

# The Tide Rises, the Tide Falls



## POEM TEXT

- 1 The tide rises, the tide falls,
- 2 The twilight darkens, the curlew calls;
- 3 Along the sea-sands damp and brown
- 4 The traveller hastens toward the town,
- 5 And the tide rises, the tide falls.
  
- 6 Darkness settles on roofs and walls,
- 7 But the sea, the sea in darkness calls;
- 8 The little waves, with their soft, white hands,
- 9 Efface the footprints in the sands,
- 10 And the tide rises, the tide falls.
  
- 11 The morning breaks; the steeds in their stalls
- 12 Stamp and neigh, as the hostler calls;
- 13 The day returns, but nevermore
- 14 Returns the traveller to the shore,
- 15 And the tide rises, the tide falls.

The speaker doesn't specify the location of the shore, the name of the town, or any personal information about the traveller apart from the fact that this person is in a hurry. This deliberate vagueness helps establish the poem's mysterious atmosphere, which, in turn, evokes the mysteriousness of death itself. Given that the traveller's journey can be taken as a metaphor for the swift passage of life, the fact that readers don't know where this person is going suggests that the living don't know what happens to the dead.

That the traveller's journey takes place as the "twilight darkens" adds to the air of gloom and mystery, and [symbolically](#) suggests that the traveller is in the "twilight," or late stage, of their journey—that this person is in the "twilight" of life and quickly closing in on the darkness of death. When darkness then "settles" across the scene in the second stanza, the implication is thus that the traveller has died—that they've travelled somewhere the reader can't follow.

Rather than following the traveller, then, the poem keeps describing the shore this person has left behind. The sun rises again the next day and activity on land and sea continues as normal, but the traveller never reappears in the poem. This absence reflects the mystery of what happens (where people "travel" to) when they die.

The sea's erasure of the traveller's footprints, in turn, implies the total erasure of the traveller from the living world. Death, here, is something irreversible and final. The closing repetition of "the tide rises, the tide falls" adds to this eerie sense of finality. Rather than showing what's happened to the traveller on land, the poem shows what's (still) happening at sea—that is, it shows "the world moving on" after one person's death.

The speaker's withholding of information is key to the poem's meaning. The speaker frames the traveller as a quickly passing stranger whose fate is beyond description or understanding. The purpose of the traveller's journey remains unknown, as if unimportant beside the larger truth that the journey (i.e., life itself) is brief and not to be repeated. The journey is symbolic, with the traveller's unexplained rush toward an unknown fate representing life's swift movement toward the mystery of death.

### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 2
- Line 4
- Lines 7-9
- Lines 13-15



## SUMMARY

The tide goes in and out, the evening gets darker, and a seabird calls out. A traveler hurries along the wet, brown sand toward a nearby town. The tide goes in and out.

Darkness falls on the buildings of the town. The sounds of the sea continue in the darkness. Small waves, with their soft foam, gently land on the shore and erase the footprints the traveler left in the sand. The tide goes in and out.

Morning arrives. In a stable in the town, horses stamp their hooves and neigh as the stableman calls out. Daytime returns, but the traveler never returns to the shore. The tide goes in and out.



## THEMES



### THE MYSTERY AND FINALITY OF DEATH

"The Tide Rises, the Tide Falls" tells the tale of a "traveller" who arrives at a shore, hurries to a nearby town, and never returns the way they came. The poem can be read as an [extended metaphor](#) for the brevity of human life and the mystery of death—something the poem presents as unknowable, inevitable, and final.



## HUMANITY VS. NATURE

"The Tide Rises, the Tide Falls" contrasts the traveller's quick journey with the endless, ongoing cycles of the natural world. Nature in the poem is so vast and powerful that it seems to engulf or erase the specifics of an individual's life and death. The poem thus portrays human life as insignificant in the face of the natural world, which continues on totally unaffected by the traveller's disappearance.

The sea is a constant presence in the poem, rising and falling no matter what the traveller does. The traveller's implied death doesn't change anything when it comes to nature, which moves through its phases as usual in the traveller's absence. Yet while the traveller in no way changes the sea, the sea erases all evidence of the traveller's passing: the waves "efface," or erase, "the [traveller's] footprints in the sands." This conveys the idea that nature soon wipes away any mark people make on the world.

So much greater is nature's power compared to that of human beings that it doesn't even take a strong storm to do this. The [personified](#) waves have "soft, white hands" that easily remove all traces of the traveller. The fact that the traveller's journey is frantic and quick (notice how this person "hastens") also contrasts with the calmer, gentler rhythms of nature. Where humanity is pressed for time, it seems nature has all the time in the world.

The endless cycles of the natural world reinforce the transience of human life. The traveller moves only in one direction, but the tide shifts back and forth and the sun rises and sets. The traveller's journey thus stands out as a one-time event that does not repeat; the world goes on and the "day returns," even though the traveller never does. Human life, the poem thus implies, is a one-way journey from birth to death—a journey that means little in the face of nature's permanence.

### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-15



## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINE 1

*The tide rises, the tide falls,*

The poem opens on a beach at night. The exact location is unidentified, just as the traveller and the town will later go unnamed. These generic details make the poem's scenario seem timeless, universal, and potentially [symbolic](#).

Line 1 repeats the title word for word, establishing a [refrain](#) that will echo at the end of each stanza. This repeated line, with its strong rhythm and description of a repetitive process (that is, rising and falling), provides a steady "backdrop" against

which the poem's changes take place.

Rhythmically, the line itself seems to "rise" toward and "fall" away from the grammatical pause ([caesura](#)) in the middle of the line. This pause is punctuated by a comma that links two independent clauses (clauses that could stand alone as complete sentences). A semicolon would be the more standard punctuation to use here, but the comma creates a softer pause, a smoother shift, that seems to fit the way the tide flows smoothly back and forth.

Line 1 establishes a strong [meter](#) of four beats per line, which continues throughout the poem:

The **tide rises**, the **tide falls**,  
The **twilight darkens**, the **curlew calls**;

The poem's meter is *accentual* but not quite *syllabic*. In other words, the number of **stressed** (accentuated) syllables remains constant from line to line, but the total number of syllables and the position of stressed syllables do not. This first line contains seven syllables, while the rest contain either eight or nine. Every line, however, contains four strong stresses. (Parts of the poem, such as lines 3-4, follow the *accentual-syllabic* meter called [iambic](#) tetrameter.)

The language of line 1 is plain, like the language of the poem as a whole, but it immediately suggests symbolic possibilities. The ebb and flow of ocean tides is a conventional symbol of change in general, including changes of human life or human fortune (as in an expression like "a rising tide lifts all boats"). It's also a classic example of a cyclical process in nature. Between the title and the identical first line, the reader may already sense that this poem will deal with change or cycles of change.

### LINE 2

*The twilight darkens, the curlew calls;*

Like line 1, line 2 rises toward and falls away from a [caesura](#), which is marked by a comma joining independent clauses: "The twilight darkens" and "the curlew calls." This is also an example of [parataxis](#) (as is the poem's first line), which subtly reflects the poem's thematic ideas about the permanence of the natural world. Nature is filled with cycles of change, but these cycles endlessly repeat; day follows night follows day. The parataxis here creates a gentle rhythm while also placing these two events—the darkening twilight and the bird call—on a level of equal importance; both events happens over and over again, and the order of the line's phases doesn't matter.

The strong [alliteration](#) in these first two lines—*tide/tide/twilight, curlew/calls*—also coincides with the line's stressed syllables, reinforcing those stresses and giving the verse a heavy, driving, ominous rhythm.

"The twilight darkens" indicates that the poem begins in the evening. [Metaphorically](#), twilight, the approach of night, is

associated with other kinds of lateness and approaching finality. For example, to be in the "twilight of your career" is to be near retirement, and to be in your "twilight years" is to be near death. Here, the darkening sky suggests that the poem takes place at the end of something (which turns out to be the traveller's journey/life). Twilight is also associated with mystery and eeriness, as it's a time when visibility decreases.

The call of the curlew helps reinforce the poem's eerie atmosphere. The curlew is a migratory shorebird with a long, thin, curved bill. One species, *Numenius americanus* (the long-billed curlew), would have been common in the New England of Longfellow's time, especially in winter. It has a fairly piercing call that might sound urgent and haunting at twilight. If this is the curlew the poet had in mind, its presence may indicate that the poem takes place in or near winter—the end of the year, or the border between one year and another.

The curlew's call is the first of three "calls" in the poem, none of which the traveller responds to or appears to notice. Since the call is presumably intended for another bird, not the traveller, this detail helps show the traveller's isolation and hints at a deeper division between humanity and nature.

### LINES 3-5

*Along the sea-sands damp and brown  
The traveller hastens toward the town,  
And the tide rises, the tide falls.*

In these lines, a "traveller" appears on the shore. The poem does not reveal their name, gender, place of origin, reason for travel, reason for "hasten[ing]," final destination (if the town is only a stopover), or even whether this person has arrived by land or sea. The traveller appears suddenly and mysteriously.

The description "damp and brown" doesn't make this beach sound particularly inviting. The traveller has no intention of pausing or relaxing on these sands; instead, they're hurrying toward the nearby "town" as fast as possible.

In fact, the only thing the traveller *does* in the poem is "hastens." At the end, the poem mentions something the traveller does *not* do: return to the shore. Otherwise, the traveller's sense of haste or hurry is what defines them, even as the reason for this haste remains unclear. (It may be relevant that this poem was published before cars, airplanes, widespread electric street lighting, etc.: in 1880, travel was primarily a daytime activity, and someone arriving in a town, particularly an unfamiliar one, might want to be indoors before dark for safety reasons.)

The poem gives no information about the town, either, except that it's built by the shore (and apparently contains the stables mentioned later). If the traveller has business or an appointment in the town, no details are provided. If the traveller's journey is read [symbolically](#) as a journey toward death, the shore and town might bring to mind various mythical and religious depictions of the afterlife as a *location* (e.g., the

heavenly city of New Jerusalem in the Bible).

There's a fair amount of [sibilance](#) in these lines: "sea-sands," "hastens," and "rises" all contain multiple s-sounds. Sibilance gives the verse a whispery or hissing quality, which suits the poem's hushed atmosphere and might even evoke the hiss of waves against sand. In general, these lines are full of [alliteration](#): sea-sands, traveler/toward/town/tide. Alliteration reinforces the driving rhythm of the verse, those sharp /t/ sounds in particular adding to the sense that the traveler is marching swiftly (or being marched, by fate) toward an inevitable destination.

The stanza closes with another repetition of "the tide rises, the tide falls." The slow, regular rhythm of these tidal shifts contrasts sharply with the sudden appearance of the hurrying traveller. The reader is reminded that whatever happens to this small, human figure, the giant tidal cycle will continue as before.

### LINES 6-7

*Darkness settles on roofs and walls,  
But the sea, the sea in darkness calls;*

In lines 6-7, the "twilight" of the previous stanza turns into "darkness." The poem describes this darkness falling over the town ("roofs and walls") and the ocean ("the sea, the sea") rather than continuing to narrate the traveller's activity. That is, the narration returns to describing the physical setting rather than the individual who was just passing through it, as if the individual is no longer a significant or active presence.

Just as twilight is [metaphorically](#) associated with lateness and approaching finality, the darkness of night is metaphorically associated with finality itself, including death. The arrival of nighttime, combined with the lack of further detail about the traveller's journey, raises the possibility that the traveller's journey—and their life—has ended.

The sea's unanswered "call" (the sound of its waves) parallels the curlew's in the previous stanza, adding to the sense that the traveller has passed out of reach if not passed out of the world entirely. The next stanza confirms that the traveller never revisits this shore, *i.e.*, never answers the "call."

"But" in line 7 adds an element of ambiguity to the logic of this passage. Normally, this conjunction would introduce qualifying or contrasting information, but the fact that the sea continues making noise in the darkness does not, in a literal sense, qualify or contrast with the fact that darkness settles on the town. The more natural conjunction to use here would be "And." The contrast implied by "But" makes the most sense if "darkness" is read as a metaphor for death and/or the "call[ing]" sea is read as a [personification](#). In other words, these lines might mean something like, "Darkness settles on the town, so the day's journey is over and the traveller is resting, but the sea continues calling as if the traveller might come back." Or, more dramatically: "The darkness of death visits the traveller, but the

sea continues calling as if the traveller *could* come back."

The [sibilance](#) of the previous stanza continues in these lines ("settles," "sea...sea," plus the terminal s's in "darkness," "roofs," "walls," and "calls"). Again, this sibilance evokes the hissing of waves and lends a whispery, hushed tone to the verse. In general, these lines are full of [repetition](#) ("Darkness...darkness," "the sea, the sea"). The steady and predictable repetitions of the natural world contrast with the traveller's quick, unrepeatable entrance and exit.

### LINES 8-10

*The little waves, with their soft, white hands,  
Efface the footprints in the sands,  
And the tide rises, the tide falls.*

Lines 8-10 extend the [personification](#) of the sea that began with "calls" in line 7. The "soft, white hands" of the waves reaching shore "efface" (gradually erase) the footprints the traveller has left in the sand. It's as if the sea is deliberately wiping away any mark the traveller has made on the landscape.

Though these wavelets are "little," they're the extension of a mighty presence: the sea that continually, indifferently "rises" and "falls" no matter what. In fact, these lines confirm that the sea is a more active and powerful presence in the poem than the traveller. It has the power to erase any evidence of the traveller's passage, just as nature in general has the power to erase any evidence of human existence. Its activity will continue as normal long after we're gone, ensuring that any mark we make on the world will be temporary.

These haunting lines also raise the possibility that the traveller *is* gone for good. Like the coming of darkness, the erasure of the traveller's footprints may be a [symbolic](#) way of indicating the traveller's death. That the poem chooses to focus on these details, rather than on any further action by the traveller, suggests that the traveller has passed into a realm beyond observation or knowing. Whatever's happened to this person, they're now more ghostly than real.

These lines' strong [sibilance](#) ("soft," "sands," "efface," "footprints") and the [consonance](#) of soft /f/ and /w/ sounds continue to evoke hushed sea-sounds, while their strong alliteration in general ("waves"/"white," "efface/footprints") reinforces the poem's emphatic, march-like quality—suggestive of the traveller's rapid march toward some ultimate fate.

### LINES 11-12

*The morning breaks; the steeds in their stalls  
Stamp and neigh, as the hostler calls;*

Lines 11-12 mark a shift in the poem's narrative—moving from night to the next day. This narrative break is reinforced by a line break, a stanza break, and the poet's word choice: "The morning breaks." The narrative shifts to the following morning, when "steeds in their stalls" (horses in a stable) excitedly

"stamp and neigh" at the call of the "hostler" (stableman).

Presumably, this action takes place in the town into which the traveller has hurried. A *hostler* or *ostler* is someone who tends to horses. It's possible that this hostler works at an inn where the traveller has checked in for the night, though readers don't know for sure, and in any case, the traveller doesn't seem to have arrived by horse. (The sea in stanza 2 erases *footprints*, not *hoofprints*).

These lines leave the general impression that, as morning arrives, activity in the town is proceeding as usual, and riders will soon be continuing on to various destinations. But whether or how any of this relates to the traveller is uncertain. The next lines state that the traveller isn't going back the way they came—and imply that the traveller may not be going anywhere or doing anything further at all.

The heavy, conspicuous [alliteration](#) in these lines—steeds/stalls/stamp—provides a sonic echo of the horses impatiently stamping.

### LINES 13-15

*The day returns, but nevermore  
Returns the traveller to the shore,  
And the tide rises, the tide falls.*

The final lines of the poem briefly register a sense of loss, then emphasize that the world goes on in spite of loss. Unlike the daytime, which "returns" as normal, the traveller never "returns" to the shore.

In the most optimistic reading, the traveller continues on their journey and simply never passes this way again. In the least optimistic reading, the traveller has died overnight. Even in the first case, the traveller will die without ever again seeing this shore.

Although the poem leaves the traveller's fate unspecified, its wording here ("nevermore" / Returns the traveller to the shore") probably [alludes](#) to two famous texts involving death:

1. The first is [Hamlet's](#) "To be or not to be" speech, in which he [metaphorically](#) compares death to "The undiscover'd country from whose bourn / No traveller returns" (*ourn* = boundary).
2. The second is Edgar Allan Poe's poem "[The Raven](#)," in which the raven's repetition of the word "Nevermore" drives home the fact that the speaker's beloved has died.

These literary echoes suggest that death is involved in this poem, too.

Also notice that the rhymed [couplets](#) in the fourth and fifth lines of each stanza are the lines that directly concern the traveller. The first of these couplets describes the traveller leaving the scene, the second describes all traces of the

traveller disappearing from the scene, and the third announces that the traveller never returns to the scene. In each case, the traveller is a fleeting, ghostly presence.

After each of these events, the poem repeats that "the tide rises, the tide falls." The implication is that the sea, like the world, goes on regardless of what happens to any individual—whether they're coming, going, or somewhere in between. Moreover, individual life travels in just one direction (from birth to death), whereas the natural world moves in cycles. The repetition of "the tide rises, the tide falls" has brought this poem full circle as well.



## SYMBOLS



### THE SEA AND THE SEASHORE

The sea and the seashore in this poem are charged with [symbolism](#). The rise and fall of the tides represents broader natural cycles of change (day turning to night, summer to fall, etc.) and, in turn, nature's indifference to human life (in that nature keeps going, no matter what happens to human beings).

The "little waves" that erase the traveller's footprints on the shore stand in for all the natural forces—from erosion and weather to time itself—that wipe away the traces human beings leave on the world. That the waves are gentle suggests both nature's power and humans' fragility; it doesn't take much to wipe away a legacy, it seems, and nature has all the time in the world to do so.

The sea, and specifically the tide, also represents the cycle of life. In evolutionary terms, the sea is the origin point of earthly life, and it's often symbolically associated with the womb. In the poem, the sea may be where the traveller is arriving from (i.e., on a journey by ship), and it's certainly what the traveller's headed away from. As the traveller hurries from the shore toward the town into which they seem to vanish, their movement evokes the progress from birth to death. It calls to mind common metaphors like "these earthly shores," which compare life to a location where we arrive, sojourn briefly, and pass.

The sea and town also set up a contrast between the natural and civilized (human) worlds. Unlike the hurrying traveller—and even the busy hostler and impatiently stamping horses in town—the sea patiently, unchangingly rises and falls. In this way, it comes to symbolize time itself, which goes on no matter what, and makes everything it gives rise to seem insignificant by comparison.

#### Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "The tide rises, the tide falls,"

- **Line 3:** "Along the sea-sands damp and brown"
- **Line 5:** " And the tide rises, the tide falls."
- **Lines 7-10:** "But the sea, the sea in darkness calls; / The little waves, with their soft, white hands, / Efface the footprints in the sands, / And the tide rises, the tide falls."
- **Lines 14-15:** "the shore, / And the tide rises, the tide falls."



### DARKNESS AND LIGHT

The poem [symbolically](#) associates darkness and light with death and life: twilight (semi-darkness) signals that death is near, the fall of darkness signals that the traveller has died, and the return of day without the traveller signals that life goes on after the traveller's death.

Like the sea erasing the footprints in the sand, the darkening sky seems to erase the traveller's presence and identity. Twilight also suggests the mystery, eeriness, and transitional nature of this person's journey. As day changes to night, the traveller crosses from one state of being to another. Night settling over the town marks the end of their journey and, symbolically, the end of life. The fact that you can't see in the dark also associates darkness with the mystery of death.

The break of day suggests life going on, renewing itself in spite of individual death. Morning may not have come for the traveller, but it has come for other humans and animals, and for the world as a whole.

#### Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "The twilight darkens"
- **Line 6:** "Darkness settles on roofs and walls,"
- **Line 11:** "The morning breaks"
- **Line 13:** "The day returns"



### THE TRAVELLER'S JOURNEY

The traveller represents human life in general. The traveller's journey is thus the journey of life, and the traveller's footprints are the traces a life leaves behind.

Because the poem provides so little information about the traveller's origins, identity, and intentions, it strongly encourages the reader to interpret their role as generalized and [symbolic](#). This traveller "hastens" along the shore just as people hurry through life—or as life hurries people—toward death. (Conventional expressions like "these earthly shores" have long compared the world to a shore in which people wash up, exist for a time, then depart.) The sea's erasure of the traveller's footprints mimics the way the world eventually wipes away any mark people leave on it.

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- **Line 4:** "The traveller hastens toward the town,"
- **Line 9:** "Efface the footprints in the sands,"
- **Lines 13-14:** "The day returns, but nevermore / Returns the traveller to the shore,"

**POETIC DEVICES****ALLITERATION**

The poem is jam-packed with alliteration (as well as its close cousin [consonance](#)). For example, note the many /t/ sounds throughout the first stanza in words like "tide," "twilight," "toward," and "town." The insistence on this sharp, quick sound adds to the poem's repetitive tone. That is, the return to the same sound over and over again subtly reflects the tidal cycle being described.

More generally, alliteration makes the poem's images all the more striking for the reader. The harsh /c/ sound of "curlew calls," for examples, evokes the loud call of the bird, while the gentle, breathy /w/ sounds of "waves, with [...] white hands" evokes the softness with which the waves erase the traveller's footprints. The muffled /f/ of "efface" and "footprints" has a similar effect (note that we've marked the /f/ sound in "efface" as alliterative because it falls on a stressed syllable—efface—which is considered a broad form of alliteration). Alliteration also helps illustrate the heavy stamping of the horses in the phrase "the steeds in their stalls / Stamp."

Alliteration also simply draws more attention to alliterative syllables, which ring out all the more clearly in the readers' ear. These syllables are all generally stressed in the poem's [meter](#). In general, then, the poem's intense alliteration creates heightened language and a sense of relentless rhythm and momentum throughout.

**Where Alliteration appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "tide," "tide"
- **Line 2:** "twilight," "curlew calls"
- **Line 3:** "sea-sands"
- **Line 4:** "toward," "town"
- **Line 5:** "tide," "tide"
- **Line 8:** "waves," "with," "white"
- **Line 9:** "Efface," "footprints"
- **Line 11:** "steeds," "stalls"
- **Line 12:** "Stamp"
- **Line 14:** "traveller to"
- **Line 15:** "tide," "tide"

**ASSONANCE**

Though less pronounced than [alliteration](#), [assonance](#) is also an important device in the poem. One notable example occurs in the poem's first line and refrain, "The tide rises, the tide falls." The repeated vowel sounds in "The tide rises" contrast with the distinct vowel sounds in "the tide falls"; this contrast, in turn, emphasizes the [antithesis](#) within the line (the opposition between rising and falling).

Assonance also helps link particular words and idea together, or to create a more unified image for the reader. For example, along with alliteration, assonance helps link the words "tide" and "twilight" in lines 1-2. This connection makes intuitive sense because both of these things are associated with time and change (and because, as night falls, sky and sea seem to blend with one another).

Likewise, assonance helps link "sea-sands" with its adjective "damp" in line 3 and "waves" with its verb "efface" in lines 8-9, making dampness and effacement seem a fundamental attribute or action of these nouns. It also links the words "break," "neigh," and "day" in lines 11-3, helping draw the image together into a unified whole: horses neighing at the break of day. Again, these effects probably won't jump out to the reader immediately, but they may register subconsciously, tracing subtle connections and patterns across the imagery and language of the poem.

**Where Assonance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "tide rises," "tide"
- **Line 2:** "twilight"
- **Line 3:** "sands damp"
- **Line 5:** "tide rises"
- **Line 8:** "waves"
- **Line 9:** "Efface"
- **Line 10:** "tide rises"
- **Line 11:** "breaks"
- **Line 12:** "neigh"
- **Line 13:** "day"
- **Line 15:** "tide rises"

**REPETITION**

The poem makes use of several forms of [repetition](#), including at least three with technical names: [refrain](#), [epizeuxis](#), and [diacope](#).

The refrain—"the tide rises, the tide falls"—not only ends each stanza but also titles, begins, and ends the poem as a whole. Its repetition underscores the overwhelming power and continuity of the sea (and, by extension, the natural world) in the face of whatever petty human events take place against its backdrop. It also seems to mimic the rise and fall of individual lives, as though the traveller in the poem were but one "wave" in an eternal cycle of life and death.

The epizeuxis in line 7—"the sea, the sea"—helps illustrate the relentless repetitiveness of the sea itself (its "call" sounds over and over as its waves break). The repetition of "tide" in the refrain, an instance of diacope, serves the same purpose.

The repetition of "returns" in lines 13-14 is also an example of diacope. Here the repetition mirrors the meaning of the word itself (the word "returns" returns!), while the close [juxtaposition](#) of these two identical words helps tease out their potentially different grammatical functions. That is, the second "returns" could be read either as an intransitive verb whose noun is "traveller" (as in "The traveller never returns to the shore") or a transitive one whose noun is "day" (as in, "The day never returns the traveller to the shore").

Lastly, the repetition of "calls" at the end of the second line of each stanza creates another pattern that runs throughout the poem. It's as if three things—a seabird, the sea, and the hostler—are calling out in turn, with no response from a traveller who seems to be vanishing into a realm beyond both nature and society.

#### Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "The tide rises, the tide falls,"
- **Line 2:** "calls"
- **Line 5:** " And the tide rises, the tide falls."
- **Line 6:** "Darkness"
- **Line 7:** "the sea, the sea," "darkness," "calls"
- **Line 10:** " And the tide rises, the tide falls."
- **Line 12:** "calls"
- **Line 13:** "returns"
- **Line 14:** "Returns"
- **Line 15:** " And the tide rises, the tide falls."

## ANTITHESIS

A form of antithesis appears in the poem's title, first line, and [refrain](#): "The tide rises, the tide falls." The rise and fall of the tide are set in close grammatical [parallel](#) (through [asyndeton](#)) to emphasize that they're opposite but integral parts of the *same* cycle. This is also an example of [parataxis](#); the two independent clauses could be placed in any order and the meaning would be the same: rising follows falling follows rising.

A final, subtler antithesis occurs in lines 13-14:

The day returns, but nevermore  
Returns the traveller to the shore,

If these lines contain a syntactical [inversion](#), their straightforward equivalent would be: "The day returns, but the traveller nevermore returns to the shore." In other words: unlike daytime, the traveller never returns here. In this reading, daytime is contrasted with the traveller: one is eternally recurring, the other transient, fleeting, ephemeral.

Alternatively, the second "returns" might be paired with the noun "day" rather than "traveller." In other words: the daytime itself returns, but it (the daylight, here with agency) never again returns the traveller to this place. In this reading, the verb "returns" shifts in meaning, and the contrast emphasizes something different: the daytime comes back again and again, but it can't bring anything *else* back. Either way, the poem contrasts nature with humanity and the eternal with the temporary.

#### Where Antithesis appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "The tide rises, the tide falls,"
- **Line 5:** " And the tide rises, the tide falls."
- **Line 10:** " And the tide rises, the tide falls."
- **Lines 13-14:** "The day returns, but nevermore / Returns the traveller to the shore,"
- **Line 15:** " And the tide rises, the tide falls."

## PARATAXIS

[Parataxis](#) (and [asyndeton](#)) appears in lines the repeated phrase "The tide rises, the tide falls," as well as in line 2: "The twilight darkens, the curlew calls." In both cases, a coordinating conjunction, "and," is omitted. The omission in both cases places two [parallel](#) phrases on either side of a grammatical pause (caesura), which is indicated by a comma (rather than the semicolon that would be more conventional, but would indicate a stronger pause):

The tide rises, the tide falls,  
The twilight darkens, the curlew calls;

Parataxis places both parts of these lines on equal footing, which in turn emphasizes the idea that these events are part of one continuous cycle. The tide will rise again after falling; both parts of the line are part of the same endlessly repeating event.

This symmetry also creates a sound of swinging or swaying back and forth, like the tides or waves themselves. Especially in the first line, the sound of the line mirrors its meaning. The slightly unconventional punctuation (again, the use of a soft comma rather than a semicolon) makes the rising and falling of the tides, as well as the darkening twilight and curlew calling, feel less sharply divided—more fluidly unified—than they would if they were set off by semicolons. This fluidity and unity feel appropriate for a description of the darkened sea and sky.

Longfellow's more conventional punctuation at other, grammatically equivalent moments in the poem (see line 11, for example, where he uses a semicolon rather than a comma to set off independent clauses) suggests that his use of a comma in lines 1-2, 5, 10, and 15 is a conscious, creative choice.

#### Where Parataxis appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "The tide rises, the tide falls, / The twilight darkens, the curlew calls;"
- **Line 5:** " And the tide rises, the tide falls."
- **Line 10:** " And the tide rises, the tide falls."
- **Line 15:** " And the tide rises, the tide falls."

## SIBILANCE

When used heavily, as it is in this poem, sibilance creates a murmuring or hissing sound, which may be soothing or ominous depending on context. Here, it's a little bit of both. Take lines 6-9, where the poem's sibilance reaches its height. These lines feature /s/ sounds, as well as many /z/ and /f/ sounds—also considered sibilant in the broadest definition of the term:

Darkness settles on roofs and walls,  
But the sea, the sea in darkness calls;  
The little waves, with their soft, white hands,  
Efface the footprints in the sands,

The sibilance suits the soft, hushed atmosphere of the nighttime beach scene and the gentleness of the little waves. It also conveys the hissing sound of those waves, which becomes rather ominous as the sea removes all trace of a traveller who (the reader later learns) will never pass this way again.

The density of sibilance in the verse, and the way it's associated from the start with the sea (it first becomes prominent in the phrase "sea-sands" line 3), is a subtle way of extending the sea's dominant presence throughout the poem. In that sense, it functions like the refrain "The tide rises, the tide falls," which helps keep the sea—arguably, the true protagonist of the poem—in the reader's mind even when it's in the background of the narrative.

### Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "sea-sands"
- **Line 6:** "Darkness settles," "roofs"
- **Line 7:** "sea," "sea," "darkness"
- **Line 8:** "soft"
- **Line 9:** "Efface," "footprints," "sands"
- **Line 11:** "steeds," "stalls"
- **Line 12:** "Stamp," "hostler"

## PERSONIFICATION

[Personification](#) is clearest in the poem's middle stanza, which grants human characteristics to the sea. In lines 7-9, the sea "calls" as if its roar were a voice and erases the traveller's footprints with wavelets that are compared to "soft, white hands."

The "call" of the sea, unanswered by the departed traveller (and

impossible to answer literally even if the traveller were there), is an eerie reminder of the *lack* of human presence in this scene. The same is true of the waves' "hands": they seem human-like, but they're actually erasing all trace of humanity from the landscape. Notice, too, that the sea's figurative voice is present in the poem, but the traveller's voice is absent; the sea's figurative "hands" are more powerful and permanent than the actual "feet" of the traveller.

In context, then, the personification of the sea is slightly [ironic](#) and disturbing. It highlights the way in which the poem's most active, dominant presence—almost the protagonist of the narrative—is the sea and not the traveller (the personified *thing* and not the actual *person*). In turn, it underscores one of the poem's major themes: the dominance and permanence of nature, or the world as a whole, compared with individual human life.

### Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-9:** "But the sea, the sea in darkness calls; / The little waves, with their soft, white hands, / Efface the footprints in the sands,"

## METAPHOR

The poem's narrative can be thought of as an [extended metaphor](#) for the passage from life to death, as well as for natural continuity in the face of human loss. Instead of explicitly introducing these comparisons, Longfellow makes use of time-honored metaphorical associations with tides, shores, twilight/night/daybreak, and travel.

In other words, the poem doesn't need to tell the reader that tidal shifts are often metaphorically associated with cycles of time and change; that shores can be associated with the world in general (as in the phrase "leaving these earthly shores"); that twilight, night, and daybreak are often associated with dying, death, and renewal; or that travel on a journey is often associated with the "journey of life." These metaphors have long been familiar across many cultures, so the poem arranges them into a broader metaphorical picture of its own.

In this picture, life is like a brief journey in which people mysteriously arrive, as if on an ocean shore at twilight; pass quickly, as if hurrying along that shore in gathering darkness; and soon enter the unknown world of death, as if vanishing into a dark town for mysterious reasons. Any effect people have on the world is temporary, like footprints erased by waves on the shore. When people die, the world goes on without them, like town business resuming and tides continuing at daybreak. In fact, the rise and fall of the tide (which will presumably carry other travelers to the shore) is like the rise and fall of individual lives within the larger, ongoing cycle of life.

Longfellow further hints that his narrative is meant to be read metaphorically by [alluding](#) to at least one specific metaphor



from previous literature. The wording of lines 13-14 strongly echoes Hamlet's comparison of death to "The undiscovered country from whose bourn / No traveler returns" in his "[To be or not to be](#)" speech (Shakespeare, [Hamlet](#), Act 3, Scene 1). Since this speech is one of the most famous passages in English literature, Longfellow can count on some of his readers recognizing the allusion, just as he can assume that many readers will understand the general metaphorical resonance of his poem's other images.

#### Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 3-5
- Line 6
- Lines 8-10
- Lines 11-12
- Lines 13-15

## ALLUSION

The poem suggests a number of possible literary [allusions](#), in part because it makes use of conventional images and metaphors. For example, stories that associate death with arrival on a shore are as old as recorded literature: the Fortunate Isles and the banks of the River Styx are two examples from Greek mythology alone.

However, lines 13-14 suggest two more specific allusions, both related to death. "Nevermore" echoes the refrain of Edgar Allan Poe's famous poem "[The Raven](#)" (1845):

Quoth the Raven, "Nevermore."

Poe's poem emphasizes the finality of death, and its speaker views the raven as a messenger from "[Night's Plutonian shore](#)" (i.e., the border between life and death in Roman mythology). These elements have clear relevance to Longfellow's poem, which also features one bird, one human, nighttime, and a shore that symbolizes the life-death border.

This same border features in Hamlet's classic "[To be or not to be](#)" speech (William Shakespeare, [Hamlet](#), Act 3, Scene 1), which includes this passage:

Who would fardels bear,  
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,  
But that the dread of something after death,  
The undiscovered country from whose bourn  
No traveler returns, puzzles the will

Here, "bourn" means "boundary." Longfellow's language—"nevermore / Returns the traveller to the shore"—strongly echoes the boldfaced lines above, suggesting that his "shore" represents the boundary between life and

death. Once travelers cross it, they don't come back from it. Hamlet's speech also compares the challenges of life to "a sea of troubles": another sign that Longfellow probably had this speech in mind while writing his poem.

Finally, the imagery, perspective, and overall message of the poem recall the biblical book of Ecclesiastes, which views earthly life from a broad, godlike perspective. Here's a relevant passage from the King James Version, with which Longfellow would have been deeply familiar:

*One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever.*

*The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to his place where he arose.*

*The wind goeth toward the south, and turneth about unto the north; it whirleth about continually, and the wind returneth again according to his circuits.*

*All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full; unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again.*

Similarly, Longfellow's poem juxtaposes the fleeting passage of human life with the eternal cycles of night, day, and the sea. It, too, emphasizes that people come and go, but the earth abides forever.

#### Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-14:** "nevermore / Returns the traveller to the shore,"



## VOCABULARY

**Curlew** (Line 2) - A kind of migratory shorebird. Many types of curlew exist worldwide, and Longfellow lived in both the U.S. and Europe, so the reference itself doesn't narrow down the poem's location or the species the poet had in mind. However, he wrote the poem in Massachusetts, where he lived most of his life, and *Numenius americanus* (the long-billed curlew) was common in the New England of his era.

**Hastens** (Line 4) - "Hastens" means "hurries" or "goes faster." Here, the word suggests some urgency, maybe even an emergency, behind the traveller's desire to get to town. An archaic form of this word, "hasteth," appears in the King James translation of the Book of Ecclesiastes (in verse 5, where it describes the movement of the sun). Longfellow's poem echoes some of the imagery and themes of this biblical passage, which could also have inspired this particular word choice.

**Efface** (Line 9) - "Efface" means to wipe out or wear away. It often implies a gradual rather than an instantaneous erasure, so it fits the image of waves gradually erasing footprints in the

sand. Here, the waves effacing the footprints [metaphorically](#) seem to efface the traveller's self—to wipe away all record of the person's presence.

**Hostler** (Line 12) - The archaic word "hostler" (or "ostler") means someone who tends horses in a stable, often at an inn. Some hostlers were also innkeepers. Here, the mention of the hostler raises the possibility that the traveller has stayed at the same inn where the hostler works. However, the traveller doesn't seem to have a horse, and it's not clear that they make it to an inn—or survive the night. The hostler is apparently preparing to send off guests with their "steeds" (horses). Perhaps this is meant to contrast with a traveller who won't be traveling further.

**Nevermore** (Line 13) - "Nevermore" is an archaic word meaning "never again." This traveller will never again return to the shore from which they came. A very famous use of "nevermore" occurs in Edgar Allan Poe's "[The Raven](#)," in which the bird's repetition of this word serves to underscore the finality of death. Longfellow may be [alluding](#) to Poe's poem, suggesting that, just as the mourned woman in the earlier text will never come back to life, the traveller in this poem never will, either.



## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

The poem consists of three five-line stanzas, which function as the beginning, middle, and end of a brief story about a traveller. Though the poem doesn't adhere to a standard, named form, Longfellow classified it as one of his "Folk-Songs" in the volume *Ultima Thule*.

The rhyming third and fourth line of each stanza function as a [couplet](#) that directly concerns the traveller, whereas the surrounding lines describe the larger context surrounding the traveller. The fifth line of each stanza—indented to help show its recurrence and importance—is a [refrain](#) also found in the poem's title and first line. It emphasizes the largest context of all: a vast, surrounding, indifferent natural world that keeps cyclically changing no matter what the traveller does.

### METER

The poem is written in a four-beat accentual [meter](#) with lines ranging from seven to nine syllables. To understand what this means, read the poem aloud and tap your hand on a table (or your foot on the floor, etc.) each time you read a strongly **stressed** syllable. You'll find yourself tapping four times per line—despite lines having a varying number of syllables, and despite those stressed syllables appearing at different moments in each line. Here's the first stanza as an example:

The **tide rises**, the **tide falls**,

The **twilight darkens**, the **curlew calls**;  
Along the **sea-sands damp** and **brown**  
The **traveller hastens toward** the **town**,  
And the **tide rises**, the **tide falls**.

Meters that are *accentual* but not strictly *syllabic* (meaning there aren't a strict number of syllables per line) are often found in [ballads](#), folk verse, nursery rhymes, and the like. With its [refrain](#), strong rhymes, simple language, and symbolic story, this poem has elements of all these genres. In fact, when publishing it as part of his collection *Ultima Thule*, Longfellow grouped it in a section called "Folk-Songs."

The third and fourth lines of each stanza, which directly concern the traveller, tend to fall into regular [iambic](#) tetrameter, whereas the other lines have a more irregular "swing" or lilt to them. This means the lines about the traveller have four iambs—four poetic feet with a da-DUM pattern, resulting in eight syllables total. Take lines 3 and 4 from the stanza above:

Along | the sea- | sands damp | and brown  
The trav- | eller hast | ens toward | the town,

This helps set the traveller apart from the surrounding context, and may even suggest a contrast between the traveller's brisk, efficient movements and the rougher but still rhythmic sway of the sea. (The exception is the third line of the second stanza, which has an extra unstressed syllable in the third foot and an extra **stressed** syllable in the last—"The **lit-** | tle **waves**, | with their **soft**, | **white hands**." But this line concerns the sea as well as the traveller!)

### RHYME SCHEME

The [rhyme scheme](#) of the full poem is:

AABBA AACCA AADDA

The first, second, and fifth lines of each stanza rhyme with each other and with the equivalent lines of the other two stanzas (they all shared the A rhyme sound in the scheme above). The rhyme-word in the second and fifth line of each stanza is the same: "calls" and "falls," respectively. Meanwhile, the third and fourth lines of each stanza rhyme with each other but not with the equivalent lines in the other stanzas (brown/town, hands/sands, and nevermore/shore).

This is a tightly woven scheme that maximizes emphasis on the A-rhymes, which both bridge the stanzas and envelop the middle rhymes within each stanza. In particular, it places enormous weight and emphasis on the rhyme-word "falls," which concludes the title, the first and final lines of the opening stanza, the final line of the middle stanza, and the final line of the poem. This scheme helps drive home the fact this is a poem about cycles of rising and falling, but with a special emphasis on falling, including the *fall* (ending) of an individual life.

This scheme also highlights the three "calls," which appear to receive no response. By completing the rhyme, the word "falls" serves as a kind of anticlimactic answer to each call.

The BB, CC, and DD couplets in the middle of the stanzas are the lines that explicitly concern the traveller. The first couplet shows the traveller hurrying away from shore; the second shows the erasure of their footprints; the third announces that they never return to shore. Together, these lines introduce and send off the traveller with maximum efficiency (in keeping with the idea that the traveller "hastens," or rushes, through their journey). Their rhymes are outnumbered and all but overpowered by the repetitive A-rhymes. At the same time, their rhymes are *unique* within each stanza, just as the traveller's journey is the unique element of this scene—it's the one thing that doesn't repeat. In all these ways, the poem's rhyme scheme reinforces its picture of individual human life as small and fleeting in the midst of a large and constant natural world.



## SPEAKER

The speaker of the poem is unidentified and does not address a particular audience. Their perspective is broad and impersonal, like that of a "third-person limited" narrator in fiction. They provide no information about the traveller's thoughts and feelings—or anyone else's (including their own). Similarly, their [tone](#) is calm and their [diction](#) plain. Their few rhetorical flourishes consist of repetitions (such as the refrain in each stanza or "the sea, the sea" in line 7) that add to the strong, lulling rhythm of the poem—the kind one might find in an old ballad or nursery rhyme. These choices fit well with the poem's generalized, fable-like narrative and detached, impersonal attitude toward life and death.



## SETTING

The setting of the poem consists of a sea, a shore, and a nearby town. It's the end of the day—"twilight"—and the world is getting darker as the sun sets, with the only sounds coming from the waves and a bird. The traveller thus seems totally isolated while rushing across the "damp," "brown" sand along the shore. Night falls across the land, and the tide goes in and out. When the sun rises again the next day, the sounds of the bustling morning fill the air—but the traveller is nowhere to be found.

The poem's setting has a few specific features, such as the curlew on the shore and the hostler, horses, and stalls in the town. However, these details do not help pinpoint a specific location or period. Species of curlew are found worldwide, and hostlers and stables were standard features of towns prior to the 20th century. The speaker intends to depict a highly

generic coastal scene, of any era, during the hours between twilight and daybreak.

This generic quality—the sense that the setting is "anytime" and "anyplace," just as the traveller could be "anyone"—encourages readers to take the poem as being [symbolic](#) rather than strictly literal. The shore suggests the earth on which the brief journey of our lives plays out. The changing sky and sea are the broad natural context within which all human activity takes place. The tides and the town that remain active after the traveller's disappearance represent the world that goes on after an individual's death.



## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

"The Tide Rises, the Tide Falls" appears in the collection *Ultima Thule* (1880), which Longfellow published two years before his death and whose title hints that he may have expected it to be his last (ultimate) book. The poem's themes—the mystery of death, the brevity and smallness of human life—may be, in part, the elderly poet's reflection on his own mortality. This would align it with other poems in the same collection, including the ["Dedication"](#) poem, in which an elderly speaker reflects on lost youth and approaching death through the [extended metaphor](#) of an ocean voyage.

The poem's vision of human life as fundamentally trivial and fleeting makes for an interesting juxtaposition with Longfellow's public image. Longfellow was arguably the most famous American poet of his century, a celebrity writer with a wide audience on both sides of the Atlantic. He was the best-known member of a literary movement critics have called the Fireside Poets. This group helped popularize both New England literature and American literature more generally.

As he approached death, Longfellow could reasonably have assumed he'd left a lasting mark on the world. Yet "The Tide Rises, the Tide Falls" seems to express a fear that his impact (his footprints on the shore of the world) would vanish—because *any* human life dwindles to insignificance in the grand scheme of things.

As well as being a so-called Fireside Poet, Longfellow is considered an American adopter of the 19th-century European poetic movement known as Romanticism. Among other things, the British Romantic poets (including William Wordsworth, John Keats, and Percy Bysshe Shelley) were known for their reflections on the relationship between humanity and nature—particularly for poems that situated lonely human figures in imposing natural landscapes (lakes, oceans, mountains, forests, etc.).

"The Tide Rises, the Tide Falls," with its tiny traveller and huge seascape, draws partly on this tradition. It also contains

possible echoes of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (in which Hamlet compares death to the "undiscovered country" from which "no traveller returns") and Edgar Allan Poe's "[The Raven](#)" (with its ominous "Nevermore" refrain; Poe, too, is often classified as an American Romantic poet).

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Longfellow's life provided many occasions to reflect on mortality. For example, both of his wives died under tragic circumstances: the first, Mary, after a miscarriage; the second, Frances, in a freak household fire in which he, too, was badly burned. Both tragedies sent him into spells of terrible grief. He confessed in his sonnet "[The Cross of Snow](#)," written 18 years after Frances's death, that he had never gotten over losing her. "The Tide Rises, the Tide Falls," published three years after "The Cross of Snow," emerges from this same period of protracted mourning. (It also features a vanished "traveller," so perhaps it's relevant that Mary died while traveling abroad.)

Readers can also see echoes of the time in which Longfellow wrote in the poem's references to "steeds," "stalls," and a "hostler." In Longfellow's time, a hostler (or ostler) was similar to a valet at a modern hotel or restaurant. Hostlers supervised stables, especially at inns, where they tended to guests' horses. In the poem, the appearance of the hostler and impatient "steeds" (horses) indicates that at least some people in town are getting ready to leave for somewhere. The implication is that the "traveller" is not among them, because the traveller's journey (i.e., life) has ended.

Historical context might also suggest some practical, as opposed to purely [symbolic](#), reasons for hurrying to reach a town by nightfall. Before electric lighting became widespread in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, streets were often poorly lit, so towns were less active and more dangerous at night. Transportation was also more limited in the later hours (horses didn't have electric headlights). In other words, while the poem's "traveller" may be racing toward a [metaphorical](#) appointment with the "darkness," travelers in general, in Longfellow's day, would have been (even) more inclined than their modern counterparts to reach their destinations by evening. After twilight, there were fewer things to do, fewer ways to get around, and more ways to get hurt.



## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [The Maine Historical Society and Longfellow](#) — Learn more about the poet's life and work courtesy of the Maine Historical Society. (<https://www.hwlongfellow.org/>)
- [Longfellow's Life Story](#) — Read the Poetry Foundation's biography of Longfellow, including context for the collection in which "The Tide Rises, the Tide Falls" first appeared. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/henry-wadsworth-longfellow>)
- [Lecture on Longfellow's Life](#) — Watch Longfellow scholar Charles C. Calhoun deliver a lecture on the poet's life and work. ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f7QsL\\_7SEcQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f7QsL_7SEcQ))
- [Early Text of "The Tide Rises, the Tide Falls"](#) — Read the Internet Archive's scan of the poem in an early (1882) edition of *Ultima Thule*, the collection in which it was first published. (<https://archive.org/details/ultimathule00longgoog/page/n51/mode/2up>)
- [A Guide to the Fireside Poets](#) — Read the Academy of American Poets' introduction to the "Fireside Poets," a school of 19th-century American writers in which some critics have grouped Longfellow. (<https://poets.org/text/brief-guide-fireside-poets>)

### LITCHARTS ON OTHER HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW POEMS

- [A Psalm of Life](#)



## HOW TO CITE

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