

The Sea Eats the Land at Home



SUMMARY

Back home, the sea has flooded the coastal town. It floods the outdoor kitchens, and drags firewood from the fireplaces back out into sea at night. The sea is consuming the land back home. The sea came suddenly in the middle of the night, tearing down the town's cement walls and carrying away its poultry and kitchen utensils. The sea is consuming the land back home. It's hard to listen to the sad sounds of the town's women crying out in mourning. They call on all their gods for protection from the raging sea. One woman, Aku, stood outside in the place where her cooking-pot had once been, before the flood destroyed her home, alongside her two children, who shivered in the cold. Her hands clutched her breasts, and she was sobbing deeply. Aku's forefathers and mothers have forgotten about her, and all her gods have abandoned her. The Sunday morning air was cold, and the violent storm was still going strong. Goats and poultry were struggling to stay afloat in the raging waters of the mean-spirited sea. You could hear the sound of the water lapping at the shoreline; louder even than the townspeople's sobs and moans was the low, never-ending hum of the vibrant sea. The sea has stolen the people's belongings. Adena, another townswoman, has lost all the little things that made up her marriage dowry and brought her a great deal of happiness. They've all gone into the sea, which consumes the land back home. Consumes every bit of the land back home.

the land at home.”

This [metaphor](#) of the sea eating the land also suggests all-consuming devastation. It emphasizes that not only have the town's structures and livestock been destroyed, but also the very essence of what made the land a *home*. This suggestion of the land's deeper meaning is mirrored by the poem's [personification](#) of the sea. Not only does it “run,” “collect,” and “carry [things] away,” just like a person would, the sea is also described as “angry,” “cruel,” and “living”—a force as alive and impactful as any person.

Despite its human characteristics, however, the sea is far more powerful than the people in the poem. Aku, a townspeople whose home has been destroyed, stands helplessly “where her cooking-pot stood, / With her two children shivering from the cold.” Adena, another townspeople, “has lost the trinkets which / Were her dowry and her joy.”

Though the scale of their losses differs, both are [juxtaposed](#) against the sea as powerless victims, reflecting the indiscriminate power of nature: nobody, regardless of background or social status, is safe from forces beyond their control. What's more, they and the other women of the town are also described as “neglected” and “deserted” by the gods and ancestors to whom they pray for protection. These lines suggest that the sea is a force mightier than humanity and divinity alike.

The sea's unyielding power is further emphasized at the poem's close, which describes the waves as possessing an “eternal hum”—suggesting that the sea has caused such destruction before, and will again, as part of the unending and uncontrollable cycle of nature. In the final line, the poem also stresses that the sea “eats the *whole* land at home.” The subtle addition of the word “whole” reminds readers of the sea's immense power, capable of destroying the entirety of the people's land and home, and once again conveys nature's dominance over humanity.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-32



THEMES



THE POWER OF NATURE

“The Sea Eats the Land at Home” is about the ocean's destruction of a coastal town. Though the poem does not specify what exactly has caused the sea to “eat the land”—flood, hurricane, typhoon, or another form of natural disaster—it is clear that nature is to blame for the devastation. The poem vividly captures nature's all-consuming power, and juxtaposes its mighty force against the tragic powerlessness of the people who are its victims.

The overwhelming destruction caused by the sea is first conveyed via vivid [imagery](#): water “running in and out of the cooking places,” “destroying cement walls” and “carr[ying] away the fowls, / the cooking-pots and the ladles.” The poem's matter-of-fact [tone](#) describing how the disaster unfolded—“It came one day in the dead of the night” and “It is a sad thing to hear the wails”—suggests the sheer scale of the sea's power versus the town. All the speaker can do is observe and report the damage; nothing can be done to stop the sea from “eat[ing]



THE DEVASTATION OF COLONIZATION

At the poem's surface, “The Sea Eats the Land at Home” is about a natural disaster. However, the poem has frequently been understood as an [extended metaphor](#) for colonialism (the subjugation of one nation by another, in which both the people and the land are conquered and exploited by a foreign power).

Much the way the sea in the poem “eats the land,” destroying people’s lives and livelihoods, so too did European colonial forces devastate and consume the country of Ghana, where poet Kofi Awoonor was born and raised, as well as many other African nations. When read in this light, the poem’s [personification](#) of the sea becomes a sharp critique of the European countries that wreaked cultural and economic devastation on the land that was Awoonor’s home.

The first clue that the sea should be read as something greater than the literal ocean is its persistent personification. For example, the first 10 lines describe the sea pouring into the town, devastating its structures, and dragging firewood and other household items out into the ocean. Verbs like “running,” “collecting,” “carr[ying] away,” and of course “eat[ing]” all suggest that the sea should be read as a metaphor for human beings, since it is people, not the ocean, who commonly perform those actions. So too does the description of the sea as being “in the town,” like a visitor—or an occupier.

The [imagery](#), with descriptions of the tide running back and forth and gathering up the towns’ belongings, is reminiscent of a colonial power, occupying a foreign land and extracting its natural resources. Likewise, the metaphor of “eat[ing] the land” suggests consumption of colonized territory.

The descriptions of the sea and the natural disaster can be read as characterizations of the colonizers themselves, with references to the storm “raging,” the sea arriving sneakily “at the dead of night,” and the sea as “angry” and “cruel” all coming from the perspective of the colonized. Though the poem does not name a specific location for the town, the details, such as outdoor cooking hearths, and the names of the women Aku and Adena, all point toward an African village, most likely in Ghana, where the poet, Kofi Awoonor, grew up. Thus this personification of the sea might be interpreted more specifically as characterization of the Portuguese and other Europeans who established the slave trade along Ghana’s Gold Coast in the 1600s, and of the British colonizers who occupied Ghana from 1821 to 1957.

Ultimately, when the poem concludes that the sea “has taken away their belongings,” the line stands out as an explicit condemnation of the economic devastation of colonization. Similarly, the final two lines, “In the sea that eats the land at home, / Eats the whole land at home,” reiterate the personal and cultural loss faced by people whose home has been raided, razed, and ruined.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-32



LOSS OF HOME AND IDENTITY

As the sea destroys the town, it gobbles up markers

of rural domestic life like goats and cooking-pots, leaving human inhabitants “shivering from the cold.” This destruction is more than physical, however, and suggests a figurative sense of displacement, of losing one’s footing and sense of self. When Aku’s ancestors and gods abandon her, the implication is that both her personal and cultural history disappear as her actual home is washed away. The poem thus implies that there is an important link between home and identity, and explores the destabilizing that pain that thus accompanies the loss of home.

This loss is also connected to the idea of emigration. The repetition of the phrase “at home” implies that the speaker has actually *left* home and is telling this story from somewhere else. This distance, in turn, lends itself to a reading in which the natural disaster described by the poem might be taken as a specific [metaphor](#) for leaving one’s home to settle in another country, and how this distance affects one’s sense of self.

Whether the storm represents the speaker’s initial departure from home or the cumulative effects of living away for many years, it is clear that the disaster marks the moment when the speaker realizes that home is forever beyond reach; either the speaker, the homeland, or both have changed too significantly to be what they once were to each other. The speaker may have once felt an innate connection to home, but with distance and time, this connection and sense of self has been “eat[en]” by the sea, lost forever, just like the “cooking-pots and ladles.”

In addition, the few lines dedicated to the women “calling on all the gods they worship / To protect them from the angry sea” metaphorically suggests a speaker trying to dredge up that lost connection to home. However, as the following and final lines make clear, this connection has been severed. Where once “her cooking-pot stood,” now Aku and her children stand “shivering from the cold.” The ancestors “have neglected [...] and deserted her.”

Aku’s fate can be read as [symbolic](#) of the speaker’s as well. Where once the speaker stood strong in their identity, tied closely to home, now the speaker also stands cold and shivering, on a metaphorical shoreline that is neither land nor sea, home nor foreign country. Bound up in this tragedy is the loss of “joy,” as the poem describes Adena’s dowry, which also symbolizes her future. The implications of these two things—pure childlike happiness, and an assured future—have also been lost to the sea, or the effects of emigration.

The poem closes on a somber note, recognizing that this loss of home and identity, and sense of alienation, is permanent and ongoing, just like “the eternal hum of the living sea.” Though the speaker may speak from a distance, there is no mistaking that at heart, like Aku, the speaker is “weeping mournfully,” as the poem acknowledges in its final lines the significance of what the speaker has lost: “the land at home [...] the whole land at home,” or the speaker’s home and sense of self.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-32

**LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS****LINES 1-4**

*At home the ...
... back at night;*

"The Sea Eats the Land at Home" opens in media res, or in the middle of the action, as a natural disaster unfolds and the sea floods a coastal town. First and foremost, these lines explicitly convey the sea's power, and the power of nature overall, as the water overruns the town's "cooking places" and drags the people's firewood out on the tide. It is clear the town and its people are defenseless to stop the sea from:

Running in and out of the cooking places,
Collecting the firewood from the hearths
And sending it back at night;

Most notably, however, these opening lines immediately introduce the sea via [personification](#). The speaker describes its actions in human-like terms, "running," "collecting," and "sending" things the way a person might.

Not only does this establish the sea as the poem's central character, but it also suggests that the sea's actions should be understood as somehow purposeful, beyond the indifferent power of nature. This renders the sea and the flood all the more sinister. It also establishes the major [extended metaphors](#) of the poem, in which the sea represents more than just nature—serving as a symbol for colonial or migratory forces as well.

Equally fundamental to the success of these opening lines are the poem's use of [alliteration](#), [assonance](#), [consonance](#), and [asyndeton](#). The first three devices all relate to sound; their presence here supports the poem's homage to Ewe dirges, traditional songs of lament in the poet's culture. In particular, note the hard /c/ sounds that capture the sea's cruelty; the repeated gerunds ("ing" verbs); and finally the /f/t and /t/ sounds, all of which taken together give these lines a sense of cohesion and unity. The assonant /o/ and /oo/ sounds, meanwhile, help establish the poem's musicality:

At home the sea is in the town,
Running in and out of the cooking places,
Collecting the firewood from the hearths
And sending it back at night;

The asyndeton, on the other hand, in which lines 1-3 form a

continuous sentence without coordinating conjunctions, subtly creates a rushed sensation for readers, helping convey the overwhelming nature of the disaster taking place before the speaker's eyes.

LINE 5

The sea eats ... land at home.

Line 5 introduces the poem's [refrain](#), which also serves as its title: "The sea eats the land at home." This one sentence captures the poem's thematic heart, conveying, through [figurative language](#), what the poem is all about.

At the surface, this line describes the way the sea has flooded the town, physically consuming the land. On a [metaphorical](#) level, it reflects the poem's two [extended metaphors](#) and major themes: colonialism, and specifically the way in which European colonial powers consumed the country of Ghana; and emigration, in which loss of culture and identity follows loss of one's native land and home.

The line itself mimics this consumption on a sonic level, with the [assonant](#) /ee/ sound in "sea eats" blending the two words together, almost as though the sea is eating up the word "eat." The sibilant /s/ sounds that surround the phrase adds to its sinister intensity as well. This reliance on musicality is prominent throughout the poem.

Last but not least, the word "home" at the end of the line adds an extra layer of meaning to this refrain. The poem could make its point about the sea's devastation of the land without the final phrase, "at home." However, by including it, the poem makes clear that the land being consumed by the sea is more than just physical space. It is a home (the speaker's home, in fact, as the preposition "at" implies) and as such holds significant emotional and cultural value to its people beyond simply providing shelter. These two little words emphasize that the devastation taking place runs deep.

LINES 6-10

*It came one ...
... land at home;*

Lines 6-10 ("It came [...] home;") capture the extent of the damage done to the town by the sea. The [imagery](#) here, rich in detail, makes clear that the devastation has been total.

The walls of the town are destroyed, and livestock has been carried away by the waves alongside the townspeople's belongings. The measured, plainspoken [diction](#) describing all of this destruction is offset by the melancholy repetition of the poem's [refrain](#), "The sea eats the land at home." This line underscores that all of these objects and belongings add up to something much bigger and more meaningful than a list of household items, and thus their loss is deeply tragic.

This passage in the poem continues to use [personification](#) to characterize the sea. The first line in particular, describing how

the sea "came one day at the dead of night," suggests that the sea snuck in when the town would be least aware. This attribution of human-like characteristics to the sea emphasizes its role as a malicious character and contributes to a reading of the poem in which the sea represents colonial occupiers or invaders.

As in the previous lines, [alliteration](#), [assonance](#), and [consonance](#) play a large role in extending the poem's meaning through sound and rhythm, in keeping with its homage to the [elegiac](#) dirge tradition of the Ewe people to whom the poet belonged. The harsh hard /c/ sound in words like "cooking" and "carried" conveys the invasive nature of the flood, while the thudding /d/ sounds in "day," "dead," "destroying," "carried," "ladles," and "land" capture the devastation. Meanwhile, the assonant /ay/ sound in "came," "day," "away," and "ladle" lends a sense of rhythm to the lines that evokes the insistent movement of the sea.

LINES 11-14

*It is a ...
... the angry sea.*

Lines 11-14 shift the poem's focus from the sea's destruction of the town to that destruction's impact on the *people* who live there. In particular, these lines highlight two women's response to the disaster, using vivid [imagery](#) to depict their grief and sorrow at the loss of their home.

In addition to the poem's explicit references to sound ("wails" and "shouts") the language itself relies on the sonic device of [alliteration](#), with three /w/ words reinforcing the connection between the women and their sorrow, and that sorrow with their desperate pleas to the gods for protection from "the angry sea."

It is a sad thing to hear the wails,
And the mourning shouts of the women,
Calling on all the gods they worship,

This repetitive technique is reminiscent of the Ewe dirge tradition in which the poet, Kofi Awoonor, was raised, and evokes the themes of mourning and lament present in those traditional songs.

Furthermore, the sea's might and power is again on full display here. The [personification](#) of the sea as "angry" evokes its [metaphorical](#) role as a cruel and powerful colonial oppressor. Protection never comes, leaving readers to conclude that the sea (and all that it [symbolizes](#)) has dominated not only these women but also their deities.

The speaker also makes a subtle appearance in this section, noting that "It is a sad thing to hear the wails" of the women. Though the speaker is expressing sadness, the tone of that line sounds a bit distanced or detached. This lends evidence to an interpretation of the poem in which the speaker is an emigrant,

cut off from home and observing these tragic events from far away. Nevertheless, the speaker's attention to detail indicates a deep concern for the town and its people.

LINES 15-18

*Aku stood outside ...
... Weeping mournfully.*

These lines introduce the first named character of the poem, a woman named Aku. Following the depiction of all the women wailing and mourning as a group, these lines stand out for the way they zoom in on Aku's fate.

Through vivid [imagery](#), the poem describes how Aku stands "outside where her cooking-pot [once] stood" as her children shiver in the cold, suggesting that her entire home has been destroyed. Certainly, she reacts with deep sorrow, clutching her breasts and "weeping mournfully." The [asyndeton](#) in these lines—the quick leap between clauses in lines 16-18—conveys the overwhelming despair that Aku feels in the face of the sea's destruction, listing one tragic detail after another without pause:

With her two children shivering from the cold,
Her hands on her breasts,
Weeping mournfully.

In addition, the devices of [alliteration](#), [assonance](#), and [consonance](#) play a prominent role. The harsh /c/ and spitting /st/ sounds emphasize the dire situation, while the repeated /h/ in "her" and "hands" narrows the poem's focus to Aku and Aku alone. The loud /d/ and /p/ sounds also lend this passage a strong musicality:

Aku stood outside where her cooking-pot stood,
With her two children shivering from the cold,
Her hands on her breasts,
Weeping mournfully.

Despite its [free verse](#) form, the poem's use of sonic devices like this lends it a sense of lyricism and unity.

LINES 19-20

*Her ancestors have ...
... have deserted her,*

In two short lines, "The Sea Eats the Land at Home" captures the overwhelming degree to which the people of the town have been left at the mercy of the sea, by narrowing its focus to the plight of one woman, Aku. Relying on [anaphora](#) and [epistrophe](#) (the repetition of the word "her" at both the beginnings and ends of both lines) for emphasis, the poem is unsparing in declaring that the gods and ancestors have abandoned Aku, and by the same token, her fellow townspeople:

Her ancestors have neglected her,
Her gods have deserted her,

While lines 13-14 ("Calling on all the gods they worship, / To protect them from the angry sea") pitted the gods against the sea, the poem now explicitly describes these divine figures as failing the people who turned to them for help, thus demonstrating that the power of nature is so great not even the gods themselves can overpower it.

In addition, the gods and ancestors serve as an important [symbol](#) of the town's cultural identity, contributing to a reading of the poem as an [extended metaphor](#) for the damage of colonization. Calling on the gods and ancestors in a time of crisis makes clear that these religious beliefs hold significance for townspeople like Aku. The gods are the ones to whom she turns when crisis strikes. Nevertheless, the fact that the gods and ancestors "neglect" and "desert" her suggests that what ails the town goes deeper than natural disaster.

The failure of the gods and ancestors to rescue the townspeople may symbolize the cultural loss and destruction caused by colonization. It may also symbolize the townspeople's distance or disconnect from their own culture and identity, as suggested by another theme in the poem, that of emigration and loss of identity.

Regardless, the [diacope](#) in these lines (which follow the same structure, "Her ___ have ___ her," and use the synonyms of "gods" and "ancestors" and "neglected" and "deserted") offers resounding, pitiless commentary on the sad state of both Aku and her town.

LINES 21-24

*It was a ...
... the cruel sea;*

The poem zooms back out, once again describing the scene of the disaster using vivid [imagery](#) and employing [personification](#) when talking about the sea. The [juxtaposition](#) of the "raging" storm, which throughout the poem has come to [symbolize](#) colonial invaders, and the "struggling" livestock linked with the colonized people, creates a clear contrast and power differential between the oppressors and the oppressed.

The speaker is explicit in declaring the sea both "angry" and "cruel," attributing not just human actions but motivations to the powerful natural element. The goats and fowls are trying to swim, but the storm's rage is too powerful, and the sea's motivations too malicious, to be overcome. The [diacope](#) of "water" adds to this sense of natural power, literally increasing the sea's presence in the lines.

Line 21 also informs readers for the first time what day it is when the townspeople awake to the disaster; it is "a cold Sunday morning." This line immediately follows the moment in the poem announcing that the gods and ancestors have

abandoned the town. The implicit [allusion](#) here to the Christian faith, by noting that the disaster has occurred during the traditional churchgoing hour, shores up an interpretation of the poem in which the gods and ancestors' abandonment can be read as a sign of cultural and religious loss. Here, as alluded to elsewhere, the colonizers' culture (their holy day) has overtaken the townspeople's beliefs.

Finally, these lines continue the poem's adherence to a musical rhythm. "Morning," "raging," "struggling" and to a lesser degree "angry" all share [consonant](#) syllables (/ing/ or /g/) that give the lines a shared cadence, while [alliteration](#) creates sonic unity in these lines that also pits the harsh /t/ and [sibilant](#) /s/ sounds against the more vulnerable-sounding words that begin with /w/:

It was a cold Sunday morning,
The storm was raging,
Goats and fowls were struggling in the water,
The angry water of the cruel sea;

These lines also feature more [asyndeton](#) and [parataxis](#), lending a choppy feel to the lines that subtly suggests that confusion and desolation of the scene.

LINES 25-27

*The lap-lapping of ...
... the living sea.*

Lines 25-27 of "The Sea Eats the Land at Home" return the poem's focus to the sea itself. Unlike the sentences that precede it, these lines are made up of sentence fragments, and play fast and loose with tense, creating a series of images that are more atmospheric than expository. Nevertheless, the rich [imagery](#) and sonic poetic devices are effective at capturing not just the scene at the shoreline, but the emotional weight of the moment.

Here, the poem makes clear that the sea is unstoppable, an "eternal" force that will return to do damage again and again, regardless of the townspeople's reactions. What's more, the sea does so with utter indifference, as the word "hum" implies, again conveying the awesome power of nature and the cruelty of colonial control.

As befits a passage dedicated to the very sounds of the sea, the poem uses [assonance](#), [consonance](#), and [alliteration](#) to linger over the sounds of the water at the shoreline at the level of language as well:

The lap-lapping of the bark water at the shore,
And above the sobs and the deep and low moans,
Was the eternal hum of the living sea.

The [onomatopoeia](#) of "lap-lapping" is reminiscent of the sound of waves breaking on the shore, and echoed later by the /p/

sound that recurs in the word "deep." Likewise, the repetition of /b/, /l/, and /s/ sounds from line to line creates a similar rhythmic pattern, not unlike the insistent sound of waves lapping at the shore. The sharp /t/ in "water" resurfaces in "eternal," linking the two inextricably, just as the word "eternal" suggests; and the long, lonely /o/ sound in "low" and "moan" foreshadows the essence of the final line, in which the speaker describes the way the sea as "hum[ming]" persistently, louder even than the sounds of people suffering. All together, this onslaught of multifaceted sound captures the sea's characterization as a "living" thing within this poem.

LINES 28-30

*It has taken ...
... and her joy,*

Lines 28-30 move from describing the sea's robbery of the whole town's belongings to narrowing in on one particular woman, Adena's, tragic loss. Her losses seem greater in scope than Aku's; where the former lost her "cooking-pot," Adena has lost her dowry—what would be used to pay her future husband's family upon marriage. In a sense, then, Adena has lost her future itself, and with it her "joy."

Aku, by contrast, had essentially lost her past, those items that made her house a home for her family. Together, these losses emphasize the scope of the destruction, showing how it affects different people in arbitrary and unfair ways.

As in previous parts of the poem, [assonance](#), [consonance](#), and [alliteration](#) play a vital role in imbuing this passage with a musical cadence:

It has **taken away** their belongings
Adena has lost the **trinkets which**
Were her dowry and her joy,

This moment also marks the poem's most powerful example of [enjambment](#). By forgoing any punctuation between "belongings" and "Adena," the poem uses enjambment to elide, or blend, the two images, making clear that Adena should be understood as representative of the whole town.

The enjambment continues into the next line, describing exactly what Adena has lost to the sea: "the trinkets which / Were her dowry and her joy." Here the enjambment serves to subvert readers' expectations. The word "trinkets" suggests items of little value, but the following line makes clear that they held immense value for Adena. This device also creates a rushed sensation, as the speaker hurries to describe just one example of the way in which the townspeople have lost everything, much the way the sea hurriedly descended upon the town and stole the people's belongings.

LINES 31-32

In the sea ...

... land at home.

Fittingly, "The Sea Eats the Land at Home" ends the poem by repeating the poem's [refrain](#), not just once but *twice*:

In the sea that eats the land at home,
Eats the whole land at home.

This is the poem's main message, and it uses its primary tools, [personification](#) and [assonance](#), to deliver it one last time: the merciless sea has devoured everything.

The most recent example is Adena's dowry, but the repetition of this phrase hearkens back to its previous uses, describing the sea's consumption of the town's firewood, walls, livestock, and household hoods. Once again, the addition of the phrase "at home" conveys what all of those items and animals add up to—a people's sense of security, sense of identity, and sense of belonging. In short, a people's home.

The slight alteration of the refrain in the final line, by adding the word "whole," further emphasizes this total consumption. The change comes as a surprise, catching readers' attention through the [consonance](#) and assonance of the /ho/ sound in "whole" and "home," which evokes longing and loneliness. In its closing line, the poem emphasizes that the sea is insatiable. It has consumed the "whole" of the land, the "whole" of home, and the resurgence of this refrain, its double repetition, implies that the sea will not stop until it has eaten everything. Even then, as the "eternal hum" of lines 27 suggests, it may still be hungry.

As a [metaphor](#) for colonialism, this refrain reiterates the incredible damage that colonization wrought on the African continent and Ghana in particular. As a metaphor for emigration, it reminds readers that the "whole" of the speaker's (and every emigrant's) home eventually gets consumed by the foreign country to which they have moved. And as a poem written in the tradition of the Ewe dirge song, this mournful refrain serves as a fitting final homage, its musicality evoking the spirit of song and lament for which that tradition is known.



SYMBOLS



THE SEA

The sea is the central focus and main [symbol](#) of "The Sea Eats the Land at Home," and represents multiple themes and ideas. At a basic level, the sea is symbolic of power and strength. When read literally, as an ocean that has devastated a coastal town, it symbolizes the immense power of nature, far stronger than humanity. The poem is explicit about this symbolism, describing the sea as "destroying the cement walls" of the town, "tak[ing] away [the townspeople's] belongings," and ultimately "eat[ing] the land," a [metaphor](#) that suggests consumption, destruction, and permanent oblivion.

However, the sea has also been interpreted as a symbol for larger metaphorical ideas as well. Some readers see the poem as a commentary on colonialism, or the subjugation of a nation by a foreign power—in this case, the centuries-long colonization of Ghana by European countries like Portugal and England.

In this reading, the sea is still symbolizes force, but the destructive force of a colonial power, which ravages another land and its people. The metaphor of the sea that "eats the land at home" takes on new meaning, symbolizing the way colonizers extracted natural resources from the countries they conquered and oppressed and enslaved the people who lived there.

Still other readers interpret the sea as symbolic of the powerful forces of emigration, or leaving behind one's country and home. In this case, the sea's destruction symbolizes the loss of identity and connection to home that results from these migratory forces. When the speaker sighs that the sea "eats the whole land at home," the speaker mourns not just for the land itself, but for home, and a sense of self the speaker can never return to, because of the sea's (or emigration's) mighty power.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-10
- Line 14
- Lines 22-28
- Lines 31-32



THE GODS AND ANCESTORS

Four lines of "The Sea Eats the Land at Home" are dedicated to the gods and ancestors of the people whose town has been ravaged by the sea. The speaker describes the women of the town standing outside where their homes once stood, "weeping mournfully" and "calling on all the gods they worship, / To protect them from the angry sea." However, as the rest of the poem makes clear, protection does not arrive in any form. The sea destroys the town, and carries away most of the women's belongings, leaving them and their families "shivering from the cold."

Though the gods (and the ancestors, whom the poem implies play a similar protective role) fail to save the townspeople from the sea's destruction, they nevertheless hold [symbolic](#) significance. For starters, they help convey the sheer power of nature. When the women "call on" their power, the poem pits the gods and ancestors against the sea, and then describes them falling short: "Her ancestors have neglected her, / Her gods have deserted her." These lines demonstrate the nature is so mighty not even the gods themselves can overpower it.

Additionally, the gods and ancestors symbolize the town's deep-rooted cultural identity. Calling on the gods and

ancestors in a time of crisis makes clear that these religious beliefs hold significance for townspeople like Aku and Adena. The gods are the ones to whom they turn when crisis strikes. The fact that the gods and ancestors "neglect" and "desert" them suggests that what ails the town goes deeper than natural disaster. The failure of the gods and ancestors to rescue the townspeople may symbolize the cultural loss and destruction caused by colonization, for which the sea serves as an [extended metaphor](#). It may also symbolize the townspeople's distance or disconnect from their own culture and identity, as suggested by another theme in the poem, that of emigration and loss of identity.

Regardless, it is clear that the gods and ancestors symbolize a mighty force brought low, no longer able to offer protection to their people.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-14:** "Calling on all the gods they worship, / To protect them from the angry sea."
- **Lines 19-20:** "Her ancestors have neglected her, / Her gods have deserted her,"



AKU AND ADENA

Aku and Adena are the only named characters in "The Sea Eats the Land at Home." They are among the women of the town destroyed by natural disaster, who "wail," cry out with "mourning shouts," and call "on all the gods they worship" as the sea seizes their belongings and ruins their homes. Each has several lines of the poem devoted to describing their particular plight. Aku stands where her kitchen used to be, "her children shivering from the cold, / Her hands on her breasts, / Weeping mournfully." Adena, on the other hand, "has lost the trinkets which / Were her dowry and her joy."

Together, the women [symbolize](#) the human cost of the storm and flood, reminding readers that each of the townspeople is an individual person whose life has been uniquely affected by this disaster.

They also symbolize two very different kinds of losses. Aku has lost the space "where her cooking-pot stood," and now her children are homeless, "shivering from the cold." In other words, she has lost her hearth and the very essence of her home—the bedrock upon which she provided for her family.

On the other hand, Adena has lost her dowry—the items that would have provided for her marriage, and secured "her joy." Where Aku lost the past, Adena has lost her future. Though the scale and scope of the women's losses are quite different, they are nevertheless both enormous blows.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 15-20:** "Aku stood outside where her cooking-pot stood, / With her two children shivering from the cold, / Her hands on her breasts, / Weeping mournfully. / Her ancestors have neglected her, / Her gods have deserted her,"
- **Lines 29-30:** "Adena has lost the trinkets which / Were her dowry and her joy,"

- **Line 17:** "Her," "hands"
- **Line 21:** "Sunday"
- **Line 22:** "storm"
- **Line 23:** "struggling"
- **Line 24:** "sea"
- **Line 25:** "lap-lapping"
- **Line 31:** "home"
- **Line 32:** "whole," "home"



POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

In keeping with its formal homage to the Ewe dirge tradition in which poet Kofi Awoonor was raised, "The Sea Eats the Land at Home" is highly reliant on poetic techniques related to sound and repetition. [Alliteration](#) is one of these.

For instance, the beginning of the poem relies on alliteration to set the scene of the flood, by repeating the hard /c/ sound in words like "cooking," "collecting," "came," and "carried." This loud, harsh sound suggests the unwelcome intrusion of the sea, while the repeated heavy /d/ in "day," "dead" and "destroying" emphasizes the destruction itself.

Later in the poem, a similar effect is achieved when the /w/ sound is used three times in quick alliterative succession:

It is a sad thing to hear the **w**ails,
And the mourning shouts of the **w**omen,
Calling on all the gods they **w**orship,

The alliteration in these three words helps to link the women with their sorrow, and that sorrow with their only recourse—calling on the gods for help.

Finally, the poem uses alliteration in a quietly devastating fashion in the final lines, which repeat an /h/ sound, as well as an [assonant](#) long /o/ sound, in "home," "whole," and again "home." This round, mournful sound captures the tragedy of the sea's destruction, while the quick succession of "whole" and "home" underscores the true depth of the disaster.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "cooking"
- **Line 3:** "Collecting," "firewood," "from"
- **Line 6:** "came," "day," "dead"
- **Line 7:** "Destroying"
- **Line 8:** "carried"
- **Line 9:** "cooking"
- **Line 10:** "sea"
- **Line 11:** "sad," "wails"
- **Line 12:** "women"
- **Line 13:** "worship"

ASSONANCE

[Assonance](#) in "The Sea Eats the Land" is most prominently seen in the line that serves as the poem's title and refrain. The long /ee/ sound in "sea" and "eats" nearly blends the two words together, mimicking the consumption that the line describes and thereby capturing the total devastation of the sea's impact.

Another striking moment of assonance is the use of long /ay/ sounds in lines 6-9:

It came one day at the dead of night,
[...]
And carried away the fowls,
The cooking-pots and the ladles,

The assonance here lends a sense of rhythm to the lines that evokes the insistent movement of the sea. The same sound appears in line 28 with "taken away," again evoking the sea's steady pull on the land.

Later, the long /o/ of "low moans" seems to evoke the moans themselves, while the /aw/ of "Calling on all the gods" makes line 13 feel particularly musical—almost like a chant or prayer itself. Finally, long /o/ sounds return in the final two lines of the poem:

[...] at home,
Eats the whole land at home.

Combined with the [alliteration](#) of the /h/ sound, assonance makes these final moments feel particularly heavy and sorrowful.

Though subtle, these little incidents of assonance also create a sense of musicality that [alludes](#) to the poem's formal roots in an oral and musical Ghanaian tradition. This musicality also intensifies the language, encouraging readers to linger and soak up the deep emotions packed into each line. Though the poem's [diction](#) is itself fairly understated, its assonance helps give the poem its tragic tone.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "back," "at"
- **Line 5:** "sea," "eats"

- **Line 6:** “came,” “day,” “dead”
- **Line 7:** “Destroying,” “cement”
- **Line 8:** “away”
- **Line 9:** “ladles”
- **Line 10:** “sea,” “eats,” “at”
- **Line 11:** “sad”
- **Line 13:** “Calling on all,” “gods”
- **Line 15:** “Aku,” “stood,” “cooking,” “stood”
- **Line 19:** “ancestors,” “neglected”
- **Line 20:** “deserted”
- **Line 25:** “lap-lapping”
- **Line 26:** “low moans”
- **Line 28:** “taken away”
- **Line 29:** “trinkets which”
- **Line 30:** “Were her”
- **Line 31:** “sea,” “eats,” “home”
- **Line 32:** “whole,” “home”

ASYNDETON

[Asyndeton](#) is a crucial device in "The Sea Eats the Land at Home," playing a substantial role in the poem's depiction of a grave natural disaster. Within the very first lines, this poetic technique conveys the overwhelming destruction experienced by the town, as the speaker lists each freshly devastating detail without the pause of a coordinating conjunction until the fourth line:

At home the sea is in the town,
Running in and out of the cooking places,
Collecting the firewood from the hearths
And sending it back at night;

Asyndeton then resurfaces in lines 8-9:

And carried away the fowls,
The cooking-pots and the ladles,

The lack of coordinating conjunction between the lines quickens the list, reflecting how quickly the sea has "carried away" all these things.

Later, in lines 15-18 ("Aku stood [...] weeping mournfully") a similar effect is achieved in painting the tragic picture of Aku. Each line and sentence clause reveals another descriptive detail of Aku's grief in response to the disaster, piling new details on top of the other: she stands by the ruins of her home, her children are shivering from the cold, her hands are clutching at her breasts. The asyndeton comes to a painful halt as the poem reaches its shortest line, summing up Aku's overwhelming despair in two short words: "Weeping mournfully." It's a devastating passage, and an excellent example of the power of asyndeton to convey emotion while creating strong and propulsive poetic rhythm.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-3:** “At home the sea is in the town, / Running in and out of the cooking places, / Collecting the firewood from the hearths”
- **Lines 8-9:** “And carried away the fowls, / The cooking-pots and the ladles,”
- **Lines 16-18:** “With her two children shivering from the cold, / Her hands on her breasts, / Weeping mournfully.”
- **Lines 19-25:** “Her ancestors have neglected her, / Her gods have deserted her, / It was a cold Sunday morning, / The storm was raging, / Goats and fowls were struggling in the water, / The angry water of the cruel sea; / The lap-lapping of the bark water at the shore,”
- **Lines 31-32:** “In the sea that eats the land at home, / Eats the whole land at home.”

CONSONANCE

[Consonance](#) is an ever-present part of "The Sea Eats the Land at Home," creating a unity of sound across the poem that gives it a strong cohesive feel despite its use of [free verse](#), which lacks the consistency of rhyme or meter. It can be found in every line, and indeed, most lines contain several instances of consonance. For example, take lines 6-10, which are filled with repeating /t/, hard /c/, /s/, /w/, /l/, /n/, /d/, and /z/ sounds:

It came one day at the dead of night,
Destroying the cement walls,
And carried away the fowls,
The cooking-pots and the ladles,
The sea eats the land at home;

The repeated /d/ sound becomes particularly ominous, a repeated thudding sensation as the lines move from one piece of bad news to the next. The sharp /t/ sounds, on the other hand, capture the speaker's devastating observational precision, ending with the poem's refrain in which the word "eat" rings out painfully clear. The /s/ and /z/ sounds evoke the sound of the waves as they come into town. The hard /c/ adds a spikiness to the lines, while the /l/ again suggests the lapping of the water.

Altogether, this one sentence achieves a stunning sonic consistency almost entirely through the use of consonance alone. And indeed, most of the poem relies on this same technique, using consonance throughout in order to evoke emotion and create musicality.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “At,” “in,” “town”
- **Line 2:** “Running,” “in,” “out,” “cooking”
- **Line 3:** “Collecting,” “firewood”
- **Line 4:** “sending,” “it,” “at,” “night”

- **Line 5:** "eats," "land," "at"
- **Line 6:** "It," "dead," "night"
- **Line 7:** "Destroying," "cement," "walls"
- **Line 8:** "carried," "fowls"
- **Line 9:** "cooking," "pots," "ladles"
- **Line 10:** "eats," "land," "at"
- **Line 11:** "It," "sad," "thing," "to," "wails"
- **Line 12:** "mourning," "shouts," "women"
- **Line 13:** "Calling," "gods," "worship"
- **Line 14:** "angry"
- **Line 15:** "stood," "outside," "cooking," "stood"
- **Line 16:** "two," "children," "shivering," "cold"
- **Line 17:** "hands," "breasts"
- **Line 18:** "Weeping"
- **Line 19:** "ancestors," "neglected," "her"
- **Line 20:** "gods," "deserted," "her"
- **Line 21:** "It," "cold," "morning"
- **Line 22:** "storm," "raging"
- **Line 23:** "Goats," "fowls," "struggling," "water"
- **Line 24:** "angry," "water," "cruel"
- **Line 25:** "lap," "lapping," "water," "at"
- **Line 26:** "above," "sobs," "moans"
- **Line 27:** "eternal," "living"
- **Line 28:** "taken," "belongings"
- **Line 29:** "lost," "trinkets," "which"
- **Line 30:** "Were," "dowry," "joy"
- **Line 31:** "that," "eats," "land," "at," "home"
- **Line 32:** "Eats," "land," "home"

ENJAMBMENT

[Enjambment](#) is used infrequently in "The Sea Eats the Land at Home" but packs a substantial punch where present. It first appears in lines 3-4, "Collecting firewood from the hearths / And sending it back at night," adding to the overall dizzying effect of the first five lines, which introduce the town, the sea, and the natural disaster's impacts all at once. Interestingly, the enjambment here overlaps with the only coordinating conjunction ("and") in what is otherwise a strong example of [asyndeton](#) across the poem's opening lines. As a result, to some degree the enjambment helps to counterbalance this conjunction, creating the same rushed, overwhelming feeling of asyndeton through another means.

However, the most significant example of enjambment occurs at the end of the poem, in lines 29-30:

Adena has lost the trinkets which
Were her dowry and her joy,

These lines follow a moment in the poem in which the description of the sea's persistent presence becomes increasingly overwhelming and despairing. No surprise, then, that the enjambment that follows continues in this same vein.

The poem refuses to stop for breath as it sums up in one fell swoop the storm's impact on the whole town ("It has taken away their belongings") before barreling onwards to specify the harm done to a particular victim, Adena.

Adena has "lost the trinkets which / Were her dowry and her joy." Here, the poem's lack of pause at the line break serves an important role, subverting the word "trinket," which connotes items of little value, in order to make clear just how meaningful they were to Adena. These are the final lines and images that the poem leaves readers with before returning to its titular [refrain](#), and the enjambment plays an important role in conveying, one last time, the total devastation wrought by the disaster.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "hearths / And"
- **Lines 29-30:** "which / Were"

IMAGERY

"The Sea Eats the Land at Home" is full of rich [imagery](#) that vividly depicts the natural disaster at the heart of the poem. In particular, many images are dedicated to describing the sea, which "run[s] in and out of the cooking places," "collect[s] the firewood from the hearths," "eats the land," "destroy[s] the cement walls," "carrie[s] away the fowls," and "lap-lap[s ...] at the shore."

The poem also describes the aftermath of the disaster, and how it has affected the people and animals who live in the town. "Goats and fowls" struggle in the water as the tide sweeps them out to sea, and the women "wail," "shout," and "call on all the gods they worship" for protection. Perhaps the most vivid image in the poem is of Aku, a woman who has lost everything, including her home; the poem dedicates six lines to depicting her plight.

These images paint a clear picture in readers' minds of the scene. However, though the poem's imagery is easy to understand and imagine, it also relies a great deal on [figurative language](#), adding a layer of emotional complexity. For instance, it is much more tragic to read "The sea eats the land at home" than "The flood covered the town." These images, therefore, serve a dual purpose, bringing to life the disaster by appealing to multiple senses, especially sight, sound, and touch, while also conveying the depth of despair woven into each line of the poem.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-13
- Lines 15-18
- Lines 21-27
- Lines 31-32

EXTENDED METAPHOR

Multiple [extended metaphors](#) unfold across "The Sea Eats the Land at Home." Though the poem can be read as a straightforward depiction of a natural disaster, many readers have interpreted its depiction of the "cruel" and "angry" sea destroying a town as larger and more complex. The [figurative language](#) and [personification](#) used consistently to describe the sea throughout the poem suggests that the sea should instead be read as a metaphor for colonialism or emigration, one whose meaning is developed and deepened over the course of the entire poem.

Why use an extended metaphor, rather than explicitly describe and condemn the forces of colonialism or emigration? Extended metaphors help to explain or describe an abstract concept in vivid and memorable terms. The [imagery](#) used to depict the storm and its impact on the townspeople is vivid and personal in a way that trying to depict the centuries-long scope of colonization perhaps could not have achieved. The image of Aku standing on the shore with her children, clawing at her breasts, "weeping mournfully," captures the tragedy of oppression, enslavement, and conquest, or loss of culture, home, and identity, in raw and emotional terms.

It is also a more subtle choice; by working with extended metaphor, the poet has chosen to make his statement on the devastation of colonialism and emigration through the art of comparison. It is, some might say, the very purpose and beauty of poetry.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-32

JUXTAPOSITION

"The Sea Eats the Land at Home" frequently employs [juxtaposition](#), placing two things side by side as a way of highlighting their differences. The first instance appears in the very first line, in which the sea is juxtaposed with the town. This juxtaposition between the sea and the town serves to highlight the difference (especially the power differential) between nature and humanity. This is a common theme that resurfaces in other moments of juxtaposition as well, such as in lines 11-14:

It is a sad thing to hear the wails,
And the mourning shouts of the women,
Calling on all the gods they worship,
To protect them from the angry sea.

Here, the women of the town are juxtaposed against the "angry sea." Their grief and sorrow illustrates that they are powerless to fight back against the sea's destruction. Instead, they call on "all the gods they worship." This introduces another instance of

juxtaposition, pitting nature against divinity. Here, too, however, just like humanity, the gods fall short, and are unable to protect the people from the more powerful sea.

Finally, the poem juxtaposes two different women, Aku and Adena, against each other, by nature of being the only named characters in the poem. Though both are victims of the natural disaster, they are affected in different ways. Aku loses her home; the poem depicts her standing "where her cooking-pot stood, / With her two children shivering from the cold." Adena loses "the trinkets which / Were her dowry and her joy."

In Aku's case, she has lost the foundation of her family life, or the past; in Adena's, the hope of marrying and starting a family of her own, or the future. The juxtaposition here makes clear that though each individual's loss is uniquely tragic, considered side-by-side they encompass the entirety of the human experience.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Lines 5-6
- Lines 10-18
- Lines 25-27
- Lines 29-32

PERSONIFICATION

[Personification](#) is the central poetic device in "The Sea Eats the Land at Home." It is employed throughout the poem, from the first line to the last, and helps the poem achieve its emotional resonance and [metaphorical](#) meaning. For instance, take the first five lines:

At home the sea is in the town,
Running in and out of the cooking places,
Collecting the firewood from the hearths
And sending it back at night;
The sea eats the land at home.

The depiction of the sea performing actions usually done by people, like running, collecting, sending, and eating, are clear examples of personification. So too is the description of the sea as being "in the town," which sounds more like a visitor stopping by than a flood filling the streets. From the start, then, the poem defines the sea as character within the poem, playing a substantial role in the action. Indeed, the sea overpowers even the human characters, supporting one of the poem's major thematic concerns: the power of nature.

Personification also contributes to the poem's [extended metaphors](#) and other major themes. The depiction of the sea as a quasi-human character lends it metaphorical significance. It is easy to read the sea as [symbolic](#) of actual people, such as the colonial powers who dominated the country of Ghana much the

way the sea dominates this small town. In this light, lines like the sea being "in the town" take on a newly ominous tone, suggesting conquest and occupation rather than a visit. So too does the [refrain](#) "The sea eats the land at home" take on a darker meaning due to the personification that suggests the sea represents the colonial forces that did indeed consume the African continent, stripping it of its people and resources.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-10:** "At home the sea is in the town, / Running in and out of the cooking places, / Collecting the firewood from the hearths / And sending it back at night; / The sea eats the land at home. / It came one day at the dead of night, / Destroying the cement walls, / And carried away the fowls, / The cooking-pots and the ladles, / The sea eats the land at home;"
- **Line 14:** "the angry sea."
- **Line 24:** "The angry water of the cruel sea;"
- **Line 27:** "the eternal hum of the living sea."
- **Line 28:** "It has taken away their belongings"
- **Lines 31-32:** "the sea that eats the land at home, / Eats the whole land at home."

poem revolves.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "At home," "the sea"
- **Line 4:** "night"
- **Line 5:** "The sea eats the land at home."
- **Line 6:** "night"
- **Line 8:** "carried away," "the fowls,"
- **Line 9:** "The cooking-pots"
- **Line 10:** "The sea eats the land at home;"
- **Line 13:** "the gods"
- **Line 14:** "the angry sea."
- **Line 15:** "stood," "cooking-pot," "stood"
- **Line 17:** "Her"
- **Line 19:** "Her," "her"
- **Line 20:** "Her," "gods," "her"
- **Line 23:** "fowls," "the water,"
- **Line 24:** "The," "water," "the cruel sea"
- **Line 25:** "The," "water"
- **Line 27:** "the living sea."
- **Line 28:** "taken away"
- **Lines 31-32:** "the sea that eats the land at home, / Eats the whole land at home."

REPETITION

"The Sea Eats the Land at Home" uses [repetition](#) in many forms. Perhaps the most obvious is its use of a [refrain](#), a line that regularly repeats, driving home the poem's central message and themes: "The sea eats the land at home." This [elegiac](#) refrain not only emphasizes the way in which the sea has devastated the land and the people's home, it also pays tribute to the poem's formal origins and Ghanaian context; poet Kofi Awoonor's grandmother was an Ewe dirge singer, which frequently employ refrains as well.

[Anaphora](#) is another type of repetition that appears in the poem, most notably in lines 17-20. Here, the repetition of the word "her" at the beginning of three lines drives home the repeated injuries that Aku has faced as a result of the disaster:

Her hands on her breasts,
Weeping mournfully.
Her ancestors **have** neglected her,
Her gods **have** deserted her,

These lines also employ [epistrophe](#), or repetition at the end of a line. This also happens to be a repetition of the word "her," again underscoring Aku's devastation.

In addition to these techniques, the poem returns frequently to the same words and images, referring multiple times to the "fowls," the "cooking-pots," "the gods," and of course, "home" and "the sea." This repetition also lends the poem its dirge-like tone, as well as emphasizing the central themes of loss, destruction, nature, power, and identity around which the



VOCABULARY

Hearths (Line 3) - Brick, stone, or concrete areas in front of a fireplace. Often used as a [metonym](#) for home.

Fowls (Line 8, Line 23) - A bird of any kind, usually domesticated as livestock.

Wails (Line 11) - A prolonged cry or sound expressing grief or pain.

Ancestors (Line 19) - Forefathers and foremothers; people from whom someone is descended, usually further back than a grandparent.

Trinkets (Line 29) - Small ornaments (such as jewels or rings); things of little value.

Dowry (Lines 29-30) - The money, goods, or estate that a woman brings to her husband in marriage.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Sea Eats the Land at Home" is a [free verse](#) poem, made up of 32 lines of approximately the same length (though a handful run as long as 10 words and some as short as two). The fact that the poem is written in free verse, without a regular [rhyme scheme](#) or meter, is not unusual given its publication date in 1964. Free verse is very much the poetic norm in

contemporary poetry. However, free verse's lack of restrictions and constraints also complement the poem's plainspoken language, and its focus on vivid [imagery](#).

The form of the poem is also highly suggestive of poet Kofi Awonor's literary heritage. [His grandmother was an Ewe dirge singer](#), and this poem, like many of his others, draws on this oral tradition. For example, the poem's use of [refrain](#), repeating the phrase "The sea eats the land at home," invokes the refrains of traditional songs and singers. The poem's reliance on [assonance](#), [alliteration](#), [consonance](#), and [enjambment](#) also mimics the techniques of song and oral storytelling.

In many ways, these techniques give the poem a feeling not unlike that of the sea at the center of the poem, with certain sounds rising, cresting, and falling like the waves of the ocean. In other words, the poem's form and content match.

METER

In keeping with its [free verse](#) form, "The Sea Eats the Land at Home" does not employ a specific meter. This is typical of 20th-century poetry. A meter would perhaps feel too structured for a poem about the ocean's insatiable, uncontrollable appetite. The poem instead relies on rich patterning of sound through devices like [alliteration](#) and [assonance](#), as well as the stops and starts of [enjambment](#) and [end-stop](#), to create its musicality and rhythm.

RHYME SCHEME

In keeping with the tradition of [free verse](#), "The Sea Eats the Land at Home" does not follow any particular [rhyme scheme](#). Indeed, a regular, predictable rhyme scheme would likely feel at odds with the poem's subject—a natural disaster that has caught an entire town by surprise.

In a few instances, though, the poem does technically use rhyme, but always when repeating the same word (something called identical rhyme). For example, lines 4 and 6 share an identical [end rhyme](#), the word "night":

And sending it back at **night**;
The sea eats the land at home.
It came one day at the dead of **night**,

Likewise, lines 24 and 27 also rhyme through repetition of the word "sea," though the two lines in between break up some aural consistency usually achieved through rhyme:

The angry water of the cruel **sea**;
The lap-lapping of the bark water at the shore,
And above the sobs and the deep and low moans,
Was the eternal hum of the living **sea**.

Similarly, lines 19 and 20 technically rhyme through repetition

of the final word "her." This is an instance of back-to-back repetition that also serves to emphasize Aku's total abandonment by the gods and ancestors:

Her ancestors have neglected **her**,
Her gods have deserted **her**,

A similar effect is achieved at the end of the poem, when lines 31 and 32 both end with "home." Once again, the repetition of this word and sound helps hammer home the depth of devastation caused by this natural disaster:

In the sea that eats the land at **home**,
Eats the whole land at **home**.



SPEAKER

The speaker of "The Sea Eats the Land at Home" is never identified, and does not appear in the poem in any way. Instead, the speaker serves as an observer, describing the sea's destruction of the town from a distance.

However, there is one phrase that sheds some light on the speaker's identity, or at least the speaker's connection to the town: "at home." The fact that the speaker refers to the town as "home" suggests a personal connection to the town and its people. The same can be said for the speaker's attention to detail when describing the destruction the sea has caused, and the fact that the speaker knows both Aku and Adena's names.

Finally, the speaker's mournful tone also suggests that this town is indeed the speaker's own home. "It is a sad thing to hear the wails," the speaker says, of the women crying at the shore. Likewise, the speaker's melancholy repetition of the phrase "the sea eats the land at home" is terribly sad, as though the speaker is trying again and again to come to grips with the tragedy that has befallen the speaker's home.



SETTING

The setting of the poem is a town by the sea that has just been destroyed by a natural disaster. The poem describes the town as having "cement walls" and outdoor "cooking places." The waves have not only destroyed those walls and homes, but also carried away livestock like goats and "fowls," or poultry, as well as people's belongings. The names of two women who live there are Aku and Adena. All together, these details suggest that the poem is set in a town in coastal Ghana, not unlike the towns and villages where poet Kofi Awoonor grew up and where his family is from. It is a place that frequently experiences major floods.

In keeping with the poem's underlying theme of colonialism, this area in Ghana was also known as the Gold Coast, and also

sometimes as the Slave Coast. (The term "the Gold Coast" is now often used to refer to Ghana as a whole, but once referred specifically to the eastern coastal region around Accra, where Awoonor is from.) It is rich not only in gold, but also petroleum, crude oil, and natural gas. It has long been a site of colonial conquest and resource extraction, dating back to the Portuguese slave trade, and is a fitting setting for a poem decrying the devastation of colonization.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Kofi Awoonor was a Ghanaian writer, translator, professor of literature, and eventual ambassador for Ghana. His first of many volumes of poetry, *Rediscovery and Other Poems*, in which "The Sea Eats the Land at Home" was published in 1964, while Kofi Awoonor was still a student at the University of Ghana.

Awoonor's work is situated within the postcolonial tradition of African poetry. Many African nations established independence from colonial rule in the 1960s. Since then, African literature has often wrestled with the legacy of colonialism, looking at issues of power, economics, politics, religion, and culture and their relation to a history of subjugation and oppression.

As much about the conditions that existed under colonial rule as about the political and cultural independence that followed liberation, postcolonial literature also encompasses such subjects as slavery, migration, suppression and resistance, race, and gender. And in many cases, postcolonial writers, both African and otherwise, respond to the particular dilemma of writing in the very languages and literary traditions of their nation's colonizers, such as English, French, or Portuguese.

As seen in Awoonor's work, one response of postcolonial African poetry to this question is to draw on indigenous African poetic conventions even while employing European languages like English. Awoonor is one among several Ghanaian poets to allude to Ewe traditions in their English language work, including Kofi Anyidoho and Mawuli Adzei. These same poets are also known for their interest in and support of pan-Africanism, a movement fostering solidarity between all indigenous and diaspora ethnic groups of the African continent, including through literary and artistic projects. The fact that "The Sea Eats the Land at Home" never specifically names the sea or town lends itself to a pan-African reading, tackling post-colonial themes that can apply to multiple African nations.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Awoonor was born in Ghana, which borders the Gulf of Guinea on the west coast of Africa, in 1935. At the time, Ghana was under British colonial rule; despite having been occupied for thousands of years, various European nations fought intensely over trading rights in the area until the British claimed

authority in the 19th century. Ghana declared independence in 1957, about the time when Awoonor was first attending university. Ghana was the first sub-Saharan African country to establish independence from European colonial rule, and its fight for liberation inspired many other African nations to quickly follow suit.

Awoonor was also a member of the Ewe people, one of Ghana's five main ethnic groups, and his grandmother was an Ewe dirge singer, or singer of traditional lament songs. Many critics have noted that Awoonor's early poetry draws from this Ewe oral tradition. "The Sea Eats the Land at Home," like much of Awoonor's work, combines Ewe poetics with contemporary and religious [symbols](#) in order to depict African experiences of decolonization. His major themes—such as Christianity, exile, and death—recur from poem to poem, as does his use of extended rhythms that incorporate Ewe musical cadences and traditions.

Awoonor's career was multifaceted. An emigrant to both the United Kingdom and United States, where he completed his studies, Awoonor served as chairman for the department of comparative literature at SUNY Stony Brook for several years. In 1975, he returned to Ghana to teach, and was arrested shortly thereafter for suspected involvement in a coup to overthrow Ghana's military government. Awoonor was imprisoned without trial, and though his sentence was remitted in October 1976, the experience left a deep impression, resulting in a notable book of prison poems, *The House by the Sea*.

Awoonor remained politically active for the rest of his life, later serving as ambassador for Ghana to multiple countries and to the United Nations. He was tragically killed in 2013 at age 78 in the terrorist attack at the Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi, Kenya, where he was traveling for a literary festival.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Kofi Awoonor's Obituary](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/23/kofi-awoonor) — An obituary of the poet, tracing the cultural and familial roots of his poetry. (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/23/kofi-awoonor>)
- [The Colonization of Ghana](https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/whp-1750/xcabef9ed3fc7da7b:unit-5-imperialism-colonialism-and-responses/xcabef9ed3fc7da7b:5-2-colonialism/v/experiencing-colonialism-through-a-ghanaian-lens-world-history-project-beta) — A Khan Academy video chronicling the history of Ghana's colonization by Britain. (<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/whp-1750/xcabef9ed3fc7da7b:unit-5-imperialism-colonialism-and-responses/xcabef9ed3fc7da7b:5-2-colonialism/v/experiencing-colonialism-through-a-ghanaian-lens-world-history-project-beta>)
- [Ewe Funeral Dirge](#) — Listen to the Smithsonian Folkways Recording's of an Ewe funeral dirge.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=enJiHej9MYw>

- [Kofi Awoonor's Life Story](#) – A biography of the poet at the Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/kofi-awoonor>)
- ["Home" in Ghanaian Poetry](#) – This article discusses “home” in Ghanaian poetry focusing on three well-regarded poets: Kofi Awoonor, Kofi Anyidoho, and Mawuli Adze. (<https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3007&context=clweb>)



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