The Poem

Sprawl commonly denotes an unevenly extended spatial position lacking visual order, as in “urban sprawl.” This fifty-line free-verse poem adapts the usage to identify a behavioral stance in which individuals exceed the limits of conventional behavior to achieve an end. The poem contains eight stanzas, each of which is an independent unit of illustration. The word “Sprawl,” which begins each stanza, is the subject of a present-tense statement of what sprawl is or does contrasted with its negative image. Many of the characters and incidents representing sprawl have the exaggerated quality of social “tall tales,” but are offered in a straightforward and definite tone that invites belief. The opening incident shows sprawl to be a farmer cutting down a Rolls-Royce to make a pickup truck. The reaction of the company in trying to reclaim its image is predictably routine and bespeaks a lack of sprawl. In the second set of illustrations, a farmer sows his fields by plane, a hitchhiker is driven “that extra hundred miles home,” and someone concentrates on internal being. These are acts of “sprawl” because they exceed accepted norms for a purpose that can be seen as practical. Wasteful and useless gestures such as “lighting cigars with tendollar notes” are not acts of sprawl. A contrast is also drawn with “style,” which has display as its goal. Sprawl extends the rules, as when racing dogs are fed “liver and beer,” or when a “dozen” bananas are actually fourteen. Acts of sprawl become expressive or powerful when words and conventions are powerless. When logger Hank Stamper, a hero figure in a film drawn from a Ken Kesey novel, faces a powerful lumber conglomerate, his eloquence consists of using his chain saw to dissect a bureaucrat’s desk. The fourth illustration turns to historical information. Sprawl is always on the side of the individual but “is never brutal,” as was Simon de Montfort in his revolt against Henry the Third. All human activities leave room
for sprawl. Among those parts of poetry that qualify as sprawl, the poet humorously includes the non-existent fifteenth to twenty-first lines of a sonnet. He continues to tease the reader, stating that, though he is familiar with paintings possessing sprawl, “I have sprawl enough to have forgotten which paintings.” Sprawl is a semi heroic stand against authority that may be seen as “criminal presumption” by those with a group identity. The sixth stanza mentions the Borgia Pope Alexander proclaiming the division between the Spanish and the Portuguese “New World” as such a questionable example. The actors in the next-to-last stanza are Australian eccentrics, such as Beatrice Miles. A street person, she reputedly travelled by taxi from Sydney to Melbourne on coin donations from impromptu recitations. Sprawl is thus elevated to a state worthy of public pride. The poet applauds the independence of spirit that leads such people to follow their impulses. The final stanza discusses sprawl and its possible effect on society. Sprawl is subversive in a mischievous way. It endures only if it is not taken seriously by those it mocks. The poem ends in a somber warning: “people have been shot for sprawl.”

Forms and Devices Stanzaic organization is a conspicuous element in the framework of “The Quality of Sprawl.” Free verse is often organized according to word and line placement that avoids recurring patterns in favour of rhythmic effects and visual configurations. In many unrhymed poems, stanzaic division is irregular or non-existent. By comparison, the discursive content of this poem is presented in eight orderly stanzas of roughly equal informational importance. The basic component of all stanzas is the complete grammatical sentence. Phrases do not dangle or drift loosely. Most are integrated within sentences as clauses. Word groupings in longer sentences are regulated by means of the correct use of commas and parentheses, though some internal quotation marks are left out. A large variety of sentence length and structure is used. The five lines of the first stanza are a single, elongated compound-complex sentence with three clauses. A short, simple sentence, “Sprawl occurs in art,” opens the fifth stanza. While the stanzas range between five and nine lines, the number of grammatical sentences in each varies from one to five. Every stanza can be read independently. No sentence or idea is continued from one stanza to the next, nor are there intricate transitions between the stanzas. In place of such links, a basic internal organization is repeated. Each stanza contains one central statement about sprawl followed by a discussion focusing on an example of this aspect of sprawl. An internal
balance is formed with a corresponding glimpse of what is never sprawl. The word “sprawl” is used to begin each new stanza, producing a visual uniformity that further connects the individual stanzas. The final stanza alone breaks this pattern by adding “No” to its first line. Despite this reliance on the conventions of written composition, Les A. Murray maintains the liveliness of natural speech. He sustains a tone of congeniality, choosing vocabulary that is never didactic or argumentative, creating an impression of immediate understanding between reader and author. This is necessary to ensure that sprawl is accepted as an existing human characteristic, not a function of Murray’s reactive imagination. The audience is, therefore, addressed in language that is specific rather than general, with examples that are concrete rather than abstract. The car that is turned into a utility vehicle is identified by brand name. The “lighting” of a cigar “with ten-dollar notes” is called an act of “idiot ostentation and murder.” The few places where language is distilled beyond the commonplace stand out. The first instance (stanza 6) is the use of a Latin term, “In petto,” in place of more everyday words such as “secretly” or “to himself.” An ordinary reader would need to look up this term, especially since it is the hinge on which the example of Pope Alexander’s act of sprawl turns. Another atypical line, “And would that it were more so” (stanza 7), is notable for its fervour as well as its poetic syntax. The overall good humour with which Murray entertains as he informs offsets the more serious tone that surfaces at the poem’s conclusion. The poem remains a light handling of a theme that Murray believes is worth serious consideration. He accomplishes this by using a lively and diverse array of subjects—from folk wisdom to British painting, from Catholic history to the author’s own kinfolk—that provide pictures of sprawl in action. The anecdotal approach, rather than one of full narrative richness, presumes acceptance and precludes close analysis. Vignettes are offered in a quick succession of cartoonlike drawings of sprawl. These are focused by means of a contrasting negation of sprawl within each frame. The overall effect is that of a good-natured piece of entertainment with a serious theme.

Themes and Meanings

The theme of this poem is the resilient spirit of the individual who refuses to be rendered helpless by the norms of society. Despite Murray’s disclaimer that “Sprawl is really classless” (stanza 7), this poem is very much about class. The hero is the “little person,” the average
citizen who does not normally control fate but who, on occasion, seizes a chance to make a forceful personal statement. The unspoken villain is the establishment, which evokes conformity to rules even when they are meaningless or makes decisions on a scale that negates individual preference. Murray presents sprawl as inherent in certain types of actions regardless of motive or consequence. The first story, for example, is clear, but many details are left out. One can imagine that there is some reason, such as a dispute or the age of the vehicle, behind the transformation of the luxury motor car into a mundane truck, but such background detail remains unnecessary. The degree of success achieved by Hank Stamper’s response is similarly irrelevant. The emphasis is on the largesse of spirit that connects such diverse acts as “farming by aeroplane” and going far out of the way to take home a hitchhiker. From the outset, there is no attempt to offer a concise, dictionary-style definition of “sprawl” as used by the author. No exact synonyms are given. Such a verbal approached is avoided. In its place, a lively, often satirical, extended definition is formed, example by example. “Sprawl” here is a noun of adjectival fullness, describing and defining a certain group of actions and reactions that will seem immediately familiar to most readers, even those who do not engage in such behaviour. Its application is to any nonroutine human response that blends the grandly inelegant with the forcefully expressive once-in-a-lifetime gesture. “Sprawl” colours human actions in glaring neon hues that break through the routine sameness and the dull everyday necessity to “fit in.” Murray begins and ends by applauding sprawl. Sprawl is noticeable but not showy. It may be inelegant, but it is not disgusting. Inventiveness and practicality merge with stubbornness and independence in sprawl. It endures because it encourages action and makes people feel good about themselves.