# Amends

## SUMMARY

On nights such as this, on the cold branch of an apple tree, it looks like white stars are bursting out of the tree bark. On the ground, the moonlight gently touches small rocks.

The moonlight also gently touches bigger stones, and it rises alongside the ocean waves. It briefly rests its cheek on the sand of the shore. It touches its tongue to a broken ledge of rock, runs like water up the cliffs, and darts quickly over the train tracks.

The moonlight endlessly pours down into, but never can fill, the wound left by the sand and gravel quarry. It leans on the housed structure of a plane used to drop pesticides on farmland.

The moonlight soaks like water through the crevices in trailers where people live, which seem to be shivering with sleep. The moonlight settles on the eyelids of the people who are sleeping, as though to repair some harm that has been done.

## THEMES

### HUMANITY AND THE NATURAL WORLD

The poem describes a nighttime scene in which moonlight moves across a landscape. This landscape includes elements of nature, such as stones and ocean waves, but it also includes human-made, industrial objects—like train tracks, a gravel quarry, and a crop-dusting plane. In juxtaposing these testaments to industrialization against nature itself, the poem suggests that human beings have created a harmful rift with the natural world.

The poem begins by describing the moonlight as it moves across a harmonious natural setting marked by an apple tree, stones, and ocean waves. The dynamic imagery of "white star[s]" of moonlight exploding on tree bark conveys a kind of life and energy within nature, and the moonlight, as the poem depicts it, is a beautiful, organic part of the scene. The natural world seems united in its movement, with the moonlight rising "with the surf," or the ocean waves. The anaphora of "as it" also conveys the ongoing, uninterrupted journey of the moonlight. Altogether, the poem's first half makes it seems as though the moonlight and the natural world as a whole existed long before industrial society and will continue long after it is gone.

Then, as the poem progresses, it shows the moonlight moving over numerous human-made things associated with industrial society—and which are notable for the harm they cause to nature. For example, the speaker describes a "quarry," a pit dug into the earth from which people extract stone and gravel. Quarries, like mines, are known for leaving lasting imprints on a landscape; once the mined substance is extracted, what is left is a kind of empty pit or scar.

Similarly, the speaker comments on "the hangared fuselage / of a crop-dusting plane." A hangar is a building made to contain a plane, while fuselage refers to the structure or body of an aircraft. Crop-dusting planes are used to drop pesticides onto large areas of farmland, causing water and ground pollution and other environmental damage.

Notably, the images of both the quarry and the plane suggest that they may be abandoned. The speaker's description of the quarry as a "gash" suggests that after people have dug the quarry and taken the gravel, they simply left this hole in the earth. Likewise, the fact that the speaker refers to the "fuselage" of the plane suggests that the plane's skeletal structure might have been left behind, within an abandoned airplane hangar.

All of this imagery conveys the carelessness and indifference of the people who owned the quarry and the crop-duster. These objects of industry are short-lived, the poem suggests, but can cause lasting damage. And the fact that the moonlight must traverse this waste before it can reach the people in the poem suggests that people have separated themselves from the natural world.

Finally, the poem implies that while industrialism carelessly harms nature, it is nature that, again and again, makes "amends," or attempts to repair the harm that has been done and reconnect with humanity. The poem describes the moonlight moving in ways that are gentle and attentive, as when it "lay[s] its cheek for moments on the sand" and "flows up the cliffs." The poem further implies that the moonlight attempts to heal the damage caused by industrialization, since it "unavailing pours into the gash" of the quarry, as though to fill the quarry up again. And when the moonlight comes into the trailers where people sleep and "dwells upon the eyelids of the sleepers," it is as though the moonlight is attempting to care for them.

All of these images suggest that, while the people within the poem seem indifferent to the impact they have had on the natural world, nature is not indifferent to humanity. On the contrary, the poem suggests that people have separated themselves from nature, but this rift is unnecessary. Nature, the poem implies, perpetually tries to reconnect and restore this rift, if only the "sleepers" would awake to this possibility.

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-16

## THE FRAGILITY OF HUMAN LIFE

"Amends" implicitly conveys the damage that people and industrialism have caused to nature. At the same time, though, the poem shows another side to human society. The poem suggests that however much power and control people might try to exert over the natural world, ultimately human existence is intensely fragile and vulnerable.

Many of the human-made aspects the speaker describes are associated with industrial production. The image of the train tracks, for example, calls to mind a speeding freight train, while the quarry invokes an image of stone being extracted. Even the "trailers" where people sleep could, theoretically, move over the land. All of these elements, then, are often associated with human dominance over the natural world, and with energy and power.

Yet notably, the poem describes this scene at night, when it is still. Within this scene, the quarry, train tracks, and crop-dusting plane are quiet and abandoned. Without the human activity associated with them, they merely seem like other objects within the landscape, neither powerful nor threatening to the moonlight that moves across them.

The people within the poem are likewise described as still, since they are sleeping. Within the scene of the poem, the people aren't engaged in the busy activities they might be during the day. Like the industrial objects they might use, they merely seem like part of the scene that the moonlight can pass over.

Additionally, the poem describes the trailers where these people live as "tremulous with sleep." The word "tremulous" means that something is slightly quivering. It can also refer to a quality of timidity or sensitivity, meaning that something or someone is easily shaken or disturbed. The fact that the trailers are described as "tremulous" with the people's sleep suggests that some quality of the people is also tremulous. This description conveys a kind of fragility within the people themselves; without their busy activity and the power they might exert through industrial tools, what is left is only their human existence, which is far more vulnerable than it might appear.

The perspective of the poem, which is aligned with the moonlight, reinforces this. As the moonlight moves over the scene and "dwells upon the eyelids" of the people who are asleep, the poem implicitly suggests that it is people who are ultimately at the mercy of the natural world, not the other way around.

This perspective offers a different insight into the power and activity usually associated with industrial society. The poem shows another view of humanity as fundamentally fragile and vulnerable, and intricately connected to nature, whether humans are aware of that connection or not.

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-16

# LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

## LINES 1-3

*Nights like this:* *on ...*
*... of the bark:*

The poem's title establishes one of its main themes. To make amends means to repair some harm or damage that has been done. The word "amends" also implies a kind of restoration after a rift. The title, then, suggests that the poem will be about some kind of rift—in this case the rift between the natural world and industrial society—and how it is or is not repaired, or "amended."

The poem then begins with the phrase "Nights like this," which is perhaps a subtle allusion to Act 5, Scene 1 of Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice*. In the scene, two characters, Lorenzo and Jessica, are speaking outside at night. Lorenzo, who is trying to seduce Jessica, comments on the moonlight and describes romantic scenes that took place in the past "[i]n such a night as this."

Within the play, Lorenzo alludes to traditional views of moonlight as romantic—and also, implicitly, feminine—in order to suggest to Jessica that this night could be romantic for them. Yet importantly, within the scene, Jessica is skeptical: she seems resistant to Lorenzo's advances and rebuffs the romantic view of the moonlight that he attempts to establish. From the outset, then, the poem subtly alludes to past descriptions and conceptions of the moon as romantic and feminine while *also* suggesting a skeptical response to these assumptions about what the moon must represent.

The continuation of the opening line confirms this skepticism, and the poem's departure from classical, romantic views of "nights like this." First, the poem pauses for a caesura of white space before going on, marking the gap between the speaker's allusion to Lorenzo's speech and the poem's own direction.

Then, the poem doesn't describe a romantic scene, but rather a "cold apple-bough," or the branch of an apple tree, on which "white star[s]" appear to "explode[e] out of the bark." This imagery can be read in several ways:

- The speaker could refer to apple blossoms, which within the nighttime scene resemble the shape of stars.
- Alternatively, the speaker suggests that the moonlight strikes the tree in such a way as to resemble white stars "exploding" out of the tree itself; the white light on the bark is star shaped.

In both readings, the speaker makes use of a metaphor, comparing the apple blossoms, or the moonlight, to another aspect of the scene at night—the stars. The image of white stars exploding is beautiful, but notably unromantic. The image seems to be one of the cosmos and eternity, not intimate human love.

These opening lines also set up the unique way in which the poem will work with syntax (basically, the arrangement of words) and pacing. The verb that appears in these lines ("exploding") is in the gerund form, conveying a sense of the movement of the natural world as ongoing. The enjambment of line 2 adds to that feeling of forward momentum, pulling readers down the page:

> a white star, then another
> exploding out of the bark:

## LINES 4-5

> *on the ground, ...*
> *... with the surf*

In lines 4-5, the speaker starts to describe the movement of moonlight as it appears on the ground, moving across on both small and large stones and reflecting on waves in the ocean.

The moonlight itself is subtly personified, as the speaker says that it "picks" at "stones"—a description that implies agency, as though the moonlight is physically touching these stones. Similarly, the description of the moonlight as "ris[ing] with the surf" implies a kind of independent movement on the part of the moonlight that is also in tune with the rest of the natural world, since the light and the waves seem to rise in unison.

The poem uses repetition, here, as the speaker describes the moonlight first "picking at small stones," and then how it "picks at greater stones." First, the speaker uses diacope, when repeating the word "picking" in its variant form "picks." This repetition links the two actions together, while transitioning from the gerund form ("picking") to the present tense singular ("picks"). Even while transitioning to the simple present tense form, the poem implies that this action on the part of the moonlight is still ongoing.

Additionally, the direct repetition of "stones" connects the images, and bridges the gap of white space between the first and second stanzas. The poem implicitly suggests that the moonlight, too, bridges gaps of space as it touches everything within this landscape.

Finally, these lines use anaphora with the repetition of the phrase "as it," which will continue for the rest of the poem. This phrase, which repeats at the start of both clauses in line 5 ("as it picks at greater stones, as it rises with the surf"), conveys the ongoing movement of the moonlight, and also implicitly suggests that the moonlight touches and moves over all of these things simultaneously.

## LINES 6-8

> *laying its cheek ...*
> *... across the tracks*

In the remainder of the second stanza ("laying its cheek [...] flicks across the tracks") the speaker continues to describe the movement of the moonlight. Here, though, the poem begins to move from a scene of the natural world into an industrialized setting.

First, the speaker continues to describe the moonlight within the image of the shore and the ocean that appeared in the previous lines. After saying that the moonlight "rises with the surf," the speaker says it "lay[s] its cheek for moments on the sand." This image conveys a sense of gentleness and care on the part of the moonlight. The moonlight, too, is even more directly personified here, as it is said to have a cheek that it can choose to rest or "lay" on a beach, much like a person might.

At the same time, though, the poem also *resists* many traditional ways in which the moon has been personified. Most conventional personifications of the moon have viewed it as feminine; but here, the speaker continues to refer to the moonlight not as "he" or "she," but "it," suggesting that it has human qualities but can't be understood according to traditional cultural norms.

The speaker then resumes the use of anaphora ("as it") and goes on to describe the moonlight as it moves closer to an industrial setting. The moonlight "licks the broken ledge," the speaker says, invoking an image of what could be a natural ledge of stone but could also be the broken ledge of a building or abandoned foundation. This image continues the personification of the moonlight, since it implies that the moonlight touches the ledge with its tongue.

Then, the speaker says, "it flows up the cliffs," conveying the sense that the moonlight can move in ways people can't; it can even run in the reverse direction up a cliff. The verb "flows" connects the moonlight to water, but also reveals the difference between the two, since moonlight can flow "up" and doesn't have to follow the laws of gravity.

Finally, the speaker says that the moonlight "flicks across the tracks," clearly evoking an image of train tracks, and suggesting that now the moonlight is within a landscape inhabited by people. Specifically, train tracks also evoke industrial society, since freight trains have played a crucial role in industrialization, allowing goods and raw materials to be carried from one place to another.

Within the poem, though, the train tracks seem empty or abandoned. And without the speeding train moving across them, it is the movement of the moonlight that is the most notable. The speaker describes this movement with the verb "flicks," conveying a quick, sudden movement as the moonlight darts over the rails of the tracks. This verb rhymes with "licks" in the previous line, and the short /i/ sound is also echoed in

"cliffs." Meanwhile, the hard /k/ and /s/ sounds at the end of "licks" and "flicks" are also echoed via consonance in "tracks." And finally, alliterative /l/ sounds connect "laying," "licks," and "ledge." The lines, then, create a pattern of sound that links the movement of the moonlight to the setting (the "ledge," "cliffs" and "tracks") that it moves across.

At the same time, it is worth noting that the sounds become more abrupt, the vowels shorter, at the moments where the moonlight begins to move through an industrial setting. The short /i/ of "licks" and "flicks," the short /eh/ of "ledge," and the short /ah/ of "tracks" all convey a sense of a kind of abruptness or departure from the earlier long vowel sounds in "moon," "stones," and "rises." This shift suggests that industrial society has, in some abrupt way, departed from the natural world, creating a rift that the moonlight alone can bridge.

## LINES 9-10

*as it unavailing ...*
*... the sand-and-gravel quarry*

As the poem moves into its third stanza, the speaker continues to describe the moonlight within an industrialized landscape. Just like the train tracks, the setting is empty of human activity; it feels abandoned, filled with things people have left behind.

First, the speaker says that the moonlight "unavailing pours into the gash / of the sand-and-gravel quarry." A quarry is a kind of pit dug into the earth, used to extract sand, gravel, or stone that is often used in construction. Quarries, like mines, are known to leave lasting marks on a landscape, since often, once the gravel has been extracted, the quarries are simply left as empty pits. Here, the speaker emphasizes this, describing the quarry as a "gash." This image also implicitly compares the quarry metaphorically to a kind of wound. The consonant /g/ and /r/ sounds in "gash," "gravel," and "quarry" convey this sense of harshness and the grittiness of the quarry itself.

The moonlight, though, as the speaker says, "unavailing pours" into this wound, as though attempting to fill or heal it. Of course, the reader knows that the moonlight can't really fill "up" a hole in the earth, so the moonlight doesn't right the wrong that has been left behind. The adverb "unavailing" reinforces this. The word means that the moonlight does this "to no avail," meaning that it achieves nothing or almost nothing. At the same time, though, the speaker implies that the moonlight pours into this "gash" ceaselessly, as though to *try* to repair it.

## LINES 11-12

*as it leans ...*
*... the crop-dusting plane*

In the second half of the stanza, the speaker describes the moonlight moving over another image of industrialization. Here, the speaker says that the moonlight "leans across the hangared fuselage / of the crop-dusting plane." A hangar is a type of building made to house airplanes, while "fuselage" refers to the body, and sometimes skeletal structure, of a plane. A crop-dusting plane is a type of small plane used to drop pesticides, usually over large areas of farmland.

Here the speaker changes the noun "hangar" to its less common past participle form, "hangared." The strangeness of the word form makes the image itself feel somehow disjunctive, at odds with the overall landscape of the poem.

This sense of disjunct is also emphasized by the sounds in the lines. Just as "sand-and-gravel quarry," and the /g/ and /r/ consonance in the previous lines (in "gash," "gravel," and "quarry"), created a cluster of dense sounds, the speaker's description of the "hangered fuselage" brings together a cluster of consonants that are almost difficult for the reader to parse. The density of sounds conveys a subtle sense of industrial life as discordant with the natural world. Unlike the longer vowel sounds at the start of the poem, which suggested a kind of openness and integration, here the reader must traverse clusters of consonants, much as the moonlight must move over the dense fuselage of the plane, and the hangar around it.

Yet it is also clear, within the poem, that the movement of the moonlight is not interrupted. Instead, just as it "unavailing pours" into the "gash" created by the quarry, here it "leans"—again, as though in human form—against the crop-dusting plane and its hangar. The contrast between the static, seemingly abandoned fuselage and hangar, and the moonlight itself, is notable here. Although the plane and quarry are the things invented by humans, it is the moonlight that seems most human and alive, as it moves through the landscape with something that could be read as sensitivity, attentiveness, and care.

The poem emphasizes the juxtaposition between the industrial scene and the natural moonlight in the structure of this stanza. Each half of the stanza (the first and third lines of the quatrain) begins with the anaphora of "as it" and describes the movement of the moonlight. Then, in the second and fourth lines of the stanza, the speaker describes an aspect of industrial life that is particularly harmful to nature: quarries are made to extract from the earth, and leave pits like open wounds behind, while crop-dusting planes cause far-reaching environmental damage by contaminating groundwater with pesticides.

Also, it is notable that each of these images suggests that they could be something made, and then abandoned, by human beings; the quarry could no longer be in use, while the image of the plane's "fuselage" suggests that it, too, is the abandoned skeletal structure of a plane. The abandoned, nighttime scene reinforces this sense, and also implies that the moonlight will continue to move over this setting, long after this evidence of industrial life is gone.

## LINES 13-14

*as it soaks ...*
*... tremulous with sleep*

Finally, the moonlight approaches the people who were present only implicitly in the poem up to this point. The speaker describes the moonlight as it "soaks," like water, "through cracks into the trailers / tremulous with sleep." After the preceding images of the train tracks, the quarry, and the plane—all of which evoke human presence as powerful, controlling, and damaging to nature—this image is notable for the impression of sensitivity, even fragility, within it.

The trailers are described as "tremulous," a word that means trembling, but also conveys a sense that something is delicate or easily disturbed or shaken. In this case, the word clearly applies to the people asleep *within* the trailers; the people, too, and their sleep, are vulnerable within the scene.

Meanwhile, the metaphor that compares the moonlight to water that can "soak" through the crevices in the trailer walls suggests that while the people are sleeping and still, the moonlight has another kind of life and agency. It can reach even these interior spaces where people might believe they are walled off from the natural world.

Several sound elements reinforce this sense and create music within the lines. Alliterative and sibilant /s/ sounds connect "soaks" to "sleep"—linking the moonlight to those asleep within the trailers—while alliterative /tr/ sounds connect "trailers" to "tremulous," implying that even these inanimate objects have a kind of vitality because of the fragile human life within them. Similarly, consonant hard /k/ and sibilant /s/ sounds connect the moonlight that "soaks" to the "cracks" of the trailers (and recall the earlier iterations of these sounds in "licks," "flicks," and "tracks"). Finally, /l/ and /s/ sounds connect "trailers," "tremulous," and "sleep."

These sound patterns show the complex relationship that has unfolded over the course of the poem, as the moonlight moves over all aspects of this scene. While people may have created an industrial way of life that is in discord with the natural world, within this poem it is clear that the moonlight can still reach across that divide to the people who are asleep.

## LINES 15-16

*as it dwells ...*
*... to make amends.*

In the last two lines, the poem brings together the personified moonlight with the people themselves, as the moonlight "dwells upon the eyelids of the sleepers." This image suggests that the moonlight rests or pauses for a moment on the eyelids of the people who are asleep, and who go on sleeping, apparently unaware. The word "sleepers" also repeats—in the form of polyptoton—from the earlier "sleep," creating a kind of continuity within the scene.

The speaker further says that the moonlight does this "as if to make amends." Recalling the word "amends" from the title, this line suggests that the moonlight pauses here in this act of gentle care as though to repair some kind of rift or harm that has been done.

Yet ironically, the reader is aware, by this point in the poem, that it is *people* who have done the harm to nature, not the other way around. This image, then, subtly implies that despite this damage, and despite the fact that people seem largely unaware of the impact they have had, it is the moonlight—and implicitly nature as a whole—that seeks, again and again, to overcome this rift, to bridge the gap people have made, and create some kind of scene that is whole.

The poem, though, does build a kind of complexity into this ending. Importantly, the speaker describes the moonlight's actions "as if" they are "to make amends." This is a simile, suggesting that the moonlight doesn't *actually* do this to make amends. But a human viewer, personifying the moonlight, might see it or experience it in this way. This simile also suggests that the moonlight and the natural world aren't at fault and don't actually need to make amends; yet the moonlight is perpetually present, whether the people within the poem are aware of it or not.

This simile also subtly builds on the anaphora throughout the poem. Where the phrase "as it" drove many of the lines and images that came before, here the speaker shifts to "as if." This phrase echoes the anaphora, suggesting that this action on the part of the moonlight is, like the rest of the things the moonlight does, continual and eternal.

Other sound echoes connect these images together, as in the preceding lines. Here, consonant /l/, /d/, and /z/ sounds link "dwells," "eyelids," and "sleepers." Where earlier, clusters of consonants created a sense of harsh discordance, here the sounds are different; the /d/ sounds are softer than the /t/ sounds that came before, while the liquid /l/ sounds and /z/ sounds can blend together, creating a sense of peaceful patterning.

The poem ends, then, within this moment that feels both peaceful, and ambivalent. The people, vulnerable and asleep, are unaware of the moonlight that "dwells" on their eyelids. The moonlight, meanwhile, is said to do this "as if to make amends"—yet the poem leaves this open-ended. Amends hasn't *actually* been made, the poem suggests, even as it suggests that the moonlight will go on doing this, again and again.

# SYMBOLS

## THE MOON

The most important symbol in "Amends" is the moon itself. The moon brings with it a range of cultural associations; traditionally, it has been viewed as romantic and also as a feminine presence. In fact, much of Western literary tradition has depicted nature as a whole as feminine, and

human presence within the natural world as masculine. According to this framework, "masculine" human presence is active and dominating, whereas "feminine" nature has been viewed as gentle, supportive, and nourishing.

The poem invokes these traditional views of the moon and the natural world. Yet importantly, it also *challenges* these traditional views of the moon, ultimately asking the reader to look at the natural world as a whole in a new way.

First, in the opening line, the speaker might be subtly alluding to a scene from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* in which one character, Lorenzo is attempting to seduce another character, Jessica. Lorenzo comments on the moonlight and talks about romantic scenes that have taken place "in such a night as this" to try to convince Jessica that this too could be a romantic night for them.

Importantly, though, Jessica resists Lorenzo's advances and seems skeptical of his framing. She replies to him by mentioning other, distinctly unromantic things that have also occurred "in such a night," implying that his way of seeing the moonlight and the night itself is superficial, cliché, and untrustworthy. Through this subtle allusion, then, the speaker calls to mind traditional views of the moon as a romanticized symbol, but also invokes the skepticism with which Jessica replies.

Additionally, the poem personifies the moon, including in ways that could be read as feminine. For instance, the speaker describes the moonlight "laying its cheek for moments on the sand," in a gesture that could be interpreted as a feminine one of gentleness and care.

These descriptions seem to reinforce views of the moon as a feminine presence in contrast with the male presence of humanity and industrial society, yet the poem also resists this easy interpretation. Throughout, the speaker describes the moonlight not with a gendered pronoun, but as "it." The reiteration of "as it" throughout the poem constantly reminds the reader that the moon *isn't* a person—masculine or feminine.

The poem as a whole, then, describes the moonlight and acknowledges what the moon has traditionally symbolized. Ultimately, though it challenges the reader's expectations, instead suggesting that the moon, and nature as a whole, is another kind of force or presence that people may not entirely understand.

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- Lines 4-16

### THE APPLE-BOUGH

At the very beginning of the poem, the speaker describes a "cold apple-bough," or branch of an apple tree, on which "white star[s]"—of moonlight or apple blossoms—appear to "explod[e] out of the bark." Because of the importance of the Bible in Western culture, images of apples and apple trees in Western literature almost always allude to the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden, from which Eve picked a "forbidden fruit." Her picking of this apple led to Adam and Eve being cast out of Eden, and, within Christian tradition, this story represents humanity's original fall from grace and separation from the paradise of nature.

The apple tree in the poem, then, alludes to this original apple tree. In doing so, it symbolizes that "fall from grace" that the original apple tree represents. This symbol makes sense when read within the larger picture of the poem, as it depicts the rift between human society and the natural world.

Yet it is worth noting that the poem also subtly challenges this symbol and how it is traditionally read. For example, the speaker describes the tree not when it is bearing fruit, but when it is in bloom, since the "white star[s]" can be read as images of apple blossoms. Additionally, the tree branch is described as a "cold apple-bough," and the scene seems empty of human presence.

In a way, then, it could be argued that the poem invokes this symbol but then subverts it. Within the poem, the branch of the tree seems just that—a bough of an apple tree. The poem asks the reader to consider, then, what people bring to and impose upon nature, through cultural traditions and through symbols themselves. Just as the poem as a whole imagines this landscape from the point of view not of humanity, but of the moonlight, this image of the apple tree, too, asks the reader to imagine a view of the natural world free of human associations. It asks the reader, then, to see the tree, and the scene as a whole, more clearly, and simply as it is.

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 1-3:** "on the cold apple-bough / a white star, then another / exploding out of the bark:"

## POETIC DEVICES

### ALLUSION

"Amends" begins with what might be read as a subtle allusion to Act 5, Scene 1 of Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice*. In this scene, Lorenzo and Jessica are talking outside at night. Lorenzo comments on the moonlight ("The moon shines bright," he says), and then attempts to seduce Jessica by describing various classical romantic scenes that have occurred "[i]n such a night as this."

Jessica, however, seems skeptical of Lorenzo. In her reply, she mentions *other*, less happy things that have occurred "[i]n such a night," and finally remarks that despite Lorenzo's "many vows of faith," there was "ne'er a true one"—in other words, she recognizes him as basically untrustworthy.

"Amends" does not quote the play exactly—the opening phrase is "Nights like this," instead of the Shakespearean "In such a night"—but the fact that the poem goes on to describe the moonlight reinforces the allusion. This allusion is important to the poem's meaning and can be read in several ways.

First, from the outset, the poem brings up classical associations with the moon and moonlight. In fact, within the scene of the play, *Lorenzo* brings up these associations; he attempts to convince Jessica that this night could be a romantic one for them, because moonlight has traditionally been connected to romance in the past. Yet just as importantly, Jessica *resists* this interpretation of the night and the moonlight. She seems, over the course of the scene, increasingly skeptical of Lorenzo and the clichéd associations he tries to invoke.

The poem, then, brings up traditional ways the moon has been viewed. But it *also* implicitly invokes Jessica's *skepticism* in response to these traditional views. In a way, after the white space of the caesura in line 1, the rest of the poem could be read as a kind of reply to Lorenzo, or even a reply to traditional ways of viewing the moon altogether. The allusion within the poem, then, establishes a cultural framework for the speaker's descriptions of the moonlight, but also resists this cultural framework, asking the reader to reconsider whatever assumptions they might bring to the poem.

**Where Allusion appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "Nights like this: "

## CAESURA

The most notable caesura in "Amends" appears in line 1, when a large gap of white space appears between the opening phrase, "Nights like this," and "on the cold apple-bough." This adds a long breath, a deep pause, which readers may fill with their own associations about what these "[n]ights" might be like.

This caesura also follows the poem's subtle opening allusion to Act 5, Scene 1 of *The Merchant of Venice*, in which Lorenzo attempts to seduce Jessica by describing the moonlight and classical romantic scenes that have occurred "[i]n such a night as this."

This caesura of white space might indicate that while the poem is opening with this Shakespearean allusion, it is also separating itself from it. The poem, this caesura indicates, will *not* be describing the moonlight in the romanticized, cliché ways that Lorenzo does. Instead, the poem describes the moonlight in a clear-eyed way, with images that are beautiful but also unromantic. The allusion, then, *connects* the poem to a classical tradition in poetry of describing the moon and moonlight. Yet the caesura that follows suggests that the poem is also resisting this tradition in certain ways.

As the poem continues, more subtle caesurae appear in lines 2 ("a white star, then another"), 4 ("on the ground, moonlight picking at small stones"), 5 ("as it picks at greater stones, as it rises with the surf"), and 7 ("as it licks the broken ledge, as it flows up the cliffs"). These mid-line caesurae, in the form of commas, help to pace the poem and create rhythm in its movement. Importantly, after the opening line, these lines with caesurae alternate, within their respective stanzas, with lines *without* caesurae; lines 3, 6, and 8 progress *without* any mid-line pauses. This alternation creates a sense of the moonlight moving across the natural landscape in a patterned, even way.

Then, as the poem moves into its third stanza, it drops the use of mid-line caesurae altogether. This shift is important, coming as it does when the moonlight is described within an industrial setting. Here, instead of caesurae, the reader encounters clusters of consonants and hyphenated words, as in "sand-and-gravel quarry," and "crop-dusting plane." These phrases create a sense of claustrophobic density in contrast with the even pacing of the poem's opening. Implicitly, this shift in the poem's rhythm suggests that industrial society is at odds with the patterning and equilibrium of the natural world.

**Where Caesura appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "this: on"
- **Line 2:** "star, then"
- **Line 4:** "ground, moonlight"
- **Line 7:** "ledge, as"

## ANAPHORA

Anaphora plays a key role in "Amends." As the speaker describes the moonlight moving over various aspects of the landscape, the poem repeats the phrase "as it" at the beginning of numerous lines and clauses.

This anaphora has several effects within the poem. First, it links each of the disparate images within the poem together, implying that despite all the various aspects of the poem's landscape—from the natural world to industrial objects—what is constant and unchanging is the moon and the light it casts.

This anaphora also creates a kind of parataxis within the poem. Each of the actions of the moonlight—each thing it moves across—is, within the syntax of the poem's sentence, on an equal plane. The phrase "as it" at the start of each of these descriptions implies that the moonlight touches all of these things equally and also simultaneously.

This has a powerful impact on the poem's meaning. The poem implicitly shows people as attempting to exert dominance over the natural world, by extracting substances through a quarry, and controlling the presence of insects and animals through pesticides dropped from a crop-dusting plane. Yet the natural world, through the presence of the moonlight, is implicitly equalizing. It is the moonlight, not humanity, that is omnipresent within the poem, suggesting that the people

"tremulous with sleep" are not as powerful as they might believe.

**Where Anaphora appears in the poem:**

- **Line 5:** "as it," "as it"
- **Line 7:** "as it," "as it"
- **Line 8:** "as it"
- **Line 9:** "as it"
- **Line 10:** "of the"
- **Line 11:** "as it"
- **Line 12:** "of the"
- **Line 13:** "as it"
- **Line 15:** "as it"

## PARALLELISM

In addition to its use of anaphora, "Amends" uses parallelism to create rhythm and emphasis. For example, in the second stanza, look at lines 5 and 7:

> As it picks at greater stones, as it rises with the surf
> [...]
> As it licks the broken ledge, as it flows up the cliffs,

Each of these lines is made up of two clauses describing two actions of the moonlight, with each clause beginning with the phrase "as it." Additionally, each clause is structured in a parallel way, with a verb ("picks," "rises," "licks," "flows") followed by the indirect object. Finally, the first indirect object in each line ("greater stones" and "broken ledge") contains a modifier ("greater" and "broken").

This parallelism conveys a sense of patterning and rhythm within nature itself. It suggests that the moonlight follows these movements and motions continuously, with a kind of internal order and coherence.

Then, in stanza 3, the poem uses parallelism differently. Here, lines 9 ("as it unavailing pours into the gash") and 11 ("as it leans across the hangared fuselage") begin with the phrase "as it" and then describe an action of the moonlight in "pours" and "leans." Each of these lines, though, alternates with *another* line that describes in more detail the industrial object the moonlight is moving across. In line 10, this is the "sand-and-gravel quarry," while in 12, it is the "crop-dusting plane."

This alternating structure implicitly shows the juxtaposition between the movement of the moonlight and the industrial setting it moves across. While the moonlight's actions seem patterned and continual in their motions, the objects of industrialism seem to jut out of the landscape and the poem itself.

Finally, the poem sustains this parallel structure, but changes it, in the closing stanza. Here, the speaker describes the moonlight "as it soaks through cracks into the trailers / tremulous with sleep" and "as it dwells upon the eyelids of the sleepers / as if to make amends."

At first, this structure seems to replicate that of the preceding stanza. The first and third lines of the stanza begin with the phrase "as it" and then describe an action of the moonlight as it "soaks" and "dwells." Here, though, the poem also subtly shifts, as it moves away from describing the inanimate objects of industrialism to the people who made these objects. The people asleep in their trailers seem "tremulous" and vulnerable. And in the last line, rather than further describing *what* the moonlight touches, the poem describes *how* the moonlight dwells "upon the eyelids" of the people who are asleep. It does so, the speaker says, "as if to make amends," with the phrase "as **if**" echoing, but also revising, the phrase "as **it**" that has driven the poem up to this point.

This slight shift at the poem's ending asks the reader to reconsider the poem up to this point. Rather than the moonlight's movements—and the parallel structures that convey them—seeming insistent or overbearing, this closing line suggests that the scene as a whole is intricately interconnected, but also more fragile and nuanced than it might initially appear.

**Where Parallelism appears in the poem:**

- Line 5
- Line 7
- Line 8
- Lines 9-10
- Lines 11-12
- Lines 13-14
- Lines 15-16

## JUXTAPOSITION

As the speaker of "Amends" describes the moonlight moving over various aspects of this landscape, the poem subtly juxtaposes nature with industrial society.

The poem conveys this juxtaposition through its sounds and imagery. For example, the opening stanzas describe the moonlight within a natural setting. These lines contain the pauses of mid-line caesurae (as in "as it picks at greater stones, as it rises with the surf") and long vowel sounds that invite the reader to linger over the lines. These long vowel sounds appear in such words as "m**oo**nlight," "st**o**nes," "r**i**ses," "l**ay**ing," "ch**ee**k," and "fl**ow**s," and convey a kind of openness and continual quality within the natural world.

The speaker also reinforces this continuous, integrated quality through the descriptions of the moonlight. For instance, the moonlight is said to "ris[e] with the surf," painting a picture of the moonlight reflected on the surface of the waves. This image implicitly conveys the interconnectedness and unity of nature, since the moonlight's movements seem united with the

movements of the ocean. (And of course, the reader knows that the movement of the moon *is* connected with the movements of the ocean and its tides.)

As the speaker describes the moonlight moving into an industrial setting, though, the sounds and images of the poem begin to change. Here, the moonlight continues to interact with the setting in ways that seem open and continual. For example, the speaker says that the moonlight "unavailing pours into the gash," or wound, created by the "sand-and-gravel quarry." This image implies that the moonlight pours into this gash endlessly, even if in doing so it has little effect.

Yet *what* the moonlight moves across now seems different. The phrases "sand-and-gravel quarry," "hangared fuselage," and "crop-dusting plane" contain clusters of consonants that are difficult to traverse. The hyphens, meanwhile, seem human-made and unnatural, in contrast to the even caesurae and fluid quality of the preceding lines. These objects of industrial society seem, then, at odds with the natural scene at the poem's opening, implying that people have, through industrialism, created a harmful and unnecessary rift with the natural world.

**Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:**

- Lines 5-8
- Lines 9-16

## IMAGERY

In a way, "Amends" is almost entirely made out of its imagery. The speaker begins by describing an apple tree at night, and how the apple blossoms (or, in another reading, moonlight on the tree bark) resemble "white star[s]." The speaker then describes the moonlight within the natural setting of a seashore, including details of how the moonlight appears to "pick" at small and large stones, move with the ocean waves, and rest its "cheek" on the sand.

Then, the poem describes how the moonlight looks as it begins to move into an industrial setting, over train tracks, a quarry, and a crop-dusting plane. The poem closes with an image of the moonlight "soak[ing]" through cracks into trailers where people are asleep, and "dwell[ing]," or resting, on the "eyelids of the sleepers." This imagery creates a clear visual picture of what the speaker describes. It conveys a quiet landscape at night, and how the moonlight looks as it touches all of these various aspects of the scene.

The poem's use of imagery is also important to its meaning. Where many poems might focus on how the speaker feels or what the speaker thinks within the moment of the poem, "Amends" gives the most emphasis to the clear, beautiful imagery of moonlight and the setting as a whole. Implicitly, then, the poem's imagery conveys a subtle message: that people are just one small part of a larger universe and of the natural world.

**Where Imagery appears in the poem:**

- Line 1
- Lines 2-3
- Line 4
- Line 5
- Line 6
- Line 7
- Line 8
- Lines 9-10
- Lines 11-12
- Lines 13-14
- Line 15

## METAPHOR

The speaker of "Amends" uses several metaphors to describe the moonlight and how it moves across this landscape. First, in the opening stanza of the poem, the speaker offers a visual depiction of an apple tree, on which "a white star, then another" appear to "explod[e] out of the bark."

This complex image can be read in several ways. The "white star[s]" could be interpreted as apple blossoms, with the shape of their petals resembling stars. Alternately, the stars could actually be the moonlight; the moonlight might be striking the tree through its branches, creating star-like shapes of light on the bark. The speaker further complicates this metaphor by saying that the apple blossoms or shapes of moonlight (the "star[s]") appear to "explod[e] out of the bark," as though they are emerging from the tree itself.

Whether the metaphor is read as representing apple blossoms or moonlight, the effect is the same; in essence, the speaker describes one aspect of this natural nighttime scene (the blossoms or the moonlight) in terms of *another* natural aspect of the scene—the stars. The fact that these "star[s]" are further described as "exploding" imbues the image with vitality and power, calling to mind the larger movements and changes of the cosmos.

Similarly, at the end of the poem, the speaker again describes the moonlight by comparing it metaphorically to another natural element. When the speaker says that the moonlight "soaks through cracks" in the trailers where people are asleep, the verb "soaks" implicitly compares the moonlight to water. This verb also recalls the speaker's description of the moonlight "flow[ing] up the cliffs" and "pour[ing]" into the quarry. All of these verbs suggest that the moonlight has qualities like water—except that moonlight is not constrained by the laws of gravity, and so can flow upward.

In these metaphors, then, the speaker visualizes the moonlight by comparing it to another aspect of nature. These metaphors emphasize the integration and unity of the natural world.

By contrast, the speaker uses another subtle metaphor in the

middle of the poem, describing the "sand-and-gravel quarry" as a "gash." The word "gash" usually refers to a cut or wound, so here the speaker implies that the quarry is a kind of wound in the earth itself. Here, the speaker describes this part of the landscape through a metaphor that connects it to humanity and human actions, demonstrating the ways in which people have, through industrial society, altered and harmed the natural world.

**Where Metaphor appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 2-3:** "a white star, then another / exploding out of the bark:"
- **Line 7:** "as it flows up the cliffs,"
- **Line 9:** "as it unavailing pours"
- **Lines 9-10:** "the gash / of the sand-and-gravel quarry"
- **Line 13:** "as it soaks through cracks into the trailers"

## PERSONIFICATION

At several points in the poem, the speaker personifies the moonlight—implicitly comparing the moonlight and its actions to a human being.

The poem begins to subtly personify the moonlight in the opening stanza, when the speaker describes the moonlight as "picking at small stones / as it picks at greater stones." The verb "picks" suggests that the moonlight has agency and choice, and the image also calls to mind a person "picking" up stones on a beach.

In the second stanza, this personification becomes more overt. Here, the speaker describes the moonlight as "laying its cheek for moments on the sand," and "lick[ing]" the broken ledge." Both of these images imply that the moonlight has a literal face, since it can rest its "cheek" on the beach as a person might do and can touch the "broken ledge" with its tongue.

Finally, the speaker says that the moonlight "leans" against the hangar of the "crop-dusting plane." This verb again conveys a sense of agency, since it suggests that the moonlight *chooses* to lean here. Additionally, it implies that the moonlight has a kind of physical weight; the moonlight "leans" against this structure as a person might.

These elements of personification have several effects in the poem. First, they bring up cultural associations with the moon. The moon has traditionally been viewed as feminine and personified as a woman. Some of the poem's personification of the moon reinforces this; the gesture of the moonlight "laying its cheek [...] on the sand," for example, could be interpreted as a feminine gesture of gentleness and care. In this reading, the moonlight is a humanized, gentle, feminine presence that appears to nurture the landscape and the people within it, despite the harm they have caused.

Yet just as importantly, the poem also includes elements that work *against* this conventional reading of the moon and its gendered personification. For example, the speaker consistently describes the moonlight not with a gendered pronoun but as "it." This repetition of "it" resists any easy interpretation of the moonlight as an actual person. It also resists traditional ways of viewing the moon as feminine, and in doing so asks the reader to consider the ways in which people have simply projected aspects of human culture onto the natural world.

Finally, the poem *also* describes the moonlight in other ways. For instance, the speaker says that it "flows up the cliffs," "pours into the gash," and "soaks through the cracks" of the trailers. All of these descriptions imply that the moonlight is a substance closer to water that can flow, pour, or soak. The moonlight can move through and across this landscape in ways that a person could not.

Taken altogether, then, the poem personifies the moonlight but also complicates this personification. Implicitly, it asks the reader to consider the possibility that this personification is coming only from the human speaker. People might understand nature in terms of human experience, the poem suggests, but the actual reality of nature and the universe is far more complex and mysterious.

**Where Personification appears in the poem:**

- **Line 4:** "moonlight picking at small stones"
- **Line 5:** "as it picks at greater stones,"
- **Line 6:** "laying its cheek for moments on the sand"
- **Line 7:** "as it licks the broken ledge"
- **Lines 11-12:** "as it leans across the hangared fuselage / of the crop-dusting plane"

## SIMILE

In addition to the metaphors and personification that appear throughout "Amends," the poem also uses one crucial simile to describe the moonlight and its actions. At the end of the poem, the speaker says that the moonlight "dwells," or rests, on the eyelids of the people who are asleep, "as if to make amends."

"To make amends" means to repair or reconnect after some kind of wrongdoing or rift. This line, then, means that the moonlight rests on the eyelids of the "sleepers" in a gesture of repair or reparation. Even though, as the poem has implied, it is *people* who have harmed nature and separated themselves from it, it is the *moonlight* that still approaches them "to make amends."

Importantly, though, the speaker says that the moonlight "dwells" on the people's eyelids "*as if* to make amends." The action of the moonlight, then, is described as a simile.

This simile builds a vital kind of ambivalence into the poem's ending. Where in one reading, the moonlight seems to be approaching the people in an act of agency and care, the reader

can also understand that the moonlight may not *actually* have this intent or have any intent at all.

In this alternate reading, it is not that the moonlight is trying to make amends with "the sleepers." Rather, the human speaker views and interprets the moonlight's actions in this way—through a human framework of wrongdoing and repair. The poem's ending asks the reader to hold both possibilities at the same time. In doing so, it subtly implies that the moonlight—and nature as a whole—exceeds simplified or reductive human understanding.

**Where Simile appears in the poem:**

- **Line 16:** "as if to make amends."

## IRONY

"Amends" makes subtle use of dramatic irony throughout. First, while the speaker describes the moonlight moving over an industrial scene and even approaching people who are asleep, it is the *moonlight* that is most personified within the poem. The moonlight is said to rest its "cheek" on the beach, "lic[k]" a "broken ledge," and "dwel[l]" on the eyelids of the people who are sleeping. All of these actions convey a kind of presence that is far more active and palpable than that of the people themselves, implying that human beings are less powerful than they might believe.

The poem's ending can also be read ironically. The speaker says that the moonlight touches the eyelids of the people who are asleep "as if to make amends." Yet the poem's imagery has shown throughout that it is *people* who have created a rift with nature, and harmed the natural world, through the industrial objects the poem depicts. It is the people, then, who should "make amends," or repair this rift. Yet the poem implies that it is nature, again and again, that extends itself to human beings in a gesture that could be interpreted as one of reconnection and care.

**Where Irony appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-16

## END-STOPPED LINE

Most of the lines in "Amends" are end-stopped, creating a sense of even pacing throughout—and implicitly conveying the natural rhythms and movements of the moonlight. The first half of the poem, which takes place in a landscape free of human beings, is notably *more* end-stopped than the second half, subtly creating a feeling of steadiness, control, and peace within this natural environment. In fact, the only enjambment in this section comes in line 2, where the leap across the line break simply evokes the "explosion" being described:

> a white star, then another
> exploding out of the bark:

Apart from this moment, though, lines 1-8 contain regular pauses at the end of lines. Of course, the poem leaves out punctuation for the most part, instead relying on the speaker's syntax (basically, the arrangement of words) to create pauses.

For example, the end of line 6 ("laying its cheek for moments on the sand") coincides with the ending of a clause. The next line begins, "as it licks the broken ledge," letting the reader know that the speaker has now moved into describing a new action of the moonlight, and a new image. Line 6, then, is end-stopped, creating a kind of silence and pause, and conveying the even, paced way in which the moonlight moves across this landscape.

Things get less steady starting with stanza 3, as the moonlight moves over evidence of civilization. The end-stopped line that appears halfway through the stanza, at the end of line 10 ("of the sand-and-gravel quarry") works much like the ending of line 6. It divides the two primary actions and images in the stanza and creates a pause between them.

By contrast, the enjambments in this stanza suggest the powerful motion of the moonlight, which bounds across the line breaks in a way that perhaps reflects an attempt to smooth over the rift humanity has created between itself and the natural world:

> as it unavailing pours into the gash
> of the sand-and-gravel quarry
> as it leans across the hangared fuselage
> of the crop-dusting plane

The next stanza follows the same pattern of alternating end-stopped and enjambed lines. Also of note is that no line in he second half of the poem (stanzas 3 and 4) contain any punctuation at all. As the reader encounters the white space at the ends of lines and stanzas, the poem implicitly conveys a sense that this movement of the moonlight and the natural world is ongoing, and will continue well beyond the bounds of the poem itself.

**Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "apple-bough"
- **Line 3:** "bark:"
- **Line 4:** "stones"
- **Line 5:** "surf"
- **Line 6:** "sand"
- **Line 7:** "cliffs,"
- **Line 8:** "tracks"
- **Line 10:** "quarry"
- **Line 12:** "plane"
- **Line 14:** "sleep"

- **Line 16:** "amends."

## ALLITERATION

"Amends" contains several instances of alliteration that create meaning and emphasis. First, sibilant /s/ sounds connect "small," "stones," "stones," "surf," and "sand" in stanzas 1 and 2. This alliteration links these images together, implicitly conveying the interconnectedness of the natural world.

Similarly, alliterative /l/ sounds connect one action of the moonlight ("licks") with what it touches ("ledge"), implying that despite the fact that this ledge is "broken," the moonlight can still come into contact with it, and is fundamentally connected to it through this movement.

Later, alliteration helps to emphasize certain images and their meaning within the poem. For example, the /g/ sound in "gash" is echoed in "gravel," reinforcing the sense that this quarry is a kind of gash, or wound, in the earth. Similarly, the /t/ sound of "trailers" recurs in "tremulous." This last moment of alliteration suggests that the trailers themselves seem fragile, or almost shivering with the presence of the sleeping people within them. While the people in the poem have impacted the landscape in harsh ways, then (through the quarry and the crop-dusting plane), the poem *also* emphasizes the fundamental vulnerability of these people and makes that vulnerability palpable in the poem's closing lines.

**Where Alliteration appears in the poem:**

- **Line 4:** "small," "stones"
- **Line 5:** "stones," "surf"
- **Line 6:** "sand"
- **Line 7:** "licks," "ledge," "flows"
- **Line 8:** "flicks"
- **Line 9:** "gash"
- **Line 10:** "gravel"
- **Line 13:** "trailers"
- **Line 14:** "tremulous," "sleep"
- **Line 15:** "sleepers"

## CONSONANCE

"Amends" makes use of consonance throughout. At times this adds musicality to the poem and evokes the imagery at hand. For example, in the second stanza, note the many hard /k/ sounds, as well as the combination gentler /f/, /l/, and /s/ sounds (sibilance). Here are lines 7-8:

> as it licks the broken ledge, as it flows up the cliffs,
> as it flicks across the tracks

The quick, light sounds of these lines suggests the quick, light touch of the moonlight as it moves across the landscape. Also note here how consonance connects each of the moonlight's actions to what it touches: it "licks the broken ledge," "flows" up "cliffs," and "flicks across [...] tracks."

In stanza 3, hard /g/ sounds and /r/ sounds connect the word "gash" with "gravel" and "quarry." These sounds create a cluster of consonants that are almost difficult for the reader to navigate. They convey the harshness of the quarry, and a sense that it is in conflict with the fluid, integrated movements of the natural world described in the opening stanzas.

Finally, the poem closes with consonance that again integrates the moonlight's actions with what it touches. The /ks/ sound at the ending of "soaks" recurs in "cracks," connecting the moonlight's movement through the cracks in the trailers with the cracks themselves. In the last two lines, /d/, /l/, and /z/ sounds predominate, in "dwells," "eyelids," "sleepers," and "amends." These sounds reinforce the presence of the moonlight as it "dwells" within this scene and enact what the poem describes. While the sleepers may have separated themselves from the natural world, the poem implies, through its patterns of sound, that they are actually still connected to it in more ways than they think.

**Where Consonance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "cold apple"
- **Line 3:** "exploding," "bark"
- **Line 4:** "small," "stones"
- **Line 5:** "picks," "stones," "surf"
- **Line 6:** "cheek," "sand"
- **Line 7:** "licks," "broken," "ledge," "flows," "cliffs"
- **Line 8:** "flicks," "tracks"
- **Line 9:** "gash"
- **Line 10:** "sand-and," "gravel," "quarry"
- **Line 11:** "leans across," "hangared fuselage"
- **Line 12:** "crop-dusting plane"
- **Line 13:** "soaks," "cracks," "trailers"
- **Line 14:** "tremulous," "sleep"
- **Line 15:** "dwells upon," "eyelids," "sleepers"
- **Line 16:** "make amends"

## ASSONANCE

Assonance appears most notably at the center of the poem, when the speaker describes the moonlight beginning to move into an industrial setting.

Here, short /i/ sounds connect "licks," "cliffs," and "flicks." "Licks" and "flicks," in fact, create an internal rhyme; the echo in "cliffs" creates an effect *similar* to rhyme, building a kind of music and emphasis at this point in the poem. This assonance emphasizes how interconnected the moonlight is with the world it moves across, since its movements ("licks" and "flicks") are echoed in what it touches, the "cliffs."

Then, short /ah/ sounds link the second and third stanzas, as

"tracks" receives an assonant echo in "gash." (Both of these words are then echoed, after the space of an intervening stanza, in "cracks" at the start of stanza 4.) Interestingly, here, assonance works to connect elements of industrial society: the train tracks, and the "gash," or wound, created by the quarry—as well as the "cracks" in the trailer walls.

Assonance, then, helps to convey the poem's meaning. It shows the interconnection of the natural world, and the fluidity with which the moonlight traverses this landscape. Simultaneously, it shows how much of industrial society has resulted in people being separated from the natural world. Objects like train tracks and quarries were built to move across the land and extract from it, yet they don't make the "sleepers" more aware of the moonlight or the natural beauty around them. The different vowel sounds for each—short /i/ sounds connecting "licks," "flicks," and "cliffs," and short /ah/ sounds connecting "tracks," "gash," and "cracks"—subtly emphasize this rift between people and the natural world.

**Where Assonance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "Nights like"
- **Line 5:** "it picks"
- **Line 7:** "it licks," "cliffs"
- **Line 8:** "it flicks," "tracks"
- **Line 9:** "gash"
- **Line 13:** "cracks"

## VOCABULARY

**Bough** (Line 1) - A main branch of a tree. In this case, the speaker describes the branch of an apple tree.

**Ledge** (Line 7) - A ledge is a kind of horizontal surface, like a shelf, projecting from a natural area (like a cliff) or a human made one (like a wall).

**Flicks** (Line 8) - To "flick" something means to touch it with a quick, sharp movement.

**Unavailing** (Line 9) - "Unavailing" means that something is done to no avail. Avail means help or assistance, so if an action is to no avail this means that has little to no effect. In the poem, this implies that while the moonlight appears to pour continuously into the quarry, it does so "to no avail": it can't actually fill the quarry back up again.

**Gash** (Line 9) - A gash is a deep cut or wound. In the poem, the word implies that the quarry is a kind of wound in the earth itself.

**Quarry** (Line 10) - A quarry is a deep pit dug into the earth, from which sand, gravel, stone and other minerals are extracted.

**Hangared** (Line 11) - A hangar is a type of building used to hold an airplane. "Hangared," then, means that the plane is within its hangar.

**Fuselage** (Line 11) - Fuselage refers to the central body of an airplane.

**Tremulous** (Line 14) - If something is "tremulous" this means that it is shaking or shivering slightly. The word can also mean that something is easily shaken or disturbed. In the poem, the word conveys a sense of vulnerability within the people who are asleep.

**Amends** (Line 16) - "To make amends" means to make up for some harm that has been done, or to repair some wrongdoing. "Amends" as a noun refers to this act of repair or reparation.

## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"Amends" is written in four unrhymed quatrains. On the one hand, these quatrains create a sense of shape and pattern, of a human presence crafting the poem.

At the same time, several elements work in tension with this formal pattern. For example, the poem leaves out any terminal punctuation (punctuation that appears at the end of a sentence). Instead, the poem uses the white space of line endings to create pauses. This lack of end punctuation helps to convey the movement of the moonlight itself, as it seems to be steady and peaceful yet also uncontained by any rigid human form.

Additionally, the lines are varied in length, and the first line contains the white space of a caesura. This variation further contrasts with the ordered formality of the quatrains. It suggests that alongside the patterned, human-made aspects of the poem, some other kind of organic quality is at work, a quality perhaps closer to the natural world the poem describes.

### METER

"Amends" is a free verse poem and has no fixed meter. Instead, it flows along freely and conversationally, evoking the smooth movement of the moonlight.

That said, the poem does use patterns of stress to create emphasis and music. For example, consider the opening of the poem:

> Nights like this: on the cold apple-bough
> a white star,

The first line contains two close clusters of stresses, in which each cluster has three stressed syllables: "Nights," "like," and "this," in the first instance, and "cold," "apple," and "bough," in the second. Then, both words in the phrase "white star" are stressed. The poem begins, then, with a sequence of mostly

monosyllabic words that are stressed, imbuing what the speaker says with authority.

Later, when the speaker describes the moonlight's movement over various industrial aspects of the landscape, the poem uses alternations between stressed and unstressed syllables to create an overall sense of rhythm. For instance, in lines 7-8 the speaker describes how the moonlight "licks the broken ledge" and "flicks across the tracks." In both of these clauses, stressed syllables alternate with unstressed syllables, linking the two descriptions together.

### RHYME SCHEME

As a free verse poem, "Amends" has no set rhyme scheme. This keeps things loose and flowing, again evoking the movement of the moonlight across the landscape.

The poem does contain numerous instances of slant rhyme and internal rhyme, however. For example, in lines 2-3 the speaker describes "a white star [...] exploding out of the bark." Here, the /ar/ sound of "star" repeats in "bark," creating not a rhyme, exactly, but a kind of echo.

Then, as the poem moves into its second stanza and the speaker begins to describe the moonlight's movement into an industrial setting, the rhymes and slant rhymes become more overt. In the last two lines of the second stanza, "licks" rhymes with "flicks," creating an internal rhyme that connects the two images together. "Tracks," referring to the train tracks, is then echoed in the next stanza with "gash"; the fact that both of these words appear at the ends of lines heightens the effect of the assonance. Finally, "cracks" in the last stanza creates a full rhyme with "tracks"—but only after the intervening quatrain.

These instances of internal rhyme and close rhyme create a complex kind of patterning in the poem. Since the poem is written in quatrains, a reader might expect a traditional rhyme scheme, which the poem resists. These instances of rhyme, then, suggest that the poem is creating its own kind of music, and conveying a distinct kind of pattern within the landscape it describes—just not one the reader might expect.

## SPEAKER

The speaker of "Amends" remains unnamed and ungendered throughout the poem. In fact, some elements of the poem could lead the reader to believe that there *is* no speaker, or that the speaker is simply part of the natural world.

For example, the scene the speaker describes is at night, and the only people described in the poem are said to be asleep; the setting seems abandoned and quiet. Additionally, it is not a human speaker, but the moonlight that seems to have the most agency and perspective in the poem. Throughout, the reader moves with the moonlight over these various aspects of the landscape, as though viewing the setting from the moonlight's point of view.

At the same time, other aspects of the poem imply a human speaker and a human presence observing the scene. First, the poem arguably opens with a subtle allusion to Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*; the speaker, then, is implicitly a person familiar with this play and its cultural relevance. And while much of the perspective in the poem seems to be aligned with the moon, other details establish a human point of view.

For instance, the speaker can observe how the moonlight looks "on the ground," where it touches "small stones." In other words, the speaker is observing the moonlight on a *human* scale, as a person would be able to see it. Finally, the speaker notes that the moonlight touches the eyelids of the people who are asleep "as if to make amends." This means that the speaker understands the moonlight's actions through a human framework of wrongdoing and reparation.

It could be argued, then, that the speaker of "Amends" is a person observing this nighttime scene but also *imagining* the scene as it would be without active or awake human presence. This perspective gives the poem an almost haunting quality, as the poem is centered not around the individual experience of a human speaker, but the vastness and presence of the moonlight, and implicitly, of the whole natural world.

## SETTING

The setting of "Amends" develops over the course of the poem. At the beginning, the speaker describes a natural scene, in which moonlight touches an apple tree, stones, ocean waves, sand on a beach, and cliffs. As the poem progresses, however, the speaker describes the moonlight moving across a more industrial setting marked by train tracks, a gravel quarry, and a crop-dusting plane. Finally, the moonlight arrives at trailers where people are asleep.

All of these details let the reader know that the poem is set in a contemporary context. It is a setting that could be found in many parts of the United States in the late 20th century.

The setting, then, is both familiar and anonymous; the speaker doesn't name a particular geographical place. Rather, the details of the scene are described as the *moonlight* might see them—simply aspects of a landscape that the moon can move across.

Finally, while the setting the speaker describes can be read *continuously*—one could imagine the sand and cliffs on the coast of California, for example, and then follow the moonlight as it crosses train tracks to a rural setting of the Central Valley—it is also important to note that these disparate settings could also be farther apart. What unifies them is the moonlight, in its ability to move across and touch all of these settings at once.

## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

"Amends" was first published in Adrienne Rich's 1995 collection *Dark Fields of the Republic: Poems 1991-1995*. As the publisher, Norton, wrote of the collection, Rich's poems in this book explore "the heart of democracy and love, and the historical and present endangerment of both."

In keeping with these themes, "Amends" appears in the opening section of the book titled "What Kind of Times Are These." This opening section and the book as a whole examine issues facing contemporary American society and ask the reader to consider issues of responsibility and repair.

The poem can also be understood within the larger literary context of Rich's work. Early in her career, Rich wrote poetry in keeping with the current literary establishment of the time, the Formalist movement of the 1950s. This movement criticized free verse poetry and emphasized the importance of form, including traditional modes of meter, rhyme, and regular stanzas.

However, Rich eventually rejected this establishment and the patriarchal values inherent within it. In her writing, she increasingly began to explore social and political issues, including the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, the Indigenous rights movement, and the feminist movement. She became a leading feminist and lesbian poet and is most well known for her later work that is sharply politically attuned and constantly questions its own assumptions.

In a way, multiple aspects of Rich's work and literary influence are present in "Amends." She continued to retain her training as formalist, having grown up, she once said, "within the circumference of white language and metaphor." "Amends" embodies this sense of form, with its opening allusion to Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and regular quatrains.

At the same time, the poem crucially questions and challenges its *own* form and its own metaphors. Throughout the poem, the speaker alludes to cultural assumptions about nature, and then resists and subverts these assumptions. In doing so, the poem asks the reader to consider the very meaning of these assumptions and metaphors within the context of contemporary life.

Rich's work has had a lasting impact on American literature. Over the course of her life she published two dozen collections of poetry and numerous collections of prose, including essays and cultural criticism. Her refusal to abide by the terms of the literary establishment of her time—and instead to explore formal possibilities, as well as the social and political realities of colonialism, racism, sexism, and homophobia—made it possible for many other writers to explore these subjects as well. Ultimately, her work challenges both writers and readers to consider poems in not only aesthetic, but also moral terms.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Amends" was published in the late 20th century, and this historical context is relevant to the poem and the themes that it explores. In 1962, Rachel Carson had published *Silent Spring*, a work which exposed the harmful effects of the pesticide DDT, and pressed people to consider the impact of industrial society on the natural world. The 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s saw the emergence of the Environmental Movement and the Environmental Justice Movement. Yet despite the gains of these movements, and the awareness they brought to the larger society, industrial practices and contemporary society have continued to impact the environment in destructive ways, leading to the climate crisis of today.

Rich's poem responds to this historical context by asking the reader to consider nature in a new way. Rather than centering the perspective and experiences of a human speaker, the poem instead places the most emphasis on the beauty and movement of the moonlight. In doing so, the poem indirectly reveals the intrinsic vulnerability and fragility of human life. It invites the reader to consider what "amends" might truly mean within this context, and what might be possible if people could form a different relationship with the natural world.

## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Biography of Adrienne Rich — Read about Adrienne Rich's life, poetry, and critical responses to her work in this biographical article from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/adrienne-rich )
- Essay on Adrienne Rich's Collected Poems — Read this article in the New Yorker to learn more about Rich's development as a poet, and her work to constantly challenge her own metaphors. (https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/06/20/adrienne-richs-art-and-activism )
- Audio of Adrienne Rich — Listen to Adrienne Rich read poems from Dark Fields of the Republic (the collection in which "Amends" was published). ( https://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Rich.php )
- The Literary Trust of Adrienne Rich — Learn more about Adrienne Rich's life and work, and read and listen to her poems, at this website run by the poet's literary trust. (https://adriennerich.net)
- More on Dark Fields of the Republic — Read this review of Dark Fields of the Republic in the Los Angeles Times to learn more about the collection in which "Amends" was first published. (https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-

xpm-1996-02-25-bk-39692-story.html )

## LITCHARTS ON OTHER ADRIENNE RICH POEMS

- Aunt Jennifer's Tigers
- Diving into the Wreck

## HOW TO CITE

### MLA

Little, Margaree. "*Amends.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 17 Sep 2020. Web. 16 Oct 2020.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Little, Margaree. "*Amends.*" LitCharts LLC, September 17, 2020. Retrieved October 16, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/adrienne-rich/amends.