Nuns Fret Not at Their Convent's Narrow

POEM TEXT

Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room;
And hermits are contented with their cells;
And students with their pensive citadels;
Maids at the wheel, the weaver at his loom,
Sit blithe and happy; bees that soar for bloom,
High as the highest Peak of Furness-fells,
Will murmur by the hour in foxglove bells:
In truth the prison, into which we doom
Ourselves, no prison is: and hence for me,
In sundry moods, 'twas pastime to be bound
Within the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground;
Pleased if some Souls (for such there needs must be)
Who have felt the weight of too much liberty,
Should find brief solace there, as I have found.

SUMMARY

Nuns aren't bothered by how narrow the rooms are in their convent. Likewise, religious recluses are happy with their tiny homes. And students, too, don't mind their secluded study quarters. Both young girls at their spinning wheels and weavers making textiles at their looms are carefree and happy. Bees that fly high to reach blooming flowers—high as the highest mountain in the English Furness Fells—will happily hum for hours inside the bell-shaped petals of the foxglove flower. The truth is that the prison into which we doom ourselves isn't really a prison at all. And thus, whenever I was in all kinds of moods, it was a hobby of mine to write poetry following the strict rules of the sonnet form. I'm happy if others (for there certainly are others) who have struggled with the difficulty of too much freedom should, like me, find comfort in this small space.

THEMES

RESTRICTION, FREEDOM, AND POETRY

The speaker of "Nuns Fret Not" asserts that restriction is actually a source of freedom. The poem opens by listing a series of people who live or work in confined spaces: nuns in convents, hermits in solitary rooms, students in libraries, and so forth. None of these people are fazed by their confinement, the speaker says, and in fact, they benefit or delight in being restrained. Suggesting that too much freedom is overwhelming, the speaker argues that people can find joy, purpose, and even liberty *through* structure. And the speaker brings all this up in a sonnet in order to make a point about the nature of poetry itself: the sonnet form, with all its rules and specifications, can provide immense freedom for both a writer and a reader.

To this speaker, confinement can be satisfying because it encourages deep, focused engagement. Neither nuns, nor hermits, nor students worry about the restrictions of their environments because these spaces provide them with all that they need in order to pray, think, or study.

Seeming "prison[s]" like the "narrow room[s]" of a convent or the "pensive Citadels" of a university thus aren't really "prison[s]" at all, but rather dedicated spaces that allow their residents to engage more fully and exclusively with their goals (i.e., in the nuns' case, to feel closer to god without any distractions).

Likewise, craftspeople, like maids at a spinning wheel and weavers at a loom, can find happiness in the sense of focus and purpose their crafts give them. Sure, the weaver can't carve wood with a loom, but that's not what a loom is for; though it restricts his behavior to weaving, it also liberates the weaver in the sense that he is able to dedicate himself to a single task—and, in doing so, to experiment with new and interesting ways of weaving that he might otherwise overlook. Even bees, though they might delight in the freedom of flying over vast expanses, particularly delight in their busy work inside the tiny space of a single flower.

Similarly, the confines of the sonnet form can be a source of liberation. The sonnet, as opposed to something like free verse, has many rules about rhyme, meter, and length. Though the form might appear like a "scanty" plot of ground with its mere fourteen lines, the speaker says that the tiny space of the sonnet is big enough for something exciting to grow.

In other words, the sonnet, while supposedly as limiting as those convents' "narrow room[s]," is actually a place for creativity and excitement. Like the weaver's loom, the sonnet form forces the poet to really dig into an art form and see what they discover. "Too much liberty," by contrast, can be overwhelming or "weighty" for a poet. Having to follow set rules (and make careful decisions about when to deviate from those rules) can actually give a poet a greater sense of freedom than a form where no such rules exist.

Confinement and freedom, the poem reveals, are not the opposites one might expect them to be. The most beautiful, exciting, and liberating work can be the fruit of restriction.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room;
And hermits are contented with their cells;
And students with their pensive citadels;

The poem begins by listing three different kinds of people with different aims or occupations: nuns, hermits, and students. These people all have one thing in common, in that they work and/or live in a very self-contained space:

1. Convents, which are houses for particular religious orders, are often attached to churches or are located in remote areas far from society. Nuns who live in convents typically have small, bare rooms.
2. Likewise, hermits are people who live simple, isolated lives removed from the rest of society (often for religious reasons). The cell the poem speaks of is not the cell of a prison, but rather refers to a single room.
3. The student's "citadel," meanwhile, refers to a raised room, perhaps in the tower of a university or in some kind of academic building. That this citadel is "pensive," or thoughtful, emphasizes the fact that it's a place for quiet study and reflection.

None of these spaces is particularly glamorous, yet each allows their inhabitants to carry out their purpose: a nun must belong to a convent if she is associated with a particular religious order; a hermit not living in isolation isn't a hermit at all; and a student cannot be a student without a place to study! For nuns, hermits, and students, then, physical confinement thus provides identity and purpose. These tight spaces free them from distraction and allow them to focus on their aims: becoming closer to God, reflecting on the nature of life, learning, and so forth. As such, none of these people "fret," or worry, about their confinement. For them, such spaces are in fact amenable to deep creativity and freedom.

On the level of form, these opening lines also reflect the relationship between confinement and freedom. The first three lines are composed largely in iambic pentameter, a meter of five iambs (feet with a da-DUM rhythm) per line. This meter is typical of sonnets, yet Wordsworth tweaks things from the getgo.

In strict iambic pentamer, the opening line would look like this, which sounds a bit unnatural:

Nuns fret | not at | their con- | vent's nar- | row room;

Read in a more natural cadence, the words "Nuns" and "not" would receive stressed beats while "fret" and "at" would not. In other words, the first two feet of the poem are actually trochees—essentially the opposite of an iamb, DUM-da:

Nuns fret | not at | their con- | vent's nar- | row room;
And her- | mits are | conten- | ted with | their cells;

Varying the meter like this adds emphasis to the speaker's opening declaration that these "Nuns" absolutely do "not" worry about their confinement. Were the poem written in free verse, without any regular meter, such a variation wouldn't stand out quite so much; those opening trochees are all the more striking *because* the poem then falls back into the expected study drumbeat of iambic pentameter. The poem's *structure*, then, is precisely what allows the speaker to twist and bend the poem's language in meaningful ways!

Also notice the repetition within these opening lines. The word "and" appears twice: first at the beginning of line 2 and then again at the beginning of line 3. This use of polysyndeton/anaphora sets up a steady, logical structure for the poem.

LINES 4-5

Maids at the wheel, the weaver at his loom,
Sit blithe and happy;

The speaker describes two more kinds of people who are happily confined: maids at their spinning wheels (that is, sitting in front of the tools they use to spin thread or yarn from fibers) and weavers at their looms (that is, sitting in front of the tools they use to weave).

In these lines, the speaker turns from the restriction of physical spaces (the room, cell, and citadel of the previous lines) to the restriction of certain single-use tools. Each of these tools cannot be used for more than its one set purpose (to spin thread or to weave). In this way, the tools are like the physically restrictive rooms of the previous lines.

And yet, once again, both maids and the weaver, the speaker says, are "blithe and happy." In this context, the word blithe means cheerfully indifferent or carefree. They find joy *within* the confines of their crafts. Just as the poet would be happy with a pen and paper, these people are content because they have the tools they need to create. And again, the poem implies that they can innovate *within* those crafts because of limitations. The weaver, for example, can create splendid and exciting textiles because he must constantly work to enliven his one and only craft.

The alliteration and assonance of line 4 add music and beauty to the poem at this moment, subtly evoking the artistic skill of

these spinners and weavers:

> Maids at the wheel, the weaver at his loom,

Of course, while the word "blithe" certainly has positive connotations, to be blithe can *also* mean to be unthinking. And while finding purpose in one's work is undeniably a good thing, there are hints here that limitation might be pacifying, and that it can lead a person to settle into unaware, and even robotic, familiarity.

LINES 5-7

bees that soar for bloom,
High as the highest Peak of Furness-fells,
Will murmur by the hour in foxglove bells:

It's not just people who can find joy and peace within "narrow room[s]," the speaker says: bees, too, can find fulfillment through restriction.

A bee, the speaker points out, can fly around freely and soar up to the "highest Peak of Furness-fells"—that is, to the top of a mountainous area in Cumbria, England—in search of blooming flowers. The polyptoton here, with the word "high" followed by the word "highest," emphasizes the vastness of the space open to the busy bee: notice how the word itself gets longer and larger, expanding as if to evoke the immensity of the bee's habitat.

And yet, even at the top of this mountainous peak, that same high-flying bee finds sustenance by spending its time *inside* a single flower (specifically, within the petals of a "foxglove" flower, which do indeed look like little "bells").

There's a sharp contrast, then, between the vast expanse available to the bee and the tiny space of the flower petals in which it "murmur[s]" away "the hour." Notice how the sounds of the poem itself reflect the contrast between these spaces: "Furness-fells" is echoed by "foxglove bells." Those petals are like the nun's "narrow room" or student's "pensive citadel": a confined space within which the bee is content, happily drinking the nectar it needs to survive.

The alliteration in these lines, meanwhile, grabs the reader's attention and brings the lines' imagery to life. The /b/ sounds in line 5 in particular ("bees that soar for bloom") emphasize the sound and movement of the buzzing bee.

LINES 8-9

In truth the prison, into which we doom
Ourselves, no prison is:

In the short space of a line and a half, the speaker repeats the word "prison" twice. This diacope creates a tight paradox, as the speaker introduces a word only to reject it a few beats later: a prison is not a prison.

What "prison" is the speaker referring to? Any one of those confined spaces or circumstances listed earlier in the poem (in fact, the word "prison" recalls the word "cell" in the second line). The speaker is saying that being bound or restricted doesn't necessarily lead to actual restriction—so long as that confined space is suited to one's purpose; a bee buzzing around drinking nectar from a flower doesn't feel confined by its petals, just as "nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room."

Given the speaker's seeming belief that restriction can be a good thing, the word "doom" in line 8 is an interesting choice. Perhaps the speaker is being tongue in cheek—using the word "doom" with a wink and a nod—or maybe the speaker is acknowledging that certain people feel compelled to "imprison" themselves. Hermits feel as though they must isolate themselves from society in order to become closer to God; students must lock themselves away to focus on their studies. Even if the entrance into a confined room or a particular occupation will ultimately lead to contentment, such a choice can feel scary or threatening at times.

Metrically, these lines generally conform to the iambic pentameter that has dominated the poem so far (lines of 10 syllables in a da-DUM rhythm). And yet, there is a bit of a trip up across the line break between 8 and 9. While the majority of the lines in the poem are end-stopped, coming to a clear pause before moving onto the next line, this line is emphatically not. The sentence continues smoothly across the line break without any hesitation:

> In truth the prison, into which we doom
> Ourselves, no prison is [...]

This is the first true enjambment in the poem, and it feels all the more striking because the poem has been so clearly end-stopped up until this point. The speaker essentially must cut line 8 off after "doom" in order to stick to the poem's expected meter (because line 8 is already 10 syllables long).

This enjambment, then, shows the speaker again playing with the sonnet form (the very "prison" chosen for this poem). The demands of the poem's form are what create the space for this moment of excitement and renewed urgency.

LINES 9-11

and hence for me,
In sundry moods, 'twas pastime to be bound
Within the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground;

This poem is a Petrarchan sonnet, a form composed of an opening octave (an eight-line stanza) followed by a sestet (a six-line stanza). Usually, the octave proposes a problem or argument of some kind to which the sestet then responds. Line 9, which marks the beginning of the sestet, is called the poem's turn or *volta*—the moment when the speaker switches gears.

In this particular poem, the volta begins halfway through line 9—after a firm caesura that separates the line into two parts.

The rest of the poem then offers a different approach to the topic at hand, as the speaker turns away from more abstract rumination on the activity of bees and hermits and instead begins discussing *himself*:

- The speaker, who can be read as a stand-in for Wordsworth, also experiences this feeling of liberation *through* constraint; the "prison" to which he "dooms" himself is the sonnet. For him, at many points, in all sorts of moods, he liked working "Within the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground"—that is, he enjoyed writing poems that stuck to the sonnet's strict form.
- With its strict rhyme scheme and meter, the sonnet is indeed quite a "binding" pasttime. It's also only 14 lines long—hence the "scantiness" of its metaphorical "plot of ground." And yet, the speaker finds that there is joy in all this restriction. Perhaps that's because, in order to work with the constraints of the sonnet, the poet must innovate linguistically.

These lines transform the poem into an *ars poetica*: a poetic meditation on poetry. That is, the poem itself seeks to give some kind of explanation as to what the "art of poetry" is. Fittingly, then, Wordsworth uses many devices that draw attention to the fact that this is poetry.

For example, note all the sibilance here, as well as the full rhyme between "ground" and "bound":

> [...] and hence for me,
> In sundry moods, 'twas pastime to be bound
> Within the sonnet's scanty plot of ground

The language sounds carefully, deliberately selected.

LINES 12-14

> *Pleased if some Souls (for such there needs must be)*
> *Who have felt the weight of too much liberty,*
> *Should find brief solace there, as I have found.*

The speaker moves from discussing his *own* comfort writing sonnets to hoping that *others* find sonnets useful. The speaker basically says, "I can't be the only one to find too much freedom oppressive." And it would thus make the speaker happy (he'd be "pleased") if other people found "brief solace," or momentary comfort, within the restrictions of the sonnet form.

It's unclear if the speaker is encouraging other people to *write* sonnets or simply hoping that others find peace in *reading* sonnets. Regardless, these lines present the most compact and explicit exploration of the poem's theme: the weight of liberty.

According to the speaker, artistic freedom—defined here as the ability to write about anything without any kind of set form—can, paradoxically, be a burden! There's such a thing as "too much liberty," the speaker says—a sentiment that anyone trying to write and confronting a daunting blank page has probably felt! To the speaker, having some sort of structure—some guidelines to follow—is actually *conducive* to creativity.

POETIC DEVICES

REPETITION

The poem uses a few different kinds of repetition to add emphasis throughout. The first example is the polysyndeton of lines 2 and 3. Given that these repeated "ands" begin two consecutive phrases, this is also an example of anaphora.

Whatever readers call it, this device makes the speaker's argument feel methodical. The speaker is compiling a steady list of different kinds of people who are unfazed by confinement, and the repeated "ands" grant this list a sense of structure. Right from the start, then, the poem comes across as a worked-out, well-prepared argument. With each "and," the speaker adds another bit of evidence in support of the thesis—and it feels as though this list could go on and on.

Later, in line 6, the speaker uses polyptoton to increase the sense of drama in the poem. The image of a bee flying across the wide, mountainous landscape of Furness-fells gains potency as "high" gives way to "highest." This expansion of the word's length mimics the wide, unfolding landscape available to the bee.

Finally, the diacope of lines 8 and 9, with the repetition of the word "prison," is part of the poem's paradoxical thesis statement: none of the so-called "prison[s]" introduced in the poem so far is actually a prison at all. The "narrow room" of a convent might feel restrictive and close-off, but it doesn't impede the nuns' purpose. On the contrary, its simplicity is meant to help them focus on their relationship with God.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "And"
- **Line 3:** "And"
- **Line 6:** "High," "highest"
- **Line 8:** "prison"
- **Line 9:** "prison"

ASYNDETON

The beginning of the poem uses polysyndeton, with each group of people mentioned being separated by the conjunction "and" (nuns *and* hermits *and* students). But the very next line uses the opposite device: asyndeton. The speaker again introduces groups of people, but separates them by a simple comma:

> Maids at the wheel, the weaver at his loom,

The use of asyndeton here picks up the poem's pace. The speaker is getting to the point more quickly; the asyndeton essentially signals the speaker saying to the reader, "You get it by now!" The swift movement between those maids and the weaver suggest that the speaker could list off any number of professions and come to the same conclusion: that a sense of structure can make people "Sit blithe and happy."

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "Maids at the wheel, the weaver at his loom, / Sit blithe and happy;"

ALLITERATION

There are multiple instances of alliteration in the poem, which add music and emphasis to the speaker's language.

Take the poem's first line, for example, which repeats the /n/ sound in "Nuns," "not," and "narrow." (Note that there are even more /n/ sounds here when including broader consonance: "Nuns," "convent.)" This repetition adds intensity to the poem's opening; it makes the speaker's declaration that these "Nuns" don't worry about the size of their rooms feel all the more confident and forceful.

In line 4, the shared /w/ sounds of "wheel" and "weaver" combine with assonance (those long /ee/ sounds: "wheel"/"weaver") to again make the speaker's language more striking. Repetition like this simply *sounds* good, making the poem more sonically interesting and engaging for the reader. In other words, alliteration draws the reader in.

Another clear moment of alliteration pops up in line 5, which contains three words that begin the /b/ sound:

> Sit blithe and happy; bees that soar for bloom,

Those repeated /b/ sounds are bold and ear-catching, calling readers' attention to both the carefree happiness of those maids and weavers and to the bumbling flight of the little bees.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Nuns," "not," "narrow"
- **Line 2:** "cells"
- **Line 3:** "students," "citadels"
- **Line 4:** "wheel," "weaver"
- **Line 5:** "blithe," "bees," "bloom"
- **Line 6:** "High," "highest," "Furness-fells"
- **Line 8:** "which we"
- **Line 10:** "be bound"
- **Line 11:** "Sonnet's scanty"
- **Line 12:** "some Souls," "such"

CONSONANCE

Consonance works just like alliteration in the poem, heightening the speaker's language and adding emphasis to certain ideas and images. Note, for instance, how all the /n/ and /r/ sounds in the poem's very first line makes the speaker's point come across more strongly:

> Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room;

Much of the consonance here is more specifically sibilance. Take the many /s/ and /z/ sounds at the end of the poem:

> In sundry moods, 'twas pastime to be bound
> Within the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground;
> Pleased if some Souls (for such there needs must be)

All these repeated sounds make the poem feel fluid and intricately connected. They might also remind the reader of the poem's most important "s" word: sonnet!

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Nuns," "not," "convent's narrow room"
- **Line 2:** "cells"
- **Line 3:** "students," "pensive citadels"
- **Line 4:** "wheel," "weaver"
- **Line 5:** "blithe," "bees," "soar," "bloom"
- **Line 6:** "High," "highest," "Furness-fells"
- **Line 7:** "foxglove bells"
- **Line 8:** "which we"
- **Line 9:** "hence"
- **Line 10:** "sundry moods, 'twas pastime to be bound"
- **Line 11:** "Sonnet's scanty plot," "ground"
- **Line 12:** "Pleased," "some Souls," "such," "needs must"
- **Line 13:** "felt," "weight," "too"
- **Line 14:** "find brief," "solace," "found"

CAESURA

There are many examples of caesura in this poem. Sometimes these mid-line pauses simply grant space for the speaker to introduce a new image or idea into the poem, as in lines 4-5:

> Maids at the wheel, the weaver at his loom,
> Sit blithe and happy; bees that soar for bloom,

Elsewhere, caesurae mark striking transitional moments in the poem. This is clearest in line 9:

> Ourselves, no prison is: and hence for me,

Here, the caesura separates the two major parts of the poem. Prior to this colon, the poem is relatively impersonal; the speaker talks about various people (and bees) who find

contentment through restriction. But after the caesura, the language of the poem turns inward; the poem becomes about the speaker himself.

The colon here is a dramatic means of breaking up the line and marking this transition in the poem.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** ", "
- **Line 5:** "; "
- **Line 8:** ", "
- **Line 9:** ": "
- **Line 10:** ", "
- **Line 14:** ", "

ENJAMBMENT

Most of the poem's lines are end-stopped: they come to a clear pause, which creates a methodical and orderly feeling of progression. This sense of order makes the poem's rare moments of enjambment, when lines spill across breaks without any pause or punctuation, all the more noticeable.

Enjambment first appears in line 8:

> In truth the prison, into which we doom
> Ourselves, no prison is: and hence for me,

Delaying the word "Ourselves" creates a sense of anticipation and momentum at an important point in the poem: the *volta*, or "turn." This is the moment in a Petrarchan sonnet when the poem switches gears—moving from discussing a problem or argument of some sort into responding to that problem.

In this sonnet, the shift in direction is clear, but it doesn't happy in the space *between* lines 8 and 9. Instead, because of the enjambment, the poem's "turn" occurs within line 9 itself—right after "no prison is," at which point the speaker starts talking about himself. The speaker thus toys with the conventions of the sonnet form a bit, stretching them to emphasize the idea that they really are "no prison" at all; instead, they provide a general structure that poets can then break as they see fit.

The enjambment of line 10 is similarly evocative. Breaking the line after "bound" rather ironically suggests that the poet isn't "bound" at all:

> In sundry moods, 'twas pastime to be bound
> Within the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground;

Line 10 has the expected 10 syllables of a line of iambic pentameter, meaning that the poet has, in one way, stuck to the sonnet form. But he's also cut a phrase off right before its preposition, enlivening the poem's language and breaking free from the "bound[s]" of the line break.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-9:** "doom / Ourselves"
- **Lines 10-11:** "bound / Within"

PARALLELISM

The poem uses parallelism to, appropriately, lend a sense of structure and order to its examples of how structure and order can be creatively, spiritually, and intellectually fulfilling.

The poem's opening lines all follow the same general format and make the same general point: the speaker introduces a group of people and then says that they are perfectly happy with confinement. Each group—nuns, hermits, students, maids, and weavers—gets paired with a space or object in which they fulfill their purpose: a convent, "cells" (that is, one-room homes), "pensive citadels" (thoughtful study quarters), the "wheel" (spinning wheel), and the "loom."

Each of these people is unbothered by these seeming limitations on their freedom—an idea that the poem's insistent parallelism hammers home for readers.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-5:** "Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room; / And hermits are contented with their cells; / And students with their pensive citadels; / Maids at the wheel, the weaver at his loom, / Sit blithe and happy;"

METAPHOR

The speaker uses two metaphors in the poem, both of which relate to the idea of confinement.

First, in lines 8-9, the speaker calls the restrictive spaces mentioned earlier in the poem—those convent rooms, hermit cells, and so forth—"prison[s]." A prison, of course, connotes the total loss of freedom. But the speaker goes on to insist that none of these prisons are really prisons at all; in limiting freedom, they actually help those who are "imprisoned" focus fully on a specific goal or purpose.

The speaker turns to metaphor again when talking about "the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground." In comparing this poetic form to a small area of land, the speaker seeks to show how restrictive the sonnet is. After all, the form allows for only 14 lines with a strict meter and rhyme scheme. And yet, the speaker doesn't feel limited because he has all he needs within this "plot of ground" to create art.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-9:** "In truth the prison, into which we doom / Ourselves, no prison is"
- **Lines 10-11:** "twas pastime to be bound / Within the

> Sonnet's scanty plot of ground;"

VOCABULARY

Fret (Line 1) - Worry, fidget, or mope.

Hermit (Line 2) - Someone who has withdrawn from society to live in isolation, often for religious reasons.

Cells (Line 2) - Living spaces that consist of a single chamber or room.

Pensive (Line 3) - Thoughtful, reflective.

Citadel (Line 3) - A fortress or castle. In the poem, Wordsworth is likely thinking about the citadel-like buildings of a university.

Blithe (Line 5) - Cheerful, carefree.

Peak of Furness-fells (Line 6) - "Furness-fells" is a range of hills and mountains in the English Lake District, the region in which Wordsworth spent most of his life.

Foxglove (Line 7) - A kind of cottage garden flower, so named because its bell-shaped flowers look like little slippers for foxes!

Sundry (Line 10) - All sorts of, many kinds of.

Solace (Line 14) - Comfort or consolation.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem is a Petrarchan sonnet, meaning it has 14 lines broken up into two main chunks: an eight-line octave followed by a six-line sestet. The octave, in turn, can be broken down further into two quatrains (four-line stanzas) with an ABBA rhyme scheme; the sestet, meanwhile, consists of two tercets (three-line stanzas).

Typically, the octave of a Petrarchan sonnet proposes a problem or argument of sorts, to which the sestet then responds. The shift between these sections is called the poem's turn or *volta*, and it usually shows up in line 9. In this poem's octave, the speaker ruminates on various people/creatures who are happy to exist within confined spaces or circumstances. The poem's turn then shows up in the *middle* of line 9, after a clear caesura:

> Ourselves, no prison is: and hence for me,

Having declared that none of the aforementioned situations is a true "prison," the speaker spends the poem's discussing the implications of this idea on his own work.

It makes sense that Wordsworth follows the traditional sonnet form here given that the poem is, in part, about the sonnet form! The speaker praises the limitations of "the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground"—with its specific length, meter, rhymes, and volta—because such restrictions offer "solace," or peace and tranquility. Having "too much liberty," in contrast, can be overwhelming.

METER

The poem is written in iambic pentameter, which is the usual meter for sonnets. An iamb is a poetic foot made up of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable, creating a da-DUM rhythm. Pentameter just means there are five of these iambs per line, creating a total of 10 syllables.

Here are lines 10-11 as an example of this meter in action:

> In sun- | dry moods, | 'twas pas- | time to | be bound
> Within | the Son- | net's scan- | ty plot | of ground;

The rigid metrical pattern of iambic pentameter is just one of the typical constraints of the sonnet form—one of the ways the poet "binds" himself in a "scanty plot of ground."

The poem has slight variations, however, as metered poems often do. Take the opening line:

> Nuns fret | not at | their con- | vent's nar- | row room;

Or line 4:

> Maids at | the wheel, | the weav- | er at | his loom,

Both lines here start with trochees, metrical feet with a stressed-unstressed pattern. (Note that "Nuns fret" might also be scanned as a spondee, two stressed beats in a row: "Nuns fret.")

Variations like this are all the more interesting *because* the rest of the poem is so regular. They add emphasis to the image of those maids and nuns.

Another interesting variation comes in the poem's penultimate line, which might be scanned as follows:

> Who have felt | the weight | of too | much lib- | erty,

While this is mostly iambic, the first foot is an anapest (da-da-DUM; "Who have felt") and the fourth is another spondee, appropriately putting an extra stress on the phrase "too much." In total, this line is 11 syllables long. It's as though the "weight" of that "liberty" has stretched out the line itself.

RHYME SCHEME

A typical Petrarchan sonnet has a rhyme scheme of either ABBA ABBA CDC CDC or ABBA ABBA CDE CDE. While this poem largely follows that rhyme scheme, it makes a slight departure in the sestet. It goes:

ABBA ABBA CDD CCD

The opening octave follows the sonnet's expected pattern perfectly, sandwiching couplets between those A rhymes. And throughout the poem, all of the rhymes in the poem are full; there are no slant rhymes here. This adds to the poem's sense of cohesion and containment. Careful, regular rhyme gives the poem a feeling of internal logic.

Notice, however, how Wordsworth switches the expected rhymes of lines 11 and 12. A more typical sonnet would have a C rhyme (here, the "-ee" sound) for line 11 and a D rhyme (the "-ound" rhymes) for line 12. Ironically, this swap comes right after the speaker expresses delight at being "bound" in the sonnet! Though the speaker says that he is being contained, then, the restraint is not *so* strict much that it binds him in complete adherence to form. That is, he can play around with the poem's rhyme scheme a bit, keeping things interested and surprising.

SPEAKER

The speaker of this sonnet is a poet who, appropriately, takes "solace" in writing sonnets. The "narrow" confines of the sonnet form, this speaker argues, aren't a prison, but a paradoxically liberating set of boundaries: within a sonnet's restrictive form, the speaker feels, true poetic freedom lies.

The poem invites the reader to imagine that the poem's speaker is Wordsworth himself: after all, this is a sonnet about writing sonnets! What's more, the poem belongs to a set of poems that Wordsworth wrote while mourning the French Revolution's descent from stirring idealism into brutal violence. At such a time, "too much liberty" might indeed have struck Wordsworth as dangerous.

SETTING

The poem does not have a particular setting. But the kinds of people the poem mentions—nuns, students, hermits, weavers, maids—evoke the Europe of the late 1700s and early 1800s. All of these figures live in a contented seclusion.

The only specific place name that gets mentioned here is "Furness Fells," a hilly area in England's Lake District. In hearkening back to the English countryside, this sonnet might reveal Wordsworth's own desire to return to his home country: many scholars believe that he wrote this poem while traveling in France.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

This poem was the opening sonnet to Wordsworth's *Poems in Two Volumes*, which was published in 1807 and cemented Wordsworth's reputation as a major Romantic poet. *Poems* actually came after what is perhaps Wordsworth's most famous collection, the *Lyrical Ballads*— a joint publication with fellow "Lake District" poet Samuel Coleridge. *Lyrical Ballads* contains some of Wordsworth and Coleridge's most famous poems, including Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" and Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner."

The preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, written by Wordsworth, functions as a statement of Wordsworth's poetic principles, and it also captures some of the major concerns of the Romantic movement in general. In it, Wordsworth describes poetry as a "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" and proposes that the language of poetry should be closer to that of natural spoken language, the "real language of men."

The Romantics also sought to reconnect with a past untouched by the contemporary forces of industrialization and modernization. As such, it makes sense that Wordsworth praises the sonnet's capabilities in "Nuns Fret Not." Sonnets are one of the oldest poetic forms around, first emerging in 13th-century Italy and making their way into English in the 1500s. This poem is more specifically a *Petrarchan* sonnet, a specific form popularized by the Italian Renaissance poet Francesco Petrarca in the 1400s.

By Wordsworth's time, sonnets had long been out of fashion. Wordsworth, along with Charlotte Smith and Coleridge, is an important figure in the form's revival.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Nuns Fret Not" was likely written in 1802, either during or after Wordsworth's time in Calais, France. In 1791, Wordsworth had traveled to France because of his enthusiasm for the French Revolution. The revolution's principles of equality, brotherhood, and liberty appealed to Wordsworth, and English Romantic poetry more broadly was greatly influenced by the intellectual and ideological repercussions of the French Revolution.

When the violence of the Revolution intensified, however, Wordsworth was forced to flee the country, and it was not until 1802, after the Peace of Amiens, that he was able to return to France. Many of the sonnets written during and after this trip are more political in theme and reflect Wordsworth's reconsideration and rejection of revolutionary ideology.

Romantic writers were also responding to the changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution in Europe. During his lifetime, Wordsworth saw the development of new

technologies that would dramatically change the economy and environment of his home country. In its attention to the beauty of nature and pre-industrial forms of labor (such as thread spinning and textile weaving), "Nuns Fret Not" expresses a kind of nostalgia for a simpler way of life in a rapidly changing world.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- More on the Lake District — Learn more about the Lake District, the area where some of Romanticism's biggest names lived and worked. (https://www.lakedistrict.gov.uk/visiting/localspecialities/famouswriters)
- More on Wordsworth — Find a treasure trove of Wordsworth resources at the British Library. (https://www.bl.uk/people/william-wordsworth)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a reading of the poem. (https://youtu.be/LxagdGPxz2U)
- A Wordsworth Biography — Read more about Wordsworth's life and work. (https://www.biography.com/writer/william-wordsworth)
- Preface to the Lyrical Ballads — Read the Preface to Wordsworth and Coleridge's Lyrical Ballads—a groundbreaking work that remains one of the most important treatises on English literature. (https://faculty.csbsju.edu/dbeach/beautytruth/Wordsworth-PrefaceLB.pdf)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM WORDSWORTH POEMS

- A Complaint
- A Slumber did my Spirit Seal
- Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802
- Expostulation and Reply
- Extract from The Prelude (Boat Stealing)
- I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud
- Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey
- Lines Written in Early Spring
- London, 1802
- My Heart Leaps Up
- Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood
- She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways
- The Solitary Reaper
- The Tables Turned
- The World Is Too Much With Us
- We Are Seven

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