

Meeting at Night



POEM TEXT

I

- 1 The grey sea and the long black land;
- 2 And the yellow half-moon large and low;
- 3 And the startled little waves that leap
- 4 In fiery ringlets from their sleep,
- 5 As I gain the cove with pushing prow,
- 6 And quench its speed i' the slushy sand.

II

- 7 Then a mile of warm sea-scented beach;
- 8 Three fields to cross till a farm appears;
- 9 A tap at the pane, the quick sharp scratch
- 10 And blue spurt of a lighted match,
- 11 And a voice less loud, thro' its joys and fears,
- 12 Than the two hearts beating each to each!



SUMMARY

The speaker describes a mysterious landscape: a dull sea and an expanse of land that looks black in the darkness. The half-moon looms low in the sky, giving off a yellow light. Small waves appear in little rings, where previously the surface had been calm. The speaker rows into the bay and brings the vessel to a halt in the wet sand.

The speaker walks for a mile along the warm beach, and can smell the sea. The speaker continues across three fields until reaching a farm. The speaker knocks gently on a window, at which point someone else (implied to be the speaker's lover) hurriedly strikes a match that bursts into a blue flame. "A voice"—either the speaker's or this lover's—talks, overcome with happiness and fear. The voice, though, doesn't seem to be as loud as the lovers' racing hearts, which beat together.



THEMES

LOVE AND PERSEVERANCE

"Meeting at Night" aims to capture the vitality and excitement of romantic love, especially when that love is in its early stages. (Worth noting is that Robert Browning wrote it while courting his eventual wife, Elizabeth Barrett, and that Barrett's father did not approve of the match!) On a literal level, the poem tells

the story of the speaker's long and clandestine journey through a mysterious coastal landscape. This determined journey culminates with the speaker finally meeting up with a lover, their "two hearts beating" powerfully together. The poem thus argues that love is precious and worth striving for, even in the face of significant obstacles. Put simply, love is worth the effort.

The poem takes care to detail just how hard this journey is before revealing to the reader where the speaker is actually going. First, the speaker traverses a "grey sea" and "long black land," reflecting the title's assertion that whatever "meeting" the speaker is heading towards is taking place "at night." This further suggests that this meeting is a secret, since it's happening under the cover of darkness when other people aren't around to watch. This adds a sense of danger and raises the stakes of the speaker's journey.

The mixture of precise imagery with vague nouns like "sea" and "land" also creates a sense of scale, suggesting the vast distance the speaker has to travel. Indeed, even when the speaker comes ashore, the journey isn't over. Now, the speaker must trudge down a mile of beach and cross "three fields," again underscoring the sheer scale of this trek. The speaker's determination remains unwavering throughout, however, as is evident by the fact that the speaker both keeps going and never complains about the difficulty of this undertaking.

And again, it's important to note that it's not until the final line that the reader really gets a sense of why the journey is being made. By delaying that reveal, the poem builds up a sense of anticipation—what powerful force could be driving the speaker forward so consistently?

The answer, of course, is love: the speaker has gone on this voyage in pursuit of romance. And when the poem finally does reveal the speaker's purpose, its imagery suggests the thrill of new love—symbolized here by the match-lit meeting place and the intense intimacy of the poem's final line.

In a sense, now that the reader knows the whole journey has been for love, the rest of the poem comes to represent the anticipation of that love. The fact that the lovers must meet at night suggests that their love is in some way forbidden, yet that it's worth taking a risk to pursue. The lines also take on a lustful tone in hindsight: for example, the "ringlets" of water could be hair, and the final two lines of the first stanza read like a metaphor for sexual intercourse itself.

In any case, the poem clearly suggests that love is something vital and thrilling. Through hiding its literal meaning until the final lines, the poem manages to capture something of the excitement—and perhaps even the danger—of love. The speaker makes the difficult journey to meet this lover precisely because love is worth fighting for.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-6
- Lines 7-12

**LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS****LINES 1-2**

*The grey sea and the long black land;
And the yellow half-moon large and low;*

Right from the beginning, the poem creates an atmosphere of anticipation. The first two lines of the first section are entirely descriptive, establishing the poem's distinct and mysterious sense of place. Of course, this isn't hollow descriptive language—the purpose of the description will become clear later in the poem. For now, though, all readers get is the image of a shoreline at night.

The nouns here are purposefully vague. The reader is presented with "sea" and "land," but no indication of *which* sea or *which* land. This creates a sense of mystery and risk—wherever this landscape is, it is an unfamiliar place. At the same time, these words also suggest that the specifics of the location are not all that important to the speaker. That is, the ominous landscape is nothing more than another obstacle in the speaker's journey. It's not important which sea or land the speaker is traveling *through*—it's where the speaker is traveling *toward* that matters most.

In addition to the title, the first two lines make it clear that the poem takes place at night. The land is visible only as a kind of black mass, emphasized by the way that /l/ sounds are drawn out by [alliteration](#) and [consonance](#) in "long black land." The adjectives, then, are an important part of creating the poem's specific atmosphere—and the low visibility suggests uncertainty and potential risk. It also suggests secrecy—that something about this meeting is clandestine, because it has to happen under the cover of darkness.

Line 2 picks up on the /l/ in line 1, with nearly half of the words in making use of the same sound ("yellow half-moon large and low"). Here, the sound works to create a sense of the imposing sight of the moon, hanging "large and low" in the sky. The line also introduces another key technique that the poem uses to develop its atmosphere and heightened suspense. The line begins with "and," introducing the poem's [polysyndeton](#). This repetition of "and" suggests the seemingly endless nature of this journey—it is one step, followed by another, **and** another, **and** another.

LINES 3-4

*And the startled little waves that leap
In fiery ringlets from their sleep,*

Lines 3 and 4 continue to develop the atmosphere of risk and anticipation begun in the first two lines. It's not immediately obvious, but the speaker is describing the next part of their journey to the "meeting" mentioned in the title. The waves are "startled" because the speaker is sailing or rowing through them, creating ripples in the water. Still, there is no sign of people in the poem, creating a sense of isolation that adds to the mystery surrounding the speaker's journey. Yet the description also hints at the speaker's reason for undertaking this journey. While the adjectives in the first two lines were simple and vague—devoted just to the colors of the landscape—the "fieriness" of the "ringlets" here hints at the approaching moment of passion between the two lovers.

Line 3 begins with an "And," continuing the [polysyndeton](#) that helps make this journey feel long and arduous. Each "and" introduces yet another stage of the speaker's journey, though at this point it's important to remember that the reader still doesn't actually know where the speaker is going! The continued delay in revealing this information increases the poem's tension.

The poem also again relies on the [consonance](#) of /l/ sounds, plus /t/, /f/, and /r/ sounds. On one level, these many densely repeated sounds give the lines a grand and literary feel; these are carefully crafted words that give the speaker's journey an epic quality:

*And the startled little waves that leap
In fiery ringlets from their sleep,*

The percussive /t/ consonance is particularly evocative, inserting short, sharp beats into the rather lolling /l/ consonance that otherwise dominates the line. This reflects, on a sonic level, the way that these sleepy waves are surprised by the slap of the speaker's oars hitting them as the speaker rows to shore.

Here it's also worth noting the effects of the poem's rhyme scheme. The end words of lines 3 and 4 ("leap" and "sleep") rhyme fully, as do lines 9 and 10 ("scratch" and "match") in the next stanza. This is the product of a scheme that brings the end rhymes closer together in the middle of each stanza (ABCCBA), meaning that the rhymes come to "meet" after having started far away. This sort of coming together, of course, is precisely what the poem is describing: two people that are at a distance from one another, traveling towards each other.

The [enjambment](#) in these lines brings the rhymes even closer by removing any cumbersome punctuation. Enjambment quickens the line, mimicking the excitement of the "two hearts" at the end of the poem when they do finally meet.

LINES 5-6

*As I gain the cove with pushing prow,
And quench its speed i' the slushy sand.*

Lines 5 and 6 mark a significant shift in the poem. So far, the speaker has offered no clues about their identity nor a verb to shed much light on what is actually happening—where the speaker is going or why. This changes in line 5 with the introduction of the first-person pronoun "I." Now, finally, the reader gets a sense of what is going on.

The speaker is traveling somewhere. This journey was partly by boat, and the first section of the poem ends as the speaker's boat comes to a stop in the "slushy sand" of a new shore. The insistent [alliteration](#) of "pushing prow" suggests the speaker's determination to get to the "meeting," whatever geography might lie in the way.

In line 6, the poem dials up the volume of its alliteration, specifically [sibilance](#), intended to replicate the sound of wet sand being moved by the prow of the speaker's boat sliding into shore:

And quench its speed i' the slushy sand.

It's also hard to avoid the sense that these two lines represent a [metaphor](#) for sex, as many critics have noted. However, the speaker still has some way to go before actually reaching their lover. Perhaps, then, the sexually suggestive language is more a product of the speaker's own heightened sexual anticipation.

Either way, the first section of the poem ends on a cliff-hanger, complete with a clear [end-stop](#). For a reader encountering the poem for the first time, all that reader knows at this point is that the speaker has landed on a new shore—the reader still doesn't really know why.

LINES 7-8

*Then a mile of warm sea-scented beach;
Three fields to cross till a farm appears;*

The poem is divided into two sections—perhaps as a kind of [metaphor](#) for the two separated lovers, and also to heighten the poem's sense of dramatic atmosphere and anticipation. The distance between the stanzas represents the actual distance between the speaker and his beloved.

The second stanza essentially picks up where the last one left off. The meeting is drawing closer, in terms of both space and time, but there is still some way for the speaker to go. First, the speaker must traverse a "mile of warm sea-scented beach" and "three fields." The [sibilance](#) of "sea-scented" in line 7 is a continuation of that used in line 6. Here it's meant to evoke the spray of the sea. The adjective "warm" subtly suggests the way in which the speaker is one stage closer to the physical and emotional warmth of their lover.

Having walked a mile along the coast, the speaker then appears to turn inland towards a farm. Specifically noting that there are *three* fields suggests that this is a route the speaker either knows well from experience or from memory. Perhaps the

speaker is following instructions issued by their lover, counting the steps of the journey as they draw gradually but definitively closer to their destination. The [alliteration](#) of "fields" and "farm" creates a sense of markers being passed.

Notably, the "I," having made its one appearance in the poem, has already departed. Part of the effect of this is to make the speaker feel absent. It's quite a beautiful device, because essentially it gives the impression that the speaker is too busy making their journey, too inspired by love, to engage with the reader directly. It's almost as if the speaker has left each line just as the reader arrives—as though the speaker has just moved out of the frame.

LINES 9-12

*A tap at the pane, the quick sharp scratch
And blue spurt of a lighted match,
And a voice less loud, thro' its joys and fears,
Than the two hearts beating each to each!*

Line 9 marks the moment in which the purpose of the speaker's journey finally starts to be revealed. The speaker gives a "tap" on a window pane—and the "pane" is a notable noun because it represents the speaker's arrival at a place occupied by other people. So far, the speaker has been intensely alone, traveling through the foreboding darkness over land and sea. The "tap at the pane"—with its wonderfully suggestive [consonant](#) /p/ sound—is a moment of communication, the speaker giving a kind of signal. The [caesura](#) that follows this tap creates a brief moment of tense silence as the speaker awaits a reply.

Evidently, the other person in this meeting has been waiting for the speaker's arrival. This other person lights a match so that the two lovers can see each other. The poem makes use of [onomatopoeia](#) here, the harsh consonance of "quick sharp scratch" representing the short and harsh sound of a match being struck. These words are all stressed as well, bringing them to sonic life *and* adding to the sense of urgency:

A tap at the pane, the quick sharp scratch

And just as the middle lines of the first stanza rhymed and were brought closer through the accelerating effect of [enjambment](#), the poem does exactly the same in lines 9 and 10. "Scratch" and "match" rhyme, linking the action—"scratch"—with the object—"match." The flame, with its "blue spurt," suggests, in almost sexual language, the building passion of this intimate moment between the two lovers.

Lines 11 and 12 introduce a complicated but beautiful idea. Here, the lovers start speaking through their "joys and fears." This, combined with the epic quality of the journey undertaken, suggests that their meeting might be secret, even forbidden. Perhaps it is an affair, or has been outlawed by some other authority (like parents, for example). Indeed, as an interesting aside, it's worth noting here that Robert Browning wrote this

poem during his courtship of his wife-to-be that he wrote this poem—and Browning definitely did *not* have the approval of Elizabeth Barrett's father.

Regardless, the lovers speak "through" these "joys and fears" because their love makes them determined to do so. Notice how this speaking is *less* loud than the sound of the lovers' "two hearts beating each to each!" In other words, their hearts are pounding so forcefully in their chests that this (figuratively) drowns out what they are actually saying. Such is the anticipation and sexual tension of the meeting that both hearts are racing, and the phrase "beating each to each" suggests they are beating in rhythm and that the lovers are physically close to one another—perhaps that the lovers are in an impassioned embrace.

Indeed, the poem's only exclamation mark here suggests a kind of climax—the reward at the end of the journey. This journey has been mirrored by the way in which the poem has delayed its final revelation, deliberately holding back the reader's understanding of what's happening in an effort to evoke the feeling of anticipation and tension shared by the lovers themselves.



SYMBOLS



THE MOON

The moon is one of the oldest symbols in humanity. People have long gazed up at the night sky and projected their thoughts and feelings onto that strange rock looking down on them. Here, the symbolism of the moon functions in a number of ways.

Firstly, it represents distance. Put bluntly, the moon is a very long way away, no matter where you stand on planet Earth. As such, it's a constant reminder of the vastness of the universe. This reminder of distance, then, represents the gulf in space and time between the speaker and the speaker's lover. Indeed, this is the gap that the speaker is trying to close through this journey.

People also often see a face in the moon. As such, it can also be interpreted as a symbol for the other lover—a faraway person who is nevertheless present even in absence.

Perhaps most important of all, this moon is a *half*-moon. It is incomplete, one half of a whole. Just like... the speaker!

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "the yellow half-moon"



THE MATCH

A match is struck in the second stanza, presumably by the speaker's lover. It's a dramatic moment, made all-the-more powerful by the [onomatopoeic](#) sound of "quick sharp scratch."

A match is, of course, a form of fire. Fire carries with its common associations of passion and emotion, which is also hinted at by the mention of "fiery ringlets" earlier in the poem. The striking of the match represents the moment of union between the speaker and the speaker's lover—suddenly, the wait is over and the flame of love is reignited. Fire is also used for warmth and, though you wouldn't get much warmth from a match, it still represents the emotional and physical intimacy that the two lovers share.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-10:** "the quick sharp scratch / And blue spurt of a lighted match"



POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

"Meeting at Night" makes frequent use of [alliteration](#) and [consonance](#). Generally, this is part of an overall strategy to build a sense of atmosphere and anticipation throughout the poem.

The first obvious example of alliteration is in line 1. In this line, the lolling /l/ of "long" and "land"—which also chime with the /l/ in "black"—create the sense of a huge, imposing landscape. The "volume" of the sound—the degree to which it imposes itself on the line—emphasizes the way in which the surrounding geography imposes itself on the speaker's experience while journeying to this meeting; in other words, the speaker can't avoid trekking through this landscape, and the insistent /l/ sound is a sonic reminder of that fact.

In the following line, the yellow moon is described as "large and low." The alliterative /l/ sound picks up on the /l/ sound found elsewhere in this line (i.e., in "yellow") and the first line. As with the previous example, the alliteration helps to create the poem's mysterious nocturnal atmosphere. The line is once again dominated by the /l/ sound, which has already been linked with the imposing landscape.

The very same sounds repeat again in the third line (also combining via consonance with "startled"). Here, "little waves ... leap." This alliteration is more about creating a sense of small and sudden movement, with the /l/ sounds "leaping" between the different stages of the line.

Later, line 5's alliterative /p/ suggests physical effort, the plosive sound causing the reader's mouth to exhale almost as if

from exhaustion. It also suggests doggedness and determination as the speaker is "pushing" the "prow" (part of a boat) to shore.

The following line uses alliterative /s/ sounds—also known as [sibilance](#)—to try to replicate the sound of the thing that it's describing. The speaker is pushing their boat through "slushy sand," making a squelchy wet sound mimicked by the sibilance.

Yet another example of meaningful alliteration occurs when, in line 8, "fields" is linked with "farm." Apart from linking two nouns that are both related to agriculture, the alliteration here also creates the sense that the speaker is passing through separate stages of the journey. That is, the two /f/ sounds read like markers along the route to this meeting.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "l," "l"
- **Line 2:** "l," "l"
- **Line 3:** "l," "l"
- **Line 4:** "f," "f"
- **Line 5:** "p," "p"
- **Line 6:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 7:** "s," "s"
- **Line 8:** "f," "f"
- **Line 11:** "A," "a," "l," "l"
- **Line 12:** "Th," "th," "e," "e"

CAESURA

"Meeting at Night" has just two [caesurae](#). The first caesura comes in line 9, just after the speaker knocks at the lover's window. Importantly, before this point—throughout the poem's first eight lines—there are no caesurae at all. The regularity of those first eight lines has contributed to the sense of an arduous and uninterrupted journey—but now the speaker has reached their destination. This brief pause as the speaker taps on the window, then, creates a moment of almost unbearable tension. In this momentary silence, the reader wonders who will answer the speaker's call—if indeed anyone will answer at all.

The second caesura allows the speaker to characterize the "voice"—which could be the speaker's or the speaker's lover's—as "less loud" than the sound of the lovers' beating hearts. It creates a little space around the phrase "thro' its joys and fears." This is important, because it's really the only moment of abstraction in the whole poem. Everything else has been about the journey to get to this moment, and suddenly the world of emotion takes hold. The lovers are probably relieved, excited, and perhaps a little nervous to finally be with each other. The caesura helps make this moment more dramatic, and also emphasizes this heightened sense of emotion.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** " "
- **Line 11:** " "

CONSONANCE

"Meeting at Night" makes frequent use of [consonance](#). As noted in our discussion of [alliteration](#), in the first stanza the /l/ sound is quickly associated with the landscape—imposing, dark and mysterious. The first four lines *all* play on this sound:

The grey sea and the long black land;
And the yellow half-moon large and low;
And the startled little waves that leap
In fiery ringlets from their sleep,

The /l/ sound has a hypnotic, almost soporific quality (think of the gentle sound of the word "lullaby"). Perhaps this reflects the speaker's fight with tiredness as they make the long and difficult journey to their beloved. In other words, desire for sleep exerts its subconscious (but ultimately unsuccessful) hold on the lines.

The /l/ sounds are punctuated by quick pops of /t/ sounds in line 3 ("startled little"), these percussive jolts reflective of the fact that the waves have been "startled" by the intrusion of the speaker's boat. Note as well how line 4 contains a quick repetition of the /r/ sound: "fiery ringlets." This subtle repetition perhaps represents the small "ringlet" shapes of water as the boat moves.

Another key example of consonance comes in lines 9 and 10, as the speaker taps at the window, hoping the lover will appear. This marks an important moment in the poem, because it's the first time the speaker attempts to communicate with anyone else. The [plosive](#) /p/ sounds require the sudden stop and release of air, evoking, through sound, the way that the speaker gives a "tap" on the window "pane." The /p/ sounds repeat again in "sharp" and "spurt." These two lines, then, seem to act out the speaker's knocks through consonance.

There is also a /t/ sound running through the second stanza. It's quite a delicate sound—in this context at least—and so helps create the sense of small but purposeful movement, as in the lighting of the match of the lovers' embrace. The three /t/ sounds in the poem's final line are also suggestive of the lovers' hearts—"two hearts beating"—with the quick succession of repeats mimicking the sound/feeling of an accelerated heart rate.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "l," "l," "l"
- **Line 2:** "ll," "l," "p"
- **Line 3:** "t," "t," "l," "l," "tt," "l," "t," "l"
- **Line 4:** "f," "r," "r," "l," "f," "r," "r," "l"

- **Line 5:** "p," "p"
- **Line 6:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 7:** "m," "m," "s," "s"
- **Line 8:** "f," "f," "pp"
- **Line 9:** "p," "t," "p," "q," "ck," "p," "c"
- **Line 10:** "p," "t," "t"
- **Line 11:** "l," "l"
- **Line 12:** "Th," "th," "t," "t," "t," "ch," "t," "ch"

ENJAMBMENT

[Enjambment](#) is used twice in "Meeting at Night," once in each stanza. In fact, it happens at the same point in the stanza both times—between the third and fourth line of each stanza—and the effect that this has is closely linked to the poem's form and rhyme.

First of all, it is important to notice the way that the rhyme scheme works, essentially creating a sandwich around the middle of each stanza (ABCCBA). This is a kind of coming-together that represents the two lovers. Likewise, the fact that there are two identical stanzas is also suggestive of a pair, and of the near symmetrical shape that the lovers make when they embrace.

This is where the enjambment comes in. It brings the middle rhymes of each stanza—those CC sounds—even closer to one another by shortening the amount of time it takes for them to chime together. Because there is no punctuation after "leap," "sleep" arrives sooner. Likewise with "scratch" and "match." This also creates an atmosphere of excitement, which is fully realized by the climactic ending of the second (when the lovers finally do meet).

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "leap"
- **Line 4:** "In"
- **Line 9:** "scratch"
- **Line 10:** "And"

EXTENDED METAPHOR

There are two main [metaphors](#) at play in "Meeting at Night."

The first essentially encompasses the entire poem, and as such is an [extended metaphor](#): the speaker's arduous journey can be thought of as more than a literal trek. Additionally, it's a kind of metaphorical journey which speaks to the passion and dedication involved in love.

The obstacles the speaker faces and the vast distances the speaker must travel in the dark represent the trials and tribulations of love. The poem gives the impression that the speaker is utterly determined to get to the meeting-place, and in turn this becomes a representation of the way that love makes people feel. In other words, the dedication of the

speaker is a stand-in for the more general devotion of love itself.

Within this broader metaphor is also the more succinct metaphor of "little waves that leap / In fiery ringlets." Waves, of course, cannot literally be fiery; ringlets, meanwhile, is typically used to describe curls of hair. The metaphor here suggests the sudden shock of the waves as the speaker pushes through the water on a boat, and also is evocative of sexual desire.

Indeed, many critics have noted, the descriptive language in the poem is sexually suggestive—perhaps making the poem, or at least the speaker's journey, a metaphor for sex itself. The key lines in question are the final two of the first stanza (though the earlier "ringlets" could be read as a lover's hair), and the final four of the second. Namely:

As I gain the cove with pushing prow,
And quench its speed i' the slushy sand.

And:

A tap at the pane, the quick sharp scratch
And blue spurt of a lighted match,
And a voice less loud, thro' its joys and fears,
Than the two hearts beating each to each!

The first quote is suggestive of sexual intercourse in the way that boat enters the sand. "Quench" contributes to this too, as a word frequently associated with desire. Continuing this metaphor, the "spurt" of the match is a kind of climax, perhaps representative of orgasm. This is supported by the physiological signs: the increased heart beats of the two chests pressed close together. The exclamation mark, too, is a kind of climax—the rhetorical height of the poem.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-6
- Lines 7-12

ONOMATOPOEIA

"Meeting at Night" uses [onomatopoeia](#) to brilliant effect.

There is one primary example—the "quick sharp scratch" of the match in line 9. These stressed monosyllables actively sound like the act of lighting a match. The *actual* sound of lighting a match is harsh on the ear, and this is precisely the effect that the phrase is going for. The crush of consonants in "sharp" and "scratch"—particularly the /r/ and /tch/ sounds—evokes the friction of the match as it is lit.

There is another onomatopoeic word near this example: "tap." The word sounds like the action itself, and this makes the speaker's action seem all-the-more present and real. Indeed, this onomatopoeia combines with the other nearby /p/ sounds

("pane," "sharp," "spurt") to suggest a subtle tapping effect.

Arguably, "slushy" in line 6 is also onomatopoeic. The way that the muscles of the mouth have to move in order to pronounce the word evoke the movement of the wet sand as the speaker pushes a boat into it.

Where Onomatopoeia appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "slushy"
- **Line 9:** "tap," "quick sharp scratch"

PATHETIC FALLACY

"Meeting at Night" is an intensely atmospheric poem. In fact, it's almost all atmosphere, and uses [pathetic fallacy](#) to construct its sense of mystery and anticipation. Words like "grey" and "black" are literal, visual descriptors, but can also be interpreted as evoking certain emotions—namely sadness or despair, neither of which these environmental elements can actually feel. The speaker seems to be projecting emotions onto the surrounding world, reflecting the speaker's anguish at being separated from the speaker's lover. Without this lover, the entire landscape seems morose and forbidding, a fact that implicitly underscores the power of love to shape the speaker's experience of the world.

The "startled" waves and "fiery" ringlets also reflect the relationship between the natural environment and the speaker's state of mind. Saying that the waves are "startled" suggests the speaker is on edge. But the speaker is also passionate, enlivened by the prospect of meeting their lover—and as such, the waves additionally appear "fiery."

In line 7, the "warm sea-scented beach" anticipates the growing proximity between the speaker and the speaker's lover, the warmth suggestive of the body heat of an embrace. Again, this can be taken as a physical reality—the beach smells/literally feels warm and inviting—but "warm" is also a personality trait. Upon getting closer to the speaker's beloved, the speaker interprets the landscape more positively.

Where Pathetic Fallacy appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "grey sea," "long black land"
- **Line 3:** "startled little waves"
- **Line 4:** "fiery ringlets"
- **Line 7:** "warm sea-scented beach"

POLYSYNDETON

Five out of the poem's twelve lines begin with "And," creating a clear pattern of [polysyndeton](#) (and also arguably of [anaphora](#)). The "ands" in the first stanza are an important part of the way the poem conveys its sense of a long and arduous journey. The speaker has to travel a long way—by land and sea—to get to the promised "Meeting" of the title. The "ands" make the journey

feel laborious, with each "and" introducing its line in the same way that each completed stage of the journey introduces the next undertaking. The speaker must do this, *and* this, *and* this, *and* this (getting tired yet?).

The "ands" thus have a cumbersome quality which informs the poem's literal content. The "ands" here are not strictly necessary, in the grammatical sense. The poem could just as easily have listed the different elements of the journey/environment without them. But as a conjunction, the "and" is a literal link between one part of a sentence and another; it also makes a sentence take up a little bit more time (and space). This helps with the sense of the *continuity* of the journey; though it does have different stages, the speaker and the speaker's desire are a consistent presence in each of these stages.

The polysyndeton in the second stanza works a little differently. Here, it is used when the lovers *have* finally been reunited. Here, the "ands" help represent a kind of nervous excitement, a heightened emotional state as the lovers go from one instinctive action to the next.

Where Polysyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "And"
- **Line 3:** "And"
- **Line 6:** "And"
- **Line 10:** "And"
- **Line 11:** "And"

SIBILANCE

"Meeting at Night" is full of [sibilance](#). The /s/ sound is often associated with whispering, which reflects the quiet, mysterious landscape through which the speaker journeys:

The grey sea and the long black land;
And the yellow half-moon large and low;
And the startled little waves that leap
In fiery ringlets from their sleep,
As I gain the cove with pushing prow,

Sibilance also specifically evokes the coastal environment, with its gentle splashing of waves and the whisper of wind through sand and grasses. In fact, notice how the sibilance increases as the poem focuses more intently on the water: in the first line there is just one /s/ sound, and the description of the sea is non-specific. But lines 3, 4, and 5 look at the sea in more detail—and accordingly the sibilance becomes more prominent.

In line 6, when the watery environment is at its noisiest, so too is the sibilance. Here, the speaker lands a boat on the shore, the mixture of water and sand creating a "slushy" sound. This sibilance is partly [alliterative](#) too.

And quench its speed i' the slushy sand.

In line 7, the link between sibilance and the sea continues with "sea-scented beach." Later in the stanza, however, the sibilance takes on different connotations. The lovers meeting is hushed and perhaps secretive, and the sibilance weaves a whispering quality throughout the final four lines, suggesting that they are trying to keep their voices down.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "s"
- **Line 3:** "s," "s"
- **Line 4:** "s," "s"
- **Line 5:** "s," "sh"
- **Line 6:** "ch," "s," "s," "s," "sh," "s"
- **Line 7:** "s," "sc," "ch"
- **Line 8:** "s," "ss," "s"
- **Line 9:** "sh," "s," "ch"
- **Line 10:** "s," "ch"
- **Line 11:** "c," "ss," "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 12:** "s," "ch," "ch"

END-STOPPED LINE

"Meeting at Night" is highly regular in the way it uses [end-stops](#) and [enjambment](#). All lines are end-stopped except for the third one in each stanza.

The use of end-stop gives the poem the sensation that it is constantly starting and stopping. Just as each line builds momentum, the end-stops seem to disrupt this forward motion. This helps to represent the long, arduous journey of the lover as they make their way to the meeting. It creates the sense of a journey in stages, making the reader travel through the poem as though they themselves are at different stages on course from line 1 to line 12.

The end-stop also heightens the suspense and tension of the poem, especially as it's not clear till the end what's actually happening here. They delay the reader's gratification in the same way the two lovers must wait for theirs.

Both of the breaks from end-stopping—the poem's two instances of enjambment—double down on this sense of excitement and anticipation. "Leap" at the end of line 3, for example, is a much more active word than those that the end the other lines in the stanza. And the enjambment in the second stanza creates space for the hurried lighting of the match, signaling that the moment of passion has arrived.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** " ;"
- **Line 2:** " ;"
- **Line 4:** " ;"
- **Line 5:** " ;"
- **Line 6:** " ."

- **Line 7:** " ;"
- **Line 8:** " ;"
- **Line 10:** " ;"
- **Line 11:** " ;"
- **Line 12:** " !"



VOCABULARY

Ringlets (Line 4) - A ringlet is a small and curly lock of hair. The word is being used figuratively here.

Gain (Line 5) - Not used in its usual sense, here "gain" means "arriving at."

Cove (Line 5) - A small bay.

Prow (Line 5) - The front of a boat—that is, the part which cuts through the water.

Quench (Line 6) - To satisfy a desire or need—as in, to "quench your thirst." Here it means simply that the boat slows to a stop in the sand (though the word also has secondary connotations of sexual desire).

Pane (Line 9) - A windowpane, i.e., the the glass part of a window.

Spurt (Line 10) - A sudden acceleration or rush.

Thro (Line 11) - An abbreviation of "through."



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Meeting at Night" has tightly-knit form. It is comprised of two [stanzas](#), both of which are [sestets](#) (made up of six lines). Each stanza is also numbered, "I" and "II," respectively.

The first thing to notice about the form, even before reading the poem, is the symmetry created on the page. It's clear that this is a poem of two halves. This is significant because what's described is essentially a story of two halves. Each lover, of course, represents one half of the meeting. The two sections, in their way, represent both the initial separateness of the lovers (because the stanzas are divided), but also the lovers' coming-together (because the stanzas are part of *one* poem).

The first stanza is a lonely one, dealing entirely with the first section of the speaker's journey. Accordingly, notice how this stanza also contains the only pronoun in the poem, the first-person singular "I."

The second stanza is markedly different in that it shows the actual meeting between the lovers. In fact, it's only in the poem's final lines that the reader understands where the speaker has been heading this whole time (that is, to a lover), and this delayed gratification reflects the agonizing wait that

the lovers themselves have to endure before seeing each other. The poem eventually ends with an exclamation mark, representing the lovers' passionate embrace.

METER

"Meeting at Night" is metrically unusual. Each line has four stresses, and most feet in the poem are [iambic](#) (an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern). Generally speaking, then, the poem is in iambic [tetrameter](#).

The only problem is that hardly any lines actually conform to strict iambic tetrameter! That metrical scheme is definitely *implied*, but the poem is full to the brim with metrical variations. It's not free verse (unmetered verse), but is far from regular. The closest the poem actually gets to true iambic tetrameter is line 4, and even that depends on "fiery" being pronounced with two syllables rather than three:

In fier- | y ring- | lets from | their sleep,

The varying metrical feet throughout the poem aren't the product of poetic sloppiness—they help create the sense of physical effort, of arduousness and dogged determination. The speaker is determined to reach an end-point—as is the poem.

Perhaps one of the most effective moments of metrical substitution occurs as the poem describes the lover lighting a match (lines 9 and 10). Here, the passion of the moment seems to overwhelm the lovers, and this is enacted by the near-total breakdown of metrical regularity:

A tap at the pane, the quick sharp scratch
And blue spurt of a lighted match,

These lines are almost at breaking point, with no real regular rhythm at all, such is the heightened emotion of the lovers' meeting.

RHYME SCHEME

The rhyme scheme in "Meeting at Night" is one of the poem's most interesting and powerful features. Put simply, the poem is the record of one person journeying to find a lover. It is, then, about the closure of distance—the speaker's traveling is an effort to reduce the gap between themselves and their beloved, and to restore physical and emotional intimacy (closeness).

Browning uses the rhyme scheme to depict this passage from remoteness to reunion, and deploys the same scheme in each stanza:

ABCCBA

The words are rhymed in pairs (another symbol of the union between lovers, in which two halves become one whole). These pairs start off at a distance from each other (note how far apart the A rhymes are), and draw closer together as each stanza progresses (the C rhymes are right next to each other). In both

stanzas, the rhyme pairs eventually meet in the middle: leap/sleep and scratch/match. The rhyme scheme, then, suggests the act of meeting itself.



SPEAKER

The speaker in "Meeting at Night" is non-specified—given no name, age, nor gender. It is often taken to be Robert Browning himself, and the poem was indeed written during his courtship of his eventual wife Elizabeth Barrett. Barrett's dad wasn't a big fan of Browning, so the poem might be about their need to be hush-hush about their relationship. That said, it's not necessary to read the poem as being autobiographical. Though little is known about the speaker, this person must be very dedicated, and very in love, to go through such a long and taxing journey in the hopes of meeting up with their beloved.



SETTING

"Meeting at Night" begins on a beach at night and passes through three fields before arriving at a window, on the other side of which is the speaker's lover.

The first four lines are entirely descriptive, more concerned with establishing a sense of place than with telling the reader what's going on. What is clear, however, is that it's very dark out, and that the speaker is on a shoreline somewhere. The lack of people creates a sense of isolation and secrecy, while the yellow moon creates an epic, mythic quality that perhaps gestures at a kind of fate shared by the two lovers.

The setting changes dramatically in line 9—moving from the vast, imposing external landscaping to the lovers' hearts. It's a dramatic shift from awesome (in the more "fearsome" sense of the word) scenery to breathless intimacy. The poem ends at the meeting place itself.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Robert Browning was an English poet and remains one of the most widely-read of the Victorian era. The poem was published in *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* (1845), which formed part of a larger work called *Bells and Pomegranates*. Browning is probably best known for his dramatic monologues; also known as "persona poems," these poems tell a story from one character's viewpoint (at a distance from the author themselves). Browning's "[My Last Duchess](#)" is perhaps the quintessential example of a dramatic monologue.

The poem itself is remarkably sensual for the age in which it was written. Victorian poetry—as with Victorian society itself—was frequently conservative, both morally and socially.

"Meeting at Night" is on the edge of being sexually explicit, and there seems to be something transgressive about the love between the poem's two characters. Such a suggestion would be extremely unlikely in the poems of Browning's contemporary, Alfred Lord Tennyson, for example.

It's also worth noting that the poem was originally published with a companion piece, called "Parting at Morning" (which is linked to in the "Resources" section). In that poem, the speaker wakes up the following morning and sees a "path of gold" on the horizon. Sensing "the need of a world of men for me," the speaker leaves their lover. Browning made the decision a few years later to separate that poem from "Meeting at Night."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Meeting at Night" was written during the Victorian era (strictly speaking, this was the time of Queen Victoria's reign from 1837-1901). This era was a time of great social, scientific and cultural upheaval. Rapid technological advancement saw the spread of rail travel, canals, and roads. Effective sewage systems were put in place, just one of many changes that improved people's life prospects (though there was still plenty of poverty and hardship).

The scientific discoveries of people like Charles Darwin, the geologist Charles Lyell, and the paleontologist Richard Owen called into question people's religious beliefs, undermining the sense that humanity was at the center of a well-designed and benevolent universe. This shift in attitudes—especially in the way it was reflected in the literature of the time by writers like Thomas Hardy—is often described as Victorian Pessimism.

With the above in mind, there's little to tie "Meeting at Night" specifically to its era. In fact, it's part of one of the oldest traditions known to humanity: love poetry. To that end, this particular poem was written during Browning's courtship of his future wife, Elizabeth Barrett (who was an accomplished poet in her own right). Barrett's father was not especially taken with Browning, and perhaps this is hinted at by the hushed and secretive nature of the meeting described.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- "[Parting at Morning](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43772/parting-at-morning)" – The sister poem to "Meeting at Night." The two were originally sections of the same poem. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43772/parting-at-morning>)
- [Further Poems and Biographical Discussion](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-browning) – More poems by and essays about Browning from the Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-browning>)
- [A Literary Love Story](http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/ebb/ebbio1.html) – An essay about the relationship between Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett. (<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/ebb/ebbio1.html>)
- [Lovers' Correspondence](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/16182/16182-h/16182-h.htm) – The letters between Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett. In the first, Browning keenly praises Barrett's poetry. (<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/16182/16182-h/16182-h.htm>)
- [The Poem Out Loud](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/play/77046) – A reading of the poem courtesy of the Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/play/77046>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ROBERT BROWNING POEMS

- [My Last Duchess](#)
- [Porphyria's Lover](#)



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