Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock

POEM TEXT

The houses are haunted
By white night-gowns.
None are green,
Or purple with green rings,
Or green with yellow rings,
Or yellow with blue rings.
None of them are strange,
With socks of lace
And beaded ceintures.
People are not going
To dream of baboons and periwinkles.
Only, here and there, an old sailor,
Drunk and asleep in his boots,
Catches tigers
In red weather.

SUMMARY

The white nightgowns that people wear to bed make their homes seem as though they're possessed by ghosts. No one wears green nightgowns, nor purple nightgowns with green circles on them, nor green nightgowns with yellow circles on them, nor yellow nightgowns with blue circles on them. The nightgowns are all perfectly ordinary, without any lace socks or beaded belts. These people won't have dreams about exotic creatures like baboons or sea snails. But once in a while, an elderly sailor, who's so drunk that he's fallen asleep in his boots, dreams about grabbing hold of tigers under a red sky.

THEMES

CONFORMITY VS. IMAGINATION

"Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock" is a short, vivid poem about resisting conformity. The speaker's "[d]isillusionment," or disappointment, stems from the fact that most people in the poem lack any kind of imagination or individuality, instead wearing only plain white nightgowns to bed and dreaming perfectly ordinary dreams. Conformity, the poem implies, is a threatening, oppressive force that haunts modern society, smothering imagination and rendering even people's *dreams* dull and boring.

The "white night-gowns" that most of the people in the poem wear illustrate the conformity that defines these people's existence. By focusing on what the nightgowns are *not*—richly colored, strange, ornamented with lace and beads—the speaker emphasizes their plainness. And this plainness, in turn, suggests that the people who wear them lack the kind of creativity and imagination necessary to add color (that is, excitement and interest) to their lives.

Likewise, the speaker's focus on what the people will *not* dream of suggests that their dreams will be like their nightgowns: all the same, and all predictably dull. There is even something ominous about the white nightgowns, which "haunt[]" the houses these people live in and seem to take on a life of their own. Through this, the poem implies that the conformity that has come to define these people's lives actively stifles their creativity.

The introduction of the "old sailor" in the poem's final lines provides a sudden burst of imagination—or, at least, mild relief from the humdrum, disappointing world of white nightgowns. The sailor's strangeness seems to uplift the speaker with his interesting, exotic dreams of tigers and "red weather."

Notably, the sailor does not fit in with—does not conform to—the rest of this world: he is old and drunk, and he has carelessly fallen asleep in his boots. He appears to be a less respectable figure than those who wear white nightgowns and go to bed promptly at ten o'clock. To many people (including the people in white pajamas), this sailor may seem irresponsible, lazy, and even dangerous.

But to the speaker, the sailor's fantastical dreams provide a sense of welcome relief. The other people and their white nightgowns are the menacing ones, with their insistence on conformity and subsequent absence of imagination. By contrasting the boring reality of these people with the wonderful dreams of the sailor, the speaker seems to assert the power of the imagination to enrich the monotony and routine of daily life—and perhaps even to overcome the harsh realities of the real world (in this case, the not-so-pleasant fact that this sailor has gotten drunk and unceremoniously passed out in his boots!).

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-15

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

The houses are haunted
By white night-gowns.

At first glance, "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock" may seem like an odd, somewhat difficult poem. The title itself provides little clear information about what's to come—and, in fact, raises several questions! *Who* is disillusioned (disappointed), and *why*? Is it ten o'clock in the morning or the evening? Why does the time matter here?

The poem's first two lines begin to answer those questions with the mention of "white-night" gowns, which imply that it's ten o'clock at night and people are getting ready for bed. Those nightgowns are a stand-in for the people wearing them; after all, nightgowns can't literally roam around a house!

The lines also imply, however, that the nightgowns *themselves* are haunting the houses, as if they had a will of their own. Those nightgowns are thus personified (or, perhaps, *ghostified*). By referring to the *nightgowns* rather than the *people* wearing them, the speaker reduces those people to their outward appearance. They are defined by their plain pajamas, which all look the same. The plain white nightgowns become a symbol of the conformity, routine, and lack of creativity that haunt human society, just as the nightgowns haunt these houses.

Lines 1 and 2 establish several patterns that the rest of the poem will follow. They are fairly short and written in free verse (meaning they have no regular meter or rhyme scheme). They make what *seems* to be a straightforward statement, though that statement is actually surprising and a bit strange! The enjambment after line 1 creates a moment of anticipation, for example, and many readers might expect the next line to reveal that the houses to be haunted by ghosts—only to read on and discover that it's "white night-gowns" possessing these homes.

The speaker's attitude toward those nightgowns is difficult to know with certainty. The lines are so short and direct that they could be read in an almost deadpan way. That same brevity, though, can also be read as a sign of intensity, drama, and emotion. To that end, take a look at the rhythm of these lines:

The houses are haunted
By white night-gowns.

Again, these are free verse lines, so they don't follow any *regular* meter. But they still have rhythm—notice how "houses" and "haunted" both have stresses on the first syllable. Combined with the alliteration on the /h/ sound, the stresses make the line seem more intense, and perhaps even sinister. This effect is heightened by the clustered stresses of "white" and "night," which also form an internal rhyme.

Though the idea of houses being haunted by white nightgowns could seem humorous or absurd, the sound and structure of the lines indicate that the speaker probably isn't making a joke. As the rest of the poem will make clear, it is these white nightgowns—and the lack of imagination they represent—that cause the speaker's "[d]isillusionment" in the first place.

LINES 3-6

None are green,
Or purple with green rings,
Or green with yellow rings,
Or yellow with blue rings.

The speaker now describes what the white nightgowns are *not*. None of the gowns are green, purple with green rings, green with yellow rings, or yellow with blue rings. "Rings" probably refers to a circular decorative pattern; it could also refer to sleeves whose color contrasts with the rest of the gown. The basic idea of the lines is that the nightgowns are not colorful or decorated in any possible way; they are plain white, and nothing else.

Why does the speaker go to the trouble of saying what the nightgowns are *not*? Line 2 has already established that they're white, so why not leave it at that? Here again, the speaker's seemingly straightforward, simple statements are actually somewhat odd, surprising, and revealing:

- The pattern of negation in these lines (that is, the way that the speaker keeps referring to what the nightgowns are *not* rather than what they *are*) reflects an important truth about "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock": much of the poem is about what does *not* exist, or what is *not* going to happen.
- This reflects the thematic idea that conformity actively smothers creativity and imagination; it prevents such the colorful possibilities that the speaker goes on to describe.

The speaker, it seems, is "[d]isillusion[ed]," or disappointed and let down, by the humdrum conformity the white nightgowns represent. But instead of just pointing out what *is* (normal, boring, plain white nightgowns worn by people who go to bed at ten o'clock) the speaker is images *what could be* (brightly colored, decorative, imaginative nightgowns).

Imagination allows for freedom and possibility, and fittingly these lines are like a sudden flourish of color after the somewhat sinister, haunting whiteness of the nightgowns of lines 1 and 2. The intense repetition here adds a burst energy that suggests the speaker's building excitement:

- There's the anaphora of "Or," which starts three lines in a row;
- The epistrophe of "rings," is ends three lines in a row;

- And the anadiplosis of "green" and "yellow."

The effect of all this repetition is powerful, making the lines sound at once playful and serious; repetition like this would be at home in a nursery rhyme or a fiery political speech!

The speaker seems to get some enjoyment out of imagining all of these combinations of color. Thinking up this whimsical list of possibilities may give the speaker some relief from the disappointment produced by the plain white nightgowns. At the same time, the proliferation of colors that do not actually exist in the poem's reality underscores the depth of the speaker's disappointment. That is, they're a reminder that none of this whimsy actually exists in the world inhabited by the white-nightgowned crowd.

LINES 7-9

None of them are strange,
With socks of lace
And beaded ceintures.

The speaker continues to point out what the nightgowns are *not*, though now the focus is on their lack of decoration. "None of them are strange," the speaker observes, mirroring the earlier observation that "[n]one are green." The speaker has moved from making seemingly straightforward observations about the nightgowns' physical appearance (their color) to making personal aesthetic judgments about them.

The speaker's judgment is the first *explicit* indication in the poem that the white nightgowns represent plainness, normalcy, and conformity to the speaker. The speaker takes a word, "strange," that often has a negative connotation, and uses it in a way that seems positive. That is, the speaker seems to wish that some of the nightgowns *were* strange, if only because that would indicate that the people wearing them had some individuality and imagination!

Lines 8 and 9 develop the speaker's notion of what might make a nightgown strange: "socks of lace / And beaded ceintures." A ceinture is simply a belt (the word comes from French). The lace socks and beaded belts are fancy embellishments that the speaker seems to miss in the white nightgowns, which don't have any such decorations.

As when the speaker imagined possibilities of color, the language that describes these imagined decorations reflects how attractive the speaker finds them. In addition to the slant rhyme between "strange" and "lace," notice the sibilance of the lines:

None of them are strange,
With socks of lace
And beaded ceintures.

The repeated /s/ sounds create a sensual, exotic, alluring atmosphere—a stark contrast to the somewhat claustrophobic, repressive feeling of the houses haunted by nightgowns.

LINES 10-11

People are not going
To dream of baboons and periwinkles.

At last, people enter the poem. Though their presence has been *implied* since line 2, human beings have been notably absent from the poem so far. Having established how drab these people's pajamas are, the speaker's attention turns to what the people are not going to do once they go to sleep.

As in line 1, the enjambment at the end of line 10 produces a disconcerting moment of anticipation. "People are not going"—to do what? Not going where? The enjambment briefly leaves the reader hanging in the empty space between the lines; the line's incompleteness also emphasizes the fact that these people are *not* going to do something. The brief moment of suspense heightens the surprise of line 11, which reveals that the people are not going "[t]o dream of baboons and periwinkles."

If the speaker's choice of animals seems bizarre, that's because it is! The point of the baboons and periwinkles (the speaker probably means sea snails, not flowers) is that they're exotic, surprising, and "strange." It takes imagination to think of such unfamiliar animals, and the fact that the people will not even dream of them indicates just how imaginatively empty their lives are. Not only do these people not think to wear colorful nightgowns; they also won't dream of exciting things!

Perhaps the speaker hoped that the bland, monotonous outer reality suggested by all those white nightgowns would disappear once these people went to sleep and were free from the social pressure to look, think, and act in a certain way. In other words, even if they looked the same on the outside, maybe their inner worlds would be fantastically unique. But that isn't what happens: so powerful is conformity that even these people's dreams are boring.

Importantly, the speaker doesn't necessarily seem to blame these people for their lack of imagination. In the speaker's eyes, conformity seems to be an oppressive force of its own (which is perhaps another reason that the houses are described as haunted by the *nightgowns themselves*). Though it's possible that the speaker is disappointed in these people, the broader social pressure to conform—to be like everybody else—seems to be the main source of the poem's "[d]isillusionment."

Notably, line 11 is the longest line of the poem, both by number of syllables and length on the printed page. The line's length is ironic because it names the things people will *not* dream of. In this way, the long line draws subtle attention to the speaker's imaginative desire for such dreams and the creativity they represent. By naming the strange and wonderful things that will not be worn and dreamed of, the speaker imagines those

things into existence within the space of the poem. In other words, the lack of imagination in the speaker's environment prompts the speaker to imagine the wonderful and strange things that *could be*.

LINES 12-13

Only, here and there, an old sailor,
Drunk and asleep in his boots,

Line 12 marks a sudden change in tone and a shift back to what actually *exists* in the environment of the poem:

- Lines 1 and 2 dealt with the houses and the nightgowns that haunt them.
- Lines 2–11 described what the nightgowns were not and what the people who wear them will not dream of.
- Now, the speaker's attention again turns to what *is* rather than what *is not*.

The drifts away from the initial setting of the houses, instead embracing an "old sailor" who inhabits an unspecified "here and there." In other words, sometimes, in one place or another, "an old sailor" appears.

Right off the bat, line 12 is complicated by the fact that "[o]nly" has two possible meanings. The word is most likely a conjunction meaning "nonetheless" or "however":

- In this reading, despite the boring nightgowns and unimaginative dreams of most people in the poem, the sailor manages to have wonderful, exotic, creative dreams.
- The people who go to bed early and wear plain white nightgowns probably wouldn't admire this undistinguished, drunken sailor, who has lazily fallen asleep in his boots. But the speaker seems to see him as a kind of unexpected hero of the imagination. The speaker is disillusioned by the conformity of the people, their nightgowns, and their dreams; the speaker seems heartened, even if mildly so, by this sailor's fanciful, exotic dreams.

But "Only" could also be an adverb here:

- In that case, the sailor is the *lone example* in the poem's world of someone who has such rich, imaginative dreams.
- This rather more pessimistic reading might indicate that the speaker feels ambivalently, or even negatively, about the sailor.
- The fact that the lowly sailor is the *only* other imaginative person to be found (and even then, only "here and there") can be read as discouraging to the speaker. It may even lead the speaker to further feelings of disappointment in the world's lack of imagination.

Whether the speaker finds cause for comfort or despair in the sailor—or something in between—is ultimately up to the reader's interpretation.

LINES 14-15

Catches tigers
In red weather.

The final lines of the poem are at once its most straightforward and complex. The short, striking lines seem to make a clear statement, but their full meaning remains somewhat elusive.

At a literal level, these lines refer to the old sailor's dream. He is "asleep in his boots," and in his dream, he "[c]atches tigers / In red weather." This evokes a few things:

- It's unclear how he catches these tigers—perhaps with a net, as if they were butterflies, or with his bare hands. The point is that he's *dreaming*; he catches the tigers in his imagination, with his imagination.
- The "red weather" may refer to the old maritime saying, "Red sky at night, sailor's delight." It may simply describe the color of the sun in the sky. Whatever the case, "red weather," especially with its gentle assonance on the /eh/ vowel sound ("red weather"), gives the poem's conclusion a relatively calm, contented feeling, as though good things are to come.
- Red is also a vibrant, bold color that is often associated with intensity, heat, creation, and life; all of this contrasts with the colorless, boring, unimaginative white color of the nightgowns.
- The exotic tigers and the promising, good weather of the sailor's dream also contrast sharply with the boring, animal-less dreams of the people from earlier in the poem.

In this reading, the speaker seems to identify with the sailor: they both use their imaginations to create a world that is more exciting, vivid, and pleasant than the literal world around them. In fact, the sailor himself may be a part of the speaker's imagination!

The sailor is said to be "here and there"; he doesn't seem to be physically present in the environment of the "houses" haunted by white nightgowns. The speaker might be saying that somewhere in the world, there's a sailor like the one described in the poem.

But it seems more likely that the sailor is the hopeful product of the speaker's own imagination—much like the colors, ornaments, and exotic animals that came before. "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock" itself thus becomes a

testament to the power of the imagination—and especially creative works, like the poem itself—to make human life more interesting, unique, and beautiful.

SYMBOLS

WHITE NIGHTGOWNS

The white nightgowns (spelled "night-gowns" in the poem) symbolize the conformity, routine, and imaginative poverty of the "[p]eople" who wear them. By focusing so intently on the many things the nightgowns are *not*—colorful in any way, "strange," decorated with lace socks or beaded belts—the speaker underscores their plainness and, in turn, the lack of imagination and individuality of those who choose to wear them.

It's important to recognize, however, that the speaker says it's the nightgowns *themselves*, not the people wearing them, that "haunt[]" the "houses." Of course, nightgowns can't literally float around a house, and the speaker is metaphorically reducing the people who wear these nightgowns to their outer garments—to their appearances. Conformity, the poem suggests, robs these people of their individuality and even of their humanity itself.

Personifying the nightgowns also allows them to take on a life of their own. Ghost-like, they haunt the houses and the people who live in them, perhaps without the people even realizing. In this sense, the nightgowns don't just symbolize the conformity of these specific people; they symbolize conformity *itself* as a larger social force by which these people and their houses are "haunted."

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "The houses are haunted / By white night-gowns."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Though there are just a few instances of alliteration in "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock," the device contributes in subtle and powerful ways to the poem tone and message.

In line 1, for example the repeated /h/ sound between "houses" and "haunted" links the two words and gives the speaker's statement a weighty intensity. The second /h/ sound almost seems to haunt the first, and the whooshing sounds (combined with the vowel sounds /ow/ and /aw/) conjure up the sounds of the ghostly nightgowns. In other words, the *sounds* of the line reflect and enact its *meaning*. Just imagine how much less convincing the line would be if it read, "The buildings are haunted"! The actual line is so much spookier and impactful thanks to alliteration.

The alliteration in lines 2 and 3 has a different effect. The repeated sounds between "night-gowns" and "None are green" would *seem* to establish a close connection between the words, just as the /h/ sound connects "houses" and "haunted." However, that connection is ironic in these lines because the nightgowns are emphatically *not green*! In this case, the alliteration draws attention to the *distance* between the reality of the white nightgowns and the *imaginative idea* of them being green.

Another interesting moment of alliteration pops in lines 10 and 11 on the /p/ sound. Again, the apparent connection between "[p]eople" and "periwinkles" has a whiff of irony about it since the lines clearly say the people are *not* going to dream of periwinkles!

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "houses," "haunted"
- **Line 2:** "night-gowns."
- **Line 3:** "None," "green,"
- **Line 7:** "strange"
- **Line 8:** "socks"
- **Line 9:** "ceintures"
- **Line 10:** "People"
- **Line 11:** "periwinkles."
- **Line 12:** "Only," "old"

CONSONANCE

While there are just a few examples of alliteration in "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock," the poem is full of consonance, alliteration's more common sibling. Consonance adds a sense of music and cohesion throughout.

Take, for example, the /t/ sound in "haunted" and "white night-gowns," the spikiness of which adds to the slightly spooky, sinister atmosphere of the poem's opening lines.

In the next lines, intense repetition coupled with consonance of the /r/ sound makes the speaker's description of everything the nightgowns are not feel all the more energetic and forceful. The hissing sibilance of lines 7-9, meanwhile, suggests the speaker relishing this description of "strangeness":

> None of them are strange,
> With socks of lace
> And beaded ceintures.

The speaker also turns to loud, popping sounds when describing both the fantastical elements that people will not dream about and the drunken, imaginative sailor himself. Note the plosive /b/ of "beaded" and "baboons," for instance, as well

as the sharp /k/ sounds that pierce the final lines in "periwinkles," "[d]runk," "and "[c]atches." Combined with frequent assonance, all this consonance helps to evoke the enchanting power of the human imagination.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "houses," "haunted"
- **Line 2:** "white night-gowns"
- **Line 3:** "None," "green"
- **Line 4:** "Or purple," "green rings"
- **Line 5:** "Or green"
- **Line 7:** "strange"
- **Line 8:** "socks," "lace"
- **Line 9:** "beaded," "ceintures"
- **Line 10:** "People"
- **Line 11:** "dream," "baboons," "periwinkles"
- **Line 12:** "old sailor"
- **Line 13:** "Drunk," "asleep," "boots"
- **Line 14:** "Catches tigers"

ASSONANCE

The assonance in "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock" is a subtle but powerful sonic device that helps glue the poem together and grant it a sense of quiet musicality. In this way, it works a lot like alteration and consonance. The poem is written in free verse, so it doesn't rely on traditional rhyme and meter to communicate meaning or create cohesion. Instead, these sonic devices steps in to support certain thematic ideas and to simply make the poem sound good to the ear.

For example, in lines 7 and 8, "strange" and "lace" are joined by assonance on the /ay/ vowel, which produces a pleasant musical effect and underscores the way "socks of lace" could make a nightgown "strange." And in line 15, there's a near slant rhyme on the short /eh/ vowel sound between "red" and "weather." Again, the musical effect of the assonance is pleasing; the red weather of the sailor's dream has a sense of calm, wondrous energy.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "white night"
- **Line 7:** "strange"
- **Line 8:** "lace"
- **Line 9:** "beaded"
- **Line 10:** "People"
- **Line 11:** "dream"
- **Line 12:** "Only," "old"
- **Line 15:** "red weather"

PARALLELISM

The speaker uses parallelism to emphasize the many combinations of colors that could have made the white nightgowns more interesting—were it not for the unimaginative conformity of the people who wear them!

After the declaration in line 3 that "[n]one are green," the speaker spends three lines describing the other colors the nightgowns are not. The anaphora of the word "or," which is repeated at the beginning of the lines, underscores the sheer number of possibilities that wearing plain nightgowns causes the people to miss out on. The repetition makes the lines seem at once playful and serious; the lines could be read like a nursery rhyme or a high-minded speech, or both at the same time.

Anaphora doesn't create this effect by itself. These lines each follow the exact same formula:

> Or [color] with [color] rings

The repetition of the word "rings" at the end of the lines is an example of both identical rhyme and epistrophe, while the way the word "green" is used at the end of line 4 and then beginning of line 5 is called anadiplosis. (The same thing happens with "yellow" in lines 5 and 6.)

The insistent repetition creates a whimsical, almost sing-song effect. It also emphatically highlights the fact that none of the nightgowns have rings of *any* color; no matter how many times the speaker repeats the word or considers the colorful, imaginative possibilities it represents, the poem cannot change the immediate reality of ring-less, colorless nightgowns.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-6:** "Or purple with green rings, / Or green with yellow rings, / Or yellow with blue rings."

ENJAMBMENT

There are four instances of enjambment in "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock." The first, between lines 1 and 2, creates a brief moment of suspense: the speaker has said that "[t]he houses are haunted," but until jumping to line 2, the reader doesn't know what they're haunted by:

> The houses are haunted
> By [...]

The empty space between the lines invites readers to imagine possibilities for themselves; perhaps the houses are haunted by ghosts, ghouls, or goblins. What a surprise, then, to read that "white night-gowns" are actually to blame! The enjambment emphasizes and embraces the oddity of the statement.

The next enjambment, between lines 8 and 9, more straightforwardly links the "socks of lace" and "beaded ceintures" that the white nightgowns lack. It also allows for an end slant rhyme between "strange" and "lace," which creates an

appropriate connection between the two words; after all, "socks of lace" are one of the things the speaker imagines would help to make a nightgown "strange."

The enjambment between lines 10 and 11 recalls the first enjambment of the poem. It creates a brief moment of suspense and invites the reader to imagine the line to come. Where are people *not* going? What are people *not* going to do? Readers might well ask these and other questions, thanks to the anticipation at the end of line 10:

> People are not going
> To dream [...]

Again, the answer—"[t]o dream of baboons and periwinkles"—is surprising and strange. And again, that answer highlights what the speaker sees as these people's lack of imagination (even in dreams, where the imagination usually roams free).

The poem's final enjambment, between its last two lines, continues with the pattern of suspense, surprise, and imagination. This time, however, the enjambment reflects the imaginative richness of the sailor's dream, at least compared to the tameness of the people and their nightgowns. The sailor "[c]atches tigers / In red weather," the line break allowing the reader (and perhaps even the speaker) to reflect upon and relish the delicate strangeness of the image of catching tigers. The division of the speaker's final statement into two separate, short lines lends the sailor's dream a sense of balance, space, and calm that may reflect the sense of imaginative outlet and relief it gives the speaker.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "haunted / By"
- **Lines 8-9:** "lace / And"
- **Lines 10-11:** "going / To"
- **Lines 14-15:** "tigers / In"

ANADIPLOSIS

In lines 4–6, two instances of anadiplosis contribute to the richness of the speaker's list of colors that the white nightgowns are *not*.

In line 3, the speaker asserts that none of the garments are green. But that's not all: neither are they "purple with green rings" (the "rings" being either sleeves or decorative patterns in a different color from the rest of the gown). Now comes the first use of anadiplosis, when the speaker picks up the color green yet again, saying that the nightgowns are not "green with yellow rings" either. Next comes a repetition of yellow: the gowns are not "yellow with blue rings":

> Or purple with green rings,
> Or green with yellow rings,
> Or yellow with [...]

All this circular repetition—in which "green" and "yellow" are repeated from the end of one phrase to the beginning of the next—demonstrates the movement of the speaker's imagination and highlights just how many possibilities of color the nightgown-wearing people are missing out on:

- First, the speaker imagines that the nightgowns could be green, though they are not.
- That leads to the speaker to imagine that the nightgowns could be purple, but with green rings. Then green with yellow rings. Then yellow with blue rings.

The cumulative effect of the lines is complex; they seem whimsical, humorous, or even silly, but they also offer serious clues about why the speaker is experiencing the "[d]isillusionment" that prompted the poem. There are so many colors out there, the speaker seems to say, and yet these people are wearing plain white. Seen in this light, the speaker's outburst of color combinations becomes an imaginative reaction against the frightening conformity represented by the white nightgowns.

Where Anadiplosis appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "green rings, / Or green"
- **Lines 5-6:** "yellow rings, / Or yellow"

VOCABULARY

Disillusionment () - Disappointment, usually caused by the realization that something isn't as good as one thought it would be.

Rings (Line 4, Line 5, Line 6) - "Rings" may refer to the circular sleeves of the nightgowns. It may also refer to colorful circular designs. In either case, the fact that the people's actual nightgowns do *not* have any rings underscores their plainness and conformity.

Ceintures (Line 9) - Belts or sashes. The word is used in both French and English, though it's rare in the latter.

Periwinkles (Line 11) - "Periwinkle" can refer to a pale blue-purple color or to various flowers of that color. Here, however, the periwinkles are most likely small sea snails.

Catches (Line 14) - The meaning of this word is clear, though it's a little strange—and maybe even a little absurd—to read about someone catching tigers as if they were butterflies. The word's casual innocence makes the sailor's dream seem pleasant and fantastical, in contrast to the unimaginative dreams of the people from earlier in the poem.

Red Weather (Line 15) - It's hard to say exactly what "red weather" means in the poem. It may refer to the old saying, "Red sky at night, sailor's delight." It may simply be describing the red color of the sun and sky. In any case, the phrase makes the drunk sailor's dream seem pleasant and peaceful. It also sets up a final contrast with the plain white nightgowns from the beginning of the poem.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock" doesn't follow a traditional poetic form. Instead, it's a free verse poem with 15 lines in a single stanza. This is just one more line than a sonnet, but that's where the similarity to an established form ends. This lack of form makes sense for a poem lamenting the imagination-crushing power of conformity (see what we did there?).

Though the poem doesn't follow a strict form, it can be roughly divided into three sections:

1. The first, lines 1–9, deals with the nightgowns and their lack of color and decoration.
2. The second, lines 10 and 11, introduces the "[p]eople" and their lack of fantastical dreams into the poem.
3. In the third section, lines 12–15, the poem's attention turns to the old sailor, who *does* have exotic dreams of catching "tigers / In red weather."

At a formal level, the poem moves from the literal (the white nightgowns) to the imaginative (the dreams of the people and then the sailor), and from the speaker's immediate surroundings (the houses and the people who live in them) to a vague elsewhere (the "here and there" inhabited by the sailor). These formal movements underscore the poem's most important shift: from the conformity and imaginative poverty of the people and their nightgowns to the comparative imaginative richness of the old sailor's colorful dream.

METER

"Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock" isn't written in a regular meter. Its 15 free verse lines are mostly short, and they follow irregular rhythms. This relatively free approach to meter was an important aspect of Modernist poetry, of which "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock" is a good example. A regular meter would likely feel too structured and rigid for a poem that criticizes conformity.

Though the poem doesn't follow a standard meter, such as iambic pentameter, rhythm does contribute to the effects of the poem in important ways. Take the first two lines as an example:

> The houses are haunted
> By white night-gowns.

Both "houses" and "haunted" have stresses on the first syllable. Combined with the alliteration on the /h/ sound, the shared stresses create an immediate, visceral link between the two words, emphasizing how the "houses" are "haunted."

In line 2, the stresses on "white" and "night" are repeated without any unstressed syllables coming between them. In technical terms, the line contains an iamb (unstressed-stressed) followed by a trochee (stressed-unstressed):

> By white | night-gowns.

By drawing attention to themselves and forcing the reader to slow down, the immediately repeated stressed syllables create a moment of emphasis and intensity. Along with the internal rhyme between "white" and "night," the clustered stresses highlight the *importance* of the nightgowns' white color, which represents conformity and the lack of imagination. The close stresses also lend the "white night-gowns" a somewhat sinister feeling—appropriate for nightgowns that haunt houses!

RHYME SCHEME

"Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock" is written in free verse and doesn't follow a strict rhyme scheme.

There are, however, some instances of rhyme in the poem. In line 2, for example, an internal rhyme between "white" and "night" emphasizes the nightgowns' (lack of) color.

Lines 7 and 8 then share a slant rhyme between "strange" and "lace." The rhyme creates an appropriate connection between the two words. After all, "socks of lace" are one of the things the speaker imagines could make a nightgown "strange." And the fact that the rhyme isn't perfect—the words are linked by assonance, not true rhyme—makes the lines themselves seem a bit "strange" in a good way. The slant rhyme reflects the decorative exoticism the lines describe.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock" is totally anonymous. The one thing that does seem to be clear is that the speaker is *not* one of the people who wear white nightgowns and are not going to dream of exotic animals.

The speaker doesn't seem to care much for these people either, declaring that their houses are "haunted" by those plain nightgowns and imagining the many possible colors and accessories that might have made them more exciting. Though the speaker doesn't blame these people for the conformity and imaginative poverty of their lives, the speaker doesn't seem to

feel very close to them either. The disillusionment of the title, it's clear, is the speaker's own; it's hard to say whether the people in white nightgowns share any of this disillusionment as they prepare for bed.

The speaker doesn't seem to be much like the old sailor either. It's certainly possible that the speaker takes comfort in the sailor's exotic dream and identifies with him as a fellow imaginative person. But the speaker also seems dismayed that the sailor is the "[o]nly" example of nonconformity, "strange[ness]," and imagination to be found in the world of the poem—and even then, the sailor is only "here and there." The speaker, then, is an outsider who perceives hidden truths—the banal conformity of the people's lives, the imaginative richness of the drunken sailor's—and observes them without too much judgment.

Though it's possible that the speaker is Wallace Stevens himself, there's no clear evidence in the poem that this is the case. Nonetheless, Stevens was certainly familiar with the kind of suburban routine described in the poem, and like the speaker, was interested in the relationship between the real world and the world of the imagination.

SETTING

Few things are clear about the setting of "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock":

- The title indicates that the poem takes place at ten o'clock; it's that hour of the evening when the "[p]eople" of the poem are putting on their white nightgowns and preparing for bed.
- The conspicuously plain nightgowns, the people's relatively early bedtime, and the general lack of imagination of the place—all of which seem to have caused the speaker's "[d]isillusionment"—may indicate a respectable, middle-class, suburban setting (much like the area of Hartford, Connecticut, where Stevens lived when he wrote the poem).

However, the poem doesn't offer clear or specific evidence to support this reading. What *is* certain is that the poem concerns a place where there are houses full of people who wear white nightgowns to bed and do not dream about exotic animals.

There is one more place to consider when thinking about the poem's setting: the "here and there" inhabited by the "old sailor." The phrase "here and there" is wonderfully vague. The sailor could be somewhere near the "houses" or halfway across the world, at sea or on land—he could be pretty much anywhere! He may not even be an actual person, but rather someone the speaker has imagined to provide relief from the humdrum tameness of the poem's literal setting. Wherever the sailor is or isn't, the highly evocative "here and there" provides a powerful foil to the poem's immediate setting of houses, white nightgowns, and thoroughly unimaginative people.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock" was first published in 1915 in the magazine *Rogue*. Stevens later included it in his first book, *Harmonium*, in 1923. In many ways, this timeline puts the poem at the heart of American Modernism, a movement that embraced a wide range of new styles, forms, and artistic concerns.

In the early 20th century, artists in America and Europe entered a period of intense experimentation. Skeptical of past forms and traditions, many went in search of new ways of capturing people's inner emotions and perceptions of reality:

- In visual art, this search led to the development of Cubism, Futurism, and other movements that questioned traditional rules of perspective.
- In fiction, it produced such works as the stream-of-consciousness novels of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce's highly experimental *Ulysses* (published in 1922, just a year before Stevens's *Harmonium*).
- And in poetry, there were seemingly as many approaches to Modernism as there were poets!

Ezra Pound championed a break with traditional metrical forms and encouraged his fellow poets to "Make it new!" above all else. In his famous poem "The Waste Land" (also from 1922), T. S. Eliot looked to the past for fresh sources of inspiration even as he invented radically new approaches to the poetic line and poetic form.

How does Wallace Stevens fit into all of this? In some ways, Stevens can seem like a bit of an outlier. He was an insurance executive in Hartford, Connecticut, and he didn't publish *Harmonium* until he was 44 years old. His version of Modernism was in some ways less public and less political than that of Pound or Eliot—though it was no less powerfully imaginative.

In fact, exploring the world of the imagination defined Stevens's poetics. He was fascinated, as he said, by "the incessant conjunctions between things as they are and things imagined." This fascination is on full display in "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock," in which the speaker imagines rich, colorful, exciting alternatives to the poem's otherwise humdrum world of white nightgowns and boring dreams. It also animates other famous poems in *Harmonium*, including "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," "Anecdote of the Jar," and "The Snow Man."

Stevens was influenced by a wide range of poets, but his particular fondness for French poets, especially Baudelaire and

the Symbolists Rimbaud and Mallarmé, had perhaps the most lasting influence on his work. In "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock," this influence manifests itself in the playful-yet-serious mixture of colors, the French loan word "ceinture," and the focus on the redemptive powers of the imagination.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The first two decades of the 20th century saw immense technological and social change. The airplane, the automobile, the assembly line, and other innovations set the stage for radical upheavals to everyday life. Cities became increasingly important as centers of social and cultural exchange, and the pace of life accelerated dramatically.

A period of intense transatlantic exchange also began as American artists ventured abroad, congregating in London, Paris, and elsewhere and participating in new and exciting artistic movements. The cross-pollination between literature, visual art, music, dance, and beyond led to a proliferation of artistic styles and movements, all of which came to be grouped under the category called Modernism.

Stevens wrote and published "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock" while working as an insurance executive in Hartford, Connecticut. The story famously goes that he composed poems in his head while walking to and from work each day. He would then write them down when he got home. Though he lived what may have seemed like a tame life, especially compared to some of his Modernist contemporaries, he produced a poetry of almost incomparable imaginative richness, philosophical depth, and stylistic innovation.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to a reading of "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MhfdVFth0Ek)
- Stevens's Life and Work — A short biography of Wallace Stevens. (https://poets.org/poet/wallace-stevens)
- What is Modernism? — A brief explanation of Modernist poetry. (https://poets.org/text/brief-guide-modernism)
- Harmonium — An electronic edition of Stevens's 1923 book Harmonium, in which "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock" was published. (https://wallacestevens.com/harmonium)
- Wallace Stevens as an American Poet — A lecture on Stevens by prominent poetry critic Helen Vendler. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rR8FOV7vEng)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WALLACE STEVENS POEMS

- Anecdote of the Jar
- The Emperor of Ice-Cream
- Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird

HOW TO CITE

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