Siren Song

SUMMARY

The speaker, a mythical siren, begins the poem by saying that she's singing something that people all over want to hear—a song that people can't help but find utterly captivating.

In fact, what she's singing has the power to compel men to jump right off their ships in droves despite being able to see the washed-up skeletons of other men who have done the exact same thing.

No one actually knows what this song sounds like, the speaker continues; everyone who's been exposed to it died as a result, or were driven mad and lost their memories.

The speaker wonders if she should confide something in the reader. If she does this, she asks, will the reader help her become fully human (rather than part bird, as sirens are)?

She's not happy to be stuck on this chunk of land in the middle of the sea, she says, where all she does is sit and look beautiful in an unrealistic, legendary sort of way.

She doesn't like hanging out with the other two sirens on the island either, whom she thinks are completely crazy. And she doesn't like performing as part of this trio, singing this song that's at once deadly and all she has.

She says to the reader that she will indeed confide in them, and in no one else. She asks the reader to come a little nearer to her.

The truth is, she says, that the song she sings is really a desperate attempt to get some assistance. She calls out for aid, saying that no one but the reader is capable of assisting her, because the reader is special, different from all the others.

Finally, the speaker says, there's someone different. Unfortunately, she continues, her tedious melody never fails her.

THEMES

THE TRAP OF GENDER ROLES

"Siren Song" toys with the "mythology" of traditional gender roles. The speaker is one of the sirens of Greek myth: a beautiful half-bird, half-woman creature who lures sailors to their deaths with an enticing song. In this version of the story, however, the siren's song isn't so much *beautiful* as it is *flattering* to the man who hears it: she makes him feel special, like the only person in the world who will be able to save her. By the end of the poem, it's made clear that this song is only a ploy; the speaker deceives men by appealing to their desire to be heroic. Yet the speaker doesn't seem particularly *happy* about her success, because it leaves her once again isolated, stuck inside a "bird suit" she hates. In this way, the poem suggests that these "boring," gendered scripts have a predictable outcome: both parties remain trapped inside a "myth" they can't escape.

The speaker begins by describing her "song," the one that men "leap overboard" to hear. She says that her song is "irresistible," and that people who have heard it either die or lose their minds. Therefore, no one on earth can describe it except for her. She promises to share her "secret" with the reader (who stands in for the man she is addressing). The intimacy makes her feel more vulnerable, while being on the receiving end of such intimacy makes the man she's addressing feel "unique."

The speaker then reveals her "secret": she doesn't actually enjoy "squatting on this island / looking picturesque and mythical." In other words, serving as an object to be longed for and feared has left her unhappy. She feels lonely and trapped; she wants to "get [...] out of this bird suit." That is, she wants to be seen as fully human. By the end of the poem, it becomes clear that the speaker isn't just describing the "song"; this "secret" *is* the "song." Her "song" is simply a "cry for help"—a desperate attempt to be seen for who she really is.

Although her loneliness is real, her cry for help is also a ploy: she uses her frustration to lure this man into the same trap as all the others. By the time her victim realizes that the speaker's vulnerability *is* the irresistible "song" itself, it's too late: they've already fallen for it. The speaker concludes the poem by saying that "it works every time," so it's clear that this man is no different from any of the ones who came before.

Yet even though the speaker succeeds in deceiving yet another guileless, would-be savior, she's dissatisfied with the ruse. The speaker's tone in the final stanza indicates that she's rather disappointed to have fooled yet another man; her "Alas" suggests she might rather have been *surprised* than successful. It seems the speaker wasn't lying when she said that she doesn't "enjoy singing" this "boring song." After all, every time she sings it, she ends up having to stay on the "island [...] with these two feathery maniacs" (the other sirens). As long as she continues to sing this song, she remains trapped in the myth created for her; she continues to be seen as not-quite-human.

The speaker's song, then, evokes the "boring" scripts assigned by traditional gender roles. These scripts leave both parties isolated and unhappy, falling for the same "fatal" lies over and over again, trapped in an endless cycle of longing and disappointment.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 4-6
- Lines 10-18
- Lines 21-22
- Lines 23-27

VANITY AND SEDUCTION

The poem cleverly pokes fun at the human desire to feel "unique." The speaker is able to seduce listeners with her "song" by appealing to their vanity. By convincing listeners—both men on passing ships and readers of this very poem—that they are the "only" ones special enough to understand this song, the speaker proves that this kind of flattery ironically works on everyone. The poem also suggests that poetry *itself* works this way, winning people over by making them feel like they're in on something that no one else can understand.

The speaker appeals to her listener's/reader's vanity by making them feel like they're the only one in the world who can be trusted with her "secret." She says that her song is one "nobody knows" because no one else has been able to handle it. By offering to share this secret with her listener/reader, she implies that she thinks this person is different from all the others, which of course the listener/reader wants to believe of themselves as well. She says she will tell the secret to no one else, and this feeling of being exceptional is what pulls one further into the song/poem.

But by convincing the listener/reader that they are special only to reveal that they've fallen for the same trick as all the others, the speaker proves that this kind of flattery ironically works on everyone. The listener is led to believe that by making it to the end of the poem, they will discover the speaker's secret, and discovering this secret will "at last" make them "unique"—they will have acquired this hidden knowledge through their own merit. Instead, they make it to the end of the poem only to discover that their vanity—the thing that made them believe they were exceptional—is the exact thing that makes them like everyone else.

The poem suggests that poetry works this way as well—that the poem seduces the reader into believing they understand it in a way that no one else possibly can. In turn, this perhaps suggests that the intimacy readers feel with the speaker of a poem is rather one-sided. Despite the secrets the speaker may share over the course of the poem, the reader can never actually reach the speaker, never actually help her "out of [her] bird suit." In the end, the speaker (and maybe the writer of the poem) is still stuck on an "island," speaking/writing to a generalized "you"—but making the reader feel chosen, singular, and special.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-3
- Lines 4-12
- Lines 19-27

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

This is the ...
... the beached skulls

The title of "Siren Song" clues readers into what this poem will be about: the sirens of Greek mythology were half-bird, half-woman creates who lived on an island and would bewitch passing sailors with their voices.

The poem draws from such mythology by describing a beautiful, "irresistible" song that makes men "leap" from their ships to the dangerous waters below. These men are desperate, rushing forward "in squadrons," or groups, despite seeing "the beached skulls" of other men lining the shore of the sirens' island. This journey is clearly a deadly one, but the men can't help it, so enticed are they by this song.

The poem is written in free verse, meaning it doesn't follow any set patterns of meter or rhyme. It does have some structure, however, made clear in these opening six lines: the poem consists of tercets, or three-line stanzas. In a way, this gives the poem a sense of orderly progression, suggesting that the siren is in control of this narrative.

The frequent enjambment of these lines also subtly evokes the siren's allure: as phrases rush past line breaks without pause, readers are continually pulled forward, forced down the page just as those "men" are forced overboard. Take lines 1-3 as an example:

> This is the one song everyone
> would like to learn: the song
> that is irresistible:

The diacope and anaphora of "song," meanwhile, lends a pulsing, hypnotic rhythm to the verse that further mirrors the enchanting pull of the sirens' singing, which apparently makes men lose all good sense:

> This is the one song everyone
> would like to learn: the song
> that is irresistible:
> the song that forces men

The mythical sirens have traditionally sirens have been portrayed as frightening, villainous creatures. Yet they also speak to a very gendered anxiety: the story of the sirens

revolves around women making men lose their sense of control and behave irrationally. In other words, a woman's allure is held responsible for a man's downfall. Sirens are like the original femme fatales: women who entrap men with their charms.

To that end, note the word "forces" here: the poem is drawing on the idea that the sirens are the ones with all the control in this situation, though by the poem's end readers may wonder if that's truly the case.

LINES 7-9

the song nobody ...
... others can't remember.

Though "everyone / would like to learn" the song that the speaker is singing, she says here that, in fact, "nobody knows" it. Note how the consonance and alliteration of this phrase ("nobody knows") seems to emphasize it to the reader's ear, making the song seem all the more mysterious and intriguing.

No one actually knows this song, the speaker continues, because everyone who has attempted to get close enough to hear it clearly is either "dead" (having crashed on the rocks and ended up like one of those "beached skulls") or "can't remember"—maybe because the song made them go mad. In either case, it's clear that the song is a trap: it lures men to their doom.

Again, the enjambment throughout this stanza seems to mimic the song's allure, pulling readers swiftly, unstoppably across the line breaks. Meanwhile, the continued use of anaphora (the repetition of "the song" at the start of this stanza) calls more attention to this beautiful but dangerous melody.

LINES 10-12

Shall I tell ...
... this bird suit?

So far, the poem has described the siren's *song* but not the siren *herself*. This is largely in keeping with traditional siren mythology, which focuses on how these female figures tempt and ruin men rather than considering their own perspective on things.

But here, in the poem's fourth stanza, the speaker brings herself fully into the poem for the first time. Speaking directly to the reader/listener, she asks, "Shall I tell you the secret[?]" This direct address creates a sense of intimacy and connection between the speaker and her listener. And in offering up her "secret," the speaker appears to make herself vulnerable—after all, the reader could choose to say no, stop reading, and leave the speaker stranded.

This vulnerability might make the reader want to trust the speaker, pulling them closer even though they know what happens to people who get close. Already, then, the speaker is making the reader feel like they're special—like *she's* coming to *them*, and like they're not like all those men leaping off their ships a few lines ago to reach her.

In return for listening to this secret, the speaker continues, the speaker wants the reader to get her "out of this bird suit." This is an allusion to the fact that sirens are depicted as half-bird, half-woman creatures. At the same time, however, the use of the word "suit" makes this part of the speaker seem like a costume that she puts on—like something that's not really part of who she is. The fact that she doesn't want to be wearing this "suit" anymore also suggests that she hasn't chosen this life for herself. It's as if the speaker is asking the reader to help make her appear fully human; perhaps she's tired of being seen as a monster.

LINES 13-18

I don't enjoy ...
... fatal and valuable.

The poem digs deeper into the siren's perspective on her situation as she reveals that she doesn't actually like "squatting on this island." The word "squatting" connotes discomfort, and it suggests that being a siren isn't exactly easy or natural. The word "squatting" can also be used to describe the act of occupying a space one doesn't own. The speaker, apparently, doesn't feel like this island she's been so linked to in myth is actually her own, and she's not all that comfortable there.

Reading the poem through the lens of patriarchy and gender roles, these lines might represent the way that women aren't the owners of their own stories. Instead, they're "squatting" on territory they don't own, forced to perform certain versions of themselves to suit a male narrative that treats them as two-dimensional villains or side characters.

In any case, the speaker is pretty fed up with "looking picturesque and mythical"—that is, she's tired of having to just stand around looking beautiful and playing up the stories about who she is. She doesn't enjoy the company of the other two sirens on the island either, whom she (rather hilariously) refers to as "feathery maniacs." The speaker's disdain for her own kind suggests some self-loathing, but it also counters the way that stories so often flatten their female characters. The three sirens are not all the same, the speaker says here; she, at least, would prefer not to be lumped in with her maniacal counterparts.

To that end, she doesn't "enjoy singing / this trio." Perhaps she'd rather a solo, a song for herself, or not to sing at all. The anaphora of the phrase "I don't enjoy" here emphasizes her displeasure with her circumstances, in turn implying that she didn't actually choose this life for herself.

And yet, this is the life she has. Calling the "trio" she sings not only deadly but also "valuable," she acknowledges that her dangerous song constitutes the only real power the speaker possesses while stuck on this island.

LINES 19-22

I will tell ...
... help: Help me!

The speaker again offers to tell the reader her "secret," further stroking her listener's ego by adding that she will confide in no one else. Notice the use of repetition in lines 19-20:

> I will tell the secret to you,
> to you, only to you.

Epizeuxis ("to you, / to you") and diacope ("to you, only to you") create a soothing rhythm here, again evoking the pleasing, hypnotic sound of the siren's "song" itself. The repetition of "you" also pulls the reader in, the speaker emphatically insisting that she's singling them out, speaking "only" to them.

The speaker then instructs the reader to "Come closer," the sharp alliteration heightening this moment. The halting caesurae of these lines slow them down as well, ramping up the sense of anticipation and making it feel as though the reader is moving closer to the speaker's truth step-by-step.

Then the speaker reveals her big secret: rather than (or in addition to being) a tempting melody that lures men to their deaths, her song is a "cry for help." Immediately on the heels of this admission, she calls out to the reader directly: "Help me!" This repetition (an example of the device anadiplosis) adds a sense of urgency. Again, it pulls the reader in: the speaker is calling directly to them and making herself vulnerable.

LINES 23-27

Only you, only ...
... works every time.

The speaker continues to flatter her listener's ego, saying that they're the "[o]nly" one who can help her. The epizeuxis ("Only you, only you") and diacope ("you can, you") again emphasize the reader and their supposed specialness. And listen to the /y/ and /k/ consonance and /oo/ assonance here, which turns the line into a kind of swirling tongue-twister of sound:

> Only you, only you can,
> you are unique

The enjambment after "unique" then thrusts readers across the stanza break, coming to rest with the emphatic "at last" in line 25. The speaker has *finally* found someone who can help her, this phrase implies, the full stop caesura that follows creating a moment of relief.

The lines are intensely musical, rhythmic, and hypnotic. They feel, in fact, like a song. And at this point, the reader might start to suspect that they've been had: they've been pulled along by this poem just as all those unfortunate sailors were pulled to their deaths. The poem *becomes* the "siren song" of its title.

And now it's too late: the reader has arrived at the final stanza "at last," where the speaker reveals that her "boring song" has once again done its job. In other words, the reader has reached the end of the poem just as the speaker intended. That cold "Alas" and
"boring" implies her disappointment: her listener proved no different from the rest, as susceptible to vanity and flattering as the men who came before; as willing to believe that the speaker was helpless and in desperate need of someone to save her. And because of this, she's again left alone. The reader has reached the end of the poem, and will soon leave her behind.

In the end, it's ambiguous whether the speaker is genuinely unhappy with her situation or has only been playing up her vulnerability to earn her listener's trust and sympathy. Most likely, both things are true: the song is at once a legitimate "cry for help" and a manipulative tool through which the speaker exercises the only power she has in a narrative that's been written for her. The speaker can't do anything else, as she's already established; she's trapped on this island. Despite perhaps legitimately hating her role in this myth, the siren has no choice but to continue acting out her part—and men just keep falling for it.

POETIC DEVICES

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment helps to pace the poem, pulling readers swiftly down the page in a way that might evoke the lure of the siren's song itself. Enjambment can also add moments of ambiguity and suspense.

The first line lines of the poem, for example, is enjambed:

> This is the one song everyone
> would like to learn: the song

Stretching this sentence across the linebreak introduces a little momentum and anticipation, as the reader can't know the relationship between this "song" and "everyone" until they continue on to the second line. The reader might expect the clause to end differently—"This is the one song everyone / knows," for example. Instead, it turns out that "nobody knows" it "because anyone who has heard it / is dead, and the others can't remember." Again, the use of enjambment here builds anticipation: the reader can't know what has happened to everyone "who has heard [the song]" until they've read past the line break.

Another striking enjambment comes between lines 24-25, when the speaker says,

> you are unique
> at last. Alas

The speaker enjambs a line across an entire stanza, adding extra emphasis as the reader lands on that ego-stroking "at last." The speaker seems to be saying not just that the listener is special, but that no one else has ever been special before—that finally, "at last," someone "unique" has come along. Once again, enjambment pulls the reader in only to abruptly pull the rug out from under them: no sooner does the reader feel "unique / at last" than the speaker makes it clear that they have fallen for the same "song" as all the others.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "everyone / would"
- **Lines 2-3:** "song / that"
- **Lines 4-5:** "men / to"
- **Lines 5-6:** "squadrons / even"
- **Lines 7-8:** "knows / because"
- **Lines 8-9:** "it / is"
- **Lines 10-11:** "secret / and"
- **Lines 11-12:** "me / out"
- **Lines 13-14:** "here / squatting"
- **Lines 14-15:** "island / looking"
- **Lines 15-16:** "mythical / with"
- **Lines 17-18:** "singing / this"
- **Lines 21-22:** "song / is"
- **Lines 24-25:** "unique / at"
- **Lines 25-26:** "Alas / it"
- **Lines 26-27:** "song / but"

CONSONANCE

The poem uses consonance to create brief moments of musicality and intensity. Take "nobody knows," which combines consonance (more specifically, alliteration) and assonance (that long /oh/) to create a sense of intrigue, calling attention to the idea that the speaker's song is a secret.

A longer string of consonance comes in lines 14-16, which feature a slew of crisp /k/ and languid /l/ sounds, as well as /m/ alliteration linking "mythical" with "maniacs":

> squatting on this island
> looking picturesque and mythical
> with these two feathery maniacs,

The various sounds here seem to highlight the tension between how things *look* to the passing men and how things *feel* to the speaker: while the smooth /l/ sounds suggest the alluring sight of the "mythical" bird-women and their beautiful song, the sharp injection of /k/ sounds seems to evoke the speaker's distaste for living life as an object of men's fantasies.

Towards the poem's end, consonance and assonance again combine. Note the /y/, /k/, /l/, /s/, /oo/, and /ah/ sounds:

> Only you, only you can,
> you are unique
> at last. Alas

The string of similar sounds is almost like a hypnotic tongue twister, again evoking the musical allure of the speaker's song.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "like," "learn"
- **Line 5:** "squadrons"
- **Line 6:** "see," "skulls"
- **Line 7:** "nobody knows"
- **Line 14:** "squatting," "island"
- **Line 15:** "looking," "picturesque," "mythical"
- **Line 16:** "maniacs"
- **Line 21:** "Come closer"
- **Line 23:** "you," "you can"
- **Line 24:** "you," "unique"
- **Line 25:** "at last. Alas"

ALLITERATION

Like consonance, alliteration adds musicality and emphasis to certain moments in the poem. For example, in line 6, note the hissing sibilance as the "squadrons" rush toward the island even as they can "see the beached skulls" of others who made the same doomed journey before them. The /s/ sounds here might evoke the sinister hiss of a snake—a creature infamously linked with danger and temptation, much like the siren herself.

Later in the poem, the sharp alliteration of "Come closer and "cry for help" adds intensity to the speaker's words just as she calls out to the reader and tries to make them feel special. Similarly, the alliteration and assonance of "you" and "unique" highlights this important moment when the speaker uses the human desire to be special to string her listener along.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "like," "learn"
- **Line 5:** "squadrons"
- **Line 6:** "see," "skulls"
- **Line 8:** "who," "has," "heard"
- **Line 15:** "mythical"
- **Line 16:** "maniacs"
- **Line 21:** "Come," "closer"
- **Line 22:** "cry"
- **Line 23:** "you"
- **Line 24:** "you," "unique"

ANAPHORA

Anaphora is one of those devices that makes this "Siren's Song" feel more like a song. Repeating words at the beginning of lines creates a sense of building momentum and a hypnotic, musical

rhythm that brings the allure of the speaker's song to life for the reader/listener.

In the first three stanzas, for example, the speaker repeats the phrase "the song that" (or just "the song") at the start of three consecutive sentences:

> [...] the song
> that is irresistible:
> the song that forces men
> [...]
> the song nobody knows

This repetition also draws attention to what it is the sailors are so eager to "jump overboard" for: it isn't the sirens themselves that the "men" find alluring, but their enchanting "song."

Elsewhere, the speaker turns to anaphora for emphasis. At the beginning of the fifth and sixth stanzas, the speaker repeats the phrase "I don't enjoy":

> I don't enjoy it here
> [...]
> I don't enjoy singing

This repetition creates a feeling of insistence. The speaker may appear to have all the power in this poem, compelling "men" to jump to their deaths against the rocky shore, yet she is also a victim of this gendered mythology. She is miserably alone and hates the "trio" she has to perform in.

Finally, the repetition inherent to anaphora echoes the repetitive nature of the speaker's seduction. The sirens have nothing to do other than "squat[]" on this "island" and lure sailors to their deaths. The "beached skulls" attest to how many times the speaker must have sung this "song," and how "boring" it must be for her to have nothing else to do besides "singing" it.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "the song / that"
- **Line 4:** "the song that"
- **Line 7:** "the song"
- **Line 13:** "I don't enjoy"
- **Line 17:** "I don't enjoy"

REPETITION

In addition to anaphora, the poem uses a couple of other kinds of repetition to add rhythm, music, and emphasis. In lines 19-20, for example, there is both diacope and epizeuxis:

> I will tell the secret to you,
> to you, only to you.

By using epizeuxis (the immediate repetition of "to you, to you") followed by diacope (the repetition of "to you" after the interceding "only"), the poem establishes a rhythm and then slightly disrupts it, making the word "only" stand out. In this way, the speaker plays up the supposed "unique[ness]" of this particular reader, implying that there's no one else she can trust.

In lines 22-23, there is anadiplosis as well as more epizeuxis:

> is a cry for help: Help me!
> Only you, only you can,

In both of these cases, the immediate repetition of a word or phrase adds a sense of urgency to the poem, one meant to pull the reader along.

There are other kinds of repetition as well, as of the words "song" (or "singing") and "secret." Altogether, this repetitive language comes across as rather soothing, as if the speaker is lulling the reader into a false sense of certainty with her "boring song." In other words, it is the very repetitiveness of the "song" that makes it so effective.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "song"
- **Lines 2-3:** "the song / that"
- **Line 4:** "the song that"
- **Line 7:** "the song"
- **Line 10:** "Shall I tell you the secret"
- **Line 17:** "singing"
- **Line 19:** "I will tell the secret"
- **Lines 19-20:** "to you, / to you, only to you."
- **Line 21:** "This song"
- **Line 22:** "help: Help"
- **Line 23:** "Only you, only you"
- **Line 24:** "you"
- **Line 26:** "song"

CAESURA

The poem uses caesura to slow the reader down within a given line. It is also used to add emphasis to particular words or ideas. In line 2, for example, the pause after "learn" creates a moment of anticipation and drama before the speaker first introduces "the song":

> would like to learn: the song

Similarly, the caesura between "help" and "Help" in line 22 makes the word sound more urgent and pressing:

> is a cry for help: Help me!

Elsewhere caesurae subtly emphasize the way in which the

speaker is drawing the reader in closer and closer, as in lines 20-21:

> to you, only to you.
> Come closer. This song

The pauses here might create a sensation of moving step by step, falling ever deeper into the siren's trap.

Finally, the caesura in line 25 between "last" and "Alas" helps to emphasize the abrupt change in the speaker's tone as she goes from seducing the reader to revealing that she was never really interested in them to begin with.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "learn: the"
- **Line 11:** "do, will"
- **Line 18:** "trio, fatal"
- **Line 20:** "you, only"
- **Line 21:** "closer. This"
- **Line 22:** "help: Help"
- **Line 23:** "you, only"
- **Line 25:** "last. Alas"

ALLUSION

The poem alludes throughout to the sirens of Greek mythology: half-women, half-bird creatures who lived on islands surrounded by cliffs and rocky shores, and who sang an enchanting "song" that passing sailors simply couldn't resist. The sailors would either go mad if they heard the "song" and drown themselves, or they'd crash their ships trying to reach its source. The "beached skulls" that the speaker mentions in line 6 thus alludes to all the men who previously died trying to get to the island and catch a glimpse of the mythical sirens.

The poem uses this allusion to do a few different things. On the one hand, the story of the sirens speaks to the link between vanity and seduction: part of the way the speaker entices men is by making them think they're the only ones for her.

But the story also might illustrate the way that gender roles trap both men *and* women in an unending cycle of violence, loneliness, and frustration. The speaker isn't happy to be in her position. Her "cry for help" isn't just a trick: she's just as trapped as the men who continually fall for her song. She's sick of "squatting" around "looking picturesque and mythical"—that is, looking beautiful and unreal. The speaker's desire to "get [...] / out of this bird suit" is ultimately the desire to be seen and understood as fully human, rather than being turned into a villain or an object of desired.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-6:** "the song that forces men / to leap overboard in squadrons / even though they see the beached skulls"
- **Lines 11-12:** "will you get me / out of this bird suit?"
- **Lines 13-18:** "I don't enjoy it here / squatting on this island / looking picturesque and mythical / with these two feathery maniacs, / I don't enjoy singing / this trio, fatal and valuable."

ASYNDETON

The use of asyndeton speeds the poem up, and it also adds a little ambiguity in places. In lines 19, 20, for example, the speaker says,

> I will tell the secret to you,
> to you, only to you.

The poem could just as easily have read "I will tell the secret to you / and only to you." This wouldn't have changed the literal meaning, but it would have affected the poem's rhythm, not to mention the sense of urgency that comes with cutting out any line-slowing conjunctions. The use of asyndeton also makes it somewhat ambiguous whether the speaker is actually addressing the same "you" each time; perhaps she's illustrating how she's turned to multiple "you"s.

In lines 23-25, the speaker says,

> Only you, only you can,
> you are unique
> at last.

The use of asyndeton here once again speeds up the poem. All those "you"s come fast, perhaps deliberately overwhelming the reader/listener—stringing them along with flattery until it's too late.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 19-20:** "I will tell the secret to you, / to you, only to you."
- **Lines 23-25:** "Only you, only you can, / you are unique / at last."

VOCABULARY

Squadrons (Line 5) - Large groups. The word is often used in a military context to refer to a smaller unit detached from the main group.

Beached (Line 6) - Washed up on shore.

Bird suit (Lines 11-12) - The speaker is referring to the fact that, in Greek mythology, sirens were depicted as half woman, half bird.

Squatting (Line 14) - *Squatting* has two applicable definitions here. The first is to crouch or hunker down; the second is to reside on abandoned or uninhabited land that one doesn't own.

Picturesque (Line 15) - Beautiful in a charming or romantic kind of way.

Mythical (Line 15) - *Mythical* has a few different definitions, all of which apply here:

- From legend or folklore.
- Idealized; something remembered as being better than it actually was.
- Made-up; imaginary.

Trio (Lines 17-18) - A composition written for three musicians to perform together.

Fatal (Lines 17-18) - Resulting in death.

Alas (Lines 25-26) - A word used to convey regret or sorrow or pity.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Siren Song" is a free verse poem whose 27 lines are broken into nine tercets. This lends the free-flowing poem some structure and might subtly reflect the speaker's control over the narrative even as she laments her supposed helplessness.

Tercets (or three-line stanzas) are a fitting choice here for another reason as well: while some stories differ, traditionally there are three named sirens in Greek myth. The speaker also refers to the sirens' singing in a "trio," implying that there are three of them on this island.

The stanzas themselves feature fairly short lines, many of which are enjambed. The combination of brief lines, frequent enjambment, and repetition grants the poem its intimate, seductive pull, encouraging readers' eyes to smoothly slide down the page from one stanza to the next.

METER

The poem is written in free verse, so it doesn't use a set meter. Free verse allows for a much looser, more casual rhythm, which makes the poem feel conversational and even intimate. This feeling, in turn, is part of how the speaker is able to manipulate the listener/reader into falling for her "cry for help."

RHYME SCHEME

As a free verse poem, "Siren Song" doesn't use a rhyme scheme. As with the poem's lack of meter, this makes the poem feel casual and intimate, as though the speaker really is having a conversation with her reader/listener. This, in turn, makes what the speaker says all the more seductive: the listener/reader feels like she's talking to them, and "only" them.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is a siren, a half-woman, half-bird creature from Greek mythology. These sirens lived on an island surrounded by cliffs and rocky shores, and they would lure sailors to their deaths by singing an enchanting song that would drive men so wild they would crash their ships—or jump overboard—trying to get to its source.

While the sirens of myth are depicted as dangerous creatures, the speaker here might be as much a victim as she is a villain. She doesn't *want* to be stranded in the middle of the ocean with only "these two feathery maniacs" (the other sirens) for company. Nor does she *want* to be singing this song that draws men to her only to endlessly let her down—both because it shows every man who tries to save her to be just as suspectable to vanity and flattery as the last, and because it leads these men to their deaths. She's essentially trapped: every time she calls for "help," another man succumbs to the "boring song" that results in her continued disappointment and isolation.

What's more, she feels like her mythical identity itself is a costume that prevents her from being seen as fully human (hence her longing to be free of her "bird suit"). This reflects the idea that women's perspectives throughout history and myth have often been ignored; the speaker is seen only as "picturesque and mythical," her own thoughts and feelings unexplored in the stories told about her.

Of course, the speaker deliberately plays up her vulnerability to reel her listener in. While she seems genuinely unhappy in her circumstances and at having to pretend to be a damsel in distress in need of saving, she's not necessarily as helpless as she appears.

SETTING

The poem takes place on the sirens' island from Greek mythology. Here, the speaker and her two fellow sirens "squat[]" indefinitely, singing to lure passing sailors. The shores of this island are marked by the "beached skulls" of men who "leap overboard in squadrons." This island, then, is a dangerous one: its rocky shores mean near-certain death for anyone who tries to approach by sea.

Beyond that, though, there's no description of the speaker's home, nor of what the sirens do there apart from "singing" their "fatal" song again and again. This might speak to the way that women's perspectives are so often ignored in the stories written about them. As far as the myths are concerned, these sirens only exist to tempt men to their doom.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

The Canadian writer Margaret Atwood (born in 1939) is best known for her award-winning dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, though she is also a prolific and critically acclaimed poet, essayist, and literary critic. Like "Siren Song," much of her writing explores themes related to gender and oppression; she also has written often about religion, the environment, and the power of language itself.

Atwood frequently draws from mythology and fairy tales in her work, granting voices and layered perspectives to women who have been treated as submissive and helpless or as one-dimensional monsters throughout history. These include Penelope, the wife of Odysseus; Helen of Troy; the Egyptian goddess Sekhmet; and Eurydice. Atwood has found inspiration in real-life history as well: her poem "Half-Hanged Mary" adopts the voice of Mary Webster, for example, who was hanged as a witch in 1683 but survived.

"Siren Song" was published in Atwood's sixth poetry collection, *You Are Happy*, in 1974. This collection is split into two sections: the first is a series of poems narrated by animals, and the second is a retelling of the myth of Circe, a Greek goddess and sorceress who plays a minor role in Homer's *Odyssey*. Atwood's version of the Circe myth went on to inspire Madeline Miller's extremely successful novel *Circe*, which is likewise narrated by the titular goddess.

Circe was famous for turning the men who visited her island into animals, and in this sense she has a lot in common with the sirens of this poem: these are all figures demonized in myth for being predatory, sexually liberated women.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Siren Song" was published in 1974. At the time, Atwood had recently divorced her first husband and was becoming increasingly interested in gender politics.

The late '60s and '70s also marked the era of second-wave feminism, which built on earlier generations' fights for suffrage and basic legal rights. Second-wave feminists fought to dismantle patriarchy and systemic sexism more broadly, pushing back on the idea that women's only purpose in life was to become obedient mothers and wives. Activists focused their efforts on issues such as women's sexuality and reproductive freedom, domestic violence, and workplace harassment.

The myth of the sirens themselves, meanwhile, emerged at a very different time and in a very different world: ancient Greece was, by and large, a decidedly patriarchal society in which women lacked many of the basic rights and protections of the modern day. Mythology itself is filled with female monsters (such as Medusa and the aforementioned Circe), whose presence suggests a certain broad societal anxiety around independent, powerful women.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Reading of the Poem — Listen to a recording of the poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zu50AaFNI6U)
- Atwood's Feminist Mythology — This essay from The Curious Reader explores the way that Atwood's feminism informs her poetic retelling of classic myths. (https://www.thecuriousreader.in/features/feminist-retellings-margaret-atwood/)
- "Margaret Atwood Bears Witness" — Check out a 2019 Atlantic article discussing Atwood's use of "personal testimony" in her writing. (https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/12/margaret-atwood-bears-witness/600796/)
- The Sirens of Greek Mythology — Learn more about the mythology Atwood is drawing from in "Siren Song." (https://www.britannica.com/topic/Siren-Greek-mythology)
- Atwood's Biography — Read about Atwood's life and check out more of her work via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/margaret-atwood)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER MARGARET ATWOOD POEMS

- Half-Hanged Mary
- The City Planners
- This Is a Photograph of Me
- [you fit into me]

HOW TO CITE

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