Pity me not because the light of day (Sonnet

POEM TEXT

Pity me not because the light of day
At close of day no longer walks the sky;
Pity me not for beauties passed away
From field and thicket as the year goes by;
Pity me not the waning of the moon,
Nor that the ebbing tide goes out to sea,
Nor that a man's desire is hushed so soon,
And you no longer look with love on me.
This have I known always: Love is no more
Than the wide blossom which the wind assails,
Than the great tide that treads the shifting shore,
Strewing fresh wreckage gathered in the gales:
Pity me that the heart is slow to learn
What the swift mind beholds at every turn.

SUMMARY

Don't feel sorry for me because the sun goes down at the end of the day. Don't feel sorry for me because the fields and thickets lose their beauties as the year goes on. Don't feel sorry for me because the moon wanes, or because the tide goes out, or because a man's love fades so quickly, and you don't love me anymore.

I've always known this much: love is nothing but a flower battered by the wind, or a strong tide that throws wreckage from storms all over the shore. Feel sorry for me because my heart is so slow to figure out what my mind can see evidence for everywhere.

THEMES

THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN THE HEART AND THE MIND

Though the speaker of "Pity me not" can provide any number of reasons that the end of a love affair shouldn't surprise her, none of them can get at her central problem: her heart still feels the pain of fading love even though her mind can see how inevitable that fading is. The poem thus explores one of the struggles of human life: understanding the truth doesn't make it hurt less.

In the first part of the poem, the speaker uses a reasoned, logical argument, comparing love to natural forces like the ebbing of the tide and the waning of the moon. This suggests that the speaker shouldn't be pitied just because her lover is losing interest in her: love, like light and tides, the speaker argues, is a big natural force, and its change and diminishment are thus only natural. These natural images also suggest love's power and beauty: love is as life-giving as the sun and mighty as the ocean.

Yet even in this seemingly objective, reasoned argument, there's a hint of sadness. The poem's natural imagery refers to a lot of things that always come back after they go away: the sun rises again, the moon waxes after it wanes, the tide comes in after it goes out. There's no such guarantee with love.

Having repeatedly insisted that she shouldn't be pitied because of inevitable change, the speaker changes her tune: she should be pitied, but only because her heart can't accept the inevitable change that her mind grasps so easily.

This turn only comes in the poem's last two lines. The simple, brief closing words suggest that the speaker is in so much pain she can hardly articulate it. The distance between the mind's knowing and the heart's feeling is expressed in silence: the mind can come up with all kinds of clever explanations, but the heart is stuck in its wordless grief.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

IMPERMANENCE

The speaker of "Pity me not" insists that she shouldn't be pitied just because her lover doesn't love her anymore, as that's only natural: everything in the world ends eventually. Through her images of natural waning and fading, the speaker points at a bigger truth: love, beauty, and essentially everything else are fleeting, because all things must one day end.

The speaker's natural imagery suggests that the whole world teaches her that nothing lasts forever. The poem's first images of "the light of day," the "waning of the moon," and the "ebbing of the tide" are grand and impersonal, bigger than any tiny human concerns. And when the speaker introduces the fact that "you no longer look with love on me" among these inevitable declines, she suggests that love, too, is a huge force that doesn't pay much attention to the people it affects. This, she insists, is why it's nonsensical to pity her for any of these changes: they've got nothing to do with her, and this is just how things are.

There's a bit of hope buried in these images, however: all the declining beauties that the speaker mentions will eventually return again. That is, the tide will always come back in after it goes out, the sun will always rise, winter will turn to spring, and the moon will always wax after it wanes. Yet while all these natural forces move through patterns of decline and return, there's no such guarantee with a lost love.

In linking the impermanence of natural things with the impermanence of love, the speaker thus seems either secretly optimistic or secretly pessimistic—or both! If the cycles of natural decline are also seen as cycles of inevitable return, perhaps the speaker hopes that love might come back to her again. But if the speaker sees nature as following the pattern of love, there's a bleaker vision here: even the cycling sun and moon will come to an end one day.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

Pity me not because the light of day
At close of day no longer walks the sky;

"Pity me not" begins with an emphatic command. The speaker insists: whatever you do, don't feel sorry for me! The reason she gives seems to be that pity, in the situation she's talking about, would be ridiculous. Why would one pity someone just because the sun had gone down? It does that every day!

But the *way* the speaker makes her command suggests that there's something more complicated going on here. She doesn't just say, "Pity me not because the sun always goes down at the end of the day." Rather more poetically, she says that "the light of day / At close of day no longer walks the sky."

This personification suggests not just a sunset, but a kind of vanishing sun-god: a human figure that has gone. While there's no direct evidence yet, there's a sense already that this speaker might be missing, not the sun, but a person who was *like* the sun to her, bringing warmth and light.

Perhaps the shape of this poem also provides a little hint in that direction. This is a sonnet—and a whole lot of sonnets are about love. Even their meter, the regular five-beat da-DUM of iambic pentameter, sounds like a heartbeat.

Here, though, that heartbeat is disrupted. The poem starts, not with an iamb, but a trochee (DUM-da): "Pity." Leaning on that first syllable, the speaker already seems both insistent and upset, thrown right off her beat. Something pitiable to do with love seems to have happened here, even if the speaker demands not to be pitied.

LINES 3-4

Pity me not for beauties passed away
From field and thicket as the year goes by;

The speaker carries on as she started. She even uses parallelism, structuring the next two lines in just the same way as the first two, and anaphora, starting this clause with the same words as the last. And again, she's insisting that she shouldn't be pitied just because the "beauties" of "field and thicket" diminish and fade as the year goes on.

Here, the speaker is hearkening back to some very old symbolism. These lines evoke autumn: the season of melancholy and change, when the liveliness of spring and summer transition into the cold death of winter. The autumn she imagines is taking place in "field and thicket"—that is, a cozy, friendly, familiar natural landscape. This isn't a wild wood, but rather cultivated farmland. Just as in that first image of the personified "light of day," there's a lot of emotion concealed in these seemingly simple words. The "beauties passed away" the speaker is thinking of here seem to be to do with familiarity and comfort—again hinting at a love that felt like a life-giving home to her.

But the speaker again insists that she shouldn't be pitied just because autumn comes. Like the sunset, that's just a part of nature. It's also a seasonal marker, though—a sign of time passing.

LINES 5-8

Pity me not the waning of the moon,
Nor that the ebbing tide goes out to sea,
Nor that a man's desire is hushed so soon,
And you no longer look with love on me.

The speaker's next lines again start with that anaphoric "Pity me not," and with more images of perfectly natural diminishment in the "waning moon" and the "ebbing tide." These images are also connected to each other: the moon controls the tides, making them rise and fall as it moves closer to and further from the earth.

Again, there's a lot of significance underground here. The moon is an old symbol of changeability; just ask Juliet, who won't let Romeo swear his love for her on "th' inconstant moon" in case his feelings change, too. But in combination with the tide, the moon also suggests the interconnection of lovers, the way one person can have an effect on another. And here, again, the moon is waning and the tide is going out.

But it's in lines 7 and 8 that the speaker really comes to her point. Having prepared all these images of fading, diminishing nature—things that there would be *absolutely no reason* to pity anyone for—she suddenly changes tack and says directly what she's lost. The sun hasn't gone down, the season hasn't changed; rather, "you no longer look with love on me."

There's a little shock in that apostrophe to the speaker's former

lover. Up until now, the reader has probably been rolling along assuming that the speaker is addressing a general audience. Here, suddenly, the reader learns that the speaker is saying all of this to a specific person with a strong, painful emotional connection to her.

That the speaker waits so long to address this person hints at her deep suffering. She can say plenty about autumnal landscapes, but she has to work up to a direct confrontation with the lover who has provoked these reflections. The relentless anaphora of "Nor that" in lines 6-7 gives the reader the feeling that the speaker has to build up a head of steam to even address her lover.

The speaker also seems to be saying that love is a huge natural force, like the sun or the moon or the seasons or the ocean. In so doing, she's classing the waning of love with the natural waning of all these phenomena. Love just fades, she suggests; there's no reason to pity anyone for that. (Note, too, that the speaker refers to "a man's desire" in particular—as if male desire is especially closely linked to impersonal natural cycles.)

But there's something rather painful in the comparison. The sun will always rise again, the moon waxes after it wanes, the tide comes back in after it goes out—but there's no such guarantee of renewal with faded love.

LINES 9-10

This have I known always: Love is no more
Than the wide blossom which the wind assails,

After the direct confrontation with her lost love in lines 7-8, the speaker makes a new point. She announces it with a dramatic caesura, the only one that appears in the poem:

> This have I known always: Love is no more
> Than the wide blossom which the wind assails,

That strong mid-line colon, stopping the reader in their tracks and insisting that they listen, fits in with the speaker's emphatic tone. "This I have known always" is pretty strong stuff. To have "always known" that love is nothing more than a windblown blossom suggests a cynicism that perhaps doesn't square with the speaker's melancholic, sensitive imagery. Perhaps the speaker does feel that she always knew that love was fragile and temporary as a flower—but that doesn't mean she wasn't invested in her love anyway.

Take a look at the alliteration of line 10, too. The repeated /w/ sounds of "the **w**ide blossom **w**hich the **w**ind assails" almost sound like the whoosh of the winds they describe. As the speaker lays out her understanding of love, she seems to become more and more deeply immersed in her imagery. That "blossom" also hearkens back to the "beauties passed away / From field and thicket as the year goes by" in lines 3-4.

LINES 11-12

Than the great tide that treads the shifting shore,
Strewing fresh wreckage gathered in the gales:

More imagery from earlier in the poem returns here. The reader has already encountered the wind-battered "blossom" in line 10, hearkening back to the earlier "beauties" of the fields. Now, the "ebbing tide" of line 6 returns in a much more dangerous form as "the great tide that treads the shifting shore."

If love is a fragile, easy-to-damage blossom, it's also a powerful tide. Here, that tide "treads the shifting shore"—personified like a sea-god, striding along uncertain and changeable sands.

What's more, it's throwing "fresh wreckage" around. The assonance on /eh/ sounds in the words "fr**e**sh wr**e**ckage" draws the reader's attention to the strangeness of that image. Freshness isn't necessarily a quality one connects with wreckage; a wreck, after all, is the *end* of something. In that paradox, there's a feeling that the speaker's heartbreak is at once the end of an old thing and the first event of a new—and unwanted—life. Her lover's abandonment has hit her like a shipwreck, and she's still staggering from it.

More alliteration—on the hard /g/ sounds of "**g**athered in the **g**ales" and the sibilant /sh/ sounds of "**sh**ifting **sh**ore"—immerses the speaker (and the reader) in the atmosphere of storm and chaos. Those /g/ sounds hit like wreckage crashing, and the /sh/ sounds like the slippery sand underfoot.

LINES 13-14

Pity me that the heart is slow to learn
What the swift mind beholds at every turn.

Familiar words come back at the very end of the poem, this time in a different form.

A lot of sonnets contain a moment known as a volta—a place where the sonnet gets a new idea or reinterprets an old one. Having fully established that she sees love as a powerful, natural phenomenon that one can't expect *not* to lose, the speaker comes to her sonnet's volta and changes her tune. Where in the past she's repeated "Pity me not," here she says, "Pity me."

But the loss of love *itself* isn't what she wants to be pitied for. Rather, it's that her heart can't catch up with her head. She can see examples all around her of things that fade and things that vanish, and understand them intellectually. But her *heart* can't just accept these good examples and go, "Oh, that's all right, then!"

The language of this final passage, after the drama of the past few lines, feels simple and quiet. Like every Shakespearean sonnet, this one ends on a couplet, and the rhyme ironically matches the line about the heart with the line about the

mind—even though those two parts of the speaker aren't "rhyming" in real life. (See the Form and Rhyme Scheme sections for more on this.)

The enjambment here makes that break between heart and mind even clearer—and also makes it sound a bit like the speaker might be trying not to cry. That break in her thought is like a sob or a hiccup. Clearly as she understands the simple facts of impermanence, this speaker is still suffering deeply, in a way that reason just can't touch. This poem, with its apostrophe to the lost lover, suggests that her heart really is not ready to let go.

SYMBOLS

THE SEA

The sea is a frequent symbol of love's dangerous inconstancy, and it plays exactly that role here. In particular, this poem draws attention to the ocean's *tides*—the regular ebb and flow of water that changes with the moon. These, like the other natural phenomena the speaker observes, are perfectly normal and predictable patterns; the tide going out isn't something to mourn, it's just a regular part of the day.

The sea, like love, can also be stormy. The speaker doesn't just imagine the tide going out, but throwing wreckage around, perhaps the remains of the former love she laments here.

In connecting her lover's waning interest in her with the sea, the speaker suggests that their shared love was once huge and powerful—and that it still has a great deal of power over her, even as it diminishes.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "the ebbing tide goes out to sea,"
- **Lines 11-12:** "the great tide that treads the shifting shore, / Strewing fresh wreckage gathered in the gales:"

PLANTS AND FLOWERS

Plants, especially flowers, are often symbolic of life, joy, fertility, and love. Here, those plants are endangered or fading away—just like the connection between the speaker and her former lover.

The speaker imagines plant life twice here: once as a generalized bounty of "beauties" of the "field and thicket" (now "passed away"), and once as "the wide blossom which the wind assails." In both of these images, there's a sense of the sadness of change. The richness of flowers in spring seems to be giving way to the storm-winds of autumn in the speaker's heart. Part of the sadness of dying flowers is that one remembers how beautiful they were when they were new, and this is exactly the predicament the speaker finds herself in as she reflects on her lost love.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "Pity me not for beauties passed away / From field and thicket as the year goes by;"
- **Line 10:** "the wide blossom which the wind assails,"

THE SUN AND MOON

The sun and the moon are often symbols of time, because they're how humans *measure* time. (The word "month," for instance, comes from the same root as "moon," as a month tracks a full moon-cycle.) In their different ways, the sun and moon also represent love: the sun for its life-giving power, and the moon for love's fickleness and changeability. They serve both of these symbolic roles here.

The speaker has resigned herself to the idea that love is just like any other natural cycle: subject to waning over time. Here, she says that it makes about as much sense to mourn her lost love as it would to mourn the fact that the sun sets and the moon gets smaller over the course of the month. There's a sad undercurrent here, though: her lover, unlike the sun and the moon, doesn't seem likely to come back again.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "the light of day / At close of day no longer walks the sky;"
- **Line 5:** "the waning of the moon,"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is a subtle presence in "Pity me not," giving energy to the more emotionally intense latter half of the poem. Because alliteration doesn't turn up too much in regular day-to-day speech, it tends to draw attention to itself, and that's just what happens here. More and more alliteration creeps in as the speaker, against her will, starts to really feel her feelings.

The first meaningful bit of alliteration in this poem appears in line 8, with the repeated /l/ sounds of "you no longer look with love on me." That's a pretty important turn, featuring the introduction of the "you," the speaker's former lover.

The following lines, in which the speaker feels her love as a blossom torn by winds and a changeable tide throwing up wreckage, keep up that alliterative emphasis. There's the windy /w/ sound of "the wide blossom which the wind assails" and the hard /g/ sounds of that "wreckage gathered in the gales"—both moments where the alliteration also mimics the sound or feeling of what it describes. There's also alliterative sibilance on

the "shifting shore," which sounds like those very shifting sands. The phrase "Strewing fresh wreckage" also features alliteration of a sort, in the repetition of an initial /r/ sound.

The speaker leaves all that dense alliteration behind in the sad, simple final couplet. Here, there's a subtle echo between "slow" and "swift," drawing attention to the contrast between the speaker's feelings and reason. Alliteration thus draws attention to the most emotionally heated part of the speaker's lament, setting up a stormy backdrop for the poem's conclusion.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "From field"
- **Line 7:** "so soon"
- **Line 8:** "longer look," "love"
- **Line 10:** "wide," "which," "wind"
- **Line 11:** "shifting," " shore"
- **Line 12:** "gathered," "gales"
- **Line 13:** "slow"
- **Line 14:** "swift"

ASSONANCE

Much of the subtle assonance in "Pity me not" appears in two of its most important repeated words: "Pity me." The long /ee/ sounds there pop up a lot in the early part of the poem—especially in the fading "beauties" of the "field and thicket as the year goes by." Though the first lines of the poem insist that there's no reason for anyone to pity the speaker, those assonant /ee/ sounds might undercut the message a little: they sound a little like pained keening, like a little kid crying their eyes out. But the speaker cuts that weepy /ee/ off with the sharpness of the word "not"—at least, until the end of the poem.

There are a few other spots of assonance here, like the /eh/ of "fresh wreckage" in line 12. That sound connects two important and vivid words. The freshness of that wreckage suggests how recent the speaker's heartbreak was, and how new her suffering is. There's also something a little bit surprising about the combination of freshness and wrecks. Wreckage is the end of something, freshness the beginning; "fresh wreckage" suggests a painful novelty, the end of the speaker's old life and the unwanted first day of her new life. The assonance both links these disparate ideas and adds some plain old musicality; the human ear just tends to like matching, harmonious sounds.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Pity me," "because"
- **Line 2:** "longer walks"
- **Line 3:** "Pity me," "beauties"
- **Line 4:** "field," "year"
- **Line 5:** "Pity me"
- **Line 10:** "which," "wind"
- **Line 12:** "fresh wreckage"
- **Line 13:** "Pity me"

APOSTROPHE

The apostrophe of "Pity me not" addresses this poem directly to the speaker's former lover—but seems to reach out to a wider circle of readers, too.

At first, the reader doesn't know that the speaker has a specific person in mind. The first direct addresses of this poem, those repeated "Pity me not[s]," could easily be directed at a general reading audience. But this poem unfolds its meaning slowly. When the reader finally reaches line 8 and learns that the speaker is addressing a "you" who no longer "look[s] with love on me," they might feel a sting of pain on the speaker's behalf. It's one thing to tell everyone that one doesn't want pity—but quite another to have to reject a former lover's pity. (Pity just isn't the most romantic of emotions.)

The slowness with which the speaker reveals the full meaning of her poem means that the volta in the final lines (that is, the moment when a sonnet turns to a new idea or reimagines an old one) hits with particular weight. It turns out the speaker *is* asking for pity from her former lover—an extra-painful position to be in. The apostrophe in this poem is another way of driving home one of the poem's central ideas: the heart finds it pretty hard to let go of love, even when the mind understands how love might fade. In addressing her former lover, the speaker here shows that she can't quite let go of that lover yet.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Pity me not"
- **Line 3:** "Pity me not"
- **Line 5:** "Pity me not"
- **Line 8:** "you no longer look with love on me"
- **Line 13:** "Pity me"

CAESURA

There's only one caesura in "Pity me not," but it's an important one, introducing a whole new tone to the poem and preparing the reader for the speaker's final words. This caesura appears in line 9:

> This I have known always: Love is no more
> Than the wide blossom which the wind assails,

In a poem that has to this point flowed on smoothly, often leaping line breaks with enjambments, this caesura comes as a little bit of a shock, halting the reader suddenly and demanding their attention. The speaker is telling her former lover (and her reader) something new and important now: she's *always*

understood that love is fragile and temporary. The break in the line gives space and weight to this idea.

That caesura marks a big change in tone, too. Where in the earlier part of the poem the speaker's imagery tracked gentle, day-to-day movements of the sun, moon, and tides, the imagery that follows the caesura is a lot rougher, full of violent winds and terrible storms. It's as if the speaker, in explaining how clearly she understands how and why her lover has stopped loving her, nonetheless finds herself caught up in blustery emotions of their own. This prepares the reader for the helpless sadness of the final couplet.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "This have I known always: Love is no more"

ANAPHORA

Anaphora is one of the most striking features of "Pity me not," and it serves an important thematic purpose. Through anaphora and the parallelism it creates, the speaker sets up an insistent pattern—only to significantly break it at the poem's end.

The most obvious repetition here is of the words "Pity me not" themselves. The first half of the poem repeats those words at the beginning of new clauses three times, and then underlines those repetitions with even *more* anaphora, adding those repeating "Nor that" clauses in lines 6 and 7. All those repetitions make the speaker sound like she's really trying to convince *someone* that she shouldn't be pitied—perhaps herself as much as her former lover. There's something insistent and even stern in all those sentences that move in the same ways.

The second half of the poem uses its own new anaphora in the repetition of lines that start with the phrase "Than the," and which insist that love is no more than a frail blossom or a destructive tide. Then, at last, the poem returns to words that are at once familiar and new: that "Pity me," but without the "not" the reader has gotten used to.

Anaphora thus provides the poem's initial stalwart, insistent tone and set up the tragic punchline: the speaker *does* need pity, after all.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Pity me not," "light of day"
- **Line 2:** "close of day"
- **Line 3:** "Pity me not"
- **Line 5:** "Pity me not"
- **Line 6:** "Nor that"
- **Line 7:** "Nor that"
- **Line 10:** "Than the"
- **Line 11:** "Than the"
- **Line 13:** "Pity me"

ENJAMBMENT

In carrying ideas over from line to line, enjambment often creates a sense of momentum, rushing the reader onward. Here, enjambment also sets up little bursts of surprise—especially in moments where the first line of the divided sentence could stand on its own.

For example, take a look at the enjambment in lines 9-10:

> This have I known always: Love is no more
> Than the wide blossom which the wind assails,

On their own, the words "This I have known always: Love is no more" could be a bleak pronouncement on the existence of love at all. Might this speaker believe that love is always "no more," a thing of the past? The next line alters the idea, but for a moment, readers finds themselves in a pretty grim worldview.

The important final couplet of this sonnet (lines 13-14) is also enjambed. Here, enjambment works on the poem's sound and tone as much as its meaning. The break in the middle of the sentence "Pity me that the heart is slow to learn / What the swift mind beholds at every turn" plays the same trick as the enjambment in lines 9-10, but also gives those final words an almost hiccupy tone, as if the speaker has to pause to hold back a sob.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "day / At"
- **Lines 3-4:** "away / From"
- **Lines 9-10:** "more / Than"
- **Lines 13-14:** "learn / What"

IMAGERY

The imagery of "Pity me not" helps to create a whole world for the speaker to feel tragic in. Perhaps the reader has had a day when, because something lousy happened to them, everything around them looked bleak and grim and grey? Something similar seems to be happening to the speaker here.

The speaker's imagery takes in the natural world around her, from the "light of day" to the "field and thicket" to the "shifting shore." These images evoke a whole landscape, moving from autumnal fields to a stormy coast as the sun sets and the moon wanes. Everything in nature seems to respond to the speaker's heartbreak; she sees examples of decline and decay everywhere she looks.

Of course, the speaker is seeking out analogues to her own heartbreak in the natural world, not actually wandering through this scenery. But in evoking all these images of fading nature, she also creates an atmospheric landscape that the poem seems to live inside.

The imagery's focus on nature also means that the speaker

seems to be looking *away* from something: in evoking diminished natural beauty, she emphatically *doesn't* have to invoke the beauty of her lost lover. He appears here as almost a ghost, a little too painful to think about directly.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 3-4
- Lines 5-6
- Line 10
- Lines 11-12

JUXTAPOSITION

In juxtaposing her lover's fading interest in her with the setting of the sun, the waning of the moon, the ebbing of the tides, and the sad beauties of autumn, the speaker of "Pity me not" performs a clever trick. Two things are happening here at once.

On the one hand, this juxtaposition allows the speaker to suggest that love is just a natural force like any other, and that its fading is as inevitable (and as easy to understand) as the sunset or the autumn.

But on the other hand, there's an important difference between nature and love. All of the natural phenomena the speaker mentions here are things that wane, certainly, but they're also things that will definitely come back again. The sun always rises, the moon waxes as soon as it's finished waning, the tide comes in when it's done going out, and spring inevitably follows winter. Love, on the other hand, is less reliable: once it's gone away, there's no guarantee at all that it will return.

The speaker's efforts to console herself are therefore doubly futile, not just because the heart can't catch up with the mind's understanding that all things end, but because even the things she tries to compare her experience to aren't complete comparisons. The juxtaposition makes this poem even sadder.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "Pity me not because the light of day / At close of day no longer walks the sky; / Pity me not for beauties passed away / From field and thicket as the year goes by;"
- **Lines 5-8:** "Pity me not the waning of the moon, / Nor that the ebbing tide goes out to sea, / Nor that a man's desire is hushed so soon, / And you no longer look with love on me."

METAPHOR

"Pity me not" is rich in metaphor. The big central metaphor is the easiest one to spot: love, the poem's images insist, is like nature, or *is* nature, a powerful and all-too-changeable force. In classing her lost love with sunsets, autumn, the waning moon, and the ebbing tide, the speaker suggests that love and nature share a tendency to grow, and then to die. (Unfortunately for the speaker, however, love doesn't seem to come back as reliably as the sun and moon.)

There are also a couple of instances of personification here. The speaker doesn't call the sun "the sun," but the "light of day" that "walks the sky," giving the sun legs to walk with. Similarly, she describes love as "the great tide that treads the shifting shore, / Strewing fresh wreckage gathered in the gales." In both of these instances, there's something godly in her metaphor. The sun becomes, not just the sun, but a *person* who's leaving the sky, and the tide becomes a destructive sea-god, throwing wreckage around. Both of these metaphors are clearly connected to the speaker's predicament: her lover has left her, and now she experiences all of nature as a painful reminder of her heartbreak.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 3-6
- Lines 9-10
- Lines 11-12

SIBILANCE

The whispery, secretive quality of sibilance lends a quiet sense of pain and danger to the second half of "Pity me not," and evokes a harsh, bleak, loveless landscape.

Sibilance often quiets a poem down: there's just no way to yell an /s/ sound. The reader can spot that effect in line 7, where the speaker remarks that it's no surprise that "a man's desire is hushed so soon." Here, the sibilance creates the very effect it describes. The speaker evokes her lover's "hushed" desire with hushed /s/ and /sh/ sounds.

Those same sounds can also hint at a more dangerous hiss. In lines 10-12 ("Than the wide [...] gathered in the gales"), when the speaker describes love as a stormy ocean beating against a beach, sibilance evokes the shifting of the sands and the whoosh of the winds (as well as the frailty of a flower in those winds):

> [...] Love is no more
> Than the wide blossom which the wind assails,
> Than the great tide that treads the shifting shore,
> Strewing fresh wreckage gathered in the gales [...]

Here, sibilance creates a whole atmosphere, helping the reader to feel the speaker's predicament. In her jaded imagination, love becomes shifting and unstable as a sandy beach battered by a cruel wind.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "hushed so soon"
- **Line 10:** "blossom," "assails"
- **Lines 11-12:** "shifting shore, / Strewing fresh"

VOCABULARY

Pity (Line 1, Line 3, Line 5, Line 13) - Feel sorry for.

Thicket (Line 4) - A small, dense clump of trees.

Waning (Line 5) - Diminishing (here used to describe the moon as it moves from full to new, getting smaller).

Ebbing (Line 6) - Withdrawing, receding.

Assails (Line 10) - Attacks, assaults.

Strewing (Line 12) - Throwing messily around; scattering.

Wreckage (Line 12) - Bits and pieces of broken debris.

Gales (Line 12) - Stormy winds.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Pity me not" is a sonnet—a form with a long tradition. Like all sonnets, this one uses 14 lines of iambic pentameter and a predictable rhyme scheme. Since this is an English or Shakespearean sonnet, it divides into three quatrains (four-line stanzas) and a final couplet.

Sonnets are often used for poems about love—requited or unrequited, fresh or fading. Their shape suits them well to this purpose. Aside from their regular pulsing meter, which sounds a lot like a heartbeat, sonnets traditionally have something called a *volta*, or turn—a surprising change in ideas and themes that comes toward the end of the poem.

Here, that volta comes in the closing couplet, where, after spending the whole poem insisting that she shouldn't be pitied, the speaker changes her mind, and tells readers why she should be pitied after all. This gives the poem its weight: after all those intellectual explanations, the closing couplet suggests the power of the speaker's grief.

METER

Since "Pity me not" is a sonnet, it uses iambic pentameter: five iambs per line, each with a da-DUM rhythm (for a total of 10 syllables per line). This is a meter that has often been compared to a heartbeat or to footsteps, and English falls naturally into its swing.

But as in many sonnets, the iambic meter here isn't steady all the way through. In fact, there are variations right up front. The first lines go like this:

Pity | me not | because | the light | of day
At close | of day | no long- | er walks | the sky;

Notice the stress on the *first* syllable of the word "pity"? That means the word is a trochee, the foot that goes DUM-da rather than the iambic da-DUM.

Those trochees will turn up at the beginning of a lot of this poem's lines—for instance, in the emphatic "Nor" at the beginning of lines 6 and 7, and on the dramatic "Strewing fresh wreckage" of line 12. Wherever these trochees appear, they add an edge of intensity: leaning hard on that first syllable makes the speaker sound insistent. The speaker's lament feels more pained and more serious because of those trochaic stresses.

RHYME SCHEME

The rhyme scheme of "Pity me not" is a perfect example of English sonnet rhyme. Its traditional pattern runs like so:

ABAB CDCD EFEF GG

The even, balanced back-and-forth of the alternating rhymes leads up to the neatness of the final couplet. In this poem, the rhyme words stay pretty gentle and small at first ("day" and "away," "sea" and "me") but rise to drama toward the end with the wind that "assails" the shore with "gales." Having built up to this storm, the speaker ends with a return to plainer language, ending with another simple rhyme on "learn" and "turn." The final couplet of a sonnet often has the quality of a punchline, a big idea towards which the whole poem builds, and this couplet is no exception. The speaker reflects her helplessness in the face of her emotional predicament in the sad simplicity of her rhyme words.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Pity me not" is, in a word, heartbroken: her lover no longer cares for her. But she's also philosophical. She sees love as a natural phenomenon, which comes and goes as it pleases, and seems to find some comfort in the beauty of the phenomena she compares her love to—even as that beauty fades.

While this speaker is able to think about her situation in broad terms as a natural part of life, she's also suffering deeply. She can understand intellectually that everything beautiful has to die. But that doesn't stop her from feeling the pain of that death.

The speaker doesn't specify her gender here, but we're calling her "her" because this sonnet is one of many in Edna St. Vincent Millay's collected works, and those sonnets are usually told from a woman's perspective. (Here, there's also a hint that this speaker is a woman because she refers to "a man's love" as something distinct from her own.)

SETTING

"Pity me not" doesn't have one clear setting. However, through its rich imagery, it creates an atmosphere of waning natural beauty. This poem is set in an emotional autumn, when past glories are fading away, and the sun is setting.

The ocean, with its ebbing tides and dangerous storms, plays a big role here, too. While the speaker doesn't tell the reader where she is, in her heart she seems to be wandering a fading countryside and a desolate seashore.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950) was a major poet in her own lifetime, winning a Pulitzer Prize for her thoughtful and often radical depictions of love and suffering. Her poetry was at once sincere and playful, and she's remembered for her work's wit as well as its beauty.

Millay was especially well-known for her revitalizing interest in the sonnet form (this poem was published in 1923, falling into a sequence of sonnets that Millay had written starting in 1920). Following in the footsteps of Shakespeare, she brought a woman's perspective to a tradition that mostly spoke *to* women or *of* women. Her work was noted for its modern take on the battle of the sexes: the women in her poems are often just as cavalier and calculating about love as men were traditionally expected to be. (Of course, as in "Pity me not," they suffer, too.)

Some of Millay's contemporaries compared her to Sappho for her frankness about love. But her formal, lyrical verse was seen as a bit out of step with the stylish, experimental Modernism of her contemporaries Eliot and Pound. Her poetic reputation thus declined after her death, until later writers like Mary Oliver rediscovered her. Today, she's seen as an influential and important poet.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Over the course of her poetic career in the first half of the 20th century, Millay watched in horror as two World Wars shredded the comparative peace and prosperity of the America she was born into. Her strong and idealistic political convictions were often put to the test by the cruelties of the world around her. For instance, she struggled with the conflict between her pacifism and her belief that the United States must play a part in World War II.

Millay was directly involved in one of the biggest controversies of early 20th-century America: the trial of Sacco and Vanzetti, Italian immigrants and anarchists falsely accused of murder. The pair were convicted and sentenced to execution by in a trial obviously corrupted by anti-immigrant and anti-anarchist bias.

This blatant injustice sparked protests around the world—including one at which Millay was arrested. Sadly, the protests couldn't save Sacco and Vanzetti, and their execution embittered Millay among many others, instilling a widespread cynicism about America's all-too-frequent betrayal of its own democratic ideals.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Celebration of Millay — Two contemporary poets read and discuss Millay's work at a Library of Congress event celebrating Millay's birthday. (https://youtu.be/-ZmYEuW8IPU)
- A Short Biography — Read the Poetry Foundation's short biography of Edna St. Vincent Millay, and find links to more of her poetry. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/edna-st-vincent-millay)
- Millay's Poetic and Personal Reputation — An article from the Guardian on Millay's posthumous reputation. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2018/feb/22/edna-st-vincent-millay-poetry)
- Edna St. Vincent Millay Reads the Poem — A recording of Millay herself reading the poem (accompanied by an unnerving animation). (https://youtu.be/zns1Tt0LlNs)
- The Millay Society — The website of a society dedicated to Millay's life and work. (http://www.millay.org/aboutmillay.php)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY POEMS

- I, Being born a Woman and Distressed (Sonnet 41)
- The Buck in the Snow
- What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why (Sonnet 43)

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