A Leave-Taking

POEM TEXT

Let us go hence, my songs; she will not hear.
Let us go hence together without fear;
Keep silence now, for singing-time is over,
And over all old things and all things dear.
She loves not you nor me as all we love her.
Yea, though we sang as angels in her ear,
She would not hear.

Let us rise up and part; she will not know.
Let us go seaward as the great winds go,
Full of blown sand and foam; what help is here?
There is no help, for all these things are so,
And all the world is bitter as a tear.
And how these things are, though ye strove to show,
She would not know.

Let us go home and hence; she will not weep.
We gave love many dreams and days to keep,
Flowers without scent, and fruits that would not grow,
Saying 'If thou wilt, thrust in thy sickle and reap.'
All is reaped now; no grass is left to mow;
And we that sowed, though all we fell on sleep,
She would not weep.

Let us go hence and rest; she will not love.
She shall not hear us if we sing hereof,
Nor see love's ways, how sore they are and steep.
Come hence, let be, lie still; it is enough.
Love is a barren sea, bitter and deep;
And though she saw all heaven in flower above,
She would not love.

Let us give up, go down; she will not care.
Though all the stars made gold of all the air,
And the sea moving saw before it move
One moon-flower making all the foam-flowers fair;
Though all those waves went over us, and drove
Deep down the stifling lips and drowning hair,
She would not care.

Let us go hence, go hence; she will not see.
Sing all once more together; surely she,
She too, remembering days and words that were,
Will turn a little toward us, sighing; but we,
We are hence, we are gone, as though we had not been there.
Nay, and though all men seeing had pity on me,
She would not see.

SUMMARY

Let's get out of here, my songs; she's not listening to us anyway. Let's be brave and get out of here in silence because the time for singing songs is over; the time for everything held dear is over. She doesn't love us the way we love her. Indeed, even though we sang like angels to her, she refused to listen.

Let's get up and out of here; she won't even realize we're gone. Let's go to the sea like strong winds do, swirling up sand and foam as they blow. What else can we do here? There's nothing to be done because this is just how things are, and the whole world is miserable. I tried to explain all of this to her through you, my songs, but she wouldn't understand.

Let's go home and away from this place; she won't cry for us. We spent so much time trying to woo her, but it was like growing flowers that had no fragrance or fruits that wouldn't ripen. We asked her to dig in her blade and harvest our love, but there's nothing left now, no grass for cutting. And you and me—the ones who planted those seeds—if we died, she wouldn't cry.

Let's get out of here and rest, since it's clear she's never going to love us. She wouldn't hear us if we were to sing right now, nor would she notice how painful love can be. Get out of here, give it up; enough is enough. Love is a desolate ocean, nothing but deep unhappiness. Even though heaven bloomed for her, she still wouldn't love us.

Let's give up and go down into the sea; she won't care. Even if the stars turned the air into shimmering gold, and the sea watched the moon emerge above it like a giant blossom whose light made the seafoam look like pretty little flowers, and even if the waves swept over our suffocating lips and drowning hair and pushed us down into the ocean's depths, she still wouldn't care.

Let's get out of here right now, this very moment; she won't notice. Let's sing one more song together; surely, hearing our song, she'll remember the times we spent together and turn slightly toward us with a sigh. But by then we'll already be long

gone, leaving no trace that we'd ever been there at all. No, that won't happen; even though anyone else watching would feel sorry for me, she wouldn't even notice.

THEMES

THE PAIN OF UNREQUITED LOVE

The angsty "A Leave-Taking" recounts the pain of unrequited love. The poem's speaker laments that nothing he does will make the woman he longs for love him back. In fact, he declares that she wouldn't even notice if he weren't around—a thought so devastating to the speaker that he considers drowning himself. It's possible to read "A Leave-Taking" as a sincere admission of the immense pain of loving someone who can't or won't return your affections. Yet it's also possible to take it as a satire of short-sighted, melodramatic poetry that treats love as a very serious matter of life and death. Either way, it's clear that the speaker cannot force his beloved to feel for him what he feels for her.

The speaker makes it very clear that the woman he loves isn't interested in him and never will be. He "sang as angels in her ear," but beautiful, lovelorn music makes no difference to someone who refuses to "hear" it. He recalls giving "love many dreams and days to keep," suggesting that he's spent a lot of time and energy thinking about this woman and the life they could have together. But his dreams are like "Flowers without scent" and "fruits that would not grow"; they can't be "reap[ed]"—metaphorically, they can't come true—without her loving him back, and she just doesn't. She'll never "see love's ways," so loving her is a lost cause.

Since he can't win her love and attention, the speaker dramatically declares that he's going to drown himself in the ocean. He resolves to "rise up" and "go seaward," where he will "lie still" as the "waves" wash over him and "stifl[e]" his "lips" for good. His suicidal ideation reflects his feeling that "Love is a barren sea, bitter and deep." The pain of unrealized love is so great he'll end his life to escape it.

The speaker doesn't *actually* drown himself in the poem, however; he only says that he's going to do so. To that end, he spends the whole poem saying he's going to leave but he never follows through on any of his threats. In repeating "Let us go hence" at the top of each stanza, he might just be trying to give his beloved *one more chance* to make him stay (saying, essentially, *"No, really, this time I'm really going to leave—I mean it! Here I go!"*). Indeed, after saying he's going to drown himself, he decides to stick around to sing one more song—one that "surely" will get his beloved's attention. He briefly imagines how she'll "turn a little toward us, sighing" only to find that the speaker is gone for good. In other words, he fantasizes about how she'll be sorry to have failed to notice him until it's too late.

Yet though he believes his situation would inspire "pity" in any man, he ultimately realizes that the woman he loves would still fail to "see" him, let alone feel any sort of sympathy toward him. Even in death, he'd remain invisible to her.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-42

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Let us go hence, my songs; she will not hear.
Let us go hence together without fear;
Keep silence now, for singing-time is over,
And over all old things and all things dear.

"A Leave-Taking" begins with apostrophe: the speaker addresses his own "songs"—that is, the songs he's apparently been singing to woo his beloved. The speaker personifies these songs, speaking to them as if they were a close friend. Since *she* won't listen, it seems he's decided to talk to himself instead!

"Let's get out of here," the speaker says, because he's tired of pining after someone who doesn't notice him. The speaker then repeats the phrase "Let us go hence" at the top of line 2, creating anaphora:

> Let us go hence, my songs; she will not hear.
> Let us go hence together without fear.

This anaphora has two main effects:

- First, it heightens the poem's language and makes the scene more dramatic. The speaker is fed up and wants to get away from this situation that's making him miserable. He commands that he and his songs "go hence together without fear"—that they bravely forge ahead.
- At the same time, however, repeatedly telling himself to go calls attention to the fact that *he hasn't actually left yet*. He will continue this pattern throughout the poem—declaring that he's about to leave and then staying right where he is, creating the sense, perhaps, that he's really just trying to give his beloved a chance to tell him to stay.

The speaker next tells himself/his songs to be quiet because o the time for singing songs "is over." In fact, the time for "all old things and all things dear" is over. The dramatic diacope of "over" and "all" in lines 3-4 makes the speaker sound downright hyperbolic:

> [...] for singing-time is over,

And over all old things and all things dear.

In his estimation, *everything* good and precious has seeped out of the world. Everything he once held dear—or dreamed of holding—is now out of reach. He has no hope of impressing this woman with his songs, so he might as well be on his way.

These opening lines are also filled with sibilance:

Let us go hence, my songs; she will not hear.
Let us go hence together without fear;
Keep silence now, for singing-time is over,

These smooth, whispery /s/ sounds evoke the very "silence" the speaker is anticipating now that he has no reason left to sing.

The poem is made up of six septets (seven-line stanzas) written in a rough iambic pentameter. This means that lines contain five iambs, poetic feet with two syllables arranged in an unstressed-stressed pattern: da-DUM. The meter is quite irregular and ambiguous at points, however. Here's one potential scansion of these opening lines:

Let us go hence, my songs; she will not hear.
Let us go hence together without fear;
Keep silence now, for singing-time is over,
And over all old things and all things dear.

Again, some of these feet are open to interpretation. For example, the opening phrase "Let us" might be read as an iamb ("Let us") or a trochee ("Let us"). The overarching pattern is iambic, however, and this adds a steady, driving heartbeat to the poem.

LINES 5-7

She loves not you nor me as all we love her.
Yea, though we sang as angels in her ear,
She would not hear.

The speaker reiterates the reason for his despair, saying to his songs:

She loves not you nor me as all we love her.

Though the speaker and his personified songs love this woman, she isn't interested in either him or his music. The chiasmus of this line—the first half of the sentence ("She loves not you nor me") is inverted in the second half ("as all we love her")—emphasizes the unbalanced, unrequited nature of his love.

Notice, too, the use of the word "all" again—this word will show up a lot in this poem, and it has a few different effects. On the one hand, it heightens the poem's angst: this speaker isn't the type to say this and that is upsetting him, but rather *all* things in the world are making him *absolutely miserable*. In other words, he's not the type to put his problems into perspective! At the same time, the open /ah/ and rolling /l/ sounds of "all" contribute to the poem's mournful music. This line would have made just as much (if not more) sense if the poet has just written, "She loves not you nor me as we love her," but it would have sounded less lyrical and less dramatic.

The speaker says that "though [he and his music] sang as angels in her ear," this woman simply "would not hear" him. The simile conveys that he's gone to great lengths to make the most beautiful songs he can for her, songs that should delight and captivate her. But alas, she remains unmoved. In boasting that his singing is angelic, the speaker makes this woman seem irrational; how cold-hearted must she be to resist the songs of *angels*?

The last line of the stanza (and of every stanza) is only four syllables long, and its meter is iambic dimeter (two iambs, poetic feet whose syllables follow an unstressed-stressed, da-DUM):

She would not hear.

Closing things with a shorter line creates an abrupt, sudden end to each stanza, evoking the speaker's frustration and hopelessness.

The last line of every stanza also repeats the second part of the *first* line of that same stanza, the only exception being the change from "will" to "would" ("she *will* not hear" / "She *would* not hear"). That "would" conveys that the woman *repeatedly* refused to hear him.

LINES 8-14

Let us rise up and part; she will not know.
Let us go seaward as the great winds go,
Full of blown sand and foam; what help is here?
There is no help, for all these things are so,
And all the world is bitter as a tear.
And how these things are, though ye strove to show,
She would not know.

The second stanza begins with anaphora, its language mirroring the first two lines of the poem's opening stanza:

Let us rise up and part; she will not know.
Let us go seaward as the great winds go,

Note that the second half of line 8 *also* mirrors the second half of line 1: "she will not hear" becomes "she will not know." This parallel language calls attention to the fact that the speaker has raised the stakes: this woman not only won't listen to his songs, but she won't even notice if he's not around (let alone mourn his absence).

Not content to "go hence" and "Keep silence," this time the

speaker says that he will "rise up and part" and then head down to the sea "as the great winds go." This simile conveys the speaker's frustration and urgency; he wants to rush to the sea like a gust of stormy wind, whipping up "sand and foam" along the way.

So overwhelmed is the speaker that he asks, "[W]hat help is there?" This question is an example of aporia: the speaker poses it only to prove a point. Indeed, he immediately answers this question by declaring, "There is no help." This is just how things are, in other words; there's nothing to be done about it. He can't get what he wants (this woman's love), and so he's going to run away.

The then speaker uses another dramatic simile to illustrate his sorrow: because his beloved doesn't care about him, "all the world is bitter as a tear." Rather than just saying he's feeling down in the dumps about loving someone who doesn't love him back, he feels that *the entire world* is a terrible, miserable place. Note the repetition of "all" again in lines 11 ("all these things are so") and 12 ("all the world"), which again adds to the poem's hyperbolic tone.

The speaker has tried explaining how he feels, and how things have been for him, to the woman he loves through his songs. Yet nothing he says or does changes anything: she still "would not know" how he felt.

LINES 15-21

Let us go home and hence; she will not weep.
We gave love many dreams and days to keep,
Flowers without scent, and fruits that would not grow,
Saying 'If thou wilt, thrust in thy sickle and reap.'
All is reaped now; no grass is left to mow;
And we that sowed, though all we fell on sleep,
She would not weep.

The third stanza begins with yet another repetition of the phrase "Let us go." *Let's get out of here and go home*, the speaker says this time, lamenting that his beloved won't "weep" for him. She won't notice or caring that he's gone.

He bitterly adds that she won't cry for him despite the fact that he spent lots of time and energy trying to win this woman over. He planted "Flowers without scent, and fruits that would not grow"; none of his efforts came to fruition because their relationship, if one could even call it that, was so one-sided.

He wanted this woman to take the love he offered her, to harvest it as if it were a crop he grew just for her—to "thrust in thy sickle" (a blade used for cutting crops) "and reap." But she didn't, and "All is reaped now" (there's that "All" again—drama, drama, drama!). There is "no grass" to be cut and taken. In other words, he has nothing left to give her.

Notice the alliteration in lines 16-17:

> We gave love many dreams and days to keep,
> Flowers without scent, and fruits that would not grow,

Alliteration makes the poem's language more intense, in turn conveying the intensity of the speaker's frustration and hopelessness. But for all of his attempts to capture her interest, he says that even if "we that sowed" (that is, he and his songs—the ones who planted the metaphorical seeds of love) "fell on sleep" (sleep being a metaphor for death), she still "would not weep."

LINES 22-25

Let us go hence and rest; she will not love.
She shall not hear us if we sing hereof,
Nor see love's ways, how sore they are and steep.
Come hence, let be, lie still; it is enough.

The speaker describes how tired and fed up he is after throwing himself at this woman only to be continuously ignored. "Let us go hence and rest," he says, because "she will not love." She's completely oblivious to the speaker's painful longing, and no amount of singing about his love for her is going to convince her to "see love's ways." These ways are "sore" and "steep"; the path of love is painful and treacherous, but this woman doesn't care.

Note, again, the fever-pitch drama of the speaker's perceptions. He isn't just saying she doesn't love him back, but that she's completely incapable of loving at all. (By this point in the poem, of course, the reader might be questioning whether the speaker is really the best judge of that!)

For the first time in the poem, the speaker reveals what he plans to do once he leaves this place: "rest." Wooing this woman has been tiring, apparently, so he says to his songs, "Come hence, let be, lie still; it is enough." The clipped parataxis of line 25 (those short, blunt phrases) evokes the speaker's exhaustion. The speaker has had "enough"; it's time for him to give up his one-sided romance. That said, readers may notice that he still hasn't actually left yet.

LINES 26-28

Love is a barren sea, bitter and deep;
And though she saw all heaven in flower above,
She would not love.

The speaker's experience with this woman has soured him on love altogether. "Love is a barren sea," he declares, "bitter and deep." According to this metaphor, love is fruitless, devoid of life; it produces nothing of value, and its cruel disappointments run deep as the ocean itself. The firm alliteration of "barren" and "bitter" adds force to the speaker's declaration. The speaker believes that love itself is a complete waste of time, a desolate, excruciating experience that brings nothing but deep unhappiness.

By this point in the poem, the speaker has mentioned the sea

twice. He first brought it up back in lines 9-10, when he said he wanted to run off "seaward as the great winds go." Now, he mentions a deep, metaphorical sea that perhaps threatens to swallow him. This motif of the sea runs throughout many of Swinburne's poems, and in this one in particular, it helps to evoke the strong, overwhelming feelings that threaten to engulf the speaker entirely.

The speaker goes on to say that although the woman he loves "saw all heaven in flower above," she still "would not love" him. This might be read in a few ways:

- On the one hand, the word "heaven" harkens back to the speaker's description of singing like an "angel[]" to her in the first stanza, suggesting that the speaker feels he has gone to every length to express his love in the most beautiful ways, and that his heartfelt songs still haven't been enough to move her.
- On the other hand, he might be projecting into the future, saying that even if in some hypothetical situation she were to look up and see the most extravagant delights imaginable, she still wouldn't be impressed. As far as the speaker is concerned, there is simply no way to win this woman's heart.

LINES 29-35

Let us give up, go down; she will not care.
Though all the stars made gold of all the air,
And the sea moving saw before it move
One moon-flower making all the foam-flowers fair;
Though all those waves went over us, and drove
Deep down the stifling lips and drowning hair,
She would not care.

The poem takes a darker (or just more melodramatic than ever) turn in the fifth stanza, with the speaker describing in greater detail what he means when he says he's finally going to get some "rest":

> Let us give up, go down; she will not care.

The grammatically parallel phrases "give up" and "go down" (which are further emphasized by /g/ alliteration of "give" and "go") draw attention to the speaker's proposed solution for his heartsickness: he's planning to (or at least *saying* he's planning to) drown himself in the sea. While suicidal ideation is nothing to make light of, it's important to remember the poem's consistently over-the-top tone. It's possible that the speaker really intends to kill himself, but it's also possible he's just saying this as a desperate ploy for attention.

He imagines the scene of his death in great detail:

- First, he describes "all the stars ma[king] gold of all the air." He's picturing a magnificent night sky filled with glowing, golden stars. Those "alls" again—two in one line!—add a theatrical flourish to the already dazzling imagery.
- He then describes "the sea moving" beneath the moon. Readers might picture the waves gently flowing beneath the moon as it rises, looking like a "moon-flower" (a giant, white, night-blooming flower).
- The moon's glow illuminates the ocean's foam, turning it into beautiful "foam-flowers."

There's an intense beauty to his description of his own suicide. The sounds of these lines enhance their imagery as well. There's soft /s/, /f/, and /m/ alliteration as well as round /oo/ assonance:

> Though all the stars made gold of all the air,
> And the sea moving saw before it move
> One moon-flower making all the foam-flowers fair;

He's thoroughly romanticizing his own death, which suggests that he's getting a certain pleasure out of his own suffering—or at least pleasure at the idea of his death finally earning him the attention he thinks he so desires. Alas, even in the speaker's fantasy of suicide, when "all those waves went over" him (not just one or two waves, mind you, but *all* of them), he realizes his one true love still "would not care."

There is more alliteration in lines 33-34:

> Though all those waves went over us, and drove
> Deep down the stifling lips and drowning hair,

The thudding /d/ sounds in particular are effective in evoking the intensity of the speaker's imagined death. The words "stifling" and "drowning" reflect that, to this speaker, his despair feels downright suffocating.

LINES 36-42

Let us go hence, go hence; she will not see.
Sing all once more together; surely she,
She too, remembering days and words that were,
Will turn a little toward us, sighing; but we,
We are hence, we are gone, as though we had not been there.
Nay, and though all men seeing had pity on me,
She would not see.

The last stanza begins with anaphora and parallelism, just as all the others did. It also contains epizeuxis:

> Let us go hence, go hence; she will not see.

The back-to-back repetition ramps up the poem's drama even

more and conveys the speaker's utter desperation. The poem then reaches its climax in the speaker's call to "Sing all once more together"; this poem is his final song for her, and he imagines dying would be his last grand, romantic gesture. Perhaps it would even inspire her to think about any times they shared, or the beautiful songs he wrote for her, and miss him. She would "turn a little toward us, sighing." She'd finally "see" him and feel some sort of pity.

Alas, she would turn too late: he'd already be "gone" without a trace, "as though we had not been there." Ironically, by the time she deigned to "see" him there would be nothing left to see (readers might get the sense that the speaker is gloating a bit here, implying something along the lines of, *"You'll be sorry!"*).

Note the use of epizeuxis in lines 37-40:

> Sing all once more together; surely she,
> She too, remembering days and words that were,
> Will turn a little toward us, sighing; but we,
> We are hence, we are gone, [...]

The tortured syntax drags the poem out. It's as though the speaker is stalling, giving his beloved one last chance to reach out to him before it's too late.

In the end, however, the speaker acknowledges that even his death would not be enough to draw this woman's gaze. Though he thinks every single person in the world ("all men," not most or many!) would feel bad for him if he drowned, the one person he wants to notice him wouldn't. In his mind, she comes across as truly heartless.

The poem's theatricality allows readers to take it as a satire of those overwrought, self-serious love poems that are really just vehicles for poets to indulge in beautifully expressed self-pity. Then again, this just might be one of those poems! Either way, the speaker's flight to the sea and fantasies of drowning himself there suggest the unbearable pain of unrequited love; perhaps there's a reason so many poets have written about it.

POETIC DEVICES

PARALLELISM

"A Leave-Taking" is a very repetitive poem. Each stanza sounds a lot like the last, and the extensive use of parallelism helps to convey the speaker's angst and desperation. He keeps saying what amounts to the same thing, using very similar wording, over and over again, hammering home the fact that this woman does not, and will never, love him back.

The first and second lines of stanzas 1 and 2 begin with the phrase "Let us," creating anaphora (in the first stanza, the anaphora encompasses the entire phrase "Let us go hence"):

> Let us go hence, my songs; she will not hear.
> Let us go hence together without fear;
> [...]
> Let us rise up and part; she will not know.
> Let us go seaward as the great winds go,

"Let us" or "Let us go" in fact begins every stanza in the poem, and they're always followed by the phrase "she will not":

> Stanza 1: "Let us go hence, my songs; she will not hear."
> Stanza 2: "Let us rise up and part; she will not know."
> Stanza 3: "Let us go home and hence; she will not weep."
> Stanza 4: "Let us go hence and rest; she will not love."
> Stanza 5: "Let us give up, go down; she will not care."
> Stanza 6: "Let us go hence, go hence; she will not see."

On one level, this repetition makes the speaker sound more impassioned. On another, however, this repetition ultimately gets, well, repetitive; the speaker keeps saying he's going to leave but doesn't go anywhere. By the poem's end, readers might doubt that he has any intention of moving at all. His rousing call to "go hence" becomes a reminder that he's *still there*, right where he began. Nothing about his situation changes over the course of the poem.

The "she will not phrase" that ends the first line of each stanza also gets repeated in the final line of each stanza. This woman's rejection boxes the speaker in:

> Stanza 1: "she will not hear." / "She would not hear."
> Stanza 2: "she will not know." / "She would not know."
> Stanza 3: "she will not weep." / "She would not weep."
> Stanza 4: "she will not love." / "She would not love."
> Stanza 5: "she will not care." / "She would not care."
> Stanza 6: "she will not see." / "She would not see."

This parallelism again emphasizes the fact that nothing is changing here: this woman definitively does not love the speaker and never has, despite his repeated attempts to woo her.

Each stanza also contains the word "though" in the second to last line ("though ye strove to show," "though all we fell on sleep," "though she saw all heaven in flower above," etc.). Altogether, parallelism makes the poem at once intensely dramatic *and* quite formulaic: readers can expect that the speaker will declare his intention to leave because this woman doesn't care about him, no matter what he does or what hypothetical tragedy befalls him.

There are also some one-off moments of parallelism:

- In line 25, the speaker says, "Come hence, let be, lie

still." These three phrases are grammatically parallel, and the list is also an example of parataxis. The clipped, blunt statements suggest the speaker's frustration.
- Similarly, in line 29 the speaker says, "Let us give up, go down." The parallelism here suggests that, to the speaker, giving up and drowning himself are one and the same.
- Finally, in line 40, the speaker says, "We are hence, we are gone." Parallelism again creates rhythm and emphasis; the speaker *really* wants his love to notice that he's disappeared. Reading the poem as an intentional satire, the repetitive language further conveys the over-the-top melodrama of so much love poetry.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Let us go hence,," "she will not hear"
- **Line 2:** "Let us go hence"
- **Line 6:** "though"
- **Line 7:** "She would not hear"
- **Line 8:** "Let us rise," "she will not know"
- **Line 9:** "Let us go"
- **Line 12:** "And"
- **Line 13:** "And," "though"
- **Line 14:** "She would not know"
- **Line 15:** "Let us go," "she will not weep"
- **Line 20:** "though"
- **Line 21:** "She would not weep"
- **Line 22:** "Let us go," "she will not love"
- **Line 25:** "Come hence, let be, lie still"
- **Line 27:** "though"
- **Line 28:** "She would not love"
- **Line 29:** "Let us," "give up, go down," "she will not care"
- **Line 30:** "Though"
- **Line 33:** "Though"
- **Line 35:** "She would not care"
- **Line 36:** "Let us go hence," "she will not see"
- **Line 40:** "We are hence, we are gone,"
- **Line 41:** "though"
- **Line 42:** "She would not see"

REPETITION

The poem contains many other kinds of repetition in addition to anaphora and general parallelism. Lines 4-5, for example, contain diacope:

> And over all old things and all things dear.
> She loves not you nor me as all we love her.

The word "all" appears frequently in this poem, adding more than a touch of drama: it isn't enough for this speaker to say that some "old" and "dear things" have passed—for this guy, it's "all" or nothing. Notice the use of chiasmus in line 5 as well: "She loves not you nor me" is inverted in the second half of the sentence, becoming "as all we love her." This stresses the inequity of their relationship: the speaker pines away for this woman, but she doesn't think of him or his music at all.

There are more of those dramatic "alls" as well as the repetition of "help" in lines 10-12, once again drawing attention to the speaker's intense, over-the-top feelings. For him, not being able to win this woman's affection is on par with the end of the world; no one can "help" him, and everything is terrible.

There is lots of repetition (specifically diacope and polyptoton) in lines 30-33 as well:

> Though all the stars made gold of all the air,
> And the sea moving saw before it move
> One moon-flower making all the foam-flowers fair;
> Though all those waves went over us [...]

Notice again the use of "all"—rhythmically, it's filling in gaps so that lines have a consistent number of syllables. The word "all" is also just sonically pleasing—the open /ah/ sound followed by those long, liquid /l/ sound makes for a more euphonic verse. At the same time, it continues to ratchet up the drama; the speaker isn't imagining being drowned by just *one* wave, but by "all" of them.

Line 36 contains epizeuxis:

> Let us go hence, go hence, she will not see.

The back-to-back repetition emphasizes the speaker's sense of urgency; he can't stand to spend another minute in this place, pining away after this woman. The repetition in lines 37-40 works similarly, building up anticipation and momentum in the poem's final moments:

> Sing all once more together; surely she,
> She too, remembering days and words that were,
> Will turn a little toward us, sighing; but we,
> We are hence, we are gone, [...]

That final "we, / We are hence, we are gone" creates a dramatic crescendo as the woman turns to face the speaker only to discover that it's too late.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "all," "things," "all," "things"
- **Line 5:** "loves," "all," "love"
- **Line 10:** "help"
- **Line 11:** "help," "all"
- **Line 12:** "all"

- **Line 18:** “reap”
- **Line 19:** “All,” “reaped”
- **Line 24:** “love's”
- **Line 26:** “Love”
- **Line 27:** “all”
- **Line 30:** “all,” “all”
- **Line 31:** “moving,” “move”
- **Line 32:** “flower,” “flowers”
- **Line 33:** “all”
- **Line 36:** “go hence, go hence”
- **Line 37:** “all,” “she”
- **Line 38:** “She”
- **Line 39:** “we”
- **Line 40:** “We”
- **Line 41:** “seeing”
- **Line 42:** “see”

METAPHOR

The poem uses various metaphors to illustrate the speaker's pain and his beloved's apparent heartlessness. The poem's figurative language is quite dramatic—indeed, often hyperbolic—and this adds to the sense that the speaker is perhaps being a little over the top.

In lines 16-18, for instance, the speaker uses a metaphor to explain what all his careful attempts to win this woman over have come to:

> We gave love many dreams and days to keep,
> Flowers without scent, and fruits that would not grow,
> Saying 'If thou wilt, thrust in thy sickle and reap.'

Like flowers that contain no beautiful fragrance or fruit that never ripened, the speaker's attempts to impress this woman never produced any results. She wouldn't harvest the metaphorical seeds of love he so tenderly planted for her, and now it's too late: "All is reaped now; no grass is left to mow." Basically, his efforts never paid off, and he simply has nothing left to give.

He bitterly continues, "And we that sowed, though all we fell on sleep, / She would not weep." Note that in this case, "sleep" is a metaphor for death—he's saying that were he to die, she still wouldn't be moved to care about him. She simply will not "see love's ways," which the speaker describes as though they were an actual, physical path: "sore and steep." The road of love is painful and dangerous.

His love has done him no good, and in the next stanza he metaphorically compares it to "a barren sea, bitter and deep." The word "barren" also echoes the earlier farming metaphor, again reflecting that love has proven fruitless for this speaker. The mention of deep, bitter waters also suggests that his despair is overwhelming—and it foreshadows his later decision to drown himself.

Meanwhile, his beloved remains utterly unmoved. Even if "she saw all heaven in flower above," it wouldn't melt her heart. This strange metaphor suggests the lengths the speaker has gone to for the woman he desires: he's presented her with heaven itself, and she still "would not love him." His dramatic metaphors illustrate just how outrageous it is, in his opinion, that this woman hasn't given in.

Finally, the speaker imagines drowning himself in the ocean, but in his mind, this scene is strangely beautiful. The "stars made gold of all the air," he says: their warm, golden light filled the night sky. He describes the moon over the ocean as a "moon-flower" (a great big, white, night-blossoming vine) that "mak[es] all the foam-flowers fair." In other words, it lights up the sea foam and makes it look appealing as a field of flowers. This is a delicate, lovely bit of imagery. It also reflects that the speaker is romanticizing his death: he's not necessarily serious about killing himself and is instead fantasizing about a dramatic, stunning exit that would finally make his beloved appreciate him.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 16:** “We gave love many dreams and days to keep,”
- **Line 17:** “Flowers without scent, and fruits that would not grow”
- **Lines 18-20:** “Saying 'If thou wilt, thrust in thy sickle and reap.' / All is reaped now; no grass is left to mow; / And we that sowed, though all we fell on sleep”
- **Line 24:** “love's ways, how sore they are and steep”
- **Line 26:** “Love is a barren sea, bitter and deep”
- **Line 27:** “And though she saw all heaven in flower above”
- **Line 30:** “Though all the stars made gold of all the air”
- **Line 32:** “One moon-flower making all the foam-flowers fair”

SIMILE

The similes in "A Leave-Taking" work much like the poem's metaphors: through this figurative language, the speaker conveys his agony *and* makes the object of his affection seem icy cold. Take that first simile:

> Yea, though we sang as angels in her ear,
> She would not hear.

The speaker insists that his songs were positively angelic, and yet this woman still "would not hear" him. He comes back around to celestial imagery later in line 27 ("And though she saw all heaven in flower above") and line 30 ("Though all the stars made gold of all the air"). All this figurative language suggests the speaker essentially tried, through song, to make her world as beautiful and magical as possible, but it all fell on

unseeing eyes: "She would not care."

The speaker uses another simile in the next stanza to describe how, exactly, he plans to leave this woman:

> Let us go seaward as the great winds go,
> Full of blown sand and foam; [...]

He wants to get out of there with all the rage and wildness of a storm wind, whipping up "sand and foam" as it blows across the shore. The simile evokes the speaker's pain and frustration, and again hints that he's being a little overdramatic about all this.

The second simile in this stanza adds to that hyperbolic tone as well: "And all the world is bitter as a tear," the speaker says. Because this one woman doesn't like him back, the entire world feels like a miserable, bitter place.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "though we sang as angels in her ear"
- **Lines 9-10:** "Let us go seaward as the great winds go, / Full of blown sand and foam"
- **Line 12:** "And all the world is bitter as a tear"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration fills the poem with music, making its language more intense and the scene at hand more dramatic. For example, listen to the alliteration of line 3:

> Keep silence now, for singing-time is over,

These hushed /s/ sounds (which also appear as general sibilance in "silence") echo the "silence" the speaker is calling for now that he knows his love is hopeless.

Later, the sustained alliteration of lines 15-17 makes the speaker come across as emphatic and forceful as he describes just how hard he's worked to win his beloved's heart:

> Let us go home and hence; she will not weep.
> We gave love many dreams and days to keep,
> Flowers without scent, and fruits that would not grow,

Alliteration works similarly throughout the rest of the poem. It makes the imagery more striking and the poem more memorable, in turn conveying the speaker's utter despair. Take lines 31-32, which feature alliteration of soft /s/, muffled /f/, and humming /m/ sounds:

> And the sea moving saw before it move
> One moon-flower making all the foam-flowers fair;

The smooth, gentle sounds of these lines reflect the beauty of the imagery at hand. The speaker is romanticizing the scene of his death, so it makes sense that his language at this moment sounds lovely and delicate.

He keeps up the alliteration in the following two lines as well:

> Though all those waves went over us, and drove
> Deep down the stifling lips and drowning hair,

The alliteration highlights the imagery of the speaker being pulled under by waves and drowned. The thud of those /d/ sounds makes the moment especially visceral, evoking the way the speaker is abruptly silenced by the sea.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "silence," "singing"
- **Line 10:** "help," "here"
- **Line 13:** "show"
- **Line 14:** "She"
- **Line 15:** "home," "hence," "will," "weep"
- **Line 16:** "dreams," "days"
- **Line 17:** "Flowers," "fruits"
- **Line 18:** "thou," "thy"
- **Line 20:** "sowed," "sleep"
- **Line 23:** "hear," "hereof"
- **Line 24:** "see," "sore," "steep"
- **Line 25:** "let," "lie"
- **Line 29:** "give," "go"
- **Line 31:** "sea," "moving," "saw," "move"
- **Line 32:** "moon," "flower," "making," "foam," "flowers," "fair"
- **Line 33:** "waves," "went," "drove"
- **Line 34:** "Deep," "down," "drowning"
- **Line 36:** "see"
- **Line 37:** "Sing," "surely," "she"
- **Line 38:** "She," "words," "were"
- **Line 39:** "Will," "turn," "toward"

APOSTROPHE

The speaker addresses his "songs" throughout the poem as though they were a separate entity. These songs obviously can't answer him back, and this device is an example of apostrophe. The speaker personifies these songs, treating them as if they were a close friend, the only one in the world who truly knows how he feels and what he's been through. Indeed, he seems as upset that the woman he loves doesn't care for his *songs* as he is by the fact that she doesn't love *him*. He says both he and his songs "sang as angels in her ear," but she "would not hear" them.

Because the poem is so dramatic, it invites an ironic interpretation in which it is actually *making fun* of the self-serious poems men have long written about women they desire. In this way, addressing his songs might be a way of directing the reader's attention to the real subject of the poem:

over-the-top love poems. In other words, the speaker might very well stand in for any number of lovelorn speakers from ages past, and his call to "go hence" might be the poet's subtle way of saying the world has had enough of such melodramatic poems.

In any case, the speaker holds out a little hope that if he drowns himself, the woman he loves will be moved to remember him and his "words," even if only for a brief moment.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Let us go hence, my songs"
- **Line 2:** "Let us go hence together without fear;"
- **Line 3:** "Keep silence now"
- **Lines 5-6:** "She loves not you nor me as all we love her. / Yea, though we sang as angels in her ear,"
- **Line 8:** "Let us rise up and part"
- **Lines 9-10:** "Let us go seaward as the great winds go, / Full of blown sand and foam"
- **Line 13:** "though ye strove to show"
- **Line 15:** "Let us go home and hence"
- **Line 16:** "We gave love many dreams and days to keep"
- **Line 20:** "And we that sowed, though all we fell on sleep,"
- **Line 22:** "Let us go hence and rest"
- **Line 23:** "She shall not hear us if we sing hereof"
- **Line 25:** "Come hence, let be, lie still"
- **Line 29:** "Let us give up, go down"
- **Line 33:** "Though all those waves went over us"
- **Line 36:** "Let us go hence, go hence"
- **Line 37:** "Sing all once more together"
- **Lines 39-40:** "but we, / We are hence, we are gone, as though we had not been there."

VOCABULARY

Hence (Line 1, Line 2, Line 15, Line 22, Line 25, Line 36, Line 40) - Away from this place.

Yea (Line 6) - Yes.

Ye (Line 13) - You.

Strove (Line 13) - Attempted.

If thou wilt (Line 18) - If you will; if you desir

Thy (Line 18) - Your.

Sickle (Line 18) - A blade used for cutting grains or grasses.

Reap (Line 18, Line 19) - Harvest.

Hereof (Line 23) - Of this (the speaker is saying she won't hear if he sings of his love for her).

Steep (Line 24) - Sharply angled. The speaker is saying that love's metaphorical "ways" are far from gentle; they're painful and treacherous.

Barren (Line 26) - Desolate and incapable of producing anything.

Moon-flower (Line 32) - A *moon-flower* is a night-blooming vine with big, white blossoms; in this case, the speaker seems to be using it to describe the moon itself.

Foam-flowers (Line 32) - The speaker is describing sea foam as little white flowers.

Fair (Line 32) - Beautiful.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"A Leave-Taking" is made up of six septets (seven-line stanzas). The first six lines of each stanza are approximately 10 syllables long, while the last line is always just four syllables. This calls readers' attention to the repetition of "She would not" at the end of each stanza, in turn emphasizing the fact that the source of the speaker's pain, and the inspiration for this poem, is the absence of this woman's attention and affection.

Each stanza also begins with the phrase "Let us." Beginning and ending each stanza with the same phrase results in the poem sounding rather formulaic by the end; it all feels a little *too* dramatic, perhaps, almost as if the poet is *making fun* of poems where people go overboard expressing their feelings of unrequited love.

METER

"A Leave-Taking" mostly uses a rough iambic pentameter: lines of five iambs, poetic feet with two syllables arranged in an unstressed-stressed pattern. Here are lines 3-4 as an example:

> Keep si- | lence now, | for sing- | ing-time | is over,
> And o- | ver all | old things | and all | things dear.

Again, the meter is very irregular. Readers will notice the dangling extra unstressed beat at the end of line 3, and it's also possible to scan that first foot as a spondee ("Keep si-"). Still, that iambic rhythm creates a steady heartbeat throughout the poem.

Many of the poem's feet are ambiguous or open to interpretation; the meter is not strict. The speaker's variations usually take the form of trochees (stressed-unstressed) or spondees, these top-heavy feet making his speech sound more emphatic and dramatic. For example:

- Yea, though | we sang | as an- | gels in | her ear,
- All is | reaped now; | no grass | is left | to mow;
- Love is | a bar- | ren sea, | bitter | and deep;

The last line of every stanza is also much shorter than the rest,

containing only two iambs:

She would | not hear.

These lines of iambic dimeter make the end of each stanza, and indeed the end of the entire poem, feel somewhat abrupt and blunt. Regardless of what the speaker does, this woman simply isn't interested.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem follows an AABABAA rhyme scheme. There are only two rhyming sounds per stanza, and that "A" rhyme gets repeated five times (i.e., in the first stanza: "hear," "fear," "dear," "ear," and "hear"). Most of the poem's rhymes are exact and ring out clearly—"know" and "go," "here" and "tear," etc. There are a few slant rhymes as well ("enough" isn't a perfect match with "love" nor "hereof," for example), and these imperfect rhymes add a touch of subtlety and flexibility to what is, overall, a pretty strict rhyme scheme.

The tight, steady pattern of rhyme makes the poem sound both intense and *tense*. The repetitive rhyme sounds might subtly evoke the speaker's obsessive, unfulfilled longing; he keeps circling around the same point in each stanza, and nothing has changed by the end of the poem. Note, too, how the two B rhymes in each stanza are kept separate from each other by those A rhymes. The B rhymes might represent the lovers themselves, who will never be togher.

SPEAKER

The speaker of this poem is utterly lovesick. He has written countless songs for a woman who does not "hear" them; in fact, she doesn't even acknowledge the speaker's existence. He clearly thinks that he's a catch: he claims to have sung like an angel to this woman and shown her "all heaven in flower above." And yet, all of his attempts to woo her have failed. Understanding that nothing he does will ever sway this woman, the speaker resolves to drown himself in the ocean.

He doesn't actually go through with this plan in the poem, however. He only *talks about* doing so, conjuring a dramatic, deeply romanticized vision of death in which the night sky is bursting with golden stars and the soft moonlight makes the ocean foam below look like pretty little "flowers." While it's possible that speaker really does feel ready to end his life, he also might be making another desperate, dramatic ploy for his beloved's attention. Indeed, he says at the top of each stanza that he's going to leave, but he never goes anywhere. Readers likely get the sense that he's holding out hope that his beloved will finally notice him, realize her terrible oversight, and tell him to stay.

The speaker's inaction combined with his hyperbolic descriptions of his despair suggests that the poem is not necessarily as earnest as it first appears. That is, the speaker might be a caricature meant to satirize the men who pine away for unavailable women in melodramatic, over-the-top sonnets and other traditional love poems.

SETTING

"A Leave-Taking" has no clear setting, beyond taking place sometime after the woman the speaker loves has rejected him (or, maybe, failed to acknowledge him at all). Readers might picture the speaker somewhere physically close to the woman, gearing up to leave her, but there are no specifics about where this is happening or where the speaker will go when he finally departs. This makes the whole scene feel somewhat surreal or frozen in time, which is part of the point: the speaker never goes anywhere, and he ends the poem essentially in the same situation in which he began it.

The only physical place the poem describes is the ocean, where the speaker says he will drown himself. He describes taking to the sea the way "great winds" do, tearing through "sand and foam." The imagery evokes a kind of desperate energy; the speaker feels he has nothing left to live for. If he can't have love, which he compares to "a barren sea, bitter and deep," then he aims to drown his sorrows in the *actual* sea. He pictures being overtaken by "waves"; he imagines his "stifling lips and drowning hair," and he assumes anyone looking on will feel "pity" for him.

The poem also paints a more metaphorical setting when the speaker envisions his death. He says that "the stars made gold of all the air" and describes the sea sloshing beneath "One moon-flower making all the foam-flowers fair." This seems to describe the moon bathing the ocean in light and making the ocean's frothy waters look like a field of glowing flowers. He's romanticizing his suicide, imagining it as this beautifully tragic, almost heroic moment—another reason to suspect the poem might be critiquing a tradition of melodramatic poems in which speakers pine for women who barely even know they exist.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837-1909) was an English poet, novelist, playwright, and critic. Swinburne's work was known for its eloquent lyricism, frequent alliteration, and lush imagery, as well as its often daring—Victorians would say outright *indecent*—themes. He's often linked with the "decadent" school of poetry, which began in late 19th-century France and saw writers using highly stylized language while exploring taboo subjects as a pushback against a deeply moralistic society.

"A Leave-Taking" was published in Swinburne's first collection, *Poems and Ballads, First Series*, in 1866. The book was well-liked, especially by younger readers, but was also contentious; it flew in the face of conservative Victorian values and flaunted what many people considered to be shockingly graphic sexuality. While his disregard for the puritanical tastes of his time would come to define Swinburne's legacy, "A Leave-Taking" is relatively tame by modern standards. The poem also belongs to a long tradition of poets writing about unrequited love. More specifically, Swinburne may be taking up (and, perhaps, poking a little fun at) the mantle of Petrarchan sonneteers, who often wrote, rather melodramatically, of one-sided love affairs.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Swinburne grew up on the Isle of Wight, an island in the English Channel, and he frequently depicted the sea in his poetry. He published "A Leave-Taking" in 1866, about midway through Queen Victoria's rule.

England reshaped itself considerably under the reign of Victoria, its first truly powerful queen since Elizabeth I. The Victorians were innovators and empire-builders, and the British Empire expanded its reach throughout the 19th century through both trade and imperialist violence. At home, a primarily rural population also made an unprecedented shift to the cities as factory work outpaced farm work, and writers from Dickens to Hardy worried about the human effects of this kind of change.

Perhaps in response to this speedy reconfiguration of the world, Victorian social culture became deeply conservative. It espoused a strict code of morals and high standards of personal conduct. Women, in particular, were expected to be chaste, pliant, and submissive, and any deviation could mean social exile.

Swinburne pushed back against the social mores of his time and indulged his interests in sado-masochism and antitheism (the rejection of belief in any and all gods). He also took an ironic pleasure in encouraging rumors about himself and his sexual preferences. Victorian culture being what it was, Swinburne was largely shunned from high society.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Algernon Charles Swinburne's Life and Work — Read a Poetry Foundation biography of Algernon Charles Swinburne. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/algernon-charles-swinburne)
- An Introduction to the Victorian Era — Read about the historical period in which Swinburne lived and wrote. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/153447/an-introduction-to-the-victorian-era)
- Listen to the Poem Out Loud — "A Leave-Taking" as read by Tom O'Bedlam. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TbKnruqxdkg)
- The Algernon Charles Swinburne Project — Peruse Indiana University's digital collection of Swinburne's work. (https://webapp1.dlib.indiana.edu/swinburne/)
- A Collection of Anti-Love Poems — Browse the Poetry Foundation's top picks for poems about breakups, heartache, and unrequited love. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/101579/anti-love-poems)

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