

# Enterprise



## SUMMARY

The journey began as a kind of religious trek to a holy place, one that lifted people's spirits and made their problems seem insignificant. The next stage of the journey led to some questions but didn't test the group's resolve. The sun shone down on the pilgrims as if in honor of their fiery anger.

The speaker thought the group was doing well, making lots of observations and taking lots of notes along the way about things such as: the economic activity of the peasants, snakes' and goats' behavior, and three cities where a wise person once taught.

But when people started to argue over how to cross a particular area of desert, one pilgrim, whose writing sounded better than anyone else's, decided to leave the group. A growing shadow loomed over them all.

During another part of the journey, the group was attacked twice and got lost. Some people declared themselves free from the group and left. The speaker attempted to pray, and the group's leader said he could smell the sea nearby.

They stopped noticing anything around them as they continued on their journey. They were a slow-moving group without much hope, not paying any attention to bad omens like thunder. They lacked the basic necessities of life, like soap. Some members of the group were totally destroyed by the experience, while others were just in the process of being destroyed.

When they finally made it to their destination, they barely even knew why they'd come. The journey had made their faces dark and sad, and they realized that nothing they'd done was particularly special or meaningful. They must collect their grace at home.

right things from the getgo. The word "enterprise" means a big project or undertaking and is often used to talk about business ventures. It's strange, then, that the speaker also calls this a "pilgrimage"—a long trek towards a holy site. The spiritual connotations of the word "pilgrimage" imply that the people setting off on this journey are seeking some sort of deep fulfillment, but the earthly connotations of the word "enterprise" suggest that they're looking in the wrong place.

Indeed, as they make their way across the land, the pilgrims get wrapped up in superficial tasks and observations. They take "copious notes" on things that don't really seem to matter: transactions made by "the peasants," the behavior of snakes and goats, and the cities where "a sage" once taught (not the sage's actual *teachings*). Rather than *experiencing* or trying to find a sense of connection with their surroundings, they appear to waste their energy calculating and cataloging material things—on the *appearance* of progress rather than *actual* progress.

This sense that the group's focus is off reappears when "a friend" with the most "stylish prose" decides to leave over a squabble about how to "cross a desert patch." Despite being ostensibly united in their aim—crossing this desert—they get so wrapped up in how to do this that the group splinters. The speaker's mention of the friend's writing *style*, rather than its *substance*, also mirrors the pilgrims' focus on "where a sage taught" rather than *what* that sage taught. In both cases, the pilgrims seem to get distracted from the main thing that a pilgrimage is typically all about: finding meaning and fulfillment. They're too focused on achieving some grand feat that they overlook what matters.

In fact, the further they go the more blinded to their initial purpose they seem to get. Their leader vaguely promises that he can smell the sea—that is, he claims to sense that the destination is close at hand—and this spurs them forward, seemingly enticed by the glory of reaching "the place." Meanwhile the pilgrims "notice[] nothing" about the world they actually inhabit, ignoring bad omens like "thunder" and immediate, basic "needs like soap." Their dreams of epic glory blind them to reality.

And even though they do reach their destination, the pilgrims no longer know "why" they wanted to go there in the first place. They realize that their actions are "neither great nor rare," but rather hollow and meaningless. Now that they've reached their goal, the pilgrims intuitively suspect that the goal was never really the point—and that what it took to get there wasn't worth it.

Read as an [allegory](#) for the journey of life itself, this suggests that such single-minded focus on some lofty end game is



## THEMES



### THE JOURNEY OF LIFE

"Enterprise" can be read as suggesting that, in life, the journey is more important than the destination.

The speaker, part of a group of pilgrims, describes a long and arduous trip that starts with hope and idealism and ends in disillusionment and despair. The poem implies that the pilgrims fail to meaningfully engage with and value the world around them as they make their way across the land, and that this leads to their undoing: [ironically](#), their excitement about the glory of their "enterprise" blinds them to the life directly in front of them.

The poem suggests that these pilgrims aren't focused on the

pointless. In fact, such focus may have led these pilgrims far from the one place they might have found the “grace,” or inner strength and purpose, that they ostensibly sought: home. The journey of life, here, is something deep, personal, and intimate, rather than a vast, epic trek.

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

- Lines 1-30



### IDEALISM VS. REALITY

In one reading, “Enterprise” is a poem that calls for readers to focus on the journey of life itself rather than any specific destination. But it can also be read as a general exploration of the way idealism gets cut down in the face of reality. Though the pilgrims in the poem begin their trek with enthusiasm, their initial vigor proves no match for the trials of the journey itself. They struggle with everything from exhaustion to clashing egos until that they start to doubt whether this “enterprise” was worth undertaking in the first place. The poem thus speaks to the way that even the most noble, idealistic “enterprise” can become worn down by stress, division, and pride.

The poem never reveals the exact nature of the “enterprise” at hand, but it’s clear that it’s something lofty and ambitious. And whether this is a literal religious “pilgrimage” or an [allegory](#) for some other kind of journey, the pilgrims start off with purpose and enthusiasm. Their pilgrimage “exalt[s]”—that is, raises—their minds and makes their “burdens” feel “light.” In other words, the mere thought of this noble endeavor seems to make earthly cares and obstacles melt away—for the pilgrims, and perhaps for those whom this “enterprise” is meant to serve.

This enthusiasm sustains the pilgrims for the “second stage” of the journey, which the speaker does not describe in detail. But the speaker *does* say that, at that time, the “sun beat down to match our rage.” The implication is that this “enterprise” gives the group a fiery idealism, a feeling as though nothing will stand in their way. The “second stage” also doesn’t “test the call”—that is, it doesn’t break the pilgrims’ lofty sense of purpose (or, maybe, they don’t feel the *need* to thoroughly question or investigate that purpose).

But the poem questions whether such intense, pure ideals can be sustained for long, and the group’s enthusiasm quickly proves to be naïve. Members start arguing, and some leave the group (including the writer with the “most stylish prose,” suggesting that there’s been a conflict of egos). They get attacked and run out of critical supplies “like soap,” suggesting that their initial idealism may have distracted them from preparing properly for the demands of this journey.

When the pilgrims finally make it to their destination, they arrive “broken” and “bent,” unsure why they’re even there. The

poem shows how this loss of idealism—perhaps caused, [ironically](#), by the initial, blinding strength of that idealism—wears the group out. Members’ faces “darken” in resignation, and their “deeds” become perfunctory and meaningless. Whether this suggests that idealism always ends in disillusion or that these pilgrims merely failed to fulfill the promise of their ideals is ambiguous. What’s clear, though, is that the energy and enthusiasm that come with hope and idealism can wane over as cold, complicated reality sets in.

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

- Lines 1-30



## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-3

*It started as ...  
... The burdens light.*

The poem starts by describing the beginnings of the “enterprise” of the poem’s title, a complex project with bold intentions. The speaker is part of a group that decides to undertake a pilgrimage. The poem never clarifies the pilgrimage’s purpose or destination, which is part of what opens the poem up to so many [symbolic/allegorical](#) interpretations. Generally speaking, though, a pilgrimage is a long journey to a holy site that facilitates personal, communal, and/or spiritual growth. A pilgrim, it follows, strives for spiritual transformation through travel.

And when this pilgrimage begins, that’s exactly what the speaker and the others seem to want. Their minds become “exalt[ed]”—that is, raised to a happier and nobler state—and problems seem [metaphorically](#) “light” (insignificant) in the context of the greater goal.

Yet, even here, there’s a hint of [irony](#) at play: it shouldn’t be the *decision* to undertake a pilgrimage that really provides spiritual nourishment, but the *journey* itself. Perhaps like life, the journey is as important, or even more so, than the destination. In other words, the pilgrims are excited by the *idea* of pilgrimage but haven’t yet come face to face with its reality.

The full-stop [caesura](#) after “light” signals that this initial optimism may be short-lived, giving the poem a jerky rhythm that goes against the momentum required by a pilgrimage.

### LINES 3-5

*The second stage ...  
... match our rage.*

Although the poem has only just started, the pilgrimage/enterprise enters its “second stage” halfway through the first stanza. As with the “exalt[ed]” atmosphere of the beginning, the

poem doesn't dwell on this "stage" for long. Time is compressed here, and all the reader learns is that questions were asked of the pilgrims—but that these questions were no match for their initial lofty idealism. The "call" towards their end destination remains steadfast, with the [end-stop](#) at the end of this line suggesting strength and purpose.

During this second stage, the sun provides the pilgrims with an [analogy](#) for their sense of determination. It's fiery and relentless—and that's just how they picture themselves to be.

By now, it's clear that the poem's meter is [iambic](#) tetrameter: lines of four iambs, feet with unstressed-stressed syllable pattern. This simple meter gives the line itself a determined, march-like rhythm:

The sun | beat down | to match | our rage.

This line sounds like one strong-willed footstep after the other, capturing the pilgrims' initial mood of optimism and idealism. But the presence of the hot sun also anticipates the moment in stanza three when things start to go wrong.

## LINES 6-10

*We stood it ...  
... sage had taught.*

In the second stanza, the speaker offers some details about the "enterprise." There's an [ironic](#), self-congratulatory tone at work, with the speaker admiring the group's ability to make observations and take "copious notes."

The pilgrims *think* they are being meticulous and wise, but an implicit question hangs in the air around whether writing reams of notes is really the point of undertaking a pilgrimage. The specific things that they choose to take notes about seem a little inconsequential and perhaps even irrelevant.

It's also worth noting how [asyndeton](#) in lines 8-10 ("On things [...] taught.") represents the "copiousness" of the pilgrims' notes. That is, the lack of any conjunctions makes this sound like a list that could go on and on, as if the speaker has made an arbitrary selection of observations from a wide—and equally frivolous—set of possibilities.

For one thing, it's hard to see how things "peasants" bought and sold relate to spiritual growth. This focus on material goods seems to fly in the face of what pilgrimages are all about, in fact: pilgrimages are sometimes associated with the rejection of material values and with spiritual lessons of impoverishment. But the pilgrims observe the peasants almost like scientists recording an experiment, rather than actually *talking* to them and learning something relevant to their mission.

The behavior of snakes and goats here could relate to behaviors or to the direction of travel. Either way, this information again doesn't seem especially relevant to the pilgrims. (It's possible that "snakes" refers [metaphorically](#) to

sneaky, dishonest people—in which case the "way" might refer to learning how to act like snakes, or how to avoid snakes.)

The stanza's final line might be the most telling: the pilgrims note the "three cities" where a wise person taught, but don't go out of their way to learn about this sage's actual teachings. They're more interested, it seems, in observational details than in raising their consciousness.

Though it's not until the next stanza that the speaker starts to describe the group's problems, this stanza subtly hints that the pilgrimage is not quite what it set up to be. The pilgrims, though traveling a long distance, behave more like detached observers than engaged participants. The poem isn't explicit about this, but it's fair to view this section as a critique of the pilgrims' shortcomings. Moreover, the group's initial hope and idealism doesn't seem all that useful without the practicality, pragmatism, and humility to match.

## LINES 11-15

*But when the ...  
... — and grows.*

In the third stanza, things start to unravel for the pilgrims. The happy, and perhaps naive, idealism of the journey's beginning gives way to disagreement and difficulty. Members of the group have different ideas about how to "cross a desert patch." This causes the best writer of the group—the man with "stylish prose"—to leave.

When faced with their first real test, then, the pilgrims fail to find a good solution and, thereby, fail to learn from the experience. They all want to cross the desert, one would assume, but squabbles over how to do so get in the way of actually doing it. This reinforces the idea that there is something superficial about the "enterprise" at hand.

Adding to that sense of superficiality is the fact that, when a man leaves the group, the speaker seems more concerned with having lost his "stylish prose" than the *substance* of that prose—or, indeed, the man himself. It's also worth noting that the speaker doesn't specify what happened to the man. It seems likely that he just left, but it's also possible that something darker happened to him (e.g., the group turned on him).

The loss of this man signals a shift towards [metaphorical](#) darkness for the group. A "shadow falls" on them, suggesting not only fear and future harm but also, perhaps, ignorance—a failure to see that the purpose of the pilgrimage is the journey itself, rather than the endpoint.

This shadow has its own momentum, actively "grow[ing]" as the journey goes on. The [caesura](#) before "and grows" makes that part of the line look like an extra little offshoot from the main sentence, a kind of mutant growth to match the increasing size of the shadow:

A shadow falls on us — and grows.

The full stop [end-stops](#) in lines 14 and 15 ("batch." and "grows.") also create small pockets of ominous silence, further heightening the sense of doom creeping into the poem.

## LINES 16-20

*Another phase was ...  
... he smelt the sea.*

In the fourth stanza), things really take a turn for the worse. The pilgrims are attacked twice and lose their course. This causes desperation in the group, with some people leaving, the speaker trying in vain to pray, and the "leader" insisting that the sea is close—in effect, that their destination is near.

The poem is deliberately short on details, opting not to discuss the identity of the group's attackers. The lack of details, though, only heightens the sense of a loss of control, along with the somewhat passive construction of "Another phase was reached" ("we reached another phase" would sound more bold and purposeful).

Though the poem is only halfway to its end, this is a far cry from the optimistic idealism of the opening—suggesting, perhaps, that such blind faith doesn't prove useful in the long run. It's possible, too, that the singular focus on the end destination prevented the group from being fully prepared for every eventuality, such as being attacked or getting lost.

With a "section" of the group leaving after losing its faith in the enterprise, the speaker tries to recover their own faith through prayer. The *lack of specifics* (readers don't know who or what the speaker is praying to) only makes this act seem more vague, futile, and aimless. The [caesura](#) just before "I tried to pray" causes this sentence to sound frustrated and isolated:

To leave the group. I tried to pray.

The line feels choppy and abrupt. It's as though the poem's rhythm—its flow—is falling apart to match what's happening to the group.

Line 20 is, given the overall context, darkly comic: "Our leader said he smelt the sea." There is something faintly absurd about the disconnect between being a leader and the insistence that the sea is nearby. The [sibilance](#) here in "said," "smelt," and "sea" has a hissing, wave-like quality that supports the idea that sea is close—but what's lacking is any reason *why* the group wants to get to the sea. The pilgrims have become obsessed with reaching their end-point, but they've lost sight of the purpose of the journey.

## LINES 21-25

*We noticed nothing ...  
... some merely bent.*

By the fifth stanza, the pilgrims have almost entirely lost their initial hope and idealism. Now, their traveling feels arbitrary, devoid of purpose, and they fail to engage with their environment along the way.

In fact, such is their stubborn devotion to reaching their end destination that they become numb to their surroundings: they notice "nothing" as they walk, and ignore bad omens like thunder. Their lives become increasingly hard, and they are deprived of basic needs like soap.

All of this might make readers wonder why they keep walking in the first place. With its subtly [ironic](#) tone, the poem suggests that this is not really a true pilgrimage in the sense of a spiritual quest. Or perhaps it once was—but cold, hard reality has taken over. The fact that pilgrims fail to heed warning signs (the thunder, the lack of "common needs") suggests that there was something false or shallow about the lofty idealism of their journey in the first place.

The poem seems to ask why, if the pilgrims weren't in it *for the journey*, they undertook it. As the crowd moves across the land like a wounded animal, the opportunity for any kind of spiritual lesson seems lost. Taken as an [allegory](#) for life, this suggests that living is about *the experience of living*—not attaining some particular end goal.

In line 25, the speaker describes how "Some were broken, some merely bent." [Metaphorically](#) speaking, being broken or being bent are not all that different: everyone's spirit—and physical condition—is cracking under the strain of the enterprise. Some are just further along in the process.

The [repeated](#) "some" has a wearisome, resigned quality, capturing the group's general state of tiredness and disillusionment. And once again, all the [end-stopping](#) throughout this stanza evokes this fatigue, the poem wading through a thick mud of full stops in lines 24 and 25.

## LINES 26-30

*When, finally, we ...  
... to gather grace.*

In the end, there is a strong sense that the entire, epic journey was a waste of time. Stanza 6 deals with the fallout.

The pilgrims have reached "the place," but they no longer know "why" they are there. The "enterprise" thus ends with a feeling of deflation and disillusionment, suggesting that this singular focus on an end goal was misplaced. That is, the pilgrims might have been better off had they valued the journey itself by engaging with the world around them in a meaningful and purposeful way (as opposed to obsessing purely over the destination). The poem here remains intentionally vague, the destination described only as "the place" and thereby denying it much significance.

It's worth re-reading the first stanza and contrasting it with the ending's anticlimax. Whereas the lofty idealism that inspired

the journey made "burdens" seem "light," now the pilgrims' faces have become [metaphorically](#) "darkened." In other words, their initial spark is long gone and failed to serve them well along the way.

While the pilgrimage had seemed like a noble undertaking, now the group's actions are devoid of meaning, "neither great nor rare" (line 29). Taken as an allegory, the poem thus warns against being too idealistic *and* the perils of focusing only an end goal. It's an old cliché that the metaphorical journey of life is more important than the destination, but that seems to be exactly what the poem hammers home at the end.

That said, the final line is strikingly ambiguous:

Home is where we have to gather grace.

It might be that the pilgrims' current location—their journey's destination—is their new home, but it's more likely that the speaker is referring to the home that these pilgrims left behind when they undertook this enterprise. Had they stayed, perhaps they would have found what they sought in this pilgrimage.

The speaker talks of the group's need to "gather grace," but the nature and purpose of that grace are uncertain. That said, "grace" is a word charged with religious significance: it can mean divine favor, forgiveness, strength, virtue, and blessings bestowed by God, among other things. This relates back to the idea that this journey has been a "pilgrimage," or a spiritual trek to a holy place. The [irony](#) of the poem would thus be that the spiritual meaning and fulfillment the group desired could only be found at home.



## SYMBOLS



### THE NATURAL WORLD

As the pilgrims make their way to the destination, they encounter various elements of the natural world. Nature here can be read as representing the difficult, earthly reality of the journey, which butts up against the group's lofty, naive optimism.

In the "second stage" of the trek, for example, the speaker notes how the "sun beat down to match our rage." The pilgrims view the sun, with its fiery, insistent presence in the sky, as a [symbol](#) of *their own* determination and idealism. That is, the way is tough, draining, hot—but that toughness simply speaks to the nobility and strength of the "enterprise" itself.

When the pilgrims arrive at a "desert patch" in the third stanza, their group spirit starts to unravel. The desert—a place devoid of shelter or nourishment—presents a challenge to their early enthusiasm. On an [allegorical](#) level, it might suggest a sudden lack of ideas, a drying up of funding/resources, or any other practical consideration that impedes the progress of this

"enterprise."

It's no wonder, then, that the group is enticed by the smell of the "sea" in the following stanza. Water, here, suggests relief and vital nourishment after this difficult journey through the desert—an answer or resolution to the problems created by the desert. Yet the poem never indicates whether the group actually makes it to the sea; its smell only pushes them forward when there's no actual end in sight.

Finally, the pilgrims ignore the typical symbolism of thunder in the penultimate stanza. Deep down, they seem to *know* the thunder symbolizes something ominous (their own destruction, perhaps—a great storm coming to topple their enterprise), but they are so stubbornly focused on reaching "the place" that they wilfully ignore nature's attempt to warn them of danger ahead.

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

- **Line 5:** "The sun beat down to match our rage."
- **Lines 11-12:** "But when the differences arose / On how to cross a desert patch,"
- **Line 20:** "Our leader said he smelt the sea."
- **Line 23:** "Ignoring what the thunder meant,"



### DARKNESS AND SHADOWS

Darkness and shadows in the poem [symbolize](#) danger, doubt, and despair.

At the beginning of the pilgrimage, the speaker notes how the very idea of the "enterprise" makes people's "burdens light." The pilgrims' problems, personal or otherwise, seem less significant because of their faith in the mission. That lightness also evokes positivity, promise, hope, and faith.

Soon enough, however, this early optimism gives way to reality. After the departure of a key member of the group, the speaker describes how "A shadow falls on us — and grows" (line 15). The shadow represents doubt, uncertainty, and fear—a feeling that all is not right. The darkness of the shadow also speaks, perhaps, to the pilgrims' growing failure to see the purpose of their journey.

Indeed, when they do reach their destination, the pilgrims no longer remember why they sought it out so desperately. The "enterprise" has lost its meaning, leaving some people "broken," some "bent," and everyone's face "darkened" by the experience. This language contrasts sharply with that of the first stanza, where the thought of the pilgrimage raised minds and lifted burdens. Darkness, here, speaks to the crushing effect of the journey and its many disappointments.

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

- **Line 15:** "A shadow falls on us — and grows."

- **Line 28:** "The trip had darkened every face,"



## POETIC DEVICES

### ASYNDETON

The poem uses [asyndeton](#) in the second stanza. Here, the speaker describes how the pilgrims behaved as they made their journey. As they traveled, they made observations and wrote "copious notes":

On things the peasants sold and bought,  
The way of serpents and of goats,  
Three cities where a sage had taught.

The lack of conjunctions here (such as "and") creates a sense that this could be an endless list, that these are just three out of countless items in the pilgrims' "copious notes."

This has a subtle comic effect, painting the pilgrims as more like detached scientific observers than engaged spiritual searchers. They seem more committed to keeping a superficial record of their travels than *learning* something or raising their minds.

#### Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-10:** "On things the peasants sold and bought, / The way of serpents and of goats, / Three cities where a sage had taught."

### CAESURA

For the most part, [caesurae](#) disrupt the flow of the poem, adding abrupt pauses that stop readers—and the pilgrims—in their tracks.

The poem has a relatively strict [meter](#) of [iambic](#) tetrameter (meaning each line has four iambs, poetic feet with a da-DUM rhythm), which makes it move along at a steady pace—until caesurae pop in and essentially tap the brakes for a beat. This tension between momentum and stasis, between forward motion and getting stuck, subtly reflects the pilgrims' own situation: they're on a mission to travel to their destination, but their journey is beset with problems—and they fail to see the value of the journey itself.

In line 3, for example, the caesura is almost comical. The full stop after "light" makes these words about elevating minds and lightening people's problems come to an abrupt halt in the middle of the line, as though crashing into reality:

The burdens **light**. The second stage

Another striking caesura appears in the third stanza, as reality

starts to kick in and disagreements arise between members of the group. The speaker sums this up in line 15:

A shadow falls on us — and grows.

The dash caesura here adds dramatic emphasis to "and grows." In fact, it makes it *look* like a growth, an extra little mutant limb attached to the main sentence. This heightens the feeling that something is going to go wrong.

Later, in line 19, caesura again evokes a kind of start-stop, plodding motion: "To leave the group. I tried to pray." That little full stop captures the sense that everything is falling apart. And the final caesura in the poem, in line 26, evokes the pilgrims' exhaustion:

When, finally, we reached the place,

Those commas surrounding "finally" draw out the line, reflecting the length and difficulty of the pilgrims' journey.

#### Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "light. The"
- **Line 6:** "well, I"
- **Line 15:** "us — and"
- **Line 17:** "attacked, and"
- **Line 19:** "group. I"
- **Line 25:** "broken, some"
- **Line 26:** "When, finally, we"

### END-STOPPED LINE

[End-stops](#) give the poem a jerky, stop-start rhythm. If the poem's flow mirrors the pilgrims' initial, naive idealism, end-stops work like a sudden shock of reality.

At the start, though, the end-stops have a determined, noble quality to them. This is before the pilgrims start to lose their faith, and part of what could be called the idealistic "stage":

Explored but did not test the call.  
The sun beat down to match our rage.

The two end-stops here have an air of defiance—as though the pilgrims' belief in themselves is unshakeable. In truth, though, that belief just hasn't been tested yet (as line 4 admits!). The firm tone created by the end-stopped lines might thus also suggest the pilgrims' rigidity, their failure to meaningfully engage with their mission.

And when things do start to go wrong, end-stops capture the pilgrims' waywardness, confusion, and loss of belief. In the fourth stanza, for example, end-stops disrupt any attempt to build a poetic sense of momentum:

Were twice attacked, and lost our way.  
 [...]
   
To leave the group. I tried to pray.  
 Our leader said he smelt the sea.

That is, each time the poem tries to get going it comes to a halt—much like the pilgrims themselves. The [caesurae](#) in these lines add yet more pauses, evoking the toil of the journey at this point. This effect continues in the following two stanzas as well.

It's also worth noting that every stanza ends with an end-stop. This has an effect on the poem's overall form, making each stanza feel like a separate "stage"—the speaker's own word—along the journey.

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

- **Line 4:** "call."
- **Line 5:** "rage."
- **Line 6:** "thought,"
- **Line 8:** "bought,"
- **Line 9:** "goats,"
- **Line 10:** "taught."
- **Line 12:** "patch,"
- **Line 14:** "batch."
- **Line 15:** "grows."
- **Line 17:** "way."
- **Line 19:** "pray."
- **Line 20:** "sea."
- **Line 21:** "went,"
- **Line 22:** "hope,"
- **Line 23:** "meant,"
- **Line 24:** "soap."
- **Line 25:** "bent."
- **Line 26:** "place,"
- **Line 27:** "there."
- **Line 28:** "face,"
- **Line 29:** "rare."
- **Line 30:** "grace."

## IRONY

Ezekiel's poems are often couched in [irony](#)—particularly those in the collection in which this poem appears. Here, that irony derives mostly from the pilgrims' expectations vs. their reality.

For example, a "pilgrimage" is a journey meant to bolster people's faith, so the fact that this one leaves the pilgrims desolate and disillusioned is deeply ironic. In the beginning, the group believes that this pilgrimage is all about "Exalting minds and making all / The burdens light" (lines 2-3). In other words, the pilgrims set off on this journey to lift up people's consciousness and make their problems seem less significant or burdensome.

It's ironic, then, that the journey has the opposite effect in the

end: instead of lightening burdens, it "darken[s] every face," and instead of making people feel more fulfilled and whole (as pilgrimages are meant to do), it leaves them bent and broken.

Also note how it seems to be the pilgrims' singular focus on their enterprise, on their goal, that destroys that goal. They're so focused on reaching "the place" that they ignore the things they need to survive as human beings—"common needs like soap." They fail to recognize bad omens like thunder, and the group begins to fracture over disagreements like "how to cross a desert patch" (despite the fact that they all have the same goal of crossing it!).

The *ultimate* irony, though, is that, once they finally arrive at "the place," the pilgrims no longer know why they wanted so desperately to reach this destination:

When, finally, we reached the place,  
 We hardly knew why we were there.

There is a difficult lesson here that suggests that the end-goal never really had any value in and of itself. In desperately trying to reach their goal, the goal itself has lost all meaning.

#### Where Irony appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-30

## REPETITION

There are two subtle instances of [repetition](#) in the poem. The first appears in the opening stanza, which describes the pilgrims' initial enthusiasm for the "enterprise":

The burdens light. The second stage  
 [...]
   
The sun beat down to match our rage.

The repeated "the" at the start of each sentence above is more specifically [anaphora](#). It has the effect of creating little "stages," hinting at how the speaker comes to view the journey. There is also something quietly determined about the *sound* of the repetition, which matches the pilgrims' early sense of hope and idealism.

Contrast this with the repetition that appears near the end, in line 25:

Some were broken, some merely bent.

Both sets of people—"broken" and "bent"—are in a bad way. The speaker's division of them into two groups makes them seem extra weary and beaten down, the repetition making the line sound tired and resigned.

**Where Repetition appears in the poem:**

- **Line 3:** "The"
- **Line 5:** "The"
- **Line 25:** "Some," "some"

**ALLITERATION**

The poem uses subtle [alliteration](#) to elevate its language, adding to the poem's intensity and music in certain moments.

For example, in the first stanza, the alliteration of the /m/ sound in "minds" and "making" adds lyricism to the line. The speaker is talking about how this "enterprise" seems to lighten people's burdens and lift up their consciousness—grand, lofty ideas that get emphasized through the more explicitly poetic language at this moment.

Alliteration similarly adds intensity in line 21, with the double /n/ of "noticed nothing" making the phrase sound all the more emphatic. The shared /b/ of "broken" and "bent" just a few lines later, meanwhile, seems to suggest that there's no major difference between these states—that those who are "merely bent" are just a few steps (a few sounds) away from being totally "broken."

The poem also ends with clear alliteration, the hard /g/ sounds of "gather grace" making this mysterious final phrase linger in the reader's ear.

**Where Alliteration appears in the poem:**

- **Line 2:** "minds," "making"
- **Line 3:** "second stage"
- **Line 10:** "cities," "sage"
- **Line 14:** "best," "batch"
- **Lines 16-17:** "when we / Were twice attacked"
- **Line 17:** "way"
- **Line 18:** "claimed," "liberty"
- **Line 19:** "leave"
- **Line 20:** "said," "smelt," "sea"
- **Line 21:** "noticed nothing," "we went"
- **Line 25:** "broken," "bent"
- **Line 27:** "We," "why we were"
- **Line 29:** "neither," "nor"
- **Line 30:** "where we," "gather grace"

**Where appears in the poem:****SIBILANCE**

There's one striking moment of [sibilance](#) in the poem. This is in the fourth stanza, when the "enterprise" starts going badly, with some members trying to separate from the main group. Line 20 offers up a comic, somewhat desperate moment:

Our leader said he smelt the sea.

This sibilance, which is also [alliterative](#), intentionally evokes the sound of the sea. Think about the hissing sound of the waves as they reach the shore! It's an [ironic](#) moment, in that readers get the sense that this leader doesn't actually know where they are. The moment suggests that the group is lost, rather than on a well-plotted course.

**Where Sibilance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 20:** "said," "smelt," "sea"

**VOCABULARY**

**Pilgrimage** (Line 1) - A long journey over a great distance to a holy site, often with the express aim of personal/spiritual growth.

**Exalting** (Line 2) - Raising, boosting, advancing.

**Burdens** (Line 3) - This might refer to physical possessions and/or problems.

**Stood** (Line 6) - Put up with/tolerated.

**Copious** (Line 7) - Abundant and wide-ranging.

**Sage** (Line 10) - A wise person.

**Stragglng** (Line 22) - Slow-moving, weary, and unkempt.

**FORM, METER, & RHYME****FORM**

"Enterprise" has 30 lines, broken into six stanzas of five lines apiece (technically known as quintains). It also sits somewhere between a dramatic monologue—the reader only hears one perspective—and a narrative poem, in that it tells a chronological story.

One way to think of the different stanzas is as different stages of the journey. The speaker talks of the "enterprise" with terms like "stage" (line 3) and "phase" (line 16), and this is reflected in the form itself. Each stanza introduces the next part of the story, and, like little chapters, each ends with a full stop ([end-stop](#)). As a result, the poem feels very self-contained and matter-of-fact.

**METER**

The poem uses a pretty steady [iambic](#) tetrameter throughout: four iambs, feet with an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern, per line. Here is line 1 as a typical example of this meter at work:

It started as a pilgrimage



The choice of meter gives the poem a march-like momentum, that fits with the story of a pilgrimage (which is, to put it crudely, a really long walk!). Try repeatedly reading the line above out loud and notice how dependable and purposeful the rhythm becomes.

But the poem prevents *too much* the meter from generating too much forward motion—this is, after all, about a pilgrimage that goes wrong. [Caesurae](#) and [end-stops](#) work against the meter, creating tense, difficult silences (as in line 19: "[...]To leave the group. I tried to pray").

Metrical variation also disrupts the poem's flow, like this example from line 7:

Observed and put down copious notes

There are different ways of scanning this line, but it's definitely awkward and has extra syllables to match with the "copious[ness]" of the pilgrims' note-taking.

The last line also features a major variation:

Home is where we have to gather grace.

There is an extra syllable at the start of this line to show that the pilgrims still face difficulty. This extra stress makes the end feel weighty and resigned, completely undoing the earlier momentum of the iambic tetrameter.

## RHYME SCHEME

"Enterprise" has a strict [rhyme scheme](#) throughout. Each five-line stanza runs ABABA (then CDCDC/EFEFE and so on):

[...] pilgrimage A  
 [...] all B  
 [...] stage A  
 [...] call. B  
 [...] rage. A

The main effect of the rhyme is dependability. That is, the rhyme scheme is stubborn and unchanging, mirroring the attitude of the pilgrims themselves. It combines with the (mostly) steady [iambic](#) tetrameter to give a sense of ongoing, forward motion (occasionally disrupted by [end-stops](#), [caesurae](#), and metrical variation). It drives ceaselessly towards its end point, similarly to how the pilgrims are focused on their destination—as opposed to the experiences *along* the journey. In having an imbalance of rhymes—three of one set and a pair of the other in each stanza—the scheme also suggests that something is slightly off.



## SPEAKER

The speaker is part of a group of pilgrims on an unspecified mission. Speaking from a first-person perspective throughout, the speaker appears to be heavily invested in the journey and charts it from its beginning to its end.

In this way, the speaker displays the same traits as others in the group—the desire to observe and record what happens. But the speaker also notably omits any sense of the journey's *purpose*, perhaps mirroring the general attitude of those partaking in the "enterprise."

In line 19, for example, the speaker says "I tried to pray." But the nature of this prayer—for what, and to whom—goes unsaid. The speaker, then, though able to acknowledge that the "enterprise" has in some sense failed (as in line 27's "We hardly knew why we were there"), also appears to remain committed to it in one form or another.



## SETTING

"Enterprise" is a narrative account of a pilgrimage that compresses seemingly long stretches of time into a short space. The first two stages of the "enterprise," for example, occur in the first stanza. After their initial optimism, the pilgrims find their journey fraught with difficulty.

The poem notably lacks specifics, perhaps in order to make it more universal, a subtly cautionary tale against the pure focus on an end destination—as opposed to embracing experience along the way. That said, the speaker does offer some details about the environment in which the pilgrimage takes place. There is a hot sun, a desert, serpents, goats, and a sea—but that's not enough to pin down where in the world this takes place.

The last line is especially ambiguous in terms of setting: "Home is where we have to gather grace." The pilgrims have reached their destination, but it's not clear whether home is where they started or finished up. This speaks to the group's general confusion and, perhaps, to the naivety of their initial enthusiasm for the trip.



## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

Nissim Ezekiel (1924 to 2004) was an Indian poet and playwright. Both his father and mother were educators, and Ezekiel himself taught in both India and England. He is considered a key figure in postcolonial Indian literature—that is, work that followed, and responded to, nearly 200 years of British rule in India. With that in mind, scholars typically group Ezekiel's writing with poets like Dom Moraes, Kamala Das,

Jayanta Mahapatra, and A.K. Ramanujan.

Ezekiel was heavily influenced by earlier English-language writers, and in particular by Modernists like W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Ezra Pound. This poem was first published in *The Unfinished Man* (1960), which takes its title from Yeats's "[A Dialogue of Self and Soul](#)." Yeats's tone, if not his content, can be detected in this poem's tight [meter](#) and regular [rhyme scheme](#).

When compared to other poems in the same collection, "Enterprise" shares a sense of existential angst—a search for meaning that doesn't quite bear fruit. Alongside poems like "[Night of the Scorpion](#)," "Enterprise" is frequently taught on courses that explore the intersection between English and Indian literature.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Ezekiel was living in India at the time "Enterprise" was written, having earlier traveled to England for his studies. Indian independence had been won in 1947, and the following years saw many writers trying to make sense of this new independent identity within the context of considerable British influence.

By the 1950s, India's direction was uncertain: Mahatma Gandhi, the pacifist figurehead of the Indian independence movement, had been assassinated in 1948. Competing visions for India's future created political tension, though the situation became relatively stable as the decade drew on and new Indian institutions attempted to fill gaps left by the withdrawal of the British administration.

Ezekiel's poetry of this era, however, doesn't offer much in the way of specific historical perspectives. The "enterprise" in question need not be specific to India (though it can be read as an [allegory](#) for some of the difficulties of post-independence existence); instead, it might speak to the human condition in general. The search for meaning, identity, and community—and the obstacles along the way—is a theme that spans human history.

Though considered one of the fathers of post-independence Indian English verse, Ezekiel's writing is not strictly tied to its

country of origin either. To that end, it's worth noting that Ezekiel came from a small Jewish community based in Mumbai, descended from oil-pressers who settled in India around 150 BCE. Pilgrimages have long been an important component of the Jewish faith.



## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- "[India's Most Famous Jewish Poet](#)" — An article in Tablet magazine about Ezekiel's relationship to India, Britain, and Judaism. (<https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters/articles/indias-most-famous-jewish-poet>)
- "[What Is a Pilgrimage?](#)" — Learn more about the kind of journey referenced in the poem. (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/pilgrimage-religion>)
- "[More Poems by Nissim Ezekiel](#)" — A selection of Ezekiel's work, including the well-known "Night of the Scorpion." (<https://www.poemhunter.com/nissim-ezekiel/>)
- "[Ezekiel's Obituary](#)" — An article discussing the poet's life and work. (<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2004/mar/09/guardianobituaries.india>)



## HOW TO CITE

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