

## “Auto Wreck” by Karl Shapiro (1942)

Its quick soft silver bell beating, beating,  
And down the dark one ruby flare  
Pulsing out red light like an artery,  
The ambulance at top speed floating down  
Past beacons and illuminated clocks           5  
Wings in a heavy curve, dips down,  
And brakes speed, entering the crowd.  
The doors leap open, emptying light;  
Stretchers are laid out, the mangled lifted  
And stowed into the little hospital.           10  
Then the bell, breaking the hush, tolls once.  
And the ambulance with its terrible cargo  
Rocking, slightly rocking, moves away,  
As the doors, an afterthought, are closed.

We are deranged, walking among the cops           15  
Who sweep glass and are large and composed.  
One is still making notes under the light.  
One with a bucket douches ponds of blood  
Into the street and gutter.  
One hangs lanterns on the wrecks that cling,           20  
Empty husks of locusts, to iron poles.

Our throats were tight as tourniquets,  
Our feet were bound with splints, but now,  
Like convalescents intimate and gauche,  
We speak through sickly smiles and warn           25  
With the stubborn saw of common sense,  
The grim joke and the banal resolution.  
The traffic moves around with care,  
But we remain, touching a wound  
That opens to our richest horror.           30

Already old, the question Who shall die?  
Becomes unspoken Who is innocent?  
For death in war is done by hands;  
Suicide has cause and stillbirth, logic;  
And cancer, simple as a flower, blooms.           35  
But this invites the occult mind,  
Cancels our physics with a sneer,  
And spatters all we knew of denouement  
Across the expedient and wicked stones.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

"Auto Wreck"  
Analysis Questions

Directions: Read and paraphrase the poem in the space to the right on the poem handout. Next, answer the following questions in the literature section of your notebook. Answers should reflect much thought and effort.

1. Each stanza contains a different focus. Characterize the content of each stanza.
2. How does the speaker feel about death by auto wreck?  
Justify your response with textual evidence.
3. According to the speaker, how does death in war differ from death by auto wreck?  
How does it differ from suicide?  
How does it differ from death by incurable disease?
4. Discuss one metaphor. What two items are being compared? Why is the metaphor effective in the poem?
5. Discuss one simile. What two items are being compared? Why is the simile effective in the poem?
6. Discuss one image not selected for question #4 or #5. Explain its effectiveness in the poem.
7. With the intrusion of "We" in line 15 of the second stanza, the poem abruptly switches from a seemingly third person point of view. What does the poet accomplish with this shift?
8. What other single words carry an important effect in the story? Jot them down and explain their impact on the reader, or to the poem as a whole.
9. Explain the final four lines (#35-38) of the poem. How might they be interpreted?
10. How would you state the poem's theme?

# Karl Shapiro

Born on November 10, 1913, in Baltimore, Karl Jay Shapiro attended the University of Virginia and Johns Hopkins University. He graduated in 1939 and served in the army for the duration of World War II. Shapiro's poetry began to be published during the war; while stationed in New Guinea, he would send poems home to his fiancée, who then had them printed. Collections of these form the bulk of his best-known work: *Person, Place, and Thing* (1942), *Place of Love* (1943), *Essay on Rime* (1945), and *V-Letter and Other Poems* (1945), which won the Pulitzer Prize. Shapiro was editor of *Poetry* magazine from 1948 to 1950.

Shapiro then became a member of the English faculty at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where he was the editor of *Prairie Schooner* from 1956-1966. There he solicited and published many important twentieth-century poets, including Richard Eberhart, Josephine Jacobsen, Josephine Miles, John Frederick Nims, Octavio Paz, and William Carlos Williams. Shapiro's fame broke important ground for Jewish-American poets: in 1948 he opposed the Bollingen Prize committee's decision to grant an award to Ezra Pound, on the grounds of Pound's rampant anti-Semitism and in 1950 he published *Poems of a Jew*. He was awarded a Levison Prize, the Contemporary Poetry Prize in 1943, an Academy of Arts and Letters Grant in 1944, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and the Shelley Memorial Prize. He also served as Poetry Consultant at the Library of Congress, a position which is now the U.S. Poet Laureate. Shapiro died in New York City on May 14, 2000.