Sea Fever

POEM TEXT

I must down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky,
And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by;
And the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white sail's shaking,
And a grey mist on the sea's face, and a grey dawn breaking.

I must down to the seas again, for the call of the running tide
Is a wild call and a clear call that may not be denied;
And all I ask is a windy day with the white clouds flying,
And the flung spray and the blown spume, and the sea-gulls crying.

I must down to the seas again, to the vagrant gypsy life,
To the gull's way and the whale's way where the wind's like a whetted knife;
And all I ask is a merry yarn from a laughing fellow-rover,
And quiet sleep and a sweet dream when the long trick's over.

SUMMARY

I have to return to the ocean, to the wide-open, empty waters and skies. All I want is a sailing ship and a star I can use to navigate; the strong pull of the helm, the sound of the wind, and the trembling of the white sail; and the silvery fog on the water's surface as the sun rises in the gray morning.

I have to return to the ocean because I can't ignore the seductive call of the tides. All I want is a wild, windy day, the foaming ocean waters, and the shrieks of seagulls.

I have to return to the ocean, to a roaming, itinerant life following seabirds and whales to places where the wind is sharp as a blade. And all I need is some cheerful tall tales from a fellow wanderer, and peaceful, dreamy sleep when my turn at the helm is finally done.

THEMES

FREEDOM AND NATURE

"Sea Fever" is about living life on one's own terms. For the speaker, seafaring represents a life of complete freedom; a ship allows him to go wherever he pleases and never be tied down to one place. And the sea itself is an endless source of inspiration, an image of boundless possibilities and exhilarating independence. A life on the ocean both satisfies and symbolizes this speaker's desire to roam free.

The speaker loves being a sailor because it grants him total freedom: with a ship, he can go anywhere he wants, and doesn't need to follow anyone's rules but his own. He says he wants nothing more than a "tall ship and a star to steer her by." In other words, he loves getting to chart his own path.

His vivid imagery of "the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white sail's shaking" suggests the joy he takes in this kind of wild, independent travel. And although not everyone could stomach weeks and months of "the lonely sea," such a life calls to the speaker with a "wild" voice "that may not be denied." Part of this "wild[ness] is the promise of "vagran[cy]," or constant travel from place to place. He likes not being tied down; he is hungry for the freedom and adventure that seafaring offers.

The sea itself symbolizes the speaker's love of freedom, its wide-open, untamed spaces a constant reminder of the life he wants. Describing "a windy day with the white clouds flying," and the constant motion of the "flung spray and the blown spume," the speaker makes it clear he's drawn to the ocean's wildness: the wind, the clouds, and the water go wherever they may, and that's just what he wants, too. Even the creatures of the ocean reflect the speaker's desire for independence. When the speaker says he wants to go "to the gull's way and the whale's way," he's imagining choosing his own instinctive "way" in life, just like these roaming creatures.

Both the freedom of seafaring and the wildness of the ocean itself thus fulfill the speaker's desire for independence in a way that nothing else can. The speaker plans to devote his whole life to freedom on the high seas: only when "the long trick's over" (a "trick" in this context being a sailor's turn at the helm of a ship—but also a metaphor for life itself) will he settle down for a "quiet sleep and a sweet dream." In other words, the speaker intends to devote himself to freedom and adventure until the day he dies.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4

- Lines 5-8
- Line 10
- Line 12

ADVENTURE AND WANDERLUST

This poem explores wanderlust and the desire for new adventures. Again and again the speaker expresses his need to return to the sea as a sailor. Having been to sea at least once before, he can think of nothing but getting back out there on the open water and seeing new sights. A taste of seafaring has not *satisfied* his desire for travel and exploration, but *stoked* it. This poem suggests that, once a relish for the unknown gets its hooks in someone, it is difficult for that person to ever return to ordinary life.

Having sailed before, the speaker is practically gushing with desire to return to the sea for his next adventure. Past journeys haven't sated him; in fact, memories of his travels only make him hungrier to get back out there. He says over and over again that he "must down to the seas again." It's all he can think about; he is obsessed with traveling and nothing else can hold his attention. A life at sea is "all [he] ask[s]" for: his desire for another adventure is more important to him than anything else. The "call of the running tide" even seems to speak to him directly, like a siren luring him back to the water. Now that he has an inkling of all the exciting places that tide may take him, he simply can't resist the urge to follow it once more.

The speaker's experience suggests that once someone has gotten a taste for adventure, it's difficult to accept a life without it. The speaker isn't the only person who itches to travel and explore. He thinks of other sailors as "laughing fellow-rover[s]," suggesting that the thing that brings them all together is their mutual love of roaming the world. In other words, the lure of adventure can make a lifelong "rover" of all kinds of people. While not everyone would be compelled by weeks and months on a "lonely sea," it's clear that for some people, the promise of adventure is infinitely alluring. After a little adventuring, one will never again be able to settle for the comforts of an ordinary life.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Lines 5-6
- Lines 9-11

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

I must down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky,
And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by;

The poem begins with the speaker's proclamation that he "must [go] down to the seas again." He might be stuck on land right now, but in his heart, a sailor's life is the life for him: this will be a poem about wanderlust, an unquenchable and "feverish" thirst for the freedom of the ocean.

This speaker's urgent repetitions prove that he can hardly think of anything but getting back out on the open water. For instance, the poem's first words, "I must down to the seas again," will repeat at the beginning of every stanza, their anaphora creating a kind of longing refrain. And when the speaker says that that he wishes to return "to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky," his polyptoton makes him sound deeply preoccupied, almost obsessed.

This "lonely" sea is a symbol of freedom and adventure. Out on the ocean, the speaker feels, he can follow his own nose, without other people around to tell him what to do or where to go.

The speaker goes on to say that the only things he really wants are "a tall ship" (i.e., a sailing ship with high masts) and a "star" he can use to navigate. The sibilant /s/ alliteration in "sea" and "sky" and /st/ alliteration in "star" and "steer" evokes waves breaking in an otherwise silent night. These musical sounds suggest the speaker finds the thought of being out on the ocean all alone quite romantic. In fact, the poem reads an awful lot like a love letter—to seafaring!

LINES 3-4

And the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white sail's shaking,
And a grey mist on the sea's face, and a grey dawn breaking.

The speaker goes on to vividly describe what exactly he loves about a life at sea, using polysyndeton (in this case, the repetition of the conjunction "and") to string his images together:

> And the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white sail's shaking,
> And a grey mist on the sea's face, and a grey dawn breaking.

Polysyndeton gives these words a fluid, soothing rhythm that feels a lot like waves sloshing against the sides of a ship. It's as if the speaker's memories are carrying him right into his seafaring past, where he can not only hear the waves, but feel the "kick" of the helm, hear the "song" of the wind, and watch the motion of the "shaking" sail.

He also begins to personify the sea here, imagining it not just as a place, but a person—one with a "face" and a "song." These images might make readers think of mermaids or sirens, legendary creatures who tempt sailors with their melodious

voices—an idea that suggests the speaker finds the ocean alluring indeed!

Meanwhile, the diacope in line 4 ("And a grey mist on the sea's face, and a grey dawn breaking") draws attention to the relationship between the sea and the sky: the two reflect each other, creating a vast, misty, mysterious expanse for the speaker to explore.

LINES 5-6

I must down to the seas again, for the call of the running tide
Is a wild call and a clear call that may not be denied;

The poem's second stanza begins with the same words as the first: "I must down to the sea again." This anaphora makes the speaker sound even more urgent. He isn't just happily reminiscing about his time at sea: he's overcome with the desire to get back there as soon as he can. Though he doesn't come out and say it, the speaker hints he's quite miserable when he's on dry land. He needs to be on a ship in order to feel fully alive.

He goes on to say that the reason he must return to a life of seafaring is because "the call of the running tide / Is a wild call and a clear call that may not be denied." This moment of diacope sounds almost like an incantation, suggesting that the speaker is truly under the ocean's spell. The echoing "call" of that personified ocean works on him like magic.

These lines, unlike any others in the poem, are enjambed; the way one sentence overflows two lines here evokes the speaker's overflowing passion for the ocean, and mimics the "running tide" these lines describe.

And the euphonious /l/ consonance ("call," "wild," "clear") and /c/ alliteration ("call," "clear") feel luxurious, seductive, and delicious, evoking the speaker's yearning.

LINES 7-8

And all I ask is a windy day with the white clouds flying,
And the flung spray and the blown spume, and the sea-gulls crying.

Line 7 begins with the same words that began line 2:

> And all I ask is a windy day with the white clouds flying,

This anaphora makes it clear that all of this speaker's desires center on a longing for the sea. The imagery of wind speeding clouds through the air evokes the excitement and exhilaration of the open ocean; perhaps the speaker, too, feels like he's "flying" when he's sailing. The parallelism between the "white cloud flying" and the "white sail's shaking" back in line 3 underlines that comparison: the sails and the clouds seem equally wild and free to him.

The poem again uses polysyndeton to string images together here:

> And the flung spray and the blown spume, || and the sea-gulls crying.

There's that wavelike rhythm again. Notice, too, the way that a caesura creates a hiccup in this rhythm, a reminder that the sea is always moving and changing.

Lines 7-8 are filled with alliteration. The /w/ alliteration ("windy," "white") evokes the whooshing wind, while the /s/ alliteration ("spray," "spume," "sea-gulls") captures the exuberant sounds of the flying water. What with all these evocative sounds, readers might feel like they're aboard the speaker's imagined ship, too, cruising along as fast and free as a cloud.

LINES 9-10

I must down to the seas again, to the vagrant gypsy life,
To the gull's way and the whale's way where the wind's like a whetted knife;

For the third and final time, the speaker begins a stanza by declaring that he "must down to the seas again."

Now, he describes seafaring as a "vagrant gypsy life." (Note that, while in this context the word "gypsy" means "free-spirited" or "wandering," nowadays it is widely considered to be an ethnic slur against the Romani people, who continue to be both romanticized and persecuted for their traditionally nomadic culture.) To the speaker, there is something alluring about a life where one doesn't put down roots; like the "gull[]" and the "whale[]," the speaker wants the freedom to follow his own instincts and go where he may.

The poem again uses diacope ("To the gull's way and the whale's way") to create a flowing rhythm and to emphasize the importance of making one's own "way" in life. The speaker wants to be able to chart his own course, even if sometimes this means going up against a "wind[] like a whetted knife"—a simile that suggests blazing one's trail in life isn't always easy.

That being said, the poem still highlights the *beauty* and *pleasure* of carving out a life of freedom and adventure. Listen to the intense /w/ alliteration in line 10:

> To the gull's way and the whale's way where the wind's like a whetted knife;

These insistent, harmonious sounds draw attention to the overwhelming beauty of the wandering life the speaker has chosen—and to his fervent commitment to freedom.

LINES 11-12

And all I ask is a merry yarn from a laughing fellow-rover,
And quiet sleep and a sweet dream when the long trick's over.

A final moment of anaphora carries the poem toward its conclusion. Repeating once more that "All [he] ask[s]" is a life at sea, the speaker reiterates that there's only one "way" for him: a life as free as a whale's or a gull's.

That doesn't mean he'll be alone forever, though. One of the seafaring pleasures he "ask[s]" for here is "a merry yarn from a laughing fellow-rover." In other words, he's not the only person who feels this way: he can find his liberty among other sailors, fellow adventurers, people equally moved by freedom and excitement. He wants to hear their tales, laugh with them, and share in the joy of traveling. Around these kinds of people, he can be his true self.

Finally, the speaker says, "when the long trick's over," he wants nothing more than to "sleep" and "dream." In sailor-speak, a "long trick" is a sailor's turn at the helm of a ship. Here, though, the speaker is wittily using this term as a metaphor for life itself. When his time on earth is over, he wants to know that he spent every second he could at sea, following his heart and looking for adventure. Only then will he be able to rest easy and recede quietly into the "sweet dream" of death. The speaker's melodious /ee/ assonance ("sleep," "sweet," "dream") suggests that, when he finally gives up the ghost, he'll do so happily, knowing he lived the life he wanted—that is, if he gets "down to the seas again."

SYMBOLS

THE SEA

For the speaker of this poem, the sea is a symbol of freedom and adventure. Its "lonel[iness]" beckons to him because it represents his freedom to make his own choices; nobody's going to tell him what to do or where to go. He can "steer" his ship through the ocean's wild expanse, using only the night sky for a map. Like the "gull" and the "whale," he gets to make his own "way" in life.

He is also drawn to the "wild[ness]" of the sea, to the "vagrant" ways of his "fellow-rovers." In other words, part of the appeal of this life at sea is that he never stays still for long. At sea, he is always moving, always discovering new places, never putting down roots. He hopes he can keep moving his whole life, following "the call of the running tide" until the day he dies.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I must down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky,"
- **Line 2:** "And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by;"
- **Lines 5-6:** "I must down to the seas again, for the call of the running tide / Is a wild call and a clear call that may not be denied;"
- **Lines 9-10:** "I must down to the seas again, to the vagrant gypsy life, / To the gull's way and the whale's way where the wind's like a whetted knife;"

POETIC DEVICES

ANAPHORA

Each stanza of the poem begins with anaphora: the speaker repeats, "I must down to the seas again." This obsessive repetition suggests that the speaker can think of nothing but returning to the sea: his thoughts are practically on a loop! Each of these moments of anaphora introduces an entire stanza of supporting imagery that paints a picture of the life the speaker so desires.

Each stanza also repeats the phrase, "And all I ask is a [...]." This anaphora draws attention to the details of the speaker's longings. He wants a "tall ship and a star to steer her by," a "windy day with the white clouds flying," and a "merry yarn from a laughing fellow-rover." By introducing these variations on a single theme—the delights of sailing—anaphora suggests that what's fundamentally important is that the speaker get out to sea again.

The poem also uses polysyndeton to create a wavelike rhythm. Take lines 3-4:

> And the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white sail's shaking,
> And a grey mist on the sea's face, and a grey dawn breaking.

The repetition of "and" strings images together and gives the poem a fluid, bouncing, downright oceanic rhythm.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I must down to the seas again,," "and"
- **Line 2:** "And all I ask is a," "and"
- **Line 3:** "And," "and," "and"
- **Line 4:** "And," "and"
- **Line 5:** "I must down to the seas again,"
- **Line 6:** "and"
- **Line 7:** "And all I ask is a"
- **Line 8:** "And," "and," "and"
- **Line 9:** "I must down to the seas again,"
- **Line 10:** "and"
- **Line 11:** "And all I ask is a"
- **Line 12:** "And," "and"

ALLITERATION

There is a lot of alliteration in this little poem! Alliteration gives

the verse musicality and rhythm, heightening the language to reflect the speaker's passionate love of the sea.

In the first line, for example, the sibilant /s/ alliteration between "sea" and "sky" instantly adds music to the poem—and draws attention to the way the sea and sky mirror each other, creating an endless expanse of blue through which a ship might freely roam.

In line 2, the crisp /st/ alliteration in "star" and "steer" adds a kick to the imagery of a sailor alone with his own thoughts under the night sky. And the /w/ alliteration in "the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white sail's shaking" evokes the *whoosh* of wind and water.

/W/ alliteration shows up again in lines 7 ("windy" and "white") and 10:

> To the gull's way and the whale's way where the
> wind's like a whetted knife;

In addition to evoking the sounds of the sea, this insistent /w/ alliteration adds some intensity to the speaker's vision of making his own "way" in life, much like the wild animals. The speaker is so obviously enchanted by all this freedom and wide-open space that he can't help but break into song!

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "seas," "sea," "sky"
- **Line 2:** "star," "steer"
- **Line 3:** "wheel's," "wind's," "song," "white," "sail's"
- **Line 6:** "clear," "call"
- **Line 7:** "windy," "white"
- **Line 8:** "spray," "spume," "sea-gulls"
- **Line 10:** "way," "whale's," "way," "where," "wind's," "whetted"
- **Line 12:** "sleep," "sweet"

CONSONANCE

Like alliteration, consonance fills the poem with music and rhythm.

Because there is so much consonance and alliteration in this poem, these devices often overlap. For instance, the first stanza of the poem is full of sibilance: within words ("must," "face"), at the beginnings of words ("sea," "song"), or both ("seas"). These constant rushing /s/ sounds evoke the sea itself: it's as if the speaker can hear the waves even now in his imagination.

And take a look at some of the /l/ consonance in the second stanza:

> [...] the call of the running tide
> Is a wild call and a clear call that may not be denied;

Those deliciously long /l/ sounds suggest just how seductive the sea's call feels.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "must," "seas"
- **Line 2:** "tall," "star," "steer"
- **Line 3:** "kick," "wind's," "song," "sail's," "shaking"
- **Line 4:** "mist," "sea's face"
- **Line 5:** "must," "seas"
- **Line 6:** "wild call," "clear call"
- **Line 7:** "windy day," "clouds flying"
- **Line 8:** "flung," "blown," "gulls"
- **Line 9:** "must," "seas"
- **Line 10:** "gull's," "whale's," "wind's," "like," "knife"
- **Line 11:** "all," "merry yarn," "laughing fellow," "rover"
- **Line 12:** "quiet," "sweet," "trick's"

ASSONANCE

Assonance works alongside alliteration and consonance to create musicality and rhythm.

Lines 3-4, for example, move back and forth between /ih/ and /ay/ assonance:

> And the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white sail's shaking,
> And a grey mist on the sea's face, and a grey dawn breaking.

All these harmonious vowels create euphony: the poem's pleasing sounds evoke the speaker's radiant delight in the sea.

And in the final line of the poem, /ee/ assonance connects "sleep," "sweet," and "dream," emphasizing the contentment the speaker imagines at the end of his seafaring life.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "And," "all," "ask," "tall," "star"
- **Line 3:** "kick," "wind's," "sail's," "shaking"
- **Line 4:** "grey," "mist," "face," "grey," "dawn," "breaking"
- **Line 7:** "day," "white," "flying"
- **Line 8:** "spray"
- **Line 10:** "whale's way," "like," "knife"
- **Line 12:** "sleep," "sweet," "dream"

IMAGERY

This poem bursts with longing imagery of the sea, evoking the speaker's vivid memories of his sailing life.

For example, in the first stanza, the speaker pictures "a grey mist on the sea's face, and a grey dawn breaking." All this greyness doesn't get him down: rather, it evokes the mystery and beauty of sailing into the unknown. The repetition of the word "grey" also suggests the way the sea reflects the sky,

creating a picture of an endless expanse, ripe for exploration.

He also envisions the "white sail[]" and "white clouds" that would billow above him out at sea. His diacope on the word "white" here draws special attention to this imagery, inviting readers to envision a link between sails and clouds: both huge, floating, free, and white against a sharp blue sky. The imagery here also suggests that both clouds and sails are constantly in motion, "shaking" and "flying," as if they're just as excited as the speaker is about a life at sea.

Meanwhile, the speaker's images of "flung spray" and "blown spume"—that is, all the water and foam that the ship's movement flings into the air—viscerally evoke the sheer exhilaration of sailing.

Vivid imagery thus pulls the reader into the speaker's experiences, helping them to share in both his memories and his emotions.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "the white sail's shaking, / And a grey mist on the sea's face, and a grey dawn breaking."
- **Lines 7-8:** "the white clouds flying, / And the flung spray and the blown spume"

METAPHOR

The poem's metaphors evoke the speaker's intense attraction to the seafaring life.

For example, in lines 5-6, he declares:

> I must down to the seas again, for the call of the running tide
> Is a wild call and a clear call that may not be denied;

The "call" of the sea here isn't a literal sound but a metaphorical one; the sea, it seems, is singing to the speaker like a mermaid, enticing him to choose a life of freedom and adventure over the conventional security of dry land.

Elsewhere, the speaker personifies the sea, giving its winds a "song" and its waters a "face." This makes the ocean seem even more like a seductive siren: it's not just a huge natural force, but a being the speaker seems to have a relationship with.

Perhaps that alluring being is a little dangerous, too. In line 10, the speaker uses a simile (a metaphor that makes a comparison using the words "like" or "as") that compares the wind to a "whetted knife." In other words, there are days when the wind is so sharp it could cut—suggesting that life at sea, and making one's own "way" in life," isn't always easy.

At the end of the poem, the speaker says that he wants only a "quiet sleep and a sweet dream when the long trick's over." A "long trick" is sailor-speak for a sailor's turn at the helm of a ship. But as it is used here, it is also a metaphor for life itself, and sleep a metaphor for death: the speaker is saying that he hopes to sail until the day he dies!

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "wheel's kick and the wind's song"
- **Line 4:** "a grey mist on the sea's face"
- **Line 5:** "I must down to the seas again, "
- **Lines 5-6:** "for the call of the running tide / Is a wild call and a clear call that may not be denied;"
- **Line 12:** "And quiet sleep and a sweet dream when the long trick's over"

END-STOPPED LINE

All but one of the poem's lines are end-stopped, a device that helps to give the poem its swinging, wave-like pace.

For instance, the end stops in lines 1-4 help to pace the poem, encouraging the reader to pause at the ends of lines before continuing on. These pauses feel particularly noticeable because the lines have a lot of momentum: polysyndeton piles up multiple "and"s over the course of a line, creating a forward drive which the end-stops cut off.

Line 3 provides one good example:

> And the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white sail's shaking,

Polysyndeton moves the line forward with greater and greater momentum, which results in a more dramatic pause at the end of the line when the comma appears. This movement between a forward rush and a sudden pause evokes the restlessness and unpredictability of the sea.

The only enjambed line in the poem is line 5. The enjambment here acts just like what it describes: a forceful "tide" that seems to sweep the speaker up in a fit of passion. Unable to say no, he is carried away by it just as uninterrupted syntax carries the reader over the line ending.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "sky,"
- **Line 2:** "by;"
- **Line 3:** "shaking,"
- **Line 4:** "breaking."
- **Line 6:** "denied;"
- **Line 7:** "flying,"
- **Line 8:** "crying."
- **Line 9:** "life,"
- **Line 10:** "knife;"
- **Line 11:** "fellow-rover,"
- **Line 12:** "over."

CAESURA

Caesura helps to break up the poem's long lines, giving the reader a chance to pause for breath and evoking the lap of waves.

For the most part, caesura overlaps with the poem's anaphora: a mid-line comma appears after the repeated words "I must down to the seas again" in the first line of every stanza. This recurring caesura helps to pace the poem, as the speaker's exclamation always introduces a barrage of imagery that brings his seafaring memories to life. It also creates a little gap in the poem's rhythm that echoes the pause between one wave and the next.

In a couple of instances, caesura appears towards the ends of stanzas as well as near the beginning. In line 8, for example, the "flung spray and the blown spume" run together without a pause, but a caesura gives the image of "the sea-gulls crying" its own space. Here, caesura helps to set a mood: the "flung spray and the blown spume" feel lively, dramatic, and non-stop, but the little pause before the "cry[]" of the gulls gives those seabirds a bit of quiet, melancholy space to themselves.

Caesura thus helps the poem to evoke the sea both through rhythm and through atmosphere.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "again, to"
- **Line 4:** "face, and"
- **Line 5:** "again, for"
- **Line 8:** "spume, and"
- **Line 9:** "again, to"

REPETITION

Repetition, like anaphora and polysyndeton, creates rhythm and draws attention to important ideas.

For instance, look at the polyptoton that appears right up front in line 1:

> I must down to the **seas** again, to the lonely **sea** and the sky,

By repeating "seas/sea," the speaker focuses straight away on the most important thing in his life.

The speaker's diacope on the word "grey" in line 4 is another good example. The poet could easily have varied the language here—for instance, by calling the mist "silver" and the dawn "gloomy." Instead, he chose to repeat the word "grey," a rhythmic repetition that draws attention to the way the endless sea reflects the endless sky.

In the second stanza, the word "call" repeats three times in close succession:

> [...] for the **call** of the running tide
> Is a wild **call** and a clear **call** [...]

Three is often considered a magical number, so this one-two-three "wild call" suggests a kind of otherworldly summons. The speaker isn't just compelled by the sea: he seems almost enchanted. This "wild call" might even allude to the sirens (or mermaids) from Greek myth who lured sailors to their deaths.

There's a final moment of diacope in line 10, where the speaker longs for the "gull's **way** and the whale's **way**." This repetition draws attention to a meaningful pun: the speaker wants both to follow the literal "way" (or path) the animals follow, and to behave the "way" they do, living by wild instinct and intuition, beholden to no one but himself.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "seas," "sea"
- **Line 4:** "grey," "grey"
- **Line 5:** "call"
- **Line 6:** "call," "call"
- **Line 10:** "way," "way"

VOCABULARY

I must down (Line 1, Line 5, Line 9) - This just means "I must go down."

Tall ship (Line 2) - A sailing ship with high masts.

Flung (Line 8) - Thrown or hurled.

Spume (Line 8) - The froth or foam on waves.

Vagrant (Line 9) - Drifting, roaming, or unsettled.

Gypsy (Line 9) - In this context, this word means "nomadic" or "free-spirited." However, these days it is also considered an ethnic slur describing the Romani people, who have long been persecuted in Europe for their itinerant (or nomadic) culture.

Whetted (Line 10) - Sharpened; honed.

Fellow-rover (Line 11) - Another traveler or wanderer.

Yarn (Line 11) - Story or tale.

The long trick (Line 12) - A sailor's turn at the helm of a ship (and, metaphorically, the speaker's life!).

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem consists of three four-line stanzas, or quatrains. Each stanza begins with the same, insistent phrase: "I must down to the seas again." These repetitions give the poem an incantatory feel: the speaker seems almost to be casting a spell, summoning

up a life in which he is free to wander the ocean forever.

Other repetitions (like the echoing "call" in lines 5-6) evoke the rhythmic rise and fall of waves, while continuing to emphasize the speaker's desire to be back on the sea where he belongs.

The poem's shape mimics the ocean, too. The lines are quite long, so the poem on the page is wider than it is tall. This expansive shape evokes the open expanse of the sea, and the freedom for which the speaker so longs.

METER

"Sea Fever" isn't written in one specific meter. Instead, it mixes different kinds of metrical feet to create a rhythm with room for variation and surprise—fitting for a poem about freedom and adventure!

The poem's changing rhythms also mirror the sea's changing moods. Take a look at line 4, for instance:

> And a | grey mist | on the | sea's face, | and a | grey dawn | breaking.

This line starts out by alternating pyrrhic feet (that is, two unstressed metrical feet in a row, da-da)—and spondees (two stressed feet in a row, DUM-DUM). Then, the final foot of the line is a trochee (a stressed-unstressed foot, DUM-da).

Overall, this rhythm is predictable and soothing, like waves hitting the sides of the ship—but the hiccup at the end reminds readers that the sea is constantly in motion and its rhythms are always changing.

RHYME SCHEME

"Sea Fever" uses this simple rhyme scheme:

AABB

In other words, each stanza is built from two rhymed couplets. This straightforward pattern evokes the speaker's simple-but-intense love for the sea. Its singsongy feeling might even call sea shanties to mind.

The poem also uses alternating patterns of so-called "masculine" and "feminine" rhymes. The first couplet of each stanza is always masculine, which means the rhyme is on a single stressed syllable: for instance, "sky" and "by." The second couplet is always feminine, which means that the rhymes close on *unstressed* syllables: for instance, "rover" and "over." Swinging back and forth between these two flavors of rhyme, the poem evokes a ship rolling over the waves.

SPEAKER

The speaker of this poem is an adventurer and a wanderer, someone who itches to get back to his life as a sailor. He isn't cut out for dry land, it seems; he needs the "lonel[iness]" and "wild[ness]" of the ocean, where he is free to roam and make his own "way" in life.

He is drawn to aspects of seafaring that other people might find difficult or strange: not just the "lonely" isolation of the sea, but the danger of the "flung spray" and "blown spume," and the wind "like a whetted knife." Yet these challenges excite the speaker and beckon him on; he can't resist "the call of the running tide," and it seems that when "the long trick" (i.e. his turn at the helm of this ship—but also, metaphorically, his life) is "over," there will be nothing left for him to do but sleep. In other words, seafaring is the only life he imagines for himself.

Note: while we're calling the speaker "he" in this guide, the speaker doesn't have a clear gender. The poem's early-20th-century context makes it likely the speaker is male—women were rarely sailors at the time—but readers don't have to interpret the poem this way!

SETTING

The setting of "Sea Fever" is, unsurprisingly, the sea! But it's the sea of the speaker's memory. Recalling former voyages, the speaker dreams of returning to the freedom and adventure of a seafaring life. He describes this life in great detail and with great admiration; everything from "the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white sail's shaking" to the "grey mist" and "grey dawn breaking" over the surface of the water appeals to him.

This setting reveals how attracted to movement he is. It isn't just the beauty or openness of the sea that calls to him, but the wind which sends "white clouds flying," and all the commotion of "the flung spray and the blown spume, and the sea-gulls crying." To him, clearly, the sea is a place of excitement and possibility.

He also describes the freedom and challenge of being surrounded by nature. Like him, the gulls and the whales find their own "way" through the waters. And the wind is sometimes a "song" and other times a "whetted" (or sharpened) knife. In other words, every day there is something new to contend with; the sea is wild and free, and it allows the speaker to be wild and free as well.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

In December of 1895, 17-year-old John Masefield was deeply moved to read Canadian poet Duncan Cambell Scott's "The Piper of Arll" in a New York magazine. He later wrote to Scott saying that, thanks to this poem, poetry had become the single most important influence in his life.

While working for a carpet factory in New York from

1895-1897, Masefield devoured as many books as he could get his hands on; he had a wide range of interests, but he became particularly interested in the work of English poets Geoffrey Chaucer, John Keats, and Percy Bysshe Shelley. "Sea Fever" in particular shows the influence of Romanticism in its speaker's love of nature and his desire to lead a "lonely," inspired life.

In 1897 Masefield met English poet W.B. Yeats, with whom he would become close friends, and began writing prolifically. By the time Masefield died in 1967, he had served as Poet Laureate of England and published around 50 books of poetry, as well as a number of novels, plays, and memoirs.

"Sea Fever," which remains Masefield's best-known poem, first appeared in his book *Salt-Water Ballads* in 1902. Many of the poems from this collection would be re-released by Macmillan in 1916 after the success of Masefield's 1911 book *The Everlasting Mercy*, which details a common man's confession as he turns from a life of sin to Christianity. The directness of this book-length poem's language was considered shocking in its day, and it is now seen as an exemplar of Georgianism, the literary movement that bridges the gap between Victorian poetry and Modernism.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

John Masefield was born in Herefordshire, England, in 1878. Orphaned at a young age, he attended boarding school before spending several years aboard the *HMS Conway*, apprenticing to become a merchant navy officer. Unlike the speaker of "Sea Fever," Masefield struggled with life at sea, often succumbing to sea-sickness and sunstroke. But he was passionate about seafaring lore, and spent much of his time aboard the *Conway* reading, writing, and listening to the stories of sailors. Eventually, he would publish a memoir, *New Chum*, about this time in his life.

"Sea Fever" can be seen as a response to the tradition of sea shanties—that is, nautical folk songs. These songs were meant not for entertainment but rather to assist in hard group labor like scrubbing decks or hoisting sails; the strong rhythms of the shanties helped sailors to coordinate their efforts. As steam power began to replace manual labor in the early 20th century, the sea shanty lost its practical purpose, but sailors and folk musicians kept on singing them. As a student of sea lore, it is likely that Masefield wrote "Sea Fever" from a similar impulse to preserve nautical memories.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Set to Music — Listen to a musical arrangement of the poem by John Ireland. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7FdNti6O1wc)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to Masefield himself reading the poem out loud. (https://youtu.be/TCYsLqV2CyU)
- More About the Poet — Read a brief biography and more of Masefield's poems at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/john-masefield)
- The Poem in Print — Explore the first edition of Salt-Water Ballads, in which "Sea Fever" originally appeared. (https://archive.org/details/saltwaterballads00maserich/page/ii/mode/2up?ref=ol&view=theater)
- More about Masefield — Read an in-depth look at Masefield's life and career from the New York Review of Books. (https://www.nyrb.com/collections/john-masefield)

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