The World Is Too Much With Us

POEM TEXT

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;—
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not. Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.

SUMMARY

The material world—that of the city, our jobs, our innumerable financial obligations—controls our lives to an unhealthy degree. We are always rushing from one thing to the next; we earn money one day just to spend it the next. The result of this is that we have destroyed a vital part of our humanity: we have lost the ability to connect with and find tranquility in nature. In exchange for material gain, we have given away our emotions and liveliness. This ocean that reflects the moonlight on its surface, and the peaceful, momentarily windless night, which is like flowers whose petals are folded up in the cold—these natural features still exist, but we just can't appreciate them. Our lives have nothing to do with the rhythms of the natural world. As a result, those rhythms have no emotional impact on us.

My God, I wish that I were raised in a culture that worshipped many gods, though that religion is now outdated. That way, standing on this pleasant patch of grass, I might be calmed and heartened by the image of the ocean before me. I might see the Greek god Proteus taking shape before my very eyes, or hear another Greek god, Triton, blow his legendary, spiral-grooved conch shell.

THEMES

NATURE, MATERIALISM, AND LOSS

In "The World Is Too Much With Us," the speaker describes humankind's relationship with the natural world in terms of loss. That relationship once flourished, but now, due to the impacts of industrialization on everyday life, humankind has lost the ability to appreciate, celebrate, and be soothed by nature. To emphasize this central loss, the poem describes it from three angles: economic, spiritual, and cultural. Notably, the poem does not suggest a way to *regain* what is lost. Rather, its tone is desperate, arguing that humankind's original relationship with nature can never be revived.

The poem first presents loss in the economic sense, implicitly blaming urban life for the change in people's relationship with nature. Because the urban world has "too much" control over our lives, we are always "late and soon" or "Getting and spending." Modern humans are always losing time or money. As working people in an increasingly urban area, their lives are structured by a never ending series of appointments and transactions.

This lifestyle comes at a price: it destroys our power to identify with nature, or to appreciate the world around us. By focusing their "powers" on material objects, people grow unaware of their wider, and arguably more important, surroundings. The result is that nothing in nature—or elsewhere—is "ours." This is a world where everything—be it a house, stocks in a company, or a loaf of bread—can be won or lost in an instant. By describing nature as something that can be owned or possessed, the speaker may be implying that modern human beings have lost the ability to think of relationships and emotions in anything but economic terms.

The poem next dwells on spiritual loss, though without forgetting that loss's economic roots. "We have given our hearts away," the speaker says. Though it uses economic language—people give something away in exchange for something else—this line adds another perspective to the depiction of loss. The price of material gain and industrial progress is the human heart itself, a symbol of life and emotion. In exchange, people receive a "boon"—that is, they gain something. Yet what they gain is "sordid"—it is dirty and immoral. In exchange for industrial progress, people have reduced themselves to an almost less-than-human state. The speaker suggests that this loss of humanity outweighs the material gain. As a result "we are out of tune" and nature "moves us not." People have fallen from an ideal, natural state into one of disrepair. Having given away their ability to access

deep, enduring emotions, they are numb to the beauty of the natural world, spiritually unmoved by it.

In its final lines the poem describes a cultural loss, and its tone of resignation suggests the loss is permanent. The speaker invokes Greek paganism, introducing a version of society in which nature played a larger role in human life. But the pagan tradition is "a creed outworn"—it's a relic, and no longer useful. Once the speaker acknowledges the uselessness of past traditions, his or her wishes come across as more fanciful than serious. "I'd rather be a Pagan" and "So might I" do not represent what the speaker believes is possible, but rather what he or she *wishes* were still possible.

As a member of modern society, the speaker cannot access nature in a way to make him- or herself "less forlorn." This doesn't mean that nature has been destroyed; the "pleasant lea" still exists, it just doesn't soothe the speaker. At this moment of emotional despair, the best he or she can do is imagine a past that, in its fullest form, is lost and inaccessible.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Lines 1-2
- Lines 3-4
- Lines 5-14
- Lines 8-9
- Lines 9-10

THE INDIVIDUAL VS. SOCIETY

The poem explores how modernity has eroded not just people's connection to nature, but also people's sense of individual identity and agency. The poem subtly suggests that modern city life has lead to a sort of uniformity of experience, and that individuals are powerless to resist society's homogenizing effects.

The poem's first eight lines notably make use of the collective pronoun "we" as they reveal how, as society grows, the individual fades. In industrial society, "we lay waste our powers." A power, skill, or ability is something that might distinguish an individual, but in an industrial society focused on material gain, those distinguishing characteristics disappear. As a result, everyone meets the *same* fate: "Little we see in Nature that is ours." The speaker suggests that the natural world used to function as a sort of mirror in which humans could learn about themselves—a tranquil counterbalance to the chaotic city, and which encouraged self-reflection. As humans grow apart from nature, the poem suggests, they lose that space for self-reflection.

What's more, the speaker insists that "We have given our hearts away." Again, the speaker describes an abstract, collective act, this time of every person giving away their heart—everything they personally care for—in the name of supposed progress. This reveals a sense of individual suffering and loss beneath sweeping societal change.

With the pronoun "we" in the poem's first half, the speaker thus describes how industrial life has isolated people in general from nature and partially erased their unique identities. With the switch to "I" in the second half, the speaker attempts to respond to those changes—and in doing so, provides an example of a person living within that industrialized society.

Yet this first-person speaker offers no solution to the problem presented in the first lines. Instead, he or she suggests that the individual is essentially helpless in the face of broad societal change through the allusions to the mythical Greek gods Proteus and Triton. In a context that showed more faith in the Greek tradition, these gods might actually represent the *power of* the individual. Proteus, with his ability to constantly change form, could stand for individual versatility. Triton, with his ability to lift waves by blowing his conch, might represent human strength. But having acknowledged the uselessness of the Greek tradition, the speaker regards these powers as pure fantasy. Thinking about them while "standing on this pleasant lea" doesn't constitute an act of individual imaginative defiance, but of pointless idleness.

What Proteus and Triton *do* represent is the individualism inherent to a society that worshipped many gods, each with unique identities and means of worship. These ancient mythical figures contrast with the Christian God—a single entity, the worship of whom homogenizes religious activity in much the same way that industrialization and the thirst for material gain homogenize life within a big, industrialized city.

The perspective of the final lines, which looks out upon a limitless ocean horizon, might suggest the possibility of a fresh, more hopeful set of relationships between the individual, society, and nature. But if that's the case, then it's no more than that—a suggestion. Regardless of how the speaker goes on to change his or her perspective, the poem's final tone is one of dejection.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Line 3
- Line 4
- Lines 8-9
- Line 9
- Lines 9-10
- Line 11
- Lines 11-12
- Line 12
- Lines 13-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;—

The first two lines introduce the poem's problem, characters, and central confusion—namely, that the world contains the city and nature, but doesn't seem to actually have room for both.

As an Italian sonnet, the poem's form dictates that it begin with a problem, or "proposition," and it does so pretty clearly in its opening statement: "The world is too much with us." (This is also used as its title, though it should be noted that the poem was first published without a title at all). This problem, however, doesn't have an obvious meaning when considered on its own.

First of all, "world" could refer to the natural world, some world in the imagination, a world created by human beings, or Earth as a whole. "Too much" also garners multiple readings. Is the world just simply "too much," unbearable and overfull with this many people? Or are those people carrying around the burdens of the world too often, too much of the time?

The ambiguity is a deliberate effort by the poem to blur the line between nature and civilization. This world, and its ambiguities, are too much with *us*, meaning humans, the ones who must suffer the effects of society's growth and puzzle over its consequences. Even though the poem speaks for a collective "we," and continues to do so for the rest of the octave, the end of line 1 and all of line 2 present a very individual perspective (though it is collective in the sense that it's something nearly all individuals experience). The poem sums up human activity in this manmade world efficiently: humans are always late, soon, getting, and spending. Though abstract, these words have the power to recall vivid memories of waiting in lines, rushing to appointments, earning money for hard work and almost immediately giving it away. These words serve a metonymic function, then, as they represent all forms of economic activity by association.

The content of these lines is reflected in their meter and punctuation. The poem is written in iambic pentameter (five stressed and five unstressed syllables in an alternating pattern), though there is a fair amount of variation:

The world | is too | much with | us; late | and soon,
Getting | and spend- | ing, we | lay waste | our
powers;—

Note how the arguable stress on "much" leads to two stresses in a row; line 1 has *too many* stressed syllables in fact (six rather than five), sonically reflecting this "muchness." Line 2 is even more irregular, following a "DUM da da DUM da da" rhythm up top that seems to reflect a sense the tedium or monotony of "getting and spending," only to be abruptly stopped short by the double stress of "lay waste." The sudden spondee here (a foot consisting of two stressed syllables in a row) cuts this waltzing list short, a sharp reminder of the havoc such "getting and spending" is wreaking on people's lives.

The caesuras and end-stops in these lines heighten the frantic tone. A semicolon abruptly ends the opening statement, and at the end of line two, the clunky combination of a semicolon with an em-dash reflects the hindrances that city life imposes on humans. It might, by drawing attention to the punctuation, a tool invented by humans to better convey language, highlight the artificial nature of living in a city.

With its final clause, "we lay waste our powers," line 2 hints at one of the poem's central questions. Later on, the speaker will implicitly wonder whether there's any chance humans can regain their "powers" and reconnect with nature. "Lay waste" describes the utter destruction of those powers. So, before the poem has fully expressed the problem, it offers an opinion about whether it can be solved.

LINE 3

Little we see in Nature that is ours;

Having articulated the problem in line 1 and defined it in line 2, the poem uses line 3 to describe one of this problem's consequences. The line's meter and punctuation give readers information about the speaker.

There is a cause-and-effect relationship between lines 2 and 3. First, says the poem, we (human beings) destroy our powers. As a result—the thing that directly follows the thrust of the semicolon and em-dash—"Little we see in Nature that is ours." This means that there's hardly anything in the natural world with which we can identify. Having wasted our powers—our attention, our emotions—on material gain, we see nothing worth celebrating in nature. In the line, "Nature" is capitalized, giving it a stately, untouchable air. The line's meter and punctuation deepen nature's remove.

Little we see in Nature that is ours;

First of all, the line is framed by hard end-stops, beginning after a semicolon and ending with another. It stands as its own unit, something the powers from the previous line cannot influence or grasp. The line begins with the stress of a trochee (little), which, as in the previous line, gives the language an impatient quality. Furthermore, the sharp /t/ sounds in "Little" and "Nature" sound as if they could be coming through gritted teeth. The speaker is not just upset, but probably a little bit angry too.

One source of this anger could be that the speaker seems unable to rise above his or her own criticisms. By describing nature as something that could be "ours," the speaker thinks of it possessively. But this economic way of thinking, which implies ownership, is what the speaker has identified as the source of

society's disconnect with nature. Here, the speaker implicitly acknowledges that he or she is no exception to the effects of modern society—that no one is.

This may be what the speaker is getting at with the word "Little," which implies that, actually, some of nature *is* ours. It could refer to fields modified to grow food, or waterways, like the Thames River in London, spanned by bridges and polluted by factories. It might also suggest, however, that small patches of pure nature remain. They are not "ours" in the sense that implies ownership, but they may be in that which implies a communal responsibility to appreciate and preserve.

LINE 4

We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!

The language of line 4 reminds the reader that individuals suffer for broad societal gains. Modern human beings, says the speaker, are not merely *distracted*; they are *reduced*, incomplete. They have "given [their] hearts away."

The heart, a symbol of human life and emotion, might be seen as the source of the "powers" that are being destroyed. What's more, humans haven't just temporarily loaned out their emotional life; they "have given" it away for good. The transaction, in the past tense, is complete. The language signals that the speaker is still stuck in the ways of selfish, economic thinking. The sale of the heart is a transaction like any other, an act of "spending." The difference is that it occurred on a massive scale—*everyone* has given their heart away. What for? Instead of specifying, the poem presents a contradictory concept (an oxymoron, even).

That concept, of a "sordid boon," comes after a caesura in the form on a comma, which adds a slight breath or pause before the phrase, emphasizing its importance. A "boon" means a benefit, but "sordid" means something like dirty, disgusting, or shameful. How can a boon, something beneficial and presumably good, be sordid, i.e., immoral and bad? The "sordid boon" is what humans have given away their hearts for. It refers to society's material gains, such as increased earning, better access to goods and services, and more social opportunities. These gains are sordid because they require a destruction of nature and people's connection with it. Here, the speaker seems to be saying, "This is not worth it."

In using "boon," however, the speaker acknowledges that this deal with the devil has resulted in comfort, things that would be hard to abandon after growing accustomed to them. The speaker's refusal to unequivocally condemn societal growth introduces a reluctant attitude that will color the rest of the poem.

LINES 5-7

This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;

Lines 5 through 7 appear like an attempt to resist society's destructive effects. They also give more information about the poem's setting.

Note how line 5 opens with "This Sea." Rather than use the article "the," which could refer to the sea in general, the speaker uses the more immediate "this." The sea is right in front of the speaker. This tells the reader that even though the poem begins with references to city life, it is being composed at a distance from the city. From the mention of the moon, the reader also knows that this is all happening at night.

The speaker conveys all this in one line. Despite what he or she has been saying, it seems like the speaker has maintained enough of a connection with nature to describe it intimately: "This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon." Bosom, here, refers to a woman's chest, and this instance of personification suggests that the speaker *does* see something "in Nature that is ours." That is, he or she is able to identify and appreciate the resemblance between human beings and nature.

All three lines—5, 6, and 7—are the closest the poem comes so far to producing pure iambic pentameter. For example, line 6:

The winds that will be howling at all hours,

The only potential break occurs in "at," which arguably should not be stressed, depending on how you read the line; this is only a minor quibble. This slide back into a steadier, almost unpunctuated flow reflects the speaker's experience. After having gotten his or her heart racing with thoughts of the city, the speaker returns to a calmer, more measured state.

In this state, the speaker is able to exercise a bit more control. As already mentioned, the speaker personifies the ocean's surface, an act of creativity. In line 6, the speaker imagines a future state when he or she says that the winds "will be howling." True, it's not particularly impressive to predict that the winds will eventually pick up, but it does indicate a certain familiarity with nature. From experience, the speaker knows that this calm is temporary.

In line 7, the speaker shows off a sort of imaginative "power" with a simile, "like sleeping flowers." The unexpected connection between howling winds and sleeping flowers draws attention to what they have in common: both are "up-gathered." Note that this connection is reinforced by the assonance of these lines (the /ow/ sound in "howling," "hours," and "flowers"). Like flowers whose petals are upturned at night, the howling winds are taking a temporary break, which is another way of saying that climatic conditions are such that the winds, for the moment, don't exist. The up-gathered flower is a symbol of potential. Surely, in the morning, it will unfold. But the speaker doesn't follow through with the image; the flower (and the winds) only remain up-gathered.

By halting their formation in his or her mind, the speaker seems

to be signaling that they are nothing more than figments of the imagination. They may be actual features of the spot where the speaker is standing, but the influence of the city is so powerful that even its memory threatens to replace, or change the appearance of, physical reality. The semicolons that end-stop lines 5 and 6 place these natural images into a list, a form that suggests it could continue. But the speaker, constrained by the form of the poem, decides to end the nature description there and get to the point.

LINES 8-9

For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not.

Lines 8 and 9 reveal the purpose of lines 5 through 7: that is, to describe what modern humans can no longer grasp. Their rhythm, broken by many caesuras, contrasts with the smooth, unbroken lines above and emphasizes the speaker's dejected emotional state. "For this" refers to the description of the moonlit ocean; "everything" refers to all the descriptions of nature that could have followed that first one, which the speaker chooses to omit in the interest of time and clarity.

As an Italian sonnet, the poem has a limited number of lines and is supposed to present a clear problem in its first eight. The poem stays true to the Italian sonnet form. It caps off the eighth line with a clear expression of the "problem" of the poem: "we are out of tune." It slightly subverts that form by once more specifying the problem at the beginning of line 9, thus delaying the sestet (final six lines). (This non-conformity is inconsequential, however, exactly what you might expect out of someone governed by inescapable societal norms.)

When the speaker says "we are out of tune," he or she means that people no longer base their activity around nature. Artificial light, for example, allows people to get things done without the sun in the sky. In a sense, these material gains provide escape from the confines of the natural world, but in the speaker's opinion that road only leads to another trap: life in the city.

Being out of tune points to a spiritual loss as well. In an earlier time—for example, a few thousand years ago, before pagan religions had been replaced across large swaths of the globe by Christianity—people may have drawn great meaning from the changing of the tides and phases of the moon, or from the behavior of delicate flowers. Modern life, says the speaker, has made it impossible—or at least economically pointless—to engage with nature on a spiritual level.

The meter and punctuation in line 8 reflect the meaning of "out of tune."

For this, | for ev- | erything, | we are | out of | tune;

There is an extra syllable here, giving the line 11 syllables instead of the 10 standard to pentameter. Additionally, the line contains what is arguably a pyrrhic (a foot of two unstressed syllables) in its fourth foot ("we are") followed by a definite trochee in its fifth (out of). In this sense, the line itself is "out of tune" with iambic pentameter. The caesura, which separates "for everything" from the rest of the line, also breaks the line's rhythm. By emphasizing "everything," it points to the infinite depth of the problem the speaker describes, and gives the poem a mournful tone.

As already mentioned, the poem breaks form by extending the end of the proposition beyond the end of the octave (the first eight lines of the sonnet). "It moves us not" concludes the expression of the poem's problem. "It," which refers to everything in nature, no longer has the emotional effect on people that it once had. The word "us"—the poem's final use of a collective pronoun—asks the reader to wonder whom exactly the speaker refers to. Lines 1 through 4 make it pretty clear that the speaker is part of the "we" and unable to escape its habits of thought and behavior. Lines 5 through 7, however, whose descriptions are evidence of a deep attachment to nature, seem to separate the speaker from the crowd. Maybe because this question occurs to the speaker as well, he or she takes the opportunity to launch into the first person, and maintains it for the rest of the poem.

LINES 9-10

Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;

Lines 9 and 10 initiate the Italian sonnet's turn with a sudden apostrophe. This apostrophe sets a tone that anticipates the speaker's attitude going forward.

That apostrophe—"Great God!"—with its monosyllables, relatively hard consonants (/t/ and /d/), and emphatic alliteration, interrupts the octave's stream of thought and marks the change between the *collective* (or group) perspective, which uses first-person plural pronouns (we, us, our), and the *individual* perspective, which uses first-person singular pronouns (I, me, my). This apostrophe comments on the octave by expressing the speaker's horror, or frustration, or in any case some sort of emotion over the state of humankind's relationship with nature. At the same time, the apostrophe could be a comment on, or introduction to, the sestet (the final six lines of the sonnet form).

Also, by invoking the singular Abrahamic God—the God of monotheistic religions, or religions that worship a *single* deity, i.e. Christianity, Judaism, and Islam—the speaker emphasizes the type of individualistic urban lifestyle described in the octave: one of hard, faithful work that, in a sense, is exchanged for a spot in heaven.

Immediately after doing so, however, the speaker makes another turn (nobody ever said that the sestet could only have one), this time toward a completely different religious tradition that emphasized a much stronger connection to nature. The

speaker would "rather be / a Pagan suckled in a creed outworn." This sounds an awful lot like the speaker is telling God that he or she would like to renounce Christianity in favor of a tradition that would now be considered heretical (that is, that would completely go against the church). This is a desperate thing to do. Maybe the speaker, seeing nature as the one true source of spiritual life, has given up on pretending he or she has any allegiance to any other supposed higher power. Or maybe the speaker is so fed up with modern society that he or she welcomes any punishment that infidelity might deserve.

The words, however, suggest a more ironic tone. The speaker either doesn't mean what he or she says, or wishes that he or she didn't. By describing the longed-for tradition as "outworn," the speaker admits to the uselessness of Greek paganism. The wish, he or she seems to be saying, is a pipe dream. It sounds nice, but it impossible to attain. In this reading, the apostrophe sounds more like shock. The speaker seems to be asking him- or herself, "Are you being serious?" The word "suckled" also demeans the speaker. Suckled, which refers to being nurtured on breast milk, presents the speaker as a powerless infant.

It also suggests that our beliefs and behavior come from the culture we were raised in. So, even as he or she indulges for a moment in imagining life among the pagans, the speaker acknowledges that he or she too is the product of a culture and society whose influence is impossible to fully escape.

LINES 11-12

So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;

Lines 11 and 12 include language that, taken out of context, might describe a perfectly pleasant scene in nature: the speaker stands on a grassy field looking out at a moonlit sea. The poem's pessimistic context, however, modifies the meaning of the words, much in the way that memories of the city plague the speaker's thoughts.

At first, the idea of a "pleasant lea" (essentially, a meadow or field) might inspire calmness in the observer. Yet the "pleasant" grassy vantage point has, at best, a neutral effect. Were the speaker a "Pagan" living in ancient Greece, this view might make the speaker "less forlorn" (that is, happier). Of course, that isn't the case. "So might I," says the speaker, implying that what he or she wishes for is impossible, because he or she was not, and could not have been, "suckled in a creed outworn." In other words, the speaker won't see anything that'll make him or her feel better because the speaker can't escape the modern world in which he or she lives.

Line 12, however, in its unbroken iambic pentameter, might suggest an emotional shift, even the speaker isn't willing to admit it.

Have glimp- | ses that | would make | me less |
forlorn;

As in lines 5, 6, and 7, the return to natural imagery relaxes the meter, which goes from being heavily punctuated to being totally iambic and unencumbered (there are no caesuras or metrical substitutions here). Even as the speaker says that nothing can make him or her "less forlorn," the flow of the line seems to suggest that he or she is at least breathing a little more easily while standing in the grass and looking out at water.

For reasons other than its immediate meaning, the choice of "forlorn" also suggests a stirring hopefulness in the speaker. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, one of Wordsworth's best friends and collaborators, wrote a long poem called "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," which describes the fate of a rather unlucky ship captain after he shoots down an albatross, more or less for sport. Many years later, the captain tells his tale to a young man at a wedding, and that man, after hearing the story, goes back home feeling "forlorn"—and because of it, both "sadder" and "wiser." By using this keyword from a poem that was first published alongside his own work, Wordsworth identifies himself as part of a literary tradition, one that quite seriously hoped to revise the English language.

As with the poem's earlier hints of hopefulness, like line 3, and lines 5 through 7, the speaker doesn't further develop this one. Given that, another interpretation might hold that the return to iambic pentameter, and the allusion to the literary tradition of which Wordsworth was a part, are merely automatically generated replicas of what has already been said.

LINES 13-14

Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.

Lines 13 and 14 continue to describe what the speaker might spot were he or she not stuck in the modern world. Proteus and Triton refer to mythical Greek gods of the sea, part of that "Pagan" "creed" the speaker mentions in line 10. These gods contrast with the singular "God" the speaker shouts out to in line 9. Both of these gods are also connected with nature, suggesting a closer link between those ancient Pagans and the natural world than exists in the speaker's day. The fact that the speaker can't see them thus reflects the poem's broader argument that human beings have grown too distant from nature.

Note also how these gods have been stripped of their power. They belong to an "outworn" tradition, which means that the religion built upon worshipping them is dead and gone. In the mind of the speaker, they exist only as shadows of themselves. The speaker isn't necessarily saying that, had he or she been raised in the Greek pagan tradition, he or she would *literally* see Proteus and Triton in the flesh, but that he or she would attribute the ocean's sounds and movements to them. Even thousands of years ago, to "see" Proteus or Triton required imagination. The speaker, whose own powers have been laid waste, can hardly imagine what it would have been like to be a

Greek Pagan. The best he or she can do is recall the gods' names.

These final lines also maintain the iambic pentameter that line 12 restored (note that there's a slight elision here, as "Proteus" scans as two syllables than three: "Pro-teus" rather than "Pro-te-us"):

> Have sight | of Pro- | teus ris- | ing from | the sea;
> Or hear | old Tri- | ton blow | his wreath- | èd horn.

In this way, the lines are traditional; they don't break any rules. In a poem riddled with broken rules, the return to a steady-state might come as a relief. But given the discussion of "outworn" traditions and the invocation of hollow deities, the meter appears stilted, even defeated. The speaker no longer innovates, instead relying on predetermined forms (i.e., iambic pentameter). In fact, the speaker *forces* the final line into iambic pentameter. Without the accent over the /e/, "wreathèd" would have just one syllable.

SYMBOLS

FLOWERS

In line 7, the speaker compares the howling winds, for the moment inactive, to "sleeping flowers." The main word that connects the two is "up-gathered." Like a flower at night, whose petals are folded up, the winds are gathered away in some out-of-reach place and taking a rest. The "up-gathered" and "sleeping flowers" appear only in this one line, but the flower symbol modifies other parts of the poem. As something that is delicate, beautiful, and momentarily closed-up, the sleeping flower symbolizes humankind's relationship with nature.

The symbol's most striking aspect is its state of being closed. Unlike humans, who are "out of tune" with nature, the flower will follow natural processes—when the sun rises, it will presumably unfold. Yet the poem suggests that people's relationship with nature will not so easily regain its color and vitality. Given the poem's pessimism, the reader might consider the fate of the up-gathered flower as uncertain. Maybe, instead of unfolding in the morning, it will wither and die. This fate seems to depend on humankind's ability to reimagine its relationship with nature. The poem does not give a definitive word on where this relationship is headed—on whether the "flower" will flourish or die—but suggests with its desperate tone that what is lost cannot be regained.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;"

POETIC DEVICES

CAESURA

The poem uses caesura in six lines to reflect both its subject matter and the speaker's state of mind. These caesuras fall into two categories: hard and soft. Those aren't technical terms. In this poem, we're using hard basically means an abrupt stop caused by a period, semicolon, or exclamation mark. We're using soft to mean a stop caused by a comma.

In line 1, a semicolon separates the opening statement from an elaboration on that statement. The opening statement expresses a problem: that human beings spend too much time in the manmade, industrial world. Immediately after this, the speaker gives examples of the effect that this problem has on the average city dweller: "late and soon, / Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers." Arguably, however, the caesura itself is the first example of people's unhealthy attachment to the fast-paced material world. Consumed by a fast-pace lifestyle, the speaker rushes headlong into "late and soon."

Line 9 contains the other instance (actually, two instances) of a "hard" caesura. Nestled between a period and exclamation mark is the apostrophe, "Great God!," which marks the border between the octave (the sonnet's first eight lines) and the sestet (the sonnet's final six lines). As in line 1, this disjointed line reflects the speaker's scattered mindset. The period after "Moves us not" also emphasizes the finality of that statement.

In lines 2, 4, 8, and 11, commas break the flow of words. Less a reflection of the feelings of the speaker, these caesuras give the poem a dramatic effect. In line 8, for example, commas separate out "for everything" in order to linger on the cost humankind's pursuit of material gain. In line 11, the caesura accommodates a specification of the speaker's location, a "pleasant lea."

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** ";"
- **Line 2:** ","
- **Line 4:** ","
- **Line 8:** "," ","
- **Line 9:** "." "!"
- **Line 11:** ","

END-STOPPED LINE

All but one line in the poem are end-stopped. Overall, this adds to the speaker's sense of despair and hopelessness; the speaker is assured in his pronouncement that industry has distanced humanity from the natural world for good. The many end-stops create the sense that each line is a definitive statement, and that the speaker will entertain no arguments to the contrary.

Many of these end-stops are notably semi-colons, which further makes the poem seem like an ever-building list of

grievances. Because a semi-colon is often used to link related ideas, its use here points to the ways all of these lines build upon one another and are thematically connected, even if they contain within them distinct points; they all spring from the speaker's consideration of humanity's disconnect from nature.

Two of the lines are end-stopped with a comma—1 and 6. The second two appear when the speaker is describing nature. Perhaps the comma, more a gentle offset than a halt, reflects the speaker's feeling of relative ease while describing nature as opposed to the city, or the problems it creates. Line 11 is arguably best construed as enjambed, because the full gist of the line overflows onto line 12; the ambiguity perhaps reflects an attempt at blurring the boundaries between humanity and nature. Standing in this grassy field, the speaker feels closer to nature than ever—but not close enough to remove the boundary altogether.

Finally, a discussion of end-stopped lines in this poem can't ignore the one in line 2. The semicolon and em-dash combination achieves the effect of both punctuation marks. It lands the preceding clause (that landing can be smooth or jouncy; here it's somewhere in between) and thrusts into the next line. With this punctuation combo, line 2 becomes the longest visually in the poem. Humans' ability to "lay waste" to the world extends itself farther than is probably appropriate.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "soon,"
- **Line 2:** "powers;—"
- **Line 3:** "ours;"
- **Line 4:** "boon!"
- **Line 5:** "moon;"
- **Line 6:** "hours,"
- **Line 7:** "flowers;"
- **Line 8:** "tune;"
- **Line 10:** "outworn;"
- **Line 12:** "forlorn;"
- **Line 13:** "sea;"
- **Line 14:** "horn."

METONYMY

In lines 1 and 2, the poem uses subtle metonymy to expand the image of the industrial city. In doing so, it confirms that the urban environment referred to in the first line deserves the broad title of "world."

In six quick words—"late and soon, / Getting and spending"—the poem evokes the pace and single-mindedly economic focus of city life. "Late and soon" might generate a load of first impressions in the mind of the reader: doctor appointments, DMV lines, job interviews—it stands for every single one of them. More specifically, this word pair represents the spiritual state of the city dweller; either late or soon, he or she is never on time, never resting or at peace.

"Getting and spending," on the other hand, represents the physical state of the city dweller. Whether working, eating, taking care of loved ones, or whatever, the city dweller is always either gaining or losing something, and often doing both at the same time. Together, these words stand in for the modern city dweller in all of his or her versions. Together, those versions form the city itself. And when that city is viewed as a system governed by the concepts of time and money, it makes perfect sense to call it a world of its own.

Where Metonymy appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "late and soon, / Getting and spending,"

PERSONIFICATION

In line 5, and to a lesser degree in lines 6 and 7, the poem uses personification to depict the speaker's seaside vantage point. Because of something the speaker says earlier, the personification adds a contradictory note to the poem.

In line 5, the ocean is described as a woman who "bares her bosom to the moon." In observing this intimate, naked act, the speaker suggests that he or she sees the ocean's true nature. In recognizing in the ocean human features, the speaker sees him- or herself reflected, to a degree, along with the moonlight. This contradicts line 3—"Little we see in Nature that is ours"—unless the bosom-bearing ocean is part of the "Little" we do see. Whatever the case, the contradiction suggests that even if society as a whole has lost its connection with nature, the individual may still hang on by a few threads.

In lines 6 and 7, the winds and the flowers are personified, but only slightly. Howl is something that a dog does; winds don't literally howl, though the noise they make as they flow over objects may make it sound like they do. Likewise, flowers do not sleep in the same way that humans do, though they do adjust their activity according to the sunlight. It would be more accurate to say they take rests between photosynthesizing. Regardless of the degree of personification, however, the winds and the flowers join the ocean as characters in the poem. As beings that can experience emotion, they augment the emotional toll the speaker feels in losing his or her connection with nature.

It should also be noted that Proteus and Triton, in lines 13 and 14, personify nature as well in that they are gods of the sea. They point to a time in which personification of nature didn't just refer to an image in the viewer's head, but to an agreed-upon fact of religious significance (many ancient gods were essentially personifications of the natural world). Without humans' ability to personify nature, they would not have imagined that the waves were caused when Triton, the son of Poseidon, blew his conch shell, or that in the traces of foam on the sand a prophetic shape-shifter, Proteus, might be glimpsed.

In the poem's final lines, the personification pays tribute to an imaginative power that the speaker doubts can be regained.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "This Sea that ," "bares her bosom"
- **Line 6:** "The winds that ," "will be howling"
- **Line 7:** "sleeping flowers"
- **Line 13:** "Proteus rising from the sea"
- **Line 14:** "old Triton blow his wreathèd horn"

SIMILE

The poem uses a simile to present one of its most meaningful images. Overlooking the ocean at night, the speaker remarks that though it's calm now, the winds will soon pick up and begin "howling at all hours." In what sense are the winds inactive for the moment? The speaker uses the simile to explain. They "are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers."

As in any simile, this one highlights common features between the two things being compared (howling winds and sleeping flowers). That feature is the adjective "up-gathered." In the same way that a flower might close up its petals at night, says the speaker, the winds are taking a rest. The simile also works both ways—that is, it modifies the reader's understanding of both the winds and the flowers. By comparing the winds with flowers—which are typically thought of as lovely but fragile—those winds might come across as more delicate, as a force within a natural system that depends on the proper combination of heat, cold, and topography.

In the other direction, winds, which might typically be thought of as powerful or strong, also modify the flowers. Perhaps in their beauty, the flowers are powerful; like the daffodils in Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," they leave a permanent image, full of emotion, in the speaker's memory.

Up-gathered also means that both the winds and flowers are full of potential, which reflects some of the speaker's implicit questioning. Does humankind have a strong enough imagination to revive its connection with nature? If so, this ability is for the moment "up-gathered." Sleeping implies eventually waking up, but the poem's broader pessimism suggests another possible future for the flower: death. The flower folds up its petals in order to protect itself from the cold night. Maybe that night, like the current state of humanity, will last longer than the flower can bear.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "up-gathered now like sleeping flowers"

METAPHOR

In line 8, and continuing a bit into line 9, the poem uses a metaphor to conclude its portrait of a society that is out of touch with nature. After describing the sort of natural scene that should excite and inspire people, the speaker says, "For this, for everything, we are out of tune; / It moves us not." This metaphor, which transforms humans into musical instruments or objects, adds a new dimension to the poem's portrait of the modern human. Whereas previously in the poem people act upon each other, always "Getting and spending," here they are acted upon, or at least should be. When "in tune," humans are "move[d]" by the forces of nature.

In the lines before the metaphor, the speaker mentions the ocean, the moon, the winds, and the flowers. Each of these features changes according to the movements of the earth and the moon. In this sense, they are "in tune" with the sun. By describing humans as out of tune, the speaker suggests that they used to be in tune and aligned with these natural features. The word "tune" also suggests music. Nature, the musical artist, can't get a satisfactory response out of humans, its instrument.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-9:** "we are out of tune; / It moves us not."

APOSTROPHE

In line 9, an abrupt apostrophe initiates the transition from the poem's octave (or problem) to its turn (or resolution). This apostrophe is notable for its placement in the poem, in its particular line, and for its appearance at the start of a religious discussion.

Whereas the "turn" in other Italian sonnets might be relatively subtle, this apostrophe signals loud and clear that the poem is changing in some important way. One of those changes is the switch to the first-person singular perspective (that is, "I"). Another is the shift from description and complaint to wishful thinking. The apostrophe, with its monosyllables, hard consonants, and exclamation mark, is itself a change. Appearing smack dab in the middle of the line, it is impossible to ignore.

The apostrophe is an appeal to the Christian God. That's not extraordinary on its own, but in context it's slightly odd. Directly after this moment, the speaker expresses his or her wish to be "A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn." In other words, it sounds like the speaker is committing blasphemy, telling God that he or she would like to reject Christianity in favor of a pagan religion. Throughout the poem, the speaker is torn between seemingly opposing forces: nature and the city; the life of the individual and the life of society. Here, the apostrophe introduces the tension between contemporary and ancient faith.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "Great God!"

ANAPHORA

The poem uses anaphora with the repetition of "Have" in lines 12 and 13. These lines describe things the speaker would like to possess—namely, "glimpses" of things that would make the speaker feel better, such as the "sight" of the mythical god Proteus. Anaphora creates a sense of building rhythm and grandeur as the speaker lists these things that he or she wishes were within reach. That said, this is in part a poem about humankind's waning spiritual and creative powers; in that sense, the repeated "Have" perhaps subtly emphasizes the speaker's mindless repetition (i.e., the speaker is too drained and tired to use another word here).

"Have" also implies possession. In this way, it returns the poem to the language of acquisition and loss that it uses in the beginning ("Getting and spending," "ours," "given ... away"). The word reminds the reader that the speaker cannot escape from the economic mindset imposed by the city. Human beings' penchant for materialism is part of what got us into this mess, the poem argues, so the return to the idea of possession here implies how overwhelming the mindset of the modern world may be.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** "Have"
- **Line 13:** "Have"

ASSONANCE

There is a great deal of assonance in this poem, which is used to draw attention to important words and also to add to the poem's overall musicality. In some lines, the assonance emphasizes a certain rhythm, which in turn conveys a certain emotional state.

In line 1, for example, the words "too" and "soon" both contain a long /oo/ sound, which further echos the slightly different but similar /o/ sound in "world." There's even more assonance here, via the short /uh/ of "much" and "us." Importantly, "too much" identifies one of the poem's central problems: an overabundance of humans and their activity. The echo of these two words' sounds across the line reflects, on a sonic level, that same thematic idea; there is "too much" of these sounds. In other words, the sounds are overwhelming, much like the presence of the modern world can be.

A similar thing happens with the assonance of line 2, which is filled with the short /e/ of "Getting and spending," the long /a/ of "lay waste," and finally the /ow/ of "our powers" (another sound that will reappear quite often later in the poem). Perhaps the expert display of shared sound here is meant to highlight those powers—that is, it's the speaker showing off how smart and clever a person can be. It could also be read differently: as an overly artificial line, underscoring the unnaturalness of the modern world.

In lines 6 and 14, assonance combines with meter to give the lines musical emphasis. Line 6 repeats a short /i/ sounds in the words "winds," "will," and "howling." These words are also connected by consonance (/w/ sounds), and are further emphasized by the meter—"winds," "will," and "how-" are all stressed syllables. Furthermore, no punctuation intervenes to break the rhythm. The line, with all these tools of emphasis, flows with a strong, steady beat. Assonance is just one contributor to this overall effect, which adds to the strength of this moment's natural imagery.

The assonance in line 14 works similarly. The words "Or," "old," "Triton," "blow," and, arguably, "horn" all use the same or extremely similar /o/ sounds. This is also a line of pure iambic pentameter, and ends the poem on a moment that feels, like line 2, either clever in its use of sound or constructed and artificial, depending on how you want to read it. Either way, it ends the poem on an emphatic note.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "oo," "u," "u," "oo"
- **Line 2:** "e," "e," "ay," "a," "ou," "ow"
- **Line 3:** "e," "ee"
- **Line 4:** "oo"
- **Line 5:** "o," "o," "o," "oo"
- **Line 6:** "i," "i," "o," "i," "ou"
- **Line 7:** "o," "o"
- **Line 8:** "u"
- **Line 9:** "o"
- **Line 11:** "i," "I"
- **Line 13:** "i," "I"
- **Line 14:** "O," "o," "o," "o," "o"

ALLITERATION

Throughout the poem, the speaker uses alliteration to:

1. Emphasize keywords as they appear.
2. Remind the reader of those same words later on.

The most important alliteration probably occurs with the /w/ sounds, since they connect with the word "world." Many repeat this /w/ sound. The first line (and title) contains two: "The world is too much with us." Allowing for consonance, the second line contains three:"we lay waste our powers." In line 6: "winds will be howling." Those /w/ sounds keep appearing in various word,

creating further alliteration and consonance: flowers, hours (which subtly makes a /w/ sound even though the letter itself is not present), now, we, outworn, etc.

Typically, alliteration occurs in closely clustered words, but in the case of /w/ sounds, the alliteration stretches across the poem. These later /w/ words, though not really alliterative on their own, remind the reader of the earlier, clearer alliteration. There is an abundance of /w/ sounds in the first two lines, thanks in part to the speaker's repeated use of "we," all of which connect with the first /w/ word, "world." Perhaps this repeated /w/, then, reflects the pesky, inescapable presence of the world.

There are other alliterative sounds as well. In line 5, for instance, the alliteration between "bares" and "bosom" emphasizes a rhythm that the meter has already created (both words are stressed syllables). This line is the poem's first pure description. Everything leading up to it has been a complaint about life in the city. The long syllables of "bare" and "bosom," along with their /b/ sounds, give the line a powerful, confident sound that may reflect the speaker's relief at returning to an image from the natural world (though this relief may be short-lived).

Line 9 also uses alliteration, to emphasize the apostrophe "Great God!" Here, the alliteration joins caesura, exclamation, and hard monosyllables to draw energy toward the center of the line.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "w," "w"
- **Line 2:** "w," "w"
- **Line 3:** "w"
- **Line 4:** "W," "h," "h"
- **Line 5:** "b," "b"
- **Line 6:** "w," "w"
- **Line 7:** "A," "a"
- **Line 8:** "F," "f"
- **Line 9:** "G," "G"
- **Line 11:** "S," "s"
- **Line 13:** "s," "s"
- **Line 14:** "O," "o"

CONSONANCE

The poem uses consonance in much the same way it uses alliteration—that is, to draw attention to important words and then remind the reader of those same words later on.

By actually highlighting all of the consonance in the poem, you can visually see just how deeply musical this poem is, despite the speaker's assertion that we, as human beings, are "out of tune." Indeed, this consonance often makes the poem sound quite nice, despite its pessimism. Maybe this is what the speaker wants: to lull readers/listeners in with pretty sounds, only to then hit them with the poem's overarching despair. The poem's sonic beauty, in a way, makes its sadness all the more powerful.

At times consonance is directly tied to the content of a line as well. In line 11, for example, the soft /l/ and /s/ sounds are indeed quite "pleasant" to the ear, which adds to the brief hopefulness of this line. The same lulling sounds continue onto the next line with "glimpses" and "less forlorn." For a moment, the speaker tries to envision a world of the past, when people were not quite so distant from the natural world. And for a moment, this seems to give the speaker a sense of peace.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "w," "w"
- **Line 2:** "ng," "ng," "w," "w," "w"
- **Line 3:** "w," "n," "N"
- **Line 4:** "h," "v," "v," "h," "d," "d"
- **Line 5:** "Th," "s," "S," "th," "b," "s," "b," "m," "m"
- **Line 6:** "w," "w," "w"
- **Line 7:** "l," "l," "l"
- **Line 8:** "F," "f," "t," "t"
- **Line 9:** "t," "t," "G," "G," "d," "d"
- **Line 10:** "ck," "c"
- **Line 11:** "S," "s," "s," "l," "s," "l"
- **Line 12:** "l," "s," "s," "m," "m," "l," "ss," "r," "l," "r"
- **Line 13:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 14:** "h," "T," "t," "h," "h"

VOCABULARY

Lay waste (Line 2) - An archaic expression that means to destroy completely. For example, an army could lay waste a city. A child throwing a tantrum could lay waste his bedroom (though that's a more hyperbolic, tongue-in-cheek example). The poem takes full advantage of the verb's full meaning, as it describes a power being wasted. Thus, the word suggests that the power to appreciate nature is like a muscle: it is being destroyed because it is going to waste.

Sordid (Line 4) - An adjective that describes immoral actions and behavior. Its root is the Latin verb "sordere," which means "to be dirty." In the poem, "sordid boon" describes the exchange of nature for material gain. Though this exchange involves a boon, or a beneficial thing, it comes at the cost of something purer and more enduring.

Boon (Line 4) - A "boon" is something that is beneficial. It could be a holiday bonus or an extension on a paper, both of which help the recipient out. The word's use in the poem is notable because it is described as "sordid"—a good, helpful thing is also bad, immoral. By modifying "boon" with "sordid," the poem argues that while material gain may be helpful in some respects, it can be destructive in others.

Bosom (Line 5) - A woman's chest. In the poem, the bosom belongs to the personified "Sea," which exposes its naked surface to the sky and reflects the moonlight.

Up-gathered (Line 7) - An adjective that means "gathered up" or "collected." In the poem, the adjective modifies the howling winds, which are "up-gathered" in the sense that they are out of sight and momentarily inactive. The word also contributes to the image of the "sleeping flowers," which the winds are likened to in a simile. At night and in cooler temperatures, some flowers close, or gather up, their petals.

Pagan (Line 10) - A "pagan" is someone who doesn't practice one of the main world religions; the term was used by Christians to describe people who practiced religions that worshipped many gods. The poem first uses the term in its broad sense, but narrows it to focus on the Greeks, those who worshipped, among others, Zeus, Athena, and Dionysus. All of these gods represented aspects of the natural world. For example, Proteus represented the ungraspable quality of water, while Triton represented the movement and roar of ocean waves.

Suckled (Line 10) - "Suckled" means breast-fed. More broadly, it means nurtured, tended to, or raised. In the poem, the speaker imagines what it would be like to have been raised in a culture that was in close touch with nature. Having been "suckled" on the lessons of that upbringing, the speaker would count its worldview as a core part of his or her identity.

Creed outworn (Line 10) - "Creed" is a noun that refers to religious belief, and "outworn" means overused and outdated. "Creed outworn," therefore, refers to an old religious system that has no practical use in the present day. In the poem, the has-been religion is Greek paganism, which worshipped many gods, each of whom represented some specific aspect of the natural world.

Lea (Line 11) - "Lea" means an open, grassy space, and is a word found mostly in literary works, like this poem. Note how "lea" also appears within the word that comes before it in the poem, "pleasant."

Forlorn (Line 12) - Deeply and inconsolably sad and lonely. Its root is the Old English "forloren," which means "depraved." Thus, the word holds a moral connotation as well. In the context of the poem, it could emphasize the speaker's complicity, as a member of industrialized society, in creating the world that makes him or her so upset. A second definition of the word is desperate, which would emphasize the speaker's hopelessness.

Proteus and Triton (Line 13, Line 14) - Proteus and Triton are gods in the Greek pantheon. Greek myths describe Proteus as a prophetic sea-god who would utter some truth to the person who could capture him, which was extremely difficult given his ability to shape-shift. Triton was a son of the main ocean god, Poseidon (some myths say Proteus was also a son of Poseidon, his first). He looked like a merman (part man, part fish), carried a trident, and blew a conch shell that could either calm or disturb the waters.

Wreathèd (Line 14) - "Wreathed" means surrounded or encircled. In the poem, it describes Triton's horn, the conch shell that the god would blow to either calm the waters or raise the waves. Presumably, it refers to the spiral that wound down the shell, though one could also imagine the shell being wrapped in seaweed. With the accent—wreathèd—it means the same thing, but is pronounced with two syllables instead of one. With two syllables, it fits within the poem's iambic pentameter.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The world is too much with us" is an Italian sonnet, also known as a Petrarchan sonnet (named after Franceso Petrarca, the Italian Renaissance poet who popularized the form). These sonnets include an octave (two quatrains, or four-line stanzas) and a sestet (two tercets, or three-line stanzas). In this and all of Wordsworth's sonnets, each unit is mashed together into a single 14-line stanza.

In the traditional Italian sonnet, the octave presents a problem, and the sestet responds to that problem. The problem is known as the "proposition," and the transition into the resolution is known as the "turn." In this poem, the problem is expressed pretty clearly in the title: "The world is too much with us." The octave explains the problem and its consequences, namely that industrial society has killed humankind's connection with nature. The sestet responds to the problem via the speaker's individual perspective.

In this poem, that transition to the sestet and this personal perspective is clearly marked. In the middle of the ninth line, the apostrophe "Great God!" breaks the somewhat meandering description of the moonlit ocean. The rest of the sestet is also clearly distinguished. Whereas the octave uses only first-person plural pronouns, the sestet uses only first-person singular pronouns.

METER

The poem is written in iambic pentameter, (five stressed and five unstressed syllables in an alternating pattern: da DUM), which is no surprise. Most sonnets (and, in fact, most poetry) written in English at the time were. In his Preface to Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth identifies meter as the main thing that distinguishes poetry from prose.

As is often the case, however, the poem does not stick to its meter exactly. Line 1, for example, can be read as containing a spondee (stressed-stressed) in its third foot, while line 2 opens with a trochee (stressed-unstressed), and then has another spondee later on:

> The world | is too | much with | us; late | and soon,
> Getting | and spend- | ing, we | lay waste | our
> powers;—

Line 1 has an extra syllable (six rather than five, which is what pentameter would normally consist of), and thus reflects via meter this sense of "muchness." Line 2 creates a feeling of tedium with the waltzing DUM da da DUM da da (or ONE two three ONE two three) rhythm of "getting and spending," which is then stopped in its tracks the double stress of "lay waste." This echoes the way that all this "getting and spending" is "laying waste" to people's lives. (Note that line 2 also technically has 11 syllables, one extra, but at the time of writing "powers" would likely be elided to sound like a single syllable word; either way, this extra syllable is unstressed, creating a weak trailing off that echoes the fact that our "powers" are not being utilized properly.)

In the first eight lines, the steady iambic rhythm is often disrupted in order to emphasize keywords that signal the poem's themes. When the poem breaks into descriptions of nature, the meter takes back over, almost completely. Take line 5:

> This Sea | that bares | her bos- | om to | the moon;

In both lines, the poem distinguishes nature from the city. When describing city life, the speaker's rhythm is rather erratic. Looking out at the moonlit ocean, his or her expression returns to the relatively smooth cadence of iambic pentameter.

RHYME SCHEME

"The world is too much with us" follows a rhyme scheme that's typical of Italian sonnets. The first eight lines (or octave) form something like rhyme sandwiches, with one rhyme as bread and another as the filling:

ABBAABBA

The final six lines (or sestet) follow this rhyme pattern:

CDCDCD

The poem follows this scheme faithfully. That is, each rhyme is nearly perfect. A word like "powers" may be pronounced slightly differently than "ours" or "hours," but any difference is extremely subtle (unlike some of the slant rhymes that Wordsworth uses in his other sonnets, like "Composed Upon Westminster Bridge"). This rigid adherence to the rhyme scheme might be interpreted as a reflection of the stultifying order of the industrial city.

In lines 6-8, the poem uses subtle internal rhyme with the participles (verb forms that act as adjectives) "howling" and "sleeping" and the pronoun "everything." The -ing suffix extends the words. It slows the pace of the poem and thus gives the impression that the speaker is savoring this fleeting glimpse of natural beauty. "Howling" also chimes with "hours," adding a sense of music to a line appropriately focused on the noise of the wind.

SPEAKER

The speaker in "The world is too much with us" is unidentified. No gender, name, or other identifying features are specified. Though it might be reasonable to assume that the speaker is Wordsworth himself, as many of his poems are indeed autobiographical, there's simply not enough evidence in this poem to prove that's the case.

The poem is especially abstract—its subjects are the broader "world" (or city) and "Nature"—so it makes more sense to interpret the speaker as a general spokesperson for humankind right around the turn of the 19th century, when England was experiencing major industrial growth. In his or her role as spokesperson, the speaker takes on the issue of humankind's relationship with nature from two perspectives.

In the first eight lines, the poem is spoken from the perspective of a collective "we." In the final six, it's spoken from the perspective of an "I." The speaker is clearly distressed over the behavior of modern humans, seeing everything they've achieved as "a sordid boon." But he or she maintains enough of an analytical mindset to approach the problem rationally, first by describing societal effects, then by considering an individual's *response* to those effects. The speaker's ordered way of thinking, or reason, however, does not relieve him or her of despair.

Nor does another intellectual faculty: the imagination. The speaker may be able to *recall* the world of Greek paganism, but he or she cannot *revive* it. For that reason, no "glimpses" will make the speaker "less forlorn." Though Wordsworth may have had more faith in the power of the imagination, the speaker's hopelessness seems to be permanent. Neither reason nor the imagination can soothe this stressed-out soul.

SETTING

The poem's setting is unspecified, but it's fair to say that it occupies both mental and physical territory. Let's first take a look at the physical. By the end of the poem, it has become clear that the speaker does his or her speaking from a point in the natural world—specifically, a "pleasant lea," or patch of grass, overlooking the ocean (in daydreaming about Greek paganism, the speaker pictures ocean gods). We also know that this is happening at night, as the poem's first specific nature description is of a windless, moonlit scene.

The poem also occupies mental territory in that the speaker, though physically in nature, returns in his or her mind to the city. "The world" from the opening line refers to urban,

industrial society. We know this because the speaker specifies by explaining what goes on in that world: "Getting and spending." This is a clear reference to economic activity, which, at the turn of the 19th century, would have occurred in the center of economic activity: the city. Even though the speaker does not mention the city in the final lines, he or she has it in mind; its memory is what prevents a full appreciation of nature.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"The world is too much with us" was written in the first years of the 19th century and published in 1807, in a book called *Poems, In Two Volumes*. Critics consider Wordsworth to have been at the height of his creative powers around this time. Certainly it was when he was most popular, even if the book elicited a rather nasty review from the poet Lord Byron.

In 1795 Wordsworth met the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge and two years later moved, with his sister Dorothy Wordsworth, also a poet, to live near him. In 1798, Wordsworth and Coleridge jointly published *Lyrical Ballads*. Containing Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," the book is considered to have gotten the English Romantic Poetry movement into full swing.

The work from this period, which some scholars call Wordsworth's "great decade," was characterized by a focus on natural imagery, poems that fit the definition of verse that Wordsworth set down in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*: "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings ... recollected in tranquillity." "The world is too much with us," then, contrasts with Wordsworth's typical work at the time. The speaker seeks tranquility in nature, but doesn't find it. Instead, he or she is overpowered by the rhythms of the city.

Other sonnets from Poems, In Two Volumes, such as "London, 1802," regard industrial changes with similar despair, though another sonnet, "Composed upon Westminster Bridge," offers a slightly more optimistic take—though it, too, is complicated. "London," a 1794 poem by William Blake, is a precursor for "The world is too much with us" in that it fixates on the ugliness of industrial urban life.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The year of the poem's publication, 1807, was a time of major social, political, and economic change for Great Britain and the world. In 1799, ten years after the French Revolution, Napoleon Bonaparte had seized power, and by 1803 had begun his march toward European domination. After a decade-long series of wars that ended with France's defeat, Britain, which had financed and organized much of the resistance, emerged as the world's leading power. During this period the island nation won colonial outposts in South Africa, secured them in India, and with its powerful navy and control of key trade routes, presided over the European economic system.

Also of note is the culmination of the slave-led Haitian Revolution in 1804 and the death of its most famous leader, Toussaint L'Ouverture, in 1803. One of the sonnets in *Poems, In Two Volumes*, "To Toussaint L'Ouverture," remembers the revolutionary with pained admiration: "There's not a breathing of the common wind / That will forget thee."

Internally, the First Industrial Revolution was firing the growth of British cities. Workers lost jobs to automation, slurry from steel foundries and offal from slaughterhouses polluted the rivers, and agricultural workers moved from the country to the cities. This new type of urban life is "the world" that Wordsworth's speaker refers to in the poem, a new order that he or she seems to think is permanent.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- William Wordsworth's Preface to Lyrical Ballads — An essay in which Wordsworth assesses the state of English poetry, explains where poetic language comes from, and lists the differences between poetry and prose. (https://www.bartleby.com/39/36.html)
- Video Explanation of "The world is too much with us" — Rebecca Balcárcel, an associate professor of English at Tarrant County College, reads and analyzes the poem line-by-line. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_U4Am9vBoA8)
- "London" by William Blake — A LitCharts guide to a poem by Wordsworth's contemporary William Blake that similarly laments the nature of urban life at the turn of the 19th century. (https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/william-blake/london)
- A Dramatic Reading of the Poem — A slow, sonorous reading of the poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vk_5H5Z7nxU)
- The First Industrial Revolution — A broad overview of the sweeping societal changes taking place during the late 18th and early 19th century in England. (https://www.britannica.com/event/Industrial-Revolution#ref3502)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM WORDSWORTH POEMS

- Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802
- I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud
- She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways
- The Solitary Reaper

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