On the Sea

POEM TEXT

It keeps eternal whisperings around
Desolate shores,—and with its mighty swell
Gluts twice ten thousand caverns,—till the spell
Of Hecate leaves them their old shadowy sound.
Often 'tis in such gentle temper found,
That scarcely will the very smallest shell
Be lightly moved, from where it sometime fell,
When last the winds of heaven were unbound.
Ye, that have your eye-balls vex'd and tired,
Feast them upon the wideness of the Sea;—
Or are your hearts disturb'd with uproar rude,
Or fed too much with cloying melody,—
Sit ye near some old cavern's mouth, and brood
Until ye start, as if the sea-nymphs quired.

SUMMARY

The sea whispers perpetually against lonely, faraway sands, and its powerful tides overflow thousands of caves, until the power of the moon goddess Hecate draws the tide back out and leaves those caves dark and quiet again. It's often in such a mild mood that it will hardly move even the teensiest seashell from the spot it landed the last time a storm blew through.

If you've irritated and exhausted your eyes, go and feed them with the sea's vastness. Or, if you've unsettled yourself with all the stupid noise of daily life, or overindulged in sickly-sweet music—then, go sit just inside a sea-cave, and lose yourself in thought, until you startle back to consciousness as if you'd heard the song of ocean spirits.

THEMES

THE MYSTERY AND BEAUTY OF THE OCEAN

To the speaker of "On the Sea," the ocean's grandeur is an antidote to all the meaningless noise and nonsense of everyday life. With its strange rhythms, its vastness, and its myths, the ocean offers an alternative to the tiresome, petty "uproar" that people live in most of the time. Paying quiet attention to something so big and mysterious, the speaker suggests, offers people a strange kind of healing. To this speaker, the ocean helps people put life into perspective, helping them escape the constant noise of their own thoughts and troubles.

In this speaker's eyes, the ocean offers people a point of contact with eternity, mystery, and magic. Its "eternal whisperings" touch the shores of faraway lands that people have never visited, its vastness can fill "twice ten thousand caverns," and its endless soft sounds suggest the singing of nymphs. At once "mighty" and "gentle," the ocean is one great big mystery: a place that encourages people to open their minds both to the wide unknown and to tiny things they might often overlook, like the "very smallest shell" that lands at their feet.

That kind of mind-opening mystery, the speaker goes on, is the perfect antidote to the pointless chaos that bedevils most lives. The speaker encourages anyone who has strained their eyes, ears, and hearts with the "uproar" of the day-to-day to simply go and sit beside the sea until they're deeply lost in thought. In fact, the speaker encourages people to go so deep into their reveries that they "start" (or jump) as they come back to themselves. Merely coming near the mysteries of the ocean, the speaker suggests, is enough to expand, calm, and quiet the human mind—and to give people a little respite from the noise of their own thoughts.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

It keeps eternal whisperings around
Desolate shores,

"On the Sea" begins mysteriously. Without the title there to guide them, readers might not even know that the speaker is describing the sea: the speaker merely introduces an enigmatic "it" that whispers around the "shores" of lonely, faraway lands.

The personification here suggests that this "it" could be a spirit, or even an immortal god: its "whisperings" are "eternal," and it can travel to "desolate" places that no human foot has ever touched.

In other words: this poem sees the ocean as more than just a bunch of water. To this speaker, the sea is a conscious, living force. And it seems to have a message to communicate. Those "eternal whisperings" might contain secret wisdom.

The speaker wants readers to hear the ocean's whisper for

themselves. Listen to the strong sibilance of these first words:

> It keeps eternal whisperings around
> Desolate shores,

Those repeated /s/ sounds—along with the consonant /sh/ and /z/ sounds—are onomatopoeic, sounding just like what they're describing: the steady, quiet hiss of ocean waves.

Right from the start, then, this poem immerses readers in the physical experience of being by the ocean and listening to the surf. But it also invites readers to see this as more than just a physical experience. To hear the "whisperings" of the ocean, the speaker suggests, is to come into contact with some mysterious spirit of nature. The rest of this poem will explore this sea-spirit's personality and encourage readers to get to know it for themselves.

LINES 2-4

> *—and with its mighty swell*
> *Gluts twice ten thousand caverns,—till the spell*
> *Of Hecate leaves them their old shadowy sound.*

In these lines, the speaker evokes the sea's character. It's not just a gentle whisperer, but a "mighty" force whose tides can overflow thousands and thousands of sea-caves (or, to be precise, *twenty*-thousand sea-caves). It's also in cahoots—or perhaps at war—with Hecate, the ancient Greek goddess of darkness, mystery, and the moon, whose "spell" empties those caves out again.

That allusion to ancient myth again suggests that there's more to the sea than meets the eye. On the most literal level, these lines simply describe the action of the tides: the water rises up, fills those "caverns," and recedes again, drawn out by the moon. But the speaker sees this natural behavior in terms of magic "spell[s]" and goddesses. The sea, in this poem, is not just vast, mighty, and awe-inspiring, but enchanted.

And yet, all that enchantment is grounded in tangible reality. Take a look at the way the speaker uses sound and rhythm to shape the first four lines here:

> It keeps eternal whisperings around
> Desolate shores, || —and with its mighty swell
> Gluts twice ten thousand caverns, || —till the spell
> Of Hecate leaves them their old shadowy sound.

The sibilance of lines 1 and 2 persists all through this passage, but there's also some sharp, percussive /t/ consonance here that imitates the slap of water inside those stony "caverns." The onomatopoeic word "gluts" does something similar, evoking the glugging sound as the caverns overflow.

There's also something evocative going on in the caesurae here. By breaking this passage up with sharp mid-line dashes, the speaker evokes exactly what these lines describe. The dashes divide the first four lines into three "stages," matching the movements of the ocean that the poem has so far followed: first the water gently whispers—then it rises up to fill the caverns—and finally it withdraws once more.

The speaker's sounds and rhythms, in other words, match the sounds and rhythms of the sea that the poem describes. This makes readers feel like they're right in the middle of this seaside scene, standing alongside the speaker.

LINES 5-8

> *Often 'tis in such gentle temper found,*
> *That scarcely will the very smallest shell*
> *Be lightly moved, from where it sometime fell,*
> *When last the winds of heaven were unbound.*

The first four lines of this poem have evoked the sea's sounds, rhythms, and personality. These next four lines delve more deeply into its moods.

Here, the speaker observes not the vastness and power of the sea, but its peculiar mildness. Personifying the ocean again, the speaker remarks that it's occasionally in such a "gentle temper" that it will set a tiny shell down on the beach and then leave it totally undisturbed for days.

The sound of the language evokes not just the rush of the waves, but the "gentle[ness]" these lines describe. Listen to all the delicate, tip-of-the-tongue /t/ and /l/ consonance here:

> Often 'tis in such gentle temper found,
> That scarcely will the very smallest shell
> Be lightly moved, from where it sometime fell,

These quiet sounds suggest how tiny and fragile that itty-bitty shell is, and how gently the ocean treats it. And the steady assonant /e/ sound in "gentle temper" suggests how even-keeled and mild the ocean can be.

But the ocean isn't *always* gentle: it has a dangerous side, too. That "very smallest shell," the speaker tells us, landed in its undisturbed spot the last time the "winds of heaven were unbound." In other words, the ocean first flung that tiny shell to its current peaceful location in a terrible storm.

All the images of the ocean the speaker has used so far have a double edge: the ocean is both "whispering[]" and "mighty," "gentle" and storm-tossed, natural and supernatural. Part of the speaker's appreciation of this place, it seems, is that it's got a little bit of everything.

LINES 9-10

> *Ye, that have your eye-balls vex'd and tired,*
> *Feast them upon the wideness of the Sea;—*

In line 9, the speaker turns from describing the sea to inviting readers to come and see it for themselves. The speaker's meter

introduces this direct apostrophe with a flourish.

"On the Sea" is a sonnet, which means it consists of 14 lines of iambic pentameter. In other words, each line uses five iambs, a metrical foot with an unstressed-stressed (da-DUM) rhythm. But listen to the way the speaker plays with that meter in these lines:

> Ye, | that have | your eye-| balls vex'd | and tired,
> Feast them | upon | the wide- | ness of | the Sea;—

In line 9, the speaker cuts out a whole syllable, leaving the stressed word "Ye" (or "you") to stand dramatically alone. And in line 10, the speaker starts with a trochee (a foot that goes DUM-da) rather than an iamb: "Feast them." These strong, upfront stresses make these lines sound like a magnificent invitation.

So does the speaker's language. The old-fashioned "Ye" here sounds grand and serious, almost biblical. That fits right in with the speaker's previous personification of the sea as a kind of spirit or god: by inviting readers to "feast" upon the sea, the speaker proposes an encounter with a vast, mysterious, powerful, and sometimes dangerous being.

But there's also a touch of humor in this invitation. The word "eye-balls" feels a little out of step with the rest of these lines' grand vocabulary. The speaker could just as easily have said something more pointedly poetic, like "your fair eyes." But the connotation of "eye-balls" is more grounded, less elevated. In describing troubled "eye-balls," the speaker suggests a down-to-earth kind of exhaustion: the physical weariness that comes from day-to-day life, not from some great poetic torment.

What's more, the suggestion that the reader's eyes might be "vex'd" (or irritated) and "tired" hints that they've been doing too much reading. It's as if the speaker is saying, "Put down this dumb poem and get yourself out to the ocean, already!" This advice also hints at the possibility that the ocean's grand "wideness" might provide an antidote to the strains and vexations of normal life.

LINES 11-12

> *Or are your hearts disturb'd with uproar rude,*
> *Or fed too much with cloying melody,—*

Having imagined the reader's strained, "vex'd" eyeballs, the speaker goes on to suggest a few more reasons the reader might be feeling a little out of sorts. They might suffer from two different kinds of noise: "uproar rude" (chaotic clamor) or "cloying melody" (sugary-sweet music). Both, the speaker implies, can wear a person out.

Both "uproar" and "melody" speak to different problems readers might encounter in everyday life. That "uproar" might evoke the bustle of a city, but also the noise inside people's minds. And "cloying melody" could suggest an attempt to drown out that "uproar" with escapist indulgences—like, just for instance, too much sentimental poetry. Such nosies strike people right to their "hearts," either upsetting them or making them feel vaguely sick, as if they've eaten too much sugar. (Perhaps these lines also hint that Keats is thinking of his own particular problems here: the "uproar" of London and the "cloying melody" of poetry that doesn't meet his standards!)

The "wideness of the Sea," the speaker suggests, offers a respite from all of these day-to-day problems. This might have something to do with those gentle, quiet /s/ sounds that pulsed all through the poem's onomatopoeic first section: the hiss of waves is a welcome break from both clamor and sentiment. But maybe the sea's "wideness" is also refreshing because it forms a contrast with the pettiness of day-to-day life, putting all that "uproar" into perspective. Next to the vast and mysterious sea, in other words, every problem seems small.

LINES 13-14

> *Sit ye near some old cavern's mouth, and brood*
> *Until ye start, as if the sea-nymphs quired.*

At the end of the poem, the speaker gives a prescription for those whose tired "eye-balls" and "disturb'd" hearts need a break from the everyday. Sit beside the ocean, the speaker encourages readers, and get so deeply lost in thought that when you startle back to consciousness, it's as if you'd suddenly heard "sea-nymphs" singing.

These last lines return to the scenery and sounds at the beginning of the poem. Once again, there's a mysterious "cavern"; once again, there's an allusion to classical mythology with those "sea-nymphs." And that hushed sibilance returns, making it seem as if the waves have been persistently whooshing in the background all along:

> Sit ye near some old cavern's mouth, and brood
> Until ye start, as if the sea-nymphs quired.

This return to earlier images and earlier sounds makes it seem as if the speaker has been doing exactly what the poem encourages readers to do: sitting by the sea, getting lost in thought, and then jolting awake to the scenery again.

Perhaps there's a little danger in this kind of deep thought, though. Those "sea-nymphs" aren't just peaceful singers: nymphs were said to lure sailors to their deaths with their songs. By sitting down by the sea and getting lost in imagination, the speaker seems not just to be taking a break, but taking a risk.

That sense of danger suggests that the sea the speaker's talking about here isn't just the literal sea. It's also the symbolic sea of the imagination. In its hugeness, its association with myth and legend, its strange moods, and its hypnotic sounds, the sea invites people to look past the "uproar rude" of daily life and into the great unknown. An encounter with the spirit of the sea

might be perilous, but it's also deeply rewarding.

SYMBOLS

THE SEA

This poem is about the sea both literally and symbolically. In its symbolic role, the sea represents the mysterious depths of the imagination.

Encouraging people to get lost in thought beside the ocean, the speaker is also encouraging them to look beyond the chatter of their everyday minds and into the unknown. The vastness, strangeness, and magic of the sea here are all images of the scope and beauty of the irrational, dreaming parts of the mind. Sitting by this kind of "sea" is not only enchanting, but inspiring: an encounter with the imagination like the one the speaker describes here must have produced this very poem.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

POETIC DEVICES

CONSONANCE

The consonance in "On the Sea" helps evoke the sounds and moods of the ocean. Sibilance, in particular, turns up all through the poem, forming a backdrop of /s/ sounds that suggests the "eternal whisperings" of the sea itself. (Read more about the poem's dramatic sibilance under Onomatopoeia.)

But other forms of consonance also help to evoke the ocean's behavior. Take a look at the /t/ and /l/ sounds in this passage:

> Often 'tis in such gentle temper found,
> That scarcely will the very smallest shell
> Be lightly moved, from where it sometime fell,

These soft, light, tip-of-the-tongue sounds evoke both the fragile delicacy of that "very smallest shell" and the ocean's strange, intermittent "gentleness."

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "eternal," "whisperings," "around"
- **Line 3:** "Gluts twice ten," "till," "spell"
- **Line 4:** "leaves," "them their," "old," "shadowy sound"
- **Line 5:** "tis," "gentle," "temper"
- **Line 6:** "will," "smallest," "shell"
- **Line 7:** "lightly," "from," "sometime," "fell"
- **Line 8:** "last," "winds," "heaven," "unbound"
- **Line 9:** "have," "vex'd"
- **Line 10:** "Feast," "wideness," "Sea"
- **Line 11:** "hearts disturb'd," "uproar," "rude"
- **Line 12:** "cloying melody"
- **Line 13:** "Sit," "some"
- **Line 14:** "Until," "start," "if," "nymphs"

ASSONANCE

Assonance gives the poem some of its music and helps draw extra attention to important moments. For example, take a look at the dramatic assonance in lines 9 and 10:

> Ye, that have your eye-balls vex'd and tired,
> Feast them upon the wideness of the Sea;—

Alternating between wide-open, long /ee/ and /i/ sounds, the speaker evokes the very "wideness" that the poem describes. These long, spacious vowels also call attention to the speaker's broad invitation: *everyone* who has "vex'd and tired" their eyes with everyday labor should come to the sea's "feast."

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "gentle," "temper"
- **Line 6:** "scarcely," "very"
- **Line 9:** "Ye," "eye," "tired"
- **Line 10:** "Feast," "wideness," "Sea"
- **Line 11:** "are," "hearts"
- **Line 12:** "melody"
- **Line 13:** "ye," "near"
- **Line 14:** "ye," "sea"

APOSTROPHE

Apostrophe first appears in this sonnet's volta, the moment when the poem's mood or thinking changes. That moment comes in line 9, where the speaker shifts from descriptions of the sea to an invitation, encouraging the weary people of the world to soak up some oceanic pleasures. By making a direct address to readers—and to the general public—the speaker suggests that visiting the sea is a solution to problems that plague everybody. But this suggestion also reveals a lot about the speaker's *own* problems.

The apostrophe begins with an old-fashioned "Ye" rather than "you": language that gives the speaker's invitation an almost biblical weight. It's as if the speaker is addressing all of humanity, encouraging everyone in the world to come refresh themselves.

But the problems the speaker describes—having exhausted "eye-balls," being shaken by the "uproar" of life, and overindulging in a sickly-sweet, "cloying melody"—feel a lot like Keats's own particular issues. Those weary "eye-balls" might be

the consequence of too much reading, the "uproar" might come from the crowds of Keats's native London, and an excess of "cloying melody" sounds a lot like the result of having read (or written!) too much sentimental poetry.

The apostrophe here thus does two different things at once. It suggests that many people might suffer from the strain, stress, and weariness of everyday life—and be relieved by the grand vastness of the ocean. And it hints that the poet is delving into his own particular experience as much as he's thinking about humanity's problems in general.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-14:** "Ye, that have your eye-balls vex'd and tired, / Feast them upon the wideness of the Sea;— / Or are your hearts disturb'd with uproar rude, / Or fed too much with cloying melody,— / Sit ye near some old cavern's mouth, and brood / Until ye start, as if the sea-nymphs quired."

CAESURA

Occasional moments of caesura help the speaker shape the poem's pace and thoughts. For instance, take a look at the dramatic caesurae in lines 1 through 4:

> It keeps eternal whisperings around
> Desolate shores, || —and with its mighty swell
> Gluts twice ten thousand caverns, || —till the spell
> Of Hecate leaves them their old shadowy sound.

Here, the speaker uses caesurae to draw attention to the sea's different moods. Having first imagined the sea as a whispering presence that murmurs in far-off lands ("Desolate shores"), the speaker breaks in with a dash to introduce a quite different idea: namely, that the sea is also a "mighty" force that fills thousands of caves. The speaker then brings this thought to an end with yet another dash, returning to the "old shadowy sound" those caves had before. In this way, caesura helps the poem mirror what it describes, mimicking the movement of the tides. Like these lines, the sea starts out calm and whispery—then gets powerful—then subsides again.

The caesurae in the rest of the poem often do something similar in a gentler way, using commas to give lines a swinging, tidal rhythm. For instance, take a look at lines 6 and 7:

> That scarcely will the very smallest shell
> Be lightly moved, || from where it sometime fell,

The subtle comma in the middle of line 7 gives this line a lulling, back-and-forth sweep, just like the movement of a gentle wave.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "shores,—and"
- **Line 3:** "caverns,—till"
- **Line 7:** "moved, from"
- **Line 9:** "Ye, that"
- **Line 13:** "mouth, and"
- **Line 14:** "start, as"

ENJAMBMENT

The frequent enjambments in the first half of the poem help evoke both the ocean and the speaker's feelings. For instance, take a look at how enjambments work in the first four lines:

> It keeps eternal whisperings around
> Desolate shores,—and with its mighty swell
> Gluts twice ten thousand caverns,—till the spell
> Of Hecate leaves them their old shadowy sound.

This passage is one long, continuous sentence. The way its lines slide into each other mirrors what it describes: the ocean moving seamlessly from quiet "whisperings" to a "mighty swell" and back. Enjambments thus suggest the ocean's endless, constant motion.

But the enjambments also introduce unexpected bumps in the rhythm, breaking this single sentence at odd and surprising places. None of these enjambments fall at a natural break: for example, in lines 3 and 4, nobody would pause between "the spell" and "of Hecate" in everyday speech! There's something a little off-kilter about the enjambments here. But that oddity *also* evokes the ocean, suggesting its unpredictable, changing moods.

Lines 5-7 similarly evoke the ocean's movement through enjambments:

> Often 'tis in such gentle temper found,
> That scarcely will the very smallest shell
> Be lightly moved, from where it sometime fell,

Enjambment gives this section momentum and flow. But it also interrupts that flow with a caesura after the word "moved" in line 7, which is also end-stopped. This combination of enjambment, caesura, and an end-stop gives the poem's pacing a subtle push-and-pull feeling that evokes the movement of the waves.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "around / Desolate"
- **Lines 2-3:** "swell / Gluts"
- **Lines 3-4:** "spell / Of"
- **Lines 6-7:** "shell / Be"
- **Lines 13-14:** "brood / Until"

PERSONIFICATION

By personifying the ocean, the speaker suggests that the power of the sea isn't just a natural phenomenon: there's something magical going on here, too. The poem introduces the sea as a mysterious figure whose "eternal whisperings" haunt "desolate shores" unknown to humanity. But the speaker doesn't say exactly what this figure *is*: it's just an "it," not named explicitly as the "Sea" until line 10. The apparently immortal whisperer the speaker first introduces thus feels more like a god or a spirit than a body of water.

That impression only gets stronger when the speaker describes the ocean's strange, "gentle temper," which, in spite of its "mighty" power, will leave even the "very smallest shell" totally undisturbed for days. Imagining the ocean's behavior as a mood, the speaker also hints that the ocean might be in a *less* "gentle temper" from time to time. If the sea is like a god or a spirit, it might be wrathful as well as peaceful!

Personification thus fits right in with the poem's allusions to sea-nymphs and Hecate, suggesting that the natural world has a supernatural side—a personality that is gentle, awe-inspiring, or both at once. Visiting the ocean, to this speaker, isn't just a nice way to spend a weekend: it's a way of coming into contact with the mysterious forces behind the everyday world.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "It keeps eternal whisperings around / Desolate shores,"
- **Line 5:** "Often 'tis in such gentle temper found,"

ONOMATOPOEIA

Rich onomatopoeia evokes the speaker's experience of the sea. The first eight lines of the poem are laden with sounds that imitate the ocean. Hissing sibilance, for instance, evokes the "whisperings" of waves on the shore:

> It keeps eternal whisperings around
> Desolate shores,—and with its mighty swell
> Gluts twice ten thousand caverns,—till the spell
> Of Hecate leaves them their old shadowy sound.

But there's not just sibilance here: there's also the sound of the word "gluts," which uses a gulping consonant /gl/ sound and a sharp /t/ sound to mimic the wet slap of the waves as they fill up all those stony "caverns." These moments of onomatopoeia help the reader immerse themselves in the landscape the speaker describes.

Sibilant onomatopoeia comes back at the end of the poem, when the speaker proposes an oceanic cure for all the weary people of the world:

> Sit ye near some old cavern's mouth, and brood
> Until ye start, as if the sea-nymphs quired.

By beginning and ending this poem with the sibilant hiss of the waves, the speaker suggests that the ocean has been whispering away in the background all along. Onomatopoeia thus invites readers into the world of the poem, encouraging them to imagine their way to the seaside with the speaker.

Where Onomatopoeia appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-3
- Lines 3-4
- Lines 6-7
- Lines 13-14

ALLUSION

The speaker's allusions to classical myth hint that this poem isn't just about the literal sea, but about the symbolic sea of the imagination. To this speaker, the ocean's phenomena aren't merely the result of physics: it isn't just the pull of the moon that empties out the sea-caves the ocean "gluts" with the tides, but "the spell of Hecate." Hecate, an ancient Greek goddess of darkness, magic, and the moon, was a dangerous and powerful figure. By evoking her right at the start of the poem, the speaker suggests that the sea doesn't just feel huge and awe-inspiring: it feels enchanted, haunted by myths and legends.

Something similar happens at the end of the poem, when the speaker encourages readers to get so deeply lost in thought while staring at the sea that they eventually startle back to consciousness as if they've heard "sea-nymphs" singing. The song of sea-nymphs might be beautiful, but it's also dangerous: nymphs were said to lure sailors to their doom with their singing. It's no wonder the imagined visitor "start[s]" at the sound of that song!

By alluding to ancient myths of alluring, powerful, dangerous women, the speaker suggests that the sea itself is alluring, powerful, and dangerous—and that it stimulates parts of the imagination that it's pretty easy to get lost in. But that depth of imagination, the speaker suggests, is worth taking a risk for: it's an antidote to the dreary "uproar" of the everyday.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "till the spell / Of Hecate leaves them their old shadowy sound."
- **Lines 13-14:** "Sit ye near some old cavern's mouth, and brood / Until ye start, as if the sea-nymphs quired."

VOCABULARY

Desolate (Line 2) - Remote, lonely, or distant.

Swell (Line 2) - Tides.

Gluts (Line 3) - Fills up, overflows.

Hecate (Line 4) - A goddess of darkness and mystery, sometimes associated with the moon; here, she's affecting the tides.

Temper (Line 5) - Mood.

Scarcely (Line 6) - Barely, hardly.

Sometime (Line 7) - Once, earlier.

Unbound (Line 8) - Released.

Ye (Line 9, Line 13, Line 14) - You.

Vex'd (Line 9) - Troubled, annoyed.

Rude (Line 11) - Rough, lowly, or abrupt.

Cloying (Line 12) - Excessively sweet.

Brood (Line 13) - Think deeply (and perhaps sadly).

Quired (Line 14) - Sang (as if in a choir).

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"On the Sea" is a Petrarchan sonnet. This means that it's built from two parts: an octave (or eight-line passage) that explores a theme, and a sestet (or six-line passage) that introduces a new idea. The beginning of the sestet is called the "volta" (or "turn"), and it marks a transition from one kind of thinking to another.

Here, the volta begins with apostrophe: the speaker turns from a mysterious, meditative portrait of the sea to an invitation, encouraging anyone who feels worn out by life to come and lose themselves in the sea's mysteries.

The poem's shape thus reflects its bigger philosophy. Switching from meditative description to broad apostrophe, the speaker seems to say that everyone (not just poets) can be refreshed and restored through an encounter with the grandeur of the sea—and, symbolically, an encounter with the depths of the imagination.

METER

As a sonnet, "On the Sea" uses iambic pentameter. This means that every line uses five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm, like this:

Or are | your hearts | disturb'd | with up- | roar rude,

But the speaker doesn't keep strictly to this meter through the whole poem. Instead, the speaker often plays with stresses, switching them around to mirror the descriptions. For instance, take a look at what happens when the speaker uses apostrophe in lines 8 and 9:

Ye, | that have | your eye- | balls vex'd | and tired,
Feast them | upon | the wide- | ness of | the Sea;—

Here, the speaker starts by dropping a syllable altogether, leaving the stressed word "Ye" to stand alone. Something similar happens in the next line, when the speaker begins with a trochee (a stressed-unstressed, DUM-da foot). Putting strong stresses right up front, the speaker introduces the poem's sestet (or last six lines) with a flourish, emphatically inviting everyone into an encounter with the sea's mysteries. These metrical variations also keep the language fresh and engaging, pulling readers from line to line with a pleasing kind of musicality.

RHYME SCHEME

Since "On the Sea" is a Petrarchan sonnet, it uses a standard rhyme scheme in the first eight lines (or octave). It then follows one of several different traditional patterns in the last six lines (or sestet). The rhyme scheme looks like this overall:

ABBAABBACDEDEC

This pattern of rhyme shapes the speaker's thoughts. The ABBA section is descriptive, evoking the moods and movements of the ocean. Then, when the poem comes to its volta (or turning point) in line 9, the speaker addresses readers in a direct apostrophe, encouraging them to go soak up some of the sea's grandeur for themselves.

Keats might have chosen the Petrarchan sonnet form here precisely because its patterns of rhyme fit his subject. That back-and-forth ABBA is like the motion of waves, and the CDEDEC pattern—which returns to the same place it began after a more complicated journey—moves like the thoughts of the person who sits down to "brood" in a sea-cave, getting so deeply lost in thought that they have to suddenly "start" back to normal awareness.

SPEAKER

Judging by their careful attention to the ocean, their impulse to escape the clamor of daily life, and their love of myth and legend, this poem's reflective speaker has a lot in common with Keats himself. But the poem doesn't clearly identify the speaker: anything readers learn about the speaker, they learn through the observations that the speaker makes about the surrounding world.

This all fits right into Keats's ideas about poetry. According to Keats, poets should be like chameleons, transforming themselves into the things they write about rather than imposing their own egos on the world. By disappearing into a description of the sea, then, the speaker gets lost in contemplation—exactly what the poem advises its readers to do.

SETTING

"On the Sea" is set, unsurprisingly, beside the sea. But the speaker isn't just describing a day at a particular beach. The sea that the speaker imagines is more like an archetypal sea: a place of mysterious and awesome power, full of mythic creatures, and with its own unpredictable moods and feelings. In other words: this encounter with the vast power of the real ocean also puts the speaker in touch with the symbolic ocean of the imagination.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

John Keats wrote "On the Sea" on the Isle of Wight in April 1817, taking a much-needed holiday from his native London. He had published his first volume of poetry, *Poems*, just a month earlier. Keats's early reviewers were often condescending and dismissive, snobbishly writing Keats off as a common "Cockney" with no business dabbling in lyric poetry. But Keats's friends (including influential figures like the poet and journalist Leigh Hunt) believed in him deeply, and encouraged him to take a break, regroup, and keep on writing. This poem's sense of the sea as a restorative answer to the "uproar rude" of daily life reflects Keats's own troubles and hopes during this time.

Keats's thoughts on the sea in this poem were deeply influenced by a long tradition of poetic thought about the ocean. This poem owes a lot to Shakespeare, whose imaginative visions of the sea in *King Lear* and *The Tempest* were much on Keats's mind during this period. And many of Keats's English Romantic-era contemporaries also used the sea as a symbol of the imagination and the unknown, from Coleridge (in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner") to Shelley (in his elegy for Keats, "Adonais").

Only four years after his holiday to the Isle of Wight, Keats would die at the age of 25—but not before he'd written some of the most beloved and influential poetry in English literature. Generations of later poets have counted him as an inspiration, from the Victorian Tennyson to the contemporary Alice Oswald.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Encouraging readers to escape to the sea, the poem draws on some very Romantic ideas about the restorative power of nature. The early 19th century was marked by a dramatic shift in old ways of life: the Industrial Revolution was getting into gear, and the British economy shifted from farming to factories, the countryside to the city. Keats was one of many artists and thinkers at this time who sought relief from the growing noise, smoke, and bustle of the cities in the beauty of the natural world.

To the Romantics, nature wasn't just a nice place to have a picnic: it was a source of wisdom, spiritual beauty, and imaginative inspiration. To get lost in the loveliness of a flower or a bird's song, in their eyes, was a way to remember that there's more to the world than the mechanical and the scientific.

In this way, Romanticism rebelled against both earlier Enlightenment ideas of reason and order, and coming Victorian ideas about progress and propriety. Romanticism argued that the natural world wasn't there either to be dissected or mastered, but experienced.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem's Inspiration — Read about the circumstances in which Keats wrote this poem. He was probably inspired not just by his holiday on the Isle of Wight but by his reading (and rereading) of King Lear. (https://johnkeats.uvic.ca/1817-08-17.html)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to the poem read aloud to the sound of waves. (https://youtu.be/owzFB-bxWAE)
- The Romantic Sea — Read about how Keats's poem fits into a bigger Romantic interest in the ocean. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jun/24/fatal-attraction-writers-artists-obsession-sea-shakespeare-woolf-turner-gormley-philip-hoare-ocean)
- Keats, Shakespeare, and Mozart — Read about how Keats's love of Shakespeare and Mozart influenced this poem. (https://wordsworth.org.uk/blog/2016/04/16/romantic-readings-on-the-sea-by-john-keats/)
- Keats's Life and Work — Learn more about Keats and his poetry at the British Library's website. (https://www.bl.uk/people/john-keats)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER JOHN KEATS POEMS

- Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art
- La Belle Dame sans Merci
- Ode on a Grecian Urn
- Ode on Melancholy
- Ode to a Nightingale
- Ode to Psyche
- On First Looking into Chapman's Homer
- The Eve of St. Agnes
- To Autumn
- When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be

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