Sonnet to Science

POEM TEXT

Science! true daughter of Old Time thou art!
Who alterest all things with thy peering eyes.
Why preyest thou thus upon the poet's heart,
Vulture, whose wings are dull realities?
How should he love thee? or how deem thee wise,
Who wouldst not leave him in his wandering
To seek for treasure in the jewelled skies,
Albeit he soared with an undaunted wing?
Hast thou not dragged Diana from her car,
And driven the Hamadryad from the wood
To seek a shelter in some happier star?
Hast thou not torn the Naiad from her flood,
The Elfin from the green grass, and from me
The summer dream beneath the tamarind tree?

SUMMARY

Oh, Science—you truly are the daughter of ancient time. You change everything with your inquisitive eyes. Why do you target the poet's heart, you bird of prey, with your wings made up of boring reality and facts? How can a poet love you? How can a poet admire your intelligence, if you don't let him wander freely to search for beauty and inspiration in the glittering skies (even as he still soars fearlessly)? Haven't you ripped Diana, the goddess of the hunt, out of her chariot? And scared the tree-nymphs out of the forest to find safety in some better world? Haven't you frightened the water nymphs out of the water, and the elves from the grass? And me—haven't you taken me out of my summery dream underneath the tamarind tree?

THEMES

SCIENCE VS. ART AND CREATIVITY

Edgar Allan Poe's "Sonnet to Science" pits science against the imagination, beauty, and art. Written during Britain's Industrial Revolution, the poem uses science as a catch-all term for technological progress and strict, evidence-based rationalism. Both of these things, the speaker argues, actively destroy creativity and inspiration with their cold, hard logic.

The poem implies that being creative demands the freedom to dream of things that aren't *strictly* real or true. Poems come from the "poet's heart," the speaker says. They are a "treasure" awaiting those willing to "wander[]" in the "jewelled skies" with an "undaunted wing." That is, great poetry and art require great and fearless feats of the imagination.

Science, by contrast, deals in plain facts and dispassionate observations, and it thus poses a grave threat to creativity. Science is a "true daughter of Old Time"—that is, like the unstoppable forces of time, it lays waste to everything in its path. It's a bird of prey whose wings are made of "dull realities" (boring facts), unable to soar to new, unimaginable worlds. It cruelly feasts on the poet's heart, and the world looks far less interesting when viewed through its "peering eyes."

To illustrate science's power, the speaker describes it driving weird and wonderful mythical figures from their realms. It "drags" Diana, Roman goddess of the hunt and moon, from her chariot; flushes tree spirits from the forest in order "To seek a shelter in some happier star" (that is, to seek safety on a different planet); and tears water nymphs and elves from their watery and grassy homes. Basically, in explaining how the world works, it makes the world less magical and mystical.

The speaker may have a grudging respect for science, but they lament the brutal way in which it limits and even crushes the free creative spirit. Where will great works of art come from, the poem implicitly asks, if not from *beyond* the limits of the rational mind? Even the speaker's own "summer dream" is stolen by science, leaving the speaker isolated "beneath the tamarind tree," waiting for inspiration that science has ensured won't come.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

Science! true daughter of Old Time thou art!
Who alterest all things with thy peering eyes.

The poem begins with an apostrophe: the speaker calls out to "Science" directly, as though it were a godly figure who might respond. Science, the speaker says, is the "true daughter of Old Time." This accusation personifies not just science but "Old Time" as well:

- Poe might have Father Time in mind here, a kind of composite mythological figure inspired by the Greek

god Cronos. Father Time represents time's constant forward momentum and, accordingly, its destructive power. Everything decays and dies—and it's all Old Time's fault.
- This opening line, then, draws a parallel between how science preys on the imagination and how time destroys "all things."

As the title reveals, this poem is a sonnet. It uses the classic sonnet meter of iambic pentameter, which means that its lines each consist of five iambs (poetic feet with an unstressed-stressed beat pattern, da-DUM).

Except, the poem actually begins with a trochee (DUM-da):

Sci ence! | true daugh- | ter of | Old Time | thou art!

This makes the opening sound particularly dramatic, as though the speaker *really* needs to speak to science, and right now. The third foot here is also a pyrrhic (two unstressed beats in a row) followed by a spondee (two stressed beats). This makes "Old Time" ring out with added force, reflecting its power.

In the next line, the speaker declares that science "alterest" (or alters) everything simply by looking at it with its "peering eyes." Science has a sharp, piercing gaze that sees into "all things" and in the process changes them.

This image of personified "Science" staring at the world brings to mind the scientific method. Science relies on careful, precise observation in order to reveal how the world works. And these revelations, the speaker argues, make the world seem less mysterious and magical; there's no place for dreaming or make-believe (and, ultimately, poetry).

LINES 3-4

Why preyest thou thus upon the poet's heart,
Vulture, whose wings are dull realities?

From the third line onwards, the speaker talks exclusively in the form of rhetorical questions. The speaker is trying to prove a point and doesn't expect science to actually pipe up and respond.

These lines depict science as a bird of prey that has "the poet's heart" in its sights. The speaker isn't being literal here: the "poet's heart" represents the artist's thoughtful, creative center. This is what science metaphorically feasts on. Note, too, that vultures are scavengers—they eat things that are *dead*. Science, in the speaker's estimation, thus doesn't simply run *counter* to creativity and imagination but *thrives* on their *destruction*.

In the next line, the speaker declares that this vulture's "wings are dull realities." That is, science soars on cold, hard, and, in the speaker's mind, utterly boring facts.

The sounds of these lines help to convey the speaker's disgust and frustration. Listen, for example, to the sharp, biting alliteration and consonance of "preyest" and "poet's." It sounds like the speaker is spitting out these words in disgust, revolted by science's cruelty.

Line 4, like line 1, begins with a trochee: "Vulture," this heavy opening stress making it seem as if the science-vulture is imposing its presence on the poem. "Vulture" and "dull" also chime together, making "dull" seem like a frightening echo of that first stressed syllable.

LINES 5-8

How should he love thee? or how deem thee wise,
Who wouldst not leave him in his wandering
To seek for treasure in the jewelled skies,
Albeit he soared with an undaunted wing?

The speaker begins the sonnet's second quatrain using the same devices as the first to portray science as a malicious influence on the imagination: apostrophe (the speaker is talking directly to science), personification (the speaker is treating science as an individual figure with will and agency), and rhetorical questions.

The speaker asks how a poet could possibly "love" science when it destroys everything "he" (that is, the poet) holds dear. Science doesn't value what poetry values (things like emotion, spontaneity, and imagination). How, then, wonders the speaker, can a poet consider science to be "wise"? In other words, how can a poet trust science's guidance? Science claims to advance humankind's knowledge and understanding. But, the poem implies, there are aspects of life that *can't* be known or understood through testing and measurement.

The speaker says that a poet has to "wander[]" through the "jewelled skies" in order to find "treasure." This is a metaphorical depiction of what it feels like to be creative: it's like mosying about among the sparkling stars above in search of inspiration.

When the speaker says that science "wouldst not leave him in his wandering," this means that science won't just let the poet wander in this heavenly world of imagination. The poet must be allowed to have his head in the clouds, but science pulls him back down to earth. That's because science deals in fact, not fancy.

Good poetry also requires a certain kind of fearless creativity, the speaker says. The poet is someone who has "soared with an undaunted"—brave, unfrightened—"wing." This contrasts with science's own metaphorical wings from line 4. The poet's wings are fearless, helping them soar high into the outer reaches of the imagination. But science's wings are made of "dull realities"—facts and figures.

LINES 9-12

Hast thou not dragged Diana from her car,

And driven the Hamadryad from the wood
To seek a shelter in some happier star?
Hast thou not torn the Naiad from her flood,

The speaker builds on the idea that science drags poets away from the glittery world of fantasy and imagination. To do this, the speaker fills this quatrain with numerous allusions to mythical/folkloric figures whom science has "driven" out of their usual habitats.

Consider the role myth and folklore have played in human history: these stories have helped shape civilizations and people's understanding both of the world and their own place within it. Of course, they're also products of the imagination, invented to explain things that people can't. Science, by breaking down how the world actually works, essentially runs these stories out of town.

First, the speaker says that science has "dragged Diana from her car":

- Diana is an important goddess in ancient Roman mythology (her Greek equivalent is Artemis) linked with hunting, agriculture, and the moon. She's sometimes depicted riding a chariot, hence the "car" mentioned here.
- Science doesn't care who Diana is; she's not real, and therefore isn't welcome in a world ruled by facts and figures.
- The loud /d/ alliteration of "dragged Diana" conveys the brutality of the way science "drags" her away.

It's a similar story with the "Hamadryad" in lines 10 and 11. In Greek myth, hamadryads are nymphs linked with particular trees (and sometimes depicted as those trees themselves). Science has no time for this nonsense and has "driven the Hamadryad from the wood." Thrust from her home, the Hamadryad runs off to find a safe space—"seek a shelter in some happier star." The sibilance here adds a gentle wistfulness to the line.

Line 12 then takes its grammatical cues from line 9:

> Hast thou not dragged Diana from her car,
> [...]
> Hast thou not torn the Naiad from her flood,

"Hast thou not" is an example of anaphora; the rest of the sentence's construction ("verb + mythological figure + location") is also identical to line 9. This parallelism heightens the speaker's sense of frustration toward science. The speaker sounds almost like a lawyer getting to the end of an impassioned speech.

In Greek mythology, a Naiad is a water nymph (not dissimilar to the forest-dwelling Hamadryad in line 10). They live specifically in flowing water (e.g., springs and streams), which ties in nicely with the idea that creativity takes place in a kind of flow state. Just like Diana and the Hamadryad, though, the Naiad has been "torn" from her natural habitat.

LINES 13-14

The Elfin from the green grass, and from me
The summer dream beneath the tamarind tree?

The final mythological figure in the poem is the "Elfin"—that is, an elf. Just as science has "torn" the water nymph from her watery home, it has torn the elf from the "green grass." The luscious alliteration of "green grass" emphasizes the beauty of the home from which the elf is driven.

Elves originate not in Greek mythology but Norse/Germanic folklore. The variety of allusions here isn't some inconsistency on Poe's part; instead, plucking figures from a range of mythological systems speaks to the role of the imagination throughout all of human history. All cultures have their stories, and science mows them all down.

This poem is a Shakespearean sonnet, and its final two lines form an expected rhyming couplet. There's a slight caesura in line 13 in the form of the comma after "grass," which creates a pause in which the speaker suddenly shifts their attention. So far the speaker has spoken of "the poet" in the third person; now, the speaker talks about themselves directly.

Like the Naiad and the Elfin, the speaker has been attacked by science:

> [Hast thou torn] from me
> The summer dream beneath the tamarind tree?

In other words, the speaker feels like science denies them the chance to idly daydream beneath a tree.

In the previous lines, science drove mythical creatures from their homes or natural habitats. Now, it drives the speaker's own "dream" from their mind. Dreams, this image suggests, are at *home* within the human mind—this is where they *belong*. And yet, the speaker says here, they, too, get stolen by the "dull realities" of science.

Listen to the gentle music of the poem's closing image, with its humming /m/ consonance and long /ee/ assonance:

> [...] and from me
> The summer dream beneath the tamarind tree?

It's as though, in its final moments, the poem is demonstrating poetry's *power*.

SYMBOLS

THE EXILE OF MYTHICAL FIGURES

In lines 9-13, the poem makes several allusions to creatures from mythology and folklore: Diana, the Hamadryad, the Naiad, and the Elfin. These figures come from ancient Roman, Greek, and Germanic mythology, and there's a reason the speaker has picked such a varied bunch: together, they represent the way human beings attempted to make sense of their natural surroundings before the existence of "science." In the poem, their exile symbolizes the way science has driven mystery and magic from the natural world.

Throughout human history, mythology/folklore has been one of the main ways in which people understand and interact with the world around them. But science, the speaker argues, has no time for these fanciful creatures and gods. Science interprets the world based on observation, evidence, and rational thinking—not stories. It thus brutally drives each character here out of their habitat, causing a loss of mystery, wonder, and cultural richness. The woods stop being a magical place, instead becoming just another aspect of the world that science can study and measure.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-13:** "Hast thou not dragged Diana from her car, / And driven the Hamadryad from the wood / To seek a shelter in some happier star? / Hast thou not torn the Naiad from her flood, / The Elfin from the green grass"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

"Sonnet to Science" is packed with allusions. These allusions dramatize the poem's argument that science is a threat to creativity, art, and imagination.

The clearest allusions appear in lines 9-13, which present science driving mythical figures out of their homes/habitats:

- Diana, the ancient Roman Goddess of the hunt and the moon (among other things) gets thrown out of her chariot (which Poe calls her "car"). Diana appears in many poems and works of art, making this attack feel particularly pointed and brutal.
- The Hamadryad, a kind of tree nymph from Greek mythology, flees the woods to find a "happier star" (i.e., another planet) where mythological beings are treated with more respect.
- The Naiad, a water nymph, is "torn" from "her flood" and the elf from "the green grass." Both creatures get kicked out of the places they belong.

Through these allusions, the speaker aims to illustrate how science makes the world a less magical place. Sure, it explains how the natural world functions—but, in the speaker's mind, this explanation comes at a dear cost.

There's another possible (though not definite) allusion in the poem. Lines 2 and 3 might be subtly nodding to the myth of Prometheus, a famous figure from Greek myth who stole fire from the gods and gave it to humanity. Zeus punished Prometheus by having him bound to a rock and sending an eagle to eat his liver every day (the organ would grow back so the ritual could take place again and again).

When the speaker says that science is a vulture that preys "upon the poet's heart," this might be a subtle allusion to Prometheus's fate. The poet becomes Prometheus here, gifting humanity inspiration and beauty through their work only for science to swoop in and pluck out the poet's heart.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "Why preyest thou thus upon the poet's heart, / Vulture / , whose wings are dull realities?"
- **Lines 9-13:** "Hast thou not dragged Diana from her car, / And driven the Hamadryad from the wood / To seek a shelter in some happier star? / Hast thou not torn the Naiad from her flood, / The Elfin from the green grass"

APOSTROPHE

"Sonnet to Science" is one long apostrophe—an address to something or someone that isn't present/can't reply. As the title suggests, the target of this apostrophe is science itself, which the speaker personifies as an individual, sentient being bent on destroying art and creativity. The poem's use of apostrophe overlaps with its rhetorical questions: the speaker repeatedly asks science questions in order to prove a point.

The use of apostrophe and personification creates a clear, distinct enemy in the poem. Instead of addressing a vague, amorphous concept, the speaker is able to level their accusations at a single source. These devices also create drama and excitement. Instead of a dry discourse on the merits of science and the arts, the speaker makes it sounds as though science is standing trial for the murder of the imagination.

Note, too, that the use of apostrophe makes the poem sound distinctly *literary*—more like, well, a poem! In a way, then, it becomes part of the way that the poem makes an implicit argument in favor of its own existence. Apostrophe helps the speaker explore issues around the impact of science while simultaneously demonstrating the suitability of poetry for asking such deep philosophical questions.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Science!," "thou art!"
- **Line 3:** "Why preyest thou"
- **Line 5:** "thee," "thee"
- **Line 9:** "Hast thou not"
- **Line 12:** "Hast thou not"

ALLITERATION

"Sonnet to Science" uses alliteration (as well as assonance and consonance) to add music and drama to its argument.

Listen to the sharp /p/ sounds in line 3, for example (and note that "upon" can be considered alliterative because that /p/ lands at the start of a stressed syllable):

> Why preyest thou thus upon the poet's heart,

This alliteration links the metaphorical bird of prey with its target: the poet's heart. The plosive sounds also simply make the image stand out more clearly in the poem. There's also some biting /s/ and /t/ consonance here ("preyest," "thus," "poet's," and "heart"), which makes the speaker's spitting anger crystal clear.

Alliteration calls attention to certain images elsewhere in the poem as well. The hammering /d/ sounds of "dragged Diana" seem to evoke the brutality of science's attack on the world of myth. These sounds are then echoed (as consonance) in "driven the Hamadryad," making this section of the poem feel heavy and intense.

By contrast, listen to the alliterative sibilance of line 11:

> To seek a shelter in some happier star?

The line is whispery and soft, conveying the nymph's wistful longing for a home far from the cruel grip of science.

The hard /gr/ alliteration of "green grass" emphasizes the vibrancy of the world from which the "Elfin" is driven. And humming /m/ consonance, flitting /t/ alliteration, and long/ee/ assonance in the poem's final rhetorical question end the poem on a note of gentle, poignant beauty:

> [...] from me
> The summer dream beneath the tamarind tree?

Even as the speaker accuses science of tearing out the "poet's heart," they end the poem with distinctly poetic-sounding language. It's this kind of beauty that, according to the poem, science has it in for.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "true," "Time"
- **Line 2:** "peering"
- **Line 3:** "preyest," "upon," "poet's"
- **Line 5:** "wise"
- **Line 6:** "wouldst," "wandering"
- **Line 7:** "seek," "skies"
- **Line 8:** "soared"
- **Line 9:** "dragged Diana"
- **Line 10:** "driven"
- **Line 11:** "seek," "some," "star"
- **Line 12:** "from," "flood"
- **Line 13:** "green grass"
- **Line 14:** "tamarind tree"

METAPHOR

The speaker relies on metaphors to illustrate the destructive potential of science.

Science, of course, is personified throughout the poem, transformed into a human-like figure with will and agency. The phrase "true daughter of Old Time" in line 1 makes science seem like a powerful mythological figure, in fact, capable of great acts of destruction. This personification allows the speaker to accuse science directly of its crimes against creativity (as opposed to talking in more abstract terms).

Science then becomes a bird of prey, looking to eat some tasty "poet's heart." This isn't a literal image; instead, the speaker is metaphorically describing the way that science tears out art's emotional, imaginative core. Note, too, that vultures are scavengers—birds who eat things that are already dead. In comparing science to a vulture, then, the speaker emphasizes the idea that science thrives on the death of art.

The speaker also uses metaphorical language when describing the process of writing poetry. The poet "wander[s]" in the "jewelled skies" of the imagination in order to retrieve the "treasure" of poetry. In other words, they have their head in the clouds (more specifically, among the stars), because this is where inspiration comes from.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Science! true daughter of Old Time thou art!"
- **Line 2:** "thy peering eyes."
- **Lines 3-4:** "Why preyest thou thus upon the poet's heart, / Vulture, whose wings are dull realities?"
- **Lines 6-8:** "Who wouldst not leave him in his wandering / To seek for treasure in the jewelled skies, / Albeit he soared with an undaunted wing?"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

After its two opening lines, "Sonnet to Science" consists of nothing but rhetorical questions. These are targeted at science

itself, which the speaker personifies and addresses directly through apostrophe.

In total, there are five separate questions, none of which require an answer. These questions are meant to prove a point: that science destroys creativity, art, and imagination.

Note how repetitive the language of these questions is, too. Line 5 has two questions beginning with the word "how," an example of anaphora:

> How should he love thee? or how deem thee wise,

The rhetorical questions in lines 9-13 also use anaphora (the repetition of the phrase "Hast thou not") along with more general parallelism:

> Hast thou not dragged Diana from her car,
> And driven the Hamadryad from the wood
> To seek a shelter in some happier star?
> Hast thou not torn the Naiad from her flood,
> The Elfin from the green grass, and from me

All this repetition makes those questions more emphatic and, it follows, make the speaker's argument more effective. While the specifics differ, the speaker is basically asking the same thing over and over again, hammering home the point that science and imagination don't mix.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- Lines 3-14

VOCABULARY

Thou art (Line 1) - You are.

Alterest (Line 2) - Changes.

Thy (Line 2) - Your.

Preyest (Line 3) - Hunt.

Thee (Line 5) - You.

Wouldst (Line 6) - An old-fashioned form of "would."

Deem thee (Lines 5-5) - Consider you.

Undaunted (Line 8) - Unafraid.

Hast thou (Line 9, Line 12) - Have you.

Diana (Line 9) - The ancient Roman goddess of the hunt, the moon, and agriculture, among other things (her Greek counterpart is Artemis).

Car (Line 9) - A reference to Diana's chariot.

Hamadryad (Line 10) - A tree nymph from Greek mythology.

Naiad (Line 12) - A nymph from Greek mythology who lives in flowing water (e.g. streams and rivers).

Elfin (Line 13) - An elf (a magical creature originating in Germanic folklore).

Tamarind tree (Line 14) - A tropical fruit tree.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Sonnet to Science" is, of course, a sonnet. More specifically, it's a *Shakespearean* sonnet. this means that it consists of three quatrains (four-line stanzas) and a closing couplet.

In Shakespearean sonnets, that couplet typically responds in some way to the previous quatrains. The moment when a sonnet switches gears is called its turn or *volta*; here, that volta starts in line 13, when the speaker shifts from talking about science's effect on poetry and imagination in *general* to its effect on the speaker *specifically*. In the poem's final moments, the speaker turns inward and admits that science has stolen their own "dream."

The sonnet is one of the most enduring and popular poetic forms. Coupled with the speaker's use of apostrophe, this makes this a very *poem-y* poem. It's as though the speaker subtly demonstrates poetry's worth not just by arguing *against* science's influence, but by relying on classic features of poetry to make their case.

METER

"Sonnet to Science" uses iambic pentameter, the standard meter of Shakespearean sonnets. A line of iambic pentameter consists of 10 syllables that follow an unstressed-stressed beat pattern (da-DUM; each of these da-DUMs is one iamb).

For example, here's line 7:

> To seek | for trea- | sure in | the jew- | elled skies,

Iambic pentameter creates a steady beat that mimics the sound of spoken English. Of course, Poe uses lots of variation to keep "Sonnet to Science" interesting and to add emphasis to certain moments.

For example, lines 1 and 4 both start with trochees (the opposite of iambs, DUM-da):

> Sci ence! | true daugh ter [...]
> Vul ture, | whose wings [...]

These lines sound more forceful and dramatic, and the heaviness of those opening beats conveys the damaging power of science. It's as though science imposes itself on the poem, upending its metrical flow.

RHYME SCHEME

"Sonnet to Science" uses the typical rhyme scheme of a Shakespearean sonnet—almost. Each quatrain follows an alternating pattern and the poem then wraps up with two rhymes in a row:

ABAB BDBD EFEF GG

There is a subtle twist here, however: the first rhyme of the second quatrain ("wise") relies on the same sound as the previous line ("realities"); these are those "B" rhymes noted above. This is a minor variation, but it does make the speaker's language sound somewhat more repetitive and insistent.

The rhymes gently propel the poem forward, adding force to the speaker's questioning of science. Rhyming, of course, is a distinctive feature of poetry, and using them here subtly makes clear where the speaker's allegiances lie in the creativity vs. science debate.

SPEAKER

The speaker doesn't reveal much about their specific identity (readers never learn their age or gender, for example), but it's clear that they're a creative person who believes that science represents an existential threat to the wonders of the human imagination.

The poem's range of allusions to mythology and folklore (e.g., the Roman goddess Diana in line 9 and the Greek water nymph in line 12) also suggest that the speaker is a well-read individual. They feel that the imagination offers insights and wonder that scientific knowledge, with its facts and figures, can't.

In line 13, an interesting twist occurs: the speaker uses the first-person pronoun "me." This suggests that the speaker has skin in the game—that they, themselves, are one of those poets whose "heart" science preys on.

SETTING

Readers might picture the poem's speaker daydreaming beneath a "tamarind tree" while thinking about all the ways science has driven magic and wonder from the world. Beyond that, though, "Sonnet to Science" doesn't have a specific setting apart from that of a generally modern world.

The speaker's world is one threatened (in the speaker's mind, at least) by cold, rational science. The time of myth and legend has passed; ancient goddesses, elves, and nymphs have been driven from the land.

Knowing the poem's context also enriches its meaning. Poe wrote this poem during the Industrial Revolution, a time of rapid societal change and urbanization. He thus witnessed the world-shaking effects of science and technology first-hand.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Though perhaps best known for macabre short stories like "The Tell-Tale Heart," poetry was Edgar Allan Poe's first love. "Sonnet to Science" appeared in Poe's collection *Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane and Minor Poems*, published in 1829.

Poe is also considered a major figure in the American Romantic movement, the influence of which is clear in "Sonnet to Science." The Romantics, both in the U.S. and abroad, celebrated the overwhelming beauty of nature, the power of the individual, and the glory of the past. They generally distrusted industrialization and the strict focus on reason championed by the Age of Enlightenment. Where earlier Enlightenment-era writers like Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift aspired to elegant phrasings and satirical wit, the Romantics preferred to write passionate verse that valued the mysteries and terrors of the imagination over crisp rationality.

Despite the scientific criticism apparent in this poem, however, Poe was fascinated by subjects like astronomy and physics. In his later work, "Eureka: A Prose Poem," Poe even anticipates later theories on the nature of the universe.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Romantic movement was a backlash against both the earlier Age of Enlightenment and the contemporaneous Industrial Revolution.

The period when Poe was writing was marked by huge scientific advances, but also by what the later Romantics saw as a bit too much reason. Where earlier Renaissance scholars and artists tried to know a little bit about everything, Enlightenment thinkers were categorizers and organizers, increasingly interested in sharp divisions between disciplines.

Meanwhile, rapid industrialization across the U.S. and Europe reshaped landscapes, working and living conditions, and the way people interacted with one another. As the countryside began to disappear beneath expanding cities and filthy factories, Romantic artists tried to remind readers that nature was full of irreplaceable beauty and wisdom—qualities that can't be commodified.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane and Minor Poems — Read the full collection in which "Sonnet to Science" appears. (https://www.eapoe.org/works/editions/atmpc.htm)

- The Poem Out Loud — Hear "Sonnet to Science" read aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9RtvUEO0_A)
- Poe's Life and Work — Listen to this informative BBC podcast about Poe, which includes contributions from renowned biographer Peter Ackroyd. (https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b008ncs4)
- "How Edgar Allan Poe Exposed Scientific Hoaxes—And Perpetrated Them" — Check out a podcast on Poe's complicated relationship with science. (https://www.sciencefriday.com/segments/edgar-allan-poe-science/)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER EDGAR ALLAN POE POEMS

- A Dream Within a Dream
- Alone
- Annabel Lee
- To Helen

HOW TO CITE

MLA

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