

The City Planners by Margaret Atwood

Liminal spaces

Explain what a liminal space is:

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Explain how The City Planners uses features of liminal spaces and why:

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Explicit meaning of the poem

Summarise what happens in each section of The City Planners.

Section	Summary of events
Stanza 1, "Cruising these residential Sunday Streets..."	
Stanza 2, "But though the driveways..."	
Stanzas 3 and 4, "give momentary access..."	
Stanzas 5, 6 and 7, "That is where the City Planners..."	

Quick write!

How and why does Atwood initially present the suburbs as a liminal space?

Summarise what you have learnt so far in a quick paragraph. Don't worry about being perfect – just get your ideas down. You use the sentence starters below or use your own words.

Optional sentence starters:

- Features of liminal spaces include... and evoke feelings of... in the viewer because...
- In The City Planners, the descriptions of the suburbs conjure a sense of liminality with the phrases “[quote]” and “[quote]” because...
- Atwood may have done this to suggest that...
- Whilst the eerie atmosphere produced by an atmosphere of liminality implies that the suburbs are... and the speaker is...

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The title

Analyse the significance of the title, "The City Planners".

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Language

Fill in the table below.

Technique	Example	Effect
Personification		
Pun		
Symbolism		
Sibilance		
Simile		
Metaphor		
Oxymoron		

Quick write!

How does Atwood use language to express the speaker's attitudes towards the suburbs?

Summarise what you have learnt so far in a quick paragraph. Don't worry about being perfect – just get your ideas down. You use the sentence starters below or use your own words.

Optional sentence starters:

- The speaker implies that the suburbs are [adj] and [adj] using [technique] in the line “[quote]”.
- This technique creates the effect of... and is used to show that the speaker believes the suburbs are...
- Furthermore, the speaker contrasts with the suburbs as they are [adj], as shown by the [technique] in line “...”.
- The word “...” has connotations and has been used to show...
- Overall, Atwood critiques...

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Form and structure

Language	Form	Structure
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simile, metaphor, personification, oxymoron • Imagery • Sound devices: alliteration, assonance, consonance, onomatopoeia • Symbolism 	<p>What type of poem it is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free verse, rhyming couplets, haiku, ballad, elegy, ode, villanelle <p>Features of that type of poem:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rhyme scheme • Metre (syllable pattern, like iambic pentameter) • Verse form (e.g. a sonnet has three quatrains and a rhyming couplet) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number and length of stanzas and lines • Use of enjambment, caesura and end-stop lines • Repetition • Organisation of ideas • Cyclical structures • Volta (turning point) • Juxtaposition • How a poem flows or fragments • Visual appearance on page

Explain the difference between form and structure.

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Identify the form of The City Planners and **analyse** its significance.

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Quick write!

How does Atwood use form and structure to explore her central message?

Summarise what you have learnt so far in a quick paragraph. Don't worry about being perfect – just get your ideas down. You use the sentence starters below or use your own words.

Optional sentence starters:

- The **central message** in The City Planners is... or perhaps...
- This explored through form, as this poem uses **free verse** to suggest...
- Furthermore, using **enjambment**, Atwood implies... while the use of **caesura** could mean...
- Finally, the length of the poem's stanzas **gradually fragments** from twelve to two, which may represent...
- Overall, these techniques are used effectively to **critique**...

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Model essay

In what ways does Atwood convey her strong emotions about the city planners?

The poem, *The City Planners*, by Margaret Atwood expresses disdain for the City Planners, who attempt to impose order upon fundamentally chaotic subjects: humanity and nature. Through her personification of the landscape, puns of insanity and use of free verse, Atwood critiques the sterile and oppressive nature of modern urban planning and argues that being too controlled is its own kind of madness.

Atwood juxtaposes the lifeless, "pedantic", and sterile suburbs with the disorder the speaker's "dented" car introduces when they pass through. Despite the suburbs being a residential location, which the reader would typically imagine brimming with human activity, Atwood's suburbs feature "no shouting", symbolising the complete absence of humanity's chaos because of the City Planners' meddling. This theme continues with a semantic field of uncanny and unnatural order, shown by the use of words such as "dry... sunlight", "pedantic rows", and "rational whine". These phrases help the reader to understand that the order imposed upon the suburbs by the City Planners strips away any job and paints a picture of rigidity that is unsettling. Particularly, using the adjective "dry" to describe sunlight is telling; whilst sunlight is typically associated with joy, the dryness might imply that even this symbol of happiness and nature has lost all its pleasure in the face of the City Planners' meddling. Whilst the suburbs are devoid of life, Atwood personifies the objects in the setting with hostile verbs: the trees "assert", the level surfaces "rebuke", the power mowers "whine," and even the trees are "discouraged". This personification portrays the speaker as an unwelcome outsider, rejected by the suburbs because of the irrational chaotic element they inject with their "dent[ed]" car, representing the imperfections that the City Planners are attempting to erase.

Yet Atwood posits that attempting to control nature is short-sighted as the environment will always regain control due to human civilisation's short existence and impending climate change. This is evident through Atwood's use of free verse, a form which follows no regular pattern or rules, much like how, ultimately, the City Planners' attempts to control nature will only be temporary. The lack of a rhyme scheme and metre highlights the serious topic of environmentalism, as rhyme often introduces a playful melodic tone unsuitable for discussing the destruction of our natural environment. It may be Atwood's attempt to resist the City Planners' efforts, as her words refuse to conform to strict, "mundane", and repetitive rules.

Likewise, the poem's frequent use of enjambment could mirror nature's resistance to being contained. Thus, the poem's structure is just as uncontainable as the natural environment itself. In particular, the use of enjambment in the line, "when the houses, capsized, will slide / obliquely into the clay..." could mirror the words sliding from one line onto the next without constraint, just as all human creations one day will slide into ruin and decay. Atwood may be suggesting that the City Planners are insignificant in the face of nature. Similarly, the word "capsized" is contained using caesura emphasises this metaphor, comparing houses (man-made structures) to overturned ships. The use of caesura may further suggest how the City Planners' efforts isolate communities from one another. This destructive image juxtaposes the previous imagery of excessive control in earlier stanzas, implying that any order we attain will be briefly won. Finally, the poem's stanza structure gradually fragments, with stanza one having twelve lines and the final stanza having just two lines. Here, Atwood demonstrates the fragmentation of communities due to City Planners' dividing lines, or perhaps she does this to show how isolated the City Planners have become by the end of the poem when it has become clear that their attempts have been futile all along.

Ultimately, Atwood derides the City Planners, portraying them as disconnected from the environment and human nature, living in denial. The speaker has a vision into the future, envisioning the suburbs engulfed in a new ice age, yet the City Planners "scattered" and in their "own private blizzards" still attempt to "sketch transitory lines" even across blizzards. At the start of the poem, Atwood uses puns such as "sanitary" and "sanities" to refer to the suburbs and the insanity of the city planners' actions. Now, in the final stanza, the meaning of this pun becomes explicit in the line "the insane faces of political conspirators", as the reader sees the madness of the City Planners who futilely attempt to control nature. Yet these actions are "transitory" and "vanishing", adjectives which demonstrate the absurdity of their actions. Atwood ends the poem with "bland madness", an oxymoron showing the City Planners' contradictory nature. It could also imply that sometimes even "madness" (associated with bold and wild actions) can be bland and mundane, just like the suburbs. This, along with previous mentions of "sanitary", "sanities" and "insane", make clear that controlling the uncontrollable is both "madness" and removes the chaotic beauty of the natural world.

Finally, the fact that both the speaker of the poem and the City Planners remain unnamed and anonymous represents how the City Planners have attempted to strip humanity of its individualism. The speaker is therefore both no-one and everyone; they could represent any of us travelling through any town we live in, suggesting that the threat of City Planners is universal. However, the City Planners being unnamed gives them a looming presence that feels sinister throughout the poem. By titling the poem "The City Planners", they are equally looming over the rest of the poem, just as they survey our towns, "sketching transitory lines" to divide us. It's ironic that whilst "city" has connotations of hustling, bustling life and "planners" has connotations of

rigid order, by the end of the poem we see a world that is lifeless, with each City Planner in "his own private blizzard" and the attempts to plan fail spectacularly, with houses "slid[ing]" in the sea and the City Planners' efforts "vanishing" in the face of the unstoppable force of nature.

In conclusion, Atwood uses the City Planners to warn against the dangers of attempting to control the uncontrollable and warns of the risks of becoming disconnected from nature. She implies that any attempts to impose order on the world around us will be temporary, as climate change and the vast time afforded to the environment will mean our efforts can never succeed. Not only this, but she suggests that succeeding in controlling the environment is undesirable anyway, as it will only lead to "the "bland madness" of suburbs, which are devoid of beauty and fundamentally clash with humanity's chaotic nature.

Annotate the model essay

After you've read the model essay for The City Planners, annotate and unpick the following elements:

- Where do I address Atwood's **central message**?
- How do I **structure** the essay as a whole?
- How do I **structure** each analysis paragraph?
- Highlight my **terminology**
- Highlight my **quotations**

Assessment Objectives

AO	Explanation
AO1 Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You understand explicit meaning of the poem • You use well-chosen quotations and references to support your argument
AO2 Inference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understands the main ideas and themes in the poem • Understands the deeper implications of the poem through inference • Understands how the significance of smaller sections of the poem in relation to the text as whole

AO3 Analysis of techniques	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• You analyse how language, form and structure create an impact on the reader• You consider the writer's intentions and their central message
AO4 Personal response	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Giving a personal and informed response to the question• Your perspective is unique and thoughtful when weighing up the poem's possible meanings

Planning sheet

Paragraph	Use note-form to plan your response
Introduction	
Language	
Form	
Structure	

Title & Speaker	
Conclusion	

Reflection

Self-mark your writing

Code	Explanation
CM	Central Message
T	Terminology
Q	Quotations
E	Effect of technique
L, F, S	Language, form and structure (Write only L, F, or S depending on which you're analysing.)
B, M, E	Beginning, middle and ending of the poem (Write only B, M or E depending on which section of the poem you're analysing.)

Self-reflection

Explain what went well:

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Explain how you could improve your essay next time:

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