

# The Cockroach



## SUMMARY

The poem's speaker describes the day when they watched a cockroach crawl across the floor, dodging a dust bunny as it went. At first, the speaker observes, the cockroach seemed content to walk in a straight line between the wall paneling and the door. But soon, the cockroach turned around and started wandering in circles around the table leg, then rolling over to scratch its wings; it was as if the cockroach were feeling more and more restless as time went on. Eventually, the cockroach climbed up a shelf and stopped, looking unsure what to do next. The speaker wondered: was this cockroach's discomfort a fitting payment for some dreadful behavior in a past life? All the speaker knew was, they saw the cockroach as a mirror of their own predicament.

With no clear sense of why they've ended up living the life they do, this poem implies, the speaker has ended up wandering around looking for meaning and direction that they can't really find. By comparing their own life with that of a roach—not a fragile but beautiful butterfly or a roving ladybug, but a pest—the speaker at least offers the consoling thought that they can find some humor in this predicament by not taking themselves too seriously.

### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14



## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-4

*I watched a ...  
... and the door,*

"The Cockroach" begins with a scene of mild squalor. The speaker sits in their room watching passively as a "giant cockroach start[s] to pace" across the none-too-clean floor, "skirting a ball of dust" that seems to have been "r[iding] the floor" for some time.

The speaker doesn't seem bothered by the sight of a cockroach wandering across the room. If anything, they feel mild interest, tracking the bug as it "trace[s] a path" from the "wainscot" (the wall paneling) to the door. Maybe they even have some degree of fellow feeling for this cockroach. They [anthropomorphize](#) their leggy guest: they call it "him" rather than "it," suggest that the bug seems "quite satisfied" with the "path" it's chosen to take, and imagine that it "pace[s]" across the floor like a thoughtful professor (rather than, say, scuttling or creeping).

This imaginative description gives the first hints that this roach will become more to the speaker than an unwelcome pest. The cockroach—sharing the speaker's dirty room like another person—will hold up a mirror to the speaker's own predicament.

Wryly, the speaker frames this tale of relating to vermin in an elegant old form: the [sonnet](#), a 14-line poem written in [iambic pentameter](#) (lines of five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm, as in "I watched | a gi- | ant cock- | roach start | to pace"). These first four lines also feature the alternating ABAB [rhyme scheme](#) typical of a Shakespearean sonnet. Framing this poem in the favorite verse style of Petrarch and Shakespeare, the speaker applies a touch of tongue-in-cheek formality to their story of relating a little too well to a cockroach.



## THEMES



### AIMLESSNESS, CONFUSION, AND PURPOSE

"The Cockroach" draws a tongue-in-cheek comparison between a wandering bug and a confused speaker, suggesting that a sense of meaning and direction can be hard to find in life. The poem's speaker watches as a cockroach crawls across the floor. At first, the roach seems set on a "path between the wainscot and the door," a straight shot from the wall paneling to the way out. But then, some confusion seems to impede the bug. The cockroach begins to wander in "crooked rings" around the table, to irritably "scratch his wings" in "restlessness," and at last to come to a perplexed halt at the top of a shelf, as if "uncertain where to go" next.

The speaker, observing the roach's inconclusive wanderings, starts to philosophize. Perhaps, they suggest, the bug's predicament is a punishment for "some vicious crime" he committed in a "former life." But really, that's just an idle theory; there's no way to tell why this roach is in the situation he's in. All the speaker can conclude is that the cockroach's life feels familiar: "I thought I recognized myself," they conclude. In other words, the speaker feels just as lost, aimless, and confused as the cockroach does, and the speaker doesn't have any better explanation for their predicament than they do for the cockroach's.

The speaker's unsuccessful attempt to figure out why the cockroach might be wandering around this way—and their sense that they and the cockroach share the same difficulty—suggest that human life can feel as mysterious, purposeless, and insignificant as the ramblings of a lowly bug.

## LINES 5-9

*But soon he ...  
... worsened over time.*

As the speaker watches, the cockroach that began its journey across the room by walking a straight “path between the wainscot and the door” now seems to lose focus and direction. The bug “turn[s] to jog in crooked rings,” wanders aimlessly around the “rusty table leg,” then pauses to “scratch his wings” in irritated confusion. Again, the speaker [anthropomorphizes](#) the roach, seeing his actions not as the instinctive impulses of a mindless pest, but as signs of a “mild” but “worsen[ing]” “attack of restlessness.” Indeed, he’s the “victim” of this “attack of restlessness,” a persecuted sufferer. This cockroach has ennui.

The poem’s [imagery](#) paints a picture of the bug’s restlessness—and gives a glimpse of the speaker’s unlovely surroundings. The “crooked rings” the roach traces as it “jogs” around the table leg suggest that it’s not trying to perform an elegant loop-de-loop maneuver, for instance, but getting lost. And the “rust[.]” on that table leg, like the “ball of dust” the roach dodged earlier, suggests that the speaker isn’t taking great care of their room. Everything here is just a little dingy.

The poem’s rhythms mirror the bug’s irritable wanderings, too. The [enjambment](#) in lines 8-9 breaks the speaker’s sentence in a spot where one would never pause in ordinary speech:

As if the victim of a mild **attack**  
Of restlessness that worsened over time.

The jolting split between “attack” and “Of restlessness” feels as awkward as the cockroach’s “crooked rings.” There’s discomfort in the poem’s very sounds.

## LINES 10-14

*After a while, ...  
... I recognized myself.*

At last, the cockroach decides to stop wandering around on the floor and try something new. He “climb[s] an open shelf” as if it were a hilltop and he were trying to get some perspective. (Note the openness of that shelf, too: the speaker’s room is as bare as it’s grimy.) But no clarity is forthcoming: atop the shelf, the roach stops, looking “uncertain where to go.” The poem uses [caesurae](#) here to mirror the roach’s actions:

After a **while**, || he climbed an open shelf  
And **stopped**. || He looked uncertain where to go.

The comma in line 10 pauses the line and lets it change direction just as the roach does. Then the period in line 11 brings the line to an abrupt halt at just the moment the roach freezes in uncertainty.

The speaker, still watching, takes this opportunity to

philosophize in lines 12-13:

Was this due payment for some vicious crime  
A former life had led to? [...]

The awkward [enjambment](#) between the lines draws attention to an ambiguous question. The speaker here wonders whether the roach has been reincarnated this way as punishment for some transgression in a past life. But these words could mean several things at once. Is the speaker asking whether the roach’s reincarnation as a roach is punishment for past crimes? Or is the speaker asking whether the roach’s *confusion* is its punishment?

Even the speaker seems to throw their hands up over the question, whatever it is. “I don’t know,” they conclude; there’s no figuring out why this roach has ended up in the predicament it’s in. All they can say is that they feel they “recognize[.]” the roach: this bug’s situation mirrors their own.

If that’s so, then the speaker, too, feels like they have no idea where they’re going or why. The speaker, too, feels like a “victim,” nervous that they’re being punished for no reason they can fathom. And the speaker, too, feels stuck, “uncertain” about life itself. The roach becomes a symbol of their very self—and perhaps of humanity in general. Who, this speaker seems to ask, can really answer the big questions about why we’re here or what we’re doing with ourselves?

Perhaps the only real conclusion this speaker comes to is that a degree of humility and humor might help them to cope with their predicament. Finding fellow feeling with a cockroach—likewise lost, likewise living in this dingy room—they present themselves as just another bug doing its best.



## SYMBOLS



## THE COCKROACH

The cockroach becomes a [symbol](#) for the speaker in particular, but perhaps also a symbol for humanity in general. When it makes its appearance on the speaker’s floor, the cockroach appears to be at a loss for goals. As the speaker watches, the roach crawls around in circles, with no apparent idea of where it’s going or what it’s trying to do. This aimlessness feels all too familiar to the speaker: “I thought I recognized myself,” they say, seeing in the cockroach’s wanderings an image of their own confusion and uncertainty. The speaker, in other words, has no clear sense of where they’re going in life or why, any more than this bug does.

By choosing the lowly cockroach as a symbol of their own confused life, the speaker pokes fun at themselves—and perhaps at everybody else, too. Perhaps, the symbolism

suggests, we're all just bugs wandering in circles, trying to figure out what to do in a world where no one can ever really know why we're here or what we should be doing with ourselves.

#### Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14



## POETIC DEVICES

### ANTHROPOMORPHISM

All through "The Cockroach," the speaker [anthropomorphizes](#) a cockroach, interpreting a bug's actions as if they were those of a person. This cockroach is a "he," the speaker decides: a little guy trying to figure out where to go and what to do.

"At first," the speaker observes, the cockroach seems "quite satisfied" to crawl along purposefully, charting a straight line from the wall to the door. But the longer the speaker watches, the more they see confusion, irritation, and aimlessness in the cockroach's actions. When the cockroach stops to "scratch his wings," for instance, the speaker imagines that the bug is "the victim of a mild attack / Of restlessness." And when the cockroach at last comes to a halt on a bookshelf, the speaker thinks he looks "uncertain where to go."

By anthropomorphizing the bug, reading human emotions into its small and aimless trek across the room, the speaker demonstrates a feeling they end up stating explicitly at the end of the poem: they "recogniz[e]" the bug as an image of their own aimlessness and uncertainty. Besides suggesting that human lives might be as small and meaningless as bug lives, this comparison injects some humor and fellow feeling into the poem: *Roach, you and I are in this together*, the poem seems to say.

#### Where Anthropomorphism appears in the poem:

- Lines 3-11

### IMAGERY

Dashes of [imagery](#) comically capture the wanderings of this poem's titular roach. When the speaker notices a cockroach making its way across their room, they don't describe it as scuttling or crawling, as many bug-observers might. Rather, they describe it "start[ing] to pace" across the floor, as if it's deep in thought with its feelers crossed behind its back. That stately progress soon turns to confusion: the cockroach ends up "jog[g]ing in crooked rings," wandering in rough circles, clearly at a loss for where to go.

These descriptions of the cockroach's wandering motion help readers to imagine it more as a tiny little person than a bug. The

cockroach's pacing and jogging create an image of nervous, frantic energy—the movements of a creature that really has no idea what it's trying to do, but *wishes* it did. This imagery also helps to suggest that the speaker might be projecting some of their own feelings onto the roach, [anthropomorphizing](#) it as they ponder their aimlessness in life.

The poem's imagery also helps readers to picture the room where the speaker sits. The cockroach has to "skirt[] a dust ball" to make its way across the floor and ends up "circling the rusty table leg" and climbing up an "open shelf." All of these images suggest a bare and run-down room: no books on the shelf, dust on the floor, rust on the table. Perhaps this ever-so-slightly bleak backdrop contributes to the speaker's feeling of being lost in the world. This doesn't sound like the most comfortable or pleasant place to find oneself feeling stuck.

#### Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "a giant cockroach start to pace, / Skirting a ball of dust that rode the floor"
- **Lines 5-6:** "he turned to jog in crooked rings, / Circling the rusty table leg and back"
- **Line 10:** "he climbed an open shelf"

### CAESURA

[Caesurae](#) help the poem's shape and rhythms to resemble what it describes: the hesitant, herky-jerky motions of a cockroach.

No caesurae at all appear in the first nine lines of the poem, when the speaker first observes the cockroach making a dash across the room. During this stretch of time, the cockroach is scrambling around frenetically: not choosing any one direction to crawl in, but also not stopping and starting.

It's when the roach finally seems to give up that mid-line pauses enter the poem. Listen to the changed rhythms of lines 10-11:

After a while, || he climbed an open shelf  
And stopped. || He looked uncertain where to go.

The comma in line 10 slows the poem's pace down. Then, the period in line 11 brings it to a full and emphatic stop—at just the same moment that the roach stops to consider its options. The poem's shape matches its action; readers have to lurch to a halt in the middle of things just as the roach does.

The poem's final caesura, which appears in line 13, injects a wry note into the speaker's voice:

Was this due payment for some vicious crime  
A former life had led to? || I don't know

Here, the caesura at the question mark lends some comical gravity to a rather melodramatic question: "Is this roach paying for its past crimes with a reincarnation of buggy indecision?"

The mid-line break leaves that question hanging dramatically for a moment before the speaker deflates it with an exasperated "I don't know."

#### Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "while, he"
- **Line 11:** "stopped. He"
- **Line 13:** "to? I"

## ENJAMBMENT

Unpredictable [enjambments](#) give the poem a jolting rhythm that chimes with the cockroach's (and the speaker's) indecision. For the most part, the poem's lines are [end-stopped](#). When enjambments appear here, then, they surprise the reader, yanking the eye across line breaks.

The poem's first enjambment, for instance, appears between lines 3-4:

At first he seemed quite satisfied to **trace**  
A path between the wainscot and the door,

Here, the enjambment falls at a particularly awkward spot, a place where there wouldn't be even a hint of a pause in everyday speech. While the speaker describes the cockroach's apparently purposeful "path," the poem's rhythm says something different: the cockroach's beeline (if you will) for the exit is already a little crooked.

There's a similarly jolting enjambment in lines 8-9:

As if the victim of a mild **attack**  
Of restlessness that worsened over time.

Again, a line break falls in an awkward, unnatural place. Here, readers might feel the poem's rhythm imitating the cockroach's sudden "attack / Of restlessness" as it irritably "scratch[es]" its wings with a back leg.

The poem's final enjambment draws attention to a comically grand question:

Was this due payment for some vicious **crime**  
A former life had led to? [...]

Here, the odd enjambment insists that readers stop and spend a minute dealing with the speaker's ambiguous, ungainly phrasing (did the cockroach's former life lead to a crime, or did the cockroach merely commit a crime in a former life? Is its punishment "being a cockroach" or "being a *confused* cockroach"?). The confusion in the language here mirrors the confusion of speaker and of roach.

#### Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "trace / A"
- **Lines 8-9:** "attack / Of"
- **Lines 12-13:** "crime / A"



## VOCABULARY

**Skirting** (Lines 1-2) - Dodging around. The word conveys that the cockroach's movements are hardly graceful.

**Wainscot** (Line 4) - Decorative wooden panelling on the lower part of a wall.

**Due payment** (Lines 12-13) - A fair, just payback.



## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"The Cockroach" is a [sonnet](#)—a 14-line poem written in [iambic pentameter](#) (lines of five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm, as in "I **watched** | a **gi-** | ant **cock-** | roach **start** | to **pace**"). However, it breaks away from the traditional sonnet form in a few ways. First off, there's the [rhyme scheme](#):

- Most sonnets stick to one of two traditional patterns of rhyme. The [English sonnet](#) rhymes ABAB CDCD EFEF GG, while the [Italian sonnet](#) rhymes ABBA ABBA and concludes with a sestet (a six-line passage) that mixes C, D, and E rhymes in various patterns.
- Here, Halligan starts out with the English rhyme pattern: ABAB CDCD. Then he switches to a more Italianate ending, with closing rhymes running EFG EGF.

Already, things are a little off-kilter. Then, in the middle of the poem, this sonnet starts to feel downright askew. Typically, a sonnet that's divided into an octave (an eight-line passage) and a sestet (a six-line passage) introduces a *volta* between lines 8 and 9: a turning point when one thought finishes and a new or contrasting idea enters the poem. Instead, lines 8-10 here lurch off in an unconventional direction:

As if the victim of a mild **attack**  
Of restlessness that worsened over time.  
After a while, he climbed an open shelf

Rather than concluding an idea neatly in line 8, Halligan carries his observations of the wandering cockroach over into closing sestet, throwing the traditional form even further out of balance.

This choice feels right in keeping with the cockroach's (and the speaker's) discombobulation and aimlessness. This speaker might wish that life felt as tightly structured as a traditional sonnet—but disorder always seems to intrude.

## METER

Like most [sonnets](#), "The Cockroach" is written in [iambic pentameter](#). That means that its lines each use five iambs—metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm, as in line 1:

I watched | a gi- | ant cock- | roach start | to pace

This fills the poem with a steady, familiar pulse. The poem doesn't stick to that rhythm perfectly the whole way through, though (few sonnets do). For instance, line 2 switches up its first foot:

Skirting | a ball | of dust | that rode | the floor.

"Skirting" is not an iamb, but a [trochee](#)—the opposite foot, with a DUM-da rhythm. That change creates a jaunty little swing in the line, harmonizing with the image of the cockroach swerving to avoid that dust ball.

Elsewhere, Halligan introduces some stranger variations in the rhythm, as in line 7:

And flip- | ping right | over | to scratch | his wings—

The colliding **stressed** syllables in "right over" wedge an ungainly trochee right into the middle of the line—just at the moment the cockroach's sense of "restlessness" really takes hold. This awkwardness reflects the poem's big theme: a sense that life *doesn't* just tick smoothly and artfully along.

## RHYME SCHEME

"The Cockroach" combines the [rhyme schemes](#) of an English and an Italian [sonnet](#). The poem's first eight lines use the alternating pattern of an English sonnet (which rhymes ABAB CDCD EFEF GG), while the closing six lines, with their changing three-rhyme pattern, borrow from the flexible ending of an Italian sonnet (which starts out rhyming ABBA ABBA and ends with some combination of C, D, and E rhymes). Altogether, the rhyme scheme looks like this:

ABAB CDCD EFG EGF

This mixed-up rhyme scheme suits a tale of confusion and disorientation. This sonnet kicks off in one rhyme scheme, only to abandon it, losing itself in disorderly wanderings—just as the cockroach starts out heading in a straight line toward the door, then finds itself turning in aimless circles.



## SPEAKER

The speaker of "The Cockroach" is a rueful, self-deprecating, playfully philosophical person, and perhaps they're also a person who is down on their luck. Over the course of the poem, they watch a "giant cockroach" traversing their room—a room whose "dust ball[s]" and "rusty table legs" suggest that the speaker isn't living in the cleanest or most pleasant surroundings. The speaker doesn't seem at all perturbed that an enormous cockroach has turned up in their room; they just watch it wander around as if massive household bugs are an everyday sight for them.

For that matter, the speaker doesn't appear to have much to *do* besides watching a cockroach meandering around the room. No wonder, then, that they relate to that cockroach's aimless wanderings. In this cockroach, they see an image of their own predicament, and perhaps of a lot of people's predicament: a difficulty in figuring out what they're doing, why they're doing it, and how they ended up here at all.

The speaker's identification with household vermin also suggests a kind of amused, self-deprecating humility. Plenty of bugs scuttle around aimlessly—but this speaker feels more akin to a pesky roach than, say, a flitting butterfly.



## SETTING

The poem takes place in the speaker's room, as the speaker watches a cockroach scurrying around. The "wainscot" on the speaker's walls—a kind of wooden paneling most popular before the 20th century—suggests an older building, while the "rusty table leg" and "ball of dust" the cockroach circles suggest a room that isn't in particularly good order. Then, of course, there's the fact that a "giant cockroach" is crawling around in here at all! The speaker doesn't seem surprised or dismayed by the appearance of the huge bug, but rather watches it with curiosity; such leggy visitations seem like part of their everyday life.

These peeks at the speaker's room might hint that their identification with the cockroach doesn't just have to do with a general sense of purposelessness, but a specific (and tongue-in-cheek) sense of grime, dinginess, and lowliness. The setting reflects the speaker's sense of their own situation: they feel as confused, disoriented, and humble as the cockroach, and who has time to sweep up dust bunnies when one's very purpose in life feels uncertain?



## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

Kevin Halligan (1964-present) is a Canadian poet. Born in



Toronto, he lived abroad for many years in Cambodia and England. He has published three volumes of poetry: *Blossom Street* (1999), *The Belfast of the North* (2005), and *Utopia* (2009) (in which "The Cockroach" was first collected).

"The Cockroach" shows the influence of several different branches of literary history. The [sonnet](#) form Halligan plays with here goes back to the Middle Ages—so in one sense, this poem draws on a grand old poetic lineage, handed down from [Shakespeare](#) to [Milton](#) to [Keats](#) to [Barrett Browning](#). The idea of seeing a human reflection in the natural world might also come across as rather capital-R Romantic: the Scottish Romantic poet Robert Burns, for instance, [famously gazed on a cowering mouse](#) and reflected that the "best-laid schemes o' Mice and Men" alike go wrong.

But this speaker's cheeky, deflating vision of himself as a wandering cockroach might also owe something to Franz Kafka's 1915 [The Metamorphosis](#) (in which the unfortunate Gregor Samsa famously wakes up one morning to discover he's been transformed into a monstrous bug) and to Don Marquis' 1927 [archy and mehitabel](#) (in which a hip [vers libre](#) poet is reincarnated as a cockroach, much to his exasperation). By tweaking an elegant, rigorous poetic form and uniting it with comically grotesque bug [symbolism](#), Halligan pokes fun at literary tradition as much as human foibles.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Cockroach" displays a very turn-of-the-20th-century sense of humor. The poem's choice to examine the big questions about life through the tale of a cockroach (and to use the elegant sonnet form to do so) reflects a 1990s-2000s taste for deflating old tropes, traditions, and values. (Carol Ann Duffy's 1999 *The World's Wife*, in which she [satirizes](#) male historical and literary greats by presenting them through the eyes of their [fed-up wives](#), might serve as one good contemporary poetic example.)

But the poem might also show the mark of some darker uncertainties. Halligan published this poem while he was living in Cambodia in 2009. When Halligan moved there, Cambodia

had only recently emerged from years of civil war, a conflict that succeeded the long and terrible dictatorship of the murderous Pol Pot. Cambodia established a fragile democracy in 1993, but the new government was also riddled with corruption. The country suffers from riots, poverty, and political suppression to this day. As a Canadian immigrant coming to terms with this backdrop of violence and fear, Halligan might well have struggled more seriously with questions about life's meaning and his own direction as he wrote this poem.



## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Roaches in Literature](#) — Read about some other literary cockroaches and consider why Halligan might have chosen a cockroach in particular as his subject. (<https://www.h-net.org/~nilas/totem/roach.html>)
- [Halligan on Cambodia](#) — Read Halligan's essay on his experiences in Cambodia, where he wrote "The Cockroach." (<https://www.khmer440.com/k/2011/08/squaresville/>)



## HOW TO CITE

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