

1. (b)

Astronauts

Armored in oxygen,
 faceless in visors—
 mirrormasks reflecting
 the general glare and
 5 shadow of moonscape—
 they walk slowmotion
 floating the lifeless
 dust of Taurus
 Littrow¹. And Wow, they
 10 exclaim; oh boy, this is it.

They sing, exulting
 (though trained to be wary
 of “emotion and
 philosophy”), breaking
 15 the calcined² stillness
 of once Absolute Otherwhere.

Risking edges, earthlings
 to whom only
 their machines are friendly
 20 (and God’s radar-
 watching eye?), they
 labor at gathering
 proof of hypothesis;
 in snowshine of sunlight
 25 dangerous as radium
 probe detritus³ for clues.

What is it we wish them
 to find for us, as
 we watch them on our
 30 screens? They loom there
 heroic antiheroes,
 smaller than myth and
 poignantly human.
 Why are we troubled?
 35 What do we ask of these men?
 What do we ask of ourselves?

Robert Hayden

“Astronauts”, from *Collected Poems of Robert Hayden* by Robert Hayden, edited by Frederick Glaysher, copyright © 1985 by Emma Hayden. Used by permission of Liveright Publishing Corporation.

¹ Taurus Littrow: name of a landing site on the moon

² calcined: heated to a point of oxidation

³ detritus: fragments from disintegration



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The poem Astronauts by Robert Hayden talks about astronauts on the moon, and what it means for humanity. There are underlying philosophical questions, which address the issues involved with technological and scientific advances.

The poem is four stanzas long, with the second stanza being six lines long, while the rest are ten lines long each. The first five lines of the poem describe the lack of identity and personality of the astronauts, as first mentioned in the second line: "faceless in visors". The lack of a face relates to the idea of no true identity. The first line of the poem suggests that the



astronauts are heroic, ~~with~~ with oxygen

- 1) for protection: "Armored in oxygen." This
b) shows how important oxygen is on the moon, as opposed to on earth. The idea of no identity continues in lines three to five, as their visors are described in more depth: "mirrormasks reflecting / the general glare and / shadow of moonscape." There is alliteration in "mirrormasks" and "general glare". This emphasises the importance of these phrases, with the former describing the astronauts as being masked, while the latter describes the bleak landscape, while also making reference to a facial expression. This passage gives the impression that the astronauts are merely being used as a means to access the moon, and to get an idea for how it appears.

In the sixth line, Hayden creates a new word, by joining "slow" and "motion" together. This highlights the word, and gives the feeling that the word and corresponding action is faster than what it



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1) b) literally is. In line seven there is more use of alliteration, in the word "lifeless", as well as a mention of "floating". This contradicts the mention in the previous line of the astronauts ~~walking~~ walking, but in turn gives the idea that they are partly floating, partly walking on the moon. The word "floating" is also referring to the astronauts disturbing the dust, as is mentioned in the next line. ~~walking~~

The last two lines of this stanza has a change of tone, and ~~uses~~ uses colloquial expressions to inject personality and life into the astronauts, as they are speaking: "Wow, they / exclaim: ~~oh~~ oh boy, this is it." This is alluding to the idea



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that ~~the~~ walking on the moon has been the astronauts' dreams. This uplifting tone is continued into the next stanza, as "They sing, exulting". "Exulting" is quite a majestic term, giving the impression that the astronauts are elated.

The tone returns to the neutral, almost ominous tone of before, as the poet uses brackets to indicate a side comment. This includes the point that they have been "trained to be wary of 'emotion and philosophy'". This suggests that the astronauts are not meant to have any bias or personal opinion while carrying out their experiments. Hayden creates another new phrase at the end of the stanza, ~~to~~ to refer to the ~~otherworldly~~ otherworldly experience: "breaking/ the calcined stillness/ of once Absolute Otherwhere." The use of the word "once" indicates ~~how~~ how the moon used to seem so alien to humans, until the first moon landing. The idea of being at the



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fringe of human exploration is suggested at the start of the third stanza, along with the idea that they are children of earth: "Risking edges, earthlings". ~~This is~~ The word "earthlings" also suggests how insignificant the astronauts are, in size, compared to the earth and the moon. It is ironic, as in the next couple of lines Hayden suggests that their machines are the astronauts' only friends: "to whom ~~only~~ / their machines are friendly". The irony of this idea is that machines are inhuman, yet the astronauts appear to be humanising them, at the thought of being their only friends. This also shows how detached they are from



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humanity, and how the astronauts are so limited in their interactions; A philosophical question is raised next, as the idea of a god is included, ~~is~~ in brackets: "(and God's radar-/watching eye?)" The question mark at the end signifies that the existence of a god is debatable. The way in which his eye is referred to as "radar-watching" is relating to the previous notion that their machines are the astronauts' only friends. It also alludes to the idea that God is "all-seeing". The rest of the third stanza is quite scientific, and talks about scientific experiments as "they / labor at gathering / proof of hypothesis". The twenty-fourth line uses sibilance and oxymoron to describe the weather: "in snowshine ~~of~~ of sunlight". This ~~is~~ depicts the sun shining down, while the moon itself gives the impression of there being ~~a~~ snow, with the sun reflecting off it. The poet then hints at





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The danger of their mission, as ~~the light is~~ "dangerous as radium". The comparison to radium adds to the scientific and technical tone of the passage, as well as the next line: "probe detritus for clues."

The ~~final~~ final stanza has a completely new tone, as it asks a series of questions. It ~~asks~~ asks for a reason as to why the astronauts are on the moon, and the idea that we cannot perceive their danger is also suggested: "What is it we wish them / to find for us, as / we watch them on our / screens?" Hayden refers to "we" several times throughout this stanza. This separates the astronauts from



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people on earth, and gives the impression that everyone on earth is depending on "them". The idea of the astronauts being heroic is conveyed again, as well as the reality of their mission, and the ~~fact~~ fact^{that} they ~~are~~ are still only human: "They loom there / heroic antiheroes, / smaller than myth and / poignantly human." By being described as "smaller than myth" we get the idea that their mission is a reality. "Heroic antiheroes" is an oxymoron, with "antiheroes" suggesting that they are not really heroes as such, they are mere scientists doing their job. The last three lines of the stanza^{each} ask a different question: "Why are we troubled? / What do we ask of these men? / What do we ask of ourselves?" These questions are quite philosophical, and address uncertainties with space exploration. Instead of ~~concluding~~ concluding the poem, these final questions leave the reader to dwell on the surrounding issues.

Throughout this





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poem, there is reference to science. This is seen in the topic of the poem, as well as the technical language used, for example "calcined", "hypothesis", "detritus". I think that this poem not only ~~addresses~~ addresses space exploration, but science in general. There is mention of "Risking edges", and the questions in the final stanza, which shows the dangers involved with scientific progress. The isolation and lack of ~~personality~~ ^{identity} of the astronauts show how the scientists who are ~~are~~ discovering new knowledge are not celebrated like other celebrities, hence "antiheroes". The ~~big~~ philosophical question referring to God shows how scientists are ~~usually~~ ultimately looking for evidence of any higher beings, and each scientist is usually either religious or agnostic. The last three questions



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of the poem shows the demands that are put on scientists, and humanity's thirst for knowledge. The first question of the last stanza shows that we are unsure of what we are looking for, as a lot of discoveries are accidental. There is another theme of the meaning for life, and what we expect of ourselves throughout our lives = "What do we ask of ourselves?"

The third stanza alludes to the ~~fact that~~ ~~scientific~~ nature of scientists, in that they are usually very independent, and work all year round: "in snowshine of sunlight." The mention that they have been "trained to be wary of "emotion and philosophy" talks of human bias, and how scientists are not meant to be ~~philosophical~~ philosophical, instead trying to prove theories with empirical studies and quantitative data. The questions in the final stanza also ~~ask~~ ask why we need to always be discovering new things, why can we not be content living on earth? The idea of our thirst





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1) for knowledge is highlighted by
b) the question "Why are we troubled?"
There is a ~~constant~~ constant notion
of fantasy throughout the poem, as
the astronauts are described as
"heroic", and being "armored". The fact
that "Absolute Otherwhere" is in
capital letters signifies the existence
of this place, and how it is so
detached from our planet.

As we can see, throughout
Astronauts by Robert Hayden, there
are several underlying themes, central
to the idea of scientific and technological
advances. Hayden is very creative in his
writing, creating several new words and using
literary techniques such as alliteration and
oxymoron to convey his ideas. This poem
is very provocative, leaving the reader



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asking themselves ~~many~~ several philosophical
questions.

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