

AQA English GCSE

Poetry: Worlds and Lives

Thirteen – *Caleb Femi*

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THIRTEEN

Caleb Femi

Brief Summary

Thirteen follows a thirteen-year-old boy who is stopped by police just minutes from home because he “**fits the description**” of a robbery suspect. The encounter shifts from disbelief to fear as he realises he is being treated as a threat rather than as a child. One of the officers is someone the boy recognises from a visit to his primary school, where the officer once gave a talk praising the children and encouraging them, which makes the situation feel especially **unsettling**. The poem ends with the boy recalling the idea of “**supernovas**”, turning something that once felt hopeful into something darker and showing how quickly safety can **collapse** into danger.



Synopsis

- The poem follows a thirteen-year-old boy walking home when he is suddenly stopped and cornered by a police officer.
- The officer tells him there has been a robbery in the area and suggests the boy matches the description of the **suspect**.
- The boy reacts with **disbelief** and tries to explain that the situation is ridiculous because he is only thirteen.
- A second officer joins in, making the encounter feel more serious and intimidating.
- The boy recognises one of the officers from primary school, where he once spoke kindly to the children in assembly.
- The boy tries to use this connection to make the officer see him as a child, not a suspect. Instead, the officers treat him as dangerous and suspicious.
- As his fear grows, he remembers that same school day, including the assembly and his teacher speaking about supernovas afterwards.
- The poem ends with an ambiguous and **unsettling mood** by recalling that supernovas are dying stars that can collapse into black holes.

Context

Caleb Femi

Caleb Femi is a **British-Nigerian** poet and filmmaker whose work explores race, identity, and power through the experiences of young Black people in London. Having moved from Nigeria to London as a child and grown up in **Peckham**, his writing reflects how environment and authority shape the lives of young people.



His writing often centres voices that are ignored or **misrepresented**, showing how quickly ordinary moments can become tense when society treats certain young people as suspicious by default.

Policing, race, and stop-and-search in Britain

In Britain, **stop-and-search** has been a long-running site of controversy because of **racial profiling** and the unequal way police powers are experienced by different communities. Official government data shows that Black people are stopped at far higher rates than White people across England and Wales, and London's policing has played a major role in shaping this pattern. This has fuelled ongoing public debate about fairness, **prejudice**, and the way **suspicion** and negative judgement can fall on young Black boys even in ordinary situations.



Childhood and innocence

In Britain, there is a wider social issue around the **“adultification”** of Black children, where Black children are more likely to be seen as older, less innocent, or more threatening than they really are. The poem pushes back against narratives that deny Black children the protection usually associated with childhood.

In Britain, there is a wider social concern about the **vulnerability** of children to violence in everyday spaces. Femi's work reflects the reality that some young people face genuine danger simply moving through their communities, as seen in high-profile cases such as the killing of Damilola Taylor in Peckham in 2000, which drew national attention to youth safety in London. This context helps explain why the poem presents a short, ordinary walk home as something that can quickly become frightening and unsafe.

The title “Thirteen”

The title is deliberately plain and factual, forcing the reader to focus on the boy's age before anything else. This makes the poem's events feel more disturbing.

Thirteen sits on the cusp of the teenage years, when someone is starting to grow up but is still undeniably a child. The title highlights how quickly that childhood can be stripped away when the boy is treated as a threat rather than protected as innocent.

Thirteen

The title reflects the boy's repeated insistence on his age as the clearest marker of innocence. By foregrounding it, the poem suggests that even being thirteen is not enough to prevent suspicion, showing how quickly a child can be misread as a threat.

Writing the age as “Thirteen” (in words) makes it feel personal and spoken, as if the boy is saying it aloud in self-defence. It also keeps the focus on his humanity and innocence, instead of making him seem like a statistic or a detail in a police report.



Perspective and Tone

Thirteen is written in the **second person**, using “**you**” to place the reader directly into the boy’s position and make the experience feel **immediate** and **unavoidable**. This perspective also reflects how common and **predictable** the situation feels, as if it is something that could happen again and again to young Black boys in public spaces.



The poem moves between the boy’s present fear and his memories of primary school, which creates a disturbing **contrast** between how adults once spoke to him with warmth and how he is treated now with **suspicion**.

The tone **shifts** sharply across the poem. It begins almost casually, with the boy laughing at the idea that he could be a suspect, but it quickly becomes **tense** and threatening as the officers’ power closes in.

The mood turns darker and more disturbing as the boy realises he is seen as powerless and vulnerable, and the **imagery** becomes increasingly surreal. By the end, the tone is bleak and **disillusioned**, as the hopeful image of “**supernovas**” **collapses** into something **ominous**, suggesting the boy’s innocence is being swallowed by fear and injustice.



Thirteen

Second-person voice places the reader directly into the boy's experience, making the moment feel personal and unavoidable rather than distant.

The question exposes racialised misrecognition: the boy is treated as a "man", stripping him of childhood. The hyphen works like a jolt, capturing the shift from disbelief to unease.

The sudden memory shift to primary school highlights how the boy searches for familiarity to steady himself.

The school assembly memory contrasts sharply with the present moment, making the stop feel even more disturbing because this officer was once associated with safety.

The smile image suggests friendliness with limits, hinting that warmth is conditional and temporary.

The smile becomes calculated rather than natural- the boy feels he has to perform harmlessness in order to stay safe. The religious language suggests desperation and dependence, as if his safety relies on the officer's mood rather than justice

Direct speech shows him trying to force recognition, turning the encounter into a desperate attempt to be seen as human. The question sounds pleading, revealing the collapse of trust into fear.

You will be four minutes from home

when you are cornered by an officer

who will tell you of a robbery, forty

minutes ago in the area. You fit

the description of a man? – You'll laugh.

Thirteen, you'll tell him: you're thirteen.

You'll be patted on the shoulder, then, by another fed

whose face takes you back to Gloucester Primary School,

a Wednesday assembly about being little stars.

This same officer had an horizon in the east

of his smile when he told your class that

you were all supernovas,

the biggest and brightest stars.

You will show the warmth of your teeth

praying he remembers the heat of you supernova;

he will see you powerless – plump.

You will watch the two men cast lots for your organs.

Don't you remember me? you will ask.

You gave a talk at my primary school.

The precise time markers create a realistic, documentary feel, showing how quickly routine life can turn threatening. Starting mid-incident creates disorientation, mirroring how suddenly the boy is pulled into suspicion.

Repetition of his age becomes both defence and protest, but it also shows how powerless facts can be against authority.

The shoulder pat seems reassuring on the surface, but it can feel controlling or performative. Colloquial phrasing keeps the voice authentic and youthful, while hinting at a tense relationship between community and police.

The exaggerated praise feels like a motivational script, setting up later disillusionment when the boy realises encouragement doesn't equal protection.

The image of the officers "casting lots" echoes a biblical scene where people gamble for possessions- the boy feels his body and future are being treated as objects to be divided up rather than something valued.

This makes the moment feel cold and inhuman, as if decisions about his life are being made casually by those in power.



Fear becomes physical and silencing, as if panic thickens and blocks speech. The poem loops back again to school, showing the boy trying to interpret danger through childhood learning.

The colon signals a final shift, preparing the reader for the memory to be redefined.

Ending here leaves the poem unresolved, with danger hanging in the final image.

While fear condenses on your lips,
 you will remember that Wednesday, after the assembly,

 your teacher speaking more about supernovas:

 how they are, in fact, dying stars

 on the verge of becoming black holes.

This detail makes the trauma immediate: the boy cannot control how his body reacts to power.

The ending reframes earlier praise into something ominous: brightness becomes collapse.

Structurally, it closes on a scientific “afterthought” that darkens the whole memory, suggesting that even hope can carry threat underneath it.

Structure

Second person future tense

- The poem is written in **second person** (“*you*”) and uses **future tense** (“*You will be*”), which makes the event feel **unavoidable**, like the speaker is reliving something that is **destined** to happen.
- This structure puts the reader directly into the boy’s position, making the police **confrontation** feel personal and immediate rather than distant.

Clear narrative stages

- The poem is organised into **clear stages**: the stop near home → recognition of the officer from primary school → the boy’s attempt to appear harmless → the moment turning threatening → the ending memory of supernovas.
- Each stanza **shifts** the situation further from “confusing” into frightening, creating a steady build in **tension**.



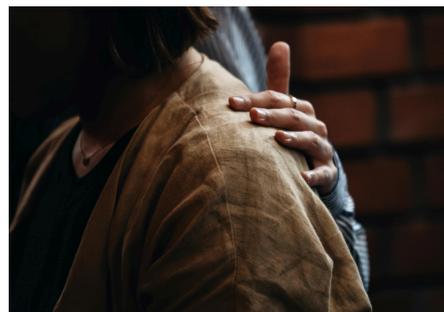
Volta

- The poem’s **volta/ turning point** comes when the boy realises recognition will not protect him, and the tone **shifts** from hope to danger.
- Structurally, this shift is marked by the move from **nostalgic** school **imagery** to **violent imagery**, especially in “*You will watch the two men cast lots for your organs.*”



Enjambment and pacing

- **Enjambment** carries sentences across lines so the poem feels fast and **pressured**, mirroring how the boy has little control over what is happening.
- The opening section moves quickly through time and accusation, creating the feeling of being **trapped** in a situation that keeps advancing.



Ending

- The poem ends by **circling back** to the memory of the primary school assembly, creating a **structural “return”** to an earlier moment in the boy’s life.
- Structurally, this return **reframes** the same image in a darker way: the officer once described the children as **“supernovas”**, but the final lines reveal supernovas are **“dying stars”**.
- Ending on **“black holes”** gives the poem a **final shift** into something more **unsettling**, so the last stanza changes how the earlier encouragement is remembered and leaves the reader with a sense of danger closing in.

Language and Imagery

Realism, accusation and power

The poem feels **realistic** because it includes precise time details such as **“four minutes from home”** and **“forty / minutes ago”**. These specific markers make the event seem ordinary and believable, as if this could happen to anyone.

That sense of **normality** is disturbed when the officer says **“You fit / the description of a man?”**. The question sounds casual, but it is deeply unsettling. It suggests that suspicion is routine and that the boy is being judged without real evidence.



Even small actions feel threatening. The detail **“patted on the shoulder”** might seem friendly at first, but here it suggests control and **authority**. It shows how quickly a normal moment can become intimidating.

Juxtaposition and the supernova metaphor

Femi creates a strong **contrast** between childhood safety and present danger. The memory of **“Gloucester Primary School”** and **“a Wednesday assembly”** should feel safe and comforting. Instead, it appears during a frightening encounter, which makes the memory feel out of place and painful.



The **extended metaphor** of stars deepens this contrast. The officer once told the children they were “**supernovas**”, an image of brightness and potential. However, the poem later reminds us that supernovas are “**dying stars**” that become “**black holes**”.



This **shift** changes the meaning of the earlier praise. What once sounded hopeful now feels dark and threatening. It shows how words of encouragement can lose their meaning when power is used unfairly.

Dehumanisation and desperate recognition

As the tension grows, the imagery becomes more disturbing. The phrase “**cast lots for your organs**” is a **biblical allusion**. In the Bible, soldiers cast lots for Jesus’ clothes, which suggests cruelty and lack of care. Here, it makes the boy feel as if his body is being divided or judged without humanity.

The description “**powerless – plump**” sounds harsh and exposed. The hyphen creates a **sharp pause**, making the judgement feel sudden and humiliating.

In contrast, the plea “**Don’t you remember me?**” is deeply human. The boy tries to remind the officer of their past connection. He hopes memory will protect him. The fact that he has to ask shows how completely **authority** has replaced personal recognition.



Themes

Racial profiling and injustice

Thirteen explores how racial profiling can make a normal moment feel dangerous, especially for a young Black boy.

Even though he is a child, he is treated with suspicion and forced to justify himself, shown through “**You fit / the description of a man?**” and his repeated defence “**Thirteen... you’re thirteen.**” The poem highlights how quickly **prejudice** can override common sense, turning an ordinary walk home into a moment of fear and vulnerability.



Loss of innocence

A key theme is how childhood **innocence** can be disrupted by adult power and judgement. The boy is caught at an age where he should still be protected, but the situation pushes him into adult fear and awareness.

The poem **contrasts** the safety of primary school memories with the reality of being **confronted** by police, showing how growing up is not always gradual – it can be **forced** and sudden.

Betrayal of trust and disillusionment

The poem also focuses on **betrayal**, especially because the boy recognises one of the officers as someone who once encouraged him at school. That past **connection** makes the present feel even more disturbing, because someone who once **represented** care and guidance now becomes part of the threat. The poem captures how trust in **authority** can **collapse** when the people meant to protect you become the ones you fear.

Fear, vulnerability, and dehumanisation

As the poem progresses, it shows how **powerless** the boy becomes in the face of authority. He is physically and emotionally vulnerable, and the officers' control makes him feel less like a person and more like an **object** being judged.

The disturbing image **“cast lots for your organs”** suggests he feels **dehumanised**, as if his life and body are being treated casually, which reinforces how extreme and frightening the situation becomes.

Comparisons

In A London Drawingroom – George Eliot

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both poems present urban life as tense and dehumanising, where people are reduced to objects or threats rather than individuals, shown through <i>Thirteen's</i> suspicion in “You fit / the description of a man?” and Eliot's bleak description of London as “a long line of wall”. Both writers suggest the city damages ordinary human feeling and safety, as <i>Thirteen</i> turns a short walk home into fear (“cornered”), while Eliot describes a place with no emotional warmth, shown in “the lowest rate of colour, warmth & joy”. Both poems create a sense of isolation in public spaces: the boy is surrounded by authority figures, while Eliot's London feels empty and disconnected, emphasised by “No figure lingering / Pauses”.
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Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Thirteen</i> is immediate and personal, using second person voice to trap the reader inside the boy's experience ("You will..."), while <i>In a London Drawingroom</i> feels detached and observational, as if the speaker is surveying the city from a distance. • Femi focuses on a single moment of threat and fear, while Eliot presents a wider, ongoing critique of the whole environment, making London seem permanently lifeless through images like "solid fog". <i>Thirteen</i> ends with a disturbing shift from hope to danger, where the "supernova" idea becomes darker through "dying stars" and "black holes", whereas Eliot ends by reinforcing monotony and emotional emptiness, leaving the city unchanged and trapped in its bleakness.
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England in 1819 – Percy Bysshe Shelley

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Both poems criticise systems of power that fail ordinary people, with <i>Thirteen</i> showing authority acting with suspicion and control, while Shelley attacks national leadership directly through "An old, mad, blind, despised, and dying King". • Both suggest that society is corrupted from the top down, where those meant to protect instead cause harm: Femi's officers intimidate a child, while Shelley describes rulers who "leech-like... drain" the nation. • Both create a mood of injustice and danger, showing how vulnerable people suffer under oppressive structures, whether through policing in the street or political decay across the whole country.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Thirteen</i> is intimate and specific, focusing on one boy's fear in one moment, while <i>England in 1819</i> is broad and revolutionary, addressing an entire nation's crisis through sweeping political imagery like "a people starved and stabbed". • Femi's poem is psychologically tense and personal, shaped by memory and betrayal, while Shelley's is openly furious and accusatory, using harsh, relentless language to condemn institutions. • <i>England in 1819</i> ends with a small possibility of renewal through "a glorious Phantom may / Burst", while <i>Thirteen</i> ends by darkening a childhood image into collapse, leaving the reader with a more unsettled and disillusioned finish.



A Portable Paradise – Roger Robinson

<p>Similarities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Both poems show a speaker trying to survive pressure from the outside world, with <i>Thirteen</i> shaped by police suspicion (“cornered”), and Robinson’s poem shaped by fear of theft and control, shown in “That way they can’t steal it”. • Both explore how identity can be protected through memory and inner life: <i>Thirteen</i> retreats into the remembered school assembly (“Gloucester Primary School”), while <i>A Portable Paradise</i> shows the mind creating safety through imagination and inheritance (“I’m speaking of my grandmother”). • Both poems use everyday realism to make the situation feel socially believable, grounding their ideas in ordinary moments like walking home or being in a room, before revealing deeper vulnerability underneath.
<p>Differences</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Thirteen</i> is dominated by confrontation and power imbalance, where authority controls the boy’s body and movement, while <i>A Portable Paradise</i> is more instructive and protective, using imperative verbs like “get yourself to an empty room” to offer a method of coping. • Femi’s poem is rooted in public danger and social judgement, while Robinson’s focuses more on private refuge and emotional survival, with the “paradise” acting as something carried internally rather than fought for externally. • <i>Thirteen</i> ends with a tone of uncertainty and threat, as the hopeful image of stars collapses into “black holes”, whereas <i>A Portable Paradise</i> ends with reassurance and renewal through light imagery like “fresh hope / of morning”.

