It Is a Beauteous Evening, Calm and Free

POEM TEXT

It is a beauteous evening, calm and free,
The holy time is quiet as a Nun
Breathless with adoration; the broad sun
Is sinking down in its tranquility;
The gentleness of heaven broods o'er the Sea;
Listen! the mighty Being is awake,
And doth with his eternal motion make
A sound like thunder—everlastingly.
Dear child! dear Girl! that walkest with me here,
If thou appear untouched by solemn thought,
Thy nature is not therefore less divine:
Thou liest in Abraham's bosom all the year;
And worshipp'st at the Temple's inner shrine,
God being with thee when we know it not.

SUMMARY

It's a beautiful, peaceful, leisurely night. The hour of evening prayer services is as hushed as a nun whose love of God takes her breath away. The giant sun is setting calmly. Heaven (the sky or God) seems to watch tenderly over the ocean. Pay attention: God is at work here, and his movements make an eternal, thundering sound (i.e., the sound of the sea). Oh, beloved little girl walking beside me: if you don't seem awestruck in this setting, it doesn't mean you're any less spiritual by nature. It's just that you feel divine comfort all the time, and (as a child) have special access to the holiest experiences; you feel God's presence even when we adults aren't aware of it.

THEMES

THE HOLINESS OF NATURE

The speaker of "It Is a Beauteous Evening, Calm and Free" celebrates the majestic, even holy beauty of the natural world. Out for a walk at sunset, the speaker describes the evening's beauty in reverent terms, comparing its quiet to that of an awestruck "Nun" and sensing the presence of "the mighty Being" (that is, God) behind the vast sky and sea. The poem urges an appreciation for the beauty and power of nature, and also for the divine "Being" that makes such beauty possible.

As the poem's opening line reveals, the speaker is struck by the world's peace and quiet during an evening stroll by the sea. The night is "beauteous" and "calm," the sun "sinking down" over the horizon in utter "tranquility" as the sky hangs gently over the ocean. The speaker compares this "holy time" of day (a reference to evening vespers/prayers) to "a Nun / Breathless with adoration." In other words, it's so quiet, it's as though the world itself is holding its breath out of respect for nature's beauty, just a nun is made breathless by her love for God.

The speaker's descriptions of nature are, in fact, filled with religious imagery that links the beauty of the evening, and of nature more generally, to God (and thus presents this beauty as worthy of reverence). For example, the speaker calls the sky above the ocean the "gentleness of heaven," suggesting that it's the place where God calmly watches over the world. The thunderous sound of the ocean, meanwhile, is the "eternal motion" of "the mighty Being." That is, God is the one making the waves move and is also the powerful "mover" and shaker behind all things. Overall, the speaker's language portrays the natural world as a divine creation capable of admiring its own handiwork.

Struck by this spectacle, the speaker encourages greater awareness of, and appreciation for, both nature and the divine spirit behind it. The speaker suddenly tells a companion to "Listen!"—a command that turns out to be addressed to the speaker's daughter, but initially seems to be addressed to the reader. On one level, it directs the daughter's (and reader's) attention to the "thunder"-like sound of the sea. On another, it urges the reader to appreciate natural beauty as an *expression* of God's power—to pay attention to the work of "the mighty Being."

The speaker also emphasizes the "divine" element present in the girl's own "nature." This language implies that human beings are themselves a part of nature and thus part of the divine. As such, the poem implies that people should tune in more closely to both.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

CHILDHOOD AND FAITH

Toward the end of "It Is a Beauteous Evening, Calm and Free," the speaker addresses a "Dear child" (representing Wordsworth's young daughter). When she doesn't seem especially awestruck by the evening's beauty, the speaker reasons that this is because, for children, feeling close

to God is an everyday occurrence. That is, kids maintain a natural sense of faith and wonder at all times, so they don't necessarily react with solemn awe to what adults would consider sacred moments. At the same time, the speaker believes that children feel God's presence in moments that might not seem especially sacred to adults. Implicitly, then, the speaker's awe during this beautiful sunset is a *rediscovery* of what children feel all the time.

The speaker notes that the young girl doesn't seem to appreciate this "holy" evening as much as the speaker does, but insists that this is only a deceptive outward appearance. To the speaker, the fact that she seems "untouched by solemn thought" during this sunset doesn't mean her "nature" is any "less divine" than the speaker's own. That is, her outward lack of reverence doesn't mean she's any less pious or *capable* of reverence.

In fact, the speaker claims, children are the *most* holy and reverent of God's creatures and have a kind of access to a divinity that adults have lost. The speaker believes that this child (along with children in general) lies in "Abraham's bosom all the year": that is, she's perpetually in God's presence. (Abraham is a central patriarch and prophet in the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim faiths; the "bosom of Abraham" usually means a place of comfort in the afterlife, but here it suggests the comforting presence of God in one's regular life.) Her childlike faith and wonder are a constant. Moreover, she has special, direct access to God and the sacred, and experiences God's presence "when we [adults] know it not."

Thus, the reverence that the speaker feels (and wants to share with the reader) during the "beauteous evening" represents a kind of tuning back into the wavelength that kids are always on. The girl may not seem *especially* full of faith and wonder now, but that's only because she's full of faith and wonder all the time—including in moments when it's much harder for adults to feel these things.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 9-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

It is a beauteous evening, calm and free,
The holy time is quiet as a Nun
Breathless with adoration; the broad sun
Is sinking down in its tranquility;

Lines 1-4 describe the poem's setting: a calm, beautiful evening, complete with a lovely sunset. (As lines 5-8 will reveal, the speaker is observing this sunset on the coast and might be walking along a beach.) The description emphasizes the speaker's feelings of peace and reverence:

It is a beauteous evening, calm and free,
The holy time is quiet as a Nun
Breathless with adoration; the broad sun
Is sinking down in its tranquility;

"Beauteous" is a synonym for "beautiful"—a grand, old-fashioned word that captures some of the grandeur of the scene itself. "The holy time," meanwhile, refers to the time of evening worship in some Christian denominations (i.e., around sunset).

A simile in lines 2-3 then compares the "quiet" of this hour to "a Nun / Breathless with adoration." In other words, the atmosphere is so windless and peaceful, it's like a religious woman whose worshipful love has taken her breath away.

This personification of the "holy time" can be read as a projection of the speaker's own feelings; after all, it's the speaker who's entranced by the beauty of the evening. The setting sun looks "broad" and "tranquil[]" as it "sink[s]" in the sky, again reflecting the calm, expansive mood of the speaker.

These are the first four lines of a sonnet, and they follow the ABBA rhyme pattern of an Italian/Petrarchan sonnet (whose first eight lines conventionally rhyme ABBAABBA; note that the next four lines will depart from this scheme slightly).

Like all traditional sonnets, this one has 14 lines and is written in iambic pentameter (meaning each line has five iambs, poetic feet with an unstressed-**stressed** syllable pattern). Its rhythmic variations on this meter often have an expressive effect: for example, iambic lines start with an unstressed syllable, but line 3 actualy begins with a **stressed** syllable: "**Breath**less." Combined with the enjambment over the line break ("a **Nun** / **Breathless** with adoration"), this effect places extra emphasis on "Breathless," making the word sound like an impassioned release of emotion.

LINES 5-8

The gentleness of heaven broods o'er the Sea;
Listen! the mighty Being is awake,
And doth with his eternal motion make
A sound like thunder—everlastingly.

In lines 5-8, the speaker continues describing their beautiful surroundings, this time pointing out the "Sea," the mild sky, and the sound of crashing waves. If this setting isn't a beach, it's *near* a beach. In keeping with the worshipful mood of the opening lines, the speaker imagines the sound of the sea in quasi-religious terms:

The gentleness of heaven broods o'er the Sea;
Listen! the mighty Being is awake,
And doth with his eternal motion make
A sound like thunder—everlastingly.

"The gentleness of heaven" could refer simply to the calm sky, which seems to "brood[] o'er," or watch over, the waves below. But the word choice also suggests a religious vision of Heaven, in which God watches over the world from a perch in the clouds. In fact, the next line directs the listener's attention—"Listen!"—to "the mighty Being" at work behind the scenes of this beautiful evening. This "Being" must be God, or at least *some* sort of god (Wordsworth's spiritual language and ideas often veer away from traditional doctrine).

According to the speaker, it's the "eternal motion" of this "Being" that makes the "sound like thunder" roaring around them. That sound is the sound of the "Sea," so the speaker seems to be imagining that God's movements are orchestrating the crash of waves—and, by extension, creating and sustaining the whole surrounding scene. (Similar language appears in Wordsworth's famous "Tintern Abbey" poem, which imagines God, or some equivalent power, as a "motion and a spirit" that "rolls through all things.")

Notice how the strong alliteration in "motion make" (line 7) helps evoke the resonant "thunder" of the sea. After a dramatic caesura marked by a dash ("thunder—"), the speaker adds that God makes this thunderous sound "everlastingly." In other words, God, the sea, and nature go on forever.

Speaking of dramatic punctuation, the speaker's command to "Listen" (line 6) is followed by an urgent exclamation point. But who is the speaker commanding? Line 9 will reveal that the speaker is addressing a "dear Girl," who's walking alongside them and is most likely the speaker's daughter. At this point in the poem, however, the word "Listen!" seems to be directed more at the *reader*. It's as though the poem is instructing its audience to pay close attention, not only to the majesty of the scene it's describing but to the divine power behind it.

LINES 9-11

Dear child! dear Girl! that walkest with me here,
If thou appear untouched by solemn thought,
Thy nature is not therefore less divine:

Lines 9-11 suddenly introduce the person the poem has been addressing: a "Dear child! dear Girl!" who appears to be the speaker's daughter. (Wordsworth based the poem on an actual seaside walk he took with his daughter Caroline.) Previously, the only clue that the speaker has company was the "Listen!" in line 6. Here, again, the exclamation points—and the dramatic caesuras they create—convey the speaker's excitement. They also convey warmth and affection toward the girl.

The speaker indicates that this "dear Girl" is "walk[ing] with me here": that is, on or near the beach. The speaker addresses her using the pronouns "thou," "thee," and "thy": archaic versions of the second-person singular pronouns "you" and "your." These pronouns were already becoming obsolete in English by the time Wordsworth wrote, but they were still used in some elevated and formal writing, including poetry.

The speaker acknowledges that the girl doesn't seem "solemn[ly]" awed by the "beauteous evening." Maybe her mood is carefree and lighthearted, or maybe it's just detached. In any case, the speaker wants to make clear that they don't hold it against her:

> If thou appear untouched by solemn thought,
> Thy nature is not therefore less divine:

In other words: *Even if you don't seem inspired (by this holy scene), it doesn't mean you're any less spiritual.* The speaker indicates, in fact, that her "nature" *is* "divine": that she has some kind of innate spirituality or connection with God. The following lines will expand on this idea.

LINES 12-14

Thou liest in Abraham's bosom all the year;
And worshipp'st at the Temple's inner shrine,
God being with thee when we know it not.

The last lines of the poem round out the speaker's reflections on the girl's spirituality. Having noted that she doesn't look especially awed by this beautiful, "holy" scene, the speaker suggests that this is because her youthful spirituality is a constant. She *always* feels God's presence, so she's not bowled over right *now*.

Lines 12-13 express this idea through a pair of allusions (examined in depth in the Poetic Devices section of this guide):

> Thou liest in Abraham's bosom all the year;
> And worshipp'st at the Temple's inner shrine,

"Abraham's bosom" is a Judeo-Christian term for a place of comfort in the afterlife; here, the speaker suggests that the girl feels God's comfort in her ordinary life, all the time. "The Temple's inner shrine" refers to an especially sacred site in the Judeo-Christian tradition, accessible only to the highest priests, and only during certain ceremonies.

The speaker suggests that, metaphorically, the child has access to this special sanctuary; that is, she has the highest and closest possible connection with God. In fact, the speaker adds, "God [is] with thee when we know it not": the child experiences the presence of the "divine" even when adults ("we") don't feel it at all.

These last observations help tie the two parts of the sonnet together, making the "turn" in line 9 (the moment in a sonnet when the speaker switches gears) seem less sharp. The speaker has spent the first eight lines describing how reverent the "beauteous evening" makes them feel. But now the speaker suggests that the "Girl"—thanks to her own personality and/or the fact that she's a child, with childlike faith and wonder—feels this same kind of reverence *all the time*, even when the world doesn't look beautiful. She may not be a poet, but her

spirituality is that much more impressive.

The assonance and internal rhyme in the last line ("being"/"thee"/"we") add an extra touch of musicality to this melodious poem. They also help highlight the crucial contrast between "thee" (the girl) and "we" (grown-ups). God is with *you*, the speaker declares, even when *we* are none the wiser.

POETIC DEVICES

PERSONIFICATION

The poem uses personification to make its "beauteous evening" more vivid to the reader. This device first appears as part of the simile in lines 2-3:

> The holy time is quiet as a Nun
> Breathless with adoration;

The speaker imagines the sunset hour—a.k.a. "the holy time," the time of evening prayer services in some Christian traditions—as a nun whose sheer love of God/creation has taken her breath away. In other words, this peaceful hour of the day seems to maintain a reverent hush. Of course, this personification is a projection of the speaker's *own* feelings onto the surrounding scene. It's the speaker who feels a reverent "adoration" for this "beauteous evening"—hence the poem!

Line 5 also uses a kind of personification:

> The gentleness of heaven broods o'er the Sea;

One meaning of "heaven" here is "sky," so the speaker is imagining the peaceful sky as a gentle spirit watching ("brood[ing]") over the ocean. At the same time, the line invokes the Christian "heaven"—the home of God—so it also implies, more specifically, that God is watching over the waters. (This line sets up the description in lines 6-8, which further implies that God's "eternal motion" produces the thundering sound of the waves.)

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "The holy time is quiet as a Nun / Breathless with adoration;"
- **Line 5:** "The gentleness of heaven broods o'er the Sea;"

SIMILE

The poem illustrates its setting and atmosphere with the help of two similes. The first, in lines 2-3, is also an example of personification:

> The holy time is quiet as a Nun
> Breathless with adoration;

Again, this simile compares the quiet sunset hour to a "Nun" (woman in a religious order) maintaining a reverent hush of "adoration." The adjective "Breathless" implies that there's no wind—the atmosphere itself seems to be holding its breath—while evoking the kind of love and awe that takes your breath away.

Later, lines 6-8 compare the booming of the ocean waves (produced by God's "eternal motion") to thunder:

> Listen! the mighty Being is awake,
> And doth with his eternal motion make
> A sound like thunder—everlastingly.

Notice that these lines don't *mention* the waves, though they directly follow the mention of the "Sea" in line 5. The reader has to put it all together: "the mighty Being" is God; "his eternal motion" is his power working in nature; the "sound like thunder" is the sound of the "Sea," which the speaker is asking the "Dear child" (line 9) to "Listen" to. It's conventional to compare both the crashing of waves and the power of God to thunder, but the unusual, indirect phrasing helps make the comparison fresh.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "The holy time is quiet as a Nun / Breathless with adoration;"
- **Lines 6-8:** "the mighty Being is awake, / And doth with his eternal motion make / A sound like thunder—everlastingly."

ALLITERATION

Alliteration adds a few musical touches to this sonnet (a song-like form that derives from the Italian word *sonetto*, meaning "little song"), and contributes to the poem's meaning as well.

Take two examples from the sonnet's *octave*, or first eight lines. Lines 3-4 bristle with /br/ and /s/ alliteration:

> Breathless with adoration; the broad sun
> Is sinking down [...]

There's some strong /d/ consonance here as well ("adoration"/"broad"/"down"). All these repeating consonants create a lush sound that matches the lush sunset imagery. It's as though the speaker is lingering over this beautiful scene and inviting the reader to do the same.

In line 7, meanwhile, /m/ alliteration creates a reverberating effect, like the "thunder[ous]" sound described in the next line:

> And doth with his eternal motion make

A sound like thunder—everlastingly.

The enjambment after "make" adds a bit of extra emphasis to the alliterative phrase, causing it to resonate even more.

There's some alliteration in the later lines of the poem, too: "walkest with" (line 9), "Thy"/"therefore" and "nature"/"not" (line 11). Some of these alliterative syllables aren't metrically stressed, so the alliteration is subtler, but it still adds to the musicality of the poem.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "Breathless," "broad," "sun"
- **Line 4:** "sinking"
- **Line 7:** "motion make"
- **Line 9:** "walkest with"
- **Line 11:** "Thy," "nature," "not," "therefore"

ASSONANCE

The poem is full of lush assonance that adds intensity and emphasis to its descriptions of the natural world, particularly in the first five lines. Listen to the long /ee/ and /i/ sounds in lines 1-2, for example:

> It is a beauteous evening, calm and free,
> The holy time is quiet as a Nun [...]

These long, chiming vowel sounds help make the "evening" sound beautiful and expansive. Lines 4-5, meanwhile, are filled with short /ih/ and /eh/ sounds:

> Is sinking down in its tranquility;
> The gentleness of heaven broods o'er the Sea;

Again, these lines have a soft, chiming musicality (there's even an internal rhyme of sorts between "sinking" and "in") that matches the loveliness of this ocean sunset.

Internal rhyme returns in lines 9-10, as the speaker affectionately addresses their daughter:

> Dear child! dear Girl! that walkest with me here,
> If thou appear [...]

And here it is in the affectionate, admiring final line:

> God being with thee when we know it not.

The gentle chiming of these /-ear/ and /-ee/ sounds—layered on top of the poem's end rhymes—seems to suit the speaker's address to a child. (Children's poetry, after all, is full of playful rhyming!) The rhyme between "thee" and "we" also helps draw out a contrast: the speaker means that God is with *thee* (you, the daughter) when *we* (grown-ups) aren't even aware of it.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "evening," "free"
- **Line 2:** "time," "quiet"
- **Line 4:** "Is sinking," "in its tranquility"
- **Line 5:** "gentleness," "heaven"
- **Line 9:** "Dear," "dear," "here"
- **Line 10:** "appear"
- **Line 14:** "being," "thee," "we"

ALLUSION

While the poem as a whole draws on Christian imagery, lines 12-13 make two specific allusions:

> Thou liest in Abraham's bosom all the year;
> And worshipp'st at the Temple's inner shrine,

The reference to "Abraham's bosom" strays from the usual meaning of the term, and illustrates how Wordsworth tends to adapt religious vocabulary to his own spiritual vision. Typically, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, "the bosom of Abraham" refers to the home of virtuous souls in the afterlife. (Abraham is an important patriarch and prophet in the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim faiths, so closeness to Abraham is basically closeness to God.)

Here, however, the term refers to the comforting presence of God in *life*, not the afterlife. The speaker is effectively saying that the daughter ("Thou") carries a kind of heaven with her all the time ("year"-round). The speaker may be praising the daughter's spirituality in particular, but this sentiment also aligns with Wordsworth's belief that children, in general, have a special connection to God because they've recently *come* from Heaven. (See the Context section of this guide for more.)

In line 13, "the Temple's inner shrine" probably alludes to the Holy of Holies: the inner sanctuary of the Tabernacle (a.k.a. Solomon's Temple or the Temple in Jerusalem). This is considered the most sacred site in Judaism; before the Temple's destruction, it was accessible only once a year, on Yom Kippur, to the High Priest of Israel. Some sects of Christianity identify their own versions of the Holy of Holies. Here, again, the allusion implies that the daughter has a close connection to God or a special spiritual authority, perhaps simply by virtue of being a child.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 12-13:** "Thou liest in Abraham's bosom all the year; / And worshipp'st at the Temple's inner shrine,"

ENJAMBMENT

The poem contains just three enjambments, the first of which is the most emphatic. Lines 2-3 enjamb the word "Breathless" over the line break:

> The holy time is quiet as a Nun
> Breathless with adoration;

Combined with an unexpected (metrically irregular) stress on the first syllable of the line—"Breathless"—this enjambment creates a strong emphasis that sounds like a passionate burst of "adoration."

Line 3 then ends with another enjambment:

> [...] the broad sun
> Is sinking down in its tranquility;

Enjambment tends to emphasize what comes directly before the line break, directly after, or both. Here, it places extra weight on line 3's closing spondee (metrical foot consisting of two stressed syllables), further accentuating the phrase "broad sun." This, in turn, helps make the sun sound heavy and imposing as it "sink[s]" through the sky.

A final enjambment occurs at the end of line 7:

> And doth with his eternal motion make
> A sound like thunder—everlastingly.

This one isn't quite as dramatic, partly because these lines are more metrically regular. Still, the enjambment adds emphasis to the phrase "motion make," which is already accentuated by alliteration, so it helps evoke the resonant "thunder" being described.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "Nun / Breathless"
- **Lines 3-4:** "sun / Is"
- **Lines 7-8:** "make / A"

CAESURA

The poem contains several dramatic caesuras, which help express its mood of wonder and excitement. The first caesura occurs in the first line:

> It is a beauteous evening, calm and free,

Though not as emphatic as some of the later pauses, this comma rounds off the first phrase—"It is a beauteous evening"—so that it could function as a standalone statement. This first statement establishes the subject of the poem: a lovely, inspiring evening. And in adding a brief pause so early in the poem, it creates the sense that this speaker is in no rush.

The semicolon in line 3 makes for a weightier pause:

> The holy time is quiet as a Nun
> Breathless with adoration; the broad sun [...]

The pause seems slightly extended because it's preceded *and* followed by an unstressed syllable: ("adoration; the"). It's as if this line about "Breathless[ness]" has briefly run out of breath, and has to recover before continuing.

The caesura in line 6 is the first of three marked by exclamation points; the other two are in line 9. These express excitement or strong emotion:

> Listen! the mighty Being is awake,
> [...]
> Dear child! dear Girl! that walkest with me here,

The exclamation point after "Listen!" suggests the speaker's joy in this beautiful natural setting, as well as their impassioned desire to draw the child's (and reader's) attention to the "mighty Being" behind it all. Specifically, the speaker is telling the child (and reader) to listen to the ocean, whose thunderous sound seems to come from God. The exclamation points after "Dear child" and "dear Girl" also convey excitement, but with affection mixed in. (It's implied that the child is the speaker's daughter.)

Finally, the caesura in line 8 is especially noticeable because, grammatically speaking, it doesn't need to be there. The poet *chooses* to insert a pause and mark it with a dramatic dash:

> And doth with his eternal motion make
> A sound like thunder—everlastingly.

This pause places special weight on "everlastingly," emphasizing that the sound of the ocean, and the workings of God, will go on for all eternity.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "evening, calm"
- **Line 3:** "adoration; the"
- **Line 6:** "Listen! the"
- **Line 8:** "thunder—everlastingly"
- **Line 9:** "child! dear Girl! that"

VOCABULARY

Beauteous (Line 1) - Beautiful.

Holy time (Line 2) - Refers to the time of evening prayer service, or *vespers*, in certain Christian denominations. Vespers

generally occurs around sunset.

Adoration (Line 3) - Profound love. Here, the word has religious connotations, as it's often associated with religious art depicting reverent love for Christ.

Tranquility (Line 4) - Peacefulness; calm.

Broods o'er (Line 5) - Contemplates deeply. Here used to suggest that the evening sky over the water looks solemn, and to suggest that "heaven" or God is watching over the world.

O'er (Line 5) - An archaic contraction of "over."

The mighty Being (Line 6) - Basically a reference to God, although Wordsworth may be using this indirect phrase to suggest a non-traditional conception of God.

Doth (Line 7) - An archaic variant of the word "does."

Everlastingly (Line 8) - Eternally.

Walkest (Line 9) - An archaic second-person form of the verb "walk."

Thou (Line 10) - An archaic form of the pronoun "you."

Thy (Line 11) - An archaic form of the pronoun "Your."

Therefore (Line 11) - Consequently; for that reason.

Liest (Line 12) - An archaic second-person form of the verb "lie."

Abraham's bosom (Line 12) - The "bosom of Abraham" is a term from the Judeo-Christian tradition, usually referring to the afterlife realm where virtuous souls await the Last Judgment. (Abraham is a patriarch and prophet in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; closeness to his "bosom" or body is a metaphor for closeness to God.) Here, the phrase suggests the presence of God in life rather than the afterlife.

Worshipp'st (Line 13) - An archaic second-person form of the verb "worship."

The Temple (Line 13) - An allusion to the Holy of Holies: the inner sanctuary of the Tabernacle (or Temple in Jerusalem), the holiest site in Judaism. Only the High Priest was allowed to enter this sanctuary (shrine), once a year, on Yom Kippur. Here, the allusion implies that the child is a high priest of sorts, with special access to the divine.

Thee (Line 14) - An archaic form of the pronoun "you."

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"It Is a Beauteous Evening, Calm and Free" is a sonnet—one of a sequence of 20 "Miscellaneous Sonnets" in Wordsworth's *Poems, in Two Volumes* (1807).

Wordsworth's poem is a typical sonnet in many ways:

- It has 14 lines and is written in iambic pentameter (i.e., its lines generally follow a da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM rhythm).
- Those lines can also be grouped into two parts: the *octave* (first eight lines) and the *sestet* (last six lines).
- A thematic shift—called the *turn* or *volta*—marks the transition between these two parts of the poem. The rhyme pattern shifts in line 9 as well.

Again, these are all conventional features of the sonnet. However, the rhyme scheme here is a bit unconventional: it's close to, but doesn't quite follow, the Italian sonnet form:

- The first eight lines of an Italian sonnet rhyme ABBA ABBA, while the last six lines typically rhyme CDE CDE or CDC DCD (though variations are allowed).
- But in Wordsworth's sonnet, the first eight lines rhyme ABBA ACCA, while the last six lines use an unusual DEF DFE variation.

In other words, the poet is following a formal tradition but putting his own spin on it. This is a fitting choice for a poem that's traditionally pious in some ways but would have been considered, at the time, unorthodox in its *expression* of religious sentiment. (For example, the poem's claim that children have a special connection with God is more characteristic of Wordsworth's private beliefs than the standard Christian doctrine of his era.)

The sonnet form is also associated with love, so Wordsworth may have seen it as a fitting choice for a poem about love of God and nature.

METER

The poem is written in iambic pentameter, meaning that its lines generally contain five iambs (metrical feet, or units, that consist of an unstressed followed by a stressed syllable). That is, its lines typically consist of 10 syllables that follow a da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM rhythm.

However, like most metrical poems, this one contains some variations in the pattern. Look at the first two lines, for example:

> It is | a beau- | teous eve- | ning, calm | and free,
> The ho- | ly time | is qui- | et as | a Nun [...]

The first foot of line 1 sounds most natural when read as a trochee (stressed-unstressed) rather than an iamb (again, unstressed-stressed), though it can be read either way. The rest of these two lines flow according to the standard pattern; notice, though, that for metrical purposes (and in Wordsworth's English accent!), "beauteous" is two syllables (BEAU-teous) rather than three (BEAU-te-ous).

Then comes line 3, which contains some clear variations on the

iambic pattern:

Breathless | with ad- | ora- | tion; the | broad sun

That first stressed syllable ("Breathless") sounds like an emphatic rush of "adoration," while the weird rhythms of the line make the language itself sound like it's gasping for "Breath[]." The line then ends with a spondee (stressed-stressed), emphasizing the huge, slowly sinking "sun" that commands the speaker's attention.

Line 4 then goes back to the poem's regular iambic rhythm, while line 5 contains further metrical quirks—and so on. The poem follows its meter pretty closely for the most part but varies it to keep things interesting for the reader.

RHYME SCHEME

The rhyme scheme of Wordsworth's poem is somewhat unusual for a sonnet. It runs like this:

ABBAACCADEFDFE

This pattern is close but not identical to the rhyme scheme of the Italian sonnet. The octave (first eight lines) of an Italian sonnet traditionally rhymes ABBA ABBA, not ABBA ACCA. The rhyme pattern in the sestet (last six lines) is typically CDE CDE or CDC DCD, though this part allows for more flexibility.

The poet has thus built a little freedom into a normally strict pattern—a fitting choice for a poem about a "calm and free" evening. The relaxed formal rules mirror the speaker's sense of relaxation. The poem's form also strikes a balance between convention and innovation—much as its content balances traditional Christian themes with a very Wordsworthian emphasis on childhood and nature.

SPEAKER

The speaker is walking beside (or near) the ocean at sunset. Though never identified by name, gender, occupation, etc., the speaker is usually assumed to be Wordsworth himself, since Wordsworth rarely used personas except in poems clearly framed as dramatic monologues. In fact, much of Wordsworth's writing is considered a landmark in the history of autobiographical poetry.

The speaker is accompanied by a little girl, addressed as "Dear child!" and "dear Girl!" This girl is usually identified as Wordsworth's daughter Caroline, whom he visited in Calais, France in 1802. In fact, this poem is part of a larger group of sonnets from 1802-1803, some of which mention Calais.

The poem itself never specifically identifies the girl as the speaker's daughter, however, perhaps because the poet hoped to protect his privacy. (Wordsworth fathered Caroline out of wedlock with a Frenchwoman named Annette Vallon and, due to wartime tensions between England and France, was only able to visit her once during her childhood. These details weren't known to the public during Wordsworth's lifetime.)

The speaker feels reverence for the "beauteous" natural scene the poem describes as well as affection and admiration for the "dear Girl." In fact, as lines 10-14 make clear, the speaker sees this child (and perhaps children in general) as more in tune with God and nature than the speaker is.

SETTING

The poem takes place beside (or near) the "Sea" on a beautiful "evening." The speaker remarks on the loveliness of this setting, pointing out its seemingly "Breathless" hush, tranquil "sun[set]," and gentle sky over ocean waters. The speaker also urges an accompanying "Girl" (and/or the reader) to "Listen" to a "sound like thunder"—probably the crashing of the ocean waves, which the speaker attributes to the "eternal motion" of God.

The setting is, in fact, the inspiration for the whole poem. The scenic atmosphere stirs the speaker's reverence toward God and nature, and it also prompts the speaker's reflections about the "Girl" coming along for this evening stroll.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

William Wordsworth (1770-1850) wrote "It Is a Beauteous Evening, Calm and Free" in 1802 and published it in 1807, in a collection called *Poems, in Two Volumes*. This book contains some of Wordsworth's best-known poems, including "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," whose speaker partakes in a classic Wordsworthian activity: reflecting on a tranquil moment in nature. "It Is a Beauteous Evening, Calm and Free" (untitled, but usually referred to by its first line) is part of the book's sequence of 20 "Miscellaneous Sonnets." It, too, finds inspiration in a scene of "tranquility."

Wordsworth was a leader among England's Romantic poets, solidifying a tradition launched by William Blake in the late 18th century and further developed by poets like Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats in the 19th century. The British Romantics wrote sensuously vivid, yet philosophical poems that often pondered the relationship between humanity and nature, childhood and adulthood, and imagination and reality.

This particular sonnet expresses Wordsworth's characteristic reverence for natural beauty, while also hinting at his belief that children have a special relationship to faith. This belief has ancient roots in Christianity and other traditions; the Bible, for example, says that "strength" and "praise" come "from the mouths of babes." However, Wordsworth's poetry elaborates on this idea at length, including in his famous "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," which

claims that "Heaven lies about us in our infancy!"

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Wordsworth wrote "It Is a Beauteous Evening" not long after the end of the French Revolution, which he witnessed while living in France from 1791-1793. During those years, he met and fell in love with Annette Vallon, and in 1792, she gave birth to their daughter Caroline. Soon afterward, wartime upheaval and money problems forced Wordsworth to return to England. In 1802, during a break in political tensions between England and France, he journeyed to Calais, France to visit Caroline (whom he had never met) and inform Annette of his plans to marry another woman.

In "Beauteous Evening," the speaker (a stand-in for the poet) describes walking on the shore with a "dear Girl" at sunset. The poem implies that the child is his, but leaves some ambiguity on this point. In 18th and 19th-century England, having a child out of wedlock was considered scandalous, so Wordsworth concealed this element of his personal history from the public. Nevertheless, the journals of his sister Dorothy (who was also a writer, and who accompanied him to Calais) suggest that he based the poem on his real-life seaside walks with Caroline. As one entry notes: "We walked by the sea-shore almost every Evening with Annette & Caroline or [William] & I alone."

Wordsworth wrote other notable poems during the Calais trip, too. For example, according to Dorothy, he conceived the sonnet "Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802" on the morning they headed back to England.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Wordsworth's Life and Work — Read a biography of the poet at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-wordsworth)
- More on the Romantics — Check out the Poetry Foundation's "Introduction to British Romanticism," the movement with which Wordsworth is closely associated. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/152982/an-introduction-to-british-romanticism)
- Poems, in Two Volumes (Vol. I) — Read the poem in its original context: the 1807 volume in which it was first published. (https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/8774/pg8774.html)
- The Romantics and Nature — Watch a BBC documentary on the British Romantics (including Wordsworth) and their relationship to the natural world. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=liVQ21KZfOI)
- The Poem Aloud — Watch British actor Benedict Cumberbatch read "It is a Beauteous Evening, Calm and Free." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DYgk0-VfPwg)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM WORDSWORTH POEMS

- A Complaint
- A Slumber did my Spirit Seal
- Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802
- Expostulation and Reply
- Extract from The Prelude (Boat Stealing)
- I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud
- Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey
- Lines Written in Early Spring
- London, 1802
- Mutability
- My Heart Leaps Up
- Nuns Fret Not at Their Convent's Narrow Room
- Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood
- She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways
- The Solitary Reaper
- The Tables Turned
- The World Is Too Much With Us
- We Are Seven

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