

# A Lesson for This Sunday

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## A Lesson for This Sunday

The growing idleness of summer grass

With its frail kites of furious butterflies

*Analysis: Personification opens the poem immediately: the grass is described as idle, giving it a human quality of purposeless rest. The metaphor "frail kites of furious butterflies" compares the butterflies to kites, emphasising their delicacy and vulnerability while also suggesting they are playthings, objects to be handled and manipulated. The alliteration of the f sound across "frail" and "furious" mimics the rapid flutter of wings. The word furious carries two meanings at once: it describes the energetic, darting movement of the butterflies, but it also foreshadows the cruelty they will suffer, as though they are already sensing their fate. The tension between frail and furious quietly hints at conflict beneath the calm surface.*

Requests the lemonade of simple praise

*Analysis: The subject of this sentence is the growing idleness of the grass, not the butterflies: the personification continues as the atmosphere itself makes a request. The metaphor "lemonade of simple praise" presents appreciation as a refreshing, easy-to-give gift, perfectly suited to a hot summer morning. The image suggests that nature asks nothing difficult, only that it be noticed and acknowledged.*

In scansion gentler than my hammock swings

*Analysis: Scansion refers to the rhythm found in poetry, and here the atmosphere communicates its request in something gentler and more soothing than the swing of the speaker's hammock. The effect is of nature petitioning quietly, in a language of slow rhythms and ease, without urgency or demand.*

And rituals no more upsetting than a

Black maid shaking linen as she sings

*Analysis: The domestic scene of the black maid is presented as equally unremarkable and unthreatening as the summer grass. But the image carries darker undertones: the maid is unnamed and defined entirely by her labour, recalling the history of enslaved domestic workers in the Caribbean. The specificity of "Black maid" is not incidental.*

The plain notes of some Protestant hosanna—

Since I lie idling from the thought in things—

*Analysis: The maid's song is described as plain: unobtrusive, blending seamlessly into the atmosphere rather than calling attention to itself. But the word Protestant works on two levels. It refers to one of the denominations separated from Roman Catholicism, but it also carries the root meaning of protesting, of speaking out against an authority. The maid singing a Protestant hosanna may be, in some quiet way, asserting her inner dignity against the position she is forced to occupy. The symbolism connecting the butterflies and the maid runs throughout the opening stanza: both are frail, both are in some sense owned or controlled, and both are presented as objects within someone else's environment. The stanza ends with the speaker confirming his own idleness: his mind has drifted away from the pressures of ordinary life.*

Or so they should, until I hear the cries

Of two small children hunting yellow wings,

*Analysis: The phrase "or so they should" is a significant pivot: it reveals that the calm described in the first stanza is what should exist, not what does. The conjunction until signals an interruption. "Yellow wings" is a synecdoche, substituting the most visible part of the butterfly for the whole creature, reducing a living thing to one bright, collectible feature.*

Who break my Sabbath with the thought of sin.

*Analysis: The metaphor "break my Sabbath" frames the children's behaviour as a religious violation: the Sabbath is a sacred day of rest, not to be disturbed by sinful thought or action. There is an irony here too: children are typically regarded as the symbol of innocence, yet it is the children who introduce the "thought of sin" into the speaker's peaceful Sunday. The juxtaposition of Sabbath (a day of rest and sanctity) with sin intensifies this irony, loading an innocent summer scene with the language of transgression.*

Brother and sister, with a common pin,

Frowning like serious lepidopterists.

*Analysis: The detail that the children are siblings makes their cruelty feel ordinary, a shared pastime rather than an aberration. They frown with concentration, completely absorbed in what they are doing. The simile "like serious lepidopterists" compares them to scientists who study butterflies and moths, emphasising the methodical, deliberate quality of their actions. Their cruelty is disguised as curiosity, and the irony is that the comparison flatters them: they take their work seriously, as a scientist would.*

The little surgeon pierces the thin eyes.

*Analysis: The metaphor "little surgeon" continues the ironic framing of cruelty as expertise. A surgeon works with precision instruments to cut and pierce the human body; this child uses a common pin to pierce the butterfly's eyes. The clinical, detached language strips away any emotional dimension: the act is presented as procedure rather than violence, which makes it more disturbing, not less.*

Crouched on plump haunches, as a mantis prays

*Analysis: The word haunches typically refers to the hindquarters of a four-legged animal, not a human being. By applying it to the girl, Walcott draws her into the natural world, subtly suggesting that her predatory behaviour is itself animal. The simile "as a mantis prays" reinforces this: the praying mantis adopts a pose that looks like prayer just before it strikes its prey. The girl, crouching and focused, is equally predatory; what looks like stillness and concentration is actually preparation to attack.*

She shrieks to eviscerate its abdomen.

*Analysis: The violent diction shatters the poem's earlier calm entirely. To eviscerate is to remove the internal organs from a body, and the word forces the reader to experience the butterfly's suffering at close range rather than at a comfortable distance. The girl's shriek reveals that her emotion is excitement, not horror: she is enjoying this. The contrast between the shriek of pleasure and the mutilation it accompanies exposes the cruelty beneath what might otherwise have been dismissed as childish play.*

The lesson is the same. The maid removes

Both prodigies from their interest in science.

*Analysis: The speaker names the poem's central lesson here, though he does not yet spell it out in full. The word prodigies carries a double meaning: a prodigy is an exceptionally gifted child, but the word can also mean a monstrous or unnatural occurrence. Both senses apply. The phrase "interest in science" is heavily ironic, describing the torture of a living creature as intellectual inquiry. It is the black maid, the most*

*marginalised figure in the poem, who ends the cruelty: perhaps only someone who has suffered at the hands of others can recognise suffering and choose to stop it.*

The girl, in lemon frock, begins to scream

*Analysis: The symbolism of the lemon-coloured dress connects the girl to the summer atmosphere and to the butterflies themselves, both described in shades of yellow. She is not distinct from her environment; she is a product of it. She screams not because she is hurt but because her entertainment has been taken away, and the irony is sharp: the butterfly is dying and silent, while its tormentor screams and demands attention.*

As the maimed, teetering thing attempts its flight.

*Analysis: The butterfly is now described with quiet, precise grief: it is maimed, permanently damaged; teetering, barely able to balance; and still attempting the one thing it was made to do. The contrast between the butterfly's silent struggle and the girl's screaming underlines a pattern the poem will name shortly: those who cause harm find ways to cast themselves as victims.*

She is herself a thing of summery light,

Frail as a flower in this blue August air,

*Analysis: The metaphor "thing of summery light" ties the girl to the season and to nature itself. The simile "frail as a flower" equates her with the butterfly she has just injured, linking victim and perpetrator in their shared fragility. The blue August air is sky-coloured, cloudless, the height of summer. The effect of these lines is to romanticise the girl, presenting her as soft and lovely even immediately after her act of cruelty. Walcott's point is that this is exactly how human cruelty tends to be treated: normalised, aestheticised, made harmless-looking. Throughout the poem, the girl has been described through images drawn from the natural world, a mantis, a crouching animal, a thing of summery light: the message is that, however cruelly we treat nature, we are part of it, and in harming it we harm ourselves.*

Not marked for some late grief that cannot speak.

*Analysis: To be marked for something is to be fated for it. The speaker observes that this girl will not grow into guilt about what she has done: the grief that might come later, the regret a child might eventually feel for cruelty it once thought was play, will not reach her. Cruelty, the poem suggests, is not something people grow out of; it is something they grow into, inherited and normalised rather than confronted.*

The mind swings inward on itself in fear

Swayed towards nausea from each normal sign.

*Analysis: The metaphor of the mind swinging inward marks the transition from observation to reflection: having watched the scene play out, the speaker now turns the experience on himself. What he finds there is fear. The phrase "each normal sign" is telling: the sights that provoke nausea are ordinary ones, the furious butterflies, the maid singing, the children playing. Their very normalcy is what frightens the speaker most.*

Heredity of cruelty everywhere,

*Analysis: This is the lesson stated plainly at last. Cruelty is not an aberration or an individual failing; it is inherited, passed from one generation to the next like a trait encoded in blood. The speaker looks around and sees it everywhere, in the grass, in the children, in the world that educated them.*

And everywhere the frocks of summer torn,

*Analysis: Personification extends the motif of the lemon frock: summer itself is now described as wearing torn clothes. What appeared beautiful and whole at the start of the poem is revealed to be damaged. The speaker, who has inflicted nothing himself, understands that we are all responsible for the state of the world we inhabit; we are the ones who leave summer's frocks in tatters.*

The long look back to see where choice is born,

*Analysis: The speaker's mind takes "the long look back" at two levels. On one level it looks back at the individual, searching for the moment in childhood when a person first chooses cruelty, consciously or not. On another level it looks back through the whole of human history, trying to find the moment when the species went wrong. The personification of choice as something born suggests it has an origin, a birthplace, though the poem cannot locate it.*

As summer grass sways to the scythe's design.

*Analysis: The closing image fuses the poem's two worlds: the natural (summer grass) and the lethal (the scythe). The scythe is the traditional instrument of the Grim Reaper, the emblem of inevitable death, and here it is personified as something with design, with intention. The metaphor extends beyond grass: the speaker is describing the fate of both nature and humanity, shaped by a force of destruction that moves with purpose and cannot be refused. The grass does not resist. It sways.*

## About the poem

**Author:** Derek Walcott (1930--2017)

**Context:** Set in the Caribbean during a summer morning, the poem reflects on a scene of casual cruelty witnessed from a hammock. Walcott was writing in the tradition of Caribbean post-colonial literature, and the poem's imagery of black domestic servants and the history of slavery runs quietly beneath its surface. The "lesson" of the title echoes the structure of a Sunday sermon: the poem tells a story in order to make a moral point.

**Form:** A meditative lyric in three stanzas. The first stanza establishes the idyllic setting; the second introduces and describes the act of cruelty; the third pulls back to philosophical reflection. The movement from peace to disruption to resignation mirrors the speaker's emotional journey.

**Core idea:** Cruelty is not an accident or an exception: it is inherited, normalised, and passed from one generation to the next. The poem finds this truth in the most ordinary of summer scenes, which is precisely what makes it so unsettling.

**Mood:** Initially calm and sensory, shifting to disturbed and fearful, finally settling into bleak resignation.

**Tone:** Reflective and increasingly sombre, with a note of quiet horror beneath the controlled surface.

**Main themes:**

- Innocence and the loss of innocence
- The inheritance of cruelty
- Human exploitation of nature
- The oppressed and the marginalised
- Suffering and indifference
- Mortality and inevitability

### Remember

- The poem moves from **peace** to **disruption** to **philosophical resignation**: the three-stanza structure maps directly onto the speaker's emotional journey
- The butterflies and the black maid function as **parallel symbols** of the oppressed: both are frail, both are in some sense owned, and both suffer at the hands of others
- "Not marked for some late grief that cannot speak" means the girl will never feel regret: cruelty is grown **into**, not out of
- The girl is repeatedly described through images drawn from nature (mantis, animal haunches, thing of summery light): we are cruel to nature, but we **are** nature
- It is the **maid**, the most marginalised figure in the poem, who ends the cruelty: perhaps only those who know suffering can recognise it in others
- "Yellow wings" is a **synecdoche**: the part (the wings) stands for the whole creature
- The **Protestant hosanna** works doubly: it evokes the gospel tradition of enslaved workers, and the word "Protestant" carries the meaning of protesting against the conditions of servitude
- The closing scythe is a **metaphor** for human destructiveness: the world sways to its design whether it consents or not