

Exploring Contrasts in Billy Collins's "The Lanyard"

Placing images next to each other—to emphasize differences or similarities or to invite the reader to infer the relationships between them—is a common poetic technique. Billy Collins uses this technique in "The Lanyard," so let's look closely at its three sections to gain a greater understanding of how the poem is put together, and when it implies things that it doesn't say directly.

Section I: The Beginning

- 1 Where is the speaker in the first section of the poem?
- 2 What is it that sends the speaker back into the past?
- 3 What words or images provide a sense of the speaker's activity and mood at the start of the poem?
- 4 What objects does the speaker look at as he moves about the room? Is there anything strange or unexpected in his description of what he sees or what he is doing?
- 5 What does each of these objects suggest about what kind of person the speaker is now—his likes, his dislikes, his age, his education, etc.? Do they all fit together, or do some stand out as different from the others? In your own words, explain the effect of placing these objects together.

Section II: The Childhood Memory

1 Where and how does the transition from section I to section II take place? Where is the speaker in the second section of the poem, and how does that new location compare or contrast to where he was in section I?

2 What images or lines reveal his feelings about making a lanyard?

3 What is the effect of repeating the phrase "for my mother" at the end of stanzas two and three?

4 Is the tone of the poem consistent in this section of the poem or does it shift? If it shifts, where does that happen, and from what to what? What is the effect of the tone shifting or staying the same?

5 Comparing Images: What images or ideas does the speaker compare his lanyard to? What is the effect of these comparisons?

Section III: Back in the Poem's Present

1 What words signal the return to the poem's present?

2 Why do you think the speaker returns to the present at this particular point in the poem? What is the effect?

3 How does the speaker feel about having "two clear eyes to read the world"? What does this image mean? Look over the poem: where else have we seen the speaker characterized as some kind of reader, or associated with reading?

4 At the end of the poem, how does the speaker feel about the lanyard and the act of giving it? More than one feeling can be involved, so feel free to list two or more emotions, even contradictory ones.

5 Comparing Images: Compare the making of the lanyard to the making of this poem. Look for images in the last section of the poem that could refer to both and that might describe the speaker as both a child and an adult.