The Stars Go Over the Lonely Ocean

SUMMARY

The speaker, feeling anxious about some distant issues that weren't under his control, was walking along the thin mountain paths by the coast. That night, as he watched the stars traveling across the sky above the lonesome ocean, he encountered a wild, black-bearded boar that was using his nose to dig through the dirt on Mal Paso Mountain.

The elderly beast sniffed and said, "Look at these tasty roots, fat bugs, glossy beetles, and growing acorns. Finland, the best country in Europe, has lost its way, but the stars keep traveling across the sky above the lonesome ocean." This was what the old boar, with his spiky black hair, said while ripping apart the ground of the mountain.

"The world's gone crazy, my friend, and it's only going to get worse before it gets better. You should lay low in these mountains for the next four or five hundred years, while the stars keep traveling across the sky above the lonesome ocean." That's what this old patriach said, while burying his snout in the mountain's uncultivated land.

"Stay away from the numbskulls who go on about democracy and from the fools who keep bringing up revolution; they're intoxicated by smooth talk and ideologues. By contrast, I put my faith in my tusks right in front of me. Embrace freedom and curse the false promises of politics." That's what the wild, black-beared boar said as he prodded at the earth with his tusks on the mountain.

THEMES

POLITICAL CRISIS AND DISILLUSIONMENT

"The Stars Go Over the Lonely Ocean" looks at humanity's prospects and comes to a bleak conclusion: it would be best to lay low for a few hundred years while humankind destroys itself through war, self-deception, and conflicting ideologies. Written at the start of World War II, the poem takes solace only in the insignificance of humankind: it gives voice to a "wild boar" who contrasts human foolishness with the vast universe beyond earth (the "stars go[ing] over the lonely ocean"). In short, the poem displays a clear sense of disillusionment with humanity and suggests that people would do well to extricate themselves from politics altogether.

The anxious, wandering speaker encounters a "black-maned wild boar" that articulates everything that's going wrong with civilization—particularly its collapse into ideological conflict. This "old father of wild pigs," roaming freely in the mountains, has some strong opinions about the state of human politics. He explains to the speaker: "The world's in a bad way, my man, / And bound to be worse before it mends." The world is also full of "dupes that talk democracy," "dogs that talk revolution," and "liars and believers." In short, humankind has chained itself in false dogma—the illusory promises of politicians on either side of the political divide.

The terrible consequences of these illusions, the boar suggests, are about to play out. That's why the boar laments the fact that "Finland" has "fallen." Finland initially tried to stay neutral in WWII; when it joined in the conflict, it, too, lost its "freedom" (by picking a side and, thereby, an ideology). In the face of all this violence and folly, the boar thinks it would be better to remove oneself from humanity altogether. Seeing as the world is "bound to be worse before it mends," the boar suggests that the speaker hides out in the mountains for a few centuries. The poem implies that it's not clear whether there will be anything left of humankind after that period.

But the poem never shakes off its atmosphere of tension and danger, because the speaker, of course, *can't* hide in the mountains. He must walk back down from the ridge and return to humanity. What awaits him, the poem suggests, is a new and terrible chapter in the human story (and given the horrors of the 20th century and beyond, it's hard to argue with this view!). The boar thus seems to validate the speaker's initial anxiety rather than teaching him an unexpected lesson—but unlike wild boars, humans can't avoid human politics so easily. What people *can* avoid, the poem implies, is getting locked into "ideologies."

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 10-12
- Lines 15-19
- Lines 22-26

NATURE VS. HUMANITY

"The Stars Go Over the Lonely Ocean" contrasts human arrogance and corruption with the power and serenity of nature. Though the poem condemns humankind in its 20th-century state, it does offer an alternative way of framing human existence. Though it doesn't suggest that nature can *save* humanity, it does present nature as a setting that's free from shortsighted "ideologies"—and so endures forever rather than destroying itself. In other words, it holds up the natural world as an ideal superior to those humanity constructs for itself.

The speaker listens to some words of wisdom from a talking wild boar. The boar represents an intuitive and natural way of being, free from artificial—and inescapably human—ways of framing existence. The boar himself stands in for the natural world, which runs on instinct, free from the "talk, liars, and believers" of human society. The boar "believe[s] in [his] tusks": the earthy, natural reality that's right before his eyes. It's implied that, by contrast, humankind has lost sight of its place in the world. The boar also shows the speaker "sweet roots, / Fat grubs, slick beetles and sprouted acorns." These remind the speaker—and the reader—that humankind is not the only life on earth, nor the center of the universe. Life will continue to thrive, with or without humankind.

Meanwhile, the stars, ocean, and mountain operate on a timescale that makes all human conflict look petty and temporary. Thus, they model a kind of enduring serenity that humans can aspire to, if only they take the long view. The stars moving overhead offer evidence of a world *beyond* humanity, subtly supporting the boar's view that humanity has gotten lost in its own self-importance. The loneliness of the ocean, in this context, isn't necessarily a negative attribute. It's a kind of freedom from the chaos of the human world.

Nature, ultimately, gets the last word, having demonstrated its wisdom in contrast with the foolishness of humankind. The poem portrays the boar as a kind of wise soothsayer: "the old father of wild pigs." He speaks from a place of deep, inherited, intuitive knowledge that goes beyond the particulars of human politics (such as the start of WWII, which hovers in the poem's background). It's telling, too, that the poem ends with the word "mountain" and focuses so much on the stars. The poem reminds the speaker of what they already know: that, in the grand scheme of time, humankind's activities are "far off things" that need not be the "affair" of someone who communes authentically with nature. To appreciate nature in this way is to find a kind of intellectual and spiritual "freedom."

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-21
- Lines 25-28

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

Unhappy about some ...
... the lonely ocean,

The poem's speaker goes out for a walk along a mountainous coast one evening in an attempt to clear his head. He's feeling anxious, "[u]nhappy about some far off things / That are not my affair." In other words, he's worried about global events that he has no real control over. (Jeffers wrote this poem at the start of WWII, and the following stanza alludes directly to the conflict.)

As he walks "the lean ridges," or narrow hilltops, the speaker looks out and sees "The stars go over the lonely ocean." This phrase will be repeated throughout the poem, becoming an important refrain. The stars and the ocean contextualize the speaker's situation, as well as that of humanity as a whole: compared to the immensity of the universe, humanity's problems suddenly seem quite small.

The speaker also personifies the ocean here by calling it "lonely." That loneliness suggests that the scene is quiet and empty. At the same time, the speaker is likely projecting his *own* emotions onto the landscape (an example of pathetic fallacy). That is, the ocean's loneliness reflects the speaker's sense of isolation from the rest of humankind. The long, round assonance of "go over the lonely ocean" evokes a moan or cry of pain, reflecting the speaker's downtrodden attitude.

The poem's formal traits help to further convey the speaker's state of mind. Though each stanza has a similar shape on the page, there's no strict meter here; the poem never quite settles into a regular, predictable rhythm. Enjambment adds to the sense of restlessness, delaying the arrival of the stanza's main verb ("saw") until line 4:

> Unhappy about some far off things
> That are not my affair, wandering
> Along the coast and up the lean ridges,
> I saw in the evening
> The stars go over the lonely ocean,

The poem, like the speaker, seems to "wander" down the page, searching for something without knowing what that something is. The first five lines thus create a quiet, if troubled, atmosphere, luring the reader into the poem's mountainous and almost mythical world. Nothing's really happened yet, but it's out of this hush that the mystical figure of the boar will emerge.

LINES 6-7

And a black-maned ...
... Mal Paso Mountain.

The speaker sees wild boar with a black beard using his "snout," or nose," to dig through the dirt "on Mal Paso Mountain." (While it's possible that Jeffers is referring to the Mal Paso Mountain of Spain's Canary Islands, more likely he's describing the landscape near the less famous Malpaso Creek or Canyon; this would set the poem near Carmel, California, where Jeffers spent much of his life.)

The sight of a boar digging through the dirt is nothing particularly special; this is just what boars do. Yet soon enough, this "wild boar" will become a symbol in the poem of another way of life: one defined by freedom and instinct, and one distinctly separate from humanity and its politics. The boar has

no need for the speaker and doesn't care about the "far off things" mentioned in the poem's opening line.

The poem uses sound to bring this wild creature to life for readers:

- The forceful alliteration of "black-maned"/"boar" and "Plowing"/"Paso" evokes the boar's sheer animal power.
- Listen, too, to the round assonance of "Plowing with his snout on Mal Paso Mountain."

Together, these sonic devices help to convey the boar's impressive, imposing presence.

LINES 8-9

The old monster ...
... and sprouted acorns.

In the second stanza, the poem takes a dramatic and fable-like turn: the wild boar starts to speak. The speaker calls the creature an "old monster," but in context, this sounds more like a playful term of endearment than an insult. *Some* people might view boars as monstrous and brutish, but that's a very human-centric perspective. This boar speaks rather eloquently, in fact, as he describes the various delicacies he's digging through the dirt for: "sweet roots, / Fat grubs, slick beetles and sprouted acorns."

It's no coincidence that the first thing the boar talks about is nature; his priorities are a far cry from those of the human world, and he's keen to point out his own world's tasty treats. Though what he describes amounts to quite a narrow aspect of nature—*things a boar might eat*—his selection nevertheless hints at the astounding variety of the natural world. "Here," just "here" on this California coast, life appears in all kinds of weird and wonderful forms.

The sounds in these lines convey this vivid diversity. Just listen to the thick consonance of " sweet roots, / Fat grubs, slick beetles and sprouted acorns." The monosyllabic chunkiness of "Fat grubs," the liquid /l/ sounds of "slick beetles," the crispness of the phrase "sprouted acorns"—all of these point to a thriving non-human environment. And they sound kind of delicious, for a boar at least!

LINES 10-14

The best nation ...
... Mal Paso Mountain.

The boar abruptly changes the subject to world events—probably the same "far off things" that the speaker had in mind in line 1. Recall that the poem was written in 1940, so the horrors of WWII were still in their early stages. The sudden shift from talk of juicy grubs to war creates a stark juxtaposition between human and animal affairs.

The boar claims that Finland is—or, rather, *was*—"the best nation in Europe." The poem itself doesn't explain why, but readers can infer some things about the boar's reasoning from Jeffers's other poems and comments:

- "The Stars Go Over the Lonely Ocean" was published in a 1940 issue of *Poetry* magazine alongside a poem called "Finland is Down." This latter poem specifically dates March 1940 as the moment of Finland's "fall."
- This was the month that Finland signed the Moscow Peace Treaty, ending the "Winter War" with Soviet forces that had begun after the Soviets invaded Finland in 1939. Finland retained its independence with the treaty, but it also surrendered nine percent of its territory to the USSR.

Though the boar laments Finland's fate, he looks beyond humanity for reassurance. In line 12, the poem's repeated refrain appears, with one small but significant variation (highlighted below):

> But the stars go over the lonely ocean,"

The boar prefaces the refrain with "But," indicating that the presence of the sea and stars acts as a kind of counterweight to the heaviness of WWII. In essence, the boar is saying, *"Sure, things look bad for humanity, but the earth's still turning."* The stars and ocean symbolize the vastness of the non-human world, which makes human troubles seem utterly insignificant. Next to these enormous, seemingly timeless entities, war becomes a blip, a speck of dust.

Lines 13 and 14 echo the ending of the previous stanza and will become part of the poem's refrain as well. Compare lines 6 and 7 with 13 and 14:

> And a black-maned wild boar
> Plowing with his snout on Mal Paso Mountain.
> [...]
> The old black-bristled boar,
> Tearing the sod on Mal Paso Mountain.

Those three alliterating /b/s—"black-bristled boar"—evoke the animal's physical prowess, its imposing, stinking magnificence. More broadly, bringing the poem back to the boar and the mountain—rather than, say, letting the boar make his entire speech in one go—keeps the reader's focus on the boar's place in the natural world. In each stanza, the penultimate line gives the speaker a chance to admire some other aspect of the boar's appearance or character; the last line in each stanza then reinforces the boar's connection with his natural habitat. The boar is content in and suited to his environment—and thus subtly offers an example of a different way of life, one that the

poem implies humans could do well to learn from.

LINES 15-21

"The world's in ...
... Mal Paso Mountain.

The boar warns the speaker that "the world's in a bad way" and will get worse before it gets better. It's sensible, therefore, that the speaker hides "in the mountain here" for the next "four or five centuries." By then, maybe, things will have blown over, or perhaps humankind will have wiped itself—and its problems—out completely. In short, the board is saying that humanity is doomed: get out while you still can. The mountain offers a kind of retreat from humanity, a return to a more instinctive and more authentic way of life (like the boar's).

Note how the boar uses casual, colloquial language ("in a bad way") and addresses the speaker on familiar terms, calling him "my man." This portrays the boar as a laidback, kindly character, or at least one who harbors no active ill-will toward the speaker. He's just calling it as he sees it.

Line 19 then repeats the poem's refrain, with one slight change:

> Better lie up in the mountain here
> Four or five centuries,
> While the stars go over the lonely ocean,"

The boar uses the passage of the stars "over the lonely ocean" as an alternative timescale. Four for five hundred years don't seem like much when pitted against a planetary timeline. In the grand scheme of things, the poem implies, it doesn't really matter what humans do. Civilizations come and go, but the stars and the ocean remain constant; they'll still be there when those centuries have passed, as they always have been.

The speaker then re-describes the boar (as part of the poem's repetitive structure). This time he's "the old father of wild pigs." He's like an ancient pig patriarch, the wise head of a big boar family. He even sounds somewhat god-like, a kind of soothsaying survivalist offering the speaker an alternative perspective that critiques humankind's arrogant self-centeredness. And while the boar talks, he never loses sight of the task at hand: he's "Plowing the fallow," still digging in the earth for food.

LINES 22-24

"Keep clear of ...
... liars and believers.

In the final stanza, the boar offers the speaker further advice on the state of the world. If the previous stanza diagnosed humanity as being in a "bad way," this one explores the causes of that sickness. In the boar's view, humankind has chained itself in false dogma; it's trapped in a prison of its own design. The boar takes aim not at one specific political agenda, but rather at the entire system.

First, the boar warns the speaker to "keep clear of the dupes that talk democracy." The heavy alliteration of "dupes" and "democracy" makes the boar sound passionate, even angry. A "dupe" is a victim of deception; the boar is arguing that "democracy," for all its promises of fairness and level-headedness, is a scam.

Jeffers was American, making this rejection of democracy all the more biting: democracy is built into the political DNA of the United States. The boar's point, though not explicitly about the U.S., is that people should distrust the shiny promises of such a political system as well as the notion that humankind has reached some highly civilized way of operating. Those who spout lofty democratic ideals are fooling themselves, in the boar's estimation; the world, the poem implies, isn't an equal or fair place. Plus, *talking* democracy and *acting* democratically are two very different things.

The boar then takes aim at "the dogs that talk revolution / Drunk with talk, liars and believers." "Dogs" is derogatory here, portraying revolutionaries as foolish failures (the word might also hint that they bark out regurgitated talking points rather than thinking independently).

The poet might have had communism and the Soviet Union in mind here, as that nation's revolutionary leader/eventual dictator Joseph Stalin pressured Finland into its "fall." More generally, the poem is dismissing anyone who thinks that a political revolution will make the world a better place. Such "revolutionaries" are "drunk with talk": they just like the sound of their own voices and get carried away by their ideals. Whether they're actively lying to the people or true "believers" in their cause makes no difference to the boar. Revolution as an idea can be intoxicating, but, in the boar's view, it will never fulfill its promises.

Note that the word "talk" appears in three consecutive lines here. This diacope underscores the boar's point that political talk is cheap.

LINES 25-28

I believe in ...
... Mal Paso Mountain.

Having dismissed "dupes that talk democracy" and "dogs that talk revolution," the boar affirms what he *does* believe in:

> I believe in my tusks.
> Long live freedom and damn the ideologies,"

All political beliefs, to the boar, are deceptions. He only has faith in himself, in the tools of his own body—not some lofty political idea that ruins people's lives. The boar's tusks help him survive—he uses them for defense and digging for food. His tusks *enable* his independence up there on the mountain.

The boar, then, advocates "freedom" and "damn[s] the ideologies." Those "ideologies," the poem implies, are what got humanity into the mess it's in.

In its final two lines, the poem repeats its now-familiar description of the boar and its activity on the mountain. The speaker describes him this time as "gamey," most likely meaning "brave" (rather than "meaty") and wild. "Black-maned" was used in the first stanza, and its repetition here signals the end of a kind of magical intervention. The poem has come full circle; the boar has spoken and now goes back to being his boar-y self. The speaker watches him "Tusking the turf," as if confirming the importance of the boar's tusks to his way of seeing and being in the world. The spiky alliteration—"Tusking the turf"—conveys the image of the tusks prodding into the ground. It's telling, too, that the last word here is "mountain"—thus ending the poem with a focus on the natural world, not the human.

SYMBOLS

THE STARS AND THE OCEAN

In the poem, the stars and the ocean act as symbols of nature's permanence as well as its utter indifference to human affairs. For the speaker, humankind's flaws, faults, and foibles seem small and petty next to the vastness of the universe. Even a world war fades into insignificance. Finland may have "fallen," but that has no effect on the stars or sea; the earth keeps turning as it always has, unmoved by "talk" of "democracy" or "revolution."The steady presence of the stars and ocean throughout the poem undermines humanity's arrogant belief that people are the center of the world. Civilizations come and go, but the stars and the ocean remain constant.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "The stars go over the lonely ocean,"
- **Line 12:** "But the stars go over the lonely ocean,""
- **Line 19:** "While the stars go over the lonely ocean,""

THE BOAR

The boar symbolizes what, to the speaker, seems like the ideal way life: a humble, independent existence defined by freedom and connection with the earth. The boar is "wild," unbound by human society. He puts his faith in himself and his own "tusks" rather than what he considers misleading, disappointing "ideologies," and he encourages the speaker to join him and lay low for a few hundred years while humanity destroys itself. The poem hints that the boar's got it right, and that people should similarly extricate themselves from humanity's squabbles and politics.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-7:** "And a black-maned wild boar / Plowing with his snout on Mal Paso Mountain."
- **Lines 13-14:** "The old black-bristled boar, / Tearing the sod on Mal Paso Mountain."
- **Lines 20-21:** "Said the old father of wild pigs, / Plowing the fallow on Mal Paso Mountain."
- **Lines 27-28:** "Said the gamey black-maned boar / Tusking the turf on Mal Paso Mountain."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration fills the poem with rough, rugged music befitting its main character: the wild boar. This alliteration often uses plosive sounds like /b/, /p/, and /t/. Such consonants require the mouth to block and then expel air, and here they make the poem's language more forceful and emphatic.

For example, listen to some of the phrases the speaker uses to describe the boar and his mountain home:

> black-maned wild boar
> Plowing with his snout on Mal Paso Mountain.
> [...]
> The old black-bristled boar,
> [...]
> Said the old father of wild pigs,
> Plowing the fallow on Mal Paso Mountain.

All those /b/ and /p/ sounds evoke the boar's huffing, grunting effort as he snuffs out food. Towards the poem's end, the spiky /t/ sound in "Tusking the turf" also conveys the sharpness of the boar's tusks.

The boar's actual speech is full of plosive sounds too, making him sound passionate and strong-willed:

> "The world's in a bad way, my man,
> And bound to be worse before it mends;
> Better lie up [...]
> [...]
> "Keep clear of the dupes that talk democracy
> And the dogs that talk revolution,
> Drunk with talk [...]

The heaving /b/ and /d/ sounds and the sharp /t/ sounds convey the boar's frustration and disappointment with the state of the world. Note, too, how alliteration links "dupes" with "democracy"—that is, people who have been deceived with the ideology that deceives them.

There's some sibilant alliteration in the poem as well. Listen to

lines 8-9:

> The old monster snuffled, "Here are sweet roots,
> Fat grubs, slick beetles and sprouted acorns.

These sounds evoke the very "snuffling" described, making the poem's imagery more striking for readers.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "black-maned," "boar"
- **Line 7:** "Plowing," "Mal," "Paso," "Mountain"
- **Line 8:** "snuffled," "sweet"
- **Line 9:** "slick," "sprouted"
- **Line 10:** "fallen"
- **Line 11:** "Finland"
- **Line 13:** "black-bristled boar"
- **Line 14:** "Mal," "Mountain"
- **Line 15:** "bad," "my man"
- **Line 16:** "bound," "be," "before"
- **Line 17:** "Better"
- **Line 18:** "Four," "five"
- **Line 20:** "father," "pigs"
- **Line 21:** "Plowing," "fallow," "Mal," "Paso," "Mountain"
- **Line 22:** "dupes," "democracy"
- **Line 23:** "dogs"
- **Line 24:** "Drunk," "talk"
- **Line 25:** "tusks"
- **Line 26:** "Long live"
- **Line 27:** "black-maned boar"
- **Line 28:** "Tusking," "turf," "Mal," "Mountain"

ENJAMBMENT

Much of the poem is end-stopped, creating a forceful, confident rhythm that lends authority to the boar's speech. That said, the first stanza is heavily enjambed. Not coincidentally, these lines also introduce the restless speaker, who is "wandering" around the mountain while plagued with worry about the state of the world. The enjambment of these lines makes the poem *itself* seem to meander (to "wander") down the page:

> Unhappy about some far off things
> That are not my affair, wandering
> Along the coast and up the lean ridges,
> I saw in the evening
> The stars [...[

It's as though the poem refuses to settle at first, the main verb not arriving until line 4 ("I saw"). The poem's form thus mirrors the speaker's state of mind.

There are a few other enjambments in the poem as well, though no strings as long as that in the first stanza. Once the boar enters, the poem seems to gain confidence; the end-stopping creates a steady, measured pace that reflects the creature's fervent belief in his worldview.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "things / That"
- **Lines 2-3:** "wandering / Along"
- **Lines 4-5:** "evening / The"
- **Lines 6-7:** "boar / Plowing"
- **Lines 17-18:** "here / Four"
- **Lines 22-23:** "democracy / And"
- **Lines 27-28:** "boar / Tusking"

ANTHROPOMORPHISM

"The Stars Go Over the Lonely Ocean" anthropomorphizes the wild boar throughout. This boar talks, and he does so quite eloquently! He tells the speaker all about the delicious bugs and roots he's digging up on the mountainside, and he also expresses quite a few opinions about the state of human affairs. This boar, somehow, knows what's going on in Finland and has no patience for politics; he dismisses "revolution" and "democracy" alike as false promises.

This talking boar makes the poem read like a fable, and, like all fables, there's a clear lesson here: "Long live freedom and damn the ideologies," the boar concludes. In other words, people should avoid getting caught up in lofty but empty ideals. They should think for themselves and break free from the ties of political society.

Readers might guess that the boar is really speaking for the poet here: these ideals align with Jeffers own. But the boar is a more powerful speaker than a human being might be for a few reasons. For one thing, he is more closely tied to the natural world than the poem's human speaker is. The boar's words are backed up by his actions: he's wild and free, trusting his own "tusks" more than political "talk." The poem implies that human beings should strive to be like the boar, too.

Having a boar say all these things also elevates a *non-human perspective* in the poem, reflecting the idea that people and their squabbles aren't the center of the universe.

Where Anthropomorphism appears in the poem:

- Lines 8-28

REPETITION

"The Stars Go Over the Lonely Ocean" uses lots of repetition, mainly in the form of a refrain. The phrase "the stars go over the lonely ocean" appears in the fifth line of every stanza apart from the last, while the final two lines of each stanza always describe the wild boar digging through the dirt.

This repetition foregrounds what is really important in the world of the poem: the movement of the sea and stars, as well

as the actions of a creature with no interest in human affairs. Note, too, that the refrain varies each time, describing the boar in slightly different terms. "Black-maned wild boar," "old black-bristled boar," "old father of wild pigs," "gamey black-maned boar"—these all portray the boar as wise, primal, and commanding.

Thanks to all this repetition, the poem also seems to keep circling back on itself, creating a hypnotic, almost meditative rhythm. The poem's cyclical motions also hint at vast cycles of time beyond the speaker's immediate perception.

Repetition also appears in lines 22-24, when the boar warns the speaker:

> "Keep clear of the dupes that talk democracy
> And the dogs that talk revolution,
> Drunk with talk, liars and believers.

This is specifically diacope, and it underscores the boar's point: that politics and ideologies are both a load of hot air. It's all a lot of useless "talk": impressive but ultimately hollow language.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-7:** "The stars go over the lonely ocean, / And a black-maned wild boar / Plowing with his snout on Mal Paso Mountain."
- **Lines 12-14:** "But the stars go over the lonely ocean," / The old black-bristled boar, / Tearing the sod on Mal Paso Mountain."
- **Lines 19-21:** "While the stars go over the lonely ocean," / Said the old father of wild pigs, / Plowing the fallow on Mal Paso Mountain."
- **Line 22:** "talk"
- **Line 23:** "talk"
- **Line 24:** "talk"
- **Lines 27-28:** "Said the gamey black-maned boar / Tusking the turf on Mal Paso Mountain."

PATHETIC FALLACY

The poem uses pathetic fallacy when the speaker calls the ocean "lonely." The ocean, of course, can't literally feel loneliness. Instead, the poem's human speaker is imposing his own feelings of isolation onto his surroundings.

The speaker, plagued with anxieties about the state of the world, is wandering by himself along the coast. He also feels alone in the sense of being disconnected from the rest of humanity. Societies around the world are engaged in "far off things" that the speaker feels "are not my affair"—that is, they're not his business or concern. And yet, these "things" weigh heavy on the speaker's mind. Feeling like an outsider himself, he might project this emotion onto the world around him.

The ocean also speaks to a more positive form of loneliness too (as do the stars). The ocean, of course, doesn't think and feel in the same way humans do, so it's not invested in the fate of humankind. It's an entire, mostly non-human world unto itself. It thus acts as a reminder that there's more to life than human beings and, the boar's mind, their foolish ways.

Where Pathetic Fallacy appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "The stars go over the lonely ocean,"
- **Line 12:** "But the stars go over the lonely ocean,""
- **Line 19:** "While the stars go over the lonely ocean,""

VOCABULARY

My affair (Lines 1-2) - My concern.

Ridges (Lines 2-3) - Thin hilltops.

Plowing (Lines 6-7) - By this, the speaker means that the boar is digging deep into the earth and churning up the dirt with his tusks.

Fat grubs (Lines 8-9) - Juicy worms.

Sod (Lines 13-14) - This is another reference to the dirt/soil/earth that the boar is digging up. More specifically, sod refers to the ground's grass-covered surface—something the boar uses his sharp tusks to tear though.

Fallow (Lines 20-21) - Another reference to the dirt. *Fallow* specifically refers to uncultivated land, reflecting the fact that this mountain is far from the reach of human civilization.

Dupes (Line 22) - People who have been deceived.

Tusking the turf (Lines 27-28) - Digging up the ground ("the turf") with his sharp tusks.

Gamey (Line 27) - Brave or wild.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Stars Go Over the Lonely Ocean" can be considered a fable: it features a talking animal who imparts wisdom. Structurally, the poem consists of four seven-line stanzas (a.k.a septets). This regular stanza shape gives this free verse poem some steadiness and consistency. Despite featuring a talking boar, the poem still feels serious and measured.

The poem is also very repetitive, thanks to its use of a refrain. Some variation of the phrase "the stars go over the lonely ocean" repeats in the fifth line of stanzas 1 to 3. The last two lines of each stanza are also very repetitive, each pair featuring a description of the boar and its search for food on the mountain. They all say pretty much the same thing, just in

slightly different ways. For example:

> And a black-maned wild boar
> Plowing with his snout on Mal Paso Mountain. (lines 6-7)
> [...]
> Said the gamey black-maned boar
> Tusking the turf on Mal Paso Mountain. (lines 27-28)

Repetition like this weaves a hypnotic spell, the poem continually cycling back to the boar and centering his philosophy.

METER

"The Stars Go Over the Lonely "Ocean" is written using free verse, meaning there's no regular meter. That said, the repetitive nature of the poem creates some familiar rhythms throughout. The last three lines of each stanza are all very similar, apart from line 26 ("Long live freedom and damn the ideologies,").

Note, too, that all stanzas have a pretty uniform shape on the page. The fourth line of each stanza is always shorter than the rest, as though the stanza is being squeezed in the middle. It's subtle, but this creates a gentle wave-like pattern from long to short to long again, perhaps gently mimicking the movements of the ocean.

RHYME SCHEME

Aside from a few half rhymes here and there, there's not much rhyming going on in "The Stars Go Over the Lonely Ocean." "Ocean" and "Mountain" chime together in each stanza except for the last, this is very subtle.

The *lack* of rhyme seems to capture the speaker's wandering (both physical and mental) and provides the poem with a ruggedness that fits its star character: the wild boar. A full rhyme scheme might make the poem feel sillier or more childish, given the presence of a talking animal.

SPEAKER

"The Stars Go Over the Lonely Ocean" has a first-person male speaker (at least, this is what's implied by the boar's use of the phrase "my man" in line 15), who is probably meant to represent Jeffers himself. The speaker comes across as restless, worried about "far off things" that he has no control over. He calls the ocean "lonesome," but he might just be projecting his own sense of isolation onto his surroundings. Meanwhile, the anthropomorphized wild boar the speaker encounters does most of the talking in the poem.

This boar relishes the bounty of the earth, quickly pointing out all the yummy grubs and roots ripe for the taking, and though he somehow is well-versed in human politics, he has no patience for them. He laments the fall of "Finland" and advises the human speaker to hide out in the mountains for the next few centuries. The boar condemns democracy and revolution, believing instead, as he says, only "in my tusks."

In his embrace of individual freedom, his appreciation of nature, and his rejection of politics, the boar's attitude reflects that of Jeffers himself. Jeffers was a staunch environmentalist who criticized what he viewed as humanity's selfishness and arrogance, and he also (quite controversially) opposed U.S. involvement in World War II.

SETTING

Though there are other Mal Paso mountains in the world (including the most famous in Tenerife, Spain), it's likely that Jeffers intended this poem to be set on the California coast. He's probably referring to Malpaso Creek or Canyon, which is not far from the coastal town of Carmel, California, where Jeffers spent much of his life.

In any case, this setting is presented as a quiet, lonely, contemplative place. The speaker, plagued with anxiety about world events, has come up there by himself to do some thinking. For him, the vast, star-filled sky above and the ocean below help to put humanity's human foibles in perspective: war and politics seem insignificant in the grand scheme of the universe.

This setting is also home to a wild boar who seems totally at home in his environment, and there's plenty of other life there too: "sweet roots/ Fat grubs, slick beetles and sprouted acorns" to name a (tasty) few. The natural world in the poem comes across as a richer, wiser, and more peaceful place than the human world.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Robinson Jeffers (1887-1962) was an American poet and environmentalist known both for his narrative, epic poetry and his shorter, more lyrical verse. An avid outdoorsman, Jeffers also wrote often about the beauty and power of the natural world. He lived for a long time on the California coast, which features in this and many other poems. Indeed, "Mal Paso Mountain" here likely refers to Malpaso Creek/Canyon near Carmel, California, where Jeffers spent the latter half of his life.

"The Stars Go Over the Lonely Ocean" was first published in an April 1940 edition of *Poetry* magazine, alongside Jeffers's poems "9, 19, 1939," "Finland is Down," "Great Men," and "The Bloody Sire." All of these poems were inspired by World War II, which is also what the "far off things" in line 1 of this poem

refers to.

The poem also showcases a worldview that Jeffers called *inhumanism*, which he said involves "a shifting of emphasis from man to not man; the rejection of human solipsism and recognition of the transhuman magnificence. [...] It offers a reasonable detachment as a rule of conduct, instead of love, hate, and envy." In other words, it values the non-human, natural world and rejects the anthropocentric view that human beings are the most important creatures on earth.

Jeffers's philosophical views infused his writing and earned him both praise and condemnation. Though he was for a while a bestselling poet, popular opinion turned against him when he opposed U.S. involvement in WWII. Jeffers's anti-war stance was construed by his critics as anti-patriotic.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The poem alludes directly to its historical context in lines 10-11:

> The best nation in Europe has fallen,
> And that is Finland,

This was written, and is set, at the beginning of World War II—the second conflict to cause unfathomable death, despair, and destruction during the 20th century. World War II began in 1939 when Britain and France declared war on Germany following Hitler's invasion of Poland. By the time the war ended in 1945, 40 to 60 million people had died. Though humankind had made huge technological advancements in the previous decades, for many these two brutal wars undermined the sense that this constituted actual progress. From this poem's perspective, civilization is a kind of lie that humanity sells to itself—and that's why the boar thinks it's better to lie low for a few hundred years in the mountains.

The poem published alongside "The Stars Go Over the Lonely Ocean," "Finland is Down," makes clear that the boar here refers to the Moscow Peace Treaty, signed by Finland following an invasion of its territory by Soviet Forces. Finland maintained its independence but was also forced to surrender nine percent of its territory to the USSR.

Though World War Two is undoubtedly a key focus in the poem, the true targets are wider than just that one conflict. Jeffers—and the boar in the poem—argues that *all* politics tends towards lies, corruption, and mindless partisanship.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Short History of the "Winter War" — Check out a brief overview of the conflict between Finland and the Soviet Union that Jeffers alludes to in this poem. (https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/a-short-history-of-the-winter-war#:~:text=By%20early%20February%201940%2C%20the,t
- Jeffers and Inhumanism — Learn more about an essential concept in Jeffers's work. (https://desperadophilosophy.net/tag/inhumanism/)
- Jeffers's Biography — Learn more about the poet in this biography from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robinson-jeffers)
- Tor House — Check out the history behind a special stone house—built by Jeffers's own hand! (https://www.torhouse.org/history)
- Robinson Jeffers Podcast — Tune into a Lit Matters episode dedicated to Jeffers's life and work. (https://litmatters.podbean.com/e/draft-ep-9/)

HOW TO CITE

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