Ode (We are the music makers)

POEM TEXT

We are the music makers,
  And we are the dreamers of dreams,
Wandering by lone sea-breakers,
  And sitting by desolate streams; —
World-losers and world-forsakers,
  On whom the pale moon gleams:
Yet we are the movers and shakers
  Of the world for ever, it seems.

With wonderful deathless ditties
We build up the world's great cities,
  And out of a fabulous story
  We fashion an empire's glory:
One man with a dream, at pleasure,
  Shall go forth and conquer a crown;
And three with a new song's measure
  Can trample a kingdom down.

We, in the ages lying,
  In the buried past of the earth,
Built Nineveh with our sighing,
  And Babel itself in our mirth;
And o'erthrew them with prophesying
  To the old of the new world's worth;
For each age is a dream that is dying,
  Or one that is coming to birth.

A breath of our inspiration
Is the life of each generation;
  A wondrous thing of our dreaming
  Unearthly, impossible seeming —
The soldier, the king, and the peasant
  Are working together in one,
Till our dream shall become their present,
  And their work in the world be done.

They had no vision amazing
Of the goodly house they are raising;
  They had no divine foreshowing
  Of the land to which they are going:
But on one man's soul it hath broken,
  A light that doth not depart;
And his look, or a word he hath spoken,
  Wrought flame in another man's heart.

And therefore to-day is thrilling
With a past day's late fulfilling;
  And the multitudes are enlisted
  In the faith that their fathers resisted,
And, scorning the dream of to-morrow,
  Are bringing to pass, as they may,
In the world, for its joy or its sorrow,
  The dream that was scorned yesterday.

But we, with our dreaming and singing,
  Ceaseless and sorrowless we!
The glory about us clinging
  Of the glorious futures we see,
Our souls with high music ringing:
  O men! it must ever be
That we dwell, in our dreaming and singing,
  A little apart from ye.

For we are afar with the dawning
  And the suns that are not yet high,
And out of the infinite morning
  Intrepid you hear us cry —
How, spite of your human scorning,
  Once more God's future draws nigh,
And already goes forth the warning
  That ye of the past must die.

Great hail! we cry to the comers
  From the dazzling unknown shore;
Bring us hither your sun and your summers;
  And renew our world as of yore;
You shall teach us your song's new numbers,
  And things that we dreamed not before:
Yea, in spite of a dreamer who slumbers,
  And a singer who sings no more.

SUMMARY

We are the ones who make music, and the ones who dream

dreams. We wander along remote shorelines and sit by lonely streams. We are people who renounce the world, people on whom the moon shines. But we also always seem to be the people who shake the world to its foundations.

We construct the world's great cities with our awe-inspiring, immortal songs. From magical stories, we create the glories of empires. A single artist with a dream can overthrow a monarch, and three artists with a new song can overthrow a whole kingdom.

Those of us who are long dead and buried built the ancient city of Nineveh with our laments, and the ancient city of Babel with our laughter. Then we destroyed those cities with prophecies of a new and better world, because every era is a dream that is either dying or being born.

A hint of our vision gives life to every new generation. Our astonishing, seemingly impossible dreams give soldiers, kings, and peasants alike a shared vision, until our dreams become reality and everyone works together to make them come true.

Normal people don't know that they're building this new world; they have no advance knowledge of the new place they're going. But the solitary artist's soul can perceive an eternal light, and the way he looks and the words he says light fires in other people's hearts.

Therefore, the present is charged with the energy of past prophecies, and today's people enact the beliefs that earlier generations didn't accept. And while the people of the present reject tomorrow's new ideas, they still live out the joyful or sorrowful dreams of artists who came before them.

But we, dreaming and singing, never stop and are not sad. We feel the glory of the future all around us, and our souls hear divine music. Oh, normal people! We must always, because of our dreams and songs, live separately from you.

For we live in the dawns of future days, and from our place in these infinite mornings, you hear us bravely shout that, in spite of your scorn for new ideas, God's future is coming closer anyway, and it's already clear that you, too, will die, as the past must.

We shout grand greetings to the visitors from the bright, unexplored shores of the future, and ask them to bring us their light and their summers, and to renew the world once again. They will teach us new songs, and new dreams, in spite of a dreamer who sleeps, and a singer who no longer sings.

THEMES

THE REVOLUTIONARY POWER OF ART

The artists of Arthur O'Shaughnessy's "Ode" are world-changers, prophets who sing of the future. To be one of these "music makers" is to have the power to predict what's to come—and by predicting change, the poem argues, to in fact bring that change about. Artists grant the people of the present a glorious vision they can strive towards. Far from being merely decorative, then, the poem argues that art is a force that shapes history.

The collective speakers of the poem survey the whole sweep of human history, finding world-shaking artistry in all eras. In doing so, they connect art to human progress. While the poem's speakers see into the world's "glorious futures," for example, they also hearken back to the distant past, when artists "built" the famous biblical city of "Nineveh with [their] sighing / And Babel itself in [their] mirth." Artists, the poem insists, have raised ancient wonders only to overthrow them "with prophesying" later. Just as artists "buil[t] up the world's great cities," they handily conquered "kingdom[s]." Their work has been both the "glory" of empires and the downfall of rulers, marking the rise and fall of entire civilizations.

At all of these times, they say, artists have had visions of revolutionary change—visions that later come to pass because artists share them. They are the ones, the poem insists, who understand when the "dream" of an "age [...] is dying" and must be dreamt anew. Part of being an artist, then, is to foresee huge shifts in the very fabric of civilization: the destruction of the current way of doing things and the rise of something totally new. Art, in this poem's view, is thus intimately connected to death and rebirth as well. The artists of this poem are always predicting change, and the change they predict is always a glorious renewal as old, outdated systems fall away and are replaced with the "dream that was scorned yesterday."

With their visions of brilliant change, artists light the way for the rest of the world, bringing about the very change they predict through the power of imagination. By presenting beautiful visions of what could be, artists light revolutionary "flames" in the minds and hearts of non-artists. Artists are thus both prophets and enactors of change, the poem insists, people who dream up and create the world itself.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 7-8
- Lines 9-16
- Lines 17-24
- Lines 25-32
- Lines 33-40
- Lines 41-48
- Lines 51-53
- Lines 65-72

ARTISTIC ISOLATION AND CONNECTION

To be a world-changing artist, in this poem, is also to be set apart from normal daily life. The artists

O'Shaughnessy imagines have to sit at a remove from the ordinary world as it is in order to see the world to come. But there's company in this isolation: while artists don't get to lead ordinary lives, they're still part of the "we," the artistic collective. The poem thus implies that to be an artist is both to be part of a shared legacy and to be set apart from mainstream society, to be at once isolated and part of a "ceaseless," "sorrowless" community working to create a better tomorrow.

Having delighted in artists' abilities to change the world, the speakers introduce a note of caution: artists are always oddballs in their time, separated from normal people, living "a little apart from ye." Part of that isolation is because no one likes being told that their present efforts and lives will one day be overthrown by change and death! The mainstream reaction to artists is thus fearful "scorning," which shuts artists out from everyday life.

But the very structure of the poem, with its choral "we," suggests that, even if an artist's life is lonely, it's also full of good and noble company. The chorus of speakers, singing together of beautiful visions, by its very existence makes it clear that to be an artist is to belong to a community—even if it's an unconventional one. Artistic outcasts come together in a legacy that stretches all through human history, their work filling "another man's heart" with the "flame" of inspiration. Artists are "ceaseless and sorrowless"—relentless and happy—in their endeavors in part because they know that their ideas will not be so scorned in the world they are creating. They "cling[]" to "glorious futures," finding in their foresight the connection and company they need to sustain their present isolation.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8
- Lines 25-53
- Lines 54-72

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-8

We are the music makers,
And we are the dreamers of dreams,
Wandering by lone sea-breakers,
And sitting by desolate streams; —
World-losers and world-forsakers,
On whom the pale moon gleams:
Yet we are the movers and shakers
Of the world for ever, it seems.

"Ode" begins with a chorus. Together, a group speaks as one: "We are the music makers, / And we are the dreamers of dreams." This "Ode" will be an ode to artists, sung by artists: a piece of art about the nature of art.

These "music makers" seem to be set apart: they're "world-losers and world-forsakers," monk-like people who turn away from everyday reality. Their dreaming takes them to isolated places, "lone" and "desolate" bodies of water under the "pale moon." The sibilance of those "lone sea-breakers" and "desolate streams" gives their wanderings a hushed, magical quality. These singers are solitary, nocturnal creatures, and they seem to feel a kinship with remote and mysterious landscapes.

But there's a paradox here: these lonely singers are also a *group*, a "we." And as a collective, they are a world-changing force. For all that they wander alone, they are "movers and shakers," people who change the world. This tension between artistic isolation and artistic power will be one of the major themes of this poem.

There's another paradox here, too: the relationship between what's eternal and what's mutable. The reader has probably heard the saying that the only constant in the world is change. The "movers and shakers / Of the world for ever" indeed seem to deal in eternally changing matters, and dense patterns of repetition in both the poem's images and its language underscore that point. Image-wise, the speakers place themselves in landscapes associated with both eternity and change: the constant but never-the-same-twice movements of waves and rivers, and the always-cycling moon.

The poem's echoing sounds reflect that feeling of eternal change with strong alliteration ("music makers," "dreamers of dreams"), diacope ("world-losers and world-forsakers"), and polyptoton ("dreamers of dreams"). Here, themes of change and repetition are baked right into the poem's sounds. Something similar happens with the rhyme scheme, where a steady, musical ABAB pattern draws the reader's attention to a rhythm of similarity and difference.

LINES 9-16

With wonderful deathless ditties
We build up the world's great cities,
And out of a fabulous story
We fashion an empire's glory:
One man with a dream, at pleasure,
Shall go forth and conquer a crown;
And three with a new song's measure
Can trample a kingdom down.

Following the paradoxical, mysterious first stanza, the chorus of speakers move on to celebrating their world-shaking achievements—and the rhyme scheme changes with their change in tone. From the balance of an ABAB pattern, the first four lines of the second stanza change to insistent couplets. That bold sound emphasizes a bold idea: the work of being a "music maker" isn't just to make the world a little better, but to change it completely.

At first, this change seems to be all to do with building and developing. Artists, the speakers proclaim, are the true builders

of cities and empires, using "ditties" and "a fabulous story" to construct whole kingdoms. That those "ditties"—songs or poems—work alongside "story" here suggests that new *ideas* are only part of how artists change the world. The *form* of their art is also important. Artists are something more than just philosophers: the way they shape their dreams is part of what gives them special power.

But artists don't just have the power to build and create. The second half of the stanza looks at the other side of the coin: destruction. Artists, the speakers say, have a disproportionate power not only to *raise* cities and empires, but to *overthrow* them. It only takes "[o]ne man with a dream" to "conquer a crown." The consonance here reflects that power, the hard /k/ sounds adding a harshness to the lines:

> Shall go forth and conquer a crown;
> And three with a new song's measure
> Can trample a kingdom down.

The metonymy here, in which "a crown" is used to mean a ruler, places the poem in an almost legendary world, suggesting that the artist's power to create and destroy works on an epic and generation-crossing scale. And artistic power doesn't stop at deposing a single monarch: "three with a new song's measure / Can trample a kingdom down." Again, there's that idea that artists' ability to communicate a revolutionary idea *beautifully*, with a new song's rhythmic "measure", is a big part of their power.

LINES 17-20

We, in the ages lying,
In the buried past of the earth,
Built Nineveh with our sighing,
And Babel itself in our mirth;

The speakers now hearken back to earlier members of their artistic family, those left behind "[i]n the buried past of the earth." The dead aren't gone, though: they're still part of the collective "we," and the speakers take part in their great deeds.

These deeds are more specific than the earlier conquests of crowns and kingdoms in general. We artists, the speakers say, were responsible for raising two famous cities in particular: Nineveh and Babel.

Those names may be familiar to the reader from famous Old Testament stories. Nineveh was a great city that was doomed to destruction until the prophet Jonah persuaded its citizens to repent of their evil ways. And Babel was the site of the Tower of Babel, a too-ambitious building that was meant to reach as high as heaven itself—angering God, who cursed its builders to confusion by making them speak different languages.

The speakers' allusions to these legendary cities thus raise all sorts of associations in the reader's mind. Both cities are connected, not just with human ambition and human failings, but with *language*. Jonah, the rescuer of Nineveh, could be seen as part of the legacy of artists: a lone prophet whose words changed the fate of a whole city. And the story of Babel suggests that communication can give people huge collective power.

It's also worth noting that both of those cities (which really existed) are long gone, and exist now only in stories. And who's responsible for stories? The very artists this poem sings of!

Artists thus seem even to have the power to reach past the boundaries of time and death. The artists of the past are still part of the speakers' choral "we," and long-dead cities can rise again through the stories artists tell. Artists can raise and destroy cities both literally and metaphorically.

What's more, they do so "with our sighing" and "in our mirth." Again, part of artists' power to transmit vision is in their style, the way they shape their ideas and channel their feelings.

LINES 21-24

And o'erthrew them with prophesying
To the old of the new world's worth;
For each age is a dream that is dying,
Or one that is coming to birth.

Picking up on the hints of prophecy raised by the allusion to Nineveh, the speakers indeed go on to speak of themselves as prophets. But while Jonah prophesied destruction, the artists here prophecy to the old world of "the new world's worth," building enticing visions of what's to come. Again, there's a paradox here: to turn toward the new is always to turn away from the old. The speakers are well aware of this: "each age," they say, "is a dream that is dying, / Or one that is coming to birth."

Notice that the rhyme scheme has returned to an even ABAB pattern in this stanza, reflecting the poem's sense of balance: the birth and death of kingdoms and eras is as regular as the cycling of the moon in the first stanza.

Here, it's also worth considering the meter. This poem is really interested in the power not just of art, but of *artistry*, the way art is actively *shaped*. Its meter, like the rest of its form, reflects those thoughts. By now, the reader has a feel for the poem's steady pulse: it generally uses trimeter (three stressed beats per line). But this poem is in sprung rhythm, which means that its beats are steady, but its metrical feet are all over the place. Take a look at how the stresses fall in lines 21-24:

> And o'erthrew | them with pro- | phesying
> To the old | of the new | world's worth;
> For each age | is a dream | that is dying,
> Or one | that is com- | ing to birth.

The unstressed syllables dance around, but the three stressed

syllables are always there. The variation in metrical feet here, alongside the constant three-beat pulse, again supports the poem's ideas of constancy and change, the eternal and the impermanent.

LINES 25-32

A breath of our inspiration
Is the life of each generation;
A wondrous thing of our dreaming
Unearthly, impossible seeming —
The soldier, the king, and the peasant
Are working together in one,
Till our dream shall become their present,
And their work in the world be done.

So far, the speakers have spent a lot of time celebrating the artist's power. In this stanza, they think about exactly how that power acts in the world.

In the first stanza, the speakers portrayed themselves as isolated figures (who nevertheless have a whole legacy of artists, living and dead, for company). Here, they bring non-artists into the picture. The normal person's role in world-changing, they suggest, is to materialize the "unearthly, impossible" dreams of the artists, working together to make them real.

Here, the artists seem to be transmitters, like lightning rods for visions of the future. When they speak of a "breath" of "inspiration," they're almost saying the same thing twice: the word "inspiration" comes from a root that actually *means* breath. The word "inspiration" has a metaphor built right into it: originally, to be inspired was to have a new idea breathed into one by a divine force. The inspired artist, the speakers say, passes along that new breath, which becomes the "life of each generation," a breath of energy and rebirth.

And who's there to receive that new life? "The soldier, the king and the peasant." The speakers don't mean there are three separate guys out there waiting to do what artists say. Rather, they're using synecdoche, suggesting that all these categories of non-artists exist across time. Inspired by the artist's ability to transmit inspiration, they go out and work to make artistic dreams of the future real.

LINES 33-40

They had no vision amazing
Of the goodly house they are raising;
They had no divine foreshowing
Of the land to which they are going:
But on one man's soul it hath broken,
A light that doth not depart;
And his look, or a word he hath spoken,
Wrought flame in another man's heart.

If "the soldier, the king, and the peasant" bring about the new future that the artists predict, it's not because they can see exactly what they're doing. Here, the speakers use metaphors of building and light to explore the way that artists transmit their prophetic vision to the people who carry that vision out.

The actions of the world's non-artists are here presented in concrete, physical terms. In responding to the artists' visions, they're building a "goodly house," traveling to a new "land." The future world, in these images, is a *place*, a new home—maybe even a promised land.

The parallelism and aporia of the first two couplets in this stanza bring that point home. The "goodly house" and the "land" arrive at the same point in similar sentences, and both those sentences begin with the same kind of denial of the builders' understanding: "They had no" foresight of the new place they'd end up.

Again, there's a contrast between the way that artists and non-artists engage with the future. The mass of humanity is a "they," while the artist is solitary, "one man" who can see "a light that doth not depart." This one artist is responsible for transmitting his vision to everyone else. It turns out that divine vision is contagious: like "flame," it passes from one person to another. Light and fire, both old symbols for inspiration and creativity, here touch on the contrasting powers of the artist. Their prophetic vision is illuminating—but it also has the fiery power to destroy the old world.

LINES 41-48

And therefore to-day is thrilling
With a past day's late fulfilling;
And the multitudes are enlisted
In the faith that their fathers resisted,
And, scorning the dream of to-morrow,
Are bringing to pass, as they may,
In the world, for its joy or its sorrow,
The dream that was scorned yesterday.

Artists, this stanza suggests, both foresee and create the future. Artists' visions of what's to come motivate everyday people, who work to create the change that artists have predicted—literally, a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The speakers seem to relish this thought, and communicate it with another stanza that starts with emphatic couplets. Today, they point out, is yesterday's future, "thrilling / With a past day's late fulfilling"—thrumming with the energy of fulfilled prophecy.

But there's also a hint of rueful humor about human nature here. Those who don't have the prophetic vision of the artist are happy enough to carry out *yesterday's* prophecy—but they're perhaps not all that wild about the prophecy that suggests a whole new world to come after the one they're working to create now. They reject "the dream of to-morrow" even as they carry out the "dream that was scorned yesterday."

Patterns of repetition are out in full force in this stanza, again

reflecting the poem's thoughts about change and the eternal in its form. Note, especially, the repetition of the word "dream" and the polyptoton on "scorned" and "scorning." These repetitions tie together the dreams of the past, present, and future—pointing out that, while the world changes, the process of artistic vision and dreaming remains the same. Not only that, but the people of the present will always at first reject the new future as the artist presents it, even as they live in and build the world predicted by the artists of the past.

LINES 49-56

But we, with our dreaming and singing,
Ceaseless and sorrowless we!
The glory about us clinging
Of the glorious futures we see,
Our souls with high music ringing:
O men! it must ever be
That we dwell, in our dreaming and singing,
A little apart from ye.

In spite of the world's inevitable initial skepticism about their visions, the speakers remain "[c]easeless and sorrowless," energized by the "glory" and "high music" of their visions. There's a sense here that artists live in an in-between world. As the very first line of the poem says, they are the "music makers"—but they also *hear* "high music." Their visions themselves seem to be a kind of divine art, which they try to pass along through their own creativity.

This turn back towards the artists' inner worlds is marked by a return to the more evenly balanced ABAB rhyme scheme, and to a hint of an awestruck whisper in the sibilance of "But we, with our dreaming and singing, / Ceaseless and sorrowless we!" That whispery quality suggests the privacy of the artists' souls, where they commune with divine visions.

The return of that feeling of solitude (in spite of the fact that the artists are still a glorious "we") prepares the reader for the apostrophe to the mass of humankind at the end of the stanza. "O men!" the speakers cry, explaining that their visionary natures mean that they'll always have to "dwell [...] A little apart from ye."

But this isn't quite the same as saying that the artist must go and be all alone in a cave in order to make art. Artists might be isolated by their powers, but only "[a] little"—and the rhyme scheme in this stanza means that the "we" of the artists actually rhymes with the "ye" they can't quite live among. As ever in this poem, there's a feeling of paradox here: artists are essential (and connected) to the rest of humankind *because* they're set a little apart.

LINES 57-64

For we are afar with the dawning
And the suns that are not yet high,
And out of the infinite morning
Intrepid you hear us cry —
How, spite of your human scorning,
Once more God's future draws nigh,
And already goes forth the warning
That ye of the past must die.

In this stanza, the speakers expand on their earlier metaphors of fire and light: the "glory" of their visions here becomes sunlight at the dawn of an "infinite morning." The artistic speakers live "afar" in a land that is also a time. Here, the sun is always rising; a new day is always about to begin. The artist's vision of the future is thus also to do with a kind of eternal present. Artists, this stanza suggests, are always one step ahead of the regular world, but they're also in a morning that is "infinite," eternally beginning.

Here, the poem seems to *do* what it *describes*. The speakers are telling a story, but it's the story of themselves. Even as they say what artists do—live in this visionary world, crying out to normal people to describe what they see—they're *doing* what artists do, and when the reader comes to the line "ye of the past must die," they're indeed receiving that "warning."

The speakers seem to feel that part of their separation from the everyday world is to do with their visions of the future. No one likes to hear that everything around them will be changed and overthrown for a future they can't see themselves. Artists, the poem suggests, play a complicated role, and not always an easy one to bear. They see the future, and light the sparks of that future in the hearts of those who are willing to listen. But often, people aren't willing to listen, "scorning" what artists have to say. The artists won't necessarily live to see the change they foretell. If that's so, it truly does take an "[i]ntrepid" soul to take on a visionary's mantle.

LINES 65-72

Great hail! we cry to the comers
From the dazzling unknown shore;
Bring us hither your sun and your summers;
And renew our world as of yore;
You shall teach us your song's new numbers,
And things that we dreamed not before:
Yea, in spite of a dreamer who slumbers,
And a singer who sings no more.

In the previous two stanzas, the speakers made an apostrophe to all of humankind. Now, they address someone else, more mysteriously. Just as they cried "O men!" in line 54, they cry "Great hail!" here—not to any known people, but to "the comers / From the dazzling unknown shore."

Here, a bunch of the poem's past images seem to be wrapped up in one. The mysterious "lone sea-breakers" of the first stanza unite with the "infinite morning" of line 59; the land of moonlit shadow marries the land of sunlit brilliance. This shining seashore is inhabited by figures who seem to be messengers, bringing "suns" and "summers" to the waiting

artists. (Notice the melodic assonance of "your suns and your summers," evoking the harmony and order of this visionary land.)

Perhaps the "comers" are angels, or spirits, or geniuses in the old sense, minor gods whose job it was to provide inspiration. Whatever they are, they seem to personify the forces of creativity and vision, and again remind the reader that the artistic speakers are themselves both the receivers and transmitters of divine knowledge. They stand in the middle, passing their messages from the visionary world to the everyday world. And they insist on the freshness and strangeness of those messages: they're "unknown," "new," and "dreamed not before."

This sense of novelty and renewal persists in spite of and beyond death. Just as the artists "lying / in the buried past of the earth" in lines 17-18 are still somehow part of the living chorus of speakers, the "dreamer who slumbers" and the "singer who sings no more" still play a role in the revival of the world. Art, this poem suggests, has the world-shaking power to cross boundaries: between the present and the future, between one person and another, and even between the living and the dead.

SYMBOLS

OCEANS AND RIVERS

Oceans and rivers represent both the current of history and the mysterious sources of intuition and inspiration. Rivers, with their constant motion, are common symbols of the flow of time and history, while the mysterious depth and power of the ocean often symbolizes the subconscious or the unknown. The "music makers" of this poem seem to draw much of their thought from these two differing kinds of water, seeing themselves as related both to the world's ceaseless movement into the future, and to deep human truths that most can't reach. The final stanza, in which the speakers imagine visionary visitors coming to them "[f]rom the dazzling unknown shore," brings that point home: these inspiring visitors must travel to artists over far-off, mysterious seas.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "Wandering by lone sea-breakers, / And sitting by desolate streams; —"
- **Lines 65-66:** "Great hail! we cry to the comers / From the dazzling unknown shore;"

THE MOON

The moon is an ancient symbol of dreams and mystery, and as such it's a perfect light for the lonesome "dreamers of dreams" to wait beneath for their inspiration. While there's plenty of imagery of glorious sunlight here, too (see the rest of the "Symbols" section for more on that), the appearance of the moon in the first stanza suggests that artistic inspiration isn't all blazing inspiration. There's also a quieter and more mysterious kind of waiting involved, guided by the changeable moon rather than the emphatic sun. The poem's interest in the paradox of change—it's the only eternal thing there is!—also makes the moon a fitting symbol for the artist's prophetic understanding.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "the pale moon gleams"

THE SUN, LIGHT, AND FIRE

Images of blazing sunlight and flame flare up all over this poem. The sun, with its awe-inspiring power to create and maintain life and light, often symbolizes inspiration and vision—illuminations both literal and figurative. Here, it turns up in the form of "suns that are not yet high," visions yet to come when the "suns and the summers" of the future arrive.

The power of the sun appears as both light and fire. The "light" that the artist perceives in line 37 kindles "flame," becoming physical and contagious as it passes from the artist to the world around him:

> A light that doth not depart;
> And his look, or a word he hath spoken,
> Wrought flame in another man's heart.

Flame has the power to warm, of course, but it also has the power to destroy. Part of the symbolism around fire and flames here is to do with one of the poem's big points: the old world must die for the new world to arise. The symbolism of the sun, light, and fire thus suggest the connections between creation and destruction, the way that new visions demand the overthrow of the old.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 38:** " A light that doth not depart"
- **Line 40:** "Wrought flame in another man's heart"
- **Lines 57-60:** "For we are afar with the dawning / And the suns that are not yet high, / And out of the infinite morning / Intrepid you hear us cry —"
- **Lines 65-67:** "we cry to the comers / From the dazzling unknown shore; / Bring us hither your sun and your summers;"

CITIES AND BUILDINGS

The artistic "music makers" of this poem speak of their work in terms of inspiration and illumination. But the actual *work* of their inspiration is to change the shape of the world, and the cities and buildings of the poem symbolize the real, physical change that comes from artists' intangible visions.

The poem deals in generic "goodly houses"—symbolically, new places to live, built by the normal people that art inspires with its visions of a changed world. But it also evokes the more specific cities of Babel and Nineveh, and with them, the idea that all that is human both rises and falls.

In the Bible, Nineveh was a sinful city that repented when the prophet Jonah warned of its destruction; Babel was the city that built a prideful tower that sought to reach heaven (and was punished for its hubris with confusion). Together, these cities symbolize the roller coaster movement of all human achievement. Both of these cities were real places, too, not just legends—a telling fact when one considers that the *stories* about them have outlived the actual places. This is yet another instance of the enduring power of art. (See the "allusion" section of "Poetic Devices" for more on the biblical cities.)

The construction and destruction of cities, here, thus represent concrete *change* in how every human lives, driven and maintained by artistic vision.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-10:** "With wonderful deathless ditties / We build up the world's great cities,"
- **Lines 19-20:** "Built Nineveh with our sighing, / And Babel itself in our mirth;"
- **Line 34:** "the goodly house they are raising;"

MUSIC AND SONG

Music is perhaps the most prominent symbol in this "Ode." While the poem seems to be talking about all kinds of artists, it most often thinks of art in terms of singing. Music is the least representative art form (that is, it doesn't have a visible *shape*, only a *sound*) and is thus a useful way to represent something as hard to depict as pure emotion or transcendent experience. The music of this poem represents the way that artists translate their ineffable visions into, well, art: into forms that everyone can feel and follow, even if they can't *see* the artists' visions first-hand. When the speakers sing that three artists "with a new song's measure" can overthrow a whole kingdom, they suggest the way that an artistic *vision*, made perceptible to others, can communicate its world-shaking power.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "We are the music makers,"
- **Line 9:** "wonderful deathless ditties"
- **Line 15:** "a new song's measure"
- **Line 49:** "singing"
- **Line 53:** "Our souls with high music ringing"
- **Line 55:** "singing"
- **Line 69:** "your song's new numbers"
- **Line 72:** "a singer who sings no more"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

The repeated initial sounds of alliteration—among other kinds of repetition—play a big part in this poem's melody and meaning. The frequent alliteration here helps to draw connections between important words, and to create the poem's rolling, musical sound.

Look no further than the famous first lines for a clear example:

> We are the music makers,
> And we are the dreamers of dreams,

Here, alliteration links up "music" with the "makers" who create it, and "dreamers" with their "dreams." (The connection between "dreamers and "dreams" is also an example of polyptoton—more on that under "repetition.") Those linkages begin a pattern that will continue all through the poem, in which artists and their art seem so closely connected that it's sometimes hard to see a separation between them.

In some spots, alliteration makes images feel all the more forceful and urgent as well. Take lines 14 and 16, where the hard /c/ and /k/ sounds imbue the line itself with power and strength:

> Shall go forth and conquer a crown;
> [...]
> Can trample a kingdom down.

The effect here is even clearer when considering that the same sound repeats within the word "conquer" itself (an example of consonance).

Repetitive sounds also fit in with the poem's ideas of artists as "music makers" more generally: they make these speakers' voices sound musical. Take a look at the alliteration in lines 65-68:

> Great hail! we cry to the comers
> From the dazzling unknown shore;

Bring us hither your sun and your summers;

The melodic, attention-grabbing repetition of initial /c/ and /s/ sounds here helps to bring the poem to its climax.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "music makers"
- **Line 2:** "dreamers," "dreams"
- **Line 3:** "sea"
- **Line 4:** "sitting," "streams"
- **Line 9:** "With wonderful," "deathless ditties"
- **Line 10:** "We," "world's"
- **Line 11:** "fabulous"
- **Line 12:** "fashion"
- **Line 14:** "conquer," "crown"
- **Line 16:** "Can," "kingdom"
- **Line 18:** "buried"
- **Line 19:** "Built"
- **Line 20:** "Babel"
- **Line 22:** "world's worth"
- **Line 23:** "dream," "dying"
- **Line 32:** "work," "world"
- **Line 38:** "doth," "depart"
- **Line 39:** "he hath"
- **Line 41:** "therefore," "thrilling"
- **Line 44:** "faith," "fathers"
- **Line 49:** "singing"
- **Line 50:** "Ceaseless," "sorrowless"
- **Line 51:** "glory"
- **Line 52:** "glorious"
- **Line 53:** "music"
- **Line 54:** "men," "must"
- **Line 55:** "dwell," "dreaming"
- **Line 59:** "infinite"
- **Line 60:** "Intrepid"
- **Line 61:** "spite," "scorning"
- **Line 65:** "cry," "comers"
- **Line 67:** "sun," "summers"
- **Line 69:** "new numbers"
- **Line 70:** "dreamed"
- **Line 71:** "spite," "dreamer," "slumbers"
- **Line 72:** "singer," "sings"

ALLUSION

Biblical allusion plays a major thematic role in the poem. Two cities from well-known Bible stories appear here: Nineveh, a city almost destroyed by its own wickedness, and Babel, the city where the ill-fated tower that was meant to challenge God himself was built.

These cities have a few important things in common. Both were grand, impressive expressions of human civilization, representing the height of human ambition (and the height of human pride). Both were dramatically destroyed. And both are connected to the poem's ideas about prophecy and language.

Nineveh was the city that the prophet Jonah (who was famously swallowed by a whale when he refused to do his job) was sent to preach in; his prophecies of doom persuaded the citizens to repent their evil ways and saved the city from destruction. Here, prophetic *speech* rescues the city, just as the artist's "speech" can alter the course of human history. Later, another Biblical prophet, Nahum, would also accurately predict the city's eventual destruction.

The Tower of Babel, meanwhile, was supposed to have been the origin of all humanity's different tongues: when the people of Babel agreed to build a tower that would reach heaven, God punished them by making them all speak in mutually incomprehensible languages.

Thus, Nineveh and Babel fit right in with the poem's ideas about the role of artists as visionaries who both raise and destroy whole kingdoms, cultures, even worlds; their prophecies shape the future by seeding new ideas in the less-visionary minds around them. The poem's allusions to the two cities suggest glorious visions that get overthrown to make room for whole new ones—and that are rooted to the earth-shaking power of artistic communication.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 17-20:** "We, in the ages lying, / In the buried past of the earth, / Built Nineveh with our sighing, / And Babel itself in our mirth;"

APOSTROPHE

"Ode" makes direct addresses to two different audiences. First, there's the mass of normal people, the people who respond to art rather than creating it. The chorus of artistic speakers here cries out to everyone who isn't them: "O men!" (Note that it was common practice well into the 20th century to refer to humans collectively as "men.")

The speakers' apostrophe to these "men" informs them that they, the artists, will always have to live "a little apart from ye" in order to do all their "dreaming and singing." In part, that's because they're just different, marked out by their visionary powers. And in part, that's because one of the things that artists do is predict the inevitable end of every person and system currently alive—and no one likes to hear "[t]hat ye of the past must die."

The other apostrophe is a little stranger. At the very end of the poem, the speakers cry "Great hail!" to mysterious "comers / From the dazzling unknown shore," asking them to bring renewing light into the world. Here, the artists seem to speak to personified forces of creativity and vision—perhaps angels, muses, or geniuses in the old-fashioned sense of "spirits of inspiration."

These two different kinds of apostrophe point out an important aspect of the artist's life as this poem sees it. Artists, in this "Ode," are mediators between the visionary world of dreams and prophecies and the everyday world of normal folks. They live in a midway space between the two, reaching out to both.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Lines 54-56:** " O men! it must ever be / That we dwell, in our dreaming and singing, / A little apart from ye."
- **Line 60:** " Intrepid you hear us cry —"
- **Line 64:** " That ye of the past must die."
- **Lines 67-68:** "Bring us hither your sun and your summers; / And renew our world as of yore;"
- **Lines 69-70:** "You shall teach us your song's new numbers, / And things that we dreamed not before:"

ASSONANCE

This is a poem about "music makers," spoken *by* music makers, so it makes sense that it should sound musical. Strong assonance throughout the poem joins with other repetitive sound patterns like alliteration and sibilance to lend the speakers' song its melodic quality.

Assonance links up words that share internal vowel sounds (like those matching /ow/ sounds in "vowel sounds," for instance). Here, a lot of assonance falls on the strong /ee/ sound that appears in the poem's oft-repeated words "we" and"dreams." The reader can spot those words linking up with "ceaseless" in line 50, "ye" in line 56, and "teach" in line 69—and in each of those spots, there's a mood of connection as well as a sound of connection. The inspired energy of the speakers means their "dreaming" is "ceaseless"; the mysterious visitors from a visionary shore will "teach" every "dreamer" to sing.

More subtly, the link between "we" and "ye" complicates the speakers' claim that they're always going to have to live "a little apart" from normal folks: both the internal rhyme and the assonance of "we" and "ye" reminds the reader that the speakers aren't totally otherworldly beings, but humans, too—just ones who happen to have a special power.

Elsewhere, assonance helps things to sound good. Consider the euphony of the line, "Bring us hither your suns and your summers". That linked /uh/ sound, plus the sibilance of "suns" and "summers", just happens to fall nicely on human ears. Patterned sound, perhaps, reminds readers of good feelings of order and beauty—themselves some of the poem's big themes.

Also note that the poem's many end rhymes are, by default, assonant; these are discussed in the "Rhyme Scheme" section of this guide.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "we," "dreamers," "dreams"
- **Line 3:** "sea"
- **Line 4:** "streams"
- **Line 6:** "whom," "moon"
- **Line 7:** "movers"
- **Line 11:** "fabulous"
- **Line 12:** "fashion"
- **Line 23:** "each," "dream"
- **Line 24:** "one," "coming"
- **Line 29:** "peasant"
- **Line 30:** "together"
- **Line 32:** "work," "world"
- **Line 42:** "day's," "late"
- **Line 49:** "we," "dreaming"
- **Line 50:** "Ceaseless," "we"
- **Line 51:** "glory"
- **Line 52:** "glorious," "we," "see"
- **Line 54:** "be"
- **Line 55:** "we," "in," "dreaming," "singing"
- **Line 56:** "little," "ye"
- **Line 57:** "we," "are afar"
- **Line 59:** "infinite"
- **Line 60:** "Intrepid"
- **Line 63:** "forth," "warning"
- **Line 65:** "comers"
- **Line 66:** "From," "unknown"
- **Line 67:** "us," "sun," "summers"
- **Line 69:** "teach"
- **Line 70:** "we," "dreamed"
- **Line 71:** "dreamer"
- **Line 72:** "singer," "sings"

METAPHOR

There are two major strands of metaphor in "Ode": those to do with building, destruction, and the physical world, and those to do with light. As the poem will show, those different dimensions—one material, one immaterial—have a lot more to do with each other than it might seem at first.

The clearest example might be in lines 33-40, in which the speakers say that the people of the past "had no vision amazing / Of the goodly house they are raising." Here, that "goodly house" is a metaphor for a whole new world, with new rules and new ideas. The image of the "house" suggests that the thing being built here is a place for everyone to live—a new home, a new and better place to be.

The people who build that "house" can't see what they're doing as they do it, though. For that they need artists, who can perceive "a light that doth not depart": the heavenly, prophetic light of inspiration. Light, for obvious reasons, is an ancient metaphor for *seeing*, and especially for sudden and brilliant realizations—just think about cartoons where someone gets hit with a lightning bolt of inspiration, or a lightbulb goes off over their heads. The chorus of speakers here live, not just in light,

but in an "infinite morning," metaphorically suggesting an endlessly new, endlessly reborn inspiration.

Artists, these metaphors suggest, are the people who receive and perceive inspired light, and then use it to spark new "flame" in the hearts of the normal people around them. Everyone else then goes about the work of building the new homes that the artists have foreseen. This is what makes artists the "movers and shakers / Of the world for ever": that metaphorical moving and shaking is an image of the power of artistic vision to change the way that people think, act, and live.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "Wandering by lone sea-breakers, / And sitting by desolate streams; —"
- **Lines 7-8:** "Yet we are the movers and shakers / Of the world for ever, it seems."
- **Lines 9-16:** "With wonderful deathless ditties / We build up the world's great cities, / And out of a fabulous story / We fashion an empire's glory: / One man with a dream, at pleasure, / Shall go forth and conquer a crown; / And three with a new song's measure / Can trample a kingdom down."
- **Line 18:** "the buried past of the earth,"
- **Lines 19-20:** "Built Nineveh with our sighing, / And Babel itself in our mirth;"
- **Lines 23-24:** "For each age is a dream that is dying, / Or one that is coming to birth."
- **Lines 33-36:** "They had no vision amazing / Of the goodly house they are raising; / They had no divine foreshowing / Of the land to which they are going:"
- **Lines 37-38:** "But on one man's soul it hath broken, / A light that doth not depart;"
- **Lines 39-40:** "And his look, or a word he hath spoken, / Wrought flame in another man's heart."
- **Lines 57-60:** "For we are afar with the dawning / And the suns that are not yet high, / And out of the infinite morning / Intrepid you hear us cry —"
- **Line 66:** "the dazzling unknown shore;"
- **Line 67:** "your sun and your summers;"
- **Lines 71-72:** " in spite of a dreamer who slumbers, / And a singer who sings no more."

SIBILANCE

Sibilance often creates whispery, soft, magical, or ominous feelings in a poem. Here, at the beginning and end of "Ode," they evoke deep mystery.

Take a look at all the /s/ sounds (and some related /z/ sounds) of lines 3-4, for example:

> Wandering by lone sea-breakers,
> And sitting by desolate streams;

Sibilance in the middles or ends of words tends to be subtler than sibilance at the beginnings of words, but here there's plenty of both. The hush and hiss of /s/ sounds in this stanza is both onomatopoeic, evoking the movement of the "sea-breakers" and the "streams," and atmospheric, suggesting that the speakers are telling their listeners a grand secret under their breaths.

Sibilance goes underground through the bold, trumpet-like declarations of the middle stanzas of the poem. But it returns in the final stanza, where the speakers conclude the poem with thoughts of death and immortality. They'll learn from their visionary visitors "in spite of a dreamer who slumbers, / And a singer who sings no more." Thinking of the endurance of artistic powers even beyond the grave, the speakers again return to mysterious whispery sounds. They're dealing with deep and incomprehensible matters here, and the quiet of sibilance reflects their awe as they come into contact with profound truths.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "sea"
- **Line 4:** "sitting," "desolate," "streams"
- **Line 49:** "singing"
- **Line 50:** "Ceaseless," "sorrowless"
- **Line 66:** "shore"
- **Line 67:** "us," "sun," "summers"
- **Line 71:** "spite," "slumbers"
- **Line 72:** "singer," "sings"

METONYMY

Metonymy plays into this poem's focus on earth-shaking, worldwide change—and adds a little sparkle of magic to the poem's vision. For example, consider lines 13-14:

> One man with a dream, at pleasure,
> Shall go forth and conquer a crown;

Referring to a monarch as "a crown" speaks to the symbolic power of kings, queens, and other leaders through time. It'd be rather less dramatic to say "One man with a dream, at pleasure, / Shall go forth and become Prime Minister." By speaking of a leader as "a crown," the speakers make the conquering power of poetry more general—and also more romantic. Crowns have associations with legend and myth as much as with history, and the metonymy here gives the reader a storyteller's-eye view.

Similarly, when the poem's speakers sing of "the soldier, the king, and the peasant" in line 29, they're not talking about three specific guys. Rather, they're referring to whole classes of people across time and space (making this an example of synecdoche, a device closely related to metonymy). Again, there's a slightly archaic (that is, old-fashioned) voice here;

even in O'Shaughnessy's time, farmers and workers would no longer have been referred to as "peasants." But speaking of different classes of people—soldiers, leaders, and ordinary folks—in old-fashioned language suggests that these classes of people have always been around, and that the people of the present are still connected to the past (and, by implication, to the future).

Where Metonymy appears in the poem:

- **Line 14:** "a crown;"
- **Line 29:** "The soldier, the king, and the peasant"

REPETITION

"Ode" is a poem that touches on an old paradox: the only constant in the world is change. The poem's "music makers" sing of how their perpetual role throughout human history is to see into the future and bring glorious new realities about. The poem's many kinds of repetition bring this point home.

Parallelism plays a big part in the poem's sound and sense. It often turns up in the stanzas that start with rhymed couplets, doubling down on the insistent energy of those rhymes. (More on this in the "Rhyme Scheme" section.) For instance, consider lines 9-16, a whole stanza that divides into two separate chunks of parallelism:

> With wonderful deathless ditties
> We build up the world's great cities,
> And out of a fabulous story
> We fashion an empire's glory:
> *One man with a dream, at pleasure,*
> *Shall go forth and conquer a crown;*
> *And three with a new song's measure*
> *Can trample a kingdom down.*

Here, two separate passages of parallelism also build a thematic parallel between themselves. In both of these four-line passages, the poem's *story* moves from a smaller to a larger victory for artists: from building a city to building an empire, and from conquering a king to conquering a whole kingdom. Parallelism makes this crescendoing, energetic movement especially clear and emphatic.

"Ode" also uses a lot of polyptoton—a kind of repetition in which related, but not identical, words turn up in proximity. For instance, take a look at lines 69-72:

> You shall teach us your song's new numbers,
> And things that we dreamed not before:
> Yea, in spite of a dreamer who slumbers,
> And a singer who sings no more.

Here, polyptoton draws connections between singers, singing, and songs, and between dreamers and dreaming. This suggests how closely the poem's artists identify with their art: dreamers and their dreams, singers and their songs, seem like almost the same thing.

There's also simple diacope here—like the repetition of the word "world," which is scattered all through this poem, but turns up with particular punch in "World-losers and world-forsakers" (line 5). The repeated emphasis on the "world" suggests the speakers' focus on huge, global change—and also points to a paradox of the artistic life. Those who change the world are also "world-losers," who always have to stand a little bit apart from the flow of events in order to see their glorious visions.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "We are"
- **Line 2:** "we are," "dreamers of dreams"
- **Line 5:** "World-losers and world-forsakers,"
- **Line 7:** "we are"
- **Lines 9-12:** "With wonderful deathless ditties / We build up the world's great cities, / And out of a fabulous story / We fashion an empire's glory:"
- **Lines 13-16:** "One man with a dream, at pleasure, / Shall go forth and conquer a crown; / And three with a new song's measure / Can trample a kingdom down."
- **Lines 19-20:** "Built Nineveh with our sighing, / And Babel itself in our mirth;"
- **Lines 33-36:** "They had no vision amazing / Of the goodly house they are raising; / They had no divine foreshowing / Of the land to which they are going:"
- **Lines 41-44:** "And therefore to-day is thrilling / With a past day's late fulfilling; / And the multitudes are enlisted / In the faith that their fathers resisted,"
- **Line 49:** "dreaming and singing"
- **Line 51:** "glory"
- **Line 52:** "glorious"
- **Line 55:** "dreaming and singing"
- **Line 69:** "song's"
- **Line 70:** "dreamed"
- **Line 71:** "dreamer"
- **Line 72:** "singer," "sings"

VOCABULARY

Desolate (Line 4) - Deserted or lonely.

Forsakers (Line 5) - To forsake is to give something up—so a "world-forsaker" has renounced the world.

Fashion (Line 12) - Build or design.

Measure (Line 15) - The beat or rhythm of a poem or song.

Nineveh and Babel (Line 19, Line 20) - Ancient cities that play

important roles in biblical legend.

Mirth (Line 20) - Delighted laughter.

O'erthrew (Line 21) - Overthrew; conquered.

Goodly (Line 34) - Admirable or wonderful.

Foreshowing (Line 35) - Premonition or foreknowledge.

Hath, doth (Line 37, Line 38, Line 39) - Old-fashioned ways of saying "has" and "does."

Ceaseless (Line 50) - Unstopping.

Ye (Line 56, Line 64) - An old-fashioned way of saying "you."

Intrepid (Line 60) - Bravely or boldly.

Nigh (Line 62) - Near, close.

Hither (Line 67) - Towards; to bring something hither is to bring it closer.

Yore (Line 68) - Long ago or before.

Numbers (Line 69) - Rhythm or meter.

Yea (Line 71) - Yes.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

As the poem's title itself tells the reader, this is an ode—that is, a poem addressed to or in praise of a particular person, place, or thing. Here, the subject of this ode is, rather unusually, the singers of the ode themselves: this is an ode to artists, sung by artists.

Odes often use freer and more experimental shapes than other poetic forms allow, and this "Ode" is no exception."Ode" uses nine stanzas, each an eight-line octet. Within those stanzas, there's a combination of consistency and free-and-easy variation: two alternating patterns of rhyme combine with the flexibility of sprung rhythm to give the poem a buoyant, musical feeling. (Lots more on that in the "Meter" and "Rhyme Scheme" sections of this guide.) The poem's steady beat and changing but ever-present rhymes line up with its ideas: this "Ode" suggests that different artists may come and go, but they will always be a music-making, world-changing force, no matter where in human history one looks.

METER

The meter of this poem is, in one way, pretty predictable. Most lines uses trimeter, meaning they have three stressed beats, like this: "We are the music makers, / And we are the dreamers of dreams." But within that steady three-beat line, there are all kinds of different metrical feet. Take a look at those first two lines again:

> We are the | mu-sic | ma-kers,
> And we | are the dream- | ers of dreams,

The poem starts with front-loaded feet: a dactyl (DA-dum-dum) and two trochees (DA-dum). Then it switches round to back-loaded stresses with an iamb (da-DUM) and two anapests (da-da-DUM). Iambs and anapests are quite common in the poem, as can be seen in lines 7-8 of the same stanza:

> Yet we | are the mov- | ers and shakers
> Of the world | for ev- | er, it seems.

This kind of metrical pattern, in which the feet are all over the place but the number of stressed beats stays relatively consistent, is called "sprung rhythm." It was popularized by the Victorian poet Gerard Manley Hopkins—who lived at almost exactly the same time as O'Shaughnessy, also born in 1844 and also dying young in the 1880s.

Sprung rhythm is meant to sound natural, coming closer to normal patterns of speech than a stricter meter might. Here, the naturalistic qualities of sprung rhythm work with the strong pulse of trimeter to create an easy, musical effect—evoking the joy and the energy of this chorus of artists living and dead.

RHYME SCHEME

The musical rhyme scheme of "Ode" switches back and forth between two distinct patterns. The first stanza introduces this steady pattern:

> ABABABAB

The second runs (using different rhyme sounds from the first):

> AABBCDCD

Both of these patterns recur a few more times in the poem: the third, seventh, eighth, and ninth stanzas use the ABAB pattern, while the fourth, fifth, and sixth use the AABBCDCD.

These variations bring subtly different flavors to the poem. The back-and-forth of the ABAB stanzas creates an even, balanced, musical effect. In contrast, the initial rhyming couplets of the AABBCDCD stanzas sound insistent, seeming to speed the poem up.

These different patterns support the poem's varying, complicated moods. The stanzas that use the more urgent pattern of couplets are often about the glorious, inspiring, world-altering powers of the artist, while the more balanced ABAB stanzas have more to do with the more secretive, personal, and sometimes painful elements of an artist's life—like melancholy, isolation, mystery, and dreams.

SPEAKER

The speaker here is a chorus: the whole collective of artists, past, present, and future. These artists sing of themselves, and share a vision of their role as "movers and shakers," people who alter the course of human history.

While this chorus of artists seems to take great pride and pleasure in the power of their artistry, there's also a hint of sadness in their reflections on their lives. They speak of wandering in lonely places, exiled from the rest of society. But if their work makes them outcasts, it also makes them special: they share a glorious destiny, and, as their singing here suggests, they have each other for company. The artistic community portrayed here stretches across time and space, crossing even the boundaries of death.

SETTING

While there isn't a single clear setting here, the poem sweeps through all of human history, and visits a variety of different landscapes on the way. References to the ancient cities of Nineveh and Babel place artists in important biblical stories, while artistic wanderings by "lone sea-breakers" and "desolate streams" suggest the inspirational power of nature. Artists, these images proclaim, find rich, deep experiences in all parts of the world, drawing their new visions both from civilization and wilderness.

Wherever this poem goes in the world, it finds glory and greatness. Much of the natural imagery here is to do with dazzling sunlight, summer, and blazing fire: this is a landscape of illumination, in which artists clearly see what's hidden to the average person.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Over the course of his short life, Arthur O'Shaughnessy (1844-1881) worked not only as a poet, but as a scientist, getting his start as a herpetologist in the British Museum. Though not many know his name today, his "Ode (We are the music makers)" continues to be both famous and influential, known for its lyrical first lines and for originating the idiom of "movers and shakers." First published in 1873, "Ode" also served as the first poem of O'Shaughnessy's 1874 collection "Music and Moonlight."

O'Shaughnessy wrote several volumes of well-received poetry, and was connected to the Pre-Raphaelite circle, a group of poets and visual artists who advocated for a return to the allegory and mystery of medieval art. O'Shaughnessy's work reflects the ideals of this school, but some scholars also see his work as a point of aesthetic and political connection between the revivalism of the Pre-Raphaelites and the stylized decadence of Art Nouveau.

Had he lived, he would have seen the rise (and fall) of Oscar Wilde—like O'Shaughnessy, an Irishman who made his home in London, and who shared his visionary idealism (though Wilde's was disguised by a veneer of arch wit). O'Shaughnessy was also an almost exact contemporary of the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, who shared his love of beauty and his transcendent religious vision.

O'Shaughnessy didn't get a lot of respect from his colleagues; one, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, even wrote a rather cruel limerick about the quality of his verse, and many of his fellow poets saw his scientific employment as suspect. O'Shaughnessy was indeed unusual among the Pre-Raphaelites for needing a day job, and his combination of the scientific and quotidian with the poetic and idealistic gave him a unique perspective.

O'Shaughnessy led a difficult life, losing two children as babies and dying himself at the young age of 36. Despite (or because) of his suffering, much of his poetry has a visionary gleam, singing of a glorious future.

The "Ode" is by far O'Shaughnessy's most enduring poem, and one can find references to it in everything from the movie "Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory" to the music of Edward Elgar and Aphex Twin.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Arthur O'Shaughnessy lived and wrote right in the heart of 19th-century England, during the reign of Queen Victoria. He died not too many years before Victoria herself did, and as such was a first-hand observer of a major shift in English culture.

The turmoil of the Industrial Revolution, in which a primarily rural and agricultural population and economy rapidly became primarily urban and factory-based, had begun to settle into normalcy by the time that O'Shaughnessy died, and new artistic and political movements arose in its wake.

Born and raised in London (though of Irish descent), O'Shaughnessy was well-placed to watch as the city became one of the most powerful and important in the world. He was also able to observe as the gap between the city's rich and poor populations grew ever wider. Like his contemporary William Morris, O'Shaughnessy was involved in workers' movements, and his political idealism—inflected by thinkers like Karl Marx—emerged in his poetry.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Short Biography — Check out Britannica's entry on O'Shaughnessy. (https://www.britannica.com/biography/Arthur-OShaughnessy)
- Gene Wilder Quotes the Poem — Gene Wilder, playing Willy Wonka, recites an excerpt from the poem. Just one demonstration of the mark the "Ode" has left on language and popular culture! (https://youtu.be/1M0eMkcc91E)
- The Aphex Twin Version of the Poem — A recent take on

the poem by the ambient band Aphex Twin. O'Shaughnessy's most famous poem continues to leave its mark on art even today. (https://youtu.be/sIXYPjIWPGY)

- An Essay on the Poem's Afterlife — Dr. Jordan Kistler, an O'Shaughnessy scholar, on how this poem has been received and remembered. A lot of people know this poem, but few know who wrote it! (https://strathprints.strath.ac.uk/69892/1/Kistler_VLC_2016_A_poem_without_an_author.pdf)
- A Reading of the Poem — Hear the full poem read aloud. (https://youtu.be/piCr2KZHIx0)

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Nelson, Kristin. "*Ode (We are the music makers).*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 8 Jul 2020. Web. 11 Oct 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Nelson, Kristin. "*Ode (We are the music makers).*" LitCharts LLC, July 8, 2020. Retrieved October 11, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/arthur-o-shaughnessy/ode-we-are-the-music-makers.