"
- **Line 18:** "on—till"
- **Line 21:** "Police! Police!"

CONSONANCE

"The Ballad of the Landlord" uses consonance regularly. Sometimes, this consonance allows for moments of smooth lyricism in a poem that, in terms of content, is fraught with frustration. In line 8, the phrase "It's a wonder you don't fall down" makes use of repeated /n/ sounds. The message of these words is slightly aggressive; it could be read as a threat, as if the

speaker were telling the landlord, "you'd better fix those steps or you will fall down." However, the consonance allows this implicitly aggressive message to be presented in a softer package. This allows the speaker to more safely take a small stand against the landlord.

Other times consonance betrays the speaker's frustration. Notice the many hard, plosive sounds that dominate stanzas 3 and 4, as the speaker asks rhetorical questions about what will happen if he doesn't pay his rent. These lines are filled with /t/, /b/, hard /g/, and /k/ sounds that imply the speaker's frustration; it's almost as though he's spitting out these words.

The final stanza is overflowing with consonance as well. Every sing word features the /n/, /d/, /l/, /g/, or /j/ sound (and sometimes many of those sounds):

> MAN THREATENS LANDLORD
> TENANT HELD NO BAIL
> JUDGE GIVES NEGRO 90 DAYS IN COUNTY JAIL!

Consonance helps the media headlines feel cohesive, like a wall of sound. The monotony of this sound reflects the monotony and strength of the message that brands the speaker a criminal. (The all-caps lettering certainly adds to this effect as well!)

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Landlord, landlord,"
- **Line 3:** "Don't," "told," "it"
- **Line 4:** "Way," "week"
- **Line 5:** "Landlord, landlord,"
- **Line 6:** "down"
- **Line 8:** "wonder," "don't," "down"
- **Line 9:** "Ten," "Bucks"
- **Line 10:** "Ten," "Bucks"
- **Line 11:** "that's," "Ten," "Bucks"
- **Line 12:** "Till," "fix," "this," "house"
- **Line 13:** "gonna," "get"
- **Line 14:** "gonna," "cut," "heat"
- **Line 15:** "gonna," "take"
- **Line 16:** "it," "street"
- **Line 17:** "talking," "mighty"
- **Line 18:** "Talk," "till," "get"
- **Line 19:** "ain't," "gonna," "be," "able"
- **Line 20:** "If," "fist"
- **Line 25:** "Copper's," "whistle"
- **Line 26:** "Patrol," "bell"
- **Line 27:** "Arrest"
- **Line 28:** "Precinct," "Station"
- **Line 29:** "cell"
- **Line 30:** "press"
- **Line 31:** "MAN," "THREATENS," "LANDLORD"
- **Line 32:** "TENANT," "HELD," "NO," "BAIL"
- **Line 33:** "JUDGE," "GIVES," "NEGRO," "90," "DAYS," "IN," "COUNTY," "JAIL"

ASSONANCE

Much of the poem's assonance is simply part of its rhyme scheme. Other times, however, the assonance works to link various words together and add emphasis to certain phrases. For instance, the repeated long /i/ in "high and mighty" in line 17 draws readers' attention to those words, which, in turn, call attention to the landlord's arrogance.

A significant amount of assonance is found in the poem's final lines, 31 through 33, when the media headlines take over:

> MAN THREATENS LANDLORD
> TENANT HELD NO BAIL
> JUDGE GIVES NEGRO 90 DAYS IN COUNTY JAIL!

These lines are filled with /a/, short /eh/, and long /ee/ sounds. As noted previously in this guide, these lines are also filled with consonance. Again, the intensity of the shared sounds here speaks to the power of these headlines. The headlines are so assonant and consonant, so filled with rhythm, that they feel almost like an aphorism or nursery rhyme. The sound of the headlines is memorable, which is part of the point: the media brands the speaker a criminal, and that is how a racist society will always see him.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "leak"
- **Line 4:** "week"
- **Line 6:** "down"
- **Line 8:** "down"
- **Line 9:** "you," "you"
- **Line 10:** "you," "due"
- **Line 11:** "you"
- **Line 12:** "you," "new"
- **Line 14:** "heat"
- **Line 16:** "street"
- **Line 17:** "high," "mighty"
- **Line 18:** "you," "through"
- **Line 19:** "ain't," "able," "say"
- **Line 20:** "you"
- **Line 22:** "man"
- **Line 24:** "land"
- **Line 27:** "Arrest"
- **Line 29:** "cell"
- **Line 30:** "press"
- **Line 31:** "MAN," "THREATENS," "LANDLORD"
- **Line 32:** "TENANT," "HELD," "BAIL"
- **Line 33:** "NEGRO," "90," "COUNTY," "JAIL"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration pops up a few times in "The Ballad of the Landlord," and is typically used to emphasize a certain mood within the poem. With the words "Landlord, landlord," in lines 1 and 5, for example, the repeated /l/ sounds draw the reader's attention to the speaker's plea; they also connect the "Landord" to the "leak," underscoring that the leak is landlord's responsibility. In line 4, the /w/ sounds in the words "Way last week" emphasize the timing of the tenant's request—specifically drawing attention to the fact that the tenant *already* brought up the topic of repairs to the landlord some time ago.

Alliteration of sharper consonant sounds is also used to create a more aggressive tone. In line 13, for instance, the sharp /g/ sounds of "gonna get" reflect the speaker's heightened emotional state as he theorizes what unjust measures the landlord is going to take. The same is true for the tough /t/ sounds in line 18: "Talk on—til you get through." In both cases, the crisp language speaks to the hostile tone here.

Finally, in line 33, alliteration couples two words together that offer a thematic summary of sorts for the poem. The words "JUDGE" and "JAIL" are aligned with /j/ sounds, highlighting the story's conclusion: the racist justice system has locked up the speaker, further oppressing him.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Landlord," "landlord"
- **Line 2:** "leak"
- **Line 4:** "Way," "week"
- **Line 5:** "Landlord," "landlord"
- **Line 6:** "down"
- **Line 8:** "don't," "down"
- **Line 9:** "Ten Bucks"
- **Line 10:** "Ten Bucks"
- **Line 11:** "Ten Bucks"
- **Line 12:** "Till"
- **Line 13:** "You," "gonna get"
- **Line 14:** "You," "gonna"
- **Line 15:** "You," "gonna"
- **Line 17:** "talking"
- **Line 18:** "Talk," "till"
- **Line 21:** "Police," "Police"
- **Line 33:** "JUDGE," "JAIL"

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment is used throughout "The Ballad of the Landlord," following a clear pattern: in the poem's first six stanzas, the third line of each quatrain extends right across the line break. This enjambment builds a sense of suspense and heighten the reader's anticipation of what's to come. Take lines 7 and 8, for example:

> When you come up yourself
> It's a wonder you don't fall down.

The reader is left hanging at the end of line 7, wondering what will happen when the landlord deigns to "come up." The sentence concludes in line 8, suggesting the landlord could trip and fall on the broken steps and, presumably, physically hurt himself. The suggestion, a veiled threat of sorts, is made all the more striking due to the sense of anticipation created by line 7's enjambment.

Another example is seen in lines 15 and 16:

> You gonna take my furniture and
> Throw it in the street?

At the end of line 15, the reader is left wondering *what* the landlord might do with the furniture. Line 16 then provides the stark image of the furniture—the tenant's personal possessions!—being just tossed out onto the street as if they were garbage. The enjambment again heightens the reader's sense of anticipation at the end of line 15 and also quickens the poem's pace, reflecting the speaker's building frustration.

As a storytelling technique, enjambment ramps up the excitement of the narrative—reflecting the growing emotional tension of the poem. The buildup continues until the climactic explosion of action that comes with the tenant's arrest in stanza seven. It thus makes sense that the device is no longer used in the poem's final three stanzas. There is no need to further amp up the suspense, or to leave the reader wondering or hanging—the big finale has already taken place.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "it / Way"
- **Lines 7-8:** "yourself / It's"
- **Lines 11-12:** "you / Till"
- **Lines 15-16:** "and / Throw"
- **Lines 19-20:** "word / If"
- **Lines 23-24:** "government / And"

IRONY

One of the characteristics of a traditional ballad is that it tells a story. "The Ballad of the Landlord" fulfills this requirement, as the speaker tells a tale with a beginning (the tenant presents the problem of the dilapidated property), middle (the landlord and the tenant "discuss" the problem), and end (the tenant ends up in jail). And with its ironic conclusion—that is, the outcome is the opposite of what the reader would expect—the poem is able to critique societal racism.

The narrative makes it clear that it's the *landlord* who is behaving badly here, not the tenant. The tenant/speaker is simply asking the landlord to make an essential repair to the

property the tenant is renting from the landlord—a reasonable and justified request.

The landlord first ignores the request, and then goes on to attempt to exploit the tenant, demanding payment from the tenant despite not doing his job; the tenant is responsible for paying rent for the right to occupy the property and in exchange the landlord is responsible for making that property a safe and habitable space.

Granted, the modern laws that protect tenants' rights were not in place in 1940, when the poem was written. Still, the fact remains that the tenant's request is justifiable. The worst he does is threaten to punching the landlord, but with the conditional use of *if*—meaning this is purely hypothetical. There's no actual violence here.

Readers also never hear what the landlord says to the tenant to prompt this threat in the first place; all readers know is that the landlord is acting "high and mighty," talking down to the tenant and refusing to address his concerns. It's entirely possible that the landlord threatened the tenant first, but, in a racist society, this doesn't matter. Whatever the landlord says or does, the tenant is expected to display deference.

The fact that the tenant thus ends up in jail is an ironic twist that shocks and surprises the reader—and unveils the racist nature of the society that the landlord and tenant inhabit. The (black, poor) tenant is demanding a basic right to safe housing while the (white, wealthy) landlord is attempting to extort money from the tenant—and yet the tenant is imprisoned while the landlord walks free.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Lines 21-33:** "Police! Police! / Come and get this man! / He's trying to ruin the government / And overturn the land! / Copper's whistle! / Patrol bell! / Arrest. / Precinct Station. / Iron cell. / Headlines in press: / MAN THREATENS LANDLORD / TENANT HELD NO BAIL / JUDGE GIVES NEGRO 90 DAYS IN COUNTY JAIL!"

VOCABULARY

Landlord (Line 1, Line 5, Line 31) - The owner of a property that is rented or leased to another person (the "tenant"). The tenant pays the landlord rent, usually a monthly sum.The landlord is obligated to provide safe and secure housing. Usually a "lease agreement" between the tenant and landlord outlines repairs and other tasks the landlord is responsible for taking care of, such as fixing a leaky roof or keeping common areas clean. The laws regulating the obligations of landlords have developed over time—tenants are better protected today than they were in the past.

Ten Bucks (Line 9, Line 10, Line 11) - Ten dollars. "Bucks" is an informal, slang-like phrase. In 1940, when "Ballad of the Landlord" was written, ten dollars was worth the equivalent of approximately $183.00 in the year 2020. This is due to inflation, the way in which prices rise and purchasing power falls in economies over time.

Eviction (Line 13) - The legal process through which a landlord removes a tenant from the property the tenant is renting or leasing from the landlord. The landlord would have to go through the courts to get an eviction order to complete the process.

Um-huh (Line 17) - A slang expression suggesting incredulity and skepticism, similar to a modern-day "uh-huh"—a sarcastic rebuttal.

High and mighty (Line 17) - Haughty and arrogant. Usually written "high-and-mighty" as a single word. A high-and-mighty person looks down on others.

Overturn the land (Line 24) - "Overturn" means to overthrow, defeat, or destroy the power of something. "The land" in this instance refers to "the land" as "the nation" (not to a specific piece of land). So the phrase "overturn the land" is equivalent to revolting against or overthrowing the nation or, implicitly, revolting against or overthrowing the government.

Copper's whistle (Line 25) - A "copper" is an outdated slang term used to refer to a policeman (a cop). The copper's whistle refers to the actual whistle that policeman used to carry while on duty, using it to attract attention.

Patrol bell (Line 26) - "Patrol" refers to a patrol car, like that a police officer would drive. Police cars used to have bells instead of sirens.

Precinct Station (Line 28) - A police station. Different parts of a city are served by different precinct stations. A "precinct" refers to the set boundary or municipal limit.

Tenant (Line 32) - The person who rents or leases a property from another person (the "landlord"). The tenant pays the landlord rent, usually a monthly sum, in order to be allowed to occupy the property. If a tenant fails to meet this financial obligation, the landlord may have the option to evict the tenant—a legal process by which the tenant is removed from the property.

Bail (Line 32) - When a person is arrested, the courts may choose to set bail. This is a specified amount of money the arrested person can pay in order to get out of prison. By paying it, the person is agreeing to return to court for a later hearing. It's like a security deposit.In some cases, a judge will not allow for bail ("no bail"). This is usually done in cases of people considered dangerous, like those who have committed violent crimes, or cases in which the person is considered a flight risk, meaning they have the resources needed to flee the country and avoid a future court hearing altogether.

Negro (Line 33) - An outdated term used to refer to a black

person, now typically considered offensive.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Ballad of the Landlord" has some traits of a traditional ballad—a type of poem that tells a story. This poem relays an anecdote, complete with a dramatic ending. English-language ballads are typically composed of four-line stanzas, following an ABCB rhyme scheme. The first six stanzas of the poem are indeed quatrains (four-line stanzas) and also adhere to the ballad format in terms of rhyme scheme.

In the final three stanzas, however, this structure is broken. Stanzas seven, eight, and nine are tercets, stanzas of only three lines each. These also feature a break in the poem's rhyme scheme and an abrupt transition to a short, staccato rhythm here—an effect further complemented by abrupt punctuation, like the exclamation marks in lines 25 ("whistle!") and 26 ("bell!").

This interruption speaks to the poem's surge in emotional intensity. The story begins with what seems like a civil conversation between landlord and tenant. The tenant becomes increasingly frustrated as he recognizes the landlord's exploitive behavior, however. As he describes the dramatic climax—being thrown in jail—the frenetic, irregular form, meter, and rhyme scheme reflect the speaker's own heightened emotions.

METER

The first six stanzas of the poem make frequent us of iambic rhythms, meaning the lines are filled with poetic feet with syllables falling in a da-DUM pattern. This often takes the specific form of iambic *trimeter*, which just means there are *three* iambs—three da-DUMs—per line. Take line 2:

> My roof has sprung a leak.

There are three steady iambs here, da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM. Much of the poem is written using this meter. The third lines of each of the first six stanzas, however, are longer than the rest (apart from line 7). This is typical of ballad meters, which consist of alternating lines of iambic trimeter and iambic tetrameter (which just means there are *four* iambs, four da-DUMs, as opposed to three).

Look at stanza 3. Line 11 is very irregular, to be fair, but you can still see there are four stressed beats as opposed to three in the other lines:

> Ten Bucks you say I owe you?
> Ten Bucks you say is due?
> Well, that's Ten Bucks more'n I'll pay you
> Till you fix this house up new.

In the next stanza, the third line (line 15 overall) again has four stressed beats instead of three, meaning it again is iambic tetrameter:

> You gonna take my furniture and

The ballad meter isn't perfect throughout the poem. For example, the first line of each of these stanzas is often a bit different. "Landlord, landlord" is two trochees, which are essentially the *opposite* of an iamb; they go from a stressed beat to an unstressed beat. The first lines of stanzas 3-6 similarly end with unstressed beats: "owe you," "orders," "mighty."

Overall, though, the rhythm is still pretty consistently rising—that is, moving from unstressed beats to stressed beats. The first six stanzas, which feature *mostly* iambic trimeter with occasional anapests (da-da-DUM) or other variations sprinkled in.

This reflects the speaker's somewhat deferential tone; think about how, when asking a question, your voice tends to rise at the end of the phrase. The general sensation of rising rhythm in these stanzas might reflect the speaker trying to remain polite, and simply to remain calm and collected even as his frustration with his slimy landlord mounts.

But as with form and rhyme scheme, any regularity in the meter completely breaks down in the final three stanzas as the speaker's voice disappears from the poem. The lines become much shorter and take on a staccato rhythm with short, consecutive points of emphasis. Take the sixth stanza, for example (lines 25 through 27):

> Copper's whistle!
> Patrol bell!
> Arrest.

The exclamation points emphasize the shortness of the lines, each one consisting of only one or two words. These lines are so short—the longest has only four syllables with "Copper's whistle!"—that they don't even have enough syllables to allow for the possibility of iambic trimeter or tetrameter.

This stark break with form in the last three stanzas mirrors the emotional intensity of the situation. The speaker has no control or say over what's happening anymore, and the poem's deteriorating meter reflects that fact.

RHYME SCHEME

The first six stanzas of the poem, in keeping with the traditional poetic form of a ballad, follow an ABCB rhyme scheme:

> Landlord, landlord,
> My roof has sprung a leak.

Don't you 'member I told you about it
Way last **week**?

Stanzas 7, 8, and 9 break the pattern. Firstly, instead of quatrains (four-line stanzas) they are tercets, meaning they are just three lines each. Each line is also no more than one to three words, creating a brisk, staccato effect. Meanwhile, in the final stanza, the disruption is accentuated by the use of all-caps, representing the "headlines" of the media.

Despite the disruption to the ABCB pattern, the final three tercets still present some regularity in terms of rhyme scheme:

A "whistle"
B "bell"
C "Arrest"

D "Station"
B "cell"
C "press"

E "LANDLORD"
F "BAIL"
F "JAIL"

This new form might reflect the idea that the social system the speaker and the landlord inhabit remains intact; it just has its *own* rules that are different from those followed by the speaker.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is a black man who is renting a rather dilapidated house from a landlord—who, in turn, refuses to make the necessary repairs.

The speaker carefully criticizes the racist and classist society he is living in by exposing the unjust treatment he, a black tenant, receives at the hands of his presumably white landlord. Commenting on this injustice is in itself an act of resistance. However, the speaker recognizes that if he fails to "toe the line" of the system—that is, if he is too overtly critical or rebellious—*he* will be the one to suffer. He thus turns to hypothetical statements and rhetorical questions to call out the landlord's behavior.

The speaker's growing, understandable frustration becomes clearer as the poem moves forward, until he is silenced altogether: the final stanza robs the speaker of his voice, and is instead written in the conventional language and style of a newspaper headline.

SETTING

The poem presumably takes place at the tenant's house as he is requesting repairs from his landlord. Beyond that, the poem does not note any specific setting. Given Langston Hughes's own historical relationship with New York City's Harlem neighborhood, however (where he lived on and off from the 1920s onward), the poem might be set there, or in a similar location before the Civil Rights movement or modern tenant protection laws were put in place.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Born in 1901 or 1902 (sources differ) Langston Hughes grew up in a time of massive cultural upheaval for black people in America. He was born in Joplin, Missouri, and went on to study at Columbia University in New York City. Although he dropped out, he put down roots in New York's Harlem neighborhood, living there sporadically from the 1920s until the day he died (he also traveled a great deal, however, and even worked as a crewman on a ship in 1923).

Hughes's first known published poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," was published in *The Crisis*, the official magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). "Ballad of the Landlord" was published in 1940, a full two decades later. In that span of time, Hughes established himself as a literary leader in the Harlem Renaissance, a blossoming of black culture centered in Harlem from about 1918 to 1937. This renaissance encompassed not only literature but also music, theater, and visual arts. Participants in the movement aimed to rethink "the negro" and to establish a black identity apart from white stereotypes. Hughes, sometimes called "Poet Laureate of Harlem," was a driving figure, alongside black writers like Zora Neale Hurston and Countee Cullen. He spurred the movement onwards with his nuanced depictions of everyday lives of black working-class America—injustices and all.

Hughes cited Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Carl Sandburg, and Walt Whitman as influences on his writing. He was also influenced by traditionally black American cultural forms, such as blues and jazz music. He would often incorporate syncopated rhythms and jive language into poems, reflecting the improvisational nature of jazz music. In fact, Hughes is recognized as an early innovator of jazz poetry, which is known for its jazz-like rhythm and the feeling of improvisation it often creates.

In addition to poetry, Hughes also wrote novels, plays, essays, and autobiographies.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The cultural upheaval that Hughes lived through in his lifetime was paralleled by social and political change for black history in America. Change was often slow to come about and frequently tempestuous, however.

For context, consider the fact that in 1901—around when Hughes was born—Booker T. Washington, a man born into

slavery, became the first black person invited to dine at the White House. In 1909, the NAACP was founded. Its goals included the abolition of all forced segregation and equal education for blacks and whites. Hughes would later publish in the NAACP magazine, *The Crisis*, on numerous occasions.

Meanwhile, the United States continued to exploit black Americans not only culturally but politically. In World War II, for instance, black men were called upon to fight for their country. It wasn't until 1948, however, that President Harry S. Truman finally integrated the U.S. Armed Forces, and schools weren't racially integrated until the 1950s and '60s.

Black tenants in Harlem (and, in fact, across the entire nation) in the 1920s and 1930s also infamously faced discriminatory rental rates. Since black workers were also often paid less at the time, black tenants were sometimes short on rent. A "rent party" was the solution: people would host a gathering, open up their apartment for the night, and charge guests a fee in exchange for the chance to attend the party. In addition to an opportunity to socialize, many also offered live music and dancing. Food was available at extra cost. The hosts would use the money they got and put it towards rent.

Hughes collected multiple Harlem rent party advertisements so presumably would have attended some of these events. The ads were found with his belongings when he passed on and are kept with his papers at Yale University's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

Hughes died in 1967, just one year before the Fair Housing Act of 1968 was passed. It is considered one of the last great legislative achievements of the civil rights era and sought to eliminate racial discrimination in the sale, rental, or financing of housing. These were precisely the issues that Hughes exposed with "The Ballad of the Landlord," published 27 years earlier.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Biography of Langston Hughes — Learn about the poem's author. (https://poets.org/poet/langston-hughes)
- Hughes's Essay in Defense of Black Art — In 1926, George Schuyler, the editor of a black paper in Pittsburgh, wrote the article "The Negro-Art Hokum." In it, he discounted the existence of "Negro art" and argued that African-American artists shared the same European influences as their white counterparts—and were thus creating the same style of work. He dismissed clearly "black" creative works, like spirituals and jazz, as "folk art." Hughes was invited to make a rebuttal. In response, he wrote "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69395/the-negro-artist-and-the-racial-mountain)
- A History of the Harlem Renaissance — Learn about the black intellectual, literary, and artistic movement that Langston Hughes took part in. (https://www.britannica.com/event/Harlem-Renaissance-American-literature-and-art)
- Hughes Reads a Poem Aloud — Watch a video of Langston Hughes reading aloud "The Weary Blues," accompanied by a live band. (https://www.arts.gov/art-works/2014/jazz-poetry-langston-hughes)
- Modern Day Landlord-Tenant Exploitation — The issues addressed in "The Ballad of the Landlord" are still present. Read about the ways in which poor Americans are sometimes exploited by landlords today. (https://www.citylab.com/equity/2019/03/housing-rent-landlords-poverty-desmond-inequality-research/585265/)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER LANGSTON HUGHES POEMS

- I, Too
- Let America Be America Again
- Mother to Son
- Theme for English B
- The Negro Speaks of Rivers
- The Weary Blues

HOW TO CITE

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