Now Let No Charitable Hope

POEM TEXT

Now let no charitable hope
Confuse my mind with images
Of eagle and of antelope:
I am by nature none of these.

I was, being human, born alone;
I am, being woman, hard beset;
I live by squeezing from a stone
What little nourishment I get.

In masks outrageous and austere
The years go by in single file;
But none has merited my fear,
And none has quite escaped my smile.

SUMMARY

May no excessive hope fool me into thinking I'm noble and free, like an eagle or antelope. I'm nothing like that by nature.

Since I'm a human being, I was born alone. Since I'm a woman, I'm surrounded by troubles. I survive by working hard for very little, as if squeezing sustenance from a rock.

The years pass as though they're parading by me, presenting themselves as extremely strange or harsh. But none of them has turned out to warrant my fears, and none of them has failed to make me smile at least a little.

THEMES

REALISM, STOICISM, AND ACCEPTANCE

"Now Let No Charitable Hope" portrays an attempt to shed illusions—both the comforting and the frightening kind—and gain a realistic outlook on the world. Its speaker rejects the false hope that she's anything more than a vulnerable human being. She refuses to imagine herself as powerful or exceptional (like an "eagle" or "antelope"), and she frankly acknowledges the challenges she faces as a woman surviving in a harsh world. At the same time, she rejects doom-and-gloom thinking, noting that she's never experienced a year that "merited [her] fear" or failed to bring at least some happiness. Overall, the poem embraces a level-headed acceptance of life's hardships, charting a middle path between naiveté and cynicism.

The speaker dispels both flattering illusions about the self and unwarranted optimism about the world. She expresses a wish that "no charitable hope" will "Confuse" her into thinking she's any more powerful or graceful than she is. The word "charitable" here implies "excessively generous"—she doesn't want an overly rosy self-image.

Rather than comparing herself to noble, free-roaming animals such as eagles, she views herself as humbly "human." She indicates that to be human is to be fundamentally "alone," and to be a "woman," in particular, is to be "hard beset" (bedeviled) by challenges. She views her life as a matter of hard-won survival, deriving "What little nourishment I get" from the harsh world around her.

Despite this unillusioned outlook, however, the speaker isn't totally *dis*illusioned or pessimistic. She serenely suggests that, as hard as life is, it's not all bad—or even as bad as "fear" sometimes makes it out to be. Personifying the years of life as a parade of "mask[ed]" figures passing by, she notes that some years look like they'll be "outrageous" (which might mean wild, terrible, bizarre, etc.), and some look like they'll be "austere" (meaning stark and harsh). But in reality, none of the years lives up to her "fear" or fails to raise a "smile" now and then.

In other words, the speaker rejects false pessimism as much as false hope. The poem promotes a worldview that's neither overly "charitable" nor overly *un*charitable; it recognizes life's difficulties while still appreciating the "little nourishment" and joy even a difficult life offers.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Now let no charitable hope
Confuse my mind with images
Of eagle and of antelope:
I am by nature none of these.

Lines 1-4 consist of a single sentence, which forms the poem's first stanza.

Abruptly, without introduction, the speaker makes a kind of wish or prayer: that "hope" will not "Confuse [her] mind" with misleading "images." Specifically, she seems to fear that "hope" (here personified as a potential source of false ideas) will flatter

her into thinking she's particularly impressive—like an "eagle" or "antelope."

Symbolically, these animals often represent grace, beauty, physical prowess, and/or freedom. The speaker doesn't believe she embodies these kinds of virtues, and she doesn't want "charitable" (here meaning overly generous) hope to fool her into believing otherwise. As line 5 will state, she knows she's only "human."

This speaker seems to be seeking a realistic perspective on her life, and on human life in general. She knows that human nature has its limits, and she knows hopeful illusions can make people forget those limits. She's guarding herself against a common mistake—possibly one that she's made in the past and wants to avoid "Now." At the same time, she's trying to express, humbly and directly, what her true "nature" is.

These opening lines establish the poem's form: quatrains that use iambic tetrameter (a da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM rhythm) and an ABAB rhyme scheme. Alliteration in lines 1 and 4 ("Now"/"no"; "nature none") underscores the negative words "no" and "none," adding emphasis to the speaker's rejection of false hope.

LINES 5-8

I was, being human, born alone;
I am, being woman, hard beset;
I live by squeezing from a stone
What little nourishment I get.

Lines 5-8 sum up the speaker's life experience in a few short statements, which add up, again, to one stanza-length sentence. (The poem contains three equal-sized stanzas, each composed of a single sentence—an effect that enhances its balanced, orderly, logical quality.)

Like line 4 in the previous stanza, lines 5-7 all begin with "I." This repetition (specifically an example of anaphora) makes the poem seem *personal*, even if it's not especially confessional. This speaker is defining herself and her experience: what "I was," what "I am," and how "I live."

The first two lines of the stanza use a parallel structure to make complementary claims. First, the speaker suggests that she has experienced loneliness as an inevitable part of "being human"; then, she suggests that she's been "beset" by difficulties as an inevitable part of "being woman":

> I was, being human, born alone;
> I am, being woman, hard beset;

In other words, all human beings suffer, but being a woman comes with special challenges. (There's an implied feminist statement here; the speaker indicates that the world is especially "hard" on, or hostile to, women.)

These lines also contain the poem's only caesuras. The four mid-line commas slow the language down noticeably, so that the lines themselves seem to struggle, just as the speaker has struggled.

The last two lines of the stanza play on a common metaphor for attempting the impossible: *trying to squeeze blood from a stone*. According to the speaker,

> I live by squeezing from a stone
> What little nourishment I get.

In other words, her "nourishment" (literal food, metaphorical rewards, and everything in between) doesn't come easily. Simply sustaining herself in a hostile world requires exhausting effort.

LINES 9-12

In masks outrageous and austere
The years go by in single file;
But none has merited my fear,
And none has quite escaped my smile.

The final stanza (lines 9-12) presents a metaphor for the passage of time. In the process, it expresses the speaker's general attitude toward time, aging, and the future.

The speaker imagines "The years" as figures "go[ing] by in single file," wearing "masks outrageous and austere." In other words, she pictures the years of her life as a parade passing one by one, sporting bizarre and/or severe-looking disguises. The "masks" make the years seem unknowable and a little frightening; clearly, they reflect the speaker's anxieties about the future (and/or about aging).

In the end, however, the speaker contemplates these "years"—the passage of time—as serenely and stoically as she accepts life's hardships. Out of all the years she's experienced, she says,

> [...] none has merited my fear,
> And none has quite escaped my smile.

Once again, the parallel phrasing gives her thoughts a calm, balanced clarity. The years have never been as bad as she "fear[ed]," nor have they ever failed to bring her some happiness. That is, they haven't "quite escaped [her] smile"—a phrasing that seems to acknowledge that some years have brought only a *little* happiness. (Compare the "little nourishment" she mentions in the previous stanza.)

All in all, the speaker accepts her limitations as a human being and recognizes the fundamental difficulty of life. Yet she ultimately finds no reason to "fear," and at least some reason to "smile," as she faces the future.

SYMBOLS

THE EAGLE AND ANTELOPE

The speaker refers to "images / Of eagle and of antelope," calling to mind the symbolism typically associated with these animals. Eagles often symbolize power, majesty, and grace; antelopes are associated with grace, speed, and beauty. Both are wild animals, meaning that they enjoy a kind of freedom most human beings don't.

The speaker invokes these animals in order to say that she *lacks* the traits associated with them: "I am by nature none of these." She no longer "hope[s]" for—aspires to—their qualities. She has stoically resigned herself to living an ordinary human life.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "images / Of eagle and of antelope:"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration pops up frequently in the poem, adding emphasis to the speaker's statements.

For example, the /n/ alliteration in "Now let no charitable hope" adds a little extra stress to "no," making the speaker's rejection of false hope more resounding. Something similar happens in line 4 ("I am by nature none of these"): alliteration accentuates "none," driving home the speaker's rejection of a false self-image.

The second stanza contains lots of /b/ and /s/ alliteration:

> I was, being human, born alone;
> I am, being woman, hard beset;
> I live by squeezing from a stone [...]

That crowd of plosive /b/ sounds helps evoke the "hard" problems that "beset" (crowd in on) the speaker. The phrase "squeezing from a stone" is emphatically alliterative, matching the forcefulness of the action it's describing.

Finally, there's a gentler touch of alliteration in line 11, as the phrase "merited my fear" contains a double /m/ sound. This is echoed in the /m/ consonance of the poem's final phrase: "my smile" (line 12). These softer consonants occur as the poem itself is softening its outlook slightly; life may be tough, these closing lines suggest, but it's not as awful as people sometimes make it out to be.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Now," "no"
- **Line 4:** "nature none"
- **Line 5:** "being," "born"
- **Line 6:** "being," "beset"
- **Line 7:** "squeezing," "stone"
- **Line 11:** "merited my"

PARALLELISM

The poem contains several parallel phrases and clauses, which add to the smoothly logical, balanced tone of the speaker's language.

The first example comes in line 3: "Of eagle and of antelope." The second "of" places the two phrases in parallel, clarifying that the speaker is rejecting "images" of these creatures individually, not in combination. That is, she's not refusing to picture a natural scene featuring both eagles and antelope; she's rejecting these animals as separate, overly hopeful symbols of grace, freedom, etc.

Lines 5-6 are also structured in parallel:

> I was, being human, born alone;
> I am, being woman, hard beset;

Again, this effect presents the speaker's ideas in a clear, logical manner. The second phrase builds on the first and clarifies her perspective: her life has been a struggle not only because she's "human," but because she's a "woman" (in a world that "beset[s]" women with challenges).

Finally, lines 11-12 use parallelism as they arrive at their serene conclusion:

> But none has merited my fear,
> And none has quite escaped my smile.

"My fear" and "my smile" here are almost an antithesis; the speaker is saying that the years of her life never fully warrant her anxieties *or* fully deny her happiness. Once more, parallel structure helps the speaker highlight fine distinctions and express her ideas in a clear, balanced fashion.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "Of eagle and of antelope:"
- **Lines 5-6:** "I was, being human, born alone; / I am, being woman, hard beset;"
- **Lines 11-12:** "But none has merited my fear, / And none has quite escaped my smile."

ANAPHORA

Anaphora appears in lines 4 through 7, all of which begin with the word "I":

I am by nature none of these.

I was, being human, born alone;
I am, being woman, hard beset;
I live by squeezing from a stone [...]

These recurring "I"s, followed by the words "am," "was," and "live," signal that this is a poem of self-definition. The speaker is expressing her true "nature," articulating her experience as a "human" and a "woman," and marking her place in the world. There's something serene about the repetition here: this is a speaker who knows who she is and isn't afraid to tell the reader.

There's also a near-anaphora in lines 11-12: "But none has merited my fear, / And none has quite escaped my smile." Again, the repetition conveys steadiness and poise; it also suggests that these two lines are making parallel claims. Both are saying, ultimately, that the years of the speaker's life never turn out as badly as she fears they will.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "I"
- **Line 5:** "I"
- **Line 6:** "I"
- **Line 7:** "I"

CAESURA

Notably, most of the poem contains *no* caesuras. In general, the lines flow evenly and smoothly in a reflection of the speaker's stoic serenity. However, lines 5 and 6 are exceptions to this rule, as each contains two caesuras:

I was, being human, born alone;
I am, being woman, hard beset;

These pauses serve several purposes. For example, the first pause in each line helps emphasize the distinction between "I was" and "I am." These lines end up drawing more of a comparison than a distinction, however, because both indicate that the speaker's life has always been hard.

The commas also emphasize two key parallel phrases: "being human" and "being woman." These phrases signal, in turn, that the poem *itself* is about being human and being a woman. In the speaker's view, loneliness is an inherent part of the first condition, and constant difficulties are an inherent part of the second. (The poem can be read as a kind of feminist statement as well as a statement about life in general.)

Finally, the commas slow the lines down, so that the language itself seems to flow with greater difficulty. They function almost as obstacles for the language to overcome—similar to the obstacles that have "beset" the speaker throughout her life.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "was, being human, born"
- **Line 6:** "am, being woman, hard"

METAPHOR

The poem contains two major metaphors, both of which are variations on conventional metaphors. (The references to "eagle" and "antelope" in line 3 are more symbolic than metaphorical; these animals are conventionally associated with grace, beauty, freedom, etc. See the Symbols section of this guide for more.)

In lines 7-8, the speaker claims:

I live by squeezing from a stone
What little nourishment I get.

This isn't a literal claim, of course; the speaker is playing on the proverbial expression "try to squeeze blood from a stone" (forcefully attempt to obtain something unobtainable). The poem reworks this cliché by having its speaker figuratively squeeze "nourishment" from a stone. Basically, the speaker is saying that whatever sustenance she earns in life (whether literal food or intangibles like money and respect) comes through constant struggle. She practically has to do the impossible just to survive.

The following lines also play on a conventional image: that of years passing by like figures in a parade. (Illustrators have long used similar images for New Year's cartoons and the like.) The speaker specifies that these figures wear "masks" that look "outrageous and austere" (wild and severe). This is her metaphorical way of suggesting that the years—or the future—seem frightening and unknowable as they approach. The closing lines indicate, however, that the future isn't as terrible as her worst "fear[s]" suggest.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "I live by squeezing from a stone / What little nourishment I get."
- **Lines 9-12:** "In masks outrageous and austere / The years go by in single file; / But none has merited my fear, / And none has quite escaped my smile."

PERSONIFICATION

The poem personifies two abstractions: "hope" in the first stanza and "years" in the third.

First, the speaker treats hope as an entity to be avoided or even feared. She prays that "no charitable hope" will "Confuse my mind" with false impressions of herself—in other words, that hope won't flatter her into thinking she's something she's not. The adjective "charitable" here carries a hint of irony: it literally

means "generous," but in context, it implies "*too* generous," like an overestimation of one's own capabilities. By personifying hope, the speaker *dramatizes* her struggle against this potential error; it's as if she's warding off an internal enemy.

Later, she imagines "The years" as masked figures "go[ing] by in single file." In other words, they're like costumed revelers parading past her—a metaphor for the passage of time. Symbolically, the masks also suggest that years are mysterious until they arrive; no one knows what they'll bring, or perhaps even knows quite what they mean as they pass. Even so, they're never as bad as the speaker fears, and they never fail to bring her at least a little happiness. By personifying them—humanizing them—she makes the future seem less scary. In the poem's view, the passage of time may be hard to comprehend, and it may not provide any special reason for hope, but it's nothing to panic about, either.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Now let no charitable hope / Confuse my mind with images"
- **Lines 9-12:** "In masks outrageous and austere / The years go by in single file; / But none has merited my fear, / And none has quite escaped my smile."

VOCABULARY

Charitable (Line 1) - Generous (here implying *overly* generous or indulgent).

Beset (Line 6) - Besieged; bedeviled; pressured or attacked on all sides.

Outrageous (Line 9) - Outlandish, wild, bizarre; perhaps shocking and upsetting.

Austere (Line 9) - Stark, simple, and severe.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem consists of three four-line stanzas (quatrains), each of which rhymes ABAB (that is, the first line of the stanza rhymes with the third and the second with the fourth). The poem's meter is iambic tetrameter, meaning that the lines generally follow a "da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM" rhythm.

Overall, then, the poem's form is neat, balanced, and consistent. Its language flows at a smooth and steady pace; it doesn't even contain many mid-line pauses (lines 5 and 6 are the only lines with caesuras).

This smoothness and consistency suit the poem's tone and theme. The speaker has made a kind of peace with the difficult world around her, and she views her life with a serene, stoic eye. No wonder she expresses herself in such a balanced and steady fashion.

It's also worth noting that Wylie wrote this poem during a time (the early-20th-century Modernist movement) when many poets were gravitating toward free verse and experimental poetic forms. This poem—and Wylie's work in general—maintains a traditional style, which seems to suit the speaker's unflappable consistency in the face of change (the passing "years" in the final stanza).

METER

The poem is written in iambic tetrameter. This means that its lines generally consist of four *iambs* (metrical feet, or units, containing an unstressed followed by a stressed syllable). That is, they typically follow a "da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM" rhythm.

As in most metrical poems, the meter varies in small ways from line to line. Readers can hear a couple of variations in the opening stanza, for example:

Now let | no char- | ita- | ble hope
Confuse | my mind | with im- | ages
Of ea- | gle and | of an- | telope:
I am | by na- | ture none | of these.

Arguably, the third foot of line 1 contains two unstressed syllables (it's a pyrrhic foot rather than an iamb), though this line can be read in other ways as well. The first foot of line 4 seems to be a trochee (stressed-unstressed) rather than an iamb; that is, it sounds a little more natural when read as "I am" rather than "I am." Again, however, this is a minor variation, and some readers might hear it differently.

In general, the meter remains steady, with few variations, throughout this stoic and even-keeled poem.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem uses ABAB-rhymed quatrains: four-line stanzas in which the first and third lines, as well as the second and fourth lines, rhyme with each other. The rhyme scheme for the entire poem looks like this:

ABAB CDCD EFEF

Most of the rhymes in the poem are exact, with the exception of "images"/"these" in lines 2 and 4 (which is a bit of a slant rhyme). In general, the poem's rhyming is smooth and consistent, in keeping with its even-keeled tone. Together with the steady meter, it helps convey the speaker's poise and serenity in the face of life's hardships.

SPEAKER

The poem's first-person speaker presents herself as an ordinary woman leading an ordinary life—which is to say, a challenging life.

In the first stanza, she humbly declares that she's *not* like an "eagle" or "antelope": a majestic, wild creature. "I am by nature none of these," she insists, adding in the next stanza that she's simply "human." She suggests that being human involves a certain degree of loneliness, and that, as a woman in a world often hostile to women, she is "hard beset" (besieged) by problems. With a touch of hyperbole, she compares her struggle to make her way in the world to the impossible task of "squeezing [nourishment] from a stone." At the same time, she acknowledges that the passing "years" never quite live up to her fears or fail to raise a "smile" now and then.

Implicitly, she's old enough to have gained a bit of life experience and reflect on what time has brought her. And her perspective as a woman seems important to her sense of the world; "I am, being woman, hard beset" suggests that she believes men face fewer challenges on the whole. Otherwise, she doesn't provide any specifics about her life; her voice seems relatively timeless and broadly relatable.

SETTING

The poem has no specific setting. Although the speaker refers to "eagle[s]," "antelope," "a stone," and a "mask[ed]" parade of "years," these aren't literal features of her location or time period; they're symbols and metaphors.

The poem's lack of specificity makes it seem timeless and universal. The speaker delivers broad statements about life rather than tying her observations to a particular era, place, or situation (apart from her gendered experience as a "woman"). She's an ordinary person contemplating the nature of life and the passage of time, and she could be doing so from just about anywhere.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

During her brief career in the 1920s, American poet Elinor Wylie (1885-1928) found acclaim as a writer of polished, formally traditional verse. "Now Let No Charitable Hope" was first published, under the slightly different title "Let No Charitable Hope," in *Literary Digest* in July 1922. It appeared the following year in Wylie's second collection, *Black Armour*. (This original version had one other difference: line 8 began with "The" rather than "What.") It has since become one of Wylie's best-known poems.

Wylie's career overlapped with, though it didn't fully participate in, the "modernist" revolution in English-language poetry. Between 1910 and 1940—and particularly after World War I—poets in the UK and America began experimenting radically with poetic form and content. Many switched to free verse (or a much looser type of metrical verse) and made their poems more fragmentary, allusive, and elusive.

In doing so, they joined a wave of experimentation across many art forms, a movement that collectively came to be known as "modernism." In fact, 1922, when "Now Let No Charitable Hope" first appeared, was a landmark year in poetic modernism: it also saw the publication of two era-defining experimental books, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and William Carlos Williams's *Spring and All*.

Although Wylie is sometimes classified as a modernist, her style generally remained traditional in its imagery and use of meter and rhyme. In this way, she had more in common with contemporaries such as Sara Teasdale and Edna St. Vincent Millay (though Millay's subject matter was often more radical).

In 1923, Wylie married another formally traditional poet, William Rose Benét, who went on to win the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1942. Though Wylie died without winning major awards, she earned high praise from contemporaries and remains frequently anthologized alongside other poets of the period.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The poem makes no direct reference to historical events. Instead, it uses a generalized, "timeless" voice to comment broadly on the human condition.

However, Wylie wrote it in the aftermath of historic upheaval. World War I (1915-1918), along with the influenza pandemic of 1918-1920, caused deaths in the tens of millions, shook up the world political order, and accelerated the cultural/artistic revolution known as modernism (see above). In its restrained way, "Now Let No Charitable Hope" seems to reflect the soberly realistic mood of the postwar "years."

It also refers to the problems that "beset" women in particular. At the time it was published, American women had gained the right to vote only two years earlier (1920). American historians often cite this victory as the end of "first-wave feminism," a decades-long struggle that focused mainly but not exclusively on voting and property rights. Meanwhile, the "second wave"—a broader fight against patriarchal institutions, including unequal workplaces—was still decades away. In the 1920s, Wylie's own field, literature, remained largely male-dominated and exclusionary toward women. Thus, Wylie's speaker, and Wylie herself, had good reason to note the hostility and deprivation (lack of metaphorical "nourishment") women often face.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poet's Life and Work — Read a biography of Wylie at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/elinor-wylie)
- The Poem Sung Aloud — Listen to composer Lori Laitman's musical adaptation of the poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y8Di39j5UvY)
- More on Wylie's Life — Read about the poet at Encyclopedia Britannica. (https://www.britannica.com/biography/Elinor-Wylie)
- Black Armour — Browse the 1923 volume in which the poem was first collected. (https://archive.org/details/blackarmourbooko00wyli/mode/2up)
- Wylie's Old Haunts — A brief biography, plus pictures of two of Wylie's former homes. (https://dcwritershomes.wdchumanities.org/elinor-wylie/)

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