

TO HIS COY MISTRESS

Lines 1-2

*Had we but world enough, and time,
This coyness, Lady, were no crime*

The speaker starts off by telling the mistress that *if* there was enough time and enough space ("world enough, and time"), then her "coyness" (see "What's up with the title" for some definitions) wouldn't be a criminal act.

This is a roundabout way of calling her a criminal, and makes us think of jails, courtrooms, and punishments.

Hmmm. What exactly is her crime? What is she being "coy" about?

Lines 3-4

*We would sit down and think which way
To walk and pass our long love's day.*

In any case, he continues.... If they had all the time and space they wanted, they could Google everything, read guide books, and carefully consider where they might go next, while aimlessly strolling and resting whenever they pleased.

Line 5

Thou by the Indian Ganges' side

She could hang out on the bank of the "[Indian Ganges](#)" finding "rubies."

The Ganges River is considered sacred and holy by many people all over the world. In Marvell's time, the Ganges is pure and pristine. Now, many parts of it are incredibly polluted.

Lines 5-6

*Thou by the Indian Ganges' side
Shouldst rubies find: I by the tide*

And, he would be across the world at the [Humber tidal estuary](#), skipping in the froth from the waves and whining. (Actually, he says "complain," which also means "love song.")

This would place them far away from each other, obviously.

The speaker doesn't sound thrilled at the idea of a long-distance relationship.

Lines 7-10

*Of Humber would complain. I would
Love you ten years before the Flood,*

*And you should, if you please, refuse
Till the conversion of the Jews.*

He would go back in time to Noah and the Flood, and forward in time to the "conversion of the Jews," all the while loving her.

The speaker's grand, Biblical language mocks poems which describe love in divine terms.

Lines 11-12

*My vegetable love should grow
Vaster than empires, and more slow;*

Then, we get one of the poem's most famous lines. The speaker starts telling the mistress about his "vegetable love."

Much debate occurs over the meaning of this term.

The word "slow" in line 12 gives us a clue. We think "vegetable love" is "organic love" – love without the pressure of anything but nature, a natural process resulting in something nourishing – vegetables.

But, be careful. Since it's organic, vegetable love will cost a little more in the grocery store.

We can't neglect another connotation, either.

A certain part of the male anatomy is shaped like certain members of the vegetable kingdom. Vegetable love also refers to that.

Some literary critics think the "vegetable" in "vegetable love" refers to the female anatomy, as well.

We'll let you do the math on your own.

Lines 13-17

*An hundred years should go to praise
Thine eyes and on thy forehead gaze;
Two hundred to adore each breast,
But thirty thousand to the rest;
An age at least to every part,*

Anyhow, he says that, *if* he had time, he would give her compliments about each of her individual body parts, and he would spend a bazillion years doing it.

Line 18

And the last age should show your heart.

And then, finally, after all that complimenting, she would "show [her] heart," presumably by having sex with him.

Line 19-20

*For, Lady, you deserve this state,
Nor would I love at lower rate.*

You're worth it, too, he says, and I wouldn't give you anything less than that first-class love.

The word "rate" cleverly links with the word "heart" of the previous line, making us think of "heart rate."

Lines 21-22

*But at my back I always hear
Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near;*

And, then, he gives her a huge gigantic "BUT." Ouch. You see, the speaker hears something behind him: "Time's winged chariot," to be exact.

He's being chased down by Time's hybrid car!

He doesn't say who's driving, but we can assume it's probably Time.

Lines 23-24

*And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity.*

Then, he seems to have a hallucination.

Look, he tells the mistress, look at all this sand. The future is just endless sand.

We're all going to die.

Line 25

Thy beauty shall no more be found,

And you won't look so pretty there, missy.

Lines 26

Nor, in thy marble vault, shall sound

- You sure won't be able to hear my pretty song when you are in a "grave."

Lines 27-28

*My echoing song: then worms shall try
That long preserved virginity,*

This next part is even creepier.

The speaker tells the mistress that, in the grave, worms will have sex with her.

According to the line, she's a virgin.

Line 29

And your quaint honour turn to dust,

In the grave, her "quaint honor" will completely disintegrate.

According to *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, "quaint" is a euphemism that means "vagina."

So, he's telling her that she can't take her virginity with her into the afterlife, and making icky jokes about her vagina.

Line 30

And into ashes all my lust:

Next, he tells her that if they die without having sex together, his "lust" or desire, will all burn up, with nothing left but the "ashes."

Interestingly, he seems to imply that, if he can't have sex with her, he won't have sex at all.

Lines 31-32

*The grave 's a fine and private place,
But none, I think, do there embrace.*

He rubs in the whole thing by telling her that coffins are great: they have lots of privacy, but no hugging!

Line 33

Now therefore, while the youthful hue

Luckily, he leaves all that morbidity behind, and gives us the old "now, therefore." By this, the speaker suggests that his argument is successful, and that he's about to tell the mistress what she should do, since his argument is so successful.

Lines 34-36

*Sits on thy skin like morning dew,
And while thy willing soul transpires*

At every pore with instant fires,

- He kind of brings her back from the grave here. Just a minute ago, he imagines her dead in the crypt, and, now, he tells her how young she is, and how her soul rushes around excitedly inside her, leaking out through her pores.
- "Transpire" has a few fun meanings that you can ponder.
- The first is "to come to light."
- The second is "to happen."
- The third actually has to do with plants. If a plant "transpires," it loses water vapor through its stomata (little pores on a plant's leaves), a crucial part of photosynthesis.

Line 37

Now let us sport us while we may,

- Since you are transpiring (rhymes with "perspiring") and all, let's play some games, he tells her.
- Then, he gets a brilliant idea.

Line 38

And now, like amorous birds of prey,

- They should pretend to be birds of prey, mating!
- (Sounds a little dangerous to us.)
- Also, the word "prey" introduces violence, and therefore uneasiness, into the scene.

Line 39

Rather at once our time devour

- But, before the games begin, we should have a little pre-mating dinner.
- Here, honey, try this seared fillet-o-time, on a bed of vegetable love.
- And for dessert – time capsules!
- See, time deserves to be eaten.

Line 40

Than languish in his slow-chapt power.

- Time exerts its "slow-chapped power" over the speaker for far too long.
- According to the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, "slow-chapped power" means "slowly devouring jaws."
- In short, he feels like he's dying in Time's mouth, and

that time is slowly eating him up.

- He wants to turn the tables, and thinks that sex, or so he tells his mistress, is the way to get time under his control.

Lines 41-42

*Let us roll all our strength and all
Our sweetness up into one ball,*

- Next comes his actual description of sex. The rolling up in a ball doesn't sound so bad. "Strength" carries on the idea of sex as sport from line 37. Come to think of it, "ball" works that way, too.

Lines 43-44

*And tear our pleasures with rough strife
Thorough the iron gates of life:*

- But, what's with "tear" and "strife"?
- It makes sense from the speaker's perspective.
- He claims to believe that sex is the way to another world, a way to break out of the prison of time.
- This also suggests that he thinks that bringing the "strife" of life into the bedroom will enhance the sexual experience.

Lines 45-46

*Thus, though we cannot make our sun
Stand still, yet we will make him run.*

- In this final couplet (a couplet is a stanza made up of two lines, usually rhyming), the speaker seems a little bit calmer.
- He talks about the sun now, instead of time.
- In his time, the sun is thought to control time.
- In the end, he admits that sex is a compromise.
- They can't use it to stop time, but they can use it to make time go faster.
- What? If time goes faster, won't the speaker and the mistress die sooner?
- Not if he's in control.
- And, not if, as we suggest in "Symbols, Images and Wordplay" under "The Great Beyond," the sun and time, also represent death.
- If they can make time run, it won't have time to kill people.
- Er, or something like that.
- It's not necessarily the most rational argument, but it has its charm.
- And, the speaker isn't the first person to think that sex is the answer to all problems.

- In any case, the final couplet can give you food for thought for years.

Motion and Stillness

Symbol Analysis

"To His Coy Mistress" is very concerned with the full range of motion, including stillness. The motion helps the poem pick up speed, and the stillness lets us catch our breath and reflect for moments before we rush on. This back and forth also helps the speaker make his point. His portrayal of stillness isn't very positive, while his moments of action are full of excitement and challenge, suggesting that our speaker is all about action.

- Lines 3-4: The speaker is big on hyperbole, and he uses it to suggest various speeds of motion and even stillness. "Picking rubies" implies a somewhat leisurely action (although actual ruby-picking is not leisurely at all).
- Lines 8-10: The speaker's declaration that (if he had time) he would love her "ten years before the flood" and "till the conversion of the Jews" combines hyperbole and allusion to create motion, in this case a sense of rapid movement through time. He also uses the grand, Biblical language ironically to poke fun at the mistress, whom he accuses of wanting something timeless (like eternal love), while saying in the same breath that he would give this to her, too, if he has time. This might create the motion of the mistress running away from the speaker.
- Lines 18-19: The speaker uses "show your heart" as a metaphor for the mistress's imagined agreement to finally have sex with him, implying faster action, and possibly a faster heartbeat. But, to emphasize the theme of mock leisure in this stanza, he slows things down by using the word "show," which rhymes with the "slow" of a previous line.
- Line 20: He then extends the "heart" metaphor in line 20 by introducing the word rate – as in heart rate, another kind of motion. We can't neglect the sense of "rate" which means "price" or "cost." With this pun, he slyly accuses her of wanting to sell her love for compliments – which brings us back to the running away thing.
- Lines 45-46: The final lines of the poem employ a variety of fun techniques. The simple imagery of the word "sun," which makes us *see* yellow or orange or red as we read, combines with personification to deepen the image. We see a red-orange blur, wearing fiery running shoes. As you might suspect, Marvell's ending flourish is even more sophisticated. The sun is also a metaphor for time. Time is an abstract concept (while the sun is an object we can see). By giving an abstract concept (time) human characteristics (running), the speaker personifies an abstraction, and we are left with an image of a bizarre red-orange clock wearing tennis shoes, trying to stay as far away from the speaker as possible.

The Imperial

Symbol Analysis

In the 1650s, the British Empire has its teeth firmly sunk into the land of India. Andrew Marvell was active politician, and very close with [Oliver Cromwell](#) – don't mention his name if you are ever in Ireland! Without a thorough study, we can't say exactly what Marvell's role in British [colonialism](#) and imperialism is, but he probably had some hand in it.

Luckily, we are here to explore the poem, and the poem doesn't say much about this issue, although what it does say is characteristically ambiguous. Nevertheless, the brief mention takes on significance, as we gaze back in to the world's past.

- Line 5: As noted, the poem briefly alludes to imperialism. The "Indian Ganges" and "rubies," when taken together in this context, can be symbols of imperialism, especially to us, today. When we consider that he generally insults the mistress in this section, the colonialists, by way of rubies and India, become a metaphor for the mistress. She steals rubies from the Indian people. She steals sex from the speaker, by not having it with him. If she doesn't stop abusing her power, she will leave him in ruins.
- Line 12: Yep, it's the word "empire" that interests us here. Building an empire ain't easy, and it takes time (though not as long as growing vegetables, apparently). Some would say the same of relationships. Thus, colonialism also becomes a metaphor for relationships. The speaker accuses the mistress of thinking that sex and relationships are something big and serious, like ruling the world (the goal of building an empire), when, in fact – or so he says later on – such things are as common for people as for birds. He accuses her of hyperbole, which is ironic, considering all of his hyperbole throughout the poem. If Marvell has anxiety concerning imperialism (which is highly possible), he picks a pretty sly way to talk about it. Of course, this poem wasn't published until after he was dead.

The Great Unknown

Symbol Analysis

As we discuss in "In A Nutshell," Andrew Marvell is considered a Metaphysical Poet, which means, in part, that he was concerned with the mysteries of life, death, and the universe. The striking images of the unknown as imagined by the speaker might not give us any answers, but they entertain us and give us food for thought as we ponder all these deep things.

- Lines 21-22: What kind of chariot does time drive? The chariot is a nice example of metonymy. The chariot becomes a stand in for time. When the speaker hears the chariot behind him (which is all the time), he associates it with time. The imagery of wings helps us see the chariot, and even hear the sound it makes. This metonymical link between time and the chariot also personifies the abstract concept of time, by implying that time is behind the wheel of the chariot. Either that, or time's chauffer is behind the wheel – but, if time has a driver, that's still personification.
- Lines 27-30. Hyperbole turns nasty in this section. He makes the ridiculous suggestion that, if she dies a virgin, worms will have sex with her dead body. Ew. This vision of the unknown employs simple, but effective visual imagery.
- Lines 36-38. It's possible that sex is unknown to the speaker, and he implies that it's unknown to the mistress. His vision of sex, like most of what he envisions, is full of hyperbole. In one of the poem's few similes, he likens their impending (so he hopes) sexual union to that of "birds of prey." While birds mating is innocent enough, the word "prey" sets us up for the weird violence that the speaker imagines taking place *before* they actually have sex.
- Line 39-40: His idea of foreplay is eating time. Conceiving time as something that can be devoured makes our head spin. In this case, time becomes a symbol for everything that the speaker thinks traps him. Ironically, the speaker wants to be nourished by the very thing that he wants to be rid of. The irony suggests a paradox. The speaker wants to be rid of time, but needs time in order to enjoy life.

To His Coy Mistress: Rhyme, Form & Meter

We'll show you the poem's blueprints, and we'll listen for the music behind the words.

Dramatic Monologue, Iambic Tetrameter

"To His Coy Mistress" takes the form of a dramatic monologue, which pretty much means what it sounds like. The speaker of the poem does all the talking, which makes this a monologue, a speech by a single character. But, because he isn't just talking to himself, but to another fictional character, the mistress, it's "dramatic" – hence the term "dramatic monologue." Although the reader might identify with the speaker in a dramatic monologue, or even with the silent character addressed, there is always the sense that the reader eavesdrops on an intimate conversation. This sense is heightened in "To His Coy Mistress," because the speaker doesn't give us any personal or biographical information about himself or the mistress to create separation between the characters and the readers.

The poem's meter is "iambic tetrameter." Don't let the fancy name scare you away. It's not complicated. Even Dr. Seuss uses it, as in these lines from *Green Eggs and Ham*:

I would not like them here or there.
I would not like them anywhere.
I do not like green eggs and ham.
I do not like them Sam I Am.

You can think of an "iamb" as a unit of poetry consisting of two syllables. This unit is also called a "foot." In iambic tetrameter each line has four (tetra) such feet, or eight syllables in total. Pick a line from your poem to test it. If you read the poem aloud, or listen to it in your head (in a normal speaking voice, of course) you will see that in each foot, or iamb, or pair of syllables, one syllable is stressed, while the other is not. Notice also that the poem has forty-six lines, or twenty-three pairs of lines. We call these pairs "couplets," and, in the case of "To His Coy Mistress," the two lines that make up each couplet rhyme with each other.

Speaker Point of View

Who is the speaker, can she or he read minds, and, more importantly, can we trust her or him?

Our speaker is anonymous. He could be any man, anywhere. He's an intense guy. He speaks very beautifully, rhyming everything so that we are barely aware of it and using the perfect word every time. We could listen to him say "amorous birds of prey" all day – as long as he doesn't bring up worms, for crying out loud. (Although some people really like that part.)

We have to face it. He has a mean streak that probably isn't much fun to deal with in a real-life relationship. But, even if he isn't fictional, his lust for life would probably charm us. It's hard not to get excited when he gets excited. Did we mention that he has a way with words?

In addition to beauty, his speech is so thick with irony and sarcasm that it's hard to know if he ever says what he means, or means what he says. So, maybe all his hurtful words are just jokes. Sigh. He's so talented, too, surprising us with little jokes. It's fun to think about all the stuff he brings up: time and the afterlife and whatnot.

But, he's way too persistent and needs too much attention. He's a high maintenance speaker. And, his paranoid fantasies of slaying time get to be a bit much on occasion, as funny and clever as they are.

The more times we read the poem, the less sure we are about who the speaker is and what he's about. On the other hand, no matter how many times we read it, the language that the speaker use

To His Coy Mistress Setting

Where It All Goes Down

There are (at least) two layers of setting involved in "To His Coy Mistress" – the setting *we* imagine, and the setting that the speaker imagines.

In terms of where the poem is set – where he writes or tells it to the mistress, we can let our imaginations go. The speaker might write the poem in a lonely, depressed state in the poorly lit bar of a rundown hotel. Or, maybe he's like John Malkovich in *Dangerous Liaisons* – in a room, using the back of a woman with whom he's just slept with as a desk on which to write the letter. Or, maybe the speaker and the mistress tour some exotic city together, and the sights inspire him to make up the poem as he goes along. Which brings us to that second layer we mentioned.

The literal setting of "To His Coy Mistress" is one area where we can let our imaginations rest a little. The speaker doesn't leave everything to our imagination, after all. He does much of the hardest work himself. He takes us, and the mistress (whether or not she is with him when she receives the poem), on a very specific tour. Grab your copy of the poem and check it out. The setting plays a major role in moving the poem along. If you consider our theme "Freedom and Confinement," you can see the poem move from confinement, to freedom, to confinement, to freedom.

In the first stanza, the speaker starts with "crime." He then moves to the Ganges River in India and the Humber Estuary in England. From there, he moves to the body of the mistress, or, at least, "each part." Finally, he goes inside her body, to her heart.

In the second stanza the setting gets creepy quickly. "Deserts of vast eternity," has a beautiful ring to it – and even a feeling of freedom, albeit a lonely freedom. The speaker snatches that image away though, and leads us into a "marble vault" (otherwise known as "the grave").

The third stanza is like a setting resurrection. The poem bursts from "the grave" into "the morning dew," and, then, beyond the mistress's body, into her "soul." The speaker then imagines their union, and the setting moves up into the sky with the "amorous birds of prey."

In the final couplet, the setting seems dangerous. We feel like the speaker stands very near to the sun, and that he might get burned.

s never gets old. Some fresh insight is always embedded in his unique way of talking

Sound Check

Read this poem aloud. What do you hear?

Poetry is an art obsessed by sound, and there is a blurry line between songwriting and poetry. One big distinction is that songwriters often write the music that goes with their lyrics, while the "music" of a poem is contained within the lyrics, the arrangement of the words on the page. Some poems are more about sound than others. Walt Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" is about how a man becomes a poet when he understands the songs of birds. "To His Coy Mistress" doesn't go that far, but it still has a lot to do with sound.

You can sing poems, but they are more commonly read aloud. True to parodies and stereotypes of people reading poetry, you will run across people reading them in exaggeratedly super-serious tones, or making wild sounds, or anything silly you can imagine. If you choose to read poems out loud, we suggest reading poetry in a normal speaking voice, letting the lines guide you.

You've probably noticed that poets often throw traditional rules of grammar out the window, so don't let it throw you if the grammar doesn't seem to make sense. These are usually lines where the poet playing with language. If you read such lines over several times, the poet's game will usually reveal itself.

Reading a poem out loud, or listening carefully to it in your head if you can't read it aloud, as many times as you wish, is almost sure to reveal something meaningful about the poem. The revelation might be something ugly, or something beautiful, or even the belief that the poem makes no sense and has nothing to do with you. And, that's OK, too.

While similar sounding and obviously all part of the same poem, we think that each of the poem's three stanzas sound a little different from each other. The first stanza, where the speaker describes the idealized world in which the mistress's "coyness" wouldn't be a "crime," sounds both fast and slow. The sound of "vegetable love" slows us down. Try to say it fast. *Veg-e-ta-ble-love*. It's not natural. "Gaze" is another word that doesn't want to be said fast. The pace of words like "flood," "refuse," and "rate" speeds things up until we get to the "but" of the second stanza.

Here, something exciting happens. The speaker tells us that *he* hears something behind him, all the time – "Time's winged chariot." When we say "time's winged chariot," we hear a sound like paper, and wind, and wings beating. Scary. No wonder this guy is afraid of time.

He's so afraid of the sound that it drives him to imagine himself and the mistress dead. The poem begins to sound less like a love poem and more like the work of a twisted creep-o. "Lust"

and "dust" and "worms" – when taken together, these sound very formal, dark, and funereal. "Vast," "marble," and even "vault" throw in some freshness and elegance. Although "vault" refers to the grave, it still has a sharper feel to it than "worm." We hear old souls crying and the rustling of things trying to get out. More creepiness.

The third stanza is a big relief: it's all power and light, and, er, violence. "Transpires," sounds soaring and fresh. "Sweetness" and "ball" sound playful and light. But, what of "prey," "devour," "tear," "rough," and "strife?" These words sound darker, with darker meanings, too, perhaps. The speaker wants to do violence to time, but it sounds a little like he wants to do violence to the speaker, too. Or, maybe he's just overexcited.

He sounds calmer in the final couplet.

*Thus, though we cannot make our sun
Stand still, yet we will make him run. (46)*

We think that this sounds bright, fast, slow, and elegant, like a promise that the speaker means to keep. What do you hear?

What's Up With the Title?

What exactly is a "coy mistress?" As we say over and over in this guide, here's an opportunity to use your imagination. To provide fuel for our imaginations, let's look at the meanings of the two words.

If the word "mistress" is in the news or the tabloids nowadays, it probably means one thing: a woman (married or not) having an affair with a married man. And, by "affair," in terms of the news, we mean sex.

Guess what, Shmoopsters! According to the *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, it means the same thing in the 1650s, when Andrew Marvell probably writes the poem. It also means "a woman loved and courted by a man; a female sweetheart." There's something for your inner paparazzi to chew on.

In Marvell's time, "mistress" also means a woman who acts as a patron, or sponsor, for an artist or artists. This sense of the word allows us to imagine a new spin on things. If the speaker's mistress is a patron, perhaps he's trying to convince her to sponsor him for a new project, or, in short, to give him money. This interpretation complicates things. See, the poem speaks literally about sex – it references the mistress's "long-preserved" virginity. So, if she is also the speaker's patron, he either has or wants to have a sexual relationship with her, *or* he's using sex as a metaphor for money. It might even be both. The tabloid journalist in you can get lots of mileage out of that one.

We haven't given you all the possible meanings of "mistress" here. If you are ever stuck and can't think of what to write your paper on, you can use this approach (looking up words in the dictionary) to build an argument that's fun to make. But, before we move on to the word "coy," we should mention that "mistress" is the feminine form of the word "master." Almost all senses of

the word "mistress" contain some element of "being in charge."

Now, for "coy." Most commonly, if a person is coy, he or she *pretends* to be shy, quiet, and reserved. (Early uses of the word imply *actual* shyness, quietness, and reserve.) The poem's title then suggests then that the speaker's mistress only pretends not to want to have sex with him. Either way, it explains why he says her "coyness" is a "crime." If she's just toying with him, and he cares about her, then he has reason to be upset. On the other hand, if she really doesn't want to, then he's accusing her of a crime she hasn't committed, and playing games with her head.

In addition to the common meaning of "coy," there is another meaning which can help us *feel* the beauty of the word. A good poet will search tirelessly until he or she finds just the right word. All the nuances of the word can be important. In Marvell's time, the verb form of "coy" that is, "to coy" means "to stroke or caress." You can find this use in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

If we tie "mistress" and "coy" together, we can imagine a complicated relationship and complicated communications between our speaker and his mistress.

Andrew Marvell's Calling Card

What is the poet's signature style?

Experiments with Persona

Andrew Marvell conducts many memorable experiments in persona. Persona is the mask, personality, or character created by an author or actor, similar to the narrator or narrators in a novel. In "Bermudas," the poem's persona is actually a group of people singing on an "English boat." In "A Dialogue Between the Soul and the Body," the personae *are* the soul and the body. Marvell doesn't shy away from the female persona, either. In "The Nymph Complaining for the Death of Her Fawn" (could he have found a longer title, maybe?), the speaker is, as you probably guess, a woman. All of Marvell's speakers are witty, use surprising images, and rhyme. His work also usually contains some deep philosophical questions, like how sex and time might be related in the poem that we study today. The more Marvell you read, the easier it becomes to see what distinguishes him from other poets.

To His Coy Mistress Steaminess Rating

Exactly how steamy is this poem?

PG-13

Sex is a major theme in "To His Coy Mistress," and one can easily read sex into almost any line of the poem. All the sex in the poem happens in the mind of the speaker in a variety of hypothetical situations. The speaker seems to think that all his problems will be cured if only the mistress will have sex with him. But, because he's so complicated, it's hard to tell if he really feels that way, or if he turns himself into a parody of someone who feels that way. Since the topic of sex can be both serious and absurd, and can lead to both pleasure and pain, the speaker is probably both joking and serious, all wrapped up together.

To His Coy Mistress Theme of Time

The speaker of Andrew Marvell's poem, "To His Coy Mistress," thinks that time is a super-villain out to get him. He wants to flip the script and control time. It's not surprising that Marvell was concerned with time. It was a hot topic in the 1600s. Marvell lived during the time of both Galileo Galilei and Sir Isaac Newton, both of whom revolutionized the way we think about time today. Time remains a mystery to us, and Marvell's poem gives us an opportunity to explore that mystery.

Questions About Time

1. Does this poem make you wonder about time? How much do we really know about time? Does the speaker seem like he knows a lot about time, or does he make it up as he goes along?
2. The speaker argues that, if his mistress has sex with him, they will have more control over time. What do you think of this argument? Do you see any connections between time and sex in "the real world?" If so, like what? If not, how are time and sex *unrelated*?
3. What would you do if you had more time? If you know you will die tomorrow, what would you do? Would you live your life differently if you had "world enough, and time?"
4. How does the poem connect "time" and the "sun?"

Time functions as a character in the poem – a character who battles the speaker over the speaker's mistress, or so the speaker claims to believe.

A look at the history of clocks helps us understand the anxiety over time that the speaker of "To His Coy Mistress" feels. (This one will require some research.)

To His Coy Mistress Theme of Sex

If time is the super-villain of Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress," then having sex is the super-power he needs to gain control over his enemy. But, sex isn't so easy to come by. Possibly because only a very special someone would understand the speaker's ideas about it. With wit and daring, the speaker discusses sex in frank, beautiful, and disturbing language. Sex is another one of those great mysteries that poets never tire of exploring. Marvell's contribution perhaps paves the way for more open discussions of sex and sexuality.

1. The speaker obviously wants to have sex with the mistress. Does he also love her? If so, how does he express his love? If he doesn't, how do you feel about the idea of sex without love?
2. Why does the speaker think it's a "crime" for the mistress *not* to have sex with him? Does his argument have any merit? Why, or why not?
3. How does it make you feel when the speaker talks about sex and death together?

The speaker's argument that sex will help him control time is meant ironically, and ultimately comments on the fleeting nature of sexual pleasure.

To His Coy Mistress Theme of Mortality

Mortality, otherwise known as "death," gets a whole stanza in Andrew Marvell's classic from the 1650s. The speaker presents his vision of the afterlife. While beautiful in terms of the that words

the speaker uses to describe it, his vision is miles away from hopeful. He thinks that dying is the ultimate lack of control. It's not as big of a downer as it sounds like. The speaker is a very witty guy, and his treatment of death makes for some of the most entertaining pick-up lines since John Donne's "The Flea."

1. Does the speaker want to be immortal? What makes you think what you do? Is the narrator afraid of dying? If so, how do you know? If not, why not?
2. What do you think of the speaker's description of the afterlife? Do you have an idea of the afterlife? If so, what is it? If not, why don't you have one?
3. Do you think that it's important to conceive of the afterlife? Why, or why not?
4. What are some examples of how the afterlife is represented in movies, other poems, or books? Do any of these seem similar to the speaker's vision?

By telling the mistress what it will be like when she's dead (something she can't verify), instead of telling her about her actual life (something she can verify), the speaker destroys his argument.

Time and death become synonymous in Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress."

To His Coy Mistress Theme of Freedom and Confinement

Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" is constantly on the move between images of freedom and images of imprisonment. As we read why the speaker feels trapped, and how he thinks he can get out, we feel the need to examine the freedoms and confinements of our own lives. The poem can feel claustrophobic at some moments, but, at other moments, we feel all our confines crumble.

1. Is the speaker "free" when he writes the mistress? If so, what makes him free? If not, what traps him?
2. What is the speaker's idea of freedom? Is it consistent throughout the poem, or does it change and move?

By trying to make the mistress do what he wants her to, the speaker tries to take away her freedom.

Sex in the poem is a metaphor for the writing process – what the speaker really wants is enough time to write, and, hopefully, to create a poem that will last longer than he will.

ON HIS BLINDNESS

Lines 1-2

*When I consider how my light is spent,
Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,*

The speaker thinks about how all of his light has been used up ("spent") before even half his life is over. As a man without light, he now lives in a world that is both "dark and wide."

The first word of the poem, "When," gives us an idea of the structure of the sentence that will follow. The structure is, "When this happens, that happens." As in, "When I broke the glass, I had to find a broom to sweep it up."

But be careful – the second part of the sentence doesn't come until lines 7 and 8. Milton's audience was more used to reading dense and complicated sentences, so you'll want to take the first seven lines slowly. (That's OK, we also think Milton's audience would have had a doozy of a time figuring out text messaging.)

Most readers believe that the poem is clearly about Milton's blindness, but the poem never directly refers to blindness or even vision. Instead, we think **that "light" is a metaphor for vision.**

The metaphor is complicated. The speaker says that his light can be "spent," and this word suggests that he is thinking of something like an oil lamp. The light is "spent" when the oil in the lamp runs out. To make a contemporary comparison, it would be like someone comparing his vision to a flashlight that runs out of batteries before it is supposed to. Milton is suggesting that he got a bad deal.

The word "spent" also makes us think of money. Milton is reflecting on how he has used or "spent" his vision, now that it is gone. Has he used it wisely, or did he fritter it away because he thought it would never run out?

The word "ere" means "before." How does Milton know that he became blind before his life was halfway over? For this to be true, wouldn't he have to be some kind of psychic who knew when he was going to die? The usual explanation of this line is that Milton guesses roughly how long he will live. Milton went completely blind at the age of 42.

Finally, calling the world "dark and wide" makes it sound like a scary place, doesn't it? Interestingly, **Milton makes it seem as if the world has run out of light, rather than growing dark because of any blindness on his part.**

Lines 3-4

*And that one Talent which is death to hide
Lodged with me useless, [...]*

These lines are the trickiest in the entire poem, because they appear to be simpler than they are.

The key word is "talent." You probably read "talent" and think of skills like throwing a perfect spiral or being a piano prodigy. But there's a double meaning intended for people who know history or Biblical scripture. In the ancient world, a "talent" was also a standard of weight used to measure money, just as a "pound" is a measure of both weight and currency.

You can read [Matthew 25](#) (it's short), but here's our brief summary of "The Parable of Talents." A lord gives three of his servants some money ("talents") to hold on to when he leaves for a trip. Two of the servants use the money to gain more money for their master. (In contemporary language, we'd call this 'investment.')

But the third servant just buries the money, the ancient equivalent of hiding it under your mattress. When the lord returns, he's happy with the first two

servants and gives them more responsibilities, but furious with the third servant. He exiles the third servant into the "darkness," which is the equivalent of "death."

When Milton says that talent is "death to hide," he is referring to the money in the Biblical story and also to his own "**talent, in the sense of a skill or trade.**"

There is no way to tell what specific talent he means, but our guess would be his intelligence and his writing and reading skills, which he had used in service of Oliver Cromwell's government. This "talent" is "lodged" or buried within the speaker just like the money in the story. It **cannot be used to make greater profit.**

Matthew 25:14-30

The Parable of the Bags of Gold

¹⁴ "Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them. ¹⁵ To one he gave five bags of gold, to another two bags, and to another one bag,^[a] each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. ¹⁶ The man who had received five bags of gold went at once and put his money to work and gained five bags more. ¹⁷ So also, the one with two bags of gold gained two more. ¹⁸ But the man who had received one bag went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

¹⁹ "After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. ²⁰ The man who had received five bags of gold brought the other five. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with five bags of gold. See, I have gained five more.'

²¹ "His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!'

²² "The man with two bags of gold also came. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with two bags of gold; see, I have gained two more.'

²³ "His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!'

²⁴ "Then the man who had received one bag of gold came. 'Master,' he said, 'I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. ²⁵ So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.'

²⁶ "His master replied, 'You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? ²⁷ Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest.

²⁸ "'So take the bag of gold from him and give it to the one who has ten bags. ²⁹ For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. ³⁰ And throw that worthless

servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

Lines 4-6

*[...] though my Soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest he returning chide;*

The speaker has just told us that **his talent is as useless as money buried in the desert**, but now he says that **his uselessness has nothing to do with a lack of will**. To the contrary, his soul desires (is "bent") to use his skills in the service of his "Maker," God.

When he is faced with God, he wants to have a record of accomplishment to show Him.

God is being compared with the lord from the "Parable of the Talents" in Matthew 25. When God "returns" to him like the master in the parable, the speaker wants to show that he has used his talents profitably.

The word "account" here means both "story" and "a record of activities with money."

If the speaker turns out to have wasted his profits, **he worries that God will scold or "chide" him**. And if God is anything like the lord from the parable, the speaker could get cast into a darkness even more fearful than the one created by his blindness.

Lines 7-8

*"Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?"
I fondly ask. [...]*

It has taken the speaker six lines to get through the part of the sentence that begins "When." Now he goes on to say what happens "when" he thinks about all the stuff he has described above. Namely, he wonders if God demands that people undertake hard, physical work, or "day-labour," when they don't have any light.

The speaker doesn't have any light because he's blind, but in Milton's metaphor he compares this condition to having to do work at night that you would normally do during the day – like, say, building a house or plowing a field.

The word **"exact" means something like "charge," "claim," or "demand."** You can "exact" a toll or a fee, for example. So the speaker wants to know if God demands work as a kind of payment that is due to Him.

The first section of the poem is completed by the words "I fondly ask." The word "fondly" means "foolishly," not "lovingly." The speaker accuses himself of being an idiot for even thinking this question.

Fortunately, "patience" steps in to prevent his foolishness. More on that in the next section.

Lines 8-10

[...] But Patience, to prevent

*That murmur, soon replies, "God doth not need
Either man's work or his own gifts; who best*

"Patience" to the rescue! **Patience is personified as someone who can talk sense into the speaker.** Patience is often personified in Christian art because of its role in **helping one to achieve important virtues like courage and wisdom.**

The speaker is about to "murmur" his foolish question about whether God would be so cruel as to make impossible demands of work, but then his patience steps in to stop him. The rest of the poem is the reply made by patience.

First, patience points out that God does not *need* anything. God is complete and perfect. He doesn't need work or talents ("gifts") of any kind.

Line 11

Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. [...]

Patience now scores its second point in the rebuttal to the speaker. Patience argues that those people are the best servants of God who allow their fates to be linked with and controlled by God, as if they were wearing a yoke.

Essentially, this means accepting things as they come, especially suffering and misfortune.

A "yoke" is a wood frame that is placed around the necks of farm animals, like oxen, so that they can be directed.

Patience doesn't want to make God sound like a slave driver, so God's yoke is called "mild," or not -that-bad. It's not how much you have to show for your time on earth that counts, it's how you handle your submission to God.

Lines 11-14

[...] His state

*Is Kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed
And post o'er Land and Ocean without rest:
They also serve who only stand and wait."*

The final point made by patience is that God is like a king, not a lord, so the "Parable of the Talents" does not strictly apply.

Lords need everyone on their estates to work for them; they usually don't have the resources to spend on keeping servants just to stand around and wait on them. Kings, on the other hand, have unlimited resources, especially if they control a "state" as large as the entire earth.

With His kingly status, God has plenty of minions to do His "bidding" by rushing from place to place – that is, doing things that require light and vision. It doesn't make a difference whether one more person fulfills the role or not.

But kings also have **people who "wait" on them**, who stand in a state of readiness until their action is needed.

To summarize, we believe that the sentence, "His state is kingly," is meant **to contrast** with the

"lordly" state of the master of the Biblical parable in Matthew 25.

This being Milton, of course, "wait" can also have the meaning of waiting for something to happen, as in, "I waited for the bus."

What would the speaker be waiting for? The Second Coming of Jesus? The end of history? We don't know because the poem only suggests this meaning oh-so-vaguely.

The word "post" here just means "to travel quickly." That's why the mail is often referred to as the "post," because you're supposed to travel quickly to deliver it.

The poem ends with a vindication of the speaker's passivity, which has been forced on him by his blindness.

Vision, Light, and Darkness

Symbol Analysis

This poem is sometimes called "On His Blindness," but the speaker might respond, "Blindness? What blindness? I'm not the one who's blind. **It's the world that has run out of light.**" This argument is like saying that you aren't really running – it's the world that is rolling beneath you like a treadmill. As you can see, Milton uses complicated wordplay to describe why the speaker has **a hard time serving God**. His "blindness" is like a lamp that runs out of fuel, like the daylight that turns to night, and like a currency that hasn't been used to maximum effect.

- Line 1: Vision is not same thing as "light," although vision requires light. So, we can't just substitute one word for the other. Milton is using a **metaphor** to compare his vision to a light source that could run out, like an old-fashioned lamp that burns through its oil.
- Line 2: "Ere half my days" is a way of saying, "Before my life is through." But "days" also introduces the idea of daylight. The speaker's "days" are now more like nights. He uses another **metaphor** to compare his lack of vision to an imagined world that does not have light. The phrase "this dark world and wide" is also an example of **alliteration**.
- Line 7: The speaker compares God – again using **metaphor** – to a master who makes his servants work in darkness. He "denies" them light, which sounds heartless.

The Parable of the Talents

Symbol Analysis

The poem hinges on a pun on "talent" in the sense of "skill" and "talent" as a unit of monetary measurement in Biblical times. The parable of talents occurs in [chapter 25 of the Gospel of Matthew](#), and it tells the story of two servants improving their own lot by increasing the bounty of their master. In the first section, the speaker compares God to the "lord" in the parable who goes away on a trip and returns to ask what his servants have done with their money. In the second section of the poem, "patience" explains that God is more like a king who does not need all his servants to actively work for him.

- Line 1: The word "spent" becomes a **pun** when we read it in light of the discussion of money and currency in the next few lines. The speaker's ability to see is like a currency, and he has unfortunately burned through it too soon. That "light" was supposed to last him all the way through his retirement!
- Lines 3-5: The word "Talent" has a double meaning, as described above. The whole

Biblical parable about hiding the talent and not turning the master's currency into a profit is used as an **extended metaphor** in which God is compared to the lord, while the speaker is the third servant who has buried the money.

- Line 6: The word "account" is also a **double-entendre** that works on both sides of the extended metaphor. In one sense, "account" is a story of justification for how the speaker has used his time on earth. In another sense, the "account" is the amount of money the servant in the parable is able to show to his lord. The servant must give this account after his lord has "returned" from traveling.
- Lines 11-12: We think that the observation that God's "state is Kingly" is meant to contrast God with the lord from the parable.

Patience, Please

Symbol Analysis

"Patience" is an important virtue in Christianity. It allows people to work toward other "theological" virtues like hope and faith. When the speaker begins to question whether God might be kind of a cruel figure for demanding work from people who can't perform it, patience steps in to correct him. The twist, of course, is that the speaker **must already have patience** in order for the personified figure called "patience" to come on the scene.

- Line 7: The speaker is about to ask a rhetorical question about God's justice before patience interrupts him.
- Line 8: The virtue of patience is **personified** as "patience," the amazing advice giver. In the second half of the poem, patience replies to the speaker's question.
- Line 11: The **metaphor** in the first half of this line compares God's rule over men to the wooden yoke that guides farm animals.
- Lines 12-13: These lines present an image of servants rushing all over the world, by land and by sea, to serve God. These "servants" are Christian soldiers, merchants, politicians, clergy, etc. Lines 11-14 form an **extended metaphor** comparing service to God with service to the most powerful king in the world.
- Line 14: The word "wait" is a **pun**. It means "wait" in the sense that the speaker will wait until the end of his life to meet his ultimate fate, and also in the sense that a person "waits" on a more powerful person simply by standing there until he is needed.

(On His Blindness): Rhyme, Form & Meter

Italian (Petrarchan) Sonnet in Iambic Pentameter

Milton loved the classics, and in the 17th century, "classic" meant anything associated with Ancient Greece or Rome. The heart of the Roman Empire was located in what is now modern-day Italy, and the sonnet was invented in Italy, so it was not a surprise that Milton would favor the original Italian form of the sonnet. This form is divided up into two sections, one with eight lines and one with six. Shakespeare, on the other hand, used a sonnet form that ended with a rhyming two-line couplet. The Italian sonnet form was made popular by the Italian poet Petrarch, who was to the literary Renaissance what The Temptations were to Motown.

The rhyme scheme of this sonnet is ABBAABBA CDECDE. So, you can see that lines 1, 4, 5, and 8 all rhyme with each other. Unlike a classic Italian sonnet, "When I consider how my light is spent" does not divide cleanly into eight lines and six lines, however. The first section of the poem consists of the speaker trying to **frame his foolish question**, and the second consists of the

response to the question by a figure named "patience." Most Italian sonnets have a sharp thematic turn or "volta" between the two sections, but in this poem the turn is a bit muddled between lines 8 and 9. If you think about it, the confusion makes perfect sense, as it conveys the **awkwardness of someone (patience) interrupting someone else (the speaker) before the speaker can say something stupid.**

The meter of the poem is **classic iambic pentameter**, with five iambs (an unaccented syllable followed by an accented syllable). Some of the lines do not fit the pattern exactly, but the pattern itself is clear:

"Doth *God* ~~ex-act~~ day-~~la~~-bor, *light* de-~~nied~~?"

Finally, this poem features a lot of enjambment, which is when one line runs over into the next without a pause. Just check out the end of each line, and you'll find that over half lack punctuation markers like periods or semi-colons.

Speaker Point of View

Who is the speaker, can she or he read minds, and, more importantly, can we trust her or him?

Though the speaker may be seething with frustration and even anger at God, he knows that he must tread *very* carefully if he wants to express himself. He has the skills and intelligence to do great things out in the world, but he has been tripped up by a seemingly trivial problem: his light has run out. Unfortunately, this unlucky event throws a big wrench in his plans to be useful. The speaker imagines that he could have become a famous politician or even, say, the author of one of the greatest epic poems in the English language. (Cough, cough). But now he can't *possibly* do any of *that*, right? (Cough, cough, cough.) He's a hard worker, and he can't just sit still! Can he?

You get the impression from reading the first section of the poem that the speaker just wants to shout, "You can't seriously expect me to do my Christian duty without vision. This is a joke, right?" Fortunately, the speaker has a little guy in his shirt pocket named "patience," capable of popping out and delivering a pep talk whenever it looks like the speaker is about to lose his cool. The important thing to remember is that "patience" belongs to the speaker.

Finally, we can see why the speaker thinks he would be so useful to God and to society: he is incredibly smart. With his ability to pack complicated arguments into a few brief lines, he would make an amazing lawyer. Also, he probably knows the Gospels inside and out because the "Parable of the Talents" is one of the *least* frequently quoted stories from the New Testament. On the other hand, the speaker still has "half [his] days" left to live, so maybe, just maybe, he'll still get around to doing great things.

Setting

Where It All Goes Down

The poem reminds us of those scenes from horror movies where the hero is walking through some dark and dangerous place – chased by monsters or something – and his flashlight/torch/lamp suddenly flickers and goes out. You hear heavy breathing and...what's that?! Did you hear a branch break?!

OK, the speaker is not in mortal danger, but he feels like his soul is endangered. He is left to navigate a "dark" and "wide" world without his vision. What's more, his demanding "Maker" has gone on a trip, and he worries he will be cast into further darkness if he can't make use of his "Talent." That "Talent" is buried deep within him, like a gold coin that has been thrown in a hole and covered up with soil.

In the second half of the poem, "patience" presents a different view of the world. In this view, the world is a huge kingdom with thousands and thousands of servants working to achieve God's will. Some of them speed from continent to continent like the characters in an *Indiana Jones* movie. Others just stand around until the king calls for them.

Sound Check

Read this poem aloud. What do you hear?

If you ever wanted to know what walking on eggshells sounded like in a poem, this sonnet is a prime example. The speaker buries the climax of the first part of the poem – the question of whether God demands "day-labour, light denied" – inside all these other delicate expressions of why light is so important to him. The poem has a lot of short phrases separated by commas and which seemingly bring us further and further from the point, as if Milton is worried that the whole sonnet might crack open into a steaming mass of resentment. It's like if you had a classmate who said, "When I think about how my pencil just broke, I can't finish my math problem, and I like math so much, but you really need an eraser to do it, or else you might be stuck with a wrong answer, which would lead to a bad grade; 'Can I borrow a pencil?' I would want to ask you." Just ask for the darned pencil already!

However, when we consider that the speaker is about to talk to God, we can understand his desire to be cautious. The decision to questioning God's judgment is not to be taken lightly. The speaker is so cautious that he says, "I fondly ask" *after* he asks the question, which serves to take the sting of arrogance and insubordination out of it. Put another way, the time it takes you as reader to figure out what the speaker is trying to get across lessens the direct force of his statements.

"Patience," by contrast, is more direct. It uses shorter, more declarative sentences like, "His state is kingly." Because they are making complex arguments, both the speaker and "patience" use frequent enjambment, where one line carries over into the next without a pause. This gives the poem a prose-like and slightly evasive sound (the eggshell thing, again). The entire poem builds to the final line, which does not carry over from the previous line and sounds remarkably clear and straightforward: "They also serve who only stand and wait." And we breathe a sigh of relief that the speaker has managed to hold things together until the end.

What's Up With the Title?

This sonnet first appeared in Milton's 1673 collection of *Poems* simply as the nineteenth sonnet in the collection, or Sonnet XIX. Many readers, including us, refer to it by the first line, "When I consider how my light is spent." Identifying a poem by the first line is standard practice in the poetry world.

But, many more readers refer to the poem as, "On His Blindness." The problem with this title is that it didn't come from Milton. It was given almost a hundred years later by Bishop Newton, a writer and clergyman ([source](#)). Now, almost everyone agrees that the poem is most likely about Milton's blindness, but Milton never says so up front, leaving the door open for some interesting ambiguity. If Milton had wanted to say, "Hey, guys, this poem is about my blindness!" he could easily have done so. Newton's invented title changes the way you read the poem, which is why we prefer to use the first line of the poem.

John Milton's Calling Card

What is the poet's signature style?

"Light" in Darkness

Some critics think that Milton's blindness gave him an uncanny ability to depict light, darkness, and shadow. This sonnet offers pretty strong evidence for that claim. The central extended metaphor combines the concepts of light and money into symbolism as dense as seven-layer cake. Light and darkness interact in strange ways in Milton's poems. One of the most famous sections in *Paradise Lost* describes the interior of Hell as having:

*No light; but rather darkness visible
Served only to discover sights of woe,*

"Darkness visible." Wow. Milton's blindness proved to him that one can "see" even without light. We should also point out that the distinction between light and darkness is central to Christian theology.

When I Consider How My Light is Spent (On His Blindness) Theme of Guilt and Blame

The speaker's mind is a big ball of guilt and confusion. He takes pride in his vast intelligence, but worries that he failed to use his "light" when he had it. You can imagine him saying, "How could I have known my vision was going to run out?!" His soul "bends" toward service of God like a flower bends toward the sun, but he is no longer fit for the kinds of intensive work that he might have done. He hopes that God does not blame him like the angry lord from the "Parable of the Talents" in the Bible.

Questions About Guilt and Blame

1. What is the speaker's "talent," and what kind of "use" does he think he can make of it?
2. Why does the speaker think that God punish him for not working in darkness?
3. In the "Parable of the Talents" in [Matthew 25](#), is the lord meant to be a stand-in for God? If not, is the speaker misinterpreting the parable?
4. What's going on with that fated question? Does the speaker ask it, or not? Why is the question so foolish that patience must prevent the speaker from saying it?

The speaker mourns the loss of his "talents" in the political sphere and not in the practice of

poetry.

Patience rescues the speaker from a vicious cycle that begins with guilty feelings toward himself and ends with blaming God for maintaining unreasonable expectations

When I Consider How My Light is Spent (On His Blindness) Theme of Dreams, Hopes, and Plans

Before going blind, the speaker has high hopes for what he might accomplish in the future. He says he would have been a supremely useful servant of God. But we can't know if his motives are truly selfless, or if he is an ambitious guy who now struggles to come to terms with a personal upheaval. As he looks to the future, he compares his situation to the third servant from the New Testament "Parable of the Talents" in [Matthew 25](#). Because he has not increased his master's wealth, this servant is cast into the darkness. Considering that the speaker already feels he lives in the darkness, what further punishment does he expect? At the end of the poem, patience gives him a new plan: he should wait until God calls on him to serve.

Questions About Dreams, Hopes, and Plans

1. Do you think the speaker really wants to serve God when he has his vision, or is his definition of "service of God" also a service to himself? (Sorry, but sometimes you've got to ask the skeptical questions.)
2. Does the speaker worry he will be punished like the third servant in the parable? How would he be punished?
3. What is the speaker supposed to wait for at the end of the poem? Is he waiting for the eternal judgment or just for further instructions from God?

The poem upholds the Protestant idea that worldly labor is necessary for the benefit of the individual soul and not for the realization of God's kingdom on earth.

The speaker believes he has nothing more to fear from God except "chiding," because he has already been cast into "darkness."

Theme of Principles

We've all heard the homespun wisdom "Patience is a virtue," which sounds almost mystical but is really like saying, "Blue is a color." The more interesting question is, what's a virtue? A virtue is a character trait that helps you achieve some desired good or outcome. Virtues are central to Christian theology. The speaker desires to serve God, but his impatience and sense of wounded pride threaten to get in his way by leading him to rashly criticize his "Maker." The virtue of patience helps him to remember that it's not all about him. Just because he thinks he has something to offer doesn't mean that God needs him to act right away.

Questions About Principles

1. Have you ever been about to do something foolish when you felt like some other part of your character stepped in to stop you?

2. Why is patience such an important virtue? What other virtues does it make possible?
3. Do you think the speaker is guilty of being prideful at the start of the poem? What about at the end?
4. How would you evaluate the argument made by "patience"? Do you agree with the idea that everyone has his or her own "yoke" to bear?

The speaker's fault in the first section of the poem is not merely impatience; it is that he misunderstands the nature of God's justice.

The fundamental principle upheld by the poem is endurance of misfortune, of which patience is only a part.

Theme of Religion

John Milton was a Puritan who supported Oliver Cromwell's republican commonwealth after the execution of King Charles I of England. During this period, politics and religion were tied closely together, so that being "useful" to the government meant being "useful" to God, at least for Milton. The poem displays Milton's encyclopedic knowledge of the Bible but also his reforming instincts. Milton is not afraid to challenge the supposed moral of the New Testament "[Parable of the Talents](#)" by pointing out the difference between God and the lord from the story. The sonnet gives expression to intense religious emotions, but its rational and rhetorical qualities are equally important.

Questions About Religion

1. If Milton was against the English monarchy, why does he compare God to a king? How would you interpret the sentence, "His state is kingly"?
2. Does the poem give any idea of how God conveys his will to his subjects? How do people know how to do his "bidding"?
3. Does it seem like the speaker's desire to work for God stems from his wish to avoid being "chided"?

Patience contrasts God as "king" with the lord from the "Parable of the Talents." If God were really like the lord in the parable, He would be profiting from humanity.

The poem argues that God will eventually reveal a person's vocation without her having to actively search for it.

Questions

Bring on the tough stuff - there's not just one right answer.

1. How do you know this poem is about blindness? What if it were not about blindness at all? In that case, what would the "light" represent?
2. What is your own particular "talent"? Do you think this talent could ever be threatened by external circumstances, like some kind of unlucky event or accident?
3. Do you think this poem might just be an elaborate justification of laziness?
4. Why do so many of the words in the poem have different meanings from the ones we're used to (like "spent," "account," "fondly," etc.)?
5. How does this sonnet differ from those of Shakespeare? (You can learn about formal

- differences in "Form and Meter," but we want to know your own personal impressions.)
6. Can you think of other artists or creative types who have succeeded in spite of seemingly insurmountable disadvantages? (For us, Beethoven and his deafness come to mind.)

LET ME NOT TO THE MARRIAGE OF TRUE MINDS

Lines 1-2

*Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love*

This poem opens with one of the most famous lines ever: "Let me not to the marriage of two minds/ Admit impediments..." Sure, it sounds nice – but what does it *mean*? Is he talking about a real marriage? If so, who's getting married? What impediments? Gaaah!

Yes, there are a lot of questions just in this one declaration – but relax, we'll walk you through it.

First of all, the poem **alludes to marriage**, and to the actual **marriage ceremony**, which remains basically unchanged; the word "impediment" is lifted straight from the official Church of England wedding service (you might recognize its modern equivalent, the whole "speak now or forever hold your peace" section of weddings, so frequently used and abused in romantic comedies).

However, don't get all crazy and start throwing rice or anything – this poem isn't actually talking about a real marriage.

The "marriage of true minds" is a metaphor for true love. We're not sure if this refers specifically to platonic love or sexual love; instead, we are intended to see it as capital-L, ideal, perfect Love.

Note that the Poet uses the word "minds" instead of anything more base, like "hearts" or (heaven forbid!) "bodies." **This is to let us know that this perfect love is the partnership of two thinking, willing individuals, who aren't simply driven by emotions or hormones.**

Finally, the truly genius part of this opening statement comes in the enjambment between "minds" and "Admit" – by putting the idea of obstruction in the second line, the Poet doesn't even admit the *word* "impediment" into the same line as the phrase "the marriage of true minds."

Lines 2-4

*Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove:*

Here, we see love defined by what it's *not*.

The repetition here is very significant – and very confusing to puzzle out. Let's tackle the first phrase: apparently, real love doesn't change ("alter") under different circumstances. That is to say, even if the lovers themselves change, or if the world around them does, true love remains constant.

The doubled "alter" and "alteration" pairing reminds us of what a less worthy sentiment, which we might think of as "not-love," is like – it's changeable, fickle, and all too easily altered.

So what about the next phrase? What does all that "bends with the remover to remove" business mean? Basically, it makes the above point even more vehemently, claiming that even when someone tries to "remove" affection, real love doesn't give in and disappear. Faced with difficulties or adversity, love will always survive.

Lines 5-6

*O no! it is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;*

Now that we've seen what love *isn't*, we learn what the poet thinks love *is*.

In these two lines, he brings some nautical imagery into the mix (think storms and ships, not anchor tattoos and pirates).

In Line 5, he dramatically changes the tone with "O no!" to signal this shift from negative to positive, and immediately launches into an affirmation of love's qualities. It is, as he says, an "ever-fixed mark" – that's easy enough, it just means a marker that never moves.

Line 6 emphasizes this steady, solid quality, saying that it weathers storms ("tempests") but is never disturbed.

What kind of marker is it, though? The answer to this question comes in the second half of the quatrain.

Lines 7-8

*It is the star to every wand'ring bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.*

Here, we discover that the "ever-fixed mark" that came up in line 5 is a star – not just any old star, but the North Star, the only one that never changes position in the night sky.

This refers to old-fashioned navigational knowledge; before the days of GPS and even reliable maps, sailors would chart their location in the ocean based on the position of the stars.

Line 8 also refers to these astronomical ideas. In the Elizabethan period, nobody knew what stars were made of (which is why the star's "worth [is] unknown"), even though mariners did know the location of stars in the sky, or their "height."

Lines 9-10

*Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come:*

OK, new image: the poet introduces a familiar figure, that of the Grim Reaper. He's called "Time" here, but we can read that not only as hours and minutes, but as age and death as well.

Line 9 tells us that Love isn't Time's "fool" – that is to say, Love isn't **a court jester** that panders to the will of Time, despite the fact that the "rosy lips and cheeks" of a loved one may fade as they age.

The "bending sickle" that swings in line 10 is the **scythe** that is traditionally pictured in images of the Grim Reaper.

Lines 11-12

*Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.*

These last two lines of Quatrain 3 sum up the point of the whole poem: love doesn't change over time. It endures the passing of time, which is depicted as fleeting and "brief," and lasts until "the edge of doom," otherwise known as Judgment Day, the end of time, or whatever you want to call it.

Lines 13-14

*If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.*

The final two lines of the sonnet provide a dramatic and quite bold closing statement.

Line 13 uses rather legalistic language to basically say, "If these ideas are wrong and anyone can prove that I'm incorrect..."

The line poses something of a challenge to readers (do any of *you* have proof that he's wrong?).

The final line resolves this challenge through a somewhat complicated twist; by saying that the poet has never written anything and that nobody has ever really been in love before if love actually turns out to be less than eternal, the poem's truth immediately becomes impossible to dispute.

Why? Well, of *course* the poet has written – we're reading his poem right now – and of *course* people have loved before...therefore, the ideas posed in the poem must be correct.

It's odd logic, but hey, it works. Kind of. Just don't think about it too much.

Marriage

Symbol Analysis

The idea of marriage is present in the background of this poem from the very first line. However, the poet doesn't necessarily define marriage the way people typically do, as a religious sacrament or a legal procedure; instead, he emphasizes a more idealistic, transcendent vision of it. The marriage described in this poem is not a formal contract; rather, it is a "marriage of true minds," a phrase that suggests a deep understanding between two equals, rather than a mere legal bond. In Shakespeare's time, marriage was far from an association between two equally powerful and independent people; women were basically surrendered into the control of their husbands when they got married. The relationship that Sonnet 116 discusses certainly does not conform to this conventional view of marriage. Instead of talking about the importance of obedience or subservience in married life, it focuses on faithfulness, forgiveness, and equality in any loving relationship.

- Lines 1-2: The poem alludes directly to the Church of England's official marriage service: before a couple can be officially married, the priest asks the gathered congregation if there is any impediment to the marriage. The poet sees none here.

Navigation

Symbol Analysis

The idea of love as a guiding star isn't a new one, but in this poem, Shakespeare approaches it with a renewed enthusiasm. The poem's central extended metaphor is the comparison of love to a star – specifically the North Star, which doesn't ever change position in the night sky. This made it particularly important to sailors, who calculated the location of their ships based on the stars. The North Star provided a stable point around which the other stars appeared to revolve, making it central to navigation for centuries. The poet uses nautical imagery to construct the mental picture of love as a star leading all of us through life.

- Lines 5-8: In line five, the declaration that love is "an ever-fixed mark" introduces this extended metaphor of love as a star to which we all look. The poet also goes a step further into figurative language land and personifies this love-star, saying that it "looks on tempests and is never shaken" (6), and later, that the star's "worth's unknown, although *his* height be taken" (8).
- The idea of love as a star guiding the rest of the world really takes off in lines 6 and 7. The "tempests" that threaten the seas are a metaphor for the challenges that may plague a relationship, like arguments or infidelity, while in line 7, the "wand'ring bark" is a metaphor for the lover, being led through the tumultuous sea of life by love. The word

"wand'ring" also personifies this lost ship, giving us the feeling that it's looking for something.

Time/Age/Death

Symbol Analysis

The macabre image of the Grim Reaper was quite familiar to Shakespeare's Elizabethan readers. This skeletal, scythe-bearing figure of Death became an icon of European culture in the medieval period, in which death was a horrifyingly present part of everyday life (we can blame the devastating impact of the Black Plague for that). This image of death has stuck with Western civilization ever since, and is commonly invoked in poetry and art to remind us all of our own mortality. However, in this poem, the Reaper (referred to simply as "Time") actually loses – it turns out that Love is the one thing that can resist the power of death.

- Lines 9-10: The poet personifies both Love and Time here, claiming that Love isn't just a court jester at the beck and call of Time. This is an allusion to the medieval conception of death as a character known as "King Death," an allegorical figure that represented the Black Plague, more familiar to us as the figure of the Grim Reaper, here brought to mind by the mention of the "bending sickle" (10). Finally, the phrase "sickle's compass come" (10) makes use of alliteration to bring home the idea of passing time; the harsh "c" sounds mimic the ticking of a clock in an onomatopoeic way.
- Lines 11-12: The "his" in line 11 signifies that the "brief hours and weeks" belong to Time, continuing the personification of this concept that we saw in lines 9-10. This notion that Time has no control over Love is emphasized in this line, since the passing of Time has no effect whatsoever upon true love.

Sonnet 116: Rhyme, Form & Meter

We'll show you the poem's blueprints, and we'll listen for the music behind the words.

Elizabethan (Shakespearean) Sonnet, Iambic Pentameter

Let's tackle the simpler part first: the meter. This sonnet, like all of the other sonnets, and like Shakespeare's plays, is written in iambic pentameter. This is a fancy way of explaining the consistent *da-dum, da-dum, da-dum* rhythm of the lines; every line has five two-syllable "feet" (yes, that's what they're actually called), or iambs. "Penta" means "five" in Greek. Each of these feet is one of the "*da-dum*" – the *dum* is stressed. Altogether, every line has ten syllables – five iambs times two syllables per iamb = ten syllables total. A perfect example is line 5 (italicized syllables are stressed):

O *no!* It is an *ev-er* *fix-ed* *mark*

Now that we've got the meter down, let's take a look at the form. Sonnet 116 is, well, a *sonnet*. The sonnet, a fourteen-line poetic form that originated in medieval Italy, made its way over to England through the very popular poems of Petrarch, an Italian poet, and Ronsard, a French one. These European sonnets followed a rhyme scheme referred to now as the Petrarchan (or Italian) sonnet. However, once it got to England in the sixteenth century, British poets started to shake things up a bit.

Shakespeare's sonnets are all written in a different rhyme scheme than their Continental predecessors. The so-called English sonnet is divided into three quatrains (stanzas of four lines each), which in turn each have two rhymes. The whole poem follows the rhyme scheme A-B-A-B/ C-D-C-D/ E-F-E-F. In our example, "minds" and "finds" are the "a" rhyme in stanza 1, and "love" and "remove" are the "b" rhyme; in stanza 2, "mark" and "bark" are "c," while "shaken" and "taken" are "d," et cetera. Finally, the last two lines (13 and 14) are grouped together as a couplet, and rhyme with each other – if they were added on to the scheme we wrote out above, they would be G-G ("proved" and "loved" in Sonnet 116). Shakespeare wrote so many sonnets of this form that we now commonly call it the Shakespearean sonnet.

The final characteristic of the sonnet is the turn, or volta. These are really just fancy words for a simple shift in gears, which usually happens in the first line of the third quatrain, between lines 8 and 9, when some change in ideas enters into the poem. This sonnet is no exception to this rule; the turn occurs at "Love's not Time's fool..." (9), where the image of love as a guiding star is suddenly replaced by a personification of love as an eternal, everlasting force that resists death, introducing the idea of the immortality of love.

Speaker Point of View

Who is the speaker, can she or he read minds, and, more importantly, can we trust her or him?

This guy has been through the wringer with love, and emerged with a clearer understanding of it. He's absolutely certain that the vision of love he depicts here is the right one, and he's willing to stake his reputation as a poet on it. We get the feeling that the Speaker has experienced what he thinks of as "the marriage of true minds," also known as true love, that his love remains strong, and that he believes that it's eternal. What with all the ships and stars and stormy seas that fill the landscape of the poem, we imagine him in full-on, rather melodramatic Elizabethan poet mode, gazing out to sea with fiery eyes half-hidden beneath a floppy, feather-bedecked velvet hat, cursing fate and vowing his undying love to some distant lover...something along the lines of the end of *Shakespeare in Love*. You get the picture. We suspect that he's been there and done that, and is now relating what he's learned from life to a younger listener.

However, before you give us all the credit for this brilliant analysis, we should come clean: this isn't just *our* interpretation of the Speaker (well, except for the floppy hat). Actually, it's a common view of the relationship between Poet and addressee. In Shakespearean circles, there's a general consensus on the appearance of several figures in the sequence of sonnets. They aren't exactly characters, which is why this info doesn't appear in the "Characters" section. They're more like the *ideas* of people, rather than actual people.

The first is the Poet, identified as Shakespeare, but not necessarily directly aligned with him (the poems may or may not be autobiographical). The next figure that we see is the so-called "Fair Youth," the subject of Sonnets 1-126. These sonnets are addressed to a young man, whose relationship to the Poet is somewhat unclear; some people read these sonnets as expressions of platonic love and affection, while others have questioned whether or not there are clues to a gay relationship here. FYI, the two final figures, who don't relate to our discussion of Sonnet 116, are the "Dark Lady," a mistress of the Poet's (Sonnets 127-154), and the "Rival Poet," who appears in Sonnets 78-86

Sonnet 116 Setting

Where It All Goes Down

Well, we can't put our finger on a real "setting" for this poem for an obvious reason: there isn't one. There are no events that take place, and no actual places referenced at all. However, the poem does create a specific imaginary space, through its key use of nautical imagery. The poet creates a vivid scene in the minds of his readers by conjuring up the mental picture of a storm-tossed sea, a lost ship, and, above it all, the calm, unchanging, and dependable polestar. This dramatic scene provides a kind of visual metaphor for the poem's interpretation of love as a guiding light above a troubled world.

Sound Check

Read this poem aloud. What do you hear?

This poem manages to sound both consistently rhythmic and conversational, formal and casual, planned and spontaneous. Faithful watchers of *Law and Order* or any other courtroom drama might recognize this mash-up of different tones from the masterful and persuasive arguments often featured on such programs; we usually see them delivered by attractive and brilliant lawyers (or rather, attractive actors portraying brilliant lawyers). Here, we might imagine the poet in this role, delivering a well-crafted, carefully paced, yet still accessible argument to a jury of readers.

The poem's meter, iambic pentameter, becomes very apparent from line 3 onwards (take a look at "Form and Meter" for more on this), creating a certain feeling of consistent pacing, but certain elements of drama, like the "O no!" in line 5, break it up and remind us that this is a real person talking, not a machine. Just like any good appeal to a jury, the poem uses clear and simple language to get its point across, and to illustrate its claims. Finally, the concluding couplet (which even engages legal language in the phrase "upon me proved" [13]) is an ideal closing statement – bold, challenging, and memorable. Case closed.

What's Up With the Title?

None of Shakespeare's sonnets actually have titles; instead, we just refer to them as the numbers of their order in the sequence, or, in a few cases, by their famous first lines (if you just say the words "marriage of true minds" to any English teacher, we'll bet she can identify this poem immediately – but don't take our word for it, try it!). The sonnets appeared in this order in their original printing, way back in 1609, and this sequence hasn't changed since

William Shakespeare's Calling Card

What is the poet's signature style?

Clarity, consistency of form, and in a word – perfection!

There's a reason Shakespeare is *Shakespeare*, if you get our meaning. You don't become the most famous and widely beloved poet of the English language by writing shoddy, confusing

verse. Working within the strict, somewhat stiff constraints of the sonnet form, he produced poems that are simultaneously high-flown and down to earth; while they *do* employ what we all think of as "Shakespearean" language – you know, the whole "Doth thou thinkest me not a wondrous poet?" kind of thing – the sonnets are notable for their frankness and clarity. This one in particular is recognizable for its very simple language (for Shakespeare's time, that is), elegant structure, and logical flow.

Sonnet 116 Theme of Love

Everyone has a different definition of love, and this sonnet offers an optimistic take on it. Love here is seen as a truly powerful, unstoppable force of nature. It's the only constant in a tumultuous and confusing world, and it's a guiding star for all of us who are lost out there. This idealized view of love is timeless and still relevant to culture in our fast-moving 21st century world. Fans of *The Princess Bride* or more recently, *Across the Universe*, among gazillions of other examples, will recognize this theme in movies, music, books, blogs...or, basically everywhere.

Questions About Love

1. How realistic, in your opinion, is this view of love?
2. Other than immortality, does the poem suggest any of love's other possible characteristics?
3. Do you think the poem specifically refers to romantic love, or are there other kinds of love it might describe?

Chew on This

Try on an opinion or two, start a debate, or play the devil's advocate.

Sonnet 116 is commonly invoked as a definition of idealized romantic love, but it can be extended to apply to any form of love.

Sonnet 116 Theme of Loyalty

As far as Sonnet 116 is concerned, loyalty plays a key role in true love – actually, the *only* significant role. The poem asserts that the true marker of love is its persistence; without constant devotion, "love is not love." A lot of difficulties can arise when two people who love each other, but if their feelings are real, none of these things should matter. In the ideal world of the poem, true lovers always forgive each other and stay together, regardless of the circumstances.

Questions About Loyalty

1. The poem alludes to a specific kind of "marriage" in the first line – how might we differentiate this from the legal idea of marriage?
2. The poem claims that love that changes when people change isn't actually love at all. Do you agree or disagree with this idea?
3. What kinds of "tempests" might the poet be referring to in terms of human relationships?
4. Can love persist even if one of the parties involved is not loyal? Do you think that true love, as the poem claims, is actually both reciprocal and eternal?

Chew on This

Try on an opinion or two, start a debate, or play the devil's advocate.

Sonnet 116 suggests that true lovers remain loyal, despite any "tempests" that may strike their relationship. This includes even, paradoxically, infidelity.

Sonnet 116 Theme of Mortality

Mortality in this poem, if not anywhere else, is a non-issue. While Time is usually seen as a force of destruction, which wreaks havoc with basically everything we mere mortals do, it doesn't have an impact on the true power of Love in this poem. Though age and decay may affect the beauty of a loved one, Sonnet 116 claims that real love perseveres in spite of this, and continues to live on until "the edge of doom" (12), otherwise known as Judgment Day.

Questions About Mortality

1. In your personal reading of the poem, does true love last until every person's individual "doom" (death), or until "DOOM" (the end of time)? Do these different interpretations of this word change the meaning of the poem?
2. The idea of immortality appears overtly in line 12, but what images introduce this concept earlier in the poem?
3. Though God is not mentioned, the idea of the "edge of doom," or Final Judgment, is a Christian one. Does religion play any role in this poem?

Chew on This

Try on an opinion or two, start a debate, or play the devil's advocate.

The description of Time as "brief" leads readers to believe that Love is not subject to Time; rather, the opposite is true, and Time is rendered insignificant in comparison to Love.

Sonnet 116 Theme of Literature and Writing

We see the problem in logic presented at the end of this poem: the poet boldly dares everyone else to prove his idea of love wrong, saying that if it's false, then he'll never have written a word. The problem is, he puts this challenge *in writing*. Clearly we can't possibly deny that he wrote anything, since the poem is right there on the page to prove it, and always will be. Confusing, we know...and also very clever. He's basically ensuring that nobody can actually step up to the plate and challenge him. By using his own body of work as proof here, the poet makes it impossible for naysayers to claim that he's wrong about love. This also does an interesting thing for poetry itself; by wagering his poems in this challenge, the poet also implies that literature is just as immortal and just as important as love.

Questions About Literature and Writing

1. Is literature, as presented in this poem, also immortal?
2. Why does the poet wager his *writing* on this definition of love, rather than anything else, at the

end of the poem?

3. What is the significance of the last-minute appearance of the idea of poetry in the closing lines of the poem? Why introduce it at all?

Chew on This

Try on an opinion or two, start a debate, or play the devil's advocate.

Poetry is valued just as highly as love in the last two lines of the poem.

Sonnet 116 Questions

Bring on the tough stuff - there's not just one right answer.

1. Does the poem's proposed view of love function in the real world, or is it simply a utopian ideal?
2. Do you agree with the poet's view of love as eternal and unchanging?
3. There are many different kinds of love out there, such as romantic, familial, and platonic. Can the ideas posed in this poem apply to all of them?
4. The poet implies that love is the only guiding light that we have in this troublesome world. Do you agree or disagree?

WHEN I HAVE FEARS THAT I MAY CEASE TO BE

Lines 1-2

*When I have fears that I may cease to be
Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain,*

- Wow. Keats sure doesn't pull his punches. This poem starts out by laying it on the line: what would happen if I died today? (Take a second and think about that. Chances are that it doesn't inspire all that many happy thoughts.)
- Come to think of it, how often *do* you think about how (and when) you're going to die? Nowadays, we'd call that morbid. In fact, we might even send you to a counselor to make sure that you're not about to commit suicide. Death just isn't one of those topics that healthy people spend all that much time worrying about, right?
- Well, that wasn't true for the [Romantics](#). See, back in the early 19th century, everyone who was anyone (literarily speaking) did a good bit of thinking about their own mortality. It helped to put things into perspective: big, scary world vs. little, mortal human being. That's just how things were.
- Acknowledging your mortality doesn't make you any less fearful, though. That's precisely the problem that sets this poem in motion. See, Keats knows that he's got quite a bit to say. In fact, his brain is "teeming" with the poems that he has yet to write.
- The first two lines of this poem set up a hypothetical world. Keats isn't dead *yet* (although, eerily enough, he will be within a few years). His poem, however, is based on two certainties:
 - 1. He WILL have lots of important stuff to write.
 - 2. He WILL die before he has a chance to write it all.
- Directing the reader towards two things that haven't yet happened (and which will, of course, cancel each other out) places us in a very weird situation. We're deep inside a very contradictory imagination – that of the poet himself.

Lines 3-4

*Before high piled books, in charactery,
Hold like rich garners the full-ripen'd grain;*

- Ah, metaphor. But what does it mean?
- Here's the rough translation: If I die before I have written lots of books (that's the "high piled books," in case you were wondering) which hold my words like a grain silo (that's the "garner") holds ripe grain...
- Keats had some seriously flowery language up his sleeves. If you're a fan, don't worry. Keats has lots more to come.
- Why play around with all of this metaphorical language? Well, some interesting things happen when Keats starts to compare his poetry (or, more broadly, the products of his imagination) to other things. The image he chooses refers straight back to nature: his poems are like harvested wheat. They're the natural product of a fruitful earth (or, er... his brain). It's almost like Keats' mind becomes a natural element in this particular metaphor.
- Look a little bit closer, though, and something strange starts to occur. Harvested grain is, well, dead. It's not the actual living plant. It's that dry, brittle husk containing the seeds of future growth. Published poems, to follow this metaphor, aren't *alive* in the same way that the poet's brain is. Just like grain, though, it's the published poems that bring in the bucks. (After all, who ever heard of paying good money for a wheat plant?)

Lines 5-6

*When I behold, upon the night's starr'd face,
Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,*

- Now Keats' speaker is gazing up at the night sky – and finding in the clouds all of the "symbols" of high romance.
- Wait a second... love in the clouds? Well, this particular kind of romance isn't exactly your run of the mill everyday love. It's elevated ("high") romance. If we were feeling flowery, we'd call it celestial. Or heavenly. It's the stuff of chivalric legend – the sweeping tales of romance and brave knights in shining armor and all that fine stuff that never really seems to happen on a first date. (Or, come to think of it, any date at all. Sigh.)
- We're not saying that Keats' version of romance is impossible. It's just pretty clear that he sees the world through some pretty heavily rose-colored glasses. After all, he's not looking for love from the people around him. Nope. He's looking up in the clouds. (And when was the last time that you found good lovin' up there?)

Lines 7-8

*And feel that I may never live to trace
Their shadows, with the magic hand of chance;*

- Oh, wait. Two lines of optimistic dreaming were, it turns out, a few lines too many. We're back to thinking about death here.
- Also, we're once again diving headfirst into some seriously imaginative language. Tracing the shadows of romance with the "magic hand of chance"? What does that even *mean*? (We have to admit, we're beginning to worry about Keats' ability to win over the ladies.)
- Here's a rough translation of what's going on here: Any sort of love or romance is dependent on a healthy dose of good luck (or, in Keats' language, "chance"). It's like that Gwyneth Paltrow movie *Sliding Doors* (or John Cusack in *Serendipity*) – you never know how one chance encounter or one small decision will shape your love life.

- We're guessing that Keats is actually pretty excited about the randomness of love. It's that randomness which makes things exciting, right. That's why it's rather sad that he thinks he'll die before experiencing this kind of love.

Lines 9-10

*And when I feel, fair creature of an hour!
That I shall never look upon thee more,*

- Hmm... let's take a little poll here: who feels excited about being called a "fair creature of an hour"? Anyone? Anyone?
- On the positive side, being "fair" is the 19th-century equivalent of being hot. So, that's good. Being the "creature of an hour," though, could mean a couple of things – and we're warning you now, neither of them are good.
- For one thing, it could mean that the "hour" is Keats' hour: as in, he likes you now, but tomorrow....well, who knows?
- Then again, it could mean that you're mortal, just like him. In other words, in comparison to things like the heavens and the clouds, which measure time in eons, humans measure time in hours. You don't have all that much time to spend on this earth.
- See? Neither one is particularly flattering, is it? Unless, of course, you buy into Keats' strange sort of ecstatic hopelessness. In that case, you're good to go.

Lines 11-12

*Never have relish in the faery power
Of unreflecting love; [...]*

- Notice all of the negative constructions stacking up here? It's all the semantic counterpart to Keats' philosophy of negative capability. Want to know what we mean? Check out what we have to say about negative capability in "Symbolism, Imagery, Wordplay."
- Once again, emotions (like, say, love) are painted in the most grand and imaginative language possible. Love's a "faery power." Maybe that means it's magical and wonderful and generally amazing – just like fairies. Then again, maybe it means that, just like fairies, love doesn't really exist.
- Maybe being thrown into "unreflecting" love is a way to get caught up in the crazy, stupid, exciting thrill of forgetting your better judgment and smooching that girl (or guy) you *know* you should just leave alone.
- But has forgetting your better judgment ever turned out to be a good plan in the long run? That's precisely the quandary that Keats packs into one small line (line 12, in case you were wondering). Is stupid crazy love a good thing? We sure can't say, but that doesn't mean that it's not appealing.

Lines 12-14

*[...] –then on the shore
Of the wide world I stand alone, and think,
Till Love and Fame to nothingness do sink.*

- If you know anything about sonnets, you probably know that they are fourteen lines long and usual have a "turn," a point in the poem that signals a major reversal in the thoughts or desires that shaped the first few lines of the poem. Oftentimes the turn occurs around line 8 or 9.
- Keats actually starts his turn in line twelve. Don't worry, we'll talk more about that in our "Form and Meter" section.
- Keats has spent a good deal of time thinking about fame, writing, and desire, as well as the possibilities and impossibilities of love. Now, though, he takes a step back and scopes out the "wide world." This, folks, is a key Romantic move. You could almost write up a formula for all Romantic poetry based upon it:
 1. Speaker gets caught up in tumultuous, overwhelming, passionate desires.
 2. Speaker goes off alone to contemplate nature.
 3. Speaker realizes that all his/her desires are petty and small – especially when they're compared to the scope of the outside world.
- See? Keats follows this formula exactly. You could almost say that he wrote it himself. In fact, we think we will.

Negative Capability

Symbol Analysis

If there's one thing that you need to know about Keats' poetic philosophy, it's these two little words: negative capability. Believe us, it'll show up on a test someday soon. For Keats, it was a philosophical stance, one that allowed him to seek out and dwell in the uncertainties of life without trying to make sense of it all. Art (like, say, poetry) is key to this project: poetry allows Keats to play through his uncertainties in all sorts of wonderful and really, really uncomfortable ways.

- Line 1: Keats begins the poem with a deliberate contemplation of his death – an uneasy **image** to begin the poem with.
- Line 5-8: An elaborate **metaphor** allows Keats to imagine love as something that is written on the night sky. It's an **image** that is both delightful and far, far too grand to contemplate on a personal level. Love suddenly becomes huge and terrifying, something not to be undertaken by mere mortals.
- Lines 11-12: Love becomes a fairy power in this **metaphor**, something which makes it both super-magical and, well, supernatural. In other words, like most versions of negative capability, Keats pushes love to two very different extremes.
- Lines 12-14: The **image** of the speaker pulling away from the world to stand on its shore

is another one of the huge, cataclysmic gestures that creates the force behind Keats' idea of negative capability. It allows him to imagine love and fame as both the most important things in the world and as absolutely unimportant.

[Next Page](#)

Nature

Symbol Analysis

We're cheating a little bit here. See, nature is also part of Keats' whole understanding of negative capability: looking at a huge, scary mountain or the tumult of a stormy sea are a way to face big, mysterious things that are completely outside of the viewer's control. In other words, they're a constant reminder of all that we can't understand. Looking at nature is like a shortcut to Keats' "negative capability."

- Line 4: Language is compared to wheat in a grain bin this **simile** (remember, similes use "like" or "as" in their comparison of two things).
- Lines 5-6: Night and clouds become **symbols** of love in this passage. Oh, it's all too heavenly to believe – and maybe that's the point.
- Line 9: The "fair creature" becomes an **image** of the natural world, but she's an especially weak one. Unlike the sky or the world, she'll grow old and pass away.
- Line 13: The "wide world" becomes **an image** of nature in general – a world far too big to understand.

Figurative Language

Symbol Analysis

If there's one thing we know about John Keats, it's that he's fond of a good metaphor. Practically every line in his poem offers up a new form of figurative language. This dense web of metaphors and similes does a pretty good job of turning the world into a playground for the imagination – and vice versa. If everything can be described as something else, it's pretty hard to tell what's real. Heck, we're getting a headache already.

- Lines 1, 2, 3, 5, 11, 14: Keats uses temporal indicators as the first word of each of these lines, creating a feeling of expectation through the use of **repetition**.
- Line 4: This **simile** compares language to wheat in a grain bin (remember, similes use "like" or "as" in their comparison of two things).
- Line 5: **Personifying** the night by turning its stars into a "face" allows the speaker to interact with it as he would a real person.
- Lines 6-7: Tracing the face of love with the hand of chance? That's some mighty flowery **imagery**, folks. It's so flowery, as a matter of fact, that it becomes rather hard to imagine. **Personifying** chance by giving it a hand doesn't make it any easier to picture.

Shakespearean (or Elizabethan) Sonnet

This folks, is a standard sonnet: fourteen lines in iambic pentameter. More specifically, it fits the mold of a Shakespearean sonnet. Not sure what that means? Let Uncle Shmoop explain:

Iambic Pentameter

Don't let the fancy names intimidate you – iambic pentameter is simple once you get the hang of it.

An "iamb" is an unaccented syllable followed by an accented one. One iamb makes the sound da-DUM.

"Penta" means five, and "meter" refers to a regular rhythmic pattern. So "iambic pentameter" is a kind of *rhythmic pattern* that consist of *five iambs* per line. It's the most common rhythm in English poetry and sounds like five heartbeats:

da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM

Let's try it out on the first two lines from "When I have fears that I may cease to be." We've put the stressed syllables in bold italics and divided up the iambs with slashes.

When I | have *fears* | that I | may *cease* | to *be*
Be-fore | my *pen* | has *glean'd* | my *teem*-ing *brain*,

Every second syllable is accented (stressed), so this is classic iambic pentameter. (Note: the word "gleaned" is pronounced with only one syllable and sounds like "glean'd.") Overall, the meter of the poem is in a fairly strict iambic pentameter.

Shakespearean Sonnet

Shakespearean sonnets all share a specific format:

- They are 14 lines long.
- They are written in iambic pentameter (discussed above).
- Usually, they include a feature called a "turn." This is a moment in the poem where the theme or the tone changes in a surprising way. In "When I have fears that I may cease to be," the turn comes halfway through line 12, where Keats zooms out and looks at the larger world.
- The first twelve lines rhyme in alternating pairs. For the whole poem the rhyme scheme would be: ABAB CDCDEFEFGG.
- See those last two letters at the end (the GG)? That's the last important thing to know about the form of a Shakespearean sonnet. They always end with two rhyming lines, one right after the other. This is called a rhyming couplet.

But wait: let's break that down just a little bit: why would Keats choose to use Shakespeare's sonnet form to begin with? Well, Shakespearean sonnets tend to be about deep emotions, like love or the desire for immortality. (If you want to see some great examples of Shakespeare's own wild desires, see our [guides to his sonnets](#).) In that way, channeling your emotions through a form that historically tends towards the melodramatic seems like a pretty natural choice, right?

The Turn

The "turn" is a really cool feature of a sonnet, so we thought we'd add a bit more detail here. In a sonnet, the first section of the poem develops a single concept (or, as in the case of "When I fear

that I may cease to be," several cumulative thoughts). Then the poem "turns." The second section reverses these thoughts, taking the poem into entirely new and surprising directions. In this case, Keats spends the first twelve (okay, eleven and a half) lines exploring the agonizing combinations of his desires (for love and success) and his certainty that death will cut those desires short. The last two and a half lines reject all of Keats' desires as futile. All of that passion? Worthless. All that desire? Not worth thinking about.

Keats' turn in this poem is pretty standard, but he does sort of rush into his emotional reversal. Instead of starting his change of pace at the beginning of a new line, he actually starts it halfway through line 12. Check out what we mean:

*And when I feel, fair creature of an hour!
That I shall never look upon thee more,
Never have relish in the faery power
Of unreflecting love;—then on the shore
Of the wide world I stand alone, and think,
Till Love and Fame to nothingness do sink.*

We've included last quatrain (group of four lines) in addition to the final couplet (group of two rhyming lines) just so you can get a sense of how sudden this transition is. Why do you think Keats made his turn so non-standard? Is he eager to get to the turn? Hesitant? Maybe, that doesn't seem like such a huge deal, but, when you're dealing with a form as established and well-used as the Shakespearean sonnet, any derivation is worth noting.

Speaker Point of View

Who is the speaker, can she or he read minds, and, more importantly, can we trust her or him?

Oh, Keats... we wish we could imagine a speaker who was *less* like you. Unfortunately for us (and, well, fortunately for you), it turns out that the speaker of this here poem is pretty much a carbon copy of... you. After all, he shares your sense of impending doom, your desire for love and fame and splendor in all forms, and your penchant for being swept up in your own imaginings.

Come to think of it, if you're an egomaniac (which, of course, we would *never* call you to your face), we couldn't think of a better way to express your feelings than by fashioning your poetic voice into something miraculously similar to your own.

Hey, we're not blaming you. Not one little bit. After all, when you've got an imagination this rich and varied, why would you try to foist it off onto someone else? Even if that someone else were a fictional voice of your own creation, he would only steal light away from the true sun in our sky... you.

So here's to you, Keats. Poet, speaker, and melancholic extraordinaire. We wouldn't know how to contemplate death without you

Where It All Goes Down

Keats' landscape for this poem is as varied and dynamic as his imagination will allow. In fact,

come to think of it, it's firmly located *within* the speaker's own mind. Sure, nature plays a starring role in just about every line of the poem, but when you get right down to it, nature doesn't appear in descriptive terms. Keats isn't wandering around amidst rocks, trees, and babbling brooks. Nope, when you look closely, you'll see that items from nature are most commonly used as vehicles in metaphors about the speaker's own emotional state. His ambition grows as he imagines his future books as storehouses of grain; his love becomes a version of the night sky.

Come to think of it, most of Keats's setting can be summed in one little phrase: "It's all about me." It's ironic, really, since the entire movement of the poem is an attempt to get *away* from all of his personal passions and desires.

When the speaker finally does get outside his own head, he does so in a rather remarkable way: he moves out to "the shores of the wide world" (line 12). We're not quite sure where to put that on a map, but we're guessing that it's a few steps away from reality – or at the very least, up in a spaceship. Since space travel wasn't exactly common practice in the 19th century, we're left with a sneaking suspicion that Keats *intends* to make his ultimate location rather unimaginable. So, from nature-as-metaphor to nature-as-uncharted waters, Keats' poem is one long trek through a very, very strange terrain: the poet's own mind

The regular meter of this poem, iambic pentameter, means that it tends to flow pretty smoothly over the tongue. (Read about that in "Form and Meter.") Ironically, that strict metrical pattern sounds a whole lot like regular spoken English. In other words, Keats is playing with complicated systems that end up sounding a lot like spur-of-the-moment thoughts.

In fact, much of Keats' language is far more carefully constructed than it initially appears. Elaborate natural metaphors are underscored by a whole lot of alliteration. Just take a look at the first quatrain: "**g**lean'd," "**g**rav'd," "**g**arnered," and "**g**rain" all feature hard "g"s, tying the speaker's metaphor together with one constant sound. Just like the carefully constructed iambic pentameter, Keats' alliteration stacks up without our really noticing it. If you're not paying attention, it would seem like the speaker just *happens* to think in really elaborate, haunting phrases.

Well, here's the thing about Keats' title: it's not really a title, just the first line of the poem.

Think of this poem as the scribbles that you'd doodle on your notebook in math class, or a note that you'd pass to your friend while the teacher's looking the other way. Okay, so most notes that you write probably aren't in iambic pentameter. And they probably don't use super-flowery imagery about fairies and ripening grain. We get that.

Here's the thing, though: Keats' world *was* full of fairies and stormy seas and metaphors of all shapes and sizes. That was just his life. When he penned this little poem and sent it off to his best friend, he didn't take the time to write a title at the top of it. "When I have fears that I may cease to be" is a message to a close friend. No title needed.

Years after Keats' death, the editors and publishers who finally got around to printing Keats' work needed *some* way to distinguish this poem from the others, so they snagged the first line and called it a title. Since we're talking about the title, we should point out that not titling Shakespearean-style sonnets is, after all, precisely what Shakespeare did himself. At least, Keats

was in good company.

Apocalypse. Now.

No, we're not referring to the end of the world or space ships landing back in the 19th century. For Keats, however, contemplating his own end is just as cataclysmic as thinking about the end of the entire world. (Hey, who blames him? Dying probably isn't the best thing to think about all the time.) Contemplating death allows Keats to elevate all of these feelings to a very high pitch, until just about everything is as urgent and melodramatic as, well, the end of the world itself.

We've got your back. With the Tough-O-Meter, you'll know whether to bring extra layers or Swiss army knives as you summit the literary mountain. (10 = Toughest)

(6) Tree Line

Sure, love and ambition are pretty common topics – but wrap those subjects up in an elaborate canvas of metaphors, and you've got yourself a poem that's just a little bit tricky to navigate. It's lovely to be part of Keats' mind, but, well, it's not always the easiest place to be.

Brain Snacks: Tasty Tidbits of Knowledge

Byron, another famous Romantic poet, did *not* like Keats' poetry. At all. Here's what he said about it: "[...] here are Johnny Keats' piss-a-bed poetry [...] There is such a trash of Keats and the like on my tables that I am ashamed to look at them... No more Keats, I entreat, flay him alive [...]. There is no bearing the drivelling idiot-ism of the manikin" ([source](#)). Ouch!

Keats was a licensed apothecary (kind of like a pharmacist). He preferred writing poetry, though ([source](#)).

In "When I have fears that I may cease to be," Keats' speaker looks to the sky for love. It seems he may have done that in real life, too. In a letter to his girlfriend, Fanny Brawne, he wrote, "I will imagine you Venus tonight and pray, pray, pray to your star like a Heathen. Your's ever, fair Star" ([source](#)).

When I have fears that I may cease to be Theme of Love

Keats' brand of love is the stuff that romantic legends are made of... if only he could ever feel any of it himself. When Keats writes of love, it's not just of a pair of fine eyes. That would be *waaaaay* too easy. Nope, his love is HUGE and IMPOSSIBLE and always, always tinged with a healthy dose of despair. We get the feeling that Keats would have been a whole lot happier as a knight in shining armor, complete with a huge white horse. Turns out that the 19th century wasn't so full of castles and giants to conquer and damsels to rescue – so Keats is left dreaming of a love that ultimately remains available only in his imagination.

Questions About Love

1. Does it sound like the speaker has ever been in a real relationship? How can you tell?
2. Do you think that love is a positive emotion in this poem? Why or why not?
3. Is love as fickle as Keats' speaker seems to think it is?
4. Do you feel like this is an accurate description of the way love affects a person? Why or why not?

Chew on This

Try on an opinion or two, start a debate, or play the devil's advocate.

The speaker's vision of love is unrealistic. Even if he lived to a ripe old age, he would never experience the kind of love described here.

When I have fears that I may cease to be Theme of Ambition

Hey, who doesn't want to be the best writer in the world? Unlike the rest of us schmucks, though, John Keats is fairly certain that he *can* be the best there's ever been – provided, of course, that he lives long enough to see his poems published. Ironically, the fears he voiced in "When I have fears that I may cease to be" were realized (he died before his poems were published), which makes this melodramatic assurance of his own failure far less silly than it might otherwise seem.

Questions About Ambition

1. If Keats knows that he's a good writer, why do you think it matters that he gets published?
2. Does Keats' consciousness of impending death make his desires weaker or stronger? How can you tell?
3. Do the speakers' desires seem reasonable? Why or why not?
4. Which do you think the speaker desires more: fame or love? How can you tell?

Chew on This

Try on an opinion or two, start a debate, or play the devil's advocate.

Just as the speaker seeks an impossible love, his ambition for achieving his literary goals are also unattainable. No artist can ever possibly realize all of his ideas before he dies.

When I have fears that I may cease to be Theme of Death

Death. Destruction. Dreams dashed in one fell swoop. Death isn't a peaceful sleep or an easy descent into old age in Keats' work. Instead, it's a particularly bitter reminder of all the things that the poet imagines he'll miss in a world that's teeming with beauty and wonders. Keats may think a lot about death, but that doesn't mean that he's comfortable with his own mortality. Luckily, he seems to enjoy dwelling in uncomfortable spaces.

Questions About Death

1. Why do you think that the speaker starts the poem out with a declaration of his fears of death? How does this affect your understanding of the rest of the poem?
2. Do you think that the speaker has reconciled himself to the possibility of death by the end of the

poem? How can you tell?

3. Does it seem like the speaker is exaggerating his fears of death?

Chew on This

Try on an opinion or two, start a debate, or play the devil's advocate.

By the end of the poem, the speaker feels more comfortable with the idea of his own mortality.

By the end of the poem, the speaker is even more afraid of dying

When I have fears that I may cease to be Theme of Man and the Natural World

Nature takes center stage in this poem in odd ways. Pretty much everything that Keats has to say about love and desire (and even about writing) comes out as a meditation on the natural world. Nature, you see, becomes a stand-in for everything that occurs in human life... which is funny, because when the speaker decides to reject all of the trials of human life, where does he turn? You guessed it... to nature. If you wanted to make sure that Keats was a [Romantic poet](#), well, here's your proof.

Questions About Man and the Natural World

1. How would this poem be different if Keats' metaphors were, say, about machines?
2. Does Keats present a realistic picture of the natural world?
3. When the speaker says he's standing on the "shore of the wide world," where you think that is?

Chew on This

Try on an opinion or two, start a debate, or play the devil's advocate.

The natural world is a source of comfort for the speaker. It calms his fears.

1. Do you think that Keats is really writing this poem for an outside reader? Why or why not? If your answer is "yes," then who is that reader?
2. Do you think that Keats has a realistic assessment of love? Why do you come to your conclusion?
3. How does Keats use of metaphor help to illuminate his message? What does that tell you about his worldview?
4. Do you think that Keats really believed he'd be famous someday?

DOVER BEACH

This is a poem about a sea and a beach that is truly beautiful, but holds much deeper meaning than what meets the eye. The poem is written in **free verse** with no particular meter or rhyme scheme, although some of the words do rhyme. Arnold is the speaker **speaking to someone he loves**. As the poem progresses, the reader sees why Arnold poses the question stated above, and why life seems to be the way it is. During the first part of the poem Arnold states, "The Sea is calm tonight" and in line 7, "Only, from the long line of spray". In this way, Arnold is **setting the mood** or scene so the reader can understand the point he is trying to portray. In lines 1-6 he is talking about a very peaceful night on the ever so calm sea, with the moonlight shining so intensely on the land. Then he states how the moonlight "gleams and is gone" **because the "cliffs of England" are standing at their highest peaks, which are blocking the light of the moon**. Next, the waves come roaring into the picture, as they "draw back and fling the pebbles" onto the shore and back out to sea again. Arnold also mentions that the shore brings "the eternal note of sadness in", maybe representing the cycles of life and repetition. Arnold then starts describing the history of Sophocles' idea of the "Aegean's turbid ebb and flow".

The sea is starting to become rougher and all agitated. Also the mention of "human misery" implies that life begins and ends, but it can still be full of happiness, and unfortunately, at the same time, sadness. "The Sea of Faith was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore." **The key word in that stanza is once, because it implies that he (Arnold) used to look at the sea in a different way than he does now**. Throughout the whole poem, Arnold uses a metaphor to describe his views and opinions. Now he only hears its "melancholy, long, withdrawing roar." It seems as though Arnold is **questioning his own faith**. The whole poem is based on a metaphor – **Sea to Faith**. When the sea **retreats, so does faith**, and leaves us with nothing. In the last nine lines, Arnold wants **his love and himself to be true to one another**. The land, which he thought was so beautiful and new, is actually nothing – "neither joy, nor love, nor light". In reality, Arnold is expressing that nothing is certain, because where there is light there is dark and where there is **happiness there is sadness**. "We are here though as on a darkling plain, swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight, where ignorant armies clash at night". Arnold uses much alliteration in the poem. For example, in line 31, "To lie before us like a land of dreams", repeating the letter L at the beginning of three words. Also, in line 4, "Gleams and is gone...", repeating the letter G. The usage of assonance and consonance is not widespread in "Dover Beach". In line 3 – "...on the French coast the light" – the repetition of the letter T is shown, as an example of consonance. Other literary techniques, such as onomatopoeia and hyperbole, are not used in the poem, besides the metaphor for "Faith" being the Sea.

The diction Arnold uses creates a sense of peacefulness and calmness. It is fairly easily understood vocabulary, with the exception of a few words, such as cadence and darkling. From reading Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach", one realizes that there is no certainty in life. When everything is going perfectly, something unfortunate may happen at any given time, with no forewarning.

Dover Beach

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Jump to: [navigation](#), [search](#)

This article is about the poem. For other uses, see [Dover Beach \(disambiguation\)](#).



Wikisource has original text related to this article:

[Dover Beach](#)

"**Dover Beach**" is a short [lyric poem](#) by the [English](#) poet [Matthew Arnold](#).^[1] It was first published in 1867 in the collection *New Poems*, but surviving notes indicate its composition may have begun as early as 1849. The most likely date is 1851.^[2]

The title, locale and subject of the poem's descriptive opening lines is the shore of the English ferry port of [Dover](#), [Kent](#), facing [Calais](#), France, at the [Strait of Dover](#), the narrowest part (21 miles) of the [English Channel](#), where Arnold honeymooned in 1851.^[2]

Contents

[hide]

- [1 Analysis](#)
- [2 Composition](#)
- [3 Influence](#)
- [4 Notes](#)
 - [4.1 References](#)

[edit] Analysis

In [Collini's](#) opinion, "Dover Beach" is a difficult poem to analyze, and some of its passages and metaphors have become so well known that they are hard to see with "fresh eyes".^[3] Arnold begins with a naturalistic and detailed nightscape of the beach at Dover in which auditory imagery plays a significant role^[4] ("Listen! you hear the grating roar"). The beach, however, is bare, with only a hint of humanity in a light that "gleams and is gone".^[5] Reflecting the traditional notion that the poem was written during Arnold's honeymoon (see composition section), one critic notes that "the speaker might be talking to his bride".^[6]

The sea is calm to-night.

The tide is full, the moon lies fair

Upon the straits; —on the French coast the light

Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,

Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.

Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!
Only, from the long line of spray
Where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd land,
Listen! you hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in.

Arnold looks at two aspects of this scene, its soundscape (in the first and second stanzas) and the retreating action of the tide (in the third stanza). He hears the sound of the sea as "the eternal note of sadness". [Sophocles](#), a 5th century BC Greek playwright who wrote tragedies on fate and the will of the gods, also heard this sound as he stood upon the shore of the [Aegean Sea](#).^{[7][8]} Critics differ widely on how to interpret this image of the Greek classical age. One sees a difference between Sophocles interpreting the "note of sadness" humanistically, while Arnold in the industrial nineteenth century hears in this sound the retreat of religion and faith.^[9] A more recent critic connects the two as artists, Sophocles the tragedian, Arnold the lyric poet, each attempting to transform this note of sadness into "a higher order of experience".^[10]

Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Ægæan, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery; we
Find also in the sound a thought,
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.^{[11][12]}

Having examined the soundscape, Arnold turns to the action of the tide itself and sees in its retreat a metaphor for the loss of faith in the modern age,^[13] once again expressed in an auditory image ("But now I only hear / Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar"). This third stanza begins with an image not of sadness, but of "joyous fulness" similar in beauty to the image with which the poem opens.^[14]

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore

Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear^[15]
And naked shingles of the world.

The final stanza begins with an appeal to love, then moves on to the famous ending metaphor. Critics have varied in their interpretation of the first two lines; one calls them a "perfunctory gesture ... swallowed up by the poem's powerfully dark picture",^[16] while another sees in them "a stand against a world of broken faith".^[17] Midway between these is one of Arnold's biographers, who describes being "true / To one another" as "a precarious notion" in a world that has become "a maze of confusion".^[18]

The metaphor with which the poem ends is most likely an allusion to a passage in [Thucydides'](#) account of the [Peloponnesian War](#). He describes an ancient battle that occurred on a similar beach during the Athenian invasion of Sicily. The battle took place at night; the attacking army became disoriented while fighting in the darkness and many of their soldiers inadvertently killed each other.^[19] This final image has also been variously interpreted by the critics. Culler calls the "darkling plain" Arnold's "central statement" of the human condition.^[20] Pratt sees the final line as "only metaphor" and thus susceptible to the "uncertainty" of poetic language.^[21]

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.^{[22][23]}

"The poem's discourse", Honan tells us, "shifts literally and symbolically from the present, to Sophocles on the Aegean, from Medieval Europe back to the present—and the auditory and visual images are dramatic and mimetic and didactic. Exploring the dark terror that lies beneath his happiness in love, the speaker resolves to love—and exigencies of history and the nexus between lovers are the poem's real

issues. That lovers may be 'true / To one another' is a precarious notion: love in the modern city momentarily gives peace, but nothing else in a post-medieval society reflects or confirms the faithfulness of lovers. Devoid of love and light the world is a maze of confusion left by 'retreating' faith."^[24]

Critics have questioned the unity of the poem, noting that the sea of the opening stanza does not appear in the final stanza, while the "darkling plain" of the final line is not apparent in the opening.^[25] Various solutions to this problem have been proffered. One critic saw the "darkling plain" with which the poem ends as comparable to the "naked shingles of the world".^[26] "Shingles" here means flat beach cobbles, characteristic of some wave-swept coasts. Another found the poem "emotionally convincing" even if its logic may be questionable.^[27] The same critic notes that "the poem upends our expectations of metaphor" and sees in this the central power of the poem.^[28] The poem's historicism creates another complicating dynamic. Beginning in the present it shifts to the classical age of Greece, then (with its concerns for the sea of faith) it turns to Medieval Europe, before finally returning to the present.^[24] The form of the poem itself has drawn considerable comment. Critics have noted the careful diction in the opening description,^[29] the overall, spell-binding rhythm and cadence of the poem^[30] and its dramatic character.^[31] One commentator sees the strophe-antistrophe of the ode at work in the poem, with an ending that contains something of the "cata-strophe" of tragedy.^[32] Finally, one critic sees the complexity of the poem's structure resulting in "the first major 'free-verse' poem in the language".^[33]

[edit] Composition

According to Tinker and Lowry, "a draft of the first twenty-eight lines of the poem" was written in pencil "on the back of a folded sheet of paper containing notes on the career of Empedocles".^[34] Allott concludes that the notes are probably from around 1849-50.^[35] "Empedocles on Etna", again according to Allott, was probably written 1849-52; the notes on Empedocles are likely to be contemporary with the writing of that poem.^[36]

The final line of this draft is:

And naked shingles of the world. Ah love &c

Tinker and Lowry conclude that this "seem[s] to indicate that the last nine lines of the poem as we know it were already in existence when the portion regarding the ebb and flow of the sea at Dover was composed." This would make the manuscript "a prelude to the concluding paragraph" of the poem in which "there is no reference to the sea or tides".^[37]

Ah, love, let us be true

To one another! for the world, which seems

To lie before us like a land of dreams,

So various, so beautiful, so new,

Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help from pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

Arnold's visits to Dover may also provide some clue to the date of composition. Allott has Arnold in Dover in June 1851 and again in October of that year "on his return from his delayed continental honeymoon". To critics who conclude that ll. 1-28 were written at Dover and ll. 29-37 "were rescued from some discarded poem" Allott suggests the contrary, i.e., that the final lines "were written at Dover in late June," while "ll. 29-37 were written in London shortly afterwards".^[29]

[edit] Influence

[William Butler Yeats](#) responds directly to Arnold's pessimism in his four-line poem, "The Nineteenth Century and After" (1929):

Though the great song return no more
There's keen delight in what we have:
The rattle of pebbles on the shore
Under the receding wave.

[Anthony Hecht](#), [U.S. Poet Laureate](#), replied to "Dover Beach" in his poem "The Dover Bitch".

So there stood Matthew Arnold and this girl
With the cliffs of England crumbling away behind them,
And he said to her, "Try to be true to me,
And I'll do the same for you, for things are bad
All over, etc. etc."

The anonymous figure to whom Arnold addresses his poem becomes the subject of Hecht's poem. In Hecht's poem she "caught the bitter allusion to the sea", imagined "what his whiskers would feel like / On the back of her neck", and felt sad as she looked out across the channel. "And then she got really angry" at the thought that she had become "a sort of mournful cosmic last resort". After which she says "one or two unprintable things".

But you mustn't judge her by that. What I mean to say is,

She's really all right. I still see her once in a while

And she always treats me right.^[38]

Kenneth and Miriam Allott, referring to "Dover Bitch" as "an irreverent *jeu d'esprit*", nonetheless see, particularly in the line "a sort of mournful cosmic last resort", an extension of the original poem's main theme.^[39]

The life of modern mankind is presented very negatively and ignorantly by Matthew Arnold in the poem Dover Beach by the fact that religious faith evanesce with the Industrial Revolution. Arnold creates the image of the dark future for the people without unwavering faith or religion.

Modern men are bastardised with the thought that new the Industrial Revolution will give them advantage over nature. This thought of gaining superiority made humans arrogant by which this appearance is broken by the reality of nature's dominance. People also seem ignorant with the wishful thought. These pebbles which 'the waves draw back, and fling' are completely powerless and are thrown around by the waves that move these "pebbles" at ease. Arnold uses pebbles as a metaphor for humans to show the inferiority in comparison to nature. The ignorance of humans is emphasised by the historical allusion to Peloponnesian War. In the dark, soldiers could not differentiate between their own army and the opponents; and so they killed their own soldiers. This is used by the poet to show the stupidity of modern man throwing away the religion which was everything to people before the Industrial Revolution; something to believe and rely on when people prayed. However, this old belief is thrown away and Arnold sees it as a very naïve decision.

The Industrial Revolution gave the source of arrogance and confidence which took place among the Western countries. This revolution was revolutionary itself; humans could mass produce, with improved quality, and at ease. These machineries became the limbs of human society. What came with the industrial revolution was the idea of realism. People could nearly produce goods to near-original standards, all thanks to improved technologies and science, and hence began to doubt the existence of God and supernatural beings. Realism contrasts the theology which is all about belief without questioning that God exists; and people believed it before the times of the machineries. It gave people hope and modesty under the mighty existence of God. However both hope and modesty disappeared with the Industrial Revolution which Arnold laments for. Bitterness is suggested when Arnold exclaims 'Ah, love' to show that in this changing world, one can only rely on the partner, and be trustful and true.

Sarcasm is used to describe the modern world as a 'land of dreams' as there is no more hope for the world, as there is no more faith.

As the poem proceeds, the transition of mood is noticeable as the grief of the loss of faith extends to a sense of resignation towards the end and having a sarcastic, sour approach to the issue. The 'tremulous cadence slow' helps to convey the gradual process of the wane of doctrine which adds to the idea that 'the change of people's lives is almost unnoticeable'. This gradual process hurts Arnold because people are caught unaware of the changes taking place and so do not think it is particularly wrong and sinful. Arnold presents his sorrow with the historical allusion to Sophocles who, was a Greek playwright, had heard the sound of waves crashing as the 'eternal note of sadness'. 'The 'sadness' of the mankind turning away from religious beliefs' is a parallel to the 'melancholy... withdrawing roar...retreating' of the waves. Before the development of science and technology, people had truly believed in the religion and thought that they were in total control of god. The metaphor 'Sea of Faith' which presents the religious faith people have, used to be 'full and round Earth's shore' but now is 'retreating... down the vast edges' which shows the decreasing religious beliefs. Arnold points out that, without faith, humans are 'naked' and have no protection and defence which reflects the vulnerability of man and their lives.

With carefully chosen words, Arnold presents the uncertainty of the future of humans. The new industrialised world seems "so various, so beautiful, so new" but it is again a mere appearance. The reality is that this mechanic, stiff world will have "neither joy, nor love, nor light" because this mechanics cannot feel love, hence no joy, and no vision as humans need love and the warm characteristics of humanity. It is thus deducible that the future will have no "certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain" which are the essentialities of humans. Humans can only survive the harsh world when everybody believes and trusts each other, and this will be broken with the introduction of industrialisation. This change of the world will bring "confused alarms on struggle and flight" which creates an imagery of a "darkling plain"; a dark vision for humans. Furthermore, the "turbid" ebb and flow shows the cloudy, uncertain future of 'ebb and flow' which is the repetitive cycles of nature. Can humans only survive when they make harmony with the nature, and to go against the natural cycles can only mean extinction of humans. The 'cliffs' of England 'gleams' and 'glimmers'; gleams and glimmers have a sense of shakiness, precariousness and unknown which echoes the uncertain modern man. Also the alliteration of 'g' and 'm' creates a stuttering tone which adds to the idea of uncertainty. This imagery

portrays the withering away of cliffs as a decline of religious beliefs and whatsmore, deterioration of the Earth itself as humans exploit resources out of the Earth which the modern development enabled men to do.

The flaws of modernism and realism are expressed in this poem. The flow of the poem is cut off by uses of caesura which is a parallel to the imperfect modern world. Arnold gives a hint that modernization of the world will have some flaws which will inevitably bring loss of faith and result in loss of equilibrium. In science, there is no hope; everything is measured out and exact. Hence in the modern world reality there can be no hope as it looks vain. Again, Arnold sympathises with the loss of hope in reality. In a different sense, the calm, naturalistic description of a beach at night in the first stanza is the appearance which contrasts to the reality that is sad, unhopeful, 'retreating' and 'tremulous'.

Human beings are inferior over nature and the spiritual beliefs as to an extent that people cannot control anything. The abandonment of the doctrine of religion with the help of the Industrial Revolution is only a vain act against the power-overwhelming nature. Religion and faith should remain in humanity and ignoring it should result in the uncertainty and vulnerability of modern man.

Time and Place

Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) wrote "Dover Beach" during or shortly after a visit he and his wife made to the Dover region of southeastern England, the setting of the poem, in 1851. They had married in June of that year. A draft of the first two stanzas of the poem appears on a sheet of paper he used to write notes for another another work, "Empedocles on Etna," published in 1852. The town of Dover is closer to France than any other port city in England. The body of water separating the coastline of the town from the coast of France is the Strait of Dover, north of the English Channel and south of the North Sea.

Point of View

The poet/persona uses first-, second-, and third-person point of view in the poem. Generally, the poem presents the observations of the author/persona in third-person point of view but shifts to second person when he addresses his beloved, as in line 6 (*Come*), line 9 (*Listen! you*), and line 29 (*let*). Then he shifts to first-person point of view when he includes his beloved and the reader as co-observers, as in Line 18 (*we*), Line 29 (*us*), Line 31 (*us*), and line 35 (*we*). He also uses first-person point of view to declare that at least one observation is his alone, and not necessarily that of his co-observers. This instance occurs in line 24: *But now I only hear*. This line means *But now I alone hear*.

Who Is the Listener? (Line 29)

The person addressed in the poem—lines 6, 9, and 29—is Matthew Arnold's wife, Frances Lucy Wightman. However, since the poem expresses a universal message, one may say that she can be any woman listening to the observations of any man. Arnold and his wife visited Dover Beach twice in 1851, the year they were married and the year Arnold was believed to have written "Dover Beach." At that time Arnold was inspector of schools in England, a position he held until 1886.

Theme

Arnold's central message is this: Challenges to the validity of long-standing theological and moral precepts have shaken the faith of people in God and religion. In Arnold's world of the mid-1800's, the pillar of faith supporting

society was perceived as crumbling under the weight of scientific postulates, such as the evolutionary theory of English physician Erasmus Darwin and French naturalist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck. Consequently, the existence of God and the whole Christian scheme of things was cast in doubt. Arnold, who was deeply religious, lamented the dying of the light of faith, as symbolized by the light he sees in "Dover Beach" on the coast of France, which gleams one moment and is gone the next. He remained a believer in God and religion, although he was open to—and advocated—an overhaul of traditional religious thinking. In *God and the Bible*, he wrote: "At the present moment two things about the Christian religion must surely be clear to anybody with eyes in his head. One is, that men cannot do without it; the other, that they cannot do with it as it is."

Type of Work

"Dover Beach" is a poem with the mournful tone of an [elegy](#) and the personal intensity of a [dramatic monologue](#). Because the meter and rhyme vary from line to line, the poem is said to be in free verse—that is, it is unencumbered by the strictures of traditional versification. However, there is cadence in the poem, achieved through the following:

Alliteration Examples: to-night, tide; full, fair; gleams, gone; coast, cliff (first stanza)

Parallel Structure Example: *The tide is full, the moon lies fair* (first stanza); *So various, so beautiful, so new* (fourth stanza); *Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain* (fourth stanza)

Rhyming Words Examples: to-night, light; fair, night-air; stand, land; bay, spray; fling, bring; begin, in (first stanza)

Words Suggesting Rhythm Examples: draw back, return; Begin, and cease, then begin again (first stanza); turbid ebb and flow (second stanza)

Year of Publication

Although Matthew Arnold completed "Dover Beach" in 1851 or 1852, the poem was not published until 1867. It appeared in a collection entitled *New Poems*, published in London.



Dover Beach

By Matthew Arnold

1

The sea is calm to-night.

The tide is full, the **moon lies fair**

Upon the straits; on the French coast the **light**

Gleams and is gone; the **cliffs of England stand**;

Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.

Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!

Only, from the long line of spray

Where the sea meets the **moon-blanchèd** land,

Listen! you hear the **grating roar**

Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,

At their return, up the high **strand**,

Begin, and cease, and then again begin,

With tremulous cadence slow, and bring

The eternal note of sadness in.....14

Notes, Stanza 1

moon . . . straits: The water reflects the image of the moon. A strait is a narrow body of water that connects two larger bodies of water. In this poem, *straits* refers to the Strait of Dover (French: *Pas de Calais*), which connects the English Channel on the south to the North Sea on the north. The distance between the port cities of Dover, England, and Calais, France, is about twenty-one miles via the Strait of Dover.

light . . . gone: This clause establishes a sense of rhythm in that the light blinks on and off. In addition, the clause foreshadows the message of later lines—that the light of faith in God and religion, once strong, now flickers. Whether an observer at Dover can actually see a light at Calais depends on the height of the lighthouse and the altitude at which the observer sees the light (because of the curvature of the earth), on the brightness of the light, and on the weather

conditions.

cliffs . . . vast: These are white cliffs, composed of chalk, a limestone that easily erodes. Like the light from France, they glimmer, further developing the theme of a weakening of the light of faith. The fact that they easily erode supports this theme.

moon-blanching: whitened by the light of the moon.

grating . . . pebbles: Here, *grating* (meaning *rasping*, *grinding*, or *scraping*) introduces conflict between the sea and the land and, symbolically, between long-held religious beliefs and the challenges against them. However, it may be an exaggeration that that pebbles cause a *grating roar*.

strand: shoreline

2

Sophocles long ago

Heard **it** on the **Aegean**, and it brought
Into his mind the **turbid** ebb and flow
Of human misery; we

Find also in the sound a thought.

Hearing it by this distant northern sea.....20

Notes, Stanza 1

Sophocles . . . Aegean: Arnold alludes here to a passage in the ancient Greek play *Antigone*, by Sophocles, in which Sophocles says the gods can visit ruin on people from one generation to the next, like a swelling tide driven by winds. **it:** "the eternal note of sadness" (line 14).

Aegean: The sea between Greece and Turkey. In the time of Sophocles, the land occupied by Turkey was known as Anatolia.

turbid: muddy, cloudy

Find . . . thought: In the sound of the sea, the poet "hears" a thought that disturbs him as did the one heard by Sophocles.

3

The Sea of Faith

Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright **girdle** furled.

But now I only hear

Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.....;.....28

Notes, Stanza 3

Sea . . . full: See theme, above, for an explanation.

girdle: sash, belt; anything that surrounds or encircles

I only hear: I alone hear

shingles: gravel on the beach

Interpretation

There was a time when faith in God was strong and comforting. This faith wrapped itself around us, protecting us from doubt and despair, as the sea wraps itself around the continents and islands of the world. Now, however, the sea of faith has become a sea of doubt. Science challenges the precepts of theology and religion; human misery makes people feel abandoned, lonely. People place their faith in material things.

Ah, love, let us be true
 To one another! for the world, which seems
 To lie before us like a land of dreams,
 So various, so beautiful, so new,
 Hath really **neither joy, nor love, nor light,
 Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;**
 And we are here as on a **darkling** plain
 Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.....37

Notes, Stanza 4

neither . . . pain: The world has become a selfish, cynical, amoral, materialistic battlefield; there is much hatred and pain, but there is no guiding light.

darkling: dark, obscure, dim; occurring in darkness; menacing, threatening, dangerous, ominous.

Where . . . night: E.K. Brown and J.O. Bailey suggest that this line is an allusion to Greek historian Thucydides' account of the Battle of Epipolae (413 BC), a walled fortress near the city of Syracuse on the island of Sicily. In that battle, Athenians fought an army of Syracusans at night. In the darkness, the combatants lashed out blindly at one another. Brown and Bailey further observe that the line "suggests the confusion of mid-Victorian values of all kinds . . ." (Brown, E.K. and J.O. Bailey, eds. *Victorian Poetry*. 2nd ed. New York: Ronald Press, 1962, page 831).

Interpretation

Let us at least be true to each other in our marriage, in our moral standards, in the way we think; for the world will not be true to us. Although it presents itself to us as a dreamland, it is a sham. It offers nothing to ease our journey through life.



Figures of Speech

Arnold uses a variety of figures of speech, including the following examples. (For definitions of the different figures of speech, see the glossary of [literary terms](#).)

Alliteration Examples 1: to-night, tide; full, fair (Lines 1-2); gleams, gone; coast, cliff; long line; which the waves; folds, furled

Assonance: tide, lies;

Paradox and Hyperbole: *grating roar of pebbles*

Metaphor: *which the waves draw back, and fling* (comparison of the waves to an intelligent entity that rejects that which it has captured)

Metaphor: *turbid ebb and flow of human misery* (comparison of human misery to the ebb and flow of the sea)

Metaphor: *The Sea of Faith* (comparison of faith to water making up an ocean)

Simile: *The Sea of Faith . . . lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled* (use of like to compare the sea to a girdle)

Metaphor: *breath of the night-wind* (comparison of the wind to a living thing)

Simile: *the world, which seems / To lie before us like a land of dreams* (use of like to compare the world to a land of dreams)

Anaphora: So various, so beautiful, so new (repetition of *so*)

Anaphora: nor love, nor light, / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain (repetition of *nor*)

3. ANALYSIS OF THE POEM.

"Dover Beach" is the most famous poem by Matthew Arnold and is generally considered one of the most important poems of the 19th century. It was first published in 1867, in the collection, *New Poems*.

(cf. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dover_Beach)

TITLE

By reading the title, we cannot know what the poem will deal with. If you read it, you will probably think that it will deal with nature but it doesn't. So, I think that he wrote this title because in the first stanza, when he locates where is that sea, the "dover beach" will be that one which can be seen on the french coast.

THEMES

This poem deals with religion and he is concretely talking about the loss of faith. But it is also about the industrialization and the changes in the cities (the progress) that were occurring in that period of time (the victorian age).

STRUCTURE

This poem is structured in 4 stanzas which have different amount of lines. The first stanza consists of 14 lines, the second of 6, the third of 8 and the last one of 9 lines. The first stanza can be divided into 2 parts. In the first part (line 1 to 6), the sea is described in a very positive way. This can be seen because the poet uses adjectives such as "fair", "tranquil", "calm" etc. But, after line 7, that harmonious atmosphere changes into sadness. In the second stanza, it is said that Sophocles heard the sadness of the sea (long ago). And this sadness is compared to human misery. In the third stanza the sea is called the "Sea of faith" to show that once humanity was more religious. The first three lines of this stanza create a feeling of hope, whereas the last lines sound sad and hopeless.

The last stanza can be seen as a conclusion of the preceding ones. In this last one it is illustrated the contrast between hope and reality. Once some time ago in victorian population existed the hope, now he is talking about the loss of faith (now everything is confused, there is no certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain etc (line 33)).

STYLE

COMMUNICATIVE STRUCTURE

The poem is mainly written in third person, for example: "the sea" (line 1, "the tide" (line 2) or "the world" (line 30). We can also see an imperative sentence in line 9 "listen!". The first person only appears one time in line 24 "but now I only hear", and it could be to emphasize that distrust in God that the author of the poem has (the loss of faith). And, eventually we can see the second person in lines 29, 31 and 35 "us and we" and he is using this person to be sad for that loss of faith and the "lies" that people were living.

Dealing with the temporal structure we find that the first stanza can be seen as a description of a present status, so he uses the verbs in simple present tense, for example: "is" (line 1), "lies" (line 2) or "begin" (line 12). Whereas the second stanza is a reference to the past, for that reason we can see verbs in simple past tense like "heard" (line 16) or "brought" (line 16). And, I must also say that when he refers to what he thought before his loss of faith, he uses the past such as "was" (line 22) but when he talks about what he thinks now, he uses the present like "hear" (line 24) or "are" (line 35).

COHESION

We can mainly find juxtaposition in this poem, such as "the tide is full, the moon lies fair" (line 2) or "Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!" (line 4) or "So various, so beautiful, so new" (line 32). But there is also a lot of coordination, using "and", for example in lines 4, 5 and 21. In all the poem he uses this connector, the word "and". Furthermore, we can see "but" in line 24, that is also a case of coordination.

We can say that there are both short and long sentences but those last ones are not difficult to understand. That long sentences are always linked by the connector “and”.

RETHORICAL DEVICES

We can find an anaphora in lines 4 and 5 “Gleams and glimmering”, to underline the harmonious atmosphere of the first six lines.

Throughout the poem, the sea is used as an image and a metaphor. At first, it is beautiful to look at in the moonlight (ll.1-8), then it begins to make hostile sounds (“grating roar” (l. 9); “tremulous cadence” (l.13)) that evoke a general feeling of sadness. In the third stanza, the sea is turned into a metaphoric “Sea of Faith” (l.21) – a symbol for a time when religion could still be experienced without the doubts brought about by progress and science (Darwinism). Now, the ‘Sea of Faith’ and thus the certainty of religion withdraws itself from the human grasp and leaves only darkness behind.

And finally, we find a simile in the third stanza, in line 22 “bright girdle furl’d” which emphasizes that faith was inseparable to earth.

We can also find repetitions like the word “sea” in lines 1, 20 and 21, or “land and begin” repeated twice in lines 8, 12 and 31.

LEXIS AND SEMANTICS

There are no archaic words although there are some words which nowadays they are not written in the way that appears in the poem, such as “to-night” (line 1) which now goes together “tonight”.

Dealing with lexical fields we can find words related with the "sea" such as "cliffs"(line 4), "bay" (line 5), "spray" (line 7), "shore" (line 22), "edge" (line 27), "strand" (line 11), "land" (line 8 and 31), "coast" (line 3), "tide" (line 2), "waves" (line 10), or adjectives which expresses positive aspects like "calm" (line 1), "gleam" (line 4), and those which express negative aspects such as "nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain" (line 34) "darkling plain" (line 5) or "sadness" (line 14).

Eventually, we can find synonyms such as "gleams"(line 4) and "bright" (line 22). Or "shore" (line 22) and "edges" (line 27) and "pebbles" (line 10) and "shingles" (line 28).

RHYTHM AND RHYME

As for the metrical scheme, there is no apparent rhyme scheme, but rather a free handling of the basic iambic pattern. In stanza 3 there is a series of open vowels ("Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar" (l. 25). A generally falling syntactical rhythm can be detected and continues into stanza 4. In this last stanza one can find seven lines of iambic pentameter (l.31-37), with the rhyme scheme of abba cddcc.

According to Ruth Pitman, this poem can be seen as "a series of incomplete sonnets".

The first two sections each consist of 14 lines that suggest but do not achieve strict sonnet form, and except for a short (three foot) opening line, the last section emulates the octave of a sonnet, but closes with a single,

climactic line instead of a sestet – as though the final five lines had been eroded.

(c.f. <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/arnold/touche4.html>)

4. PERSONAL INTERPRETATION

From my own point of view, the main topic of this poem is religion, and concretely the loss of faith in the Victorian age. I think the main reason why he wrote this poem is because he questioned himself whether the religion was true or not. We must know that he was a Christian but as soon as he grew up, he became agnostic, that means, he lost his trust in God, so, in a way, we can say that he lost his faith. Dealing with the structure of the poem, we can say that in the first stanza, from line 1 to 6, the sea is described with very positive connotations whereas from line 7 to 14, this sea is turned into negative ones.

Then, the second stanza makes a reference to the ancient Greek. In this stanza the sea continues having bad connotations and it is said that, at those times, Sophocles also heard that Sadees on the Aegean. In the third one, the sea is called as the "sea of faith" and he makes a comparison between the good aspects that the sea once had and that now it has turned into bad ones. And finally, the last one, we could say that it entires all the other stanzas. And here he could be saying that he has realised that people are alone in the world, he did not know if he must have faith or not, so the only way to survive is being supportive with each other. But he could also be talking about the industrialization. We can see in the last stanza, where we can suppose that he could be saying that the city was changing due to the industrialization but there are people who are discontent with this progress.

But, as a whole, I think that the main theme is the loss of faith.

5.CONCLUSION

In order to sum up, I would like to say that we have seen why this poem reflects so good what he felt about religion. We must also say that apart from reflecting quite well Matthew's own feelings, it also expresses the epoque of doubt and of questioning religion (whether it was true or not) in the victorian age. We should remember that, as I have said before, this age is characterized by the distrust in God, and the loss of faith (which this poem reflects very good).

We must know too, that he was a christian but, while he grew up into adulthood, he became agnostic, I think that's the reason why he wrote this poem, to express what he thought in that moment about religion.

So, to conclude, we can say that although this is one of the most important poems that Matthew Arnold has wrote, it is also interesting and I have chosen this poem to do my paper because it helps us to understand better the view that victorians had towards religion and faith. And Matthew, uses simple sentences, not difficult to understand, to explain this topic that has a very important role in victorian age. That is why I have chosen this poem.

The first time I read the poem "Dover Beach" by Matthew Arnold, I got the impression of somberness, uncertainty, and melancholy. To me, it conveys the ideas of self-deceit, change, consequence, humanity, and a struggle for truth. I had to look up the word "shingles," because it's not used as a reference to roofs, but piles of small stones on a beach. In order to understand it better, I interpreted and paraphrased the poem as follows: 'Our faith in ourselves and the world was once strong, and earth was full of texture, quality, and diversity. But now I only hear those things ebbing away, leaving us to destroy nature and become dull and emotionless. Let us love one another! For the world seems to have everything we want, so diverse, so beautiful, so new, but it really doesn't have joy, love, goodness, certainty, peace, or solace; we are mentally and emotionally blind, fighting in secret, confused, not knowing what we're fighting about.'

"Dover Beach" by Matthew Arnold- the name of the poem may be a reference to an actual place, a beach that has rocks instead of sand, suggesting that it's rather bare and dull. This is a lyric poem, because there aren't events that happen sequentially like in a narrative poem. It doesn't exactly change topics between the two stanzas; however, the focus does shift a bit, because in the first stanza, it's talking about a beach, giving an example to represent the world in general, which is what

the second stanza is about.

There are several sensory images in the poem. For example, when it says "melancholy, long, withdrawing roar," it appeals to the sense of hearing and gives the reader a feeling of desperation and emotional pain. When you read that line, you can just hear in your mind the long, desperate cry of a person struggling with some unknown, internal force. Engaging the reader's sight, the "round earth's shore" and "the folds of a bright girdle furled" come into play, giving off a positive, beautiful feeling. This may be because the poet wanted to give the reader an intimation of what the world was like when it had the "Sea of Faith," when we still appreciated nature and had faith in it and ourselves. The phrase "a darkling plain" brings to mind darkness of course, showing that people don't know what they're doing; we're just swaggering around with blindfolds on. The last few words of the poem, "...ignorant armies clash by night" gives a sense of confusion and stupidity, but at the same time secrecy.

As far as I'm concerned, this entire poem is a series of metaphors all merging together. The first line, "The Sea of Faith," is probably referring to the faith and appreciation that people put in nature and in themselves. So when it says that the sea of faith was once, too, at the full, it's saying that people had a lot of faith in themselves and in nature but we don't anymore. "But now I only hear its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar, retreating, to the breath of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear and naked shingles of the world" means that people are losing their faith, so the world is becoming much more dreary, bare, and without beauty or texture, probably because of humans placing less importance on nature and emotions, and emphasizing technology, dehumanizing society in general. The last two lines of the poem, "Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight where ignorant armies clash by night," most likely refers to opposing people fighting and going to war, but they don't even know what they're fighting about. Drawing on "clash by night," the fighting is done in secret so that the majority of people don't know that there's even a problem. There are three similes in the poem- "and round earth's shore lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled" shows that before we lost ourselves, the earth was predominantly natural and full of life and diversity. The second simile is "For the world, which seems to lie before us like a land of dreams..." A land of dreams would contain everything you could ever want, everything beautiful and painless, so the poet is saying that that's how most people perceive the world. Lastly, "and we are here as on a darkling plain" compares being in a dark place to the fact that our society doesn't really know what it's doing even though it thinks it does, and if we just shoot blindly, there might be negative consequences.

There is a repetition of the words "so" three times, and "nor" five times, in the second stanza of Dover Beach, probably to emphasize the contrast between the perceived world and how it actually is. It especially draws attention to the lines about the world not really having all these great things like love, joy, certainty, or peace, which is significant because humans have made it this way. The word "roar" is an onomatopoeia, drawing attention to the feelings of anger and desperation. "Clash" can also be an onomatopoeia, showing the forceful struggles of the "armies." There are a few couplets in the second stanza, but only two really draw the reader's attention because of the rhythm of the lines, the places where you pause. For example, the rhyming lines in 'for the world, which seems to lie before us like a land of dreams' isn't nearly as noticeable as 'nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain; and we are here as on a darkling plain' or 'swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight where ignorant armies clash by night.' The author may want to draw attention to those four lines because they contain one of the most imperative messages- we should think about the consequences of what we do before we just stab wildly in the dark.

This poem uses first person point of view. The mood is dreary and very reflective. The theme is that people should place their faith in the world, because if you change things too much without thinking of the consequences, negative things will probably happen. The poet calls attention to the phrase Sea of Faith by capitalizing it, because that's what the whole poem is about and that's essentially the most important thing according to the poet, having faith in ourselves and our world.

The first time I read "Dover Beach," I really didn't have a clue what it meant, but as I read it carefully and thought about it deeply, the more I came to understand it. Just like Mrs. Phelps in the novel Fahrenheit 451, I feel like I can make a connection with the poem, making it more meaningful. As for

Mrs. Phelps, her husband was going to war and therefore she could relate to the poem; it speaks of fighting for no reason and although Mrs. Phelps may not realize it, deep down she knows there's no reason for the war and there really shouldn't be one. She still retains that human element under the surface and she does care a lot about her husband and doesn't want to see him get hurt.

The effect this poem has on the reader has a lot to do with the techniques Matthew Arnold used. For example, if the mood was extremely cheery and upbeat instead of somber and dreary, it wouldn't convey the message nearly as well; it wouldn't make the reader reflect on society and him or herself nearly as much, so the whole point of the poem wouldn't come across. The message also wouldn't come across as well if the poet hadn't used all the metaphors that he did, especially when it comes to being on a dark plain and armies clashing by night, because that really illustrates the point that we don't know what we're doing when we do half the things we do. I'm still uncertain about several aspects of the poem, because there are so many ways you can interpret everything. Who exactly are the "armies?" Do shingles symbolize the empty quality of the people in society, or the bareness of the world because people are ignoring nature and advancing technology so much?

The road not taken

Even if you haven't yet read "The Road Not Taken," it will probably have a familiar ring when you do – it's one of the most popular poems by one of the most famous American writers of the twentieth century, [Robert Frost](#). Along with Frost's poem "[Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening](#)," it's probably one of the most taught poems in American schools. First published in Frost's collection *Mountain Interval* in 1916, almost a century later "The Road Not Taken" is still quoted left and right by inspirational speakers, writers, commercials, and everyday people.

We could go on and on about how famous this poem is, but, since it is famous, you probably already know that.

What you might not know is that this poem may not be as simple and uplifting as it seems. While "The Road Not Taken" is often read as a resounding nonconformist's credo, the poem isn't so sure about its message. In fact, sometimes it flat out contradicts itself.

But the possibility that the poem has multiple meanings doesn't mean that it's not worthy of its popularity. Actually, the poem's ambiguity improves it. Read closely, this poem is more than popular culture has made it out to be. It's more than a call to go your own way; it's a reflection on life's hard choices and unknowns.

Why Should I Care?

Most people have been faced with a fork in an actual road or path, and not been sure which path to go down. Of course, today, we can whip out a GPS or cell phone and figure out which is the correct path. But if we're beyond the reach of satellites, we just make a choice, unaided by technology. We might pick the road that gets us where we want to go, or one that takes us somewhere new, but either way, the road we choose takes us to where we are.

Just like trying to pick a path when we're driving or walking, we've all had to choose from different paths in life: which job to take, which college to go to, which girl or boy to ask to homecoming – the list of life's choices is endless. And for every metaphorical road we take in life, there is a road not taken – the club we didn't join, the class we didn't take, the words we didn't say.

One of the big questions we face is whether or not to take the well-beaten, typical path. Is that the best choice, or should we be non-conformists and take the less-traveled route? Years into the future, after making our decision, how will we feel about the path we've chosen?

[Robert Frost's](#) "The Road Not Taken" is about these quandaries, present in every person's life. A lot of people think this poem is encouraging us to take the road that's less traveled. And while it's easy to fall into that well-beaten path of analysis, it's not exactly accurate. So make sure that when you read this poem, you take your own road, whether it's the road less traveled or not.

Our speaker has come to a fork in a path in the woods. It's fall, and the leaves are turning colors. He's unsure which way to go, and wishes he could go both ways. He looks down one path as far as he can see, but then he decides to take the other. He thinks the path he decides to take is not quite as worn as the other one, but really, the paths are about the same, and the fallen leaves on both look pretty fresh.

The speaker reflects on how he plans to take the road that he didn't take another day, but suspects that he probably won't ever come back. Instead, far off in the future, he'll be talking about how his decision was final and life changing.

Line 1

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,

- Our speaker is describing a fork in the road. This poem was first published in 1916, when cars were only just beginning to become prominent, so these roads in the wood are probably more like paths, not roads like we'd think of them today.
- The woods are yellow, which means that it's probably fall and the leaves are turning colors.
- "Diverged" is just another word for split. There's a fork in the road.

Lines 2-3

*And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood*

- The speaker wants to go down both roads at once, but since it's impossible to walk down two roads at once, he has to choose one road.
- The speaker is "sorry" he can't travel both roads, suggesting regret.
- Because of the impossibility of traveling both roads, the speaker stands there trying to choose which path he's going to take. Because he's standing, we know that he's on foot, and not in a carriage or a car.

Lines 4-5

*And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;*

- The speaker really wants to go down both paths – he's thinking hard about his choice. He's staring down one road, trying to see where it goes. But he can only see up to the first bend, where the undergrowth, the small plants and greenery of the woods, blocks his view.
- This is where we start to think about the metaphorical meanings of this poem. If our speaker is, as we suspect, at a fork in the road of his life, and not at an actual road,

he could be trying to peer into his future as far as he can. But, since he can't really predict the future, he can only see part of the path. Who knows what surprises it could hold?

Line 6

Then took the other, as just as fair,

- So after all this buildup about one road, which he's looked down for a long time, our speaker takes the other path.
- Then we get a tricky little phrase to describe this road. It's "as just as fair." Read without the first "as," this phrase is clear, if you think of fair as meaning attractive, or pretty. But the first "as" makes the phrase a little more difficult. Combining the words "just" and "fair" in the same phrase is a play on words – both of these words have multiple meanings. The phrase could mean something like "as just as it is fair," as in proper, righteous, and equal. But this doesn't quite apply to a road.
- Yet we trust that our speaker wouldn't let things get awkward without meaning it. We're guessing that he means the road is just as pretty, but that in the metaphorical world of this poem, he thinks he made the fair, or right, choice.
- But it's not fairer – it's just as fair. So he was choosing between two roads, or futures, that were different but potentially equally good.

Lines 7-8

*And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;*

- The speaker still seems pretty uncertain when he explains that this second path is better. It is only "perhaps" better.
- Then the speaker tells us why the path is better – it seems like it hasn't been walked on very much, because it's grassy and doesn't look worn.
- Be careful not to think that the phrase "wanted wear" is personification (it is alliteration, though). "Wanted," in this instance, means something more like "lacked."

Lines 9-10

*Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,*

- The speaker of this poem really can't seem to make up his mind! Just when we think we've got a declaration about which path is better, he changes his mind and

admits that maybe they were equal after all.

- The "as for that" refers to the path being less worn.
- "The passing there" refers to traffic, probably on foot just like our speaker, that may have worn the paths down.

Lines 11-12

*And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.*

- Here, again, we hear that the paths are equal, but we find out something new, that it's morning. It's possible that our speaker is the first to travel to this place on that day.
- The paths are covered with leaves, which haven't been turned black by steps crushing them.
- Wait, we thought one path was grassy...and now it's covered with leaves. Possibly, the leaves aren't very thick, or the grass sticks up in between them. Or maybe the speaker isn't being quite honest.

Line 13

Oh, I kept the first for another day!

- The speaker seems like he's already regretting his decision. He is rationalizing his choice of path by saying he'll come back to the one he missed later.
- This is a familiar way to deal with difficult choices; "you can always come back and try it again later," we think.
- With an "Oh" at the beginning and an exclamation point at the end, this line is emphatic. The speaker feels strongly about what he's saying here.

Lines 14-15

*Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.*

- The speaker realizes that his hopes to come back and try the other path may be foolish.
- He knows how "way leads on to way" – how one road can lead to another, and then another, until you end up very far from where you started. Because of this, he doesn't think he'll ever be able to come back and take that other path, as much as he wishes he could.
- Here we return to the metaphorical meaning of this poem. In any life decision, we can hedge our bets by thinking we can always come back, try a different option later. But sometimes our decisions take us to other decisions, and yet still others, and it's impossible for us to retrace our steps and arrive back at that original decision.
- It's like deciding which college to go to – "I can always transfer" a high school senior might think. But then, once

the decision is made and freshman year has passed, the reality hits that switching schools is a lot more complicated than it seems, and it's hard to start completely over somewhere else.

Lines 16-17

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:*

- Now we jump forward in time. We don't know exactly when, but we know that it's ages and ages "hence," or, from now. So we're probably talking years, not months.
- We know that this story is important, because the speaker will still be telling it many years later.
- He'll be telling it with a sigh, though, which is interesting because sighs can be happy, sad, or merely reflective – and we don't know what kind of sigh this is.
- So, we know that this choice is probably going to be important for the speaker's future, but we don't know if he's going to be happy about it or not.

Line 18

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—

- This line is a repetition of the first line of the poem, with the subtraction of the word "yellow" and the addition of the words "and I."
- This repetition helps to bring the poem to a conclusion. It reminds us what's important in the poem – the concept of choosing between two different paths.
- Then, we get the hesitation of "and I" and the dash. This lets us know that whatever the speaker is about to say next is important.

Line 19

I took the one less traveled by,

- In this line, the speaker sums up his story and tells us that he took the road less traveled by. With the hesitation in the line before, this declaration could be triumphant – or regretful.
- Also, remember it wasn't exactly clear that the road our speaker took was the one that was less traveled. He said at first that it looked less worn, but then that the two roads were actually about equal.
- Before you start getting mad at our speaker for stretching the truth, remember that he's telling his story far in the future, a long time from when it actually happened. He's predicting that his memory will tell him that he took the road less traveled by, or that he'll lie in the future, no matter what the reality of the situation was.

Line 20

And that has made all the difference.

- At first glance it seems that this line is triumphant – the narrator took the path that no one else did, and that is what has made the difference in his life that made him successful.
- But he doesn't say that it made him successful – an optimistic reader wants the line to read positively, but it could be read either way. A "difference" could mean success, or utter failure.
- Remember, the speaker is telling us about what he's going to say in the future. From where he is now, just looking down the path as far as he can see, he can't tell if the future that it leads him to is going to be good or bad. He just knows that his choice is important – that it will make all the difference in his life.
- The speaker of this poem could be saying that his choice made all the difference while he's surrounded by his grandchildren, by a fire in a cozy little house. Or he could be saying it to the wind, while walking alone on the streets. At this point, he doesn't know – and neither do we.

Roads

Symbol Analysis

This poem is about actual and figurative roads: the roads we walk and drive on, and the roads we take through life. As the speaker of this poem discusses, for every road we take, there's a road we don't take. Wrong turn or not, the roads we take can end up making significant changes in our lives. And we'll always wonder about the roads that we didn't try.

- Line 1: This line sets the scene for the literal and metaphorical fork in the road that the speaker faces. The road splitting in the woods is a **metaphor** for a choice. Wherever the speaker's life has taken him so far, he has come to the point where, to go any farther, he needs to make a choice that takes him down one path and precludes him from taking the other. Because the fork in the road is a metaphor for choices throughout the poem, it's called an **extended metaphor**.
- Lines 4-5: This description of the road is a **metaphor** for the future. Just like we can only see a path in the woods for so far, we can only see the consequences of our decisions for a short while into our future.
- Line 6: Here, the speaker decides that, even though he's spent a long time looking down one road, he's going to take the other, which seems just as interesting. This is probably a **metaphor** for a sudden decision – when we think about doing one thing, like, say, staying with a boyfriend or girlfriend, for a long time. But then, all of a sudden, we find ourselves doing something else – dumping the boy or girl, and setting out on a new path. We don't know why we did it, other than that we thought we'd be just as happy with one choice as the other.
- Lines 13-15: The speaker wants to be able to take both roads, but realizes that the nature of these roads is such that he probably will never be able to come back to this place. This is a **metaphor** for a decision that changes everything – once you've made it you can never go back.

- Lines 18-20: The repetition of the first line brings us back to the beginning of the **extended metaphor**, and then the last two lines conclude the metaphor. In line 19, one of the roads is being affirmed as less traveled, even though the narrator seemed unsure before. And then we get the famous line "and that has made all the difference," which solidifies the figurative level of this poem by saying that taking the road that the speaker took, making the choice that he made, has changed his life.

Nature

Symbol Analysis

You might not associate roads with nature, but remember, we're talking about a Robert Frost poem here. We're not talking highways – highways didn't even exist when this poem was written. Instead, this poem centers on two roads (more like paths) going through the woods in autumn. Nature in this poem sets the scene, and could hold metaphorical meaning as well.

- Line 1: This line gives us the setting of the poem. The speaker tells us the woods are yellow, so we can infer that it's autumn. The **metaphorical** significance of this poem taking place in autumn could be that the speaker is making this choice in the fall of his life, when he's beginning to grow old.
- Line 5: We find out here that these woods must be pretty thick, because a road can disappear in the undergrowth. **Metaphorically**, the undergrowth could represent aspects of the speaker's future that are unclear.
- Lines 7-8: The speaker is biased in favor of nature. He thinks one path could be better because fewer people have worn it down. These lines are not just about nature, but are a **metaphor** for a decision that is less commonly made.
- Lines 11-12: Here, we see the autumn **imagery** continue, and we find out that it's morning. We also see a contradiction of the earlier claim that one path is less worn than the other. This line shows us that the leaves have freshly fallen – perhaps masking which path was more or less traveled the day before. So, **metaphorically**, this line points out that sometimes there's no way to tell which decision is better.
- Line 18: The first line is repeated here. The detail that the woods are yellow is left out, but the repetition shows that nature is still important to the speaker.
- **Rhyming Quintains of Iambic Tetrameter**

- This poem has a pretty complicated form. We'll start with the (relatively) simple stuff. The poem consists of four stanzas with five lines each. These are called quintains. And in each quintain, the rhyme scheme is ABAAB. For example, take the first stanza:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, (A)
 And sorry I could not travel both (B)
 And be one traveler, long I stood (A)
 And looked down one as far as I could (A)
 To where it bent in the undergrowth; (B)

The rhythm of the poem is a bit trickier. It is basically iambic, which means that there is one unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (da DUM). There are many variations in this poem, most of which are anapestic, which means that there are two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed syllable (da da DUM).

The most common use of iambs in poetry is in pentameter, which means that there are

five "feet," or units of stressed and unstressed syllables, in the poem. But this poem is in iambic tetrameter, which means that there are only four feet (tetra = four). If you read the poem aloud, you should be able to hear four distinct beats per line. It will sound roughly like this: da DUM da DUM da DUM da DUM.

Let's look at the first line as an example. Stressed syllables are in bold and italic.

Two *roads* | *diverged* | in a *yell*ow *wood*

Each of the four feet in this line is iambic except for the third, because both "in" and "a" are unstressed syllables, making it an anapest.

So this poem has a rhythm and rhyme scheme, but they depart a little from the norm, just like the speaker of this poem, who chooses his own path.

Speaker Point of View

Who is the speaker, can she or he read minds, and, more importantly, can we trust her or him?

Our speaker is a very conflicted guy. He doesn't tell us too much about himself, but we know that he is facing a big decision; the road he's walking on, and the life he's leading, is splitting into two separate roads up ahead. Leaves are falling and the woods are yellow, so, if the woods are a metaphor for the speaker's life, we can guess that he's somewhere in the fall of his life, maybe his forties or fifties. In this stage of his life, it's probably too late to go back and change his mind after he makes big decisions; he knows that he probably will never have time.

The decision he's up against could be something like changing careers or moving to a different place. He could just be having the typical mid-life crisis, unsure if he likes where his life is going, even though he always thought he would. Whatever the decision is, it must be major, because he knows that he'll still be talking about it far in the future, saying that it made a big difference in his life.

We can guess that he likes nature, because he's out in the woods, just wandering around without a plan of where to go next. We know he's adventurous and impulsive, because though he spends a long time contemplating one path, he takes the other in a split second. He prefers to think that the path he takes is less traveled, even though both paths are about the same, and thinks that, in the future, he'll say that he took the path less traveled no matter what.

We're not sure if our speaker is happy or sad with the choice he's made. What do you think? He might not know either.

The Road Not Taken Setting

Where It All Goes Down

Our setting is in a forest, but it's not "lovely dark and deep" like the woods in one of Frost's other famous poems, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." Instead, these woods are just yellow, and our speaker is not, like in the other poem, in a horse drawn cart, but on foot.

It's fall in this poem – the trees are turning colors, and the leaves are falling. It's probably quite pretty out, with the crisp smell of autumn in the air. There's a nice little road, probably gravel or dirt, running through the woods, which suggests that there's a good amount of traffic running through here. But it's early enough in the morning that the fallen leaves are still fresh on the road, and one road is even grassy. Neither road shows much sign of wear.

So here our speaker is, in the fall without a map or a worn path to lead him on his way. He studies the paths, but more to try and choose which one to take than to appreciate their beauty.

Overall, this setting would be a pretty nice place to be, looking at the colors, choosing our path as we went, and walking in the fresh air all day.

Read this poem aloud. What do you hear?

The rhythm of this poem makes us feel like we are walking through the woods with the speaker. We can hear his footsteps in the steady rhythm and rhyme, with the occasional diversion to look at the colors of a particularly brilliant tree. With lines a little shorter than the average metrical poem (a poem that follows a set pattern of rhythm) and stanzas a little longer than the average rhyming poem, the sound of "The Road Not Taken" isn't like many other poems, just like the speaker, who tries to be different from everyone else when he chooses his path.

Still, we can hear in the sound of the poem that the speaker isn't speeding ahead, but proceeding slowly and carefully, as he's not quite sure he's on the right path. The most obvious indication of this hesitation in the sound of the poem is in the last stanza, where the speaker repeats the word "I." This sounds like the speaker has stopped walking for a moment, and even the birds in the wood have stopped to listen to how the speaker will end the poem.

The title of this poem may be the key to its interpretation. The title is not, as it is often mistaken to be, "The Road Less Traveled," but is "The Road Not Taken." If the title were "The Road Less Traveled," the poem would have a stranger focus on nonconformity – taking the path that others don't take. But the title "The Road Not Taken" focuses the poem on lost opportunities – the road that the speaker did not take.

The poem shows considerable ambivalence about which road is less traveled – one moment, one is more grassy, the next, they're both equally covered with fresh leaves. It seems that, on this autumn morning, neither road looked worn, regardless of what the speaker may say when he tells the story years from now.

But the speaker made a choice, and took a path. In taking that path, he gave up his chance to take the other one. Metaphorically, this means that the speaker is reflecting on his life choices, and how they are going to affect his life. What could have happened if he made a different choice? What his life would have been like?

More than anything in the text of the poem, this title hints that the poem is about lost opportunities, and the complexities of choices, not just choosing the path that is fresh and new.

What is the poet's signature style?

Pick Your Own Meaning

Frost likes to leave the meaning of his poems up to the reader. He guides us in the right direction with hints and suggestions, but in the end, he uses a lot of words and phrases that probably mean one thing – but could very well mean something completely different. This makes Frost poems fun to read, because the reader gets to brainstorm lots of possible meanings, and then choose what the poem means to them. It also makes it so that every new time you read a Frost poem, you can find a slightly different meaning in it.

We've got your back. With the Tough-O-Meter, you'll know whether to bring extra layers or Swiss army knives as you summit the literary mountain. (10 = Toughest)

(3) Base Camp

The difficulty of this poem fits its subject: you're not hiking up a mountain, but taking a lovely walk in the woods. The language is pretty straightforward and easy to follow, with little bumps but no major hills to climb. However, just like the speaker of the poem has to make a decision about which path to take, you have to make a decision about what the poem means to you, because there's more than one possible meaning. Luckily, unlike choosing a path in the woods, with poetic meaning, you can choose more than one.

The Road Not Taken Trivia

Brain Snacks: Tasty Tidbits of Knowledge

When Frost tried to submit poetry to *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1912, he was refused. ([Source](#))

When Frost spoke at President Kennedy's inauguration, Kennedy was afraid that Frost would show him up. Turns out Frost, who had written a new poem for the occasion, couldn't see or hold the pages of his new poem on the sunny and windy day, and recited an old poem, "The Gift Outright," instead. Good thing he happened to have it memorized! ([Source](#))

When Frost died, his family requested that people send not flowers, but money, so they could create a foundation for rewarding high school teachers. ([Source](#))

The Road Not Taken Theme of Choices

"The Road Not Taken" centers on the concept of choice. The path that the speaker is walking on is splitting in two directions, and he has to decide which way to go. This path is not just in the woods, but also represents a decision in his life. Something in his life is changing, forcing him to make a choice. Yet he has a really hard time deciding – one moment, he thinks one way is better, the next, both paths are about the same. Whether or not he has a reason why the choice he makes is better, he has to make it. And that choice changes his life.

Questions About Choices

1. What do you think the fork in the road could represent in the speaker's life?
2. Do you think the speaker is happy with his choice or not? Why?

3. Which road do you think you would have taken if you were the speaker? Why?
4. What do you think the differences between the two roads in this poem are, if any?

Chew on This

Try on an opinion or two, start a debate, or play the devil's advocate.

Despite what the speaker's memory tells him later, the roads in this poem are equally traveled, making the speaker's choice more difficult.

The speaker is purposefully ambiguous about whether or not he's happy with his choice.

The Road Not Taken Theme of Dreams, Hopes, and Plans

Choices, like the choice "The Road Not Taken," are linked to the future. The speaker of this poem realizes that his choice of path will change his life. But the tricky part about the nature of the future is that the speaker won't know how his decision will change his life until it has already changed it. The speaker thinks of his lost opportunities as his choice takes him into one future and leaves another behind.

Questions About Dreams, Hopes, and Plans

1. What does the title of the poem suggest about how the speaker feels about his decision?
2. How old do you think the speaker in this poem is? Does that affect his perspective on the future?
3. What does the speaker think his future will be like now that he's made this choice?
4. How sure do you think the speaker is that he will never come back to try the other road?

Chew on This

Try on an opinion or two, start a debate, or play the devil's advocate.

The speaker of this poem will only know whether or not he made the right decision a long time in the future.

The speaker of this poem is not unhappy with his choice, but will always wonder where the other path, the road not taken, would have led him

The Road Not Taken Theme of Man and the Natural World

Throughout "The Road Not Taken," nature is used as a metaphor for the life of the speaker. The speaker contextualizes a major decision by writing about it as if it were something he encountered while walking in a forest in the fall. This metaphor helps us wrap our minds around the complexities of a choice that will decide his future.

Questions About Man and the Natural World

1. Why do you think this poem takes place in autumn?
2. What do you think the roads in this poem look like?

3. What is the effect of this poem taking place in a forest?
4. If you had to create a metaphor about one of your major life decisions, where would your setting be?

Chew on This

Try on an opinion or two, start a debate, or play the devil's advocate.

The speaker would prefer to take a path that would keep him closer to nature, and farther away from other people.

The Road Not Taken Theme of Exploration

Our speaker is out in the woods without a map, and he doesn't know which path to take. But instead of turning tail and running back to where he came from, he chooses a path and forges on, willing to face whatever challenges that path may lead him to. He is attracted to a path that might be less traveled, which suggests that he likes to go where few people have gone before. "The Road Not Taken" embraces exploration, suggesting that the only way to see what's beyond the bend in the road is to keep walking.

Questions About Exploration

1. Is the road the speaker takes actually less traveled? Why or why not?
2. Why do you think the speaker chooses the path that he does?
3. If the speaker could disregard the constraints of reality, what do you think he would have done?
4. Why does the speaker place so much emphasis on taking the road less traveled?

Chew on This

Try on an opinion or two, start a debate, or play the devil's advocate.

Even if both roads seem worn about the same, the speaker tries to take the one less traveled.

The speaker chooses to take the path that he does because it's different from what he originally planned on doing.

Summary

The speaker stands in the woods, considering a fork in the road. Both ways are equally worn and equally overlaid with un-trodden leaves. The speaker chooses one, telling himself that he will take the other another day. Yet he knows it is unlikely that he will have the opportunity to do so. And he admits that someday in the future he will recreate the scene with a slight twist: He will claim that he took the less-traveled road.

Form

"The Road Not Taken" consists of four stanzas of five lines. The rhyme scheme is ABAAB; the rhymes are strict and masculine, with the notable exception of the last line (we do not usually stress the *-ence* of *difference*). There are four stressed syllables per line, varying on an iambic tetrameter base.

Commentary

This has got to be among the best-known, most-often-misunderstood poems on the planet. Several generations of careless readers have turned it into a piece of Hallmark happy-graduation-son, seize-the-future puffery. Cursed with a perfect marriage of form and content, arresting phrase wrought from simple words, and resonant metaphor, it seems as if “The Road Not Taken” gets memorized without really being read. For this it has died the cliché’s un-death of trivial immortality.

But you yourself can resurrect it from zombie-hood by reading it—not with imagination, even, but simply with accuracy. Of the two roads the speaker says “the passing there / Had worn them really about the same.” In fact, both roads “that morning lay / In leaves no step had trodden black.” Meaning: **Neither of the roads is less traveled by.** These are the facts; we cannot justifiably ignore the reverberations they send through the easy aphorisms of the last two stanzas.

One of the attractions of the poem is its archetypal dilemma, one that we instantly recognize because each of us encounters it innumerable times, both literally and figuratively. Paths in the woods and forks in roads are ancient and deep-seated metaphors for the lifeline, its crises and decisions. Identical forks, in particular, symbolize for us the nexus of free will and fate: We are free to choose, but we do not really know beforehand what we are choosing between. Our route is, thus, determined by an accretion of choice and chance, and it is impossible to separate the two.

This poem does not advise. It does not say, “When you come to a fork in the road, study the footprints and take the road less traveled by” (or even, as Yogi Berra enigmatically quipped, “When you come to a fork in the road, take it”). Frost’s focus is more complicated. First, there *is* no less-traveled road in this poem; it isn’t even an option. Next, the poem seems more concerned with the question of how the concrete present (yellow woods, grassy roads covered in fallen leaves) will look from a future vantage point.

The ironic tone is inescapable: “I shall be telling this with a sigh / Somewhere ages and ages hence.” The speaker anticipates his own future insincerity—his need, later on in life, to rearrange the facts and inject a dose of Lone Ranger into the account. He knows that he will be inaccurate, at best, or hypocritical, at worst, when he holds his life up as an example. In fact, he predicts that his future self will betray this moment of decision as if the betrayal were *inevitable*. This realization is ironic and poignantly pathetic. But the “sigh” is critical. The speaker will not, in his old age, merely gather the youth about him and say, “Do what I did, kiddies. I stuck to my guns, took the road less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.” Rather, he may say this, but he will sigh first; for he won’t believe it himself. Somewhere in the back of his mind will remain the image of yellow woods and two equally leafy paths.

Ironic as it is, this is also a poem infused with the anticipation of remorse. Its title is not “The Road Less Traveled” but “The Road Not Taken.” Even as he makes a choice (a choice he is forced to make if does not want to stand forever in the woods, one for which he has no real guide or definitive basis for decision-making), the speaker knows that he will second-guess himself somewhere down the line—or at the very least he will wonder at what is irrevocably lost: the impossible, unknowable Other Path. But the nature of the decision is such that there is no Right Path—just the chosen path and the other path. What are sighed for ages and ages hence are not so much the wrong decisions as the moments of decision themselves—moments that, one atop the other, mark the passing of a life. This is the more primal strain of remorse.

Thus, to add a further level of irony, the theme of the poem may, after all, be “seize the day.” But a more nuanced *carpe diem*, if you please.



Readers' Notes

Most Helpful Readers' Notes (3 total)

my interpretation

He is dying--right here right now falling down dead and is wondering if it will be a bad thing like the ice falling and breaking or the apples falling and going to the cider heap. He spent a lifetime picking apples and now is his natural moment of death. This is my interpretation of the poem and what frost is conveying in this poem.

Re: you statement: "Neither of the roads is less traveled by."

Re: you statement: Neither of the roads is less traveled by.

Take a look at the second stanza:

Then took the other, as just as fair
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;

Meaning the other was not grassy, and more worn. I.e. more travelled by.

My Interpretation

I believe Frost is speaking to the unique path we all travel in life. Every day we are faced with decisions. We weigh our options and try to predict what the outcome of a decision might be. Unfortunately we cannot predict the future...We look down one path as far as we can "to where it bends in the undergrowth" or as far as we can predict however there will always be variables preventing us from seeing too far into the future. Frost says he chooses the path least traveled by, but realistically the path we are all on is this very road he speaks of. No one has walked in my footsteps and I have not walked in another person's footsteps...we forge our own path. The option of there being two roads simply refers to the decisions we face. Further Frost speaks of keeping the not taken path for another day and never returning to travel it. To me this is not a negative statement filled with regret; it is a statement of acceptance. "knowing how way leads onto way" speaks to the fact we indeed get caught up in the path we choose or create and you can bet that that path is going to branch to another and then another. Life takes us down roads presenting new dilemmas and choices. Most people will not come back to that same fork in the road.

The poem does leave a lingering sense of melancholy mystery in my mind and I think both the "sigh" and title express this. What did the other path really hold?...This we'll never know though we'll often wonder about. We are but travelers and all we have is the path we're on...and it really is the only one that makes a difference.

This is just my interpretation, only Robert Frost knows what the poem was truly about, if it does indeed have a definitive meaning.

Still I rise

This poem is written with Maya Angelou herself as the speaker. She is speaking to her audience of oppressors about how she has overcome racism, criticism, sexism, and personal obstacles in her life with pride and grace.

This poem is historically rooted with the mentions of slavery, a “past of pain,” and “gifts of ancestors,” however she is speaking in the present having overcome all of the hardships of her past and embarking on the rest of her journey with the knowledge that she is a strong African American woman. *Still I Rise* is about overcoming oppression with grace and pride, having no sympathy for the oppressors and giving validity to the reasons for oppression.

There is rhyme every other line for most of the poem that immediately guides the reader through the poem. The phrases “I rise” and “Still I rise” are used repetitively throughout the poem to show that the speaker continues to overcome each situation of oppression and each oppressor. Imagery is dominant in this poem, especially after Angelou questions her oppressors. She gives the us images like “I walk like I’ve got oil wells /Pumping in my living room” and “Shoulders falling down like teardrops” and “ I dance like I’ve got diamonds/ At the meeting of my thighs.” There is also the repeating image of air and dust rising. Much of her imagery is conveyed through similes and metaphors. This usage of figurative languages gives us a very clear picture of what Angelou means and usually conveys a strong emotion. For example, when Angelou says “Shoulders falling down like teardrops,” we get an image of drooping shoulders (like the shape of a tear) and the tear itself is immediately associated with sadness. The two of these combined makes the images even stronger. The poem is more a narrative than anything else because Angelou interacts with her audience as she talks about the highs and lows of her life and history.

The main symbol throughout the poem is that of rising dust. For dust to rise, it must be unsettled from the ground in some way and then forms a dust cloud. But once the dust has been unsettled from the ground, it can leave and RISE. This can be applied to Angelou’s overcome of the obstacles and her oppressors on the “ground” and rising above them all, unsettling and challenging the oppression.

This poem has a very certain seriousness to it, but Angelou brings in her pride as an African American woman and injects playful images into the poem when questioning her oppressors. The stanzas that have questions show the direct relationship between the speaker and the audience, Angelou and her oppressors, and allows the reader to put themselves in the heat of the discussion and in the heart of the poem. The tone is one of sureness, pride, and grace.

This [online analysis](#) says that the “you” that the poem is speaking to is the white race and that the “I” is the black race. This analysis says that the poem is a discussion between black and white, where the black, with Maya Angelou speaking, is taking pride in her heritage and what she has come from and intimidating the white race. This analysis says that “Maya is pretentiously assuring the audience that she will ‘rise’ to any occasion and her color won’t hold her back.” After reading this analysis, I agree with the “you” being the white race. I thought before that the “you” had been specific to her own life, but this interpretation makes sense with the multiple references to slavery.

Poem Analysis

Rhyme Scheme

- lies, rise
- gloom, room
- tides, rise
- eyes, cries
- hard, yard
- eyes, rise
- wide, tide
- fear, clear
- gave, slave

With the exception of the last stanza, the rhyme scheme is A,B,C,B. In the last stanza

Just like moons and like suns – simile

Comparing how she continuously raises herself up emotionally to stay strong just, like how the moon and sun rises everyday no matter what happens.

I’ll rise; I rise – repetition

By repeating these words it makes the words that much more powerful and makes it

stand out and also emphasises Angelou's message, which is to stay strong and to never allow anything or anyone stop you from fighting and living strong.

Does my sassiness upset you? ; Do you want to see me broken? ; Does my haughtiness offend you? ; Does my sexiness offend you?

By questioning the readers ("you"), it catches the reader's attention and is affective because it makes readers realize how many people have made the person ("I") feel and how many people may be feeling, it makes readers read the poem and take it to a more personal level.

oil wells; gold mines; diamonds – metaphor

These are often known to be expensive and valuable, and Angelou is relating these to the value of herself. She is worth just as much as everyone else and therefore she should receive just as much respect and love like others.

Shoulders falling down like teardrops – simile

Comparing how a person's shoulders drop as they lose confidence in them self and when feeling down, similar to how tears drop down one's face when upset or hurt.

At the meeting of my thighs

Expressing her sexuality of being a woman

I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide

The colour black is usually used to create a sense of fear and evil. A "black ocean" seems to describe an ocean that is full of cruelty and how things occur unexpectedly. This may be referring to how her own life is, full of horrific and unexpected events. The "black ocean" may also be describing her own race which allows readers to understand that the poem is about racism.

Still I Rise has a positive and strong tone throughout the entire poem. The words Angelou used also makes it seem as though the character in the poem is talking to the readers. By doing so Angelou got the readers to get more personally involved in the poem emotionally which helps to make readers realize how humans are all guilty of discriminating others in some form. The poem should be read with confidence, especially in the parts "I'll rise and "I rise" to show the strong attitude the person ("I") has about them self. In some lines for example "Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines" the tone changes almost to a point where the reader is chuckling like how it says in the poem.

The main theme in the poem *Still I Rise* is discrimination. This poem portrays a strong person living with a positive attitude. I chose to do this poem because although it was written in 1978, the message portrayed in the poem is very powerful and can be related by anyone even in this time period. This poem is very straightforward which makes the message that much more meaningful and affective. At some point in life everybody experiences discrimination, although it may be in different ways and extents it is a struggle that all people go through within their lifetime. This poem teaches readers that all humans have strength that lays within us that can help to overcome any obstacles. This poem also makes readers realize the importance of having pride and hope in ourselves. The line "*Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave*" shows the importance of having appreciation in those in previous generations for what they have done for us and what they have left. Also, the line "*I am the dream and the hope of the slave*" shows how Angelou believes that one person stepping up to make a difference or to have their voices heard will not only help themselves, but it also has a potential of helping those who are also suffering from the same or similar discrimination.

There are many forms of discrimination, and there is always someone in the world trying to overcome these obstacles, hence why this poem is still famous and read today. Through this poem Angelou created an inspiring message for those who were also suffering what she had suffered, racism and stereotypes due to her gender. There are also many other inspirational people who have fought for the rights of their own and also for the rights of others, and Jackie Robinson and Abraham Lincoln are prime examples. Jackie Robinson was the first black man to become a professional baseball player. He proved many people that race does not determine how well of a player someone can be. Robinson broke the separation among the different races and what he did also contributed to the Civil Rights Movement. Abraham Lincoln is considered to be one of the most memorable U.S. presidents of all times, this is because he fought for the rights of black people and freeing slaves and Southerners. What this heroic man did changed the lives of many people at that time and has also influenced the lives of many people today. The reason why people argue is to have their voices heard and because they are trying to make some kind of difference. For example, a child may cry and wail to their parents so their voices can be heard and because they want to be understood and they are too young to know any other ways of doing this but to wail or cry. Trying to have your voice heard and trying to prove your rights for yourself and for others is not easy, it requires a lot of courage and commitment, however once a person can overcome the obstacles that they face throughout their way they can create a big difference. Humans are very strong, we have so much potential that we should pride and have faith in, and we are to not allow anything to stop us from becoming a strong independent person; this strong message is portrayed throughout this poem through the eyes of a person struggling from discrimination, a struggle humans all go through and a one that everyone can relate to.

Theme:

One of Maya Angelou's most celebrated poems is "Still I Rise." Through it, Angelou conveys her sense of confidence, African-American pride, feminism, independence, and beauty.

Angelou begins her poem with, "You may write me down in history/With your bitter, twisted lies." With the first two lines of her poem, Angelou transmits to her audience the immense confidence she has within her. She uses this approach because she likes to be seen as a strong person. As she continues, Angelou questions her reader with rhetorical questions to further underline her self-confidence.

At various points in the poem "Still I Rise," Angelou alludes to her African-American roots and shows pride in being Black. She says, "Up from a past that's rooted in pain/I rise," and refers to herself as "a black ocean." When she was younger, Angelou had a misconception that Blacks were inferior to Whites, but now she wants to express that Blacks are not inferior. Instead, Angelou feels all people are equal and she shows pride in being African-American so that others who read her works will validate Blacks as equals, too.

Maya Angelou is often heard as a man, due to her deep voice, but through her poems, one cannot doubt her feminism. In "Still I Rise," she writes "Does my sexiness upset you?/Does it come as a surprise/That I dance like I've got diamonds/At the meeting of my thighs?" Even while growing up, Angelou experienced gender discrimination because of the era she was born in. She never agreed with it, however, and in this poem she flaunts her womanhood.

Angelou never truly experienced love in her childhood, and instead she gained independence from her experiences. As an adolescent, not many would accept a woman's independence, but Angelou continued to be strong in her beliefs. She shows her independence in the poem "Still I Rise" where she writes, "Why are you beset with gloom?/'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells/Pumping in my living room." Through these lines, Angelou is defying the stereotype that women are not fit to work, earn money, or manage money.

Too many people become timid because of their body mass, for instance if they are overweight. Maya Angelou is physically heavy set, but she does not let that factor bring her down. As an alternative, she shows pride in her physical attributes. Angelou writes, for example, "Does it come as a surprise/That I dance like I've got diamonds/At the meeting of my thighs," and "I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,/Welling and swelling I bear in the tide." She is accepting her physical appearance and is putting it in a positive outlook.

Maya Angelou is a person who has undergone more life experiences than many people on this earth. As a writer, she communicates her experiences through her works, and they often become the theme of many of her pieces. "Still I Rise" is one piece that covers several of Angelou's experiences.

Still I Rise is a poem of inspiration, appearing in 1978 with a collection of other poems in a book known by the same title. It's a fairly short poem consisting of 8 stanzas. It's an inspirational narrative written from the standpoint of a victorious woman speaking directly to those who wish to oppress and defame her character.

In the first stanza, it appears as if she is speaking on behalf of a collective experience of black women, who at the time were battling against being blamed not only by sociologists but also black male nationalists for the destruction of the black family as a result of slavery creating a matriarchal family structure. She writes;

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may tread me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

That verse alone appears to take on the sentiments of a book written by the late Daniel P. Moynihan called, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action" as well as the image of the "welfare queen" which began to populate around the same time.

In second stanza, she takes on the Sapphire image and aloof images so often used to characterize black women.

Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.

However, this may be speaking to the common occurrences of verbal assault encountered by black women by black men. The "you ain't all that anyway" and "B-" words heard by average black women who may respond defensively or not respond at all to catcalls.

The third and fourth stanzas seem to speak from the standpoint of professional women who are often accused of having attitudes, or being arrogant, by coworkers, friends and family. She writes,

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops.
Weakened by my soulful cries.

Does my haughtiness offend you?
Don't you take it awful hard
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
Diggin' in my own back yard.

We can speculate many things about her intentions, but being a black woman, I tend to interpret the meaning of her words based on common sentiments and experiences by the majority of black women. In the aforementioned stanzas, all deal with mis-characterizations and assaults against black womanhood.

The conclusion in the final stanza is a glorious ending and reflection of being the hope and the dream of slaves as reflected in the freedom and opportunity of the present day. The message drives a point that no matter what stumbling blocks, cruel words or expressions of contempt, the protagonist will be triumphant.

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise.

Still I Rise

As the title indicates, this poem is a tribute to Angelou's ability to rise above anything that happens or has happened to her. The poem creates a voice for all people, not just her individual story.

'Still I Rise' begins with a mention of writing down history. There has been a movement to analyze the text books presented to students to see if they hold the true history, or just one rose colored version. It is interesting that 'Still I Rise' begins by making the reader immediately think of the skewed versions of history they have been taught over the years.

There is a sense of lies and silent discrimination that surrounds the history of African Americans. She also mentions dust in the first stanza. This goes along with the theme, bringing to mind many blacks who were killed. However, she says that the dust will rise, indicating that although the history has been difficult, the spirit will prevail.

The second, fourth, fifth, and seventh stanzas begin with different questions. This question is spoken to those that are perceived as taking offense at the rise of her spirit. The tactic of asking the questions pulls the reader into the poem. Instead of being able to skim over the content, the reader is forced to examine his or her own beliefs. The first, third, and sixth stanzas, those that do not question the reader, end with the phrase "I'll rise." The mixture of questions and assertion that "I'll rise" lets the reader know that the answers to the questions are mute. They are to be filled in by the reader.

This poem has a consistent rhyming pattern until it reaches the last two stanzas. With these two stanzas the format changes. Instead of talking to the reader, Angelou begins to assert the rising the title speaks of. She makes reference to 'roots' and the slavery era. Instead of these experiences being a weight around her neck, she draws on the strength of her ancestors to increase her own. She says that she is able, in fact obliged, to persevere to fulfill the dreams of her ancestors for the opportunity to be a success in a free world.

While teaching this poem to students, I will make them examine their own character traits. They will have the opportunity to examine their personal strengths and how they have helped them develop. Many of my students feel modern day effects of racism and power struggles, including 'driving while black', frequent questioning by the police, and close scrutiny in stores. This poem will tap into their prior experiences and provide an interesting forum for discussion.

Teacher Comments: A lesson plan using the famous poem, "Still I Rise" by Maya Angelou. I created this lesson plan to expose students to Maya Angelou's powerful poem, "Still I Rise" as well as to enhance their understanding of the power of poetry. In addition, it informs students on how poetry has its own unique format, language, and poetic devices such as metaphors, similes, and personification and how these poetic conventions can add a tremendous punch to a poet's message.

This lesson conforms to the learning concept of "Thematic Learning." The major theme (Thematic Learning) of this poem is the undeniable and unbreakable strength and spirit of the African American people, past and present; however, students will begin to formulate their own identification with the poem's message by seeing beyond the cultural relevance and finding a connection to their own teenage lives, in spite of race or culture.

Many students will respond by saying that in spite of peer pressure, trends, or negative situations that they have been confronted with, they, too, have found ways to rise above the adversities that often plague those to conform to the negative standards and trends set by other teenagers.

Goals: Students will better understand slavery, oppression, and resiliency.

Objectives:

The learner will:

- annotate the poem, "Still I Rise," for the poet's tone and theme;
- be able to identify similes, metaphors, allusions, and personification in the poem, "Still I Rise."

Materials:

- Maya Angelou's poem, "Still I Rise" (see below)
- writing utensils
- Annotation Chart. [PDF file](#)

Procedure:

Distribute a copy of the poem, "Still I Rise" to each student along with a copy of the annotation chart. Explain to students that poetry is best enjoyed and understood when read aloud. To give students a strong understanding of the poem's tone, it is best that the teacher read the poem first with lots of fervor and emotion. Then have a few students read the poem aloud to see if they can mirror the teacher's tone.

Put the following literary terms on the board: personification, metaphor, simile, tone, and allusion. Have students define these terms by looking them up in their literature textbooks. Explain to students that they will be using their annotation charts to look for these poetic devices throughout the poem. Discuss how these devices help the reader understand and enjoy the speaker's message better. They will begin to search for similes, metaphors, personification, allusions (made to slavery), and the speaker's tone and place them in the annotation boxes. After students have completed their charts, they are to summarize what the poem's message or theme appears to be. Students should explain how that determination was made by using their analysis to connect the poetic devices listed in the charts.

Assessment:

Provide students with another poem and have them use the same techniques of annotation to identify the poetic terms they defined for Angelou's poem. Students should also write a short summary discussing the poet's message or theme.

Special Comments: Students should be able to understand the speaker's indomitable spirit to overcome America's shame of slavery. The teacher can give a brief overview of the slavery institution and then discuss how African Americans overcame oppression in spite of bondage.

"Still I Rise"! The poem Still I Rise written by Maya Angelou is a legendary poem where she is proclaiming her victory of being able to overcome any obstacles that may try to hinder her on her life journey as an African-American woman. Maya Angelou primarily uses pathos as a rhetorical element to help to convey a very strong message to women of color about being confident about who they are and not allowing circumstances or people to defeat them or dictate their level of self esteem or happiness.

Maya Angelou uses pathos to appeal to the emotions of the audience by comparing the qualities of woman of color to Caucasian woman. This has been a very sensitive issue for many decades. Throughout the poem Maya Angelou uses "my" in reference to herself as a colored woman while also reciting the poem in a first person narrative as if she speaks for her entire race. She poses questions to what seems to be the women of the Caucasian race based on society's judgments of colored woman. During the time the poem was composed, woman of color were looked upon as inferior to Caucasian women because they were of a lower socioeconomic class. Maya Angelou attempts to build confidence and levels of self-esteem in other African-American woman by creating analogies equating their sense of worth to things of rare value. She also uses pathos to appeal to the emotions of the audience in the first and seventh stanzas of the poem. In the first stanza she makes reference to overcoming the stereotypes that black women may have previously been labeled with. Black women were considered to be substandard and did not have equal rights which were very difficult times for them, not to mention in the seventh stanza of the poem she quotes "out of the huts of history's shame, I rise, up from a past that's rooted in pain, I rise". Maya Angelou definitely reaches out to black woman with intentions of encouraging them to be able to rise above racial barriers and giving them a sense of hope and the will to do what ever it is that they desire.

Although Maya Angelou uses pathos to try to convey a positive message to woman of color and to tear down the racial barrier that supposedly inhibits the growth of a black woman, she also uses pathos to reinforce those same barriers. While a woman of color may read Still I Rise and interpret it as a personal message about prevailing over oppression, a woman of different ethnicity may read Still I Rise and construe it as forceful segregation of woman. Maya Angelou forces the reader's reaction to what she presumes it will be without leaving room for the readers themselves to internalize and develop their own opinion based on what she has written, This reinforces the same barriers she is trying to destroy for

woman of color by increasing the divide between the women of the race she is representing and those of any other race.

The infamous poem *Still I Rise* by Maya Angelou was written to convey a message which she feels is vital to women of color that is to destroy the racial barriers, overcome obstacles that may hinder them throughout life's journey and to be confident about themselves. She primarily uses pathos to appeal to the emotions of her readers by making reference to the different struggles that women of color have had to endure and surmount throughout their lives. This will hopefully serve as inspiration to other women of the day as well as a drive to succeed. However, in her attempts to strengthen the black woman by tearing down their racial barrier, she is in turn reinforcing the same barriers for women of other races who may develop a different interpretation of the poem based on its hostile presentation

In Exile no notes

The child who was shot dead by soldiers at Nyanga

The body in the sea

In the early hours of the morning of 19 July 1965 a lovely young woman walked into the sea at Three Anchor Bay, [Cape Town](#), and drowned. Her lifeless body was found by the police in about three feet of water at about 7.30 that morning. And so ended the life of one of [South Africa's](#) most promising young writers, a poet of great power and originality, a voice of honesty and openness, a person with a great love of life and the life of words.

[Ingrid Jonker](#), the young poet who died so tragically, has since become an icon in South Africa, especially among young people who love literature, and has achieved in death a fame far beyond what she had experienced, or, perhaps, even hoped for, in life.

She was an Afrikaner, the daughter of a Nationalist Party Member of Parliament, and yet was honoured by the Government of a free and democratic South Africa for "her excellent contribution to literature and a commitment to the struggle for human rights and democracy in [South Africa](#)."

Even before the advent of democracy in South Africa, the then President of the African National Congress, the late O.R. Tambo, in a 1987 speech in Harare, Zimbabwe, had this to say about her: "By her [death](#), she joined herself to the children of our country about whom she had written. Her tragic passing was as powerful an indictment of the apartheid system as were these verses which she has left us."

And when [Nelson Mandela](#), on 24 May 1994, opened the first democratic parliament in South Africa as the first democratically elected Black president of the country he quoted her poem "Die kind wat dood geskiet is deur soldate by [Nyanga](#)" (The child who was shot dead by soldiers at Nyanga) and said these words: "The time will come when our nation will honour the memory of those who gave us the right to assert with pride that we are South Africans, that we are Africans and citizens of the world. The certainties that come with age tell me that among these we shall find an Afrikaner woman... Her name is [Ingrid Jonker](#)."

Cover of the Collected Works, Third Edition, 1993

Cover of the Brink and Krog collection of translations of a selection of Ingrid Jonker's poems published in 2007

The memorial to Ingrid Jonker on the beach at Gordon's Bay with a brief quotation from the poem "The child who was shot dead..." Photo by Tony McGregor

"Die Kind" set to music and sung by Dutch composer Peter de Jonge

Die Kind

Nyanga is one of the Black townships around Cape Town and was a centre of protest in March 1960 against the infamous "Pass Laws" then in force, protests which were violently suppressed by police and army units there and, in a better-known incident, at Sharpeville in the then Transvaal. Ingrid was deeply moved by the report of a child who was shot in his mother's arms and wrote this poem, "Die Kind", about which she wrote in a Drum Magazine article in 1963: "Go back to the days in March 1960, when blood flowed in this land. For me it was a time of terrible shock and dismay. Then came the awful news about the shooting of a mother and child at Nyanga. The child was killed. The mother, an African, was on her way to take her baby to the doctor. ... I saw the mother as every mother in the world. I saw her as myself...I could not sleep. I thought of what the child might have been had he been allowed to live. I thought what could be

reached, what could be gained by death?"

Die kind wat dood geskiet is deur soldate by Nyanga

*Die kind is nie dood nie
die kind lig sy vuiste teen sy moeder
wat Afrika skreeu skreeu die geur van vryheid en heide
in die lokasies van die omsingelde hart
Die kind lig sy vuiste teen sy vader
in die optog van die generasies
wat Afrika skreeu skreeu die geur
van geregtigheid en bloed
in die strate van sy gewapende trots*

Die kind is nie dood nie

nòg by Langa nòg by Nyanga

nòg by Orlando nòg by Sharpville

nòg by die polisiestatie in Philippi

waar hy lê met 'n koeël deur sy kop

*Die kind is die skaduwee van die soldate
op wag met gewere sarasene en knuppels
die kind is teenwoordig by alle vergaderings en wetgewings
die kind loer deur die vensters van huise en in die harte van moeders
die kind wat net wou speel in die son by Nyanga is orals
die kind wat 'n man geword het trek deur die ganse Afrika
die kind wat 'n reus geword het reis deur die hele wêreld*

Sonder'n pas

The English translation below is by Ingrid's friend, mentor and lover Jack Cope, famous South African author.

The child who was shot dead by soldiers at Nyanga

*The child is not dead
The child lifts his fists against his mother
Who shouts Afrika ! shouts the breath
Of freedom and the veld
In the locations of the cordoned heart*

*The child lifts his fists against his father
in the march of the generations
who shouts Afrika ! shout the breath
of righteousness and blood
in the streets of his embattled pride*

*The child is not dead
not at Langa nor at Nyanga
not at Orlando nor at Sharpeville
nor at the police station at Philippi
where he lies with a bullet through his brain*

*The child is the dark shadow of the soldiers
on guard with rifles Saracens and batons
the child is present at all assemblies and law-givings
the child peers through the windows of houses and into the hearts of mothers
this child who just wanted to play in the sun at Nyanga is everywhere
the child grown to a man treks through all Africa
the child grown into a giant journeys through the whole world*

Without a pass

In the May 1963 *Drum* Magazine article Ingrid wrote further: "I am not sure how I came to write the poem. It grew out of my poetic technique, which I have slowly developed like any workman who improves his skill by hard work."

And yet the [poem](#) touches on issues that Ingrid returned to again and again in all her poetry - death and childhood, and the role of rejection, the impact of rejection, on both. Her own mother was rejected by her father before Ingrid was born, and she saw her mother descend into poverty and insanity as a result of this rejection.

Gedigte - collections of poems by Jonker

In her lifetime two collections of her poetry were published. The first, *Ontvlugting* (Escape), was published in 1956, and contained mostly works written in her youth. She dedicated the book to her father, Abraham H. Jonker, MP. His reaction on being told by her that her poems had been published and that the collection was dedicated to him, was typically dismissive and cruel: "My child, I hope there's more to it than the covers. I'll look at it tonight to see how you have disgraced me."

The second collection, *Rook en Oker* (Smoke and Ochre) appeared in 1963 and immediately drew favourable attention. It was a collection of a mature artist, sure of herself and her art, and indeed breaking new ground in Afrikaans literature.

A third collection, *Kantelson* (Tilted Sun) appeared in 1966. It was put together mostly by her sister Anna, from notes and poems left by Ingrid. It contains some of the most personal of her poems, written for various lovers and friends. Also one of the most unusual, called "Wagtyd in Amsterdam" (Waiting in Amsterdam), which she sent to two of her most intimate friends, with a dedication to each: the Afrikaans writer Andre P. Brink and the English South African author Jack Cope. This poem has been published in the collection of English translations of Ingrid's poetry by Andre Brink and Antjie Krog, *Black Butterflies* (Human and Rousseau, 2007).

She wrote the poem while on a trip to Europe in 1963. Her sister Anna was very dubious about publishing the poem because of one particular line which she thought too risqué.

The poem, in Brink and Krog's translation:

I can only say that I waited for you

through western nights

at tram stops

in lanes

by canals

and the tower of tears

You came

through the forlorn cities of Europe

I recognised you

I prepared the table

with wine with bread with grace

but unperturbed you turned your back

you took off your cock

laid it on the table

and without a word

with your own smile

forsook the world.

Anna found disturbing the use of the word "cock" in the context of a poem deliberately evoking Psalm 23 and the Christian Eucharist. Ingrid apparently thought it hilarious.

Andre Brink reads his translation of Ingrid's poem "Autumn Morning"

Valkenburg and the struggle for security

Her life, though, was not hilarious, it was a struggle, with poverty, with failed love relationships, with her sometimes tenuous grip on reality, and in particular, her constant and ultimately unsuccessful search for a caring, trustworthy father figure.

At one time, in July 1961, she spent time in the psychiatric hospital Valkenburg, in Cape Town, trying to deal with her reaction to having felt herself forced to abort the child of her lover Jack Cope. Again a failure of a father figure. Cope was considerably older than Ingrid and she had

come to rely very much on him, both in terms of her writing and in her life. She wrote the now-famous poem "Korreltjie Sand" (Grain of Sand) in reaction to this experience. In fact, she gave the original copy of the poem to the psychiatrist who had treated her in Valkenburg.

The poem has in Afrikaans an almost childlike rhythm and rhyming structure, almost like a nursery rhyme, but the deeper significance of the words give it an overall bleakness belied by the outward form.

The last two stanzas read, in Brink and Krog's translation:

*Small arrow feathered into space
love fades away from its place
Carpenter seals a coffin that's bought
I ready myself for the nought
Small grain of sand is my word, my breath
small grain of sand is my death.*

While this translation does capture the literal meaning of the words, it doesn't quite capture the depth of the feeling which the Afrikaans words carry, which I can't read without wanting to cry with the pain:

*Pyltjie geveer in verskiet
liefde verklein in die niet
Timmerman bou aan 'n kis
Ek maak my gereed vir die Niks
Korreltjie klein is my woord
korreltjie niks is my dood.*

Not a poet myself I can only translate the words prosaically but hope to capture something of the feeling that I get from them: "little arrow shot into the distance (the word "verskiet" can also be understood as being "used up", or a shifting of pain) / love reduced into the nothingness / Carpenter is building a coffin / I get myself ready for the Nothing / little grain is my word / grain of nothing is my death."

In the poem the constant use of the diminutive is also important: Ingrid refers to the "little grain", the "little pebble", the "little sun", the "little eye" and so on. Its almost as if she is trying to reduce

the impact of her pain and her feeling of loss. Again the sense of a lost future, just like the child who was shot at Nyanga the previous year. Such pain to feel.

This video is of Dutch artists Niki Romijn and bassist Erik Robaard singing a version of this poem.

This is an early poem which recalls Ingrid's childhood in the little town of Gordon's Bay on the coast of False Bay, on the Cape South Coast. The last couplet is poignantly prescient of the death she would actually die: "my body lies washed out in weed and grass / in all the places where we once were."

Love and redemption

In her last letter to Jack Cope, which he didn't receive until after her suicide, she listed all the people she loved, and especially, she wrote, "daardie kuikentjie van ons wat 'n graf het in die hemel (that chicken of ours who has a grave in heaven)".

The pain that she felt was to some extent countered by the love of life she had, the love of significant people, like Cope, to whom she dedicated a wonderful poem collected in *Kantelson* entitled "Gesig van die liefde (Face of love)" which Brink and Krog translated thus:

Your face is the face of all the others before you and after you and your eyes calm as a blue

dawn that breaks again and again

herder of the clouds

keeper of the white ever-changing beauty

the landscape of your declared mouth that I have discovered

retains the secret of a smile

like small white villages beyond the mountains

and your pulse the measure of their rapture

there is no question of beginning

there is no question of possession

there is no question of death

face that I love

the face of love

Mandela, in his address at the opening of the first democratic parliament quoted above, also said

of Ingrid: "In the midst of despair, she celebrated hope. Confronted by death, she asserted the beauty of life. In the dark days when all seemed hopeless in our country, when many refused to hear her resonant voice, she took her own life. To her, and others like her, we owe a debt to life itself. To her and others like her, we owe a commitment to the poor, the oppressed, the wretched and despised."

I think she, in her life and in her death, answered her own question: "What could be reached?" - the breath of freedom and the veld, the breath of righteousness and blood.

Alexandra