

The Effort

By Billy Collins

Would anyone care to join me
in flicking a few pebbles in the direction
of teachers who are fond of asking the question:
"What is the poet trying to say?"

as if Thomas Hardy and Emily Dickinson
had struggled but ultimately failed in their efforts—
inarticulate wretches that they were,
biting their pens and staring out the window for a clue.

Yes, it seems that Whitman, Amy Lowell
and the rest could only try and fail
but we in Mrs. Parker's third-period English class
here at Springfield High will succeed

with the help of these study questions
in saying what the poor poet could not,
and we will get all this done before
that orgy of egg salad and tuna fish known as lunch.

Tonight, however, I am the one trying
to say what it is this absence means,
the two of us sleeping and waking under different roofs.
The image of this vase of cut flowers,

not from our garden, is no help.
And the same goes for the single plate,
the solitary lamp, and the weather that presses its face
against these new windows--the drizzle and the
morning frost.

So I will leave it up to Mrs. Parker,
who is tapping a piece of chalk against the blackboard,
and her students—a few with their hands up,
others slouching with their caps on backwards—

to figure out what it is I am trying to say
about this place where I find myself
and to do it before the noon bell rings
and that whirlwind of meatloaf is unleashed.

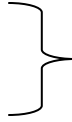
"The Effort"



Consider the meaning and/or significance of the title

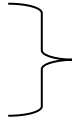
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Would anyone care to join me
in flicking a few pebbles in the direction
of teachers who are fond of asking the question:
"What is the poet trying to say?"



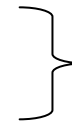
Based on what we can deduce from this stanza, who is the speaker of this poem? What does the speaker of the poem mean by the phrase "flicking a few pebbles"?

as if Thomas Hardy and Emily Dickinson
had struggled but ultimately failed in their efforts—
inarticulate wretches that they were,
biting their pens and staring out the window for a clue.



Who are these people? What might they have in common? Examples of strong or interesting or well chosen diction? "Efforts" to do what?

Yes, it seems that Whitman, Amy Lowell
and the rest could only try and fail
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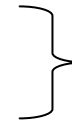
Who are these people? What do we now know is a possible setting of the poem (or at least it seems that way for now)?

with the help of these study questions
in saying what the poor poet could not,
and we will get all this done before
that orgy of egg salad and tuna fish known as lunch.



What can we tell is the occasion of this poem? We know where the setting might be, but what is actually taking place in the poem? What interesting diction does the speaker use to describe lunch? How does that add something to this poem or tell us something about the speaker?

Tonight, however, I am the one trying
to say what it is this absence means,
the two of us sleeping and waking under different roofs.
The image of this vase of cut flowers,



There is a major shift in with this stanza...*now* what do we know is the other setting of the poem? What does the word "absence" mean (it has two meanings)?

not from our garden, is no help.
And the same goes for the single plate,
the solitary lamp, and the weather that presses its face
against these new windows--the drizzle and the
morning frost.



The word "our" should be a clue as to what is going on here...the underlined phrases in the 5th and 6th stanzas are *allusions* to other poems by the previously mentioned authors

So I will leave it up to Mrs. Parker,
who is tapping a piece of chalk against the blackboard,
and her students—a few with their hands up,
others slouching with their caps on backwards—



The word "So" denotes another shift...*now* what setting are we back to? Based on the *imagery* of the students in the class and Mrs. Parker's body language, what can we tell about them?

to figure out what it is I am trying to say
about this place where I find myself
and to do it before the noon bell rings
and that whirlwind of meatloaf is unleashed.



"Place where I find myself" has two meanings here...what are they?

Now that you are finished reading the poem, consider the questions below:

What can we tell about the speaker now that we have finished reading it? What can we tell is the speaker's purpose in writing the poem? Who or what is the intended audience? Theme statement? Tone---how would we describe it? Tone *can* change throughout a poem. This poem has no established rhyme scheme...therefore, it must be written in _____ .